

John Mahoney Photo



Rip Williams

by Norm Bogan

In 1978, when Rip Williams began a sprint car driving career with the California Racing Association (CRA), his father Bob stated that if you want to be somebody in racing, you need to score 100 wins. Since most of the heroes of that time were only near the half-century mark, Rip realized that he had quite a steep hill to climb.

From meager beginnings, Williams struggled just to keep his race car on the track.

Building his own steel-block engine and purchasing a used chassis with a small collection of spare parts, Rip would load it all on to a pickup and dune buggy trailer owned by Jim Quick, a high school buddy, and head to the famed Ascot Park dirt track in Gardena, California.

As an All-League high school running back, Rip established a very competitive demeanor and arrived at Ascot determined to make the most of what talents he had. Veteran racer Tony Simon sensed something special with Williams and acted as a sort of mentor. He advised Rip on how to 'read' track conditions and move to a better line on the track, and how to adjust the chassis. Rip heeded the advice since Simon had been pretty successful for a guy with a hook on one arm.

During a long battle for the 1978 Rookie of the Year honors, late in the season, at Chula Vista, a bad crash damaged the frame of his car. CRA President Gary Sokola approached Rip after the race and gave him a name and phone number to contact. Rip called the number and the voice on the other end was aware of his bent chassis and told Rip to bring it to the shop so they could fix it. Williams explained that he had a lack of money and was told that they would 'work something out'.

Arriving at Corsa Works, Williams discovered the voice on the phone was long-time Indy mechanic Hank Paronelli, father of a fellow CRA rookie driver. Hank had Bob Meli working in the shop and instructed Meli to "fix-it." Bob spent the day getting it straightened and aligned. As Rip loaded up his repaired race car, Paronelli informed Rip that it was a donation for the season. For 1978, Rip Williams and Ric Paronelli were named CRA Co-Rookies of the Year. This was a great lesson in the goodness of fellow racers.

When future brother-in-law Norman "Bubby" Jones moved west, he imparted much wisdom about the focus and perseverance necessary to consistently run up front. Racing against Bubby every week made Rip a better driver.

In 1982, Williams was named CRA Most Improved Driver and then scored his first victory the following year at the wheel of his own car in the 50-lap "Salute to Indy" at Ascot. He edged mentor Tony Simon after racing wheel-to-wheel most of the event. Williams has always focused on winning races and not chasing points, but he secured the CRA car owner championship for Frank Lewis in 1990 and the Sprint Car Racing Association (SCRA) car owner's title for Jan Gaffney in '94. He finally claimed the United States Auto Club/California Racing Association (USAC/CRA) driver's title in 2004, along with the owner's championship for friends Jack and Sharon Jory.

Off the racetrack, Williams loved playing football, and his three sons (Cody, 19, Austin, 18, and Logan, 13) have all been football players. Much credit goes to Rip's wife, Becky, who toted the kids to Saturday games while Rip was prepping for the races. Williams started a new business about two and one-half years ago, Full Throttle Lift and Equipment Rental. He currently has 111 scissors lifts that are rented to commercial contractors.

Aside from football, his business and his racing, Williams has been helping his boys get going in racing. They have come up through the USAC Ford Focus program driving for veteran midget car racer Wally Pankratz. The boys always worked on their dad's cars at the shop and in the pits. The sons have saddled up in a sprinter at practice sessions. When Rip suffered a broken foot in a 2008 season-opening crash, his owner of 12 years, Jack Jory, said,

"Let's put Cody in the car." When Rip returned mid-season, Jory said, "we'll run two cars." Cody was named the North American Non-Winged Sprint Car Poll Co-Rookie of the Year by the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 2008, and Rip jokes that Cody made the Hall of Fame in his first year and it took him 31 years. This year, Austin joins the Jory team in a third car. Logan, meanwhile, will be under the tutelage of Wally Pankratz.

Rip feels good that his sons have been there learning and working to prepare the race cars. That time in the shop is an opportunity for father and sons to bond. It also allows dad to give one-on-one time with each, passing on knowledge gained through hard knocks and also gleaned from some of the masters of the sport. Cody is now learning to fabricate midget cars at the Edmunds facility. Seeing Cody being tutored takes Williams back to his years with engine builder Ralph Tracy, who treated Rip like the son he never had. Another force in Williams' career is Rich Atkins, who has been in the pits with Rip since the beginning in 1978 and for all the annual tours east.

Two accomplishments during Rip's career stand out. First, at Las Vegas several years ago, Williams crashed in the heat race and damaged the car too severely for trackside repair. Long-time friend Mike English offered his seat in the Priestley sprinter, but the 'Ripper' had to start the feature at the tail of the field. Williams came through the pack and seized the victory in a car he had never driven. Also, there was the 1996 Oval Nationals with its Twin-20s format. After winning the first 20-lapper, the field was then inverted according to their finish. Starting on the back of the grid, Rip maneuvered through the myriad of cars with some of the country's best non-winged sprint car drivers and swept the second feature.

When queried about tough competitors, Williams remembered that when the old Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC) took on the CRA troops in Civil War races at Ascot and Calistoga, it was an awesome lineup. The events featured names like Chuck Gurney, Gary Patterson, Jimmy Sills, LeRoy Van Conett, Jimmy Boyd, Johnny Anderson, Mike Andretta and Rendy Boldrini - quite the lineup featuring many of the greats from northern California. In 1984, Williams claimed the North/South Civil War Series Championship, besting most of the above-mentioned drivers plus some stellar performers from his own backyard in southern California.

The Yorba Linda resident, who was born on May 5, 1956, continues racing with the USAC/CRA sanctioning body today, with its home track of Perris Auto Speedway in Perris, California. To date, he is credited with 106 career non-winged sprint car feature wins with CRA, USAC, SCRA, USAC/CRA, and open competition. You can bet that Bob Williams is looking down and saying, "My boy is somebody!"

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