

**Oral History Interview of
Andy Mears**

**Interviewed by: Daniel Sanchez
February 5, 2019
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Sports Interviews***

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Andy Mears as he discusses drag racing. In this interview, Mears describes his passion for drag racing and delves into details about his car dealership business.

Length of Interview: 01:38:14

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Introduction and background information; getting into drag racing	05	00:00:00
Getting seriously injured while racing; drag events	10	00:15:34
Getting the feel of a car; getting his children involved in racing	13	00:25:22
Types of races he is running	19	00:39:15
Driving a Formula Ford car; racing model planes	22	00:47:59
People who have influenced him along the way	27	01:03:58
His thoughts on drag racing TV shows	29	01:12:03
Technology in drag racing; the auto sales business	34	01:25:08

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Daniel Sanchez (DS):

Let me read my intro. My name is Daniel Urbina Sanchez. Today's date is February 5, 2019. And I'm interviewing Andy Mears at his office in Lubbock, Texas. This interview is part of our motorsports initiative. [Moves recorder] All right. Andy, thank you for letting me come in and talk to you today.

Andy Mears (AM):

Absolutely.

DS:

And let's start off with your complete legal name.

AM:

James Andrew Mears.

DS:

And your name—date and place of birth.

AM:

11/28/56. Born in Lubbock, Texas.

DS:

How about your parents? Give me the same information on them.

AM:

My father was James Reed Mears. Was born in Lubbock. My mother was Kay Mears. Was born in East Texas around Decamp [?] [0:00:55] area. But moved to Lubbock when they were—when she was a little kid, and lived here all her life. Where she met my father at the Hi-D-Ho.

DS:

At the Hi-D-Ho?

AM:

At the Hi-D-Ho. [Laughs]

DS:

The one that was on University? Do you know where it was?

AM:

I think so. I mean—it was on 34th and [pause] P?

DS:

P? Okay.

AM:

I think there was a Mexican—or used to be a Mexican restaurant. But it was a drive-up Hi-D-Ho. My mother was a waitress, and dad was a hoodlum. [Laughter] And that's where they met.

DS:

So, what did your dad do, growing up? I mean, for his—

AM:

He did several things. He told me he did a lot of things—and learned—he didn't want to do. He was a fast food cook. He was—he owned a flower shop for a little bit. Started kind of jockeying cars on the side, and just decided that's what he wanted to do. So he started selling cars. He sold cars for Modern Chevrolet for several years. Went into management. Was there probably ten years. From there, in the late sixties, he went to Volkswagen and established a used car department for Volkswagen. At the time, Volkswagen didn't sell used cars. So he basically started the used car division for Volkswagen in the United States. Taught classes in how to do it, and set it up and everything. In about 1971, he opened a little note lot, you know, over on Texas Avenue—19th and Texas. In 1974, we moved to the old Burger Chef building, and got—acquired the Mazda franchise. We had Mazda there. In '79, we moved back to the—or back to the building on 19th Street, which was the one that Buddy Holly used to sing on top of. It's actually a historical marker, that building is. The Riflemen appeared there. Buddy Holly sung on the roof in the fifties. And we got Jaguar, which was kind of short-lived. Jaguar M.G. trial. In 1981, we got Volvo. We've stuck with Mazda and Volvo since '81. And we moved out here fourteen years ago, just because a better location and nicer—newer building.

DS:

And you've got a lot of space to grow out here, right?

AM:

Yeah. Yeah. Of course, now I'm too damn old to—[laughter] to care.

DS:

So where did you go to school?

AM:

I went to, uh, Monterey High School.

DS:

What were you planning on becoming when you were in high school?

AM:

I wanted something to do with cars. I always wanted something to do with cars. I mean, when I was in junior high, I was—I had my own business rebuilding lawnmowers and edgers. I liked motors. I was doing whatever I could to—because I liked cars. I liked mechanics. Actually, I was fifteen and became an ASE [**Automotive Service Excellence**] certified master technician at fifteen. And I worked for Bill Reese Auto Service at that time. When we got Mazda, then I started to—of course, Dad—when we got Mazda, my brother and I both worked there. I started out as a technician. I went from technician—I went to sales, I went to the office—because Dad moved us around. My brother was a service manager and a parts manager. He moved us all around so we could learn all aspects of the business. So when it was our turn to take over, we knew what we were talking about. I could do anybody's job in this place. But don't tell the mechanics I can't do their job anymore. [Laughter] Because it's all computer now.

DS:

I was going to say, because it's all changed from the seventies to now.

AM:

Oh yeah. Used to you had to work on them. Now they plug a computer in and it says, "This is wrong." That's beyond me.

DS:

They even have chips where you can change the performance of the engines and stuff.

AM:

Oh yeah. The Volvo—you can—it's like nine hundred bucks. You can plug in a computer and hit a button and you gain two hundred horsepower.

DS:

Just with the right code.

AM:

At the click of a button. I worked for years to make two hundred extra horsepower. [Laughter] And try this and try that and different cabs and different carburetors and different whatever. And they just go, "Click. There's a button. There's two hundred horsepower. Have fun."

DS:

And that kind of brings us back to why I came here: your drag racing. And you started talking about how your dad got you in that early.

AM:

My dad got me in it. I soon made a pass at fifteen at Lubbock Dragway, when I was fifteen years old. And I was hooked on cars. I liked working on them. But Dad got me into the cars to keep me out of trouble. I was a little wild. A little rebellious, I guess you'd say. Of course, back in those days, they beat the OCD out of you. They didn't give you a pill. [Laughs] Our deal was if I did good in school and stayed in school and did what I was supposed to do and made good grades, I could drag race. Built me a V-stock '55 Chevrolet in 1973. Was my first car. That's what I wanted since I was six years old, was a '55 Chevrolet. Loved it. And built—there's a picture of it on the bottom left. Green and white '55 Chevrolet. We built it. Me and Dad built the motor. We built the transmission. We built the car. Went out and set a national record first pass out. And I won several national events with that car. It wasn't that fast, but it—you know, for the time it wasn't bad. But of course, a typical drag racer, I wanted to go faster. So we had built an E-stock '69 Rambler. We built it. Set a national record with it. Dad was racing at the time. He had a '66 Nova, and he drove the Rambler to start with while I was running the '55. He quit. I took the—bought the Rambler from him. Ran it for a while, then I wanted to go faster. "I've got to go faster." Funny story. A friend of mine had a front-engine dragster in Levelland. And I went over and bought the car and trailer. I think I gave two thousand dollars for the whole car. Ready to run with a trailer. And we're sitting up at the showroom on 19th Street, and here comes the guy pulling the trailer. Dad said, "Look at that drag car?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "You know who that is?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Whose car is that?" And I said, "Mine." And Dad—you could see the red. It started in his toes and it worked all the way up to his ears. Got up and left. Didn't speak to me—didn't even come back to the dealership for three days he was so mad at me because I bought this car. And it tried to kill me. It was a piece of crap. But, you know, I learned. I built it. I rebuilt it, and did okay with it. Ran it for a while. Then I decided I would go circle track racing. And did that for a little bit, then I got seriously hurt—burned in a car on the circle track. Spent three months in the hospital in the burn unit. Of course, you're laying there in pain, and you tell your wife stupid stuff like, "I'm never getting back in another car. I've learned my lesson." By the time I get out of the hospital—"I've got to learn my life lesson on dirt track cars. I'm going to build a drag car again." [Laughter] Went to Mike Carpenter, a friend of mine. Has built racecars here forever. And I built a—something that nobody had ever seen. I built a '77 Mazda rotary-engine racecar in 1980, when nobody was running imports. Imports are cool now, but I ran imports when they wasn't cool. And took an eighty-cubic-inch Mazda rotary and put a blower on it with injection, and a five-speed manual transmission. You can ask anybody in this town today if they ever saw that car run. They remember it. It was obnoxiously loud. It was—it jerked the front tires off the ground and carried them to the third gear. It was right at about fourteen thousand RPM. And we did it with Mazda telling us, "You can't do that. It won't

