



Photo by: Paul Arch

By Doug Kennedy

Want to read a who's who of sprint car racing? Just turn to the bio pages of legendary engine builder and mechanic Don Ott of East Berlin, Pa., who was born Nov. 22, 1966. Ott has built motors for a list of drivers, including Fred Rahmer (whom Ott grew up with as his next door neighbor), Steve Kinser, Sammy Swindell, Lance Dewease, Stevie Smith, Terry McCarl, Greg Hodnett, Jason Johnson, Brad Furr, Robert Ballou and fellow 2025 inductee Todd Shaffer. The Rahmers had a general auto shop while the Otts had an auto body shop that Don's brothers Alan (Bird) and Carl (Shorty) still operate.

At a young age, Ott hung around the shop of Rahmer, asking him question after question regarding racing and earning himself the nickname of "Bug." During his high school days, Ott worked for local engine builders, Doug Meyers and Harlan Gustafson (HG Associates). Then at the age of 19, he began his career as a mechanic for the Joe Harz race team with Kenny Adams as the driver. The team moved all of their equipment to Adam's shop in West Grove, Pa.

"We would race three nights a week," said the 58-year-old Ott. "We left on a Friday and didn't get back home until Sunday night. Here I was at 19 and going on these weekend trips to Central PA." On Friday through Monday, Ott worked on Harz's equipment, and from Tuesday through Thursday, he worked for Harlan Gustafson. That's where he learned how to build engines. In 1988, Harz hired Ott as a full-

time employee to be the mechanic and engine builder for his race team. That lasted until the end of 1990 when Harz got out of the racing business. "I was out of a job," said Ott. However, things would take a turn for the best when Bob Weikert hired Don and converted him from being a sole mechanic to a legendary engine builder. The team was on a roll with Keith Kauffman as the driver. That lasted until the end of the 1993 season when Weikert and Ott started having some problems. "We got into a battle and I quit," said Ott.

The business venture began at Weikert's shop. Eventually, Ott moved the operation to his own basement before moving the business to another building on his property. Then in 1996, Fred Rahmer talked Al Hamilton into buying an engine from him, and it won the first night out.

Donny Schatz, Jason Meyers, Jason Sides, Andy Hillenburg and Jesse Hockett are just a few others who have tasted victory with Ott racing power. Ott has also placed his winning stamp on series like the World of Outlaws, the All-Star Circuit, the American Sprint Car Series and USAC, as well as at tracks like Knoxville Raceway, Williams Grove Speedway, Port Royal Speedway and Lincoln Speedway amongst others.

"We started getting more and more drivers," said Ott. "I'm only five years into the business and things were booming. I hired a couple of employees and eventually ended up with five people in the shop." In 1998, he became the first guy who could mass produce a light engine. "A 410 motor would weigh about 380 pounds and we could build them to weigh in at 320 pounds. "I had five drivers running the World of Outlaws full-time. When Steve Kinser called and ordered two of my motors, I thought it was a joke that my friends were playing on me. We were winning 150 to 200 races a year and building 40 new engines a year and 150 rebuilds a year," said Ott. The increase in business forced Ott to build a 60' by 120' shop in its current location in York Springs.

DON OTT

ENGINE BUILDER

"There was one day at Williams Grove when I looked out to the track and I realized that we had Ott power for 18 of the 24 drivers racing in the feature," Ott said. "From 2007 through 2012, we had more than 50 percent of the field."

Ott's two children, Aaron and Amy, also did some racing. Aaron won about 20 races until two broken necks forced him to retire. "After his second accident, I thought that was enough and sold all the equipment except for the trailer and one motor," said Ott. In 2013, Ott reconsidered his decision, and he bought back in and had Aaron race until 2017. At that point, Ott retired as a car owner. His daughter Amy also ran some races from 2009 through 2012. At one point, Ott had six full cars, twelve engines, a trailer and more parts than you could imagine.

By the end of the 2023 season, Ott promised Adam Cofer, who had come on board in 2021, that he would sell the business to him. In 2024, Ott did some part-time work, but the business now belonged to Cofer. "I was burnt out," said Ott about his motor building business, "I wanted to do some things that I didn't have time to do before like travelling. My plan is for my wife (LeeAnn) and I to drive our motorhome to the Sprint Car inductions and then head to the Northwest."

When asked who has had the most influence on his racing career, Ott said, in order: Fred Rahmer, Harlan Gustafson, Joe Harz, Bob Weikert and Al Hamilton.

As for his feelings of being inducted into the Hall of Fame, Ott said, "It's pretty unexpected for me to get in even though there were many others who said that I belonged in there. I was doing what I liked and made a living because I loved racing. It wasn't that hard to do, but just running the business was. I just wasn't a businessman and got tired of the grind. But in the end, all I wanted to do was win, just win."

Q. What driver in 1941 was the first to drive a gasoline fueled car 500 miles without a pit stop? Where did he finish?

A. Cliff Bergere. Fith.

Q. What driver started out behind the wheel of midgets and sprint cars, then moved on to drag racing and then had interests in off-road racing?

A. Mickey Thompson.

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