

SHANE CARSON

In His Own Words

As told to Lew Boyd

- Born July 21, 1954 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
- A popular, phenomenally proficient open-wheel specialist, he won nationally in both sprinters and dirt Champ Cars over a 27-year career in racing's toughest era. Today, known as sprint car racing's ambassador, he is a constant presence on the circuit—as he would say—“promoting the future by preserving the past.”

PHOTO BY DICK BERGGREN

My dad never drove a race car, but he might as well have. In 1957, when I was three and one of four kids, Dad gave up a good-paying job to promote races at the Oklahoma City Fairgrounds under the name Mar-Car. The events went really well, progressing from modifieds to supers to sprint cars, and, I believe, became the biggest weekly show in the country, with 8-9,000 in attendance.

I knew I was going to be a racer. When I wasn't selling programs, I was racing bicycles and then motorcycles. But when I won the local motocross championship, and my dad realized how serious I was, he put his foot down. "No more! Only on four wheels."

In 1973, when I was 18, my older brother, Scott, already a racer, was moving to another car. He and my dad gave me Scott's old one—a six-cylinder open-wheeler. There were often 90 cars in the pits, but it was a good car and I knew everyone there and their styles. Even then, I knew that watching is learning. When I started, I was allowed to run only the consi for a couple of nights before being qualified to start at the back of the heat. But the sixth night I won the feature and by year end was Rookie of the Year. I thought, "Maybe I can make a go of this." My dad thought so, too, and said that I was going fast enough that I needed an even better car, and he got me one.

So, I began racing a lot. Just a couple of years later, after a night's racing in Tulsa, LaVern Nance asked me to hot lap his sprint car. I couldn't believe it. Neither could the fans. They all stayed to watch the wreck. As I climbed in, I looked up at them—and dug deep. All I had to do was to go about 50 miles an hour faster than I ever had before. Apparently, Nance liked what he saw and asked me to join him at an IMCA event in Denver the next weekend. I asked him where Denver was.

That's when it all really began. I've never had a job outside of racing, I went with Nance in '77, and soon there was a double feature over at Phenix City in Alabama. Doug Wolfgang won one and I got the other. At the end of that '77 season Doug left Bob Trostle to go with Speedy Bill Smith,

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and Bob Trostle turned to me. "Sure!" I said.

So, at 22, my future wife Debbie and I moved to an apartment in Knoxville. After a breakout season winning the Knoxville season title, NSCA title, Iowa-Nebraska series and 25 main events, Trostle let me go near the end of 1978. I was disappointed but picked up a ride in the Nickles Brothers car out of Lima, Ohio, for the Busch Bash-World of Outlaws season finale at Eldora.

They were good guys. In fairness, it was maybe not the best-equipped car in the place. But we won it. I remember walking back to the pits with \$10,000 from Earl Baltes and hearing some commotion in the pits. The Nickles guys were so thrilled about winning that they were jumping up and down on the roof of their van. They totaled it. Needless to say, I called Trostle and told him all about it. He didn't have much to say, but there was a lot of buzz after that win. It landed me in the seat of the CK Spurlock/Loretta Lynn sprint car the next spring.

The road was becoming our way of life. Debbie and I married in 1980. We made our home in Oklahoma City, but we weren't there much. We were traveling around, sleeping in our '73 Chevy Suburban. I remember going out to a show at Ascot, and we asked Bob East if we could park at his place. When we got there, he looked at us kinda surprised and asked, "But where's the motorhome?"

One way or another, it was constant racing but ever-changing at the same time. So many different owners, so many different states. I spent a couple years on the Outlaw tour, 1982 and 1983, both in the top five, won the Hutchinson Kansas Nationals in '85 for Pat Suchy, and the NCRA 100" dirt Champ Car championship in '86.

Debbie and I were getting by, but in 1980 we decided to augment our income by promoting some World of Outlaws races back home at Oklahoma City. I revived the name Mar-Car, dormant since Dad had joined the Fair Board. Dad was dead set against our entering the promotional game and offering a \$12,500 purse. But Debbie and I thought otherwise. By this time, I knew the Outlaws as well as I knew

that track in Oklahoma City, and the two of us made it happen. Dad ended up teaching Debbie all the back-office duties.

