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Gary Sisson Finds Success in Auto Racing...By Dave Dragovich

Garry Sisson grew up around automobiles. He developed a passion for cars at a young age, and particularly enjoyed watching them go fast in circles. "Growing up, I spent every Saturday night of my life at the races," said Sisson. "My dad used to take me to Morgantown Speedway, and G.T. George, who owned the No. 145 coupe that Mel Minnick, Sr. drove, used to take me everywhere back in the day, including Jennerstown Speedway, and the old Latrobe Speedway. Kids weren't allowed in the pits in those days, and he'd sneak me in. I'd have to sit on top of the tow truck, straddling the bubble light, and stay put."

One night, Garry didn't listen, and paid the consequences. "I was going from the pits to the stands to get something to eat," he remembers. "A tire came off a car and hit me. I got a brush burn on my back. It scared G. T. and me to death, and he didn't want to take me anymore. But he ended up taking me back. My heroes in the day were Bill Dull and Mel Minnick, Sr."

As Sisson grew into his teens, his passion for cars and auto racing in general grew along with him. It wouldn't be long before he tried his hand as a race car driver. "A bunch of us would buy old cars for fifty or a hundred bucks," he recalls. "Then we'd take them up to the site of the old Uniontown Speedway and race them just for fun. It was just a field, but we had a ball. I even took my dad's car up there a couple of times," he laughed.

"In 1968, I built a 1956 Ford stock car," he recalls. "I had some guy run it for a race or two, and then decided that's what I wanted to do. I drove my first race at the old Motordrome Speedway in Ruffsedale. I didn't do very well in my first race. To be quite honest with you, I was scared to death. It's kind of a momentum thing. Once you get comfortable, then you do better. You become a better driver. That's what happened to me."

"One day at Morgantown, I led the whole feature, all but two laps. The flagman was Frank Baker, the father of Steve Baker, who races Late Models now. Frank was a great guy. He gave me the two to go sign, and I thought 'I'm not going to lose this one.' I just barreled it into the turn, and went down over the hill. I ended up fourth that day. I won a lot of heat races at Morgantown, but never a feature. But I really thought I had a good chance that day. I had a good time. I absolutely loved Morgantown Speedway. The people that ran the track were very nice. If you had a million dollars, or two dollars, they treated you the same." The track closed after the 1978 season.

During the early 1970's, while employed at a carpet store, Sisson enrolled in a technical school where he learned to paint and repair cars. He continued to race every summer. In 1975, Sisson

made a major decision that required a huge sacrifice. "I worked at the carpet store for five years," he relates. "All along, I had been buying and selling cars part time on my own in my back yard. I had very little dollars to work with. I'd buy an old car, fix it up, and paint it. When I was on vacation from the carpet store, I sold two cars that week, and never went back. I decided to sell cars full time. But I had to sell my race car, all my racing equipment, and borrow a thousand dollars from the bank to get started in the car business."

Thirty-two years later, Garry's Auto Sales, located on Connellsville Street in Uniontown, continues to serve the area. "We have a great customer base," said Sisson. "We've been selling cars to the same families for over thirty years. We spend our money back on our customers, and we're doing quite well. Somebody's not afraid to bring a friend here to buy a car. When I first started, we only had a few cars in stock. Now we have 195. You can drive a car off my lot with your family and be assured that it's safe."

Almost ten years after turning his passion for automobiles into a thriving business, the Uniontown resident returned to the sport of auto racing. He said, "In 1985, I bought a race car from Bill Stile, and went to Motordrome with it. I won my first feature in that car." Garry would win a total of five features at the Smithton oval that year. In 1986, he achieved his first track championship. Ferris "Pee Wee" George, Sisson's long-time pit crew chief, remembers it well. "The 1986 season was very special," said Pee Wee. "We ran fourteen features that year, won eleven of them, and won the Limited Late Model championship."

