



Don Shepherd

“One time, Herk and I popped a motor somewhere out on the road and so we went down to the junkyard and got some rods and some pistons and went back and put it back together. The old car just kept on a running.”

Herk, of course, is Jim Hurtubise. The teller of the tale is Don Shepherd, and that quote sums up his career about as well as anything. Don Shepherd was never a rich car owner but he always attracted the top talent and helped mold some of the most legendary racers in the sport.

Don was first introduced to racing when his brother A.J. started racing jalopies with the likes of Billy Mears and Harold Leep around their hometown of Wichita, Kansas. “I tried driving, but I crashed too much. Every time I went fast, I spun out. I put my brother in my car one time and he did so well I just left him in it. That was the end of my driving career,” said Don.

Don knew right away where his talents could be put to use. “I just liked working on them. I liked to hear my motor run. Just to put all those pieces together and watch that thing run and then try to make it better.”

In the late Fifties, the Shepherd boys advanced to the sprint cars and before long they found themselves in sunny California. Shortly after they arrived, the Shepherds met Jim Hurtubise and Don started wrenching on his race car. The pair did a lot of racing with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) in 1958 and 1959 before heading off for the big stage in Indy in 1960. “I was just a mechanic in those days but I helped him build those old roadsters. We really worked hard in those days. I had to get away from him though because I wasn’t making any money.”

Shepherd remained in IMCA, though, and had a lot of success with Johnny Rutherford while working with owners like Dave Beatson and Jack Colvin. “Rutherford and I took a car to the Little 500 and set a new track record and sat on the pole. That was the first time we ran pavement. A week later, we went to Salem and did the same thing. Johnny and I ran a lot of IMCA together but I kind of lost him to the United States Auto Club (USAC). I stayed with IMCA and hired ‘Buzz’ Rose and we finished out the year together.”

Shepherd bounced around for a few years, working with various teams around Indianapolis. It was also during this period when Shepherd was married for the second time to Sandy. “She and a friend of hers helped me get started. Her friend had the money to buy the K.E.Y. car from Elmer George.”

Don and Sandy were later divorced but had a daughter, Donna Jo, and remain close friends to this day. In fact, it was Sandy’s daughter from before she met Don that was the inspiration for the famous K.E.Y. Special. Her name was Kimberly Ellie Young – K-E-Y.

Don and Sandy Shepherd, and Jack Colvin, formed a partnership on the K.E.Y. Special, with Jack listed as the official owner entrant, and they started attracting top talent right away. Said Don, “The first guy that drove the K.E.Y. Special for me was Bobby Marshman. He drove for me until he was killed tire testing in Phoenix.”

Along with Marshman, they employed Johnny Rutherford, who he had run with some in IMCA, for the 1964 USAC season. The next year, though, Shepherd put Bobby Unser in the car and found great success. By season’s end, Jack Colvin

was a USAC champion sprint car owner, with Don Shepherd as the champion mechanic. Unser, however, missed the driver title because he was busy dabbling in Pike’s Peak and other endeavors. Shepherd’s good friend Rutherford won the driver title. Colvin, with Shepherd, used a lot of drivers to claim the owner title. “When Bobby wasn’t there, I put Bob Wente in it a lot. Greg Weld run it at Winchester one time and did really, really good. Jud Larson drove it some. We won the championship because we went to so many races.”

The 1965 USAC title was the high water mark for Shepherd’s career but he had a lot of success after it. He continued to nab top talent and raced throughout the country with names like Gordon Woolley, Johnny Parsons, Roger McCluskey, Rick Muther and Al Unser amongst many others.

During his racing years, Shepherd often spent his winters in California working with Ted Halibrand at Halibrand Engineering. “I’d do the rear ends for them and make a few bucks and get my sprint car back together.”

A fiery competitor, Shepherd was famous for his rivalry with Wally Meskowski over the years, but he was equally regarded for his tire innovations and mechanical prowess. “I was famous for my tires. Everybody wanted to see what kind of tires I had. We just had the narrow tires, about seven or eight inches wide, and they were hard as cement. We tried a lot of different things. We had to innovate back then. There was no big speed part shops around. We made all our own stuff. I did a lot of the metal work; we didn’t have all that fancy fiberglass to work with. We did all our own straightening and painting. I did all my own work. I bet there is nobody that ever won the USAC championship with less money than we did. I was

always famous for finishing races. We just always managed to make it to the end.”

By the mid-Seventies, Shepherd had met and married his third wife, Mary, and was ready to get out of the sport. “I just kind of ran out of drivers and

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wasn’t making any money. Looking back, the one thing I am very proud of is that I never, ever got one of my guys hurt – and it wasn’t because they didn’t stand on the gas either. Between Rutherford and Bobby Unser, nobody stood on it harder.”

After racing, Shepherd ran a successful service station and wrecker business in Indianapolis for nearly 20 years. He remained involved in racing, though, and stayed close friends with Bobby Unser. “He and I were just like brothers. We were always together for years and years. We’d get together and ride dirt bikes out in Colorado... till we got too old for the dirt bikes.”

These days, Shepherd, who turned 76 on April 16, and his wife Mary enjoy their two children, Paul and Lisa, and live in Brownsburg, Indiana. An old rambler, Shepherd never quite got the racing lifestyle out of his blood. “You just won’t believe what I’m doing now. I’m almost a carnie. I’ve got a big beautiful trailer and I sell hot apple dumplings and ice cream. We do State Fairs, car shows, art shows. We’re totally independent.”

Come ‘500’ time, Shepherd sets up his trailer near his home in turn four of the Brickyard and sells ice cream to the masses and still gets visits from Bobby and John, as he calls them. That’s Bobby Unser and Johnny Rutherford to the rest of us.

In fact, it was Bobby Unser who brought Shepherd back to Indy for the final time in the early Eighties to be chief mechanic for Josele Garza, but Shepherd’s true passion remains with sprint cars. “I never really liked the Speedway all that well anyway, I’m just an old sprint car guy. That’s all I ever wanted to be.”

By Justin Zoch

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