work.” It was in *Super Stock Magazine*. They called it the “Rickshaw Rotary.” And Mazda flew me out because they wanted to know how I did it. They said, We’ve tried it for years and we can’t make it work, and you can. And we want to know how. And I wouldn’t tell them, because they told me I couldn’t—they wouldn’t help me with any parts. I still was the only one who could do it. [Laughter] I ran that car for a while. Then I built a RX7, then I wanted to go faster, like we always do. I built a rear-engine dragster. Carpenter built it for me. Beautiful car. We put the rotary in it, actually, and ran it for a year. But I wanted to go a little quicker, so we put a small-block Chevrolet in it. And I crashed it and broke my back. I spent a year in a body cast, so I didn’t—couldn’t do anything. In the interim of that, I had two kids. So I went and bought the go-karts and let them run go-karts, because I had to work on something. And we ran go-karts. I got me a kart, too, because I had to drive something. We’d go out and run go-karts. And my kids—as they grew up, they—I got them into the Junior Dragsters. And they were in Junior Dragsters. Then my daughter ran a full-blown super comp dragster. She went to college, and the car was sitting on there in the driveway in a trailer, tearing me up every day. I’d leave and see that trailer every day. And I told my wife—I said, “What are you doing this weekend?” She said, “Nothing.” I said, “Well, pack—pack your purse, we’re going to the drag strip.” She said, “For what?” And I said, “Because I’m taking that car and I’m running it.” “You have no business running that. You haven’t been out of a body cast six months.” Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I said, “I feel good. I’m going to run the car.” Made the first pass on it. Everything perfect. Ran 160 miles an hour, made the turn, went to get out the car, and a girl coming down the return road ran right in the back of the car. Put me back in the hospital with a broke back. [Laughs] Or fractured. I stayed wrapped up for six months with that. My son drove it a few times. Of course, he goes to college. I sell it. Start helping a friend of mine with a blown alter. Going to the races and helping him tune and set the car up and everything. I did that about three years. I came home and told my wife—I said, “I’m building a racecar. I’m done helping. I’m building one.” So we built the dragster, which is that center car right there. And very successful with it. I ran it for seven years. Came home and said, “Honey, I want to build a funny car.” Oh, she just went nuts. She was scared to death of, you know, motors in front, you’re all enclosed with the motor. I told her—I said, “I’ll tell you what. If I find a ’57 Chevrolet body, I’m going to build a funny car.” I said, “There’s eight that I know of that has been built.” One man designed the car and had the mold, had eight bodies built, and destroyed the mold. I said, “I know where most of them are. I can’t get one.” A year and a half later, I get a ding on my computer: “’57 Chevrolet funny car for sale.” I picked up the phone and called the guy. I said, “I’ll take it. I’ll be there this weekend.” Called her and I said, “What are you doing?” She said, “Nothing.” I said, “What are you doing this weekend?” She said, “Nothing.” I said, “Well, pack a bag, we’re going to Nebraska.” She said, “For what?” I said, “I bought a funny car.” Oh, it was a long trip to Nebraska. [Laughter] She was mad the whole way there. And we got there and they roll that car out and she says, “That’s the prettiest car I’ve ever seen.” I’ve been running it for five years, and it’s absolutely flawless. I built a front-motor dragster between those two. I built a front-motor car just to have something to do. And I ran it twice. And a friend of mine said, “I’ve got to have that car,” and he

bought it. But that funny car has just been—I mean, I have won [pause] plenty with it. I'm going to go run it again this year. I can't seem to get it out of my system. [Laughs]

DS:

I think once it gets in there, it just stays in there. I mean—because—I mean, if you were going to back down—you've had plenty of opportunities to leave the sport.

AM:

Oh yeah, I've had chances to quit. But I just—I can't. I mean—you know, I could be driving home and hear a good-sounding Mustang or Camaro take off from a light and, boy, I'm looking. It's all in my head. I just—I love cars. I love working on cars.

DS:

Before I forget, I need to talk to you about—you know, you mentioned, you know, all the burns and being laid up for months. What's that like?

AM:

It sucks. [Laughs] Well, when I got burned—I was burned—and it burned me—you can see where this line is. It comes up and goes down my back, around here and down my legs. That's the most—I've had some pain before. That's the most pain I've ever had. And they scrubbed me twice a day, every day, with a plastic brush, for two months; taking the dead skin off. Dr. North did it here in town. Everybody kept saying, "You're going to have a skin graft. You're going to have to have a skin grafts." And he just said, "No, we're not going to do it that way. We're going to do it my way." And thank God he did, because I don't have scars on my leg from skin grafts and patches all over me. Yeah, it took two years to get over it. My wife was six months pregnant when that happened. Had a baby when I was still in bandages. That kind of stopped my—Like I said, I dirt tracked for a while. And I was good. I was good at it. I was real aggressive, but I could—I was good. I could put the car where I wanted it. And I won a lot. And when you have a baby—after I got over it, I still had the car, so I went out and thought I'd just drive—I'd drive it again, because I needed to get back on the horse type deal. I couldn't drive it. I couldn't drive it the way I was. I mean, two things: one, I'd been burned in it, and the second is I got a baby. I can't take that chance of going high or low or whatever I needed to do to win. It was like, "I'll wait. I'll wait." So I sold that car and went back to drag racing. Convinced my wife it was safer. [laughs] You know, I was drag racing when I met her. She went drag racing with me, you know, from the time we started dating. So she's put up with all this crap for forty years now. I'm beginning to think she understands. [Laughs]

DS:

Well, you know, since you've done—had this career and been a family man, you know, you

probably did a lot of traveling together to different events. Can you talk about some of those events?

AM:

Oh, we've been—March Meet, which was Bakersfield, is a huge event. We went there a couple of times just because it—like I said, a '57 Chevrolet's very unique, so it gets a lot of attention. Been featured in a lot of magazines. We've been to Bakersfield. As a matter of fact, me and my wife, my brother and his wife—you know, we travel out there. We just spend a week in Bakersfield, messing around and racing. I've been as far up north as Sacramento, California. Went around with the California funny car guys there, [pause] and did real well there. We've been—Kansas, all over Oklahoma, all over Texas, all over Louisiana, all over New Mexico. I mean, our house is almost like a pit stop during the summer. It's just come by, restock, spend two days get in the truck, and go somewhere. I have promised her I'd slow down a little with that. On top of drag racing, I fly competition model airplanes. And we travel all over the world. We've been to France twice, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Australia; flying model airplanes.

DS:

You know—and I misunderstood Jackie on that. I thought he meant you were flying, you know, real airplanes.

AM:

No.

DS:

You're doing, you know, some stunt work and stuff like that.

