



Gil Hearne addresses the Flemington Speedway Historical Society in 2017.

Gil Hearne

In His Own Words

- Born June 18, 1939, in Miami, Florida
- Hugely admired in the formative years of modified racing. Roamed up and down the East Coast before settling down in New Jersey as a construction engineer. Motored into the history books as eight-time champion at Wall Stadium.

JACK KROMER

As told to Lew Boyd

Let me say this right away. I once went to write a book. It turned into just names. About a million of them. They were all the people who helped me.

I was the oldest of four down in Miami and was pretty much on my own. But, after watching *To Please a Lady* in 1950, I knew one thing: One way or another, I was gonna be a racer.

Miami was the right place. Jim Rathmann was next door, and Herbie Tillman was

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right nearby. Herbie was a life teacher. He and his wife looked out for me, taught me manners. When he worked on his car, I could see how he analyzed everything. Off the track, his speed was slow and organized. I began to understand the value of a buck.

H.C. Wilcox was nearby, too. He hired me at 11 to tear motors apart. By 15, I was in the assembly shop. He'd take me out to dinner and guide me. He had very fast race cars and got me a job in the construction of Hialeah Speedway.

I began racing there in 1957. I had no money and found out that using the word "I" wasn't too good. When you don't have money, "we" can be a big yes.

In the fall of 1960, Atlanta Motor Speedway had just opened and "we" went to Atlanta to a modified race with a '57 Chevy owned by citrus-juice magnate Norm Edwards. We got fourth. Then it was off to Daytona with about 20 helpers, including Herbie, and we were seventh. That put me into second spot in the 1961 NASCAR Modified point chase.

That's when I went on the road. Herbie told me to follow guys like Bob Malzahn, Spud Murphy, and Pee Wee Griffin who were going north. They were my heroes. Off I went on the circuit.

Joe Chambliss, who had left H.C. Wilcox to work on the Alaska pipeline, came back with a few bucks and joined me. We often slept in a boarding house for \$2.50 a night, living on RC Cola and MoonPies. But Joe could keep us in tires. Then in August our car caught fire in a pit stop at Islip, New York. Joe was badly burned and eventually moved away.

Chasing all those NASCAR shows for points was a blur. Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, New York. Bob Sall and Bob O'Rourke from NASCAR were like my agents. They'd tell me where a race was going to be—maybe like that old drive-in in Menands, New York—and off I'd go. They'd sneak me a few bucks.

Dirt or asphalt surfaces made no difference. We'd even figured out tires. Depending on where we were going, we'd set out

with pavement tires on the car. But we used '37 Ford hubs on the trailer with dirt tires in case we ended up on the clay.

It was not easy going, but, you know, it was my favorite time in racing. To me it's all about people, and at the time everyone trusted each other more and let each other in. There were a lot less keys!

Back then I met three of the most influential people in my life. Through a mutual friend, an old-time racer named Howard Stevens, Bob Rossell and I kind of fell together. Bob's different, like me. We were meant to be together racing, and we were for 33 years. We shared Howard's garages and would go down to the river for lunch and talk, before going back to work on the cars until the early hours. He was a lot like Herbie and should have been an engineer in the space program. He'd look at some problem I was working on, say nothing, and come back an hour later with the perfect, simple solution. He was so deliberate, and I hope some rubbed off on me.

Bob and I also really lucked out to have a friend in Tom Green, a racer who owned an ice-cream plant. Whatever we needed, he supplied. He even had a phone, which I could not easily afford in those early days.

Later in the 1970s, I met Carol Tilghman. I guess I should thank Bob Sall for that because he used to take her bird hunting when she was young. Carol traveled with me for years, very welcome company. I had been alone so often. She also got to be a big helper right at the track. After an eight-year courtship over a million miles, we married. We settled down in New Egypt, New Jersey.

By the 1970s, NASCAR racing in the mid-Atlantic was played out. Also, I was a firm believer in the Tri-State movement, so I couldn't run the high-paying dirt tracks like East Windsor. Money was tight. And then, in 1971, I was in a street accident and was out of commission for almost a year.

That's when Tom Durkin came along, wanting to buy a race car. We hooked up, and I drove for him even while regaining my strength.

It worked out for both of us. Tom had a

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large construction company in Philadelphia and, aside from the racing, he gave me a job and got me into the union. I had never wanted to own a Ferrari, but I sure appreciated the steady paycheck, and it just got better over time. Along the way, he taught me so much about business when I would sit in on things like meetings, doing bid work for projects.

As for Tom, racing's where he could get a release, some enjoyment. I met him one night after a rainout at Wall Stadium, and we made the deal the next day. He was content to pay all the bills himself. We never had to chase money; there was never a name on the car other than his.

Tom wasn't as into traveling around as I was, and we focused on Wall Stadium. It seemed like everything in my life was firming up, and I guess the record would show it. Our cars, all No. 12, liked that 1/8-mile, and so did we. We were together for 20 years.

Even great relationships can have their differences. One of ours was that Tom always wanted to win. Given where I was coming from, second seemed pretty good to me. But I think Tom ended up being pretty satisfied. We had 101 wins, an all-time record at Wall.

By the 1990s, though, it was time. There was a strike at Wall. Tom had had enough, and I went over to Flemington for a show or two. But I thought to myself that I had a good job and, after all, it had been over three decades behind the wheel. I hung it up.

Our son, Jason, is racing modifieds now. He has his head on straight. Things have changed in racing so much with the technology, the necessary equipment, and the huge expense. Jason's got a good car and car owner, and he's content to run five or so times a year. I'm a good watcher, but I'm no good at watching him. It is so natural for me to want to make suggestions, but you can't drive someone else's car. He's smart enough by himself.

I am amazed by what I see when I do go. All I can say is, can you imagine how much help I would need if I was going to get started today? 🙄