

YORK REGION
WHEELS

By **JASON STEIN**
FOR WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS



She rode the stereotype of parade queen all the way to her personal Victory Lane and spun the inequalities of the day into an iconoclastic status.

But, in the end, Linda Vaughn, the buxom beauty queen of the racing scene, the one who could turn more heads at a race track than a 10-car pileup, was simply Linda.

To her fans, she was the sweetheart of stock car racing... and every other form of horsepower that involved a heavy right foot. To her friends, she was a shy girl from Dalton, Ga., who enjoyed southern cooking, water skiing, the Rolling Stones and hard work.

With a golden jump suit, six-inch heels and an ability to work a track like it was her living room, Vaughn was to racing what Junior Johnson, beer and T-shirts were to summer Saturday afternoons.

She was irony, draped in a checkered flag, making a name for herself as 'Miss Hurst Golden Shifter,' then using her name as a platform to speak out on issues she held dear.

A trophy queen, but so much more.
"My first love affair was with American cars and still is,"

Vaughn once said. "So I'm glad I grew up in the '60s with musclecars and rock 'n' roll. ... And I'm glad I am who I am."

Four decades later, the allure hasn't faded. For years she was the most recognizable figure in a male-dominated sport; a queen among kings. For racing, she was the icing on the cake.

Twenty-five years ago, author Jerry Bledsoe described it best when he wrote that an appearance by Vaughn at a local track made grimy mechanics "stand in awe, made them punch one another in the ribs and giggle like little boys."

Wherever Vaughn's trail would turn, crowds would gather, grown men would turn into teenage boys, and teenage boys would wonder how they ever watched Victory Lane without her.

"When she walked into a room," said Jon Lundberg, a longtime friend and writer for draglist.com, "you could feel the earth move."

"She had a presence that made her very special."

And she knew it from the start.

After an unsuccessful career as a dental technician out of high school, Vaughn quickly discovered she was better in front of the spotlight than pointing one at others. At 18, following the encouragement of some friends, she won "Miss Atlanta Raceway" in just her second pageant, displaying her anatomical charm while seated in pace cars around the south.

A year later, she was named "Miss Pontiac" at the 1962 Daytona 500, then "Miss Firebird" in 1963, then, ultimately, "Miss Hurst Golden Shifter" after responding, and winning, an open audition for the position in Hot Rod Magazine among 200 entries.

Her association with the Hurst company, a die-hard race outfit known for its aftermarket performance shifters, would last for decades, and her popularity would roar out of control.

From her standing perch on the back of a Hurst Oldsmobile convertible fitted with the likeness of a replica three-metre-tall Hurst stick shift, she was a fixture in major motorsports and automotive events. Along with drag-racer Don Garlits and stock-car 'King' Richard Petty, Vaughn quickly became a prominent figure in the racing world.

She toured military bases in Vietnam, made drag-race strips a regular stop and became the talk of the racing world. "Hurstettes" were hired, an additional set of blonde beauties who filled in for Vaughn when demand became too much. Then, TV contracts were signed and movies followed.

And, either way, Vaughn always got what she wanted.

From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, she was the First Lady of Drag Racing, Formula One, NASCAR and Indy. Out of her trophy-queen image, Vaughn, the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) driver, competed in races while driving home her personal goals.

She bought two of her favourite cars — a red Ferrari Dino and a black Cadillac El Dorado — and she sold her causes.

After retiring from the automotive scene in the mid-1980s, Vaughn used her success to promote the growth of women in motorsports, to encourage the work of trade organizations for producers and marketers of specialty equipment, a \$15-billion industry, and to commit herself to other charitable work.

She became a catalyst for the International Motorsports Hall of Fame, was elected to the Drag Racing Hall of Fame, but eventually she would return to her first love, teaming up with Mr. Gasket Performance Group, a conglomerate of automotive companies that acquired Hurst Industries, where she was promoted to Vice President in charge of Public Relations.

Today, you'll find Vaughn making the rounds at car shows and automotive races, the race-queen label traded for the role as guest of honor. And she still turns heads at every tour stop. She still has her fans. Web sites still sell autographed prints.

And she is still proud of the career that took her from humble beginnings in a small Georgia town to the sweetheart of stock-car racing.

"My goal has always been to live long enough to write my book about living a healthy life in racing and the auto industry," Vaughn said in a 1999 interview. "And I'm almost there."

What a ride.

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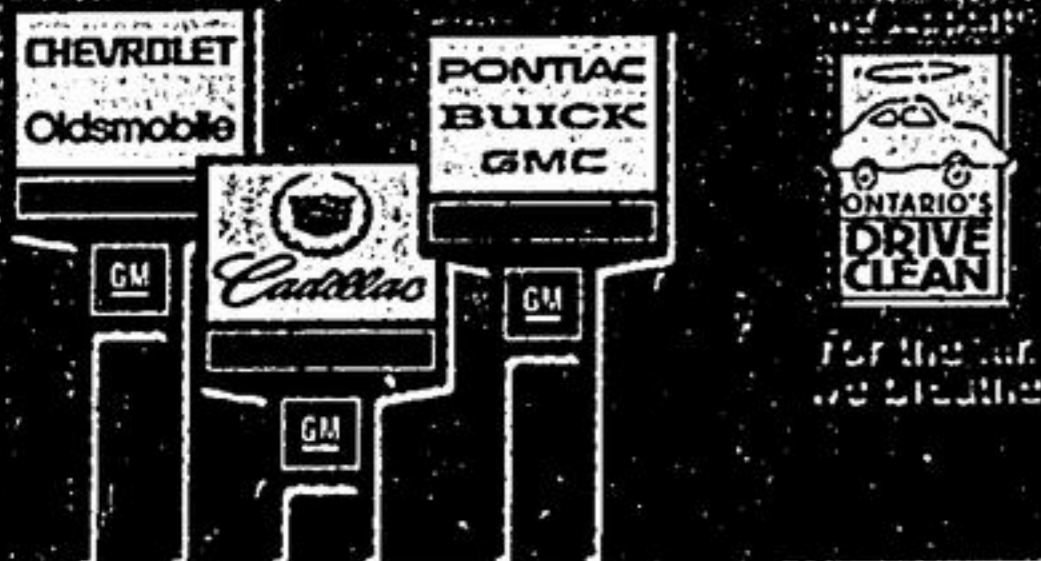
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