AM:

Yeah, it's a competition model airplane. Yeah, we travel all over the world doing that. So we have a pretty—pretty full schedule. [Laughs]

DS:

It's got to be hard to balance that life and running a successful business. You know?

AM:

The only way to do it is good management. I mean, seriously. If it wasn't for the fact that we got good managers, we couldn't do what we do. You know? We've had bad ones. And had to—the first thing you do is you throw the brakes on all the toys—no drag racing, no model airplanes, no going out of town, no nothing—and spend twelve hours a day here. But a successful business has let me be successful in my hobbies. So, you know, we've got some good management—good management team; front, back and everything. So, that helps.

DS:

You know, you said your dad helped you learn the ropes for running the business. Did he help you learn about how to race?

AM:

Oh, he's taught me everything about racing. I mean, the mechanics of a car and what it does and why it does this. Like he said, the car'll talk to you and tell you what it needs or what it doesn't need. And he's right. That car has a personality. I don't fear it, but you better respect it. You know? But my father taught me, you know—of course, it was kind of funny. He ran the—like I said, he ran the Rambler, and he pretty well quit after that. And my mother passed away. And I built the dragster. He'd start going—he went to some of the races with us. He's watching it. Of course, that car was a two-hundred-mile-an-hour—over two hundred miles an hour at a quarter. We're out at the track one day and he says, "Well, I think I want to make a pass." I said, "Yeah, I bet you do." [Laughter] And he got a little insulted. He said, "What, you don't think I can drive this?" I said, "Dad, an eight-year-old can drive it whenever they drive. That's not the problem. It don't always go right." You know? "And, no, I love you enough not to put you in this car, because if you don't—I built to this speed. I didn't hop in it and go." It took him a little bit to get over that, because I think he thought I didn't think he could drive it. Yeah, he could drive it, but he wasn't going to go out there and run six seconds at two hundred miles an hour, first hit. He would've tried, because I am his son and I know how he thinks. [Laughs] But he taught me—I mean, from the time I was—like I said—in junior high, building lawnmower motors. He was showing me and teaching me and explaining and—yeah. He taught me a lot. And then he—like I said—taught me everything about the business.

DS:

I think that—you know, that probably gives you an advantage, being a racer, because you know the nuts and bolts of the engine, also. You're not just—you know, you're not just a driver.

AM:

Yeah. Well, I mean—it's kind of funny. A friend of mine said, "Oh, you've got to try this racing radio," which is earphones and a radio so the pit crew can talk to you if you have a problem. "Make one pass." I said, "No. I can't hear the car." He said, "What do you mean you can't hear the car?" I mean, it was pretty loud. I said, "I can't hear the car. I have to listen to the car. I have to"—you know, I could make a run and, say, put a cylinder right over here and did this, or it was making noise here. You know, this isn't right because I hear it or feel it. You know? I have to be able to hear it. I have to—you know. And I can't run with earplugs, because I listen to the motor. Every time I make a run, I see everything that's happening in that motor. I see all the valves going up and down, all the push rods, all the rocker arms, the rods, the pistons, the torque convertor. I see it all moving. Okay? And I know it's strained. But if you don't know what it's doing—if something goes wrong, you don't know why. [Coughs] So, you know—my street cars.

Same thing. I mean, I'm constantly listening. My wife makes so much of me. We'll be driving down the street. A car would go by. [Imitates car sound] "That car needs a U-joint." Or, "That car needs a CV shaft." Or, "They better get their brakes fixed." You know? "This is wrong with that car because I hear it go down the street." You know? I still—I mean, I'm sixty-two years old. Technicians come here and say, "Come drive this car and come listen to this noise. I don't know what it is." I drive the car and I hear it. I see it. I see the noise. And I do the same thing in a racecar. I made hit a last year in the funny car. Won the round, pulled it back, and I said, "Okay, we're done." He said, "What do you mean? We've got another round." I said, "No. The rear end's broke.", "How do you know?" I said, "I can hear it. I heard it when we was pulling it back. It's got a tooth off the ring here." We jack it up. "I don't hear nothing." I said, "It's got a tooth off the ring here." Pull the drag plug out, and a tooth fell out. "Told you." [Laughs] It's just—like I said, I hear the noises. I see the noises.

DS:

And how about the touch and feel? Can you—I mean, how good are you holding onto the steering wheel and knowing exactly what's going on?

AM:

You're one with the car, constantly. I'll make a pass. My term is if it goes down there and spins and gets crooked, I come back and go, "Well, that was sporty." My wife says, "No sporty runs." Or, "Why didn't you lift?" She'll get mad because the car will go down there and it'll do something, and I'll correct it—and don't lift—just drive into it and get back straight. She'll go, "Why didn't you lift?" I said, "It's okay. It told me it was okay. It's fine. I can feel it. I can tell you when it's too far out. If it's too far out, I'll lift. But it's not too far out"—"Well, I can see both sides of the car, and it was"—and I said, "But it was fine. It was still going where it needed to go. We were fine." I mean, I got Dennis', He redid the track and messed up, kind of got powdery. That's the only time I thought I was going to get hurt. That's one time in a car that I was—actually got scared, because I was running at two hundred miles an hour and the car just went sideways. And I'm looking at this roll cage on a 240-inch wheelbase car. Wheel fully cranked. And you can't let off the gas. If you let off the gas, it rolls like a pencil. So I got the gas pedal buried to the floor, steering wheel full-cranked, both parachutes pulled, looking at the deal going, "I'm screwed." [Laughs] And it came back. Parachutes hit, straightened it up. Got the car stopped. Of course, my wife gets down there and she's like this, you know, shaking. I said, "Don't worry, we're putting it up. We're done. The track can't handle it. We're okay." But that's one—that was one time that I've been down there and I go, "I'm screwed." [Laughs]

DS:

I talked to somebody who had raced on that track. And it's, like—and they had the same thing. They had—they had a—but they had—they actually had the accident. Their wife—his wife had

brought her mother-in-law and father—his mother-in-law and father-in-law along to watch. And he said, “Every time her dad was there, I had a wreck.” [Laughter]

AM:

[laughs, inaudible, 0:27:37]. While my mother was alive I was driving [gets out of chair] that car. That’s the one Mike Carpenter built. My mother—she was always freaking. She knew I raced, but—you know, my father carried her out there and carried her down in what we called the Top End Club, which was about a thousand-foot. That car would run 160, 165. It wasn’t that fast. And I’d run down there, and collected up my gear. And there I see them. So I’m running down there at about 160 miles an hour, and I wave at Mom as I went by. Oh, my God. I’m married with kids. She starts chewing me out about keeping both hands on the wheel. She was going to ground me, take my driver’s license away. [Laughter] I said, “Mom, at 160 it don’t really make any difference. That car’s going to go where it wants to go.” You know? “I don’t care. You keep both of those”—

DS:

And it’s going to happen so fast.

AM:

Yeah. So it was kind of funny. Last time she ever went and watched a race. She said, “I can’t take it.” She said, “I was a nervous wreck every time you ran.” I said, “I made a thousand passes.” She said, “I don’t care.”

DS:

You know, you mentioned how you had gotten your children involved. When did they start that aspect of Junior Racers?

