

It was the winter of 1979 when I got a phone call from a friend telling me that Pete Williams, driver of the famed Chi-Town Hustler had retired and they were in search of a new driver. I could hear opportunity banging on my front door.

When I went to interview with Austin Coil to drive the Chi-Town Hustler I was, as you may have guessed, a bit nervous. I had struggled with my own cars for a number of years living hand to mouth and this was to be, if I got the job, the first time I would ever get to drive a car, especially a good car, that I would not be solely responsible for taking care of or more importantly not have to pay for. If I was successful in convincing Austin that I was the man for the job I would not only be driving a world famous race car but I'd actually be getting paid to do it. I'm don't believe my intense desire (i.e. desperation) helped my presentation but I got the job anyway.

During the interview which included visiting with Austin at his home, stopping by the race car shop and enjoying

dinner at a local restaurant, Austin had a lot to say about what they were looking for in a driver. He said they wanted someone that knew how to win (that was me alright), someone that was an experienced mechanic and could service the car (right again), a person who would not whine about long hours and travel (I'm your guy), and above all, a driver that would not tear up their stuff (well, 3 out of 4 I thought).

He was very candid with me and said that he had spoke with a number of other drivers about me and they all said pretty much the same thing. I was fast enough, did most of my own work and was a consistent winner on the UDRA alcohol circuit but there was one area of concern. According to Austin, one well known driver said I either ran into things on a regular basis or I had a VERY narrow trailer because the side of my car was always scraped up.

Following hours of discussion, Austin said that he wasn't sure if those drivers were right but he would let me drive his car at the first race of the year with one

understanding... that if "I as much as put a scratch on his car" he would kill me. I was fairly sure he used the word "kill" instead of the phrase "yell loudly at" but I wasn't positive.

I went on to spend five years with Austin driving the Chi-Town Hustler. We won many national events and Austin earned his first two NHRA World Championships in 1982 and 1983 while I was at the wheel. During that time, I never crossed a center line, touched a guard rail or wall, ran off the end of a track or otherwise put a single scratch on his car, which is by the way a much better record than I had had previously.

You see, those other drivers that attested to some of my poor judgment behind the wheel prior to my job with Austin were accurate. I had more than once been guilty of lifting too late or not at all and yes, bumping into some stuff. I guess I thought that might be acceptable to others, or maybe I didn't care what others thought. I saw each and every race as the most important run anyone had ever

made. I told myself it was never over until it was over, that winning was everything, losing was nothing and I would never accept defeat until it was inevitable. I'm scaring myself just talking about it!

It wasn't that I was an unskillful driver. An unskillful driver can't handle a car, is unaware of what the car is doing, can't interpret feedback, detect wheel spin, small angle changes, or engine or driveline operation. I was good at all of that. I was a skillful driver with a bad attitude and a poor perspective on what I was supposed to be doing with the car. I simply changed my driving behavior when I stepped into Austin's car. I did not develop new skills, I already had them. I just changed my mind about how I was going to drive.

The fact is that no driver can save every run. Sometimes it's screwed up and you have to quit. Period. The fact is that there is no run that's so important that it's worth risking damage to equipment or your safety. And the fact is that no one that matters will ever look at a driver,

driving over his or her head and be positively impressed by it. I don't think everyone has to learn these lessons the hard way. You can, if you'd like, take advice from drivers that have been there, seen that and done that. The conservative approach is often a better choice.

As Chuck Yeager, the test pilot and first man to break the sound barrier once said.

"There are old test pilots... and there are bold test pilots... but there are no old bold test pilots."

Words to live by.