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## **Remember When: Bud Kunkel...Racer, Champion and Friend**

Drag racing is a very popular venue for young men to be proud of their cars and accomplishments, so it comes as no surprise that in the late 50's and early 60's George Leon, Skip Bertges, and Bud Kunkel were drag racing for some fun and relaxation. These three young guys were racing for trophies at the local drag strips when someone told them about stock car racing. Stock cars not only sounded like fun, but you also got money for winning. This trio of "gearheads", as well as some of their pals from the North Hills section of Pittsburgh, decided to go circle track racing and the rest is history. George Leon was the very successful car owner for the 8-Ball teams of Herb Scott and Bob Wearing, Sr. during the 70's and Skip Bertges has been a winning driver and car owner for over 50 years.

Bud Kunkel started his racing career in the Figure 8, Claiming Divisions and Demo Derby's at Old Heidelberg Raceway in the early 60's. During the early years Bud worked for George Leon at his auto parts store and they raced stock cars on the weekends. One incident involving Bud and Skip took place during a double header with Heidelberg and South Park Raceways during the 60's. Wes Springnob, a friend, along with Skip, and Bud had taken Bertges' 1957 Chevy Claimer to Heidelberg for an afternoon race. When the races concluded they knew that the gears would need changed for the night race at South Park. Wes got under the car and started removing the bolts on the rear end. Bud was unaware that Wes was under the trailer and he drove away with Wes lying on the ground.

Bud's racing career includes driving the Figure 8's, Demo Derby's, Claimers, Semi-Lates, Limited Lates, Super Compacts and the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Senior Series Division. In the early 70's Bud decided to open his own auto parts store by purchasing a former gas station at the corner of Route 8 and Wildwood Road. The new store became Bud Kunkel Auto Parts. As Bud's

business began to grow so did his involvement in auto racing. I first met Bud in 1972 when he was racing at North Hills Raceway and Lernerville Speedway. Bud was one of the toughest competitors I ever had the pleasure of racing. He won Championships at North Hills, Lernerville, and Pittsburgh.

One of the things about auto racing that is very special is the longtime friendships that grow and develop over the years. Connie Welsh is a very special person that I met while racing with Bud. Connie and Bud dated for many years and were married in 1994. Behind every successful man there is a good strong woman and Connie is that special lady. The two of them worked side by side building a very successful auto parts business and a winning race team. At one time they had three auto parts stores and were campaigning two race cars. The stores were busy and the cars were winning. Sometimes Bud would be so busy that he needed a substitute driver. I have been fortunate on many occasions to drive and win races in some of Bud's race cars. At the end of the 1979 season Bud and I were first and second in the points chase at Pittsburgh. The night before the Season Championship at Pittsburgh Bud's father passed away and his crew chief Jim Miller asked me to drive their car at Lernerville Speedway. My car was not at the speedway, we were saving it for the championship race the next day. If I crashed Bud's car Friday his team has no chance to win the title the next night at Pittsburgh. You can be sure I was very careful at Lernerville...I think we finished a conservative fifth place in the feature. Bud was not able to drive Saturday, due to the death of his father, and I was offered the ride for Pittsburgh. The problem was that I would be competing with myself for the Semi-Late Championship at PPMS. The decision was made to put Frank Chappel in the number 8 car and I would drive my car. Lady Luck was not there for our team as we lost and engine in fast laps...and we lost a chance to battle Frank, in Kunkel's car, for the championship.

Trips to Daytona with Bud, Connie, the Bertges crew and many of the Pittsburgh crowd always proved to be an interesting experience. Fish fries, picnics and parties in the infield at Daytona were a very special time and have left me with countless memories of good friends, good times and good racing. There is a very interesting story about the time Bud was in the New Frontier Motel bar and his socks fell down. Someone said "Bud you better pull up your socks". The

problem was tight pant cuffs, so to eliminate the problem he dropped his drawers, pulled up his socks and went about his business. One year on the way to Daytona Florida, Bud ran out of gas at 2:00 AM in some deserted part of West Virginia and his traveling companions made him walk to get gasoline. Bud's vacation trips to Las Vegas and Australia with Joan and Skip Bertges are stories in themselves. All the travel, trips and racing were very special memories that Bud talked about.

Bud raced four or five nights a week during the 70's. He picked up victories at North Hills, Lernerville, Pittsburgh, Schmuckers, Motordrome, Jennerstown, Mercer, and Tri-City Speedways. Several track championships we collected during his career. His dedication and determination to racing was illustrated one evening when he was on the way to Jennerstown and there was a fire in his motorhome. The race car was at the speedway so Bud got out of the motorhome, grabbed his helmet bag, told his passengers he would meet them at the track and he hitch hiked a ride to the track to race. Jennerstown promoter Piney Lasky later sent a truck to pick up the stranded passengers.

Bud was successful in the PCTC Senior Series races at various dirt and asphalt tracks in Western Pennsylvania at the end of his driving career. In 1994 Bud was inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame. This was a well deserved honor that culminated a long career as a driver, car owner and sponsor of local motorsports. Bud ran the toughest race of his life against cancer and passed away on Memorial Day 1995. This man made a major contribution to local racing over 30 years and I felt privileged to consider him a competitor and a friend.