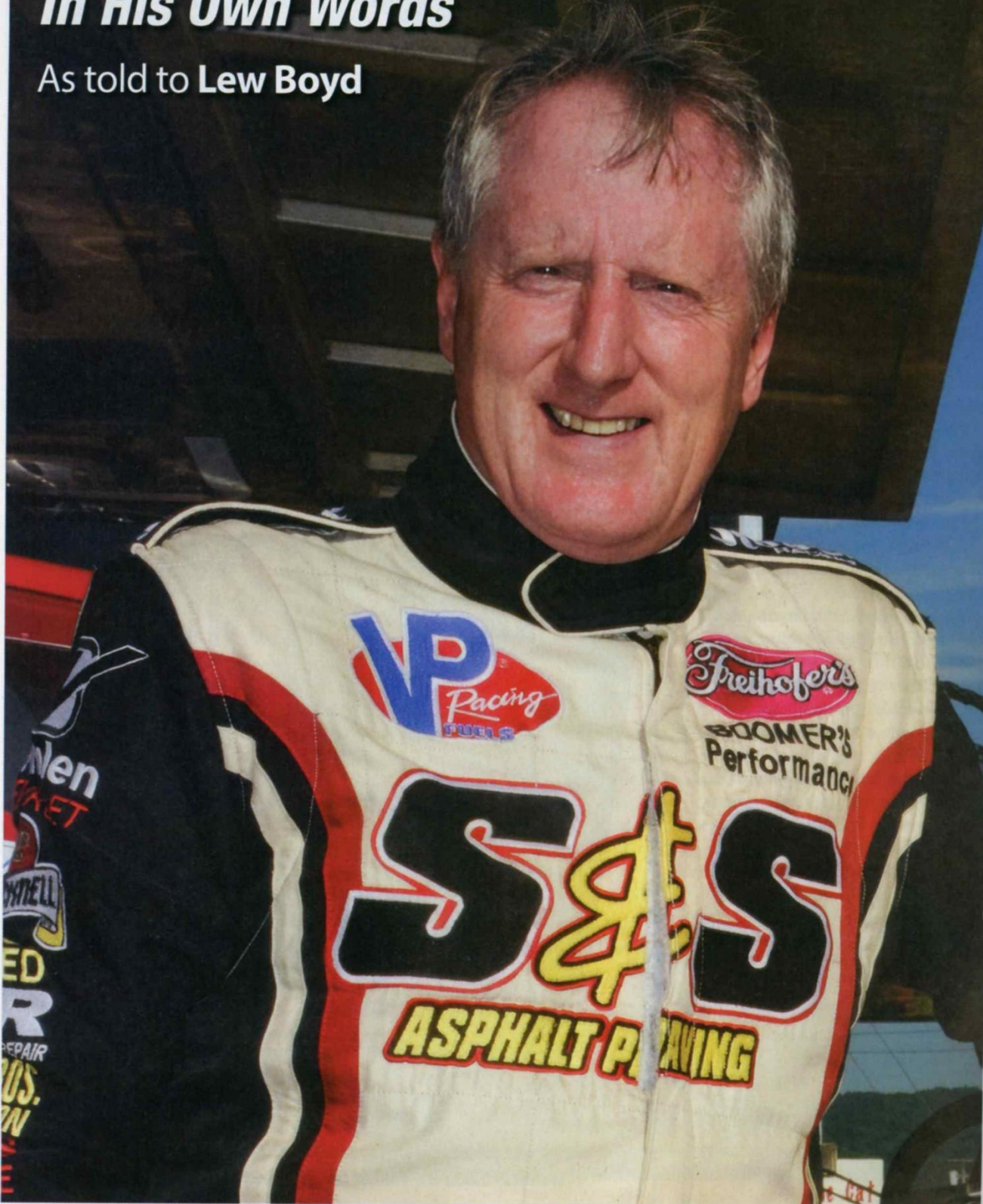


KEN TREMONT JR.

In His Own Words

As told to Lew Boyd



KARL FREDRICKSON

- ***Born November 13, 1961 in Troy, New York***
- ***A gracious and popular center-steer modified driver from upstate New York just now hanging up his helmet after 40 seasons. Competing nearly 3,000 times, he amassed 393 features and 46 championships, almost always aboard family-owned #115s. Quite possibly that would make Kenny and his dad, Ken Sr. (Speedway Illustrated Voice of Experience April 2012), the winningest father/son team of all time.***

As I now retire from racing, I'm realizing how unusual it's all been.

It started so early. Before being allowed into the pits at 14, I was in the stands catching countless races. Even then I could see some guys like Flemke, Reutimann, and Cagle had *method* while others were haphazard lap to lap. I just loved it and knew I was lucky to be there—but now I realize that what was really lucky was the key people who influenced me at key times.

Most of all my dad. When I was growing up, he'd already fielded fast cars at Lebanon Valley and elsewhere for 20 years. He needed all the help he could get, and that included me.

Dad drove school buses, and after school I would go straight to his bus. He'd give me a list of things to do on the car as soon as I got home. He could seem almost tyrannical at times, but he was teaching me the way to do things right.

There was a time late in high school when my interest in racing started to fade a little—you know, girls and things. Dad may

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

have been trying to reignite that interest by putting me in a car right after I graduated. It worked. He had a top-notch driver at the time named Chuck Ely, and it was a twist of fate that Chuck was preparing to retire. He was the perfect guy to coach me as I'd take our second car out in the consi and run a few laps to pick up Lebanon Valley's \$100 for last place.

