

Racing With “The Doctor”

Todd R. Thomas

The conversations in this book all come from the author's recollections, though they are not written to represent word-for-word transcripts. Rather, the author has retold them in a way that evokes the feeling and meaning of what was said, based on his memories, and the essence of the dialogue is accurate to the best of his abilities.

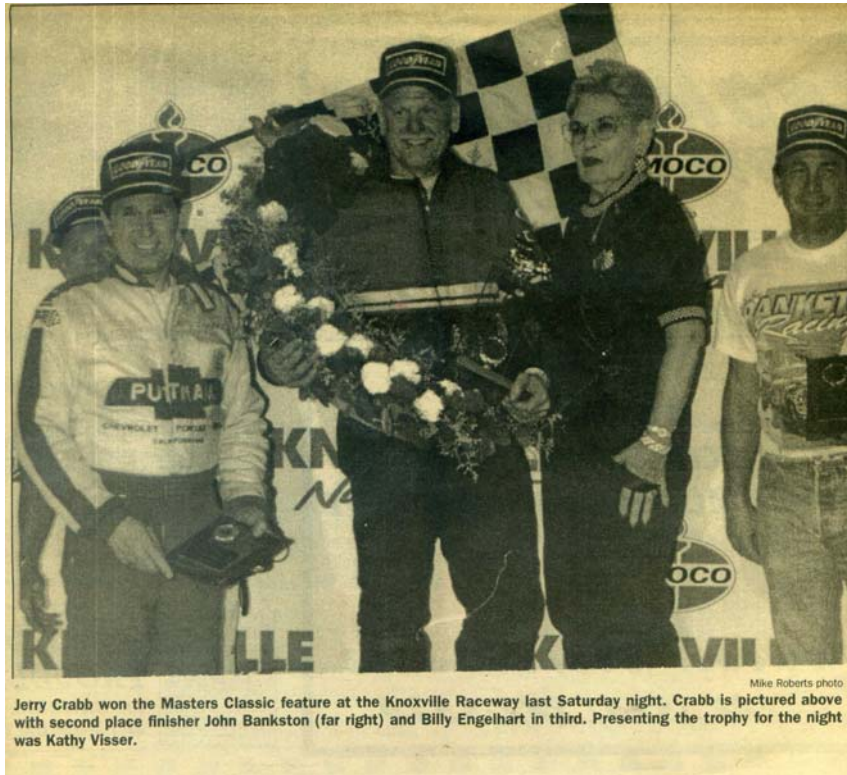
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To Logan and Hannah, so you know what your dad was doing
all those summer Saturday nights.

God speed Jerry, we sure had a lot of fun.
I'll see you again one day.



L-R: Billy Engelhart, Jerry Crabb, Kathy Visser, and John Bankston.
Dirt Digest, June 5, 1998, issue. (Mike Roberts photo)

Cover Photo: L-R, Jerry Crabb leaning over left rear tire, Todd Thomas sitting on right rear tire, Tracie Wilson kneeling, Jan Crabb standing. (author's collection)

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The Man in the Arena

It is not the critic who counts;
not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,
or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly; who errs,
who comes short again and again,
because there is no effort without error and shortcoming;
but who does actually strive to do the deeds;
who knows great enthusiasms,
the great devotions;
who spends himself in a worthy cause;
who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high
achievement,
and who at the worst,
if he fails,
at least fails while daring greatly,
so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls
who neither know victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt

Excerpt from the speech "Citizenship in a Republic," delivered
at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France, on April 23, 1910.

Whatever it Takes

Jerry Crabb leaned forward in the cockpit of his sprint car, and sported an all too familiar scowl on his face. The fifty-something-year-old's right hand rested on the top bar at the front of the roll cage, and his index finger tapped impatiently. "Come on Nelson, let's go!" he barked over his shoulder.

Ron Nelson, Jerry's longtime friend and crewmember, sat in the driver's seat of Jerry's Dodge van parked directly behind the sprint car in the driveway of Jerry's shop. He muttered something unintelligible, likely profane, under his breath, and then slowly nudged the sprint car with the van onto SW 9th, one of the busier four-lane streets on the south side of Des Moines.

Disrupting traffic from both directions Jerry pointed his sprint car north, down the hill just north of Lincoln High School, through a gritty tree-lined neighborhood consisting of small businesses and private residences. His attempts to merge with the normal vehicles traveling the street could not quite be described as courteous.

