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Al Humphrey-The Hombre

"Take the I-80 Exit 324 south to Giltner. Cross the tracks and there is a 4 way stop by the school. Continue straight south for three miles. Where the pavement ends is my house," directed Al Humphrey. Not simple, just straight forward, get you where you want to go. Like his directions, Al Humphrey is a straight forward, get the job done type. Probably a result of a lifetime of tilling central Nebraska soil. And the attitude doesn't just fit farming 1300 acres of corn, soybeans, and wheat. It also works in the race shop, and on dozens of area dirt ovals.

Ask someone in the grandstands or the pits how old Al Humphrey is, and the answer is likely to be "early 60's Don't let the silvery hair fool you. Al Humphrey is NOT in his early 60's.

"You be sure to tell those people I am only 51," laughed Humphrey.

Al is only 51 people. And though it seems he has been a Midwest icon forever, this is just his 33rd year chasing racing. Just!

Life changes are sometimes the result of a whim, chance, an impulse.

"I went to the races with my football coach. I thought they were OK, but nothing special," stated Humphrey. "It didn't take."

Then one summer day, driver Rob Talich saw the 16 year old Humphrey in downtown Giltner and asked if he wanted to help him out at the races that night. Talich knew that Humphrey could weld and work on machinery and figured he would be good help in the pits. Humphrey agreed to go that night, and this time racing did take.

After pitting for Talich a few years, Humphrey decided he wanted to drive in a mechanic's race in 1972.

"My mom was against it. My dad was for it. We had a pretty good meeting about it over supper one night," said Humphrey. "Mom finally agreed, and she and dad became my biggest fans."

Humphrey finished second in the mechanics race and decided he wanted to drive full time in 1973. Over the winter he built a 55 Chevy stock car, and went racing full-time in 1973.

Like any rookie, Humphrey discovered there is a learning curve in racing. However, another driver's misfortune greatly shortened his learning period.

Racing at the Speed Bowl in Red Cloud, NE, Nebraska legend Kent Tucker had car trouble and was not able to run his car one night. Humphrey asked Tucker to drive his machine. Tucker looked at the car, made a few changes, then made several more changes after hot lapping it. Tucker ended up with a second place in the A main with the borrowed car. Not only did Humphrey collect the points that night, but he had a set up to race with too. He ended up as Red Cloud's Rookie of The Year-a pretty good accomplishment. Of course winning the points championship as a rookie was an even bigger feat.

Racing Student

Humphrey became a student of the sport. He asked questions. He worked on his equipment, tried new ideas, made his share of mistakes, learned the hard way. But learn he did.

"In the old days, being able to weld and fabricate was a must," stated Humphrey. "For many years, even into the 90's I always built my own cars. Humphrey built what he could afford. "In 1983 I built a stock-stub that was obsolete when I built it. It was all I could afford," reminisced Humphrey, "but I won in that car every year from '83 to '88."

"In 1990 I won the championship at Doniphan when it was still a NASCAR track," Humphrey added. "I finished in the Top Ten in regional points, and won races at three different NASCAR tracks. That was a home built machine."

And Humphrey wasn't the only beneficiary of his car building skills. Many area drivers sat behind the wheel of a Humphrey built racing machine. "The same year I won the championship at Doniphan, 1990," stated Humphrey, "I built five cars at the top of the track's sportsman's division."

Humphrey remains a student to this day, but admits one change one change in racing from the old days is a good one. "Today it is easy to get the info you need to run good," stressed Humphrey. "You can get chassis makers or engine builders on the phone and they are all willing to help you solve any problems that arise."

Fifty one years old, 33 years of experience, he has seen his best years some fans might mumble. Don't believe it for an instant. "The type of equipment that we use has evolved, but the game is the same," according to Humphrey. There's more sophistication, a lot more technology, and a lot more money. I call it cubic \$\$\$\$. But you still need a driver that can make consistent laps."

Humphrey's current car owner Rick Blaha of Bellevue, NE had this to say about his driver. "Al is still a good solid competitor. He is knowledgeable, has good

ideas on getting the car to work, but does not get carried away. He does not tear up equipment. And, he can really read a track."

Wins And A Few Of Al's Favorite Things

Like most long-time drivers, Humphrey cannot tell you his exact number of feature wins. "Over 100" was his best guess. As far as track titles, "well, there was Red Cloud, Lexington, and four at Doniphan, no five at Doniphan." In 2004 Humphrey added a tour championship to his resume, winning the CNCTA Friesen Challenge.

There was no question or thinking about his favorite victory though. "The 2003 WDRL race in Oskaloosa, IA," smiled Humphrey. "Jim Wilson's got himself a tough, really good series, but that night was especially tough, with several national drivers including Billy Moyer present. We always figure a top ten at any WDRL show is a good night for us, so that one was really special." The most money he ever won at a race? \$6400 in 1988 at the Speedbowl in Red Cloud, NE. And yes, it was an Al Humphrey built car.