AM:

Six. Six years old. My daughter was actually seven, and my son had to wait a year, because he five. As soon as he turned six, he wanted to start driving. And we went—I mean, we went to Muncie—or Indianapolis at that Nationals. We raced there. We raced Denver with kids all around here. It’s like I told them. I said, “Look, you can do baseball, basketball, soccer. You can do anything you want. You can play the piano. Your daddy knows cars. Okay. I’ll help you. I’ll support you in anything you do. But if you want me *help*, your daddy knows cars. So if you want to do something with cars, I can help. If you want to go play baseball, well, I’ll go out there and throw the ball with you.” And my daughter, at fourteen, could rebuild a Briggs, lap the vales, set the carburetor and—yeah. My son did not get that into, believe it or not. He didn’t get into it until he got seventeen or eighteen years old. I mean, he raced, and he did okay. But no mechanical—he didn’t want to learn it. “Just put me in the car and I’ll go there.” My daughter wanted to know—she’s like me. She wanted to know how this works, how you do this, why you

do that. And she was exceptional at it. But she went to college and grew up. Then it's boys, and then it's, you know, college and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. I told her once, I'd put her in that car. She says, "Nope. Too fat and got a kid." [Laughter]

DS:

Is she still local or has she already moved on?

AM:

No, they live here. Both of my kids. They both moved off, and they both moved back. So, life is good. [Laughs]

DS:

So is there another generation already coming up for racers?

AM:

I've got one granddaughter is all I've got. And she is a girly girl. She'll ride around in my street rod a little bit, but, you know—"Don't go too fast, Papaw. It's too loud." I mean, she won't go to the drag races because it's too loud. So, no, I guess I'm it. [Laughs] I'm going to run out. [Laughter]

DS:

And you mentioned your dad, you know, was a big influence, getting started. How about any friends? Did you have any contemporaries here that you grew up with, racing?

AM:

Racing was real popular. Because, like I said, I graduated in '75. And drag racing was pretty popular in the early—mid to early seventies. So a lot of the kids I went to school with—most of them had the hot rod cars: the Trans-Am's or the Hurst/Olds or something. They didn't built their cars, they bought their cars or whatever. And I was the one driving a '55 Chevrolet that could outrun them all, you know, because I built it. Oh yeah, we drag raced all the time. I mean—as a matter of fact, the dragstrip's right here, right behind our building. That was—this is out in the middle of farmland. There's nothing around. But 66th and Frankford was the dragstrip. We had it marked off. We had it—you've been there, right? [Laughs]

DS:

I had a Trans-Am. [Laughs]

AM:

I mean, there was some fast cars. I mean, Buddy King had the SS454. And Thompson had a Hurst/Olds. And Terry had a W30. Mike Benham had a Trans-Am. There was a couple of

Firebirds. I mean—you know—and we'd all gather up on the weekend, Sunday afternoon—and we were out here. Of course, different times.

DS:

Yeah. No one would mess with you.

AM:

Do what?

DS:

No one would mess with you.

AM:

We'd have a cop come up and say—we had a cop go down there with his radar gun and clock us to tell us how fast we was going at the end of the quarter. "Well, you won, and you was going 114 at the end of the quarter." You know? And we'd sit there and race for hours. Then he would drive back down there and say, "You guys, it's about time for y'all to break this up." "Yes, sir," and we'd all leave. But yeah, different times.

DS:

Yeah, because it was empty out here.

AM:

Yeah. Yeah, there was nothing—nothing out here. This was all farmland. I couldn't even figure out why they had—we raced here and then Hayloft Road, which is Upland.

DS:

It was just that old WVA building, right?

AM:

Uh-huh. Yep. Hell, we'd get down there and race sometimes, and the VA people would come out and bring out chairs and sit down and watch us. [Laughs] They didn't call the cops. They were just going, Cool. You know? My dad—some guy came and knocked on the door once—and my brother had a '59 El Camino, of all things, but it was fast. Knocked on the door and—"I'll race for a hundred bucks." My dad answered the door. And he said, "I heard Bob has a fast El Camino. I want to race him for a hundred dollars." He goes and gets Bob and he says, "This guy wants to race you. You get ready. I'll go warm up the car." [Laughter] So they went out and raced right down the middle of our residential street, on 70th Street—70th and P. And lined up and raced right down the street for a hundred bucks. Of course, if you did that today, you'd be under the jail.

DS:

Oh yeah. You'd be in so much trouble.

AM:

And I understand it, because people get killed doing it. And we're lucky we survived. But it was a different time, different place. I don't know. It's all okay. If I pull up beside somebody in my hot rod that I drive on the street, and they rev up their motor—I'm sixty-two and I'm taking the chance. We're going. [Laughter]

DS:

Well, you've got a long ways to go. Like I told you, I started off interviewing some guys in Amarillo. And some of those guys are pushing ninety. One of them still has some nice cars in his garage. He has, like—he has a brand new, you know, Cadillac—top of the line Cadillac. It can just haul. He goes, "This is faster than my first drag racer."

AM:

Yeah. Oh yeah. I mean, you can go buy one off a showroom that's faster than anything I ever owned. I mean, that Rambler—I drove it on the street some, and it ran thirteen eighties. Okay? And it was the fastest street car in Lubbock, Texas. And you can go buy a Demon that'll run nines, [pause] or low tens, right off the showroom.

DS:

Like a nine-nine I think they say.

AM:

Yeah.

DS:

Which is amazing.

AM:

Yeah. You tell me. And I've driven one. We traded—we've traded for a Hellcat out here, once. And I took it out here—it's funny, because I took it out and I circled the block, made sure there was no cops, went down here and stood on it, and it is just an absolute hauler. I mean, this just chattered the tires and just got you in the seat. And you go, "This is impressive." And I pull in here and park it, and the sales manager goes, "You want to drive it with the hot rod keys? This key adds two hundred horsepower." I was driving with a standard key. They have two keys. Changing keys makes a two hundred horsepower difference. Okay? I said, "Why? It's doing everything—it black-tracked from Milwaukee till I shut it off. Two more horse—two hundred horsepower ain't going to do anything else." I mean, with the traction controls and everything

they've got on—the launch controls, traction controls. They're just impressive. But I can't drive one. I mean, if I had one on the street, I'd go to jail. I'd go to jail in a week. We had a new Volvo two years ago—a C30, which is a twin-turbo, five-cylinder—little bigger than a MINI Cooper—well, it's bigger than a MINI Cooper. But it's a small car with lots of horsepower. And you put the Polestar on it, and it adds two hundred horsepower. So we had one. I carried it back. I said, "Put the Polestar on it. I'm going to drive it. This is what I'm going to drive for a little bit." I drove it for three days, came and threw the keys on the desk, and I said, "I'm going to kill myself or go to jail. You have to take that car away from me." I went over—the flyover, testing a Cobra Mustang. I went over to 34th Street, running 140 miles an hour on I-27. I'm sixty-freaking years old. You should know better. [Laughs]

DS:

You should. But like you said, it's in your blood, right?

AM:

Yeah. I mean, I would—

DS:

It's part of your being.

AM:

I was eighteen when I went over that [laugh, inaudible, 0:37:58]. Because I was having a ball. And I thought, How stupid is this? I came back and I gave him the keys. I said, "No, I'm not driving that no more." But I'm sitting there—I've got a '48 Ford sitting in my garage—chopped top, suicide door Ford. I've got a '34 Ford truck. I've got a '65 Shelby Cobra. All sitting in my shop. And the truck and the '48 Ford are all stock. They're not a hot rod. The Cobra's a hot rod. And I don't drive it. I have to just tell two things: they either have to take my wife—because she beats me up if I stand on it—or just have to talk to myself all the way while I drive to work. "Don't get on it. Don't get on it. Don't get on it. Don't get on it." All the way to work. "Don't stand on it. Don't stand on it. It's fine. Don't stand on it." By the time I get to work, I'm shaking because I just want to—it sounds good; it smokes the tires and goes all over the—you know? I just—it gives me the shakes. It's like withdrawals, because I—it's like putting cocaine in front of me and saying, "You can't have it."