The team's success continued throughout the decade. Sisson commented, "In 1988 at Motordrome, we had so many close races with Bobby Henry. If you look at the films, you couldn't put a hair between our cars. He'd race you. He'd make you work. But he was not a person who would take you out. To this day, Bobby Henry is probably the toughest and cleanest racer that I ever raced with."

When Motordrome Speedway converted from dirt to asphalt in 1990, Sisson decided to give the pavement a try. He was successful immediately, and won the very first Limited Late Model feature run at the newly renovated facility. He was among the top ten in the final point standings in 1990 and 1991. "We had a lot of second place finishes down there, but truthfully, I didn't like the asphalt," said Garry. "There wasn't enough action for me. Maybe it's different now. The track was green then and the racing wasn't that good. It just wasn't fun."

After taking another break from racing, Sisson returned to the dirt tracks in the late 1990's. He raced at Pittsburgh's Pennsylvania Motor Speedway, where he won a feature. He's been a regular contender at the Roaring Knob Motorsports Complex in Markleysburg since it opened in 1999, and is currently the defending Late Model Champion, a title he's won two consecutive years.

"I consider Garry an excellent driver," said Pee Wee. He's a good guy, has a good reputation, and he's been racing a long time. This season is not to our liking. We changed the motor and other things, but it seems like we've been battling and struggling all year. We're finishing in the

top two or three, but that's not good enough for us. We're not really pleased with it at all. We had two track championships. Hopefully we can turn it around this late in the season. We're going to venture out to a couple of other tracks after Roaring Knob closes. Maybe we'll run Thunder Valley , Marion Center , and Latrobe, if it opens back up. We'd like to get a win before the year is up. I'd be happy with one win. We're dying for a win."

Sisson concurs with his crew chief's assessment of their racing season. "We're struggling this year," he said. "We've had some motor woes, and just can't seem to get a handle on it. You get spoiled when you're used to winning. Sure, we've run well. But those solid finishes don't get it. I've taken two hiatus's from racing and keep coming back. I don't know how smart of a move that is," he laughed.

There are many funny stories from Garry and Pee Wee's days in racing, too numerous to mention. However, one incident sticks out in Sisson's mind. "One night in the early 1970's, we were hauling the race car in a bus," he remembers. "We were traveling on Connellsville Street out to Bounce Hager's garage to put a motor in it. Pee Wee was in the race car when it rolled out of the bus. There he was, sitting in the race car, in the middle of the street, in the middle of the night, with no motor, and traffic coming in each direction. He sat there for about ten minutes because I couldn't turn the bus around to pick him up!"

"Pee Wee is my crew chief, my first cousin, and my best friend," said Garry. "He volunteered to help me build my first race car, and he's been with me for every race since then." Other members of the pit crew that keeps Garry's race car in top condition include Bill "Doc" Petruska, Randy McClland, Don Frankhouser, Tony Palmer, and Garry Sisson Jr. Garry's team receives special chassis help from driver Mel Minnick, Jr. and his racing team.

Sponsorship is vital to the success of any racing operation, and several have stepped up to support Sisson in 2007. They consist of Garry's Auto Sales, Dicks Auto Parts, Guardian Warranty, NAPA Fayette Parts, Elite Motors, Mileground Pre-Owned Motors of Morgantown, Mark Richards Racing, Bobby Lake Motorsports, Squeeze and Go Gas, Neratka Decals, D&M Trucking, Gebe and Skocik Tire, Aye-Cee Car Care, and Faris Auto Body and Sales.

Garry's wife Barbara and the couple's children, Gary, Jr., Amanda, and Anita (Sisson) Depto, have always been supportive of his racing efforts. Sisson, age 55, isn't sure how long he'll keep racing. He noted, "I race for fun, and when it's not fun, I don't want to do it anymore. My priorities in life are family, the car lot, and racing, in that order. And his lifelong passion for automobiles will continue to burn.