

It was a frozen moment in time

Maybe if Dave McClelland hadn't been there, on the back of that flatbed trailer that night in 1959, he'd still be waiting for the good times to roll.

Maybe he'd still be wondering when his dream would detour into reality.

Thinking back, it was kind of a dream, after all.

How could the drag-racing announcer, that day at the old airport track in Carlisle, Ark., have frozen up when Art Malone and Eddie Hill screamed down the track? How could the announcer have flubbed his chance, forgot his lines or swallowed the microphone the way he did?

How could Dave McClelland have been so fortunate?

"It was a match race," McClelland told Rod & Custom Magazine last October, "and as the first run came up between Malone and Hill, the announcer froze at the microphone. He didn't say a word. The track owner, who I knew pretty well, was just standing there looking at the guy. He knew I worked in radio, so I asked him if I could give it a try."

The track owner's response?

"You couldn't do any worse," McClelland remembered with a smile.

As it turns out, drag racing couldn't have done much better.

For more than 40 years, one familiar sound has echoed throughout drag strips across the nation. He was *The Voice*: a poet with great pipes, all the charisma without the clichés.

From that fortuitous day in '59 when a rookie stumbled into the start of a legendary career to eventually become the lead announcer for the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA), McClelland has always hit the right key at the right time.

He is 'Mr. Quarter-Mile'. He is the music, the face and the symbol of drag racing's evolution. He still counts himself fortunate.

"I never expected to be doing this 40 years later," he said two years ago, at a celebration of his 40th anniversary calling the U.S. Nationals. "But there's a lot about this business that sometimes we just never imagine."

With a love of cars that began in little Liberty, Kan., a town of 26,000 just north of the Oklahoma line, McClelland's passion for all things that revved was crystal clear. From the long, dusty nights at the oval tracks in Lakeside and Riverside, to the drag strips in Kansas City and Carlisle, he was the kid who always wanted to drive, but had to settle for a better seat on the side.

One trip to Kansas City in 1955 to take in an event designed to promote sanctioned drag racing had him stuck on the sport. A trip back a year later to see the NHRA Nationals had him "really hooked," he said.

A career in broadcasting would pull him away from drag racing. One night would set him up for good.

"Who knew I'd begin my race-announcing career on the back of a flatbed trailer?" he said.

Who knew what happened next would turn out so good?

After a series of small-town TV and radio stops, from Shreveport, La., to Little Rock, Ark., McClelland's chance encounter would come at the Carlisle raceway when an announcer went numb.

McClelland's work that night at the old airport track eventually led to one gig, then another, and another. He was still news director at a TV station in Shreveport, yet he was also doing some of the biggest jobs on the drag-racing circuit. By 1961, McClelland was announcing the U.S. Nationals in Indianapolis, Ind. By the mid-'60s he would become a fixture everywhere engines whined, calling a race somewhere across the country every weekend during the season.

In between TV-station gigs, and jobs running race tracks in Louisiana and Dallas, Tex., McClelland kept up his drag-racing work and eventually caught the ear of NHRA president Wally Parks. Within a week, McClelland was working for Parks, who was quite impressed with what he heard. By 1971, McClelland was doing full-time work for the NHRA, the organization he admired most.

"I knew then, drag racing was something I was never going to leave."

Ultimately, he didn't. When the NHRA needed someone to spearhead public relations, McClelland was the perfect voice. When it expanded and needed a TV personality two years later, he was the perfect face. He would continue with commercials, promotions and syndication, producing many NHRA events.

"When I think about it," he told Rod & Custom, "it's hard to believe I actually did all those things."

And he would keep announcing, even after joining a California hot-rod publication in the late-1970s, even when he kept up his street-rodding hobby as a member of the legendary L.A. Roadster Club.

By 2000, he had done the U.S. Nationals for four decades, and he hasn't let up.

Last year, for his contributions to drag racing, McClelland was the recipient of the 2001 Don Prudhomme Award, given by the NHRA to an individual who has made a profound impact on the growth and positive image of drag racing.

The charismatic kid from Kansas could only smile.

"It's amazing to think where I've ended up," he said. "Especially when you think where I started."

It's even more remarkable to see what he keeps on doing. McClelland is still involved in many broadcasting projects, including a role as host for Hot Rod Magazine TV (Speed Channel).

He's still the master of ceremonies at the Hot Rod Museum's monthly car cruises in Pomona, Calif., and competes in Nostalgia and Super Comp-class drag events.

And, once a month, he still pulls the tarp off one of his best hot rods, rolls it out for a show 'n' shine and wonders where he would be had it not been for one frozen moment in time.

Drag racing could wonder the same.

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Sometimes you can trace your path in life back to a single day, an hour, or maybe even a second.



By JASON STEIN FOR WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

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