

Introduction

By C.J. Baker

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Smokey Yunick is an American icon. His automotive and racing accomplishments are legendary. But if that were all you ever knew about Smokey, you'd be missing the real story of one of this country's great characters.

I've had the privilege of knowing Smokey for nearly 30 years. Much of the time I've spent with him centered around discussions of engine technology and mechanical things that were destined to become the basis for articles for the pages of various *Hot Rod* and *Circle Track* racing magazines. I learned more about engines and racing from Smokey than I did from any other single source, but through it all, he taught me more about life than anything else.

Smokey isn't a formally educated man, but you'd be wrong to equate that to a lack of intellect or insight. On the contrary, Smokey is one of the smartest guys I've ever known. His no-nonsense, common sense approach to problem solving is refreshing and effective. For example, when he was looking for competitive

advantages in racing, he didn't read the rulebook to see what was permitted. Instead, he took the approach that if the rulebook didn't specifically state something was prohibited, then Smokey assumed it was allowed.

When it comes to separating fact from opinion, Smokey has one of the best "bullshit filters" I've ever seen. He takes nothing for granted until he's checked it out for himself. And if his explorations require information he doesn't have, he digs in and learns what he needs to know. Smokey is largely a self-taught man. He has a knack for putting complicated things into simple terms, and he's not bashful about telling people they're wrong, if indeed he believes that's the case.

"Well, you really [screwed] up his time." More than one engineer or supposed technical expert has heard that opening phrase from Smokey Yunick. And to their chagrin, Smokey was usually right. But that's only part of the reason people listen when Smokey talks. He's friends with many of the movers and shakers in industry. He's unusually well informed. They value his counsel. But Smokey will take the time to answer anyone who seriously wants to learn. He's a wealth of information. He's done more than most, and whether he realizes it or not, he's an incredible teacher.

Smokey's straight-forward approach to life came from solving everyday problems with little or no resources in his youth. He learned to make do with what he had – to use his head. And his World War II military experience quickly separated those who used their heads and learned fast from those who simply didn't come back. The war also taught Smokey to live as much life as you could every day. As a result, Smokey has probably lived more life than the average person, although not always to his advantage.

As an accomplished fixed-wing pilot, he taught himself how to fly helicopters by the trail-and-error method – not the recommended approach. On his first helicopter flight (after taking delivery of a helicopter he'd just bought) he didn't reach his destination until after dark and he had no idea how to turn on the landing light. Instead, still wobbly at the controls, he had to "feel" for the ground using the Braille method. Somehow he survived to tell the tale.

Smokey has reputedly made and lost several fortunes. He's been involved in the oil industry, in crude oil pipelines in South America, in the automotive and racing industries, in aviation, and in the light- and heavy-duty truck market. He's designed his own electric generating equipment – just to prove a point. He's designed and built successful engine packages that many said were impossible – and some of his designs still sit on the shelf awaiting recognition when somebody else figures out a way to either beat Smokey's patents or a way they can claim credit for his inventions. He's concerned with race track safety and environmental issues. He likes to vacation in the jungles of South America, and he even had plans to catch a record length anaconda to bring back alive to the United States. Fortunately for the snakes, dope smuggling along the Amazon headwaters where the snakes are found proved far more life threatening than the anacondas and the adventure was scrapped.

Smokey loves animals and children. He loves women. He loves people, period. He's had his successes, but he's had his failings too. He had his bouts with alcohol, but when he recognized the damage alcohol was doing to him, he walked away from it cold turkey. He likes public speaking, and audiences appreciate his frank and colorful style. And can he tell a story! His appearances are always a mixture of humor and common sense logic, insightful, and spiced with just enough “down home” color to keep audiences entertained and asking for more.

Often opinionated, honest to a fault, and brighter than most, he is rarely at a loss for words. The world has precious few like Smokey Yunick, and I, for one, think the world is a better place because of him. Read on. I think you'll agree.

*C.J. Baker joined Petersen Publishing Company in the early '70s as the Technical Editor for **Hot Rod Magazine**. He served most of his 10-year tenure at **Hot Rod** as its Executive Editor and Detroit liaison. In October of '82, C.J. created and launched **Circle Track & Racing Technology Magazine**, which was the first oval-track racing magazine in Petersen's history.*