



Steve Bird

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- Born February 12, 1955, in Lawrence, Massachusetts
- Hard-working, hard-partying, straight talker from backyard tracks who emerged as a starring crew chief in NASCAR's top divisions, and is now owner of SCB Racing Concepts.

An ornery old racer, Oscar Ridlon, promoted races at tracks around New England in the 1950s and 1960s. My dad worked all of them as an official, and I went with him, directly into the racing rabbit hole.

There was a gas station across the street from my school during first grade. Ollie Silva and crew kept the No. 0 cutdown there, and after class I'd head right over to clean the car—and get in the way. I was so obsessed that I didn't mind if they were hard on me. When I screwed up, they'd hook me to the peg on a telephone pole with the back of my pants and leave me hanging until Dad came to pick me up.

Meanwhile, Oscar could be mean as could be, but not to me. I was so driven he saw he could use me. I was hardly high as a hubcap when he had me parking cars. Then it was to the ticket booth and the pit shack. And one day the announcer didn't show up, and Oscar said, "You're on." I'm not even sure my voice had cracked. That lasted four years. Then one afternoon I was announcing up in the booth at Hudson, New Hampshire, and my friend Pete Fian-daca was knocked off the track into the woods. I flipped out and ran down to see if he was okay. I never went back. Already I was into competing, not officiating.

During the week, I had been helping Peter. Operating with next to nothing, he was known as racing's non-stop "Travelin' Man." The minute I was out of school, I went with him full-time, often to five shows a week.

I never drove the race car. That satisfaction came during the winter months, making my living racing snowmobiles. Like with Peter, I was on the road a lot, out to New York, up into Canada, wherever the good money was.

Peter was a cult legend. I learned how to put my passion to work. We never quit. Do what you have to do.

Like the time we were going through New York to the races down near Fort Dix in New Jersey, a front tire blew. The roadside was covered with trashed and abandoned cars. We knew we'd be in trouble if we

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stopped, so we plowed on for 15 miles with that flat until the Jersey line. Anything to get there.

Another night, a 500-lapper at Massachusetts' Riverside Park, we blew early on, borrowed someone's spare engine, plunked it in, and went back out. Anything to finish.

When Monadnock Speedway in New Hampshire opened, they allowed only 301s. We had a 327 and we won. They wanted to puff us. I went to work taking the valve covers off, looking to be smoking about 70 cigarettes. Actually, I was stuffing them into the spark plug holes. It worked. We tested at 289. Anything to win.

A tough modified owner, Bob Johnson, did our motors. He hired me to join him when he became crew chief for a Connecticut Cup team, Race Hill Farms. There was a lot of hard work, screaming and hollering, just like with Peter. But, still so ambitious, I was thrilled to be in big-time auto racing.

I had been used to balancing the wheels about every three weeks. Now, everything came apart. Everything. All the time.

The hard part, though, was the Rebels and Yankees thing. They just didn't like us. Some, like the Wood Brothers, though, were helpful.

Harry Gant did well in our car. But, when Ron Bouchard came on board and we won Talladega, everyone lightened up on us. They knew we were racers.

When the team lost steam, I joined Jay Hedgecock building cars. It was good for me. I began to look at fabricating as finish carpentry. The days of 6011 welding rod were over.

Then Bob Johnson opened another door. Dick Moroso wanted his boy Robbie to go NASCAR Dash racing, and I was brought in as crew chief. I moved to Charlotte. Robbie was a great kid, and we got to be great friends. I learned how important it is for a driver and a crew chief to merge their personalities.

It was an exciting deal. Robbie turned out to be really good. He got a third the first day out at Langley. But he hadn't even

known how to drive with a stick shift. After Langley, I persuaded Dick to buy him a road car with a four speed so we could get racier on starts.

It worked. We moved up to Busch and were second in Busch points in '88 and champions in '89.

