



RICHIE TOBIAS

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- **Born on June 16, 1966, in Lebanon, Pennsylvania**
- **Current flag-bearer of the star-crossed Tobias racing family, he's been a racer, fabricator, promoter, and founder of Speedway Entertainment—notorious for his gutsy, winning performances in his own, unique equipment.**

My mother thought otherwise about her youngest son driving, since my dad had been killed in a race car. But by 14, I was dying to get in one—and on my first night out, I thought that's exactly what was going to happen. It was 1984 at Silver Spring, and I was in a super sportsman I had cobbled together. In the first warmups, Vance Yinger got sideways, and I drilled him.

It was, of course, a gift to be brought up as a Tobias, but it was a little different for me. My brothers, Ronnie and Scott, and my brother-in-law, Paul Lotier, were already operating out of the Tobias Speed Shop. I kinda had to pick up any scrap parts that were available and learn most everything for myself. A couple of years later when I was building a modified outside the shop, Ronnie put a tarp over it so customers wouldn't think we were putting used equipment on their cars.

The driving part and the speed seemed natural to me. Five races after my start, I was running with the leaders at Williams Grove. I did have anxiety about keeping up with the Tobias name, but it went right away when I strapped on my helmet. It came to be that when I looked at a race-track, I always wondered, 'How could I get around this place wide open all the time?'—and I would make any change necessary to do just that.

If my driving was outside of the box, so was my car design and building. I'm stubborn in a way, always wanting to do something to make me win over others. I see myself as a problem solver, so I always preferred

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to drive my own cars with my own team. I think that mechanical creativity came from my dad.

Along the way I drove just about everything—super sportsman, sprinters, dirt and pavement modifieds, Busch cars, Silver Crown. I won over a hundred races. Most memorable were at Super DIRT Week in a modified and a Silver Crown showdown at Du Quoin.

The modifieds had so many different rules at the time that you really needed a fleet of cars. But I'm not a complainer. It's my way just to move on. You have to have a positive attitude to race.

I went to Syracuse in 1990 with a new design of mine that was really quick, but our motor broke. The Council Harrell team kindly lent me a monster Pontiac to put in it, and we were right up front with a good shot at winning when the magneto quit. Two years later we went back with a car of my own design and that same Pontiac. We won. There was quite a bit of chatter since I wasn't one to fall in line. I ran the upstairs.

The irony of that win was that apparently my mom had changed her mind by then. When I got home, she asked me why I had to win Syracuse in a car that wasn't like the ones sold in the speed shop!

Du Quoin was a big deal. I had been needing a little change. The modifieds had so many different rules at the time that you really needed a fleet of cars. But I'm not a complainer. It's my way just to move on. You have to have a positive attitude to race. So, like my dad, I built a Silver Crown car. It was unique, of course.

We went to the mile at Springfield in 2003. We were quick, but what a wreck I had.

I was totally amped up and charged through the pack and got the last qualifying spot. I did the same in the main event—and won it. Somehow the chief steward had overlooked what happened, and I'm probably the only guy to win a USAC race without really qualifying.

The track wore blue paint from my car. I was pinned in the seat by a torsion bar, the motor was gone, and even my fingernails hurt. A half-hour later my cousin Chet called from Knoxville. He'd just heard I'd died. I think he was pleasantly surprised when I answered the phone.

So, we turned our sprint car into a Silver Crown car and went to Du Quoin. It felt good until the transmission broke, and we couldn't quite repair it for the start of the B-main. The green flag flew—and off went the field, but there was an immediate yellow. Fixed by then, I rushed out on the track and picked up the rear. I was totally amped up and charged through the pack and got the last qualifying spot. I did the same in the main event—and won it. Somehow the chief steward had overlooked what happened, and I'm probably the only guy to win a USAC race without really qualifying.

Billy Pauch came by the other day, and we got to talking about why it is that sometimes, when your back is up against the wall, you become a different person, driving much more aggressively. Why don't we drive that way all the time?

By 2000, the Tobias Speed Shop was slowing down and would soon close. Scott and Paul had both been badly hurt, and Ronnie was stricken with a heart attack while racing at Susquehanna. Before he died, he and I had designed a new kind of race car

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called a “Slingshot.” It was a response to the huge, growing expense of even racing a sportsman.

I kept going with the project and started a company called Speedway Entertainment to build them. The concept was to allow a beginner to showcase his or her talent without financial burden—with a racy car that would cost about the same as a snowmobile and would fit in the back of a pickup truck.

I had gone to work fabricating cars and racing right after high school, so I surely had no MBA. But I had a broad and strong concept for the Slingshots, and it was good for everybody. Everything progressed quickly, and I didn’t have to spend a lot of time crunching numbers.

There are currently more than 30 tracks running Slingshots weekly. We have over 1,600 cars out there with drivers aged eight to 70. I get enormous gratification that guys like Mike Mahaney, Anthony Perrego, and Billy Pauch Jr. started out in one.

In 2008, we took another step, introducing a “SpeedSTR” at Shenandoah in Virginia. It was designed for professional drivers who wish to make their living through racing. That just can’t be done driving a \$100,000 vehicle.

SpeedSTRs are comparable to midgets, but a car of their own with a self-starting Mopar and a simplistic design. They go for \$24,000 new, \$13,000 used. I insist that they be the headline attraction wherever they compete and that their purse is equivalent to what modifieds would get.

To prove out our theory, Doug Rose and I opened and are promoting the current track at Kutztown (PA) Fairgrounds. Things really took off. We had incredible names early on—like Kenny Brightbill, Jeff Strunk, Rick Eckert, and guys like Dave Darland and Matt Westphall coming in from afar.

The SpeedSTRs offer a dynamic 2½-hour show appropriate for today’s thrill-seeking community, but it has been more of a struggle to grow the concept. Right now,

we have about 170 of them out there, with concentrations here in Pennsylvania and in Quebec. We’re always looking for more tracks.

I’m wearing so many hats these days that it’s hard to put a helmet over them. At 56, I’m still racing whenever I can. Somehow, I can’t forget hotlapping on a perfectly prepared Springfield mile. That’s the poetry of our sport.

I’ve entered Super DIRT Week at Oswego this year and will be driving for Dan Humes out of Connecticut. He’s got good stuff—a Troyer that suits me well since it’s a little different, with a strong motor from my friends at Enders.

And Dan will have a nut behind the wheel. I’ve always seemed to do well when the track goes away and gets horrible. The way I figure it, that’s when you lose half your competition, and, because of my glass half-full attitude, that’s when I get going.

Let’s see if we can prevail. 🍀