

Historical Perspective

When you saw Smokey walking around the garage area before a race, you might think a farmer had somehow wandered into the track. His gait was more of a relaxed lope than generally associated with person of such achievements. As he walked closer, you would realize that if those were a farmer's eyes beneath that dirty hat, he was calmly concentrating. He looked so deep in thought you could almost hear the gears turning; nearly a trance. Once you saw his cars run, you realized that beneath that simple exterior and placid countenance, powerful forces were at work.

As I came to know Smokey I found that as he seemingly ambled around the pits or paddock, he was actually planning the exact details of what he was going to do next. When he reached his car, he would go immediately to work and somehow accomplish as much in half an hour, without really looking that busy, as most folks do in two. The steady pace and organization of his work revealed the deliberate persistence and focus of his character.

When I began reporting stock car races in 1958, he was already a superstar in motor sport. He and Herb Thomas had been an all but unbeatable combination for much of the 1950s. Herb's fantastic driving ability, and Smokey's enigmatic expertise as a mechanic had created a legend further fueled by Smokey's successes with Paul Goldsmith and Fireball Roberts.

But what was more impressive than all those wins was Smokey's bravery. Think about the claim he put on the sign of his shop, "Best Damn Garage in Town." For him that wasn't being cocky; it was simply a mat-

ter of fact. Courage entered into the issue when Smokey chose to prove such claims in very public circumstances. If he failed as a racer, the neon sign out in front of his shop would make him ridiculous in front of thousands. Setting himself up to fail in such an unpredictable sport and emerging victorious anyway was all the more fantastic.

This brings us to another point I would like to make about Smokey. Creative rule interpretation and radical technical innovation that would have been stunts for others were his stock and trade. He built the extraordinary out of very ordinary things. Though some times he went too far, maybe got a little too creative, his vehicles were always interesting. The game was that everyone knew Smokey read the rule book very carefully, but few could figure out exactly what he had done. The subtle brilliance of every car he built reflected willingness to see everyday things in an original ways. This quality and his matter of fact view of life and attention to detail make Smokey as great a storyteller as mechanic.

I think that is why Smokey wrote this book the way he did. He is not interested in anything but the truth as he saw it, and to keep things clear he wrote this as a conversation. Be prepared to hear the whole, unfiltered truth as Smokey saw it. His forthright manner makes this book at once personal, shocking, and very funny. I am delighted that his knack for subtle comedy (that he doesn't even know about) is everywhere in these chapters. I think too that this book will make you think. Beyond Smokey's stories of how things were, you'll find how he thinks things ought to be.

He was a legend in his time.

Gene Granger

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