

Tony Martin Photo



Jack Elam

by Jimmy Jones

Jack Elam's impact on the sport of sprint car racing is more than just profound; it is legendary. From the early days of building four-bar sprinters to today's championship-winning chassis, he and his team at J&J Auto Racing in McKenzie, Tennessee, have produced championship caliber sprint cars for notable drivers such as Bobby Ward, Chuck Amati, Donny Schatz, Fred Rahmer and the Swindell brothers, Jeff and Sammy.

Jack proved to be a master-craftsman, and his cars became a favorite of the racers in the Mid-South area. In 1966, at Chuck Amati's suggestion, Jack paid a visit to A.J. Watson in Indianapolis and, with a set of plans and Watson's blessing, went home and built his first four-bar sprinter with Bobby Ward. Hill and Elam became partners in H&E Engineering from 1969 until '72. Sprint cars became the focus with Jack acting as the main fabricator. In 1972 Jack acquired sole ownership of H&E Engineering and moved it to the current location in McKenzie and formed J&J. It wasn't long before J&J cars began taking the checkered flag as feature winners and the little shop in Tennessee was noticed nationally. With numerous victories by such noted drivers as Sammy Swindell, Norman "Bubby" Jones, Rickey and Clarence "Hooker" Hood, Ron Shuman, and Bobby Davis, Jr., the demand for J&J's quickly accelerated. Famed mechanic Kenny Woodruff was also an early believer and endorsed Jack's products. Their 100-inch Championship Dirt cars also became very popular in Plains States competition.

"Ever since I started in the fabrication business, my goal has been to provide a product that the customers will be happy with. The racing part of it just picked up and no matter if we are building them one piece, part or complete chassis, we still look to please the people we do business with," said Elam.

"The Hall of Fame selection is a reflection of all the people that we've worked with during the years. It's the people that we started racing with here in the mid-south and the guys that raced nationally that gave us the chance to build them a car. Loyalty from those people and the success of the drivers and owners we've worked with has spread the word of the quality of service we try to provide. It's the people that matter. All the people that have been in our shop in McKenzie, either building the cars or buying the parts helped make this opportunity possible. Even the people that just pick up the phone and call us from around the world and order parts play a role in it. I'm honored to be selected to join some of the very best people that have truly impacted the sport of sprint car racing," said Elam.

Elam was raised in the west Tennessee town of Greenfield. There his work ethic and superb craftsmanship was molded while working for his father in a local blacksmith shop. During those early years he spent countless hours pounding steel and honing his skills to razor sharp perfection. He learned the benefits of hard-work and unwavering devotion to quality. Jack's future was forged through fire and steel in that blacksmith shop in Greenfield.

Jack began building sprint cars in 1964. Les Hill, who ran a manufacturing company, recognized Jack's talent in crafting machinery when he helped build some plastic injection molding equipment for him in the senior Elam's shop.

When Hill's company decided to branch out into the speed equipment business, Les hired Jack to work full time building race cars. Although Jack didn't have the slightest working knowledge of race cars, he was a quick study. At the Auto Speed Supply shop, Jack learned his trade working shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Jackie Howerton, Chuck Amati, Ellis Palasini, and Bobby Ward. Jack gives credit to CAE's Jim Culbert for his support and assistance in building those first cars and to Les Hill for pushing him to create what is now the senior sprint car manufacturing company in the world.

Elam gained a reputation for turning out quality race cars and with the ways of a Southern Gentleman, he mentored those who owned, worked on, and drove his creations. At the time, Jack along with three employees, including Mike Brown - son of famed car owner M.A. Brown - was turning out about 30 cars a year. Along the way, Jack has also turned out midget cars, United States Auto Club (USAC) Silver Crown cars and pavement sprint cars.

A typical year at J&J (with 14 employees), will see around 200 cars roll out of the back door in McKenzie. Those cars will go anywhere from Brownsburg, Indiana, to Hanover, Pennsylvania, to Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. After nearly 40 years, J&J cars are still in demand and business is booming.

Things may change in this microwave society we live in today, but what won't change at J&J is their dedication to safety and quality, which have been and always will be the cornerstones of their business and, as Jack says, it's a never-ending process. "Racing is always changing and when it's your business to keep up with the changes, you have to stay plugged in. Today's racing; the big picture might look quite a bit different from when we started. The similarities are that it's still fundamental racing. The first car to finish wins. The winner usually has the best handling car. Today, just like 30 years ago, it's about having a driver and mechanic working together to get the car to respond in a way that enables them to make the best laps. Things will continue to change and there are always crazy ideas of how sprint car racing can get better, etc. We're thrilled to be involved in the sport and enjoy the challenge of maintaining our status as one of the best car builders in the sport."

Jack's sister Faye Garrett and wife Bonnie are key to Jack's continued success with J&J Auto Racing.




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