

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE



JOYCE STANDRIDGE

In Her Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

LENNY BATYCKI

- ***Born September 3, 1950, in Pittsfield, Illinois***

- ***A farm girl who faced down every challenge to become one of America's most prolific and respected motorsports journalists. There is no corner of our sport she does not touch with her disarming humor, humility, and insight.***

Well, I'm a lifer, and I think like a lot of people who end up spending their whole life around racing, it wasn't planned at all.

We lived on a farm, and there wasn't much money. We had no TV set until I was seven, no indoor plumbing until eight. Our world was really small, and the biggest thing in it was Saturday night at the races. Mom and Dad loved to go, and it was cheap. Back in the 1950s, you know, you could go for a quarter. So our heroes weren't going to be people we picked up on television. They were our granddad, on whom we thought that the sun rose and fell—and the race drivers.

Every Sunday afternoon, my sister, Kathy, and I would recreate the races we had seen the night before on our tricycles in our gravel driveway. But our racetrack came to a sudden closure when she did a slide job on me. All these many, many years later I'm still getting little bits of gravel out of my knee. And, of course, she got away with it because she was absolutely adorable, so my mom couldn't get mad at her. Yeah, you can do a slide job with a tricycle, but it's hard to pull it off, and I've not been a fan of poor slide jobs ever since.

Because my dad didn't have boys, from the time we were really little he wanted us to learn how to do things, how to be self-sufficient. He never wanted us to have to depend on a man or anybody else. We were taking tire pressure measurements by

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age six. We knew how to check oil, how to put water in the radiator—just all those common-sense, easy things to do.

We lived in Florida for a while, and my dad worked on a race car down there. It was driven by a guy by the name of Harold Johnson, allegedly a cousin of Junior Johnson. Harold had a racoon whose name was Rocky living up in the eaves of the garage. When he and the guys were working in the engine compartment, Rocky would climb on the air cleaner and chew on something or look at them. If they were on the creeper, he'd get down there with them and steal cigarettes out of their pockets. So I remember Rocky better than I remember Harold. Probably understandable. When you're a kid, that's what sticks with you.

When we came back to Illinois, one of my favorite drivers was Francis "Wild Man" Kelly. Mr. Kelly had a very long and very successful career, and one of the most traumatic nights ever was the first time that my racer husband, Rick, beat him. Because I was loyal to both, I had trouble comprehending that Mr. Kelly had human weakness and could be beaten. But, on the other hand, there was the pride of knowing that Rick was getting racy. If he could beat Mr. Kelly, what couldn't he do? It was so cool that the two got to be pretty good friends, even before Mr. Kelly hung up his helmet and stopped racing.

My father and a partner had started a business repairing banged-up cars. They put Kathy and me into service, doing things like taping cars off before they were painted. It was a few years before they would let us do the actual painting, but there was never anything about this being a boys' job or a girls' job. I didn't know anything different until probably high school. Then it got to be an issue because, you know, there were always the teenaged idiots who are looking to cut people down. Even then, before social media, Kathy and I never talked about what we did on weekends. But we never stopped it, and I was becoming pretty good with my hands. I was so into it, because, of course, I wanted to be a race car driver.

Louise Smith and a few other women were out there at the time, but basically no one was beating the door down. I would

have if I'd had one scintilla of talent. In high school there was a simulator used in drivers' education that would time your reflexes. Beyond any doubt, I had the worst reflexes in the class.

How I tried to overcome that! I worked at it every spare second. I tried what drag racing guys do to improve their launch time. I just got worse. So that killed that career real fast. I was not going to be behind the wheel, but in an odd sort of a way it's partially the reason why all these years later I'm still a huge fan of race car drivers. They can do something I can't.

But no way was I *not* going to be involved in racing. I became an official. Bill Oldani, a business partner of Indy 500 winner Rodger Ward, introduced me to Christy Zwaagstra, USAC's late model scorer. He took me under his wing. When I did some serial scoring for the first time, he realized I was actually good—really good—at scoring, despite my terrible reflexes behind the steering wheel.

