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Remember When: Don Luffy

Don Luffy started drag racing in the 1950's. After a couple years he determined that he did not care for that type of competition because of the expense and travel time involved. Don always used to take his tow truck to Heidelberg or South Park Speedways, and after watching the racing, he decided give it a try. He purchased a 1948 Chevy and contacted Bill Friethoffer to put in a set of roll bars. Don started his circle track career in 1958.

In 1959 he built a 1951 Plymouth Business Coupe; considered by many to be the ugliest car on the race track. Don had Bill Wolken build him an engine. They ran the Plymouth all year and were running second place in the point standings. The last day at South Park, the officials, checked for locked rear ends which were not permitted. Don was disqualified and this eliminated his chance to win the championship.

The next year, Don more or less, jumped around here and there. In 1961 he got into a 1957 Chevy that Dick Linder, a good friend, had driven. It was the same car that Gus Linder had taken to Daytona. Luffy had a very good year in 1961, winning the championship and the Dapper Dan Award. At South Park, Herb Scott and Don, running a car numbered 89, were running side by side for 89 laps. In the 89th lap, Herb lost an axle. That was the year Don won the PRA Championship. Herb had been the previous point champion and Don took it away from him that year, because of the axle failure. The next day they went well to Canfield to race their half-mile. Don was doing fairly well and on the 89th lap, he lost an axle.

In 1962, Late Night's Johnny Carson came to Pittsburgh to do a promotion for Channel 11 and the Pittsburgh Symphony. Luffy was given the opportunity to serve as Carson's chauffeur. He drove Johnny all over town and found him to be just as super as he appeared on television.

During their travels Carson told Luffy that one thing he'd learned about life was never to put on airs because you're still the same as the average person walking down the street. Don believed that was a good advice and has followed it all his life. Don drove Carson to the Beau Brumel Club on Liberty Avenue to have dinner and as they were talking, Carson told Don there was something about the place that made him uncomfortable and that he wanted to leave. They were driving to the airport when they heard a news flash on the radio that the Club had just burned down.

In 1962 Don drove a 1955 Chevy, also numbered 89, at Langhorne and qualified at 98.75 mph. They made the consolation race, but Don said that rarely did the drivers from the Pittsburgh Racing Association go to Langhorne and make the show. Don said the only ones that ever did well there were Don Dahle and Herb Scott. Luffy continued on through the year and because racing had been good to him. He was running five nights a week and twice on Sundays.

In 1965 Luffy drove a 57 Chevy for Harold Rider at South Park and Heidelberg and finished third in points that year. In the late 60's Don landed a ride in a car from the Indiana area. The car was number 101 and named "Old Ironsides". Luffy felt that it was one of the best rides he ever had. His hunch was right. He ran that car for three years and won three championships.

In 1970, Don began to feel that racing wasn't fun anymore and that he just walked away. He didn't even attend any races during that period. When returned in 1974 Heidelberg was asphalt and he just couldn't get excited racing the blacktop. He didn't have good equipment for the asphalt tracks so he went back to the dirt.

In 1981 Luffy started in the Senior Series and everyone told him he was too old. He started with one of his own cars and then drove for George Bland for one year. Don decided to run the Senior Series on a regular basis and visited victory lane on a regular basis. He had a few more rides and when they came out with the new UMP Modifieds in 1993, Luffy drove for Paul Busch. Paul had suffered a heart attack and asked Don to run for him. Luffy finished third in points at Pittsburgh's Pennsylvania Motor Speedway. Paul was going to run the car the next year, so Don only ran it on a limited basis.

I introduced Luffy to Wally Bird from Central Auto Body in Hazelwood PA. Wally asked him to run his car. Don ran that car and the first time they went out he scored a second in the heat and a third in the feature. Don finished 1993 out and in 1994 he ran the same car for Bird in five or six races and finished tenth in the standings.

One of Don's most memorable moments was 1961 when he took championship away from Herb Scott on the final night of racing at South Park Speedway. Scott and Luffy were running door to door and leading the feature when Scott broke an axle on the last lap and Luffy won the title.

Luffy remembers an incident at Heidelberg during the Tri-State Championship. He started a third, and was running third most of the day during the 150 lap race. coming down to the 149th lap, Buddy O'Connor was leading the race. Don passed him coming into the corner and Buddy put his car sideways, almost losing it. Don got underneath him but Buddy got better bite coming out of the corner Buddy beat Don by about a half-inch. O'Connor was the PRA champion that year.

Everyone said Don gave the race away, but after the race was over O'Connor told everyone, "Luffy would never give anything away on a race track."

When Luffy first started racing. He was running against Buddy O'Connor and Buddy had said to him, "kid, you hit me once, now don't hit me again." Don, thinking he was kidding, said "okay". So Don bumped him again and after the third time, as Luffy was just about to pass him, O'Connor hit him, spun him out and said, "I told ya, kid"!

Don thinks that the money involved in racing today has gotten to the point that the drivers have suffered. There is so much money involved, they spend their time trying to protect it and can't relax racing. He thinks if there wasn't so much money invested, racing would be different. He said he'd make changes to racing today by putting in tire and engine sizes so that everyone is equal and try to eliminate a lot of the rough driving. When they drive that way, many times they end up on the losing end.

Don's been raced for over 45 years, and has won over 300 features. He won the PCTC Senior Series Championship, and in 1985 was one of the youngest drivers to be inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame.

When Don returned to racing wondering if he'd lost his touch. He was running at Lernerville and always liked to run high. When he came out of the corner and bumped the fence, he knew he still had it. A lot of the young fellows today are afraid of running against the fence, but if you're going to hit it, you're not that far away. Don didn't think he had as many trophies as some drivers because when he ran PRA, they were given money, not trophies.

Don's favorite track was South Park Speedway because it was so small, then Heidelberg, Blanket Hill and Marion Center, basically he loved all of them. Another of Don's most memorable events was the first night that Lernerville opened. He ran a late model and was leading the feature for seven or eight laps when Jim Minton came into a corner too hard and bumped Don, sending him around and caused him to finish second.

Luffy believes that his friend Tucker Baumiller was the person who helped him the most during his racing career. He and Don were friends for 45 years and Tucker was the one who got Don started.

Luffy commented on how the support from the fans makes it really worthwhile for all the drivers. Don never had any sponsors in all the years he raced.

Don met his wife Lois Jean, in 1954, and they have been happily married for years. Luffy is a regular at the Lernerville Speedway where he has returned to his roots by bringing his wrecker to the track. You will not find a nicer person at the speedway. He usually has a fist full of pretzel sticks that he shares with anyone and everyone that he stops to talk too. Don Luffy is one of the great drivers that help us "remember when".