

Rhonnie Vesco:



In love with a "Little Giant"

By Wendi Epps

Who says women can't race with the big boys? Local resident Rhonnie Vesco believes that racing is in her blood. The legacy started with her grandfather, was passed down to her uncle and her father, and now she is stepping up to try her hand as the first female racer in her family.

Female racers are becoming more common in the motorsports arena. Although the field is dominated by men, women are competing more often and are beginning to break records and place at races. As of mid-August the Web site that hosts the Bonneville races, <http://www.scta-bni.org>, reported that for this year's races, one female had placed in the 200 mph club.

"There are two friends of mine that have previously placed in the 200 mph club, Julie Burkdoll and Alison Volk-Dempsey. That's what I'm hoping to get into," says Vesco.

Her first race was going to be at the Bonneville Salt Flats near Wendover in August. She planned to race a modified version of the "Little Giant," originally built by her grandfather. For its 50th anniversary, they repainted the car to look as it did in 1957, on the day of its first race. They also put the old engine back into the car, with the new modifications.

Vesco and her family spent months preparing for the race. "My dad has been working on it for a year, and my brother and I have been going every weekend to my dad's house, sanding the body and



Racing is in Rhonnie Vesco's blood, a legacy that started with her grandfather in the 1950s.

repainting it."

Vesco's father Rick began making modifications to the body, making the nose narrower and longer. He added a tail where the parachute comes out, so the parachute tubes would be closed in. This had never been done before and was a hot topic of conversation at the races.

The engine itself was being worked

on by an antique engine specialist, and Rick had been working with him over the phone for weeks, trying to get all of the parts measured out right and put together. With only one week to go before the start of the races, Rick went to help his engineer put everything back together and bring the engine home, never wanting to give up. They worked all week, but couldn't get it done in time.

Unfortunately, after months of preparation, the modified engine wasn't completed in time, and the car was unable to compete at Bonneville's Speed Week. "We kept thinking we wouldn't make it, but my dad kept giving us hope that we would. We were pretty anxious, hoping every day for the phone call that said he was coming back with the engine. When we realized we couldn't race, we were all really disappointed," recalls Rhonnie.

Rhonnie and family weren't the only ones having a hard time making it to the races. The Bonneville Salt Flats have had quite a few setbacks this year. Storms have created potholes and standing water, both of which are unacceptable conditions for racing.

According to the SCTA, three courses were originally prepped for Speed Week. All three succumbed to the downpour and were unusable. Two more courses were established, and while the schedule was slightly set back, they did everything they could to ensure that the races went on.

Speed definitely runs in the Vesco family

blood. "I've always been a fast driver. I've gotten several speeding tickets to prove that." It was at the Bonneville Salt Flats in 2001 where her uncle, Don Vesco, broke the World Land Speed Record for wheel-driven cars, setting the bar at an astonishing 458 miles per hour. Don and Rhonnie's father, Rick, designed and built the streamliner. Their car, named the "Turbinator," was powered by a modified helicopter engine.

The "Turbinator" is now waiting for a new set of wheels. "It's not running right now because it's waiting for 500 mph tires. They just started making them, and the car needed them in order to go the speed we wanted it to go." They don't know when they'll get it up and running, but the car will be the ticket to turning their 500 mph dreams into reality.

The family has been pretty lucky with their racing career. They have had only one major accident in the "Little Giant." In 1981, while Rick was racing at Bonneville, he blew a rear tire and the car flipped over. He zoomed through the timing lights at about 300 miles per hour upside down. With the seven-point seatbelt system, leg and arm restraints, he wasn't hurt. "It was fine. There's not anything to hit out there; it's all pretty flat," explains Rick.

Vesco is anxious to get back out to the

Bonneville Salt Flats. "It's been six years since I've been out there. The last time I was there I saw my uncle break the world speed record."

Their family's need for speed began with her grandfather, Johnny Vesco. Back in 1954, the cars that were used for racing were saucer-shaped, bulky, and prone to flipping over. Johnny began building a new car, one that he felt would be safer and be more aerodynamic.

Three years later, the "Little Giant" was born and raced for the first time. In 1969, Vesco's father inherited the car and began to rebuild it. The Vesco family's goal was to develop the first wheel-driven car to go 500 mph. Don went on to break 18 motorcycle records and six automobile records. However, their goal has never been realized. In 2002, Don passed away, a victim of cancer.

What inspires Vesco to race is deeply personal. She didn't become interested in racing until her uncle died. She realized that there would be hundreds of people at the races trying to break her uncle's land speed record.

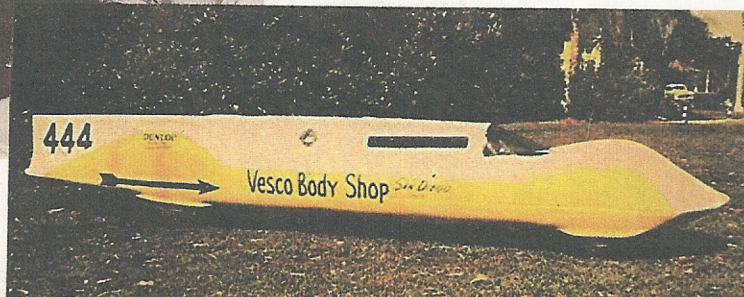
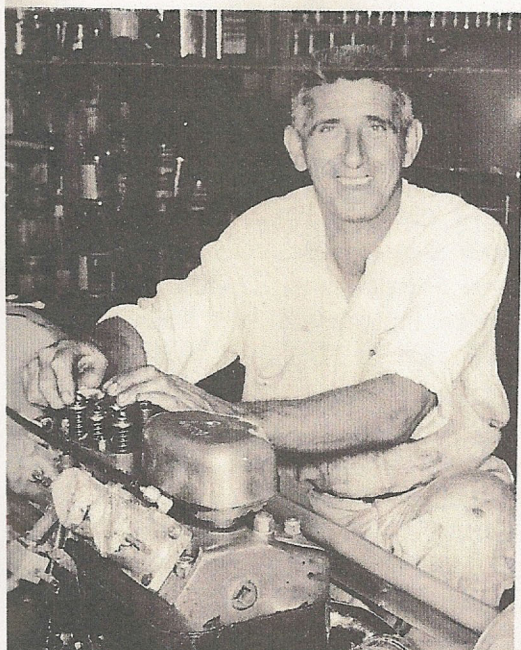
"My uncle and dad worked very hard to get as far as they did, yet that record could and probably will be broken. I don't want that to happen. I want that record to stay in our family...It will be painful to let the memory die with my uncle."

While Vesco didn't get to race the "Little Giant" in August, she hopes to compete again once they get the engine up and running. She has set her sights on qualifying for the 200 mph club at one of the last two races of the year, in September or October, weather permitting.

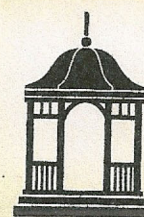
"It's important that we get to race this year, so it's still the 50th anniversary of the 'Little Giant'...It's an honor to follow in the footsteps of my grandpa, my uncle, and my dad." ■

Johnny Vesco, (left) works on an early racing engine during the 1950s.

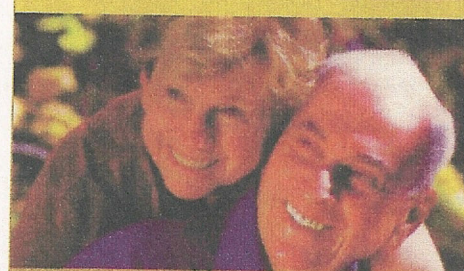
The original Vesco racer, (below) built in 1957.



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