By 19, I was working at USAC events and at local tracks as well. I would be the only female in the pits, and Security took me from the gate to the stage or judges' stand. If you happened to be one of the few women scoring then, you had better have iron kidneys. Because they weren't going to let you do anything until intermission.

Scoring races was something you had to really *want* to do. It was hard to take getting yelled at at that age. Being called stupid was especially tough when it came from someone you thought you respected. I managed that for probably about 10 seasons, but two things brought it to an end. One was that I got tired of the abuse, and I found out if you are a writer, you get yelled at—but you get yelled at less.

But the second thing was one dusty day I scored a race with 30 cars going 75 laps—and the yellows counted. That was some challenge. When we finished, I realized that had been the max anyone could handle. I couldn't have done 76 laps. But, once I achieved that level, I kind of lost interest.

A seed had been planted in college at Illinois Central by a professor who told me I

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might be a professional writer if I worked at it. I dabbled in it a bit and then wrote a letter to Dick Berggren at *Stock Car Racing* magazine, the precursor of *Speedway Illustrated*. He was so welcoming and became a mentor—and my boss. Perhaps Dick thought he kind of needed a girl's voice. I just never really was into gender, so I don't know if that entered into it or not. But they were looking for someone with a sense of humor, and I guess I qualify.

Dick sent me to interview Richard Petty at a Cup show at Michigan. I was over the moon and starstruck at the same time. Subsequently, Dick asked me if I wanted to become one of the magazine's primary NASCAR writers, but with kids and all at that time, lots of travel wasn't in the cards. The relationship has continued right up to today, though. *Stock Car* became *Speedway Illustrated*, and I have remained an active contributor and columnist.

That, in turn, led right into another passionate chapter: writing books. I've done a number of them, including with Ken Schrader, Kenny Wallace, and a couple on sprint cars. You can imagine what writing books about the Kennys was like—some of the best experiences of my life. But writing books is so much work. I can do an article

in a week, but a book is a year's commitment.

It may have been a mistake for me not to go on the road full time for Dick Berggren back then, but, you know, my husband's racing was so much fun for me I didn't want to be missing it. Rick was winning a lot. He came from a racing family, and our entire courtship consisted of rebuilding his sprint car over a winter. We were married just four months after we met. I was 22. You know, sometimes you just meet the right person and you know it. You just know it. Our 50th anniversary is in April.

Like his brothers Rob, Randy, and Ron, Rick and I ran at Little Springfield in Illinois until it closed. It was mostly sprint cars for us early on, but we got into late models because we could race five or six nights a week, and you couldn't do that with sprinters. Rick, a tough old bird, is still racing, even if not in the best of health. He's always been successful at being innovative, out of the box. That's been important because we've never had sponsorship over about \$1,000. It touched my heart to watch his 50 years of racing be commemorated four years ago at Jacksonville Speedway.

I guess I have seen a lot of what racing offers. I've done hundreds of columns, been to thousands of races, flagged at Bear Ridge up in Vermont, ridden along with a friend in those outrageous stock cars in England, and rushed 100 miles an hour to the hospital after Rick took a sky-scraping ride out of Shepps Speedway. But something is bothering me these days. I encounter so many young guys who just think about themselves and what racing does for them, rather than contributing anything whatsoever to racing itself. That old sense of community has become a dysfunctional family.

A little while back I wrote a book about the four Standridge brothers' racing, each so talented and, yes, so passionately devoted to the betterment of the sport. I worked on it every waking minute, even when Rick pointed out I wasn't going to make any money on it. I did it because I loved those people's lives so much.

The *Speedway Illustrated* readers have no idea of how much they mean to me, too. I love when someone comes up to me and says they've been reading my work since they were kids. I can tell I've helped "raise" some pretty awesome people. 🍷