

DON MARTIN



Don Martin

Linda Fennell Photo

Donald Paul Martin was born on October 12, 1922, in Cabot, Pennsylvania. His parents Willis and Edna Martin had three sons, Charles, Don and Homer.

When Don reached his teenage years, Charles had started a trucking business. Don drove trucks for his brother before and after his graduation from high school in 1940.

Three years later, he was called to serve in World War II and he served for three years in England, Germany and Belgium. When he returned from the war, he continued to work with his brother and started to purchase some trucks of his own. In 1948, Don married Helen Sones, and in '64, Don decided to go into business for himself. He bought a piece of property, built a garage and started his own trucking and excavating business.

Around the same time that he

returned from the war, Don became an auto racing fan. In the 1950's, he became a car owner with driver Dick Swartzlander. Later, he owned a number of race cars, ranging from coupe-bodied modifieds to an Indy roadster which ran against the sprints on Western Pennsylvania tracks in the mid-60's.

In 1967, three friends called Don and wanted him to help them build a race track. They were "Bucky" Fleming, Dale Hafer and Earl Bauman. Because Don also had excavating equipment, he was asked to become a partner and build the track.

Later, Don would observe that "the one thing they forgot to tell me was that nobody had any money to build a race track."

They leased property that formerly belonged to Don's uncle, Frank Lerner. For years prior, the land had been home to an amusement park, hence the name "Lernerville". Don remembered the jalopy races that he had watched at the park in the late Thirties, and cut the quarter mile track in the same general area as the previous dirt oval.

In the fall of 1967, the men ran two races in order to validate the track's existence. Buffalo Township supervisors were establishing a zoning ordinance in January of 1968 that would have interfered with the track's operation. The first race was a 100-lapper for modifieds with Johnny Axe taking the checkered flag and the promotional team taking a \$10,000 loss. As the race track lost money, Don quickly became the sole owner of Lernerville Speedway.

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At that point, Don had made a commitment. With Helen beside him to help manage the business, Don decided he would make the thing work and he would do it with honesty and integrity. According to Don, "When people ask me what was the single most important thing I did when I started this track, I tell them it was guaranteeing a purse for the drivers. No matter how many people turned out in the stands, I made sure that the drivers got their full purse. That way you would be sure that the drivers would be back week after week. You have to treat every driver and owner like you need them, 'cause you do!'

As the years went by, the track continued to lose money. According to Jean Lynch, Lernerville's first public relations person when most tracks didn't even have one, "He sank his heart and soul into his trucking business and that track. There were nights he'd get only two or four hours sleep. Some nights he never went home. His wife, Helen, supported him. She did a lot of work behind the scenes. They were a team and they got it done."

In late 1970, Don enlarged Lernerville to a three-eighths-mile oval. He bought and closed the Butler Speedway in 1973. During the 1970's, Lernerville was still losing money, but it was gaining a reputation in the industry as one of the best-managed weekly tracks in the nation. Teams and fans appreciated Don's old-fashioned concern for their needs. The track surface was well-prepared and did not have a retaining wall around it on the corners, allowing drivers to slide off the surface and work their way back on it without tearing up expensive equipment. According to Albert "Ouch" Roenigk, "Don was con-

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cerned about drivers and fans alike. He was the first to put a cable fence up along the front of the speedway for the fans' protection."

Don was proud of his regular lineup of sprint cars, late models, modifieds, semi-lates, 6 cylinders, and street stocks. The weekly Friday night shows began promptly at 7:30 p.m., and because they were free of time-consuming delays and intermissions, fans were usually home in time for the Johnny Carson Show. As the cars from one race were exiting, the cars for the next one were already pulling out onto the track, gridded in proper order. Drivers would take one lap and the green flag would fall.

According to Lynch, "He believed that if the track served quality food, people would come straight from work, have dinner at the track and watch the races. And that's exactly what happened."

Again, in late 1982, the dust-free track was enlarged. This time 'the Action Track' became a half-mile oval on the outside, with 80 feet wide sweeping turns. The track turned the financial corner in the early 1980's, but Don never changed his warm, generous, respectful personal style. He greeted fans and drivers with open arms, shaking hands with everyone. He helped racers with gas & travel money, lodging and even repair bills.

According to 1980 sprint car track champion Brad Doty, "We were a low-budget team racing at Lernerville early in my career. Don asked me where I was staying the night, I told him the Butler Holiday

Inn, and he picked up the tab at the hotel. He made me feel like I was at the top of the heap. I'll never forget that. Don was truly a premier promoter, and also a premier person. He was out of the ordinary. He really took care of people. It was amazing how hard he would work to make sure everyone was happy. He made you feel special. He made you feel he was truly glad you were there."

Don didn't buy a lot of advertising, instead believing in word-of-mouth advertising. He once said, "Send the fans and competitors home happy, and they will come back along with others."

In 1983, the much respected Don Martin was named Racing Promotion Monthly's "Auto Racing Promoter of the Year" at their annual banquet in Daytona Beach, Fla. It was quite an accomplishment for a man who was generally considered a maverick amongst his peers because of his lack of race advertising, lack of intermissions, and abundance of headline divisions (sprints, late models and modifieds).

Throughout the 1980's and into the '90's, Don kept making physical improvements to his beloved Lernerville. Some of the additions included an infield scoreboard, corporate skyboxes, enlarged seating areas, start-of-the-art television-quality lighting, and an electronic message board. It is interesting to note that the scoreboard included a clock so fans could be assured that the weekly races were starting on-time.

Besides the weekly Friday night shows, Don also successfully pro-

moted special events at Lernerville. Bert Emick's All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) and Ted Johnson's World of Outlaws (WoO) were frequent visitors to the Sarver oval. His crowning achievement was the 1992 \$25,000-to-win "Silver Cup" race, the biggest one-day purse in WoO history, which celebrated the track's twenty-fifth anniversary.

In 1992, Don was named the "Promoter of the Year" by the National Sprint Car Poll, an official awards program of the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum. Again, the award was voted by his peers, this time within the sport of sprint car racing (promoters, sanctioning officials, media members and manufacturers). Don Martin had earned their respect through hard work and dedication to the sport he loved so dearly.

Sadly, cancer claimed the life of the veteran track promoter and community leader in 1993. Since then, his wife Helen, daughter Patty Martin Roenigk, and grandson Donald Paul Roenigk are all involved in operating the track. In fact, last night, TNN: The National Network was scheduled to broadcast the Pennzoil World of Outlaws sprint car racing live from Don Martin's Lernerville Speedway.

According to Dick Swartzlander, "Don Martin was a strong-willed man who made decisions on his own and saw them through. He hired good people, stayed out of their way, let them do their jobs, treated everyone fairly and helped anyone who needed it. What more could you want in a man? Lernerville is his legacy."

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