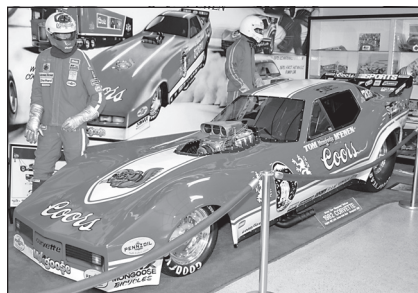


The Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing

Story & photos by Phillip Prichard

"Big Daddy Don Garlits is considered the father of drag racing. Drag racing began in California around 1949, Garlits began racing in Florida in 1950. Always a pioneer in the field of drag-racing, Garlits, with the help of T.C. Lemons, in 1970 following an accident in the Swamp Rat XIII, a front engine dragster that resulted in the loss of a portion of his right foot, perfected the rear-engine top fuel dragster design. The design is exceptionally safer as it puts the engine, drive train and rotating or reciprocating parts of the dragster behind the driver. The driver is placed in "clear air" in front of nearly all mechanical components, thus remaining capable to activate a variety of safety equipment in the event of catastrophic mechanical failures or fire. Garlits was an early promoter of a full-body, fire-resistant suit - complete with socks and gloves, often branded as Nomex.

Garlits was the first drag racer to officially surpass the 170, 180, 200, 240, 250, and 270 miles per hour marks in the quarter mile; he was also the first to top 200 in the 1/8 mile. All official NHRA records require a "back-up" (speed and elapsed time within 1% of the record) run during the course of the particular event where the record was set to verify the newer, higher level of performance. Garlits earned seventeen (17) World Champion Titles: Ten (10) AHRA, Four (4) IHRA and Three (3) NHRA. He won the prestigious U. S. Nationals eight times. He has been inducted in numerous halls of fame and has won numerous awards during his career.



In 1976, "Big Daddy" and his wife, Pat felt that after 25 years of racing that the sport of drag racing should have its own museum to house the many cars and trophies that he had accumulated, plus honor the people who have made drag racing the sport it is today.

In 1984, the original 25000 square foot facility opened in Ocala. The drag racing museum is in one building and Don's Antique Car Museum is in the other building. The drag racing museum today has over 50,000 square feet of displays that chronicles the history of the sport of drag racing. Some 90 race cars can be seen in the Drag Race building; while an additional 50 vehicles are in the Antique Car building. Many of the Garlits "Swamp Rat" cars are here, but he also turns out to be a pack rat with an accumulation of cars and memorabilia from other top names in the sport.

As soon as you park, one of the first displays is a Navy A-7 jet on a pedestal in front of the drag racing building. Garlits has a long history with the Navy from: going to Vietnam in 1971 on a Christmas tour, being on Navy recruiting posters, and racing various Navy aircraft including an A-7 on the USS Lexington. When Cecil Field was shut down the A-7 display was given to "Big Daddy"

You enter the museum through a well-stocked gift shop to purchase the ticket for the tour. Various ticket prices prevail, regular admission, senior discount, military discount plus children's prices. The drag racing museum is divided into three large rooms; the first is the original museum that housed various drag racing vehicles plus other race cars. Not only are Garlits cars such as many of the Swamp Rat dragsters are on display, Connie Kallitta's Bounty Hunter, Dick Kraf's The Bug, TV Tommy Ivo's Dragster, Don Prudhomme's Mattel Dragster, Wedge Dragster and U.S. Army Funny Car, Darrell Alderman's Dodge Daytona, Chris Karamines' Wedge Dragster, Tom "Mongoose" McEwens' Funny



Car, Lloyd Scott's Bustle Bomb, the AMT Pirahna with its Cyclolac body, Craig Breedlove's Spirit of America, Shirley Muldowney's 1980 Attebury Car, plus many other displays including streamliner cars such as the Saltliner which ran at the Bonneville Salt Flats.

The second room houses displays such as "Jungle Jim" Liberman's Chevrolet Vega Funny Car, the 1939 Fiat "Fire Fly II" recreated in memory of Bob Daniels, John Force's Funny Car, the Max Wedge Dodge built in 1962, the "Pollutionizer" powered by a V-12 Allison engine, Bill "Grumpy" Jenkins Nova, Bruce Larson's first all fiberglass Chevelle Funny Car, Barbara Hamilton's 1937 Willy Coupe, Shirley Muldowney "Last Pass" Dragster, plus many Don Garlits cars.

The engine room houses many Dodge Hemi engines, blowers, transmissions, etc. Many have cut aways to show the internal working parts.

The Antique Car Museum is home to 50 vehicles plus a host of other automotive memorabilia. The collection consists of such rarities as: 1942 Mercury Convertible; 1950 Ford Tudor, a 1964½ Ford Mustang, "Big Daddy's" Prize for Top Eliminator at the NHRA Nationals in his Swamp

Rat VI-B; Chrysler Victory Siren, Smoky Yunick's 1954 Hudson Hornet Engine that won the Daytona 500, 1904 Orient Buckboard car, a supercharged big block Chevrolet lawnmower, a 1948 Ford Limousine, many 1930s vintage Fords, 1960s vintage Dodges plus many others.

The Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing is located at 13700 SW 16th Ave, Ocala, Florida, just off Exit 341 on Interstate 75. It is open daily 9 am - 5 pm except for Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. It has a self-guided tour that describes the history of drag racing. Two - three hours should be devoted to the tour to soak in the history of drag racing.

Stop by Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing while you're in town for the NHRA GATOR NATIONALS March 13-16, 2014.



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