



DAN ROBINSON

In His Own Words

- Born November 25, 1970 in Burlington, Wisconsin

- A racing enthusiast from childhood, Dan Robinson provides a textbook example of how to navigate the way to a top career in the business of motorsports

As told to **Lew Boyd**

Earlier this year I became Vice President of Motorsports Operations for Lucas Oil Products, and these sure are busy times. But I've been a race fan all my life, and I still love it.

As well as overseeing Lucas Oil Speedway in Wheatland, Missouri, I am responsible for the Lucas Oil Late Model Dirt Series, the Midwest Late Model Racing Association, and the Lucas Pro Pulling League. I'm usually in my office during the week, but most every weekend I'm off to the biggest event in our groups. One weekend in October I headed to the Dirt Track World Championship at Ohio's Portsmouth Raceway Park, and the MRLA Championship at Tri City Speedway in Illinois on the way home.

It's been a winding road to get here, but I had a goal, and I tried to stay focused about reaching it. I was just a kid when I began going to Wilmot Speedway in Wisconsin and met Tom Zillmer, whose family was involved with a late model. I was infatuated from the start. Soon I was working in the pits. It all led to a life-long friendship with Tom and, you could say, to a profession. Even then I knew I wanted a career in racing.

By 16, Tom and I began racing our own street stocks in Wilmot. I tried driving myself for a short time, but it was not what really interested me, as I was more into the mechanical aspects of racing. When I graduated from high school, I went to UTI in Phoenix to learn automotive mechanics, which I did as a career for several years in the tiny town of Bassett, Wisconsin, home to Bassett Wheel and just down the road from Five Star Bodies.

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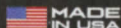
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Then a family situation led me to move to Missouri, close to Bolivar and Lebanon I-44 speedways, which was a big deal at that time. I went right to the pits, working with several local racers, but I was most impressed with Larry Phillips and tried to get to know him. Soon he began to take notice of me, and when his crew chief moved to Charlotte, I went to Larry and asked him for a job. I had developed a good track record and with my racing references, he hired me at the end of the season in 1992. Over the winter, it was off to Volusia, working on his pavement cars, which was valuable experience for me. But the grind of working 12 hours a day, six days a week for \$180 got to be too much. And, honestly, I was homesick for Wisconsin. I moved back. My departure from Larry was not a smooth one. Larry was not happy, and it troubled me.

When I returned to Wisconsin, Tom and I acquired an asphalt modified and went racing for fun. Meanwhile, at 23, I joined an injection-molding company my dad had been at for years. I was a production supervisor.

But I was still unsettled. I couldn't quite forget a girl named Dee Ann I had met in Missouri. And, when an injection-molding position opened up back there in the fall of 1996, I was on it. Dee Ann and I married that December, and work went well there for the next few years. It came easily to me. I progressed from setup person to project engineer, learning a lot about business operations.

On the side, I was going to Bolivar and I-44 speedways on weekends, making contacts that quickly led to becoming a lineup man at both tracks. I made \$60 a night at each and quickly realized that it was a better deal than going broke with a race car.

Relationships are so important in racing. I just couldn't forget what had happened with Larry Phillips. Then one day, doing lineups when he was racing, it was me who had to penalize him to go to the rear. He was really furious. Later I heard that he was at a nearby airport, where he kept his plane, and I went to see him. There he was next to his plane. We talked and talked and worked it out. And, friends again, he took me for a ride. It was a relief, and I will

never let anything like that happen again.

Curiously, it was at the injection-molding factory that I made a real significant contact. Visiting on business one day was Mike Mittler of Mittler Bros. Machine & Tool, the racing-tool and equipment company. Soon Mike and I developed a relationship, and I became a weekend crewman on their NASCAR truck, with Justin Allgaier at the wheel.

I had stayed in the plastics industry as my full-time job, but I was ready to make a career change, which led me for a brief time in 2006 to work for Kluhsman Racing Components, the manufacturer of racing tools and components in Lockwood, Missouri.

All the while, I just longed to get out of the factory environment towards my dream of working racing full time.

As I still had a great relationship with Mittler Bros., I did some freelance marketing for Mittler—press releases, graphics, and some computer work. It really seemed that contacts were lining up and that I was learning the different aspects of the racing trade—shop and track operations, the mechanical side, marketing, purchasing, trade shows, etc.

Meanwhile, back in 2004, I had heard that Forrest Lucas was building a beautiful track in Wheatland, 25 miles away. He had started his oil-products company as a truck driver seeking to preserve his own trucks, and it was only up from there. His track sounded like Daytona to me, and I was all over it.

I knew some people on the ground there, and in 2007, I worked my way in, doing computer work, then running the scoring system, and writing some PR. It was a time to be patient. I concentrated on learning all I could and watched as five general managers came and left. In 2009, I had a shot at becoming GM myself. I knew I was an unknown commodity, but, once again, I provided lots of references from my contacts. I did a phone interview with Forrest, and he gave me a try. I'll admit that at that point I wished I had gone to business school, but I had tried to make up for it by being a constant reader, learning

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as much as I could about business, sales and marketing. I still read the *Wall Street Journal* every day.

By 2010-2011, we had stabilized things. Attendance was up, and we were on the path to success. I am the first to admit that I was getting a lot of credit for what others were doing, but I did make a real effort to surround myself with the best people possible. I had read about—and witnessed—how important that is.

In 2013, we had the opportunity to acquire the Midwest Late Model Racing Association from two of my longtime mentors, Harriett and “Cowboy” Chancellor. I told Forrest that if we did, I would run it, so that was added to my plate. In 2018, I also took over the Pulling Series. During this time we also cleaned up a couple of our other motorsports activities that were not profitable. This past spring, the national Late Model Series also consolidated under me as I was promoted to VP of Motorsports Operations.

Lucas Oil’s biggest business is in over-the-road trucks and problem solvers for passenger cars. It also does government work. Motorsports has always been a significant part of the revenue, but it is also huge in terms of building our brand. Identity with racing really works for us—it’s no accident that there is a checkered flag in our logo. It all started when Forrest sponsored a car years ago, and it’s not about to stop.

Admittedly, racing currently faces some challenges. The supply-chain shortages hurt all of us. It’s far deeper than the tire shortages we felt over the summer, and we’re watching it carefully. And, as we hear so constantly, the cost of racing is really a concern. Everyone hopes that some racing teams won’t be forced to take a break for a while.

Still, the attendance at our track has been good. Last fall we held the USRA nationals in Wheatland with 323 cars in five classes. The grandstand crowd was maybe not quite as strong as we had hoped, but a whole lot of them were in the pits!

All in all, we’re in a good place, focused on building our track and our series. And, as I said at the outset, I’m just loving it. 🏆

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