

Introduction

By Humpy Wheeler

April, 2001

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I don't specifically remember meeting Smokey. As a young man interested in stock car racing during the fifties, he was just always in my consciousness. Our first meeting probably at Darlington in the 50's when I was a teenager down there working for Russ Catlin. Russ was the best publicist we've ever had in American racing, he really put Darlington on the map and certainly his publicity did a lot to put Smokey on the map. He was one of the early publicists that recognized Smokey's engaging personality and enormous talent.

Stock car racing has always been a magnet for creative people. We've had creative promoters, publicists, and creative people mechanically, engines chassis etc. There is no doubt that Smokey is the most creative on the mechanical side we've ever had in stock car racing. He thought completely out of the box most of the time.

For me, his most phenomenal technological triumph came when his car captured the pole with Curtis Turner at Daytona in '67. Notice I say car not Chevelle. That was one special machine. I don't think folks

today realize just how impossible it was for Smokey to come in there with that car against the might of Ford and Chrysler with multi, multi-million dollar factory teams. Only Smokey could pull it off with a dark-horse car numbered 13 among the superstitious racers of the day. He was just about the only Chevy entered, no one knew what a Chevelle should look like. When that black and gold car took to the track, it was like something from a movie. Putting it on the pole was terribly embarrassing to Ford and Chrysler.

The trick was that along with the customary masterful engine building, Smokey had figured out just how much aerodynamics meant. He slicked that car up and went out there and blew them off the track. There have been other great cars in stock car racing, cars like the Hudson Hornets, and the Chrysler 300s, but in my mind that car is the number one car in the history of stock car racing.

In addition to being a mechanical wizard, Smokey was a sensitive and ferocious competitor as crew chief. He had an uncanny ability to feel what the driver was thinking and read a driver's performance. In the days before radio, it was especially important for a mechanic to be able to feel what was going on with the driver. His ability to observe the car at speed and to understand and communicate with the driver kept his cars in front and out of the wall most of the time. His contribution to stock car racing is rather large. You might say his methods helped set a pattern emulated by most of today's crew chiefs. What they do and how they do it comes in large part from what Smokey did at the very genesis of this sport.

In fact, Smokey's mechanical ability frequently meant that drivers were operating in territory seldom experienced by other drivers. His cars had so much more horsepower that, though Smokey knew a lot about chassis dynamics and built really good chassis, his cars were often not up to managing the corners. Smokey's cars always had the more horsepower, so almost anyone who drove for him was inexperienced when they first got in the car. For this reason, he had to know who was up to handling his equipment and who was not. Luckily he also had that extraordinary ability to also know when a driver was past his prime. He had a

magical way of seeing the little signs that predate retirement. He once confessed that those signs always made him nervous.

For all his achievements, Smokey remained a person of sincere and passionate commitment to the racing community. I can still recall being called at Indianapolis in 1964 on the day Fireball crashed at Charlotte. At the time I was working for Firestone when I took a call from Max Muhleman who told me of Fireball's fiery wreck. Upon finding Smokey, I knew what I had to do would be one of the hardest tasks of my life. I knew that Smokey had tried to get Fireball to retire earlier that year, he saw that Roberts was past his prime. He was in his garage, sitting next to the wreckage of his 'capsule' Indy car with his hat off and his head in his hands. Smokey very rarely removed his hat so I knew he had taken the loss of his qualifying hopes very hard. I also knew I was about to take him lower.

Even in the depths of despair, Smokey was a man of purposeful, compassionate action. After I told him of Fireball's accident, he quickly loaded his tools, left the car for his helper to bring home, and headed for Charlotte. His disappointment in missing the race he loved was quickly put aside, and without regret he left to be near and help his old friend in any way he could.

Above all Smokey was and is a man of action: a man who worked, raced, thought, and lived just as hard as he could. This book is a testament not only to his talent as a great racer, an a great innovator, but also as an energetic, caring member of the community of stock car racers that built the sport we all love.