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Remember When: Dick Swartzlander...A Racing Institution

This story is about a great Western Pennsylvania driver Dick Swartzlander. Dick raced for thirty-four full seasons in various types of racecars and "quit" in 1985 due to the lack of a competitive car. If you notice the word "quit" and not "retire" is being used because Dick has told this writer that if a good car should come along he would gladly climb back into the cockpit.

The Swartzlander name has been in racing since 1932 when Dick's father and three uncles bought a sprint car built on an old Essex frame. Racing has always been his favorite past time but hunting and fishing with his father and brothers was a big part of his life too. His dad and two brothers were part of his team along with Uncle Neal and Jeff Swartzlander. As a family, they worked together, played together, and raced together for many years. The team raced two coupes for about eight years and went to three when Dick's friend Russ Matchett joined the team as a driver. Russ was a pit crew member who decided he wanted to drive. Matchett drove the #23 and won the track championship at Shipperville. Dick won the title at Franklin in the #3 that same year. Dick felt that this was the best part of his racing career because it involved all of his family.

Most of the competitors thought he had a large garage and at least two extra cars because they never missed a race. In reality, Dick had a one-car garage lined with cardboard and a dirt floor. Each morning after working late at night, his wife would rake the dirt floor, get all the tools up, and clean them so they could work again the next night. Very few people have ever had a family relationship where everyone worked together to make Dick's career so successful.

Dick just can't break away from the sport and he owns son Dan's car. Swartzlander got his interest in racing as a small boy as he was toted from track to track. The Swartzlander family

had another generation of race driver. Dick didn't start racing when he came of age. First, he got a college degree then spent three years in the Marine Corps. The first car Dick ever drove was bought by his wife, Pearl, to keep him from re-enlisting in the Marines after the Korean War.

While racing with the Pittsburgh Racing Association from 1955 to 1958, Dick raced a five-night-a-week schedule. Most drivers have had one or two tracks which they ran regularly, but Dick ran the five P.R.A. tracks on a regular basis and at one time or another ran Franklin, Jennerstown, Butler, Mercer, Motordrome, as well as Lernerville. .

Dick owned and drove a championship car that sat on the pole at Indy three times and finished second, third, and fifth in the 500. When Dick bought the car, he got Don Martin, the owner and promoter of Lernerville Speedway, to sponsor him. He raced under the United Racing Club sanction traveling from South Carolina to Vermont each weekend to all of the U.R.C. tracks.

With all this traveling week after week, Dick used one of Don Martin's flatbed trucks with a homemade sleeper on top, which Dick, Pearl, and their first child lived in while on the road. There were no fancy motor homes or enclosed haulers back in those days. Dick never won a feature in this car, but he finished second six times behind such past racing greats as Earl Halaquest, the five time U.R.C. champion, Jerry Karl, Steve Kristaloff, Walt Brown, and the great Ernie McCoy.

With the many teams Dick has raced for, one of his most successful years was while driving the #70 of Larry Peters when he won forty-two feature races in one season. Winning seven track championships is something Dick is very proud of. Some of the owners he has driven for over the years were Larry Peters, John Maher, Chuck Hathaway, Jim Flegger, Red McDowell, Tim Temple, Ted Tedesco, Joe Pitkavish, Bill Potts, and Dave Cochran.

Dick Swartzlander not only was a short track driver but also ran the big tracks at Trenton, New Jersey, the 1 1/8 mile Nazareth, Pa. dirt, plus Syracuse, New York where

He had a 14th place finish after starting 37th. One of his favorite cars was the Ford Mustang, which he drove from 1971 through 1973 for the Ford dealers of Western Pennsylvania.

Along with these many miles of racing, Dick was an automotive technician for over 30 years at Gulf Research. His wife Pearl, now deceased, put up with Dick's racing through 37 years of marriage raising three children, Kathy, Patricia, and Dan. It makes you wonder if Pearl ever regretted buying that first racecar for Dick years ago.

“There were some funny incidents that involved the kids. I was having my new home built in 1960 so we moved in with my father. His cellar floor was sand and dirt, which made building a racecar difficult. My young daughter Kathy came in one evening while I was putting bearings in a Buick and very proudly dumped two handfuls of nice soft sand over the crank and rods and baptized them”.

“Dan helped also. On the Indy car, he discovered many places to hide a box of spikes; like down the injector stack, in the radiator, and in the oil tank on the side. A real challenge for Dad. One other day I came home and Pearl told me Dan changed the racecar. He found the Permatex can and with a brush and repainted all my mag wheels and valve cover pans”.

Dick's favorite sprint car was the McDowell #22 which he drove for six years. He finished fourth in the All Star Circuit of Champions. They raced at Orrville, Eriez, Homburg, Morgantown, and Sharon. He ran with Ferkel, Quarterson, Blaney, Wise, and Seese, just to name a few.

Dick's first sprint car was built in 1940 by Harold Hailes. The car had a hand-built body and a Hudson Terraplane engine, Dick later put a Buick engine in the car. The car was eventually sold to Fred Shaub (Barry Peter's father-in-law) and raced the Penn-Jersey circuit with Pop Healey as the driver.

Dick recalled his family dynamics. “Patience and love grew in the family over 51 years. Dan and I have never had a fight. We disagree over gear set-ups and tire compound but he has never raised his voice or argued with me. I always told him Dan, since I’m paying the bill we will try my way first; if it doesn’t work, then we try your way”.

“Racing can be the most frustrating sport in the world but for me it has been good. Like a marriage, as long as the good outweighs the bad you keep trying. We are trying. I have just remarried at the age of 74 and my wife Andree likes racing. I drove nine times last year and enjoyed it but two cars are too expensive so I retired. My new wife fits well into our racing program”, he said with a big smile.

To say Dick Swartzlander has lived a full life would be putting it mildly, but he is still in the middle of the action every Friday night at Lernerville helping Dan keep the Swartzlander #3 on the track. Most institutions have been around for a long time. That is what makes Dick Swartzlander a racing institution plus one hell of a driver, sportsman, and one great guy. He helps us to “remember when?”