DS:

But you're fortunate you get a chance to really race on the weekends, sometimes.

AM:

Yeah.

DS:

So that's—

AM:

Yeah, you take a funny car out—and I mean, there's nothing more fun than that.

DS:

So, are you running the quarters or the eighth now?

AM:

I run both. Mostly eighth. The series I run with—which is the Heritage—is a nostalgia-style deal, and they all run eighth. I've run Tuscan, Bakersfield, Sacramento—run a quarter there. And I've run six seconds of over two hundred in it there. It's fun. When it gets up—you know. Eighth mile's a lot of fun because the race is over quick, and it's all good. From that eighth mile to the quarter mile, when the car gets up on the tires, and the high speed lean out comes in, it's got you pushed back in the seat. And you—you know, you could tell it's going two hundred miles an hour. You know? And then you throw two chutes out, and it, you know, snaps a knot in you, you know, coming 4 G's on a stop. Negative G's when you pull two parachutes, you know? Yeah, it's a rush that I can't describe. And I keep thinking—I've done it long enough, I'll get over that. But now every time I drive it, it gives me the giggles. First six-second pass I made, it was Bakersfield. Pulled up there and the car was perfect. Went down the track, ran 6.90 at 202. My brother and wife came down to pick me up. I asked my brother—I said, "Did you hear that funny noise down there, about a thousand foot?" He said, "No, it sounded fine. What noise was it?" I said, "Me giggling." [Laughter] Because, I mean, it—the high speed lean out came up, and it got up on the tires. I thought, Man, this is hauling butt. [Laughs] Like I said, I'm sixty-two and I still get a thrill every time I strap in it.

DS:

How long do you plan on racing?

AM:

[sighs] Hell, that's my seventh "last car." You know? [Laughter]

DS:

I liked the way you phrased that.

AM:

As a matter of fact, I just bought a '34 Chevrolet Roadster drag car, to be able to race more local. I told my wife—I said—I told her at the first of the year, "I said I'd quit when I was sixty-two, and that's not going to happen. It's just not going to happen." And she wasn't—she would like

me to get out of the funny car. She just would like me to slow down a little. So I bought the '34 Chevrolet Roadster to build for—like I said—a bracket car. It's a little slower and, you know, easier to work on, and blah, blah. I'll never quit. I'll never quit. I'd like to say I'm going to quit, and I'd like to quit smoking, too, but that's not going to happen either, apparently. [Laughs] I guess I'm just going to run till I can't get in the car anymore. And she doesn't—it doesn't bother her. She says, "Hell, it makes you happy."

DS:

That's a good habit. I mean, it's a good hobby.

AM:

It's a good hobby. I mean, I can do a lot worse. I mean—I've got a—a cop stopped me. I had a '55 Chevrolet on the street, and I got stopped for racing before they impounded your cars. Got stopped for racing. Officer came up. I was racing an El Camino down 82nd Street. I had him covered. I see the lights come on, you know, on the cop car, so I shut off. This El Camino goes [imitates car noise]—goes flying by me. The cop does a U-turn, points and me goes after him. This was several years ago. I just followed him. The El Camino, he's got stopped over on University and 82nd Street. And he is reading this poor kid the riot act. Giving him tickets. Dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. And I'm just sitting there behind him, waiting. I'm waiting my turn. He came up. I handed him my driver's license, you know. He looks at my driver's license and shines that flashlight in my face. He looks at it. And he does this about four times. He says, "Mr. Mears, you're fifty-goddamn years old." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "You ought to know better." I said, "I do." I said, "But, I don't drink. I don't do drugs. I don't chase women. This is my entertainment, and it's worth it. So give me my ticket. I'll take defensive driving, put the car up for six months. In six months, I'm off defensive driving, and I can get it back out.", "Well, you know drag"—I said, "You don't have to"—I said, "Buddy, I've had 137 tickets. You can't tell me anything I haven't heard. So, just—I'm good with it. Give me my ticket. I deserve it. And I'll go put the car up." That's my philosophy. I don't do drugs. Never done drugs. I have two beers a year. And I don't chase women. I've got a beautiful wife. So I go out and drag race. Everybody needs a hobby. [Laughs] So, yeah, that's what I do. But now they take your car away if they catch you drag racing.

DS:

I didn't know that.

AM:

Yeah.

DS:

When did that start?

AM:

Right after the *Fast & Furious* movie came out.

DS:

Oh, okay. After the first one?

AM:

Um-hm. All the kids went stupid. You know?

DS:

Was there—I mean—because I'm not from that car culture. Did that happen? Were there a lot of local kids?

AM:

Around here, yeah. Well, a bunch of—it's a movie. So they think—oh yeah, they can go drifting around corners and running two hundred miles an hour down 82nd Street, and that's cool. That's the movies. Somebody forgot to tell them it's just a movie. You know? Apparently they didn't see *Alien*, because they'd be worried about somebody coming down and eating them. Because they get out here in their little Hondas and Toyotas and, you know, crashing and killing people and doing stupid stuff, because they saw it in the movie. Was I stupid racing down 82nd Street? Absolutely. But I made sure there was no cars in front of me. You know? So they started impounding your cars. In California, they crush them. Here, though, they'll take you to jail and impound your car, take your driver's license away, blah, blah, blah. So it kind of put a damper on street racing. You have to be a little careful. Typical politics. They went overboard. I was good with paying my 250-dollar fine and driver's ed—defensive driving, and I was good. [Laughs] I'll go home and I'll get my calendar. "I get off probation here and I can get my car back out." You know? [Coughs] That's just—that's me. I live and breathe for my wife and cars, and that's just about—just my life.

DS:

You've had a good life with that doing that, right?

AM:

Absolutely. I wouldn't—I tell God every day how lucky I am. And I am. [inaudible, 0:46:37]. I said—they have a movie called *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was an old movie. They don't know what a wonderful life is. They need to live in my shoes. I mean, I've had some things happen to me, and I've had some bad things happen to me. I've lost my parents and all the stuff that happens in life. Nobody's had a better life than me. I go home giggling every night. And that's—that's me. I mean, I just—I think it's the best thing that's ever happened. Nobody could live and do more than I've done. I was telling a guy once—me and my brother were talking to him. Was

talking about racing. “What have you raced?” I said, “What have I raced? Raced go-karts when I was a kid. Ran flat-track motorcycles when I was younger. I ran SCCA”—which is Sports Car Club. “I’ve won a solo championship. I’ve driven Formula Fords. I’ve driven dirt track. I’ve driven sprint cars. I’ve driven dragsters. I’ve driven funny cars. And race boats.” He said, “Nobody can do all of that at your age.” Bob said, “He’s got pictures.” [Laughs] I mean, I’ve driven—I’ve driven it all. I will drive anything.

DS:

So what’s it like driving a Formula Ford car?

