



JEFF BLOOM

(Through the eyes of Linda Bloom) By Lew Boyd

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• **Jeff and Linda Bloom are one of racing's prominent power couples, together navigating a long and highly successful but treacherous path through life. Here Linda speaks of Jeff, a pavement specialist who racked up wins in three Little 500s, in USAC's Silver Crown, sprint and stock car divisions, and hundreds of weekend features.**

My husband, Jeff, is as strong and as focused as they come. From April to October, he's a race car driver, and November and December a hunter. He also enjoys fishing in his spare time.

Back in 2012, at 63 he was very badly injured and burned in a sprint car crash. But 12 weeks later, he got back in the woods and shot another buck! It wasn't easy. His trigger finger was useless, his middle finger barely bendable. Jeff's now 76, racing for the 59th consecutive year, and has 84 bucks on his hunting wall of fame.

It all started with the two of us in 1973. We've both been in racing all of our lives, and I was working for the *MARC Times Racing News*, the paper my parents started. His car owner's wife wanted my sister to meet this 25-year-old guy, Jeff Bloom. He was handsome and had won the Little 500 as a rookie the year before in his dad's car, Ole Yeller. I knew about that because I'd typed the story. Jeff and I had never actually been introduced to each other!

He dominated a stock car race at Hartford, Michigan, and I went to congratulate him. He laid one great big kiss on me. He does like to impress, but he admitted later that he was just trying to avoid interacting with the trophy girl. Two days later, he brought me ice cream in the grandstands at Galesburg Speedway. We were married five months later, and it's now been almost 52 years.

That first summer he won eight races, mostly in stock cars. Then in 1975, Jeff's

dad bought a Smokey Yunick stock car, and it was off to Texas Motor Speedway for a USAC stock car race. A promised sponsorship fell apart, and someone lost a transmission a straightaway ahead. Running fourth, he ran over some parts and went into the wall. It took four guys to load him into a sprint car at Winchester six days later, but he finished second, one of his record 29 second-place finishes there.

It was the open-wheel cars that really scared me at first, but I knew I'd married a guy with a lot of talent. They really were his thing, and we did so many miles with our three daughters chasing these races. He won hundreds of them.

I think the one race that impressed me most was his second Little 500 win in 1977. He was out front by eight laps when he was rammed into the fence, bending his left-rear wheel. Everyone went to work, and, even with losing 12 laps from the wreck, he won it with a lap and a half to spare.

In 1981, Jeff was scheduled to run Lindsey Hopkins' backup car in the Indy 500, but Roger McCluskey totaled the primary car in practice. And that same season he had an amazing run at the Pocono 500, sitting straight up in a Silver Crown car and tantalizing the rear-engine Indy cars—until the motor blew while running fifth. By 1989, Jeff was mostly driving his own cars and taking care of them full time. We live way out in the country and it was hard to find help out here. But about the same time, women were finally let in the pits.

I jumped in and started to help, mostly stagger and fuel at first. Previously, I'd just been in the stands quietly taking care of kids, but now, as "free help," I got a little more involved in the pits. Sometimes we disagreed, which caused some tension between us. In fact, some people thought we were kind of a sideshow. But we had to be careful not to get too edgy with each other because we had such a non-stop schedule. I felt like I was going to work on Monday to rest!

One Saturday night at Auto City in Michigan in 1991 we won big time, but there was a plume of smoke going across the finish line. We were planning to run Salem, Indiana, the next day. We were going to skip it,



Jeff and Linda in Victory Lane at Algona, Iowa, in 2010. (Bloom Collection)

but while driving home, Jeff made a plan to fix the car, gathered up the tools and parts (and flashlight!) we would need and took right off for the six-hour all-night ride to Indiana.

I drove the motor home, and Jeff was in the trailer working on the motor, replacing two pistons. We communicated by walkie talkie and CB. He kept yelling at me to slow down. He was bouncing all over the place back there. Meanwhile, I was so worried about getting to Salem too late to race, I told my daughter to turn off the CB and I stood on the gas. We did arrive in time and prepared enough to lead the feature again, until the motor blew.

The next weekend there was a two-day show at Winchester, Indiana. Again, we were out front in the main event on the first day and again we blew up. This time we figured out that there was a blockage in the cooling system. We rushed home, put in another engine and were really pleased to be running out front with no problems. There was a caution with six laps to go—and the throttle linkage broke. We were done.

It was so painful to have led four races and have three costly DNFs. But we almost always made money with Jeff's racing. The worst time, though, was that fire in 2012. At a combination ISMA/Must See program at Berlin, Michigan, Jeff had an oil-cooler fitting break, and oil got on the right-rear tire, sending him backwards into the third-turn wall in a complete blaze of fire. It was horrifying. It took five agonizing minutes before fellow racers Jason Blonde and Aaron Pierce could pull him out. He was severely burned and so broken that, on top of all the rest, a crushed pancreas turned him into a Type 1 diabetic that day.

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

While recuperating Jeff did talk about quitting, but I doubt he remembers because he was so full of medication.

People have asked me how I felt about his racing again after such a terrible accident. I'm a Christian and believe things are beyond our control. His life is his choice, and it is my duty to support him. I don't want him to die, but, if he goes while racing, he'd be doing something he loves so much. We had a lot of fundraisers that were really helpful, and Tony Stewart was especially generous.

It seemed kind of inevitable he would go back, and we were off to Anderson eight months later.

I didn't notice anything different about Jeff's driving afterwards. He's just got more grit than anyone in the world. I love him and love to watch him race. I'm never afraid of what he's going to do in that car. He has that sixth sense. It's the other guy...

In 2021, there was a double feature at the Speedrome in Indianapolis, and, at 71, Jeff snatched the first 35-lapper going away, making him the only sprint car driver to score feature wins in seven consecutive decades. The next day was a 100-lapper, and another guy ran all four tires below the inside yellow line, lost it and ran right over our front end. That put us out of the race while running fourth and just cruising. The downside is that it seemed to start a bad luck streak that carries on still today.

I really don't understand just what it is that keeps him going through times like this. If things weren't going the way I wished, I'd just put it all behind me and play with the grandkids. They're at the top of Jeff's list, too, but so is racing. He just breathes it and has had alcohol in his blood all his life, even though he doesn't drink. He's so focused on achievement and good at what he does—a jack of all trades and master of all of them, too.

He used to say he'd race for another 25 years. Now he says he'll continue until either his reaction time or eyesight fail him.

That's not likely to happen too soon. As we talk, he's out in the shop preparing for Sandusky, Ohio, this weekend. **FSW**