His wildest ride? Maybe a rollover in 2004 along the front stretch at NRP? "You know, I went 30 years with out going over one time. I did it again at a WDRL show in Alta, IA, this year, so now I've done it twice in two years," he stated, shaking his head. "But neither was my scariest. They happened fast and were over. My worst wreck was at Sunset Speedway in Omaha. I got hit in the door bars. They collapsed, breaking a bone in my leg, and pinning me in the car. I couldn't get out, and you always worry about fire. Then I heard Speedy Hill's voice, him taking control of the situation, reassuring me, and I knew everything was going to be OK," sighed Humphrey. Hill was the long-time fire and safety director and the Omaha track, and currently fills the same position at I-80 Speedway. "I trust Speedy with my life," stated Humphrey. "He is simply the best."

How about a favorite track? "I loved Sunset Speedway," smiled Humphrey. Everyone who was anyone raced there one time or another. Plus you didn't need the best car to win. At that track it was about handling, and driver ability."

Favorite stat? "I have won at least one race every season since 1983," smiled Humphrey, "including this year at I-80 Speedway."

The nickname "Hombre"? Looking at pictures of a younger Humphrey, one could easily picture how the nickname came about. However, whether or not Al was a little ornery in his youth had nothing to do with the name. In fact, it really wasn't him that was named 'Hombre,' it was his car. "My cars all had the name 'Hombre' on them, up into the 80's," laughed Humphrey. "For some reason, some people started calling me that. But it was the car."

Toughest competitors? "Oh gosh, too many years, I'll forget some," stated Humphrey. "Craig Lockhart, Kent Tucker, Dean Ward, and of course Kyle Berck." Berck has won many track, tour, regional, and national titles, and is one of the top two or three drivers in the Midwest. Berck had this to say about Humphrey. "Al has been around me since I began racing dirt late models and has definitely been a mentor to me in many ways. He has always been willing to share his wisdom and experience with our team, and it has been an invaluable asset to us. I feel it shortened the learning curve tremendously. I still rely on Al's ideas and advice. He might not think I am listening, but I am hearing him loud and clear. He has a very down to earth, common sense approach to racing, which helps me in many ways, as I tend to over think things. Al has been a father like figure to me in the sport, and I value his friendship. Al never hesitates to give me advice, whether I want it or not, and he's not afraid to set me straight when he disagrees with my thinking, which I also appreciate."

Like Berck stated, Al Humphrey has a down to earth, common sense approach to racing. To farming, to life. A common man-maybe, but a most rare driver, one with class, courage, skill, and at age 51, a still great passion to compete and win. So, how much longer will Midwest fans be able to enjoy Humphrey's racing talents?

Humphrey's wife Ielene passed away in 2003 after a lingering illness. The lines etched in this farmer/racer's weathered face have grown deeper these past few years. He met Ielene at the track, and she became his biggest fan, always taping his races. Those memories of his wife and racing remain poignant, but racing is also part of Humphrey's healing. Two weeks after Ielene's death, Humphrey raced in the late season Cornhusker Classic at Nebraska Raceway Park.

"When I go racing, I have to depend on others to help me with the farm," stated Humphrey. "My friend Randy Obermeier has been great helping with irrigating, but it is tough. Still, I'll probably race as long as I feel I am competitive. I've had some success driving for some really good owners in the past, fellows like Don Waterman, Jeff Ashby, Steve Wessels, Frank Detamore, and Rick Honeycutt who is with my cousin Jason now was my racing partner from 1979-97. But I feel I have my best deal ever right now with Rick Blaha of Bellevue, NE. Rick, son James, and brother Ray maintain the car, and I drive the 140 miles from Giltner to help out about once a week. We work well together, no arguing, we just get things done. As long as Rick will have me, I would like to drive for him." And what does Blaha have to say about this joint venture? "As long as I am in racing, Al is going to be my driver."

And for Midwest race fans, lets hope that will be until Al Humphrey really is in "his early 60's."

Sidebar-Another Humphrey at the track.

Al Humphrey's 21 year old son Alex is following dad's footsteps, or rather tire tracks. Alex races a crate engine late model at both I-80 Speedway in Greenwood, NE, and Junction Motor Speedway near McCool Jct, NE. In early August, young Humphrey stood 4th in the I-80 standings, and 9th in points in the CNCTA Napa Late Models at JMS. With I-80's Chase For The Championship, Alex is very much in contention for the crate engine championship, and with some late season good finishes, could climb into the top five at JMS. Yes, dad offers pointers, but cleaning and maintaining the car are the responsibilities of Alex.

Al does weigh in on the side of crate engines. "Any new rules in racing are controversial, but the crates are beginning to prove their durability, plus I am in favor of anything that reduces costs," commented the elder Humphrey. "I like to see where a fellow on a budget can still win races through his hard work."

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