

DOUG CLARK

In His Own Words

As told to Lew Boyd



BUCK MONSON

- ***Born on September 19, 1952 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota***
- ***The improbable Black, one-eyed race fan who calmly and consistently worked his way up to become quite likely the most famous and admired starter in all of racing. He waved his enormous flags all the way into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame.***

Looking back, I guess I'm proof that you can fall in love with the races before even going to one.

While growing up, my brother Jim worked for Pete Peterson's welding shop here in Sioux Falls. There was lots of racing going on, and a lot of race cars were being built and repaired there. I was fascinated by them and the guys who drove them. Soon Pete took me along to the tracks, letting me sit in the grandstands in return for cleaning the shop.

I wasn't the only kid who was infected. A bunch of us—including my friend Doug Wolfgang—were so into it we made a little dirt oval in someone's backyard and raced push wagons—heats and a feature. It was modeled after the 3/8th-mile Huset's Speedway out here, and soon we also had a bigger layout, pretending it was the half-mile up at Jackson, Minnesota.

So much happened to me at Pete's. One day when I was 10 or 11 things were slow, so I went to move some rose bushes for Pete's wife. Wouldn't you know, the handle of a brand-new potato fork broke, and something hit my face. I went inside and asked Pete if my eye was bleeding. He said, "Oh, my God!"

I had lost the sight in one eye, but honestly, it didn't seem like that big a deal. In junior high school I did all the normal hurdles,

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basketball, football. You learn how to do things in life. I gassed the pedal and kept going.

I began working more and more on race cars. I remember going to the junkyard where Doug and I both worked, borrowing a motor for his modified for the weekend and putting it back on Monday.

And I remember Bill Hill, who came to town from California, racing on those heavy dirt tracks with no power steering and 12 degrees setback on his kingpins!

Neither Jim nor I raced, however. He went into the Navy and became an officer. As I got ready for college, my parents made me promise never to drive one of those things or to smoke pot. I'm now 70, and I have been true to them!

After school I went to work for Montgomery Ward and crewed a lot for my friend Darryl Dawley. He was running a new track, Hartford Speedway. In 1976, they held a contest to attract a new starter. I was wanting to do something more. I went for it.

I was aware what a prominent position a flagger undertakes, and there was only a small Black community in the area. I did have my detractors. But they tried me out and soon saw how very serious I was about taking on the responsibility. I talked with the drivers the way I wanted them to talk with me. I was able to gradually wear them down. I loved it and wanted more.

A couple of years later, I approached Ralph Capitani at Knoxville about the Mystery Feature he held during the Nationals. I told him he needed a Mystery Starter. He smiled and agreed. I did that for a couple years and remember how the announcer Jack Miller would carry on about my huge three-foot square flags, calling them 'Doug's bedsheets.' I custom-sourced them in California, and they became part of my brand.

Then one day, waiting outside the office at Jackson Speedway to see if I would be hired, a call came from Cappy offering me the stand at Knoxville full time. It lasted 36 years.

As you can imagine there were some moments. Early on one year at the start of the Nationals, Wolfgang and Sammy Swindell were on the front row, and Sammy jumped the start big-time. I knew I had to put him to the back. A kind of riot ensued.

Understand that it's 350 miles from Sioux Falls to Knoxville, and I learned that there's a lot of Southern thinking in those miles. We had a rough start.

There were the guys who would toss beer cans at me. They'd sit right behind me, close to the stand, cussing me and saying dumb stuff, using the N-word. I was determined to keep my head down, exercise my authority evenly—and gas it and keep going.

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Then, of all things, Chris Economaki, who I guess was a kind of Mystery Announcer, blurts out, "Ladies and gentlemen, I've just been told that Doug Clark and Doug Wolfgang are best of friends out there in Sioux Falls." That sure didn't help!

Eventually, people started liking me. I was trying so hard to be consistent, firm and fair that the sport's higher-ups began to take notice. I had a pressure-washing busi-

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ness then, so I could take time off. Promoters like Ted Johnson, Shane Carson, Bob Sargent, and even Bubby Jones out there at Perris, California, started calling. I've now flagged in 19 states.

Along the way in this community, you make so many friends. After the intensity of racing, there's sitting down, having a beer, some bullshitting. And it is so hard when the sport can go ugly. It was devastating seeing Darryl Dawley and Roger Larson die together at Knoxville. And I have seen so much more of it.

Of course, a starter is right on top of the action, so I was lucky to be hurt only once. A piece of metal lying on the track that should have been removed flew up and hit my hand, causing a few stitches. But there was a more remarkable moment with my son, Justin. We often worked together. He was flagging a 360 race at Knoxville, and I was assisting. I turned to hand him

a flag—and he was not there! He was on the floor of the stand, unconscious. He had just been struck by a flying side panel. He recovered fine but was surprised some months later when his dentist commented, “That must have been quite the fight you were in. You sure broke your jaw!”

I'm still fairly active, still burning up that 4.5-hour ride to Knoxville to serve as a corner man, as I also do here at Huset's.

All in all, it's been a good and satisfying run for me. I do see room for some improvement, though, especially in the higher levels of the sport.

You probably wouldn't be surprised to hear me say that officials are becoming too reluctant to penalize drivers. Some younger runners—kids who never owned a car or worked on one—are just plain willing to drive a competitor right into the infield. I tried to show respect in what

I did, and they should, too.

Also, it seems that promoters are so worried about having the big teams on the road that they get favored at the pay-off window. They start up front and finish up front. It's understandable, but is it sustainable? Single file sure stinks up the show for the fans, let alone for the track regular who has to start down back.

And wouldn't it be a good idea to bring back the larger fuel tanks in sprint cars so the races could be a little longer? Give that little guy down back a half a chance.

But, you know, on a more local level, things seem pretty good. I just did a lively 410 show out here with 20-23 cars. And there are usually about 30 305s on hand these days.

Come on out and have a look. We'll grab a beer. 🍺