

Old service station's owner has a history of speed

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Norm Day was formerly a drag racer for Don Garlits. He now owns a full-service Marathon garage in Middletown. The shop is decorated with old memorabilia of his racing days. / Ashley L. Conti / The Star Press

Written by

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At first glance, Norm Day's service station seems a throwback to a sleepier, quieter time when nothing much exciting was happening, one where the friendly, laid-back owner would fit right in.

Then you walk inside and see his pictures.

They are of dragsters, culminating in fire-breathing National Hot Rod Association "funny cars," and Day, the gray-haired guy wearing the baseball cap and the work shirt with "Norm" sewn on the breast, is the man behind their steering wheels.

"It kept you in great shape," he said with his perpetual smile, discussing rocketing down a drag strip at hundreds of miles an hour. "It pulled a lot of G forces. I could get in the car with a back ache, but by the time I got to the other end and pulled the (para)chutes, it was like I was a new man."

Those days are behind him now. But he remains a drag-racing legend, one who drove for no less a fellow legend than Don Garlits and even TV Tony Ivo, the former *Mickey Mouse Club* Mouseketeer who gave up television and movies to race a four-engine monster, one that Day drove, too. Modern-day NHRA star John Force and Don “The Snake” Prudhomme were among his regular competition.

Day raced all over the United States. He raced in Canada. He raced in Europe. He took particular joy in racing California hotshots who, early on anyway, underestimated the shy Hoosier.

“I used to enjoy sending those guys back home,” he said from behind a battered counter as customers and others wandered in and out of his business.

One woman asked, could he pass out fliers for a fund-raising lemonade stand?

“Yeah, we’ll pass ’em out,” he answered pleasantly, accepting a stack.

More in keeping with the mood of the place was the comment of his friend and customer, Mont Switzer — who was there to pick up some valve covers — upon seeing a newspaper reporter taking notes.

“The guy’s a crook!” he joked, which brought a belly laugh from Day.

“He ain’t even got the bill yet!”

Over in the old-fashioned service bay, meanwhile, master mechanics like Don Kiser and Rick Best plied their trade, a truck in mid-air on an aged pneumatic lift and fan belts conveniently slung from a wall.

“We’re laid back, but it’s not a back yard shop,” Day said of his business, noting the sophisticated level of service offered. “We do all types of mechanical work here. We even get some jobs from out of state.”

The shop is old, though.

“This place has been in the family right at 70 years,” he explained. “I’ve been working here since I was 8 years old. ... We’re still full service. We wash the windows, pump the gas.”

The shop also offers a gathering place for local “gearheads,” folks who know a manifold from a carburetor and like nothing better than tinkering with an engine.

“I still do some of the performance work,” Day said.

Back in the day, though, that sort of service was the purview of his old 10th Street speed shop, a famous place that drew those aforementioned gearheads like ants to a picnic.

“I had people come from Hawaii and everywhere,” said Day, who also owned Muncie Dragway for five or six years.

His reputation, though, was made by his performance driving race cars, beginning as a teenager on back roads, moving to a 1955 Chevy built for the modified production class and a killer-looking AA gas class

1968 Opal. It was campaigning cars like these that brought him to the attention of drivers in the sport's upper levels, who urged him to compete nationally in the funny cars, dedicated race cars loosely based on production-style bodies.

Beginning in his 30s, Day racked up incredible winning percentages in the sport's highest tier, living on the road through the years and mingling with stars and other famous folks on the sport's periphery.

How was that?

"It felt pretty good," he said with a laugh.

Of course, not everything felt good.

What racing a funny car is like is next to indescribable, he said.

"It's so quick, it's really kind of hard to explain," Day continued, discussing the effort involved in keeping it straight, shifting, popping the chutes and bringing it to a halt, all in a matter of seconds.

But bad things happen quickly, too, he noted, holding up a hand deformed in one crash and telling about the skin that was burned off one leg in 1986 in Brainerd, Minn., when his car exploded in fire and barrel rolled down the track, trapping him in the flames until he was pulled out.

Eventually the time came when he decided to call it quits, though in the late 1990s he was nearly lured back to the sport with a sponsorship package funded by heavyweight sponsors like Hanes and Wheaties. In the end he decided against it, but admits he still misses racing.

To that end, he has been buying back his old race cars and others, and hopes to display them in a museum he is planning for Middletown.

Sound expensive?

"I'm pretty well set," Day admitted. "I'm not hurting."

Don't expect to see him put a lot of money into revamping his classic old service station, though. His dedicated customers, who like the station as it is, won't hear of it. Pointing out the particle board topping his counter, a surface about as pock-marked as the moon's, he said he considered replacing it until an old customer heard about it.

Day tried to replicate the stricken look in the man's eyes.

"The guy said, 'Oh, don't do that!'" he recalled with a laugh.