

DONNIE ROBERTS: A NEED FOR SPEED



Since age eighteen, Michigan Motor Sports Hall of Famer Donnie Roberts has been looking for ways to stay in the fast lane at most of the small oval auto racetracks across the Midwest. Today at age 64, Donnie still has the passion for speed that keeps him going into his shop at Homestead Motors on M-18 in search of more speed.

“I might not have the most horsepower but if my car is right, I’m gonna beat ya,” said Roberts. At this stage of his racing career, getting the most out of his racecar is as important as the victories. “I can’t compete against someone who’s willing to drop \$40,000 or \$50,000 for a high-powered engine but I do alright with my little 720 HP motor,” Roberts laughed.

Donnie was born in Saginaw and raised in Midland, the second son of six children. His father, a barber by trade also dabbled in racing cars. “My father wore slacks his entire life; I don’t think he ever owned a

pair of jeans,” said Roberts. “He never would get dirty but was very good at telling others what needed to be done to his cars.”

There was also another racecar driver in the family. The oldest son, Jimmy was inducted into the Motor Sports Hall of Fame in 1999 after a long and successful career in racing, which began in 1957 and included over 500 feature wins. Many times the Roberts brothers would go head to head on the racetrack and a lifelong rivalry was born.



While working at the Standard Station in Midland, Donnie met his first wife Sandy Zeits who worked across the street at Pat’s Drive-In. Not too far down the street was Donnie’s first race sponsor the Clark gas station, which resulted in Donnie

painting his 1936 Plymouth Coupe “Clark” orange.

The summer after graduation from Midland High in 1963, Donnie Roberts became a household name in the winner’s circle at the local tracks. His first win came at Mt. Pleasant Speedway while driving another racing legend’s car. Ed Howe put the youngster in the driver’s seat and Donnie took his first of many checker flags.

He went on to take track championships at such places as Auto City in Flint, Tri-City in Auburn and Owosso. He was one of the elite drivers in the Carlings Circuit of Champions and was inducted to the Hall of Fame in 2005.

An ironworker during the week, Donnie gave up racing by the late 1970’s. “I really just couldn’t afford to compete anymore,” Roberts said. “I had a family and I always said if I thought another driver could beat me with my own car I’d quit. And that’s what I did.”

Donnie’s wife Sandy passed away after a long battle with cancer in 1993. He remarried a few years later and got back into racing, establishing Homestead Motors in 1995.

I convinced the grizzly old driver to come out from under his racecar long enough to find out why he’s still got the fire in his belly to win races.

ROR: When you started racing, who was the toughest competition on the track?

Donnie: Me. I've raced against some of the best. But I'll work harder and longer than most will, spend a lot less money and still beat'em. I never raced against other drivers. I always raced the track. If my car was right and I got beat...that's ok but that didn't happen too often.

ROR: Who was the better driver: you or Jimmy?

Donnie: If you asked my dad, he'd have told you I was. Now if you were to ask Jimmy, he'd say he was (laughing).

ROR: What type of racing do you like best, dirt or blacktop?

Donnie: I like'em all but I race more on dirt these days because there's more money in it right now. But dirt tracks require so many more tires - different setups, different compounds. Tires will kill you quicker (financially) than a wreck.

ROR: Can you make money at this or is it just an expensive hobby?

Donnie: In the top series out there, the best drivers might make as much as \$300,000 a year, which sounds like a lot but the expenses eat up most of that unless you've got quite a few sponsors. A fifth place finisher will be lucky to break even and still have a tank of gas leftover.

ROR: There's been a lot of coverage about Danica Patrick, a woman race driver in the news. What's your opinion about women racing?

Donnie: I think its great for the sport. I'd work twice as hard if I could get my wife to drive for me but that ain't gonna happen (laughing). I had a young girl show up here one day who wanted to learn how to build a racecar and drive but I turned her down. It's no secret I've been looking for a driver and I had nothing against her but I told her dad it wouldn't work. I'll admit I'm a tough bastard to work for. I've probably forgot more things than most of the young drivers today know. But I know what works for me and what's right for me. And it's gotta be right.

ROR: What is the most important skill a driver needs to have?

Donnie: Many times you'll hear people talk about needing good reflexes, which is true with almost every sport. I think a better way to describe the necessary skill is timing and reflexes are just a part of it. Timing is a critical factor in every aspect of racing. But now at my age experience really helps (laughing).

ROR: You build your own cars but what's the biggest change you've seen in racing over the years?

Donnie: Motors. In all the years I raced in my twenties, I never spent more than \$800 for a motor. They've built a new small block engine now that is 540 cubic inches with 995 HP. You can run it for one race and then it has to be torn down and redone for \$10,000. The original cost is somewhere around \$55,000. That's where you're at with motors.

ROR: So why are you still racing?

Donnie: First and foremost, I just plain love to race a car. Second and almost as important, I can afford it now. That's really why I quit the first time. I accomplished all of the criteria or credentials to get into the Hall of Fame by the time I was twenty-seven. But I couldn't compete anymore with the best because I couldn't afford it. I used to save, save, save. After my first wife died, I realized that life is short and I had to ask myself 'what am I saving for?' My second wife Sharon has helped me appreciate enjoying life while I'm living. That may sound corny but it's true.

ROR: Have you ever had a bout of road rage?

Donnie: I've probably had more people after me with road rage. But I did have one incident where some guy didn't like my driving on the freeway. He came up beside me, then almost sideswiped my car and cut right in front of me. Well, I thought 'you're messing with the wrong boy.' So I drove up to his front wheels and started turning right...put the SOB into the grass (laughing).

ROR: Do you sleep better before or after a race?

Donnie: I just sleep when I'm tired. I'm too damn old to be nervous about racing but I do have trouble turning the brain off. I've been known to get up in the middle of the night and go out to the shop to work on something that needs fixing.

ROR: Do you have any passions outside of racing?

Donnie: We travel with our motor home, which I enjoy but I've really been very lucky. I married what I consider two perfect women for a racer. Both my wives just let me do what I love...racing cars.

ROR: The competition may not appreciate the fact that you're still out there racing but we do. Thanks Donnie.