

AL HAMILTON

by Brian Householder

To today's sprint car fan, seeing Al Hamilton's red number 77 racer parked in victory lane by Lance Dewease is not an altogether uncommon sight. However, because of the amount of wins and his reputation for pristine equipment, Hamilton is often envied, and perhaps even chastised, because of the seemingly limitless finances he provides for his car.

But, Al Hamilton, with three brothers and a sister, was not born wealthy. A rather penniless native of the coal-producing area surrounding Clearfield, Pennsylvania, he began his Al Hamilton Contracting Company by collecting the useable coal from the scrap piles around the local coal mines and eventually worked his way into purchasing the entire mines. From this humble beginning, Hamilton founded a construction company and eventually several automotive and real estate development businesses around Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

It was in the late 1940's that Al Hamilton and his brother Joe attended their first auto race, a pilgrimage to the Indianapolis 500. However, it was not this event that caught his interest, but rather the local dirt tracks in Pennsylvania. In the early part of the 1950's, Hamilton strapped himself into a stock car and began a modestly successful career. In fact, Hamilton once had a bounty placed on his head as he racked up 24 wins in 36 races in 1960.

As that decade progressed, he moved into the modified stock cars and late models, which drew him into the central Pennsylvania circuit. After winning a late model



Al and Tim Hamilton with Stevie Smith

Paul Arch Photo

Bannick and Clearfield with J.D. Leas. The next season, Hamilton snared seven more wins with Rick Schmelyun, Sr., and Bobby Gerhart, Sr., handling the wheel. Although successful, Hamilton kept a rotation of drivers his first few seasons. But, in 1969, he hired Bobby Adamson and held on to him for four years, racking up 27 wins throughout the region.

It was also at this time that Hamilton began to occasionally field two cars. Many famous names turned cameos in the car but Larry "Smokey" Snellbaker, Elmer Ruby, Billy Cassella and Lee Osborne made a winner of the backup car. As his ride racked up wins, its prestige developed and soon, the Hamilton number 77 quickly became a desired ride for traveling racers. From 1973 through '75, sprint car racing legends like Jan Opperman, Lynn Paxton, and Kramer Williamson all drove for him. However, it was Richard "Mitch" Smith who captured Hamilton's fancy and the duo settled on racing together for the next two seasons, 1976 and '77, racking up 22 feature wins while only racing one night a week.

During the next six seasons, Hamilton took a self-imposed sabbatical from racing and only returned upon Paxton's urging for the latter's final season in 1983. It was a spectacular return as they grabbed 13 wins and dominated the National Open at Williams Grove. Since Paxton was finished at the end of the season, Hamilton hired Keith Kauffman to pilot the team car and would keep the "Man from Mifflintown" in his ride for 80-plus wins over the rest of the 1980's.

For the 1989 season, Hamilton gleaned an eye upon the son of a central Pennsylvania legend and hired young Stevie Smith. After a year chasing the local scene, Hamilton took to the road full-time for the first time and did the full World of Outlaws (WoO) tour with his young star. After four-and-a-half successful seasons, 40-plus feature victories and a near miss at the 1993 Knoxville Nationals, Hamilton and Smith parted ways. Following in his stead would be a string of traveling throttlers including Danny Lasoski, Jeff Shepard and Johnny Herrera.

Tired of the road, Hamilton set his sights on the local



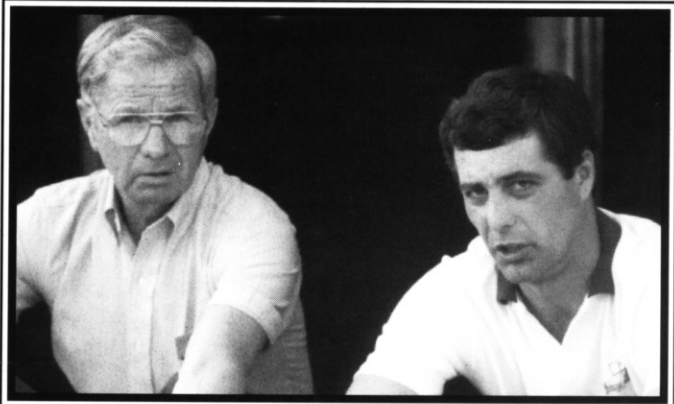
Stevie Smith and Al Hamilton

Paul Arch Photo

AL HAMILTON, cont.

scene in 1996 and found quick victory with Dave Calaman. However, things really started churning when he picked up Fred Rahmer near the mid-point of the season. The most feared two-some of the 1990's in central Pennsylvania dominated through the end of the decade when Hamilton and Rahmer split up at the end of the 2001 season, opening the doors for the much-discussed ride swap with Lance Dewease.

2002 would see another 20 wins for Hamilton as well as another National Open victory over Ted Johnson's Outlaws. As the 2003 season dawned, Hamilton is closing in on 400 wins as a car owner and could hit the mark by the end of the calendar year. Along with his victories,



Al Hamilton and Keith Kauffman

Paul Arch Photo

Hamilton owns 23 track championships, nearly every prestigious event in the country and is the winningest car owner in the history of Williams Grove Speedway.

Throughout his career, the generous and deeply religious Hamilton always listed his operation as owned by Al and Betty Hamilton, as she has steadfastly supported him and his hobby over their 50 years of a marriage. For Hamilton, racing has always been about family as his brother Joe wrenched the ride for many years. In more recent times, his grandson-in-law "Moon" Byers has performed those same duties. Today, Al and Betty live in Manheim, Pennsylvania, not far from their children Tim Hamilton, Gayle Gearhart, Carolyn Hindy, and Colleen Clark.



Jay Woodside with Hamilton's Sprint Car

Lloyd King Photo