

Ken Coles

by Allan Brown

Ken Coles has been shooting photos of race cars most of his life, and he is considered by journalist John Sawyer as America's top racing photographer. As you look through publications such as National Speed Sport News, Open Wheel and Speed Age magazines, you will discover Cole's racing photos going back from the late 1950's right up through the present.

Kenneth Coles was born in Detroit, Michigan, on October 7, 1931. He's resided in southeastern Michigan most of his life. When Ken was about 10 years old he started taking pictures. He would take pictures of the neighbor's houses, and then paint the photographs to match the color of their houses. Remember in the early 1940's color photography hadn't been perfected yet. He then would sell these 8-inch by 10-inch photo-paintings to his neighbors.

As a teenager, Coles developed into a racing fan. Shortly after World War II ended, he started attending races at Motor City Speedway. A neighbor, also by the name of Ken, had a roadster and Coles helped him at Motor City and Dayus Speedway, across the river in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Coles reluctantly got a chance to race the roadster one time when the driver didn't show up. He wasn't comfortable driving it, and decided driving wasn't for him.

Coles went back to what he did best, and that was taking photos. He had taken his first racing photos sometime in the late 1940's when he was about 17 years old. Ken remembers that Motor City had some pretty talented roadster drivers. Drivers like Iggy Katona, Jack Goodwin and Spencer Foreman were fun to watch, and thus they were the drivers of which Ken took pictures.

Coles worked for a company in Detroit called Instructional Arts. They worked with artists and photographers setting up ads for magazine and papers. They were also equipped to do recordings. He worked for that company from 1953 until it abruptly closed in 1977. At that time he wondered where he would find work, but his wife suggested that he concentrate on his racing photos and he developed it into a full time job selling his photos to competitors.

Ken Coles has always been somewhat of a nomad, traveling the circuits to follow the races taking and selling his photos. Only once was he ever a track photographer. And that was for a short-lived three-quarter (TQ) midget car track near Detroit called Legion Speedway.

Most of his early efforts were following circuits like Tom Cherry's All-American Racing Club (AARC); Coles would shoot promo shots of the cars for Cherry. He used to travel to the races with Detroit drivers like Ronnie Duman, Al Miller, Claire Lawicki or Johnny White. As Duman, Miller and White moved up the ladder, so did he and it wasn't long before he became acquainted with the United States Auto Club (USAC) drivers and began shooting photos at USAC events.

Coles loves to tell stories of his travels with his friends. He was with Ronnie Duman the time Duman won the 1959 "Little 500". Duman wrapped the trophy in a blanket. Duman was so superstitious that the next year he went back to the same motel and ate at the same restaurant as he had the year before. One time on the way home from a USAC sprint car show at Milwaukee, Coles was driving with Johnny White as a passenger. Duman came up on the rear of his car, and started pushing on their back bumper with his front bumper. Coles sped up and Duman stayed right with him and was still pushing him at 90 mph.

Another time, Johnny White was driving Ken's 1957 Ford as they were coming home from a race. White was throwing cherry bombs out the window and they would explode under Duman's car as they were going down the road at 70 or 80 mph. Johnny was passing people on the gravel shoulder to keep ahead of Duman.

In addition to his racing photos, Ken Coles developed a technique for hand painting his black and white photos and has his racing paintings hanging in almost every state in the union, plus Europe, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Australia. So, not only is he an outstanding racing photographer, but is really a racing artist as well.

Coles started painting his photos in 1959, and he took a few with him to Heidelberg Raceway in western Pennsylvania in 1959. They were an immediate hit. Since that time he has developed not only a business relationship (selling action racing photos) with the world's most successful race drivers, but he has cemented personal relationships with such drivers as Mario Andretti, Parnelli Jones, A.J. Foyt, Al and Bobby Unser, Jim Hurtubise, Jud Larson, Don Branson, Rick Mears, Jimmy Clark, Graham Hill, Peter Revson, Dennis Hulme, Richard Petty, Cale Yarborough, Bobby Allison and Darrell Waltrip.

He tells the story of the time he took a great photo of A.J. Foyt and Parnelli Jones at Dayton Speedway. Both were driving cars numbered 'one' as they were the defending USAC regional champions. Foyt was the Eastern Champion, and Jones was the Midwest Champion. He made copies of the photo and painted them. Coles then took the paintings to Indianapolis and promptly sold one to Parnelli. Shortly after that Coles heard his name mentioned over the loud speaker. A.J. Foyt wanted to see Ken in his garage. He was wondering why A.J. wanted to see him or what he did wrong. When he got there A.J. whipped out his wallet and told Ken, "Give me one of those paintings." Foyt then scolded him for selling one to Parnelli first. A few years ago, one of those Foyt/Jones-autographed paintings was auctioned off during the Knoxville Nationals and it sold for three thousand dollars.

Many professionals have said that there is something about the photos that Ken Coles takes that is different from those of all other racing photographers. Somehow he has a different perspective, and his photos look more like a work of art. His favorite classes of racing cars are definitely of the open-wheel variety, with the dirt championship cars at the top of his list. But he has also photographed sports cars, including the Can-Am series, as well as hydroplanes and motorcycles.

One of his most memorable races he remembers was a "Hoosier 100" where Bobby Marshman was leading A.J. Foyt. Foyt proceeded to give Marshman a major 'slide job' to take the lead. After the race, Marshman, still in shock that A.J. pulled off the pass, commented, "He must be God, as only God could do that!"

Ken Coles entered into an agreement with Georgia Marketing & Promotions (GMP). On all of their die-cast models of the USAC cars from the 1960's, they use his photos so they can get the models accurate.

Ken Coles spent two years in the Army in the early 1950's and met his future wife Christa while he was stationed in Germany. They have been married for 55 years. They had four sons and three granddaughters.

Thanks in part to his racing photography, the Coles have felt very fortunate. They have had the opportunity to travel all over the world, visiting over twenty countries. They continue to live today in Pinckney, Michigan.