AM:

Like a big go-kart. It’s just awesome. It’s—it’s totally—it’s probably the most relaxing driving you can do, believe it or not. It’s so comfortable, and the car is just off the ground, and so fast. And you’re going through these curves. And it’s just—you know. You have to drive it and pay attention, but it’s really a relaxing—it’s not a high—it’s a marathon, not a sprint. Everything I’ve ever done has been a sprint. A ten-lap race or an eighth-mile, you know, whatever. This is just a nice, calm, drive. Oh, they’re fun to drive, though. Totally opposite of a sprint car. I drove a sprint car for a friend of mine once. I say I’ve driven sprint. I drove one a couple of times, just for fun. After I got burned, I went back out. A friend of mine from Amarillo called me and said, “Come out here. I want you to drive a sprint car for me. Just pedal. We’ve got three qualifying chances. You take it out the first time. You’ve been talking about it. Come drive it.” So I went out there, drove it, and, you know, made it about three laps. They held up the green flags, which means the next time you’re going to start qualifying. You show me a green flag or a green light, buddy, I’m going for it. And I decked it. It was a four-lap qualifier. I’m the only one on the track, so it’s all nice and easy. And I’ve never driven—it’s like a horse. It has a mind of its own. You come out of the corner, you’re forty-five degrees to the track. Got the steering wheel crank. The left front tire’s this high off the ground. The right front tire’s over here doing this crap. This tire over here’s throwing mud all over you. You know? And it’s just—the motor’s just tacked out and screaming. I qualified second for the main event. He says, “Drive it in the races.” I said, “Oh, hell no. I can do it with just me out there on the track, but I’m not going out there with twenty other cars, because I will stick it to where it doesn’t need to be, and I’ll crash. And I know I will. Because if there’s an opportunity to pass somebody, right here, and I think I can fit it in there, I would put it in there. [Laughs]

DS:

You’re just too competitive, right?

AM:

Yeah. Yeah, I’m too competitive. I have a great time when I’m racing—when I’m drag racing. I love everybody I race with. And I have a great time. But when the green light comes on, I don’t

have a friend. From the starting line to the finish line, I don't like anybody. I'm there to win. And after the finish line, it's all fine. A guy put a camera on me in the dragster. He was doing film work for New Mexico. Put some cameras on the outside and put a little camera facing me. He says, "You need to watch that." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because you do your burnout, you back up, and you're looking around and everything's fine." And he said, "When the pre-stage light comes on that Christmas tree, your whole face changes. Your eyes get big. You get your head down." He said, "Your whole demeanor changes. You leave," and he said, "You could see the concentration in your face. And then when you get to the finish line, you lift and you pull the chutes, then you're back to you." He said, "But that starting line to finish line, you're a different guy." And that's the way you—you know, that's the way you have to be, to be competitive. I don't notice it. But he had it on film. And I looked at it, and he's right. [Laughs] He said, "Your whole—your whole expression changes. Your eyes change." He said, "I see little horns come out." He said, "You just—you could see the competitiveness in your face. Because when you stage, the game's on." And it doesn't make—it's like model airplanes. I have a great time flying model airplanes. But when we take off, I don't like you anymore. I'm there to beat you.

DS:

I think I heard you won some world titles, right? Model airplane?

AM:

Yeah. I've won seven national events, and qualified for the world team twice.

DS:

So how does a drag racer get into racing a—

AM:

My father. I started flying when I was six.

DS:

Really?

AM:

Okay. At this time, there wasn't computers. What'd you do when you was a kid? You're not quite as old as I am.

DS:

How old are you?

AM:

Sixty-two.

DS:

Yeah, I'm just a year younger.

AM:

Okay. When you were a kid, what'd you do? You played football in your front yard, baseball, you rode your bicycles. Right? You played with your buddies. Now everybody spends on their time on a computer. Well, the other thing to do was play with model airplanes. And Dad flew model airplanes. So he got me and my brother into it, because that's what we did as a family. And taught me how to build. Taught me good construction techniques; how to cover one, how to make the motor run, how to do—you know—yeah. And me and brother are both part of the top—we're in the top ten in the United States in flying and competition and pitting and knowing our stuff. Yeah. We won some big things. But Dad taught us all of that. I mean—but, again—you know, I got a granddaughter. She'd rather play on her iPad. You know? She's ten. I taught her last year how to ride a bicycle, because she didn't care. But I made her. I said, "Everybody needs to learn how to ride a bicycle." Everybody needs to learn how to drive a standard transmission, too. [Laughs and coughs] But yeah, I went and bought her a bike and taught her how to ride a bike. Because—"I don't need a bicycle.", "Yes you do. Everybody"—you know. All she cares about—"I need to watch TV or play on the iPad." And that's what's wrong with the kids. They don't have any physical contact. Go to a restaurant and they're all sitting there like this, on the telephone, texting each other, because they can't communicate. [Laughs] And I built her an airplane. I was going to teach her to fly, and she's like, "Oh, no. I don't want to." And my son—I begged him to fly when he was young—six, seven, eight years old. Didn't interest him at all. And he walked out there one day and said, "We're having a competition here." He was about twelve. He says, "I want to fly you in combat." I said, "You have to know how to fly an airplane." He says, "I can fly an airplane." I said, "Well, grab a handle, smartass." And he could. You know? He watched us. And hand-eye coordination. He could fly. Carried him to the Nationals. Won the Nationals. Qualified for the world team to go to Paris. Went to the world champs. Did pretty good there. Didn't win, but did pretty good for his first time. Came back and said, "Okay, I'm done.", "What do you mean you're done?", "I'm done. I mean, I won the Nationals. I qualified for the world team. I went to the world champs. I'm done." Never picked up a handle again. And probably one of the best pilots in the United States. [Laughter]

DS:

He was just a natural, huh?

AM:

Just a natural, yeah. He absolutely—he could do stuff that was absolutely amazing. Me and my brother would sit over there and we'd pit him, watch him, going, "I can't believe he did that." I mean, that and he was younger. We're old and fat and crippled, you know? He's over there flying an airplane, duck-walking—flying an airplane duck-walking so he can get real low. You

just have to see the event. But I'm going, "I can't do that." I said, "Hell, I couldn't do that when I was twenty, much less"—you know. Him out there and he's just doing whatever. An absolute natural. Yeah. After he got back from the world champs, he said, "Okay." And you can't do better than that besides win the world champs. "It'd be four year before I could do that. No, I'm good." [Laughter]

DS:

Did he want to prove it to you or to himself?

AM:

I don't know. I think probably to me. Or a little of both. Because he wanted to prove to me he could do it. I mean, after he started flying, I knew he could do it. And he wanted to prove to himself that he could make the world team. And he did that. After he made that—check that off the bucket list. Nobody else.

DS:

"Done. Next?"

AM:

Yeah. You know, "The next thing on my agenda." And I didn't ever force him. At our—when I was younger, Dad's like, "Well, get your stuff. We're going flying." It wasn't, "Do you want to go flying?" It was, "We're going flying. You don't have to fly, but you're going to the park with me." [Laughs] We had a great park in McKenzie. We'd go fly at night. But, you know, at that time—I think there was fifty-something members in Lubbock, in the club. Now there's four. It was popular back then. But things change. Technology comes around, and kids don't want to ride their bikes and go fishing and stuff like that. I don't have to go fishing. I can fish on my computer. I don't want to go hunting or shooting. I can do that on my computer.

DS:

I think now something—the thing that's closest to that is the drones—flying the drones.