Chuck would take a cardboard box and push it around a table, explaining motion, stagger, wedge. He'd tell me to always stay straight on the straightaways, and, if I had to change a lane, to do it with a slight move first to alert the guy behind me what I was going to do.

Then I started actually racing, right in the modifieds. It was pretty scary at first; I wasn't sure I was up to it, but we took it a little at a time. Then at the end of '81, Chuck retired.

For '82, we bought a new Troyer and I won some shows on the road. At Lebanon Valley we won the seventh night out, my only one of the year, but with points we did grab the title. And we won it the next four years in a row.

After I became his driver, my relationship with my father didn't change much. I remember him pounding on my door early one Saturday morning saying, "Jack Johnson is beating you. He's already working on his car!"

Aside from Dad and Chuck, there was another major influencer. After high school, I took automotive-tech courses at Hudson Valley Community College. My teacher was a well-known racing figure, Walt Cross. If Dad was teaching me the proper way to maintain a car, Walt was doing the same with engines.

Another surprising advisor was Will Cagle, a fabulous racer but as tough as they come. One time Will told Dad, "I'm going to make that kid fast enough to run right up to my back bumper." I thought for some reason he liked me. He turned to me once and said, "Don't you ever listen to that guy or you'll become as stupid as he is." And, "When you first go to a race track, *always* jump the start. If you get away with it, put it in your pocket for future use. You have

to understand how much a track will stand from you."

By 1985 we were racing a lot—at all the local tracks and the Super DIRT Series. It was in the midst of a racing-technology boom, and expenses were going way up. We were so stretched that our family repair shop, Brookside Garage, was just a means to get a few bucks over to the race cars. It also became a case study in how not to run a business. Fortunately, we had understanding customers. They would typically drop their cars off with a note saying what needed to be fixed; we'd repair them (who knows when!), and they'd send us a check.

We were able to attract some faithful sponsors. I had no luck trying to persuade people to support our racing with fancy proposals. Instead, we relied on my friends, many of whom had businesses, who liked what we were doing and would suggest others who did, too. We've been with George Rifenberg, Joe Wunderlich, Paul Emerick, and George Starchak for years.

Speaking of friends, we were really leaning on them for all the help they could give us working on the cars. Sometimes it seemed just like our repair business. We'd be on the road, come back and drop off one car and pick up another they had waiting for us. I wish we could have paid them.

I recall going to a Series race at Williams Grove, an eight-hour pull. We got there and promptly knocked out a rod bearing. We headed home and arrived at daybreak, exhausted. Dad urged the guys just to help unload before going home. Then he pulled out an oil drain pan and asked if they could help pull the motor—and then the crankshaft. Next, he called our good friend Artie McCarty, asking him if he could deliver the crank for a quick repair. Artie agreed, assuming the shop might be in Albany. It was actually in Tennessee.

There were many, many wonderful moments, though, the greatest being winning the Eckerd 300 at Syracuse in 1999. We'd had #115s there since 1972; it had become the pinnacle for modifieds, but sometimes we hadn't even qualified. But that year we really went after it, with kind of a strategic approach. My friend Brian Bedell and I had very carefully studied all the yellows flown

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

in past 200 lappers there—when they tended to fall, especially the last one in the race. We measured down to a second the time to refuel and all other conceivable data points and came up with a plan. I'm proud to say we carried it out, and I didn't run into anyone along the way! As you might have guessed, my dad didn't show a lot of emotion, but I could tell by his gestures that he was really pleased. And that pleased me.

We were on a roll, and, out of the blue, came something different—the possibility of running a Busch North car from Maine down at Dover. I decided to invite the car owner to Lebanon Valley to watch us run. He came down, and a week later he called and said he just couldn't do the deal. I think I scared him. We never considered doing anything different again.

We were winning, and the continuous racing—March to November and sometimes Florida in February—would grind on for 20 years. Often right around July 4, we'd be on the road for two weeks, every day needing to keep two or three cars going. There was always that extra pressure of running up front. It was unacceptable for us just to be at the track. Sometimes it

was hard not to dream of restful camping for a weekend—or in September thinking, "Thank God it's almost over." But we always kept going. Family and racing run deep with the Tremonts.

By 2005, though, financial stresses made me add teaching at Hudson Valley to my plate. And, wouldn't you know, I was standing right where Walt Cross had taught me. I loved it, and the insurance sure came in handy when the family faced some serious health issues.

In recent years, I've been watching some of the up-and-coming kids, like Tim Hartman and the Buff brothers who are looking good in the sportsman ranks. A lot of people say it must be hard for them because racing is so expensive and increasingly technical. But I disagree. It's equally expensive for old and young and will only continue to be more so. And it may be actually easier these days with everything that is readily available to purchase. And perhaps experience is not as necessary as it once was because you can find so much information on the Internet.

Recently Tommy Corellis came back out of the South and retirement to try one of

our cars at Lebanon Valley for a couple of weeks. Fearless as he may be, he had a struggle trying to adjust to those tricky left-side panhard bars used today. Kids just starting out don't have that problem, because it's all they know.

As for me, as I entered my sixties, I knew the results were often just no longer there. I could look for reasons to blame, but I'm the one in control. I believe I could easily run another 10 years, but we would be progressively slower. I feel fine, but my doctor has told me that, because of concussions, one wrong move could prove really bad.

I already know nothing will ever be as exciting as driving a race car, but I'm comfortable with stepping down. My son Montgomery has been doing some racing, and Dad and I will see where that might go. I'll continue my teaching and working at Brookside. Sometimes I think it would have been fun to build a real business. I also have a couple of significant race cars I'm planning to restore.

As I said at the start, along the way I was too busy to realize what a life I have had, but I am beginning to know now. **FSW**