For those unfamiliar, a sprint car is anything but street-legal. A spartan vehicle, it consists of four open wheels connected to two solid axles, which are attached to a tubular chromoly frame. An eight-cylinder fuel injected open header small block Chevy resides directly in front of the driver, who sits bolt upright surrounded by a roll cage. A tear drop fuel tank is located at the rear.

A small wing is mounted at the front of the car and a large wing sits atop the cage. The wings create downforce to improve traction while speeding around dirt tracks. However for the purpose at hand the top wing sat in the shop, as it wasn't necessary and kind of in the way while the car rolled down the city street.

A sprint car contains no headlights, turn signals, windshield, or glass of any type. No rearview or sideview mirrors, and no exhaust system that would conform to any sort of city noise ordinance. And certainly no glove box to hold registration or insurance information, and no license plate, for that matter.

There is no speedometer in the dashboard, although there is a tachometer, and gauges for oil pressure and water temperature. Not lacking is safety equipment, which far exceeds that of a passenger or commercial vehicle. It's probable that traffic fatalities would become nearly nonexistent if street vehicles utilized the roll cage, seat, and safety harness of a sprint car. However the decrease in comfort and increase in cost would likely make doing that unrealistic.

Lightweight and extremely over-horsepowered, these vehicles are all race car and have no business travelling city streets.

It was interesting to observe the reactions of the passenger and commercial vehicle drivers when they encountered a sprint car sharing their roadway. Some were clearly startled and tended to hang back, I assume to avoid any contact with this odd-looking vehicle that had invaded the routine of their day. Or they appeared curious, yet kept a safe distance to view just exactly what this crazy person driving this buggy-looking machine might do next. Others simply ignored the contraption and continued on their way, obviously passing by Jerry on the way to wherever they were going. Sometimes they even switched lanes and positioned their cars in between the coasting sprint car and the van that followed it down the hill. Others appeared annoyed, and on more than one occasion gave Jerry the middle finger salute. In any case it gave these drivers a story to tell later in the day.

Fortunately this coast down the hill only lasted a couple of blocks and Jerry made a left turn into the parking lot of a small accounting firm. This was sometimes a tricky maneuver

depending on the amount of oncoming traffic headed south. It was a timing thing. He preferred to coast the car onto the parking lot unimpeded rather than stopping for traffic to pass by, which would require an additional push from the van to reach the parking lot. I know he preferred to handle it this way because I've witnessed him having close calls in front of, amongst, and immediately behind oncoming traffic in his attempts to make the turn.

As he coasted onto the level parking lot and the effect of gravity slowed his momentum, Jerry steered as far left as possible in order to point the sprint car back south in the direction of his shop. If he didn't get a good enough run off the street this little procedure sometimes took some manual effort. This is where I came in.

Nelson pulled the van onto the parking lot and I jumped out of the passenger door as we rolled to a stop. The turning radius of a sprint car is not near as sharp to the left as it is to the right, so sometimes it is a chore to maneuver a stationary one towards the intended direction.

While sprint cars circle dirt tracks in a counter-clockwise direction, obviously turning to the left, they spend much of their time turning right while sliding through corners. Think back to Driver's Ed and how they told you to steer into a skid, and that's basically how sprint cars travel through corners. If set up correctly it doesn't take much of a turn to the left to start the slide into a corner, so by design there isn't much concern to steer sharply in that direction.

I asked then future Knoxville Raceway Hall of Fame driver Mike Twedt about this several years ago while helping him push his sprint car. Someone pointed out that a sharp left turn would appear to cause the left front tire to rub the steering link, which travels along the left side of the car. He simply stated that if a driver needs to turn that sharply to the left while racing, he had more immediate concerns to contend with.

So I pushed forward while Jerry turned left and pushed backwards while he turned right a few times until the car was pointed in the right direction. If you have ever tried to jockey around your passenger car 180 degrees in a tight spot, you get the idea. I enjoyed the added bonus of listening to Jerry growl that I was not moving fast enough.

Nelson pulled the van in behind the sprint car and pushed it back onto the street headed south, once again disrupting traffic. Jerry stopped on the road and worked the gear slider handle to place the car in gear. Since a sprint car does not have a self-starting system or transmission, to start one it needs to be put in gear and then push started with another vehicle, hence the van.

A sprint car is always either in gear or out of gear. To confirm it is in gear it is normal practice to rock the car back and forth and feel the resistance if it is properly in gear. Again, this is where I came in.

As I did this rocking, still enjoying Jerry's comments that I was still not moving fast enough, I had my left hand grasped to the sprint car's rear push bumper. Unfortunately, Nelson did not see this and pulled the van up and made my ring finger a sandwich between the push bumper at the front of the van and the rear bumper of the sprint car. I was married at the time and luckily wore my wedding ring, as the band gave my finger some protection. I said a bad word and hopped back in the van.