AM:

Those are kind of nuts. And I have no interest in them whatsoever. I've got a friend that will go out and take his drone and film us flying combat. What's he do? Click, click, click. Hits a button, the drone takes off, gets over here, flies. He watches us fly. He doesn't even drive. And he's got it programmed—in five minutes, it comes back and lands. He doesn't fly it. He takes the camera out and downloads the chip, you know? I mean, I've flown RC airplanes. I've got half a room full of radio-control airplanes. But once you learn how to fly one, there's no—there's no thrill. I'm in it for the thrill, I guess, is the best way to—because the control lines that we fly run about a hundred miles an hour. You have two of them in the air, at one time, and you're chasing each

other, trying to cut a ribbon off of the other guy's airplane. Okay? So you've got a two-hundred-miles-an-hour closing speed. And you're attached to the airplane, because it's wire-controlled. [Talking to himself quietly] And they're—[silence] oh, come on, you've got to play. [Silence] What the hell? Maybe it won't play. It was something that was kind of funny. That's the RX3 I was talking about. [Plays a video] [Car engine revs]

DS:

Yeah, I find that the feature of the video, the one that moves over to the side as you scroll down annoying because you have to go back and shut it down. Used to be you just go onto the next one and not have to worry about closing out the other one. [Video plays in background]

AM:

That was a cool car. [Plays a video, model airplane noises, then silence until 1:03:00] I win. I cut his _____ off [1:03:01]. [Laughs]

DS:

You must have exception eye-to-hand coordination, right? [Laughs]

AM:

Well, that makes me good at drag racing, too. I see the light better and—yeah.

DS:

Yeah, because that's the way you—you think it and you do it. There's not that gap.

AM:

That's all a reflex sport. You're watching and you react without even—you can't think about it. Yeah, that's the other sport. [Laughs]

DS:

I can see that's probably high adrenaline, also.

AM:

Yeah.

DS:

You're out there just—

AM:

The trouble is I'll get out there flying, and I'll have a match like that, and I'm out there and I

start laughing, because—I mean, there's—you're just going nuts. You know? You get out there giggling and flying the match. [Laughs]

DS:

Well, who are some of the people you've met along the way that have influenced you?

AM:

A lot of people. Randy Pumphrey that ran Competition Eliminator was a very good mentor. He taught me a lot; the real insides of drag racing. My father could teach me how to fix a car, how to drive a car, you know, how to do everything to it. But he couldn't teach me the business part of drag racing. Okay? And Randy was a businessman in drag racing. So he taught me a lot. Tracy Dennis taught me a ton about motors. I mean, I could build motors, but [pause] he showed me the little tricks and everything. And Jackie Mize has been insurmountable to me. I mean, just between support and helping me gather pieces. When I was young and broke and couldn't afford to fix anything, Jackie was the man that helped me. And I've been friends with Jackie since I was fourteen years old. He's really—you know, he's been there the whole time, where most people goes, You're a kid, Get the hell out. Mike Carpenter. I met Mike when I had the Rambler. He did a little work on it then. And he has a little shop, and nobody knows about him. And he's probably one of the best chassis men around. I mean, he—I always say, "If it comes out of Carpenter's shop, it's a winner." Because he builds cars and they go out and win. Fixes cars and they go out and win. You know, he built that—when he built that funny car, we won the second race we went to. He build the dragster I won the first race I went to. He built Monty Weaver's Corvette. Monty Weaver has won a world championship once and a division championship this year—or 2018—won the division championship. And Mike's just been a lifelong friend, and has really helped me. He teaches me the—he teaches me the mechanics of the chassis. So I have friends that teach me a little bit of everything along the way. Carpenter can teach me the chassis and how to make the chassis work. Jackie helps me with the general stuff. Tracy helped me with the motors. So, I've had a lot of—I've had a lot of help along the way. I'm not a miracle child. I'm just a good listener. [Laughter] I mean—the people that just taught me. Then I met Kenny Bernstein. And I met Kenny Bernstein through Jackie, because Jackie and Kenny grew up together. I hung out with him and talked to him. Ronnie Wood was a—grew up down the street from me, and he was a clutch man on several of the nitro cars. So he taught me a little bit about the—taught me I don't want to be a clutch man. [Laughs] But he worked for Coletta's, and he worked for Eddie Hill, and he worked for several teams, so I got to meet those people. And it's kind of cool to—you know, when you go up and they say, Well, come on in. It's a really old deal, I guess, more than anything. Most fun I had is I met John Force before John Force won his first championship. I went to the inaugural race in Dallas to watch the nationals. You know, I wasn't going to race, but I wanted to watch. And John Force drove up in his truck. He's driving the truck, because he's not rich and famous yet. You know, he's struggling. And we sat one two fifty-five gallons of nitro and sat out there and talked for two hours, like just—just talking. Not

particularly about racing, but just about life in general, you know. I've had a lot of fun. I've met a lot of people, a lot of—I've met a ton of friends through racing and model airplanes. I've got acquaintances—I mean, I talked to several people in the Ukraine and Australia and Germany and Paris, you know, that I've met through model airplanes. And I talk to people all over the United States I've met through drag racing. I mean, I'll ask them a question, they'll ask me a question. "How are things going?" You know, I've got—all over the world I've got friends that I talk to all the time. And just from the sport of drag racing and model airplanes.

DS:

You know, we know that drag racing is just—probably just as popular as it's ever been. But you mentioned the model airplane—here, locally, it's dwindled down to, like—

AM:

Me, my brother and a couple of others.

DS:

Just a handful.

AM:

Yeah.

DS:

How about nationwide or worldwide? What's it like? Is it still pretty strong?

AM:

Worldwide it's strong. United—and overseas, in the Ukraine, Russia, all that area, it's a job. They actually—the government pays them to do it. So it's a job. And they, in turn, are different pilots than what we are. We're out here chasing streamers, having fun. Okay? There, it's win at all costs. If it's fly through your airplane because I can beat you because I crashed you, then that's why I'll do. And I'll lie, cheat, steal, do whatever it takes to beat you. Because it's their job. You know? Do they win more than we do? Oh, absolutely. But I'm not going to fly that way. I mean, I'm out here to chase streamers and have fun. You know? Because you're not going to make any money at it, so it's not going to change my tax structure, so enjoy it while you're doing it. And drag racing is a little bit the same way. I mean, I can make some money at it, but it's not—I'm not going to rich. I'll be lucky to pay the bills at the end of the year. But I like the friends. I like the people. And drag racing—you know, drag racing has really gone downhill. I mean, it really—it has started a downhill trend. And then the "Street Outlaws" stuff started showing up on TV. And Dennis ought to go kiss them people, because it's—he went from a closed down place to four hundred people a weekend to go out there and run on a piece of asphalt because you don't get arrested. That's the reason everybody's out there: they don't want

to get arrested. I mean, it's the best thing that's happened to drag racing in ten years is the damn "Street Outlaws" TV show. Is it fake? Most of it. All the drama and stuff—and I hate drama. I can't watch those shows. I say that. I do watch "Street Outlaws." I like to see the cars. I like to see what technology they're using. You know, the turbo chargers or the pro chargers or the nitrous or whatever. I watch. I see how they're hooking it up, how they're plugged. [coughs] I look for that. The drama—I don't like the drama. I don't watch reality shows, because they're all fake drama. So I mute it. I tell Jen I'm going to go watch the "beep-beep" show, because it's all "beep, beep, beep," beeping out all the cuss words, you know, so they can show—be dramatical TV. And I'll fast forward through all the crap, and I watch the cars. [Laughs]

DS:

Well, you know, I'm glad you went there, because I was going to ask you about that: what kind of impact shows like that had on someone like you that was an old racer? And you unexpectedly said, "Well, it was actually good. It brought racing back to the forefront."