We usually did two shows a season, and that lasted 22 years until the track deteriorated too much to deliver a good program. At first, I had also raced in our events. Then one night when I was driving back to the pits after qualifying, I saw a guy jumping over the fence onto the track. I gunned it over there, killed the motor, and started yelling. The guy went back over the fence, but I realized I had to concentrate on the promoting at our own shows.

During that period, I saw myself as a kind of driver for hire who would come in and have a reasonable shot at winning everywhere. I tried very hard to be careful not to be a costly crasher. Also, it was clear that promoting races was going to be in our future, and I didn't want to jeopardize that by making enemies with other competitors.

Along the way, though, there were the inevitable incidents. I earned a bed in that little hospital in Belleville [Kansas] with broken vertebrae after a wreck out there. And on the first lap of the '81 Knoxville Nationals I tangled and flipped down the frontstretch, ending up inside the car, unconscious, all tightly wrapped by the safety-fence wire. I was so lucky they got me out before any fire.

By 1989, however, I had fallen into a great situation. I went to work in James Helms' car on the NCRA circuit that now featured sprint cars. The ride lasted right up to 2000. Sprint car racing can be cutthroat, and it is so hard to find a sense of security. But with that team we had complete mutual confidence; it was the most comfortable owner relationship I've ever had. I never had to worry where I would go if things fell apart. You've gotta fit right in a car. When you do, it shows. We were top 10 in points for all 10 years. When James fell ill and eventually passed, I felt it was time to quit and was planning to spend more time back in Oklahoma.

That's when Brad Noffsinger called and asked me to come to Milwaukee and try out instructing at the Petty Driving Experience. I went up there, and Richard walked up to me and asked if I was "that sprint car

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guy.” “Don’t go wrecking my cars,” he said. Anyway, I kinda liked it and asked Brad if I could do more. He sent me the whole schedule—200 days a year at 20 different tracks. It was back on the road.

That went on for five years, and along the way I also did some two-seater open-wheel driving. One time I got to drive Tony Stewart’s dad around Indy. When we were done, he turned to me and said, “I can’t believe they let you do this.” Honestly, I couldn’t either.

After that I got a call from the World of Outlaws. They were going through a tough patch with a competing sanctioning body, and I think they needed someone with experience with their series. I liked that they were then located in Norman, Oklahoma, near home. I became Vice President of Race Operations. After a few seasons they moved to Charlotte. I did some commuting, but by 2010, that was getting old. I knew my home was Oklahoma City, especially now. Our daughter, Kristen, had

had our first grandchild, and that’s where I wanted to be.

I never got far from sprint car racing and became very involved with the Sprint Car Hall of Fame first as a Board member and now on the Advisory Board. Some people have referred to me as the sport’s ambassador, and I guess that may be true. I do see myself as someone trying to promote the future by preserving the past. I’ve been nominated for the Tom Schmeh award at the Hall of Fame this year, which is a great honor, particularly since Tom and I have been friends since the establishment of the Museum in Knoxville in 1991.

You know, being at the races so much even now, I think about the kids and how I got started. I was certainly lucky having a dad who was a promoter and who was willing to provide cars for Scott and me. And I guess I was lucky that my name made me more visible, which may be why LaVern Nance watched me at Tulsa. But it seems to me that motivated kids, boys or girls, who

race today are pretty lucky, too.

I am just now back from the Lucas Oil Tulsa Shootout, the pre-Chili Bowl for kids and their micro sprints. It ran for five days with an astounding 1,600-plus entries from 900 cars. Some of the drivers looked so good, and they were being analyzed by all kinds of eager owners and their scouts.

So many of them also have something else going for them, just as I did. I remember a couple years ago sitting at the pit gate at Ocala, Florida, with Bubby Jones, watching the cars come in. He turned to me and asked, “Do you know what car owners today are called?”

I thought about it and answered, “Rich?”

He said, “No. Dads.” So many of them these days are willing to step up and help their kids along.

It’s a great and promising time for our sport. **FSW**