

Pit Stop

Dragster trains student

Stop That Snickering. This column is called "Pit Stop," the auto-racing term for a short service break. But that's not all it means.

Several years ago race-car builder Carrol Shelby (of Cobra and GT 350 fame) decided to branch out. One of his new products was "a real man's deodorant" called...PS.

So to all who've been making those snide remarks: somebody thought of it first.

A Man Possessed. When talking to Brian Willey, you have to be careful not to get the wrong idea.

Willey, 18, is from Sidney and a freshman advertising major at UNL. He also is one of the five youngest professional drag racers—driver, mechanic and partner—in a \$50,000 "funny car," the only one of its kind in Nebraska.

As a road-racing nut, I once viewed draggers as brutal jerks, weeknight rubber-burners, automotive Neanderthals.

But Willey doesn't talk about the joys of laying scratch and shutting 'em down. He talks cost breakdowns, expenses and sponsorships.

Put on good show

"A funny car is just a 200-mph billboard," he said. "You don't have to win to make money as long as you put on a good show."

The expenses are undeniable. Willey's partner, Scott Norman of Sidney, bought the Mustang II-based dragster for \$30,000. Its 480 cubic-inch Chrysler engine cost \$8,000. Travel and repair expenses run \$80,000 a year. The highly-explosive nitromethane fuel ruins 300 pistons a season—at \$60 a shot.

But the money is there, if you can get it—and getting it is one of Willey's concerns. Drag racing is very salable now, he said. Cigarettes and beer dealers, even the armed forces will part with cash to have their names associated with a popular racer. Wonder Bread built two cars.

Seventy million people may see Willey's car during its planned coast-to-coast tour of races and auto shows. In return, he's looking for \$140,000 in sponsorships.

Professional operation

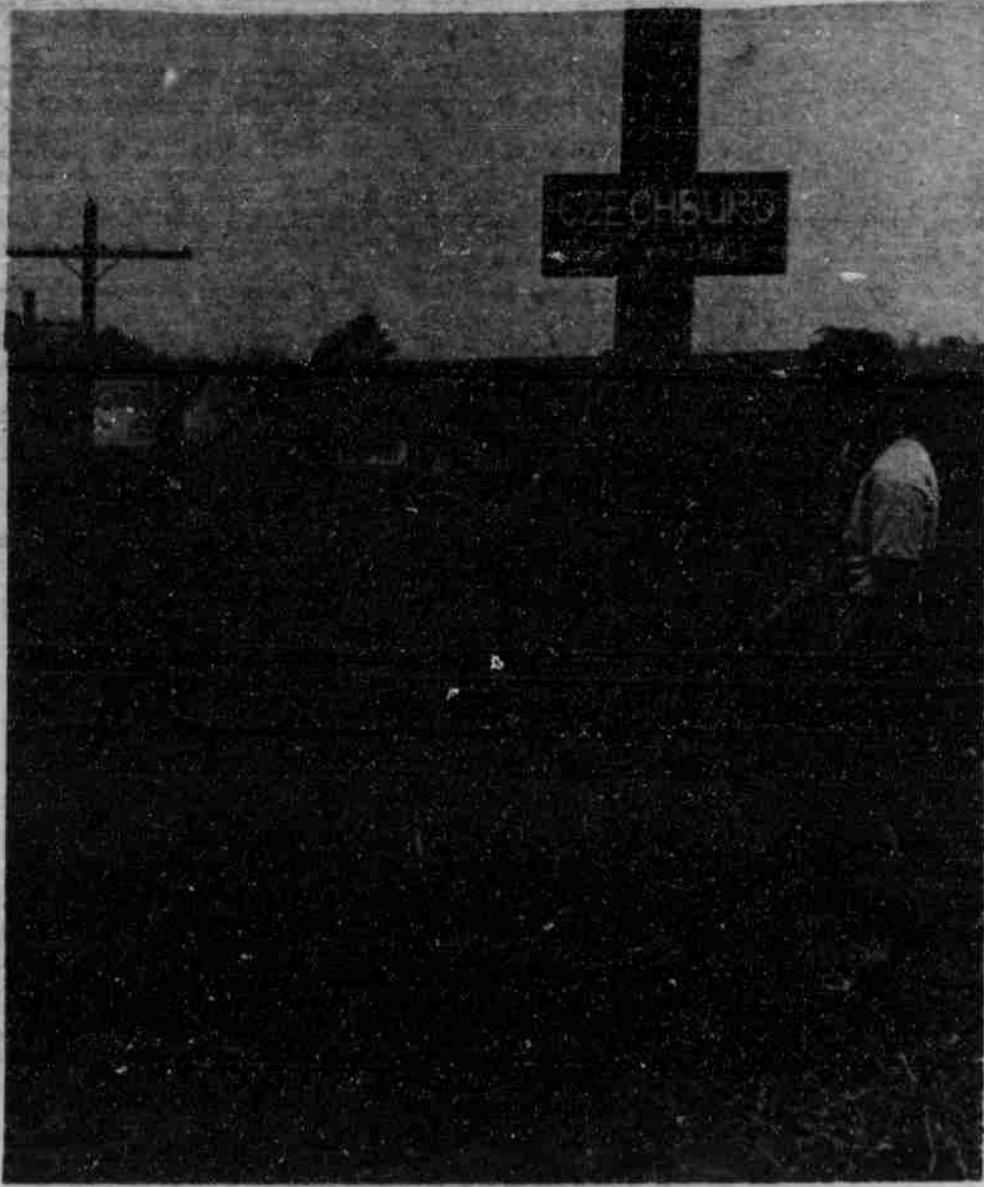
"I'm just trying to start a professional operation," Willey said.

Maybe too professional, I thought. All the guy talks about is money. And as I was about to write off Willey as a mercenary, he started telling me about what it's like to live the way racers do.

He started in the sixth grade as a mechanic working on drag cars. For seven years he towed racers from Denver to Oklahoma to Minnesota, rebuilding cars and engines in motel parking lots and alleys. As he worked, he learned to drive. How to keep the car straight at 230 mph, feel the clutch, fire the braking parachutes—all in the six seconds it takes to run the quarter-mile race.

Willey showed me the chassis of his car, a simple steel-tube frame with no front brakes or rear springs. The only other parts are the engine (in Denver for work) and the body (in Sidney for paint.) There is no mechanical resemblance to a production Mustang.

"College comes first for me," Willey said. But to me, the purpose of his advertising training is clear—to help him get what he needs so he can keep doing what he loves to do.




Bored?

Rules for the Pit Stop "Find Czechburg" contest: find Czechburg. It's about 25 miles north on 27th St. Copy the initials on the back of the town sign and send them to me (Jim Williams) at Nebraska Union 34.

Winner gets a large Valentino's pizza and goes to Valhalla at death. (Hint: Don't use the weak bridge.)

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