AM:

Well, and it—you know, for years, in the sixties and seventies, we were all the grease monkeys, cigarettes rolled up in our sleeves, slicked-back hair. We were the hoodlums. We were those "damn racers." You know? You know, then it kind of flattened out. We were just, you know—we were—we were just doing what we did. When it all of a sudden came on TV—and not a national event, like they'll show all the top dogs running. Not a national event, but somebody on the street with their shorts and their black socks and their hat turned around backwards, that could cuss on TV and create a little drama, all of a sudden they were the golden child. Every time I tell somebody—I run an outlaw funny car. "Would you run in 'Street Outlaws'?" Everybody sees it. People that don't drag race watch that show. You know? Real drag racers can't stand the show, because we go—while we're running down a no-prep track—well to me, you're an idiot. [Laughs] You know? Are they good at it? You bet. But I'm not going there. I told Carpenter—I said, "If we want to make a lot of money, we need to build us a 'Street Outlaws' car." He said, "I'm not building you one of those pieces of crap." He said, "You'll go out there and kill yourself." They're good. They're good at what they do. And I'm proud of them because they brought drag racing back up. NHRA banned them. First year they did that show, NHRA banned them from any racetrack. And they figured out that they were creating more of a crowd than NHRA was. So now they do the commercials for NHRA. All of a sudden they've become a little bit of a golden child themselves. Because they brought—like I said, they got—now they got "Street Outlaws," "Street Outlaws: New Orleans," "Street Outlaws: Mississippi," "No Prep Kings." They've got four or five shows out there now, all about the drag racing.

DS:

I mean—and the impact just here—I mean, it brought back the Amarillo Dragway, the Lubbock Dragway. So, you know, that's—because I think Amarillo was doing the same thing they were

doing out here, where they just, you know, have three, four hundred people show up on a weekend and run.

AM:

Well, and it's funny. You can take a real—like, Amarillo has clocks, has the—you know—because I raced there last year, with the funny car, in the Chaos. They've got a sanctioned—NHRA sanctioned dragstrip. They open the gates and say, We're not going to run the clocks. You just come out here and flag start or whatever, and you run what you run. Dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. And they have four hundred people. Okay? Four hundred cars out there, running down that track, hot lapping—it looks like a dirt track—just making laps, as fast as they can go. Okay. I was there two years ago—they were doing it. People everywhere. You couldn't hardly get to your car. You couldn't get to the staging lanes there was so many people. At nine o'clock, they said, "Okay, we're turning on the clocks, because some people need to." Us, real racers. They don't want clocks. They want to be able to tell somebody, "My car runs four flat at 160 in the eighth. It runs 6.50s at ninety-seven." You know? But a time slip proves them wrong, so they don't want time slips. Same thing at Dennis's. First one to the finish line wins. That's all they care. They can just challenge their buddies. They're out there betting twenty bucks, and they're racing. It's great for drag racing.

DS:

It's like life on 66th Street, right?

AM:

Yeah. Yeah, we did a lot of that.

DS:

You know—because you could make up your own time and speed.

AM:

Yeah. And, at the time, we just—you know, you'd have to, "Well, my car went ten flat.", "Well, okay. Whatever. I know mine runs, and I'll still race you. Mine's still a thirteen-second car. And let's bet." [Laughs] "If you're true, you'll outrun me." All we cared about is drop the hammer and get to the finish line. But, yeah, the "Street Outlaws" stuff has just—like I said, it's brought drag racing back to the forefront that now people can relate to it. You know?

DS:

And you mentioned somebody. You mentioned Force. And him and his daughters have really taken over the sport.

AM:

Yeah. Well, one of them quit this year: Courtney.

DS:

Did she?

AM:

Yeah. She's not going to run the funny car this year. She's married to Graham Rahal. And I figure she's pregnant. Just speculation.

DS:

He's not a bad racer, either.

AM:

Yeah. And they'd make a pretty good kid, [laughter] between the two of them. But she's out of the funny car this year. And I really—either she's pregnant or they're trying to get pregnant, one of the two. Because she's mentioned before she's ready to start a family. Bad thing about having a girl for a—your driver. Your daughter—because they get pregnant. If it's the husband, he can keep going racing. [Laughs] She can't.

DS:

Well, you know, I think we've gone probably at least an hour, right? [Picks up recorder]

AM:

An hour and twenty minutes, because I won't shut up. [Laughter]

DS:

Is there something that I didn't cover that you'd like to talk about?

AM:

No, I think you got it. I mean, drag racing has been around Lubbock since the early seventies, since they built Lubbock Dragway. It went through a couple of owners. Dennis has had it forever, and did a great job. He got—I cannot believe—I've got to be honest. I cannot believe somebody had to come in and put in a dragstrip here. I tried. I've tried three times to put one in myself. I tried to put one at Reese twice. Okay? They won't let me have Reese. I wanted to run one. I thought I bought Town & Country Airport, and I was going to put one in there. And he sold it out from under me. And I talked to Ross Day about the old Dolaca Strip, which is the emergency landing strip for Reese. He had a drag strip out there, then quit so he could store cotton on it. Lubbock is the best place for a drag strip in the nation. You think about it. We're 125 miles from Amarillo. We're 160 miles from Abilene. We're 108 miles from Hobbs. We're

130 miles from Odessa. We're the hub. I mean, it's called the "Hub City" for a reason. If you live in Amarillo and you want to go drag racing in Hobbs, okay. You've got to go three hundred something miles. But if it was in Lubbock, you only have to go 125. If you're in Abilene and want to go to Hobbs, you know, it's 260 miles. But you can drive 160 and come to Lubbock. This would be an ideal place. I still think it'd be an ideal place. I'm too damn old to do it now. I fought—yeah, I went to the city and tried to get them to help. Not interested at all. I'd tell you that story, but your tape recorder's on. [Laughs]

DS:

I took—I talked to the gentleman that started the Amarillo Dragway back in '59. And back then, it was kind of a similar story. He wanted to, you know, put that together, and he didn't get a whole lot of help from the city, until after it was up and running, successfully, then the city was really interested.

AM:

Yeah. Then the houses start moving, so then they—you know—"We need to close that down." I went to the City of Lubbock—[coughs] I went and spent a week with Billy Meyer, who built the Texas Motorplex. You know, he spent millions on that racetrack. He said he paid for it the first year. Okay? I go down and said, "I want to know what you did, how you did it. I'm not going to be in competition with you, but I need to—I need some insight here, buddy, because I want to go to the city and try to get some help." Because I know he did with Ennis. And he laid it all out for me. I mean, for two days. "The city ought to do this. The city should do that. The city should do this. The city should do that.", "Okay." I said, "Well, how do you get them to do that?" He says, "Here's how. Average spectator spends 186 dollars"—his was twenty years ago—"spends 186 dollars a day; average person. Average family brings in 2.3 people to the dragstrip. So that's this much money per family. Okay? You have this many races, this many times a year, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, and it'll bring in, you know"—I told Ennis