I've never been a political type. I spoke my mind. One time I really got to carrying on. When I was with Robbie, a smaller model car was allowed in Busch, and I built one with a three-point rear and a tiny cage. It was fast. In no time I was called to the NASCAR trailer and told not to bring it back. I objected, saying it was built to the rule book. I was told that they were "reading further than those pages." It took me a while to cool down. Guess they didn't like my modified experience.

It was heartbreaking when Robbie died in a road crash in Mooresville.

By now I was more on the radar screen and was making good money. I couldn't believe my lifestyle compared to my days up north. I remember a moment in a radio interview in 1990. I was working with Steve Grissom, and we'd won four races. The interviewer asked the two of us—Alabama Steve with that great Southern drawl and me from the Nawth—how we could possibly communicate. We smiled at each other and responded, "We're both Americans, aren't we?"

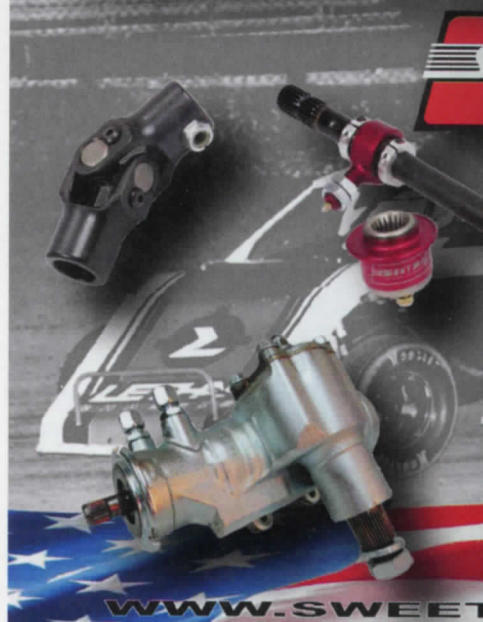
In 1991, I crew-chiefed with Kenny Wallace in a deal with Felix Sabates and Dale Earnhardt, and it sure was fun. Our Busch win in New Hampshire was a favorite. All of my friends were there, and there's still a lot of talk about one helluva party down at Henry J's afterwards.

But there was a tough moment at Loudon, too. Kenny hit that third-turn wall really hard. As often happens, he was hurt more than we knew, and he was actually recovering the rest of the season.

There had been a bad one with Robbie, too. He hit the pit gate at Bristol and went down the backstretch tearing fencing down. That one really scared me.

In mid-1993 I went over to BACE with Bill

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Speedway Illustrated
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Baumgartner. Jack Sprague was driving first, and we almost won Dover. I could feel then I was now in the middle of management things. Bill wanted a new driver, and he asked me to call Johnny Benson, which I did. Johnny joined us and was Rookie of the Year and Dover winner in 1994. The next year we were champions, but we knew Johnny was going to Pennzoil.

I suggested New Englander Randy LaJoie. That worked, too. Two more great Busch championships in a row.

As money became tight with BACE, the folks at GM called me, saying Bill Davis wanted to talk. I moved over there to run the Busch operation with Mike Borkowski, while Dave Blaney was in the Cup car. Mike was a good kid, a road racer, but things just didn't pan out.

After spending some time with David Green, there came a shocker. In 2002, I was diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm. The docs told me no more racing.

That didn't work for too long. I was still driven. So I asked if I could do one-day shows. I joined with Bobby Gill in the Hooters Pro Cup Series. It was super. We won the title two years in a row.

Finally, last year, the aneurysm really acted up. Three months ago, I was on the operating table for nine and a half hours, and there were heart complications with a bypass. It threw me on my ass. I don't remember anything for the two weeks after getting out of the hospital except how much it hurt.

I'm improving slowly. Allyson, my wife, is wonderful, and I wouldn't have made it through without her. I am proud of my career, especially the 45 Busch wins and four titles—and two with Hooters Pro Cup and 24 wins. I'm more careful now, but I'm also proud I never missed a party, though I do wish I remembered a little more of them.

I often think of something my friend Bruce Cohen, formerly a racing journalist, once told me: "You know, Birdie, we lived through the best period of auto racing ever." 🙏