

Don Jensen

Was there ever anyone who loved to race more than Don Jensen? Fast, prolific, and successful, Don was and is a no-nonsense guy who does not collect trophies or clippings, attend meetings, or get involved in controversies. He just wanted—and wants—to race.

Jensen started out as a neighborhood drag racer who got into the top ranks of amateur and the mid ranks of professional road racing the hard way, teaching himself to race and working on his own cars.

Jensen never had the money or the backing in proportion to the speed he showed in cars he cobbled together and maintained largely by himself. Fast and successful cars often held together with little more than elbow grease and a prayer. This was as true from the moment he arrived on the scene with a fearsome Chrysler-powered Victress though the days when he competed in the United States Road Racing Championship and the Canadian-American Challenge Cup. For the most part, he was driver, crew chief, engine builder, chassis tuner and pit crew. His employer and sometimes sponsor John Gorman helped on occasion and was at least sympathetic to the demands of Jensen's racing career.

Jensen got amazing mileage out of a Pontiac engine he first put into a Victress body in 1959. When that car was destroyed, the engine went into a Corvette and then into the Black Mariah, a Devin-bodied car that was fast but not always reliable. From there Don went to the car that is most closely associated with him in the period covered in this book: the Mk2 Burnett. Built for him by Stan Burnett and tuned and maintained by Jensen himself. Burnett and Jensen in their Mk2s were regularly seen all over the northwest. They were always very popular with spectators and given enormous respect from their competitors. Jensen put a series of different wings on his model and Burnett eventually moved on to the Burnett Mk3.

Jensen traveled outside the area when it was economically feasible, racing at the Runoffs, nearby CanAm races, and at several Canadian tracks. Budgets always held him back but he found way to get to almost every local race and even won a few regional season class championships. It's hard to finish often enough to win season championships when going as fast as possible and winning each race is your only goal. "Gamesmanship" was never part of Don Jensen's makeup. Continually tuning the Chevrolet engine in the Burnett, even Jensen and Gorman eventually could get nothing more out of it and the cost of getting a more competitive engine was too much. Jensen retired from real racing in the mid-70s, finally bowing to the realities of home life and the impossible cost of remaining competitive at the level he demanded of himself. He returned to vintage in the late 90s over the protests of his wife Arlene, who has been married to Don for over 40 years (she probably deserves an entire chapter in this book for that feat).

Jensen recently retired from vintage racing where he drove a very fast CanAm Lola, finally conceding that his vision was not up to the 160mph-plus car and refusing to go slower.