Jerry waved that he was ready and Nelson put his foot to the gas pedal of the van, pushing the sprint car back up the hill. Jerry opened the fuel valve, waited for oil pressure to build, pumped the throttle a couple of times, and flipped the magneto switch to the "on" position.

With a sight and sound that I will never grow tired of, the sprint car's engine belched, bellowed, and erupted to life. If you ever hear a fuel injected open header sprint car engine start up you will not soon forget the experience. It is similar to the sound of a Harley starting, only louder and more intense. The sound is very crisp. If you are standing next to one of these machines while it is running you can feel the vibration throughout your entire body. I have seen and heard literally thousands of these engines start and it still regularly startles me. I am pretty sure I have suffered some hearing loss because of these engines. I believe it was worth it.

I've sometimes wondered what the drivers in their passenger cars thought if they happened to be alongside Jerry when the engine fired in his sprint car. I think it would have scared the crap out of them. It makes me chuckle to imagine that a soccer mom out running errands may have had to go

home and change her underpants after experiencing Jerry's car starting procedure firsthand.

After the sprint car started, Jerry basically left Nelson and me standing still. Yes, he could have simply idled the car back up the hill to his shop. But, after all, he is a race car driver. By the time Nelson pulled the van back onto the shop's parking lot, Jerry was already out of the cockpit and attaching the timing light to the number one spark plug wire while the car sat idling.

As soon as we were within earshot, Nelson and I received orders from Jerry in rapid-fire succession: block a wheel to keep the car from rolling, take the timing cover off, get the magneto lock nut wrench and loosen the nut, and several other things that I don't remember. As per usual Nelson and I ran into and tripped over each other as we tried to meet the demands.

This whole process always made me feel a bit uneasy. I think I worried about what would happen if the local authorities ever observed this activity. Actually it did happen a couple of times, thankfully in my absence.

On one occasion a traffic officer drove by immediately after Jerry turned into his parking lot. She just kept on driving, shaking her head. I imagine she didn't want to wake that sleeping dog.

On another occasion an officer with "Squad Commander" printed on the side of his police car, or something to that effect, pulled into the shop after Jerry completed this procedure. Jerry simply walked up to the police car, grinned, and leaned up against it with his arms crossed. The officer sat in his car, also grinned, and repeatedly said, "I can't f*****g believe it." No warnings or tickets were issued, but the officer did say that if a complaint was registered they would need to do something about it.

For some reason I don't believe anyone ever seriously complained about this practice. Perhaps race fans lived along that street? It likely helped that Jerry would normally wait until rush hour was over, or close to it.

There was a time when one of Jerry's neighbors, who Jerry had never met, stopped by the shop with his small son. He said that on a recent evening, while he sat inside his home, he was

startled when he heard Jerry’s engine come to life.

The neighbor exclaimed to his wife, “That sounds like a sprint car!” He was right of course, and traced the sound back to Jerry’s shop. He simply wanted to show his son a real race car up close.

I never agreed to drive the push vehicle though. In later years, when I no longer had time to spend at Jerry’s shop and restricted my racing activities to Saturday nights at Knoxville, and Nelson had moved on to other things, Jerry enlisted the help of his then girlfriend and future wife Jan to drive the van.

Jan, one of the nicest and most caring people I’ve ever met, but also just as stubborn and outspoken as Jerry, is probably only five foot nothing and would not tip the scales past 100 pounds even if she was soaking wet. Jan driving that full-size Dodge van and pushing Jerry in his sprint car down that busy street, his t-shirt sleeves and unbuckled safety harness belts flapping in the wind, was likely quite a sight.

This process was a regular occurrence outside Jerry’s shop on SW 9th during his sprint car racing years. Whenever he did any work that required him to start the engine, this is what he did. There have been products on the market which allows a sprint car team to start the engine while the car is in a stationary position. However the cost of such a luxury item normally far exceeds what the average grassroots racer is willing to spend. For the low-budget team, in a decision whether to purchase such an item versus, say, tires and fuel, tires and fuel wins every time.

I’ve often heard of other teams starting their cars on quiet city streets, county highways, gravel roads, parking lots, or farm fields. But I’ve never heard of any starting them on busy, crowded, four-lane main artery city streets – just a couple miles south of downtown Des Moines.

I must admit, the first time I saw Jerry do this I thought he was crazy. Actually, at first I thought he was kidding, then I thought he was crazy. But looking back, that activity really described Jerry in a nutshell.

He did whatever it took to go racing.