

RIVET

Ring! Year in and year out, the telephone does that at Jackie Howerton Racing Products. Namesake and proprietor Jackie Howerton originally opened his Indiana repair and fabrication emporium to cater to teams in the Indy 500. Cater it did.

Ring!

"Jackie? Don Whittington. Listen, Rivet, what we're going to do is quit paying the Limies money for Indy cars and build our own..."

But Howerton's killer reputation as a metal beater and arc welder supreme soon was delivering him a far wider clientele than he ever expected.

Ring!

"Jackie? Lee Iacocca at Chrysler Motors. We want you to make us a six-wheel lowboy pickup truck prototype."

Ring!

"Jackie? Shirley Muldowney. Can you do some work on my digger?"

Ring!

"Jackie? Dr. Steve Olvey. Can you make a custom muffler for my Ferrari?"

Howerton Racing Products is among the jungle of competition shops stretching for a half mile along Gasoline Alley, a twisting two lane byway one mile south of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. And 20 years' worth of chewing the fat with Fortune 500 cohunes heroines of drag racing and osteopaths on Indy 500 stars has been a hoot for Jackie. And that's not to mention the distinction of getting the nickname "Rivet" from the notorious Whittington brothers, Don and Bill, a pair of airplane-and-car-racing swashbucklers and pirates from south Florida, who eventually got locked up for running a multimillion-dollar "laughing tobacco" smuggling ring.

HRP's phone still rings around the clock, but more and more its proprietor leaves the day-to-day functions to his two sons, who inherited his skills and who among other things are busy tooling up oil systems and exhaust headers for the Indy Racing League. Several seasons ago when carbon fiber came in and tin went out, Jackie knew it was time to begin a graceful departure. These days he takes his own sweet time hand-constructing the all-time dream street hot rod roadster.

Coming from bum-screw Tulsa, Okla., and a family of super-modified car champions, all it took to make Howerton happy was having an aluminum torch or a steering wheel in his hands. In those early years, he judged himself a better race car driver than a fabricator.

But once he got to Indianapolis, one of the Speedway's fast-talking spellbinders put the old Jesse James to him and conned Jackie into purchasing \$500 worth of racing parts. A sheriff arrived to confiscate them as stolen goods and put the spellbinder behind bars.

"I was almost in tears," Jackie says. "The \$500 was all the money I had, and I was a long ways from Tulsa with a wife and kids. So I went down to the jail to hear the guy who'd sold me the parts. First, he talked the sheriff into letting him go, and then I got my money back. Next thing I heard, the guy borrowed a car off a used-car lot, then went to the bank and told the bank that his mom and dad had just gotten killed in a plane crash. And then he borrowed money on their insurance policy and blew town. Years later I saw him at a race and said, 'Hello,

-----.' And he said, 'Shhh! That's not my name anymore. My new name is -----.' He's still racing today."

A flipping sprint car rang Jackie's bell. A station wagon and a race car hauler he was a passenger in that got upside-down in an Arizona gully did the same thing. Worst of all, Howerton found that he was 15 years too late to cash in his super-modified credentials for a ride in the Indy 500. Only his skills as a tin and torch man saved him from going home to Tulsa. It was in 1975 that he opened HRP, and that was one season after he'd enjoyed his one and only moment as an Indy car winner.

The godly George Bignotti, head honcho of Patrick Racing in Indianapolis, entered Jackie in the Hoosier Hundred dirt track event at the State Fairgrounds. And the Bignotti automobile Jackie was entrusted with was such a ridiculous expression of overkill -- a violently-barking Indy 500 turbocharged Offenhauser crammed into a standard upright dirt chassis -- that the U.S. Auto Club went into a faint and outlawed it the minute that Jackie won the Hoosier Hundred.

It was a wild afternoon. In the course of the 100 miles, Al Unser Sr. and Mario Andretti both tried taking strips off Howerton. But, as Bignotti described the action: "as soon as people started running into him, Jackie just packed up and pedaled the throttle and got out of there."

His ringing, roaring ears remained full of turbocharger bark for years. "But I'd do it again," Jackie says. "We've all got our scars."

Is he depressed that in 1998, he's a 54-year-old fabrication icon instead of a 54-year-old race-driving titan?"

"No way. It has all been pretty interesting."

Ring!

"Rivet? Don Whittington. I'm out of prison and just crashed a P-51 Mustang into the Gulf of Mexico. They can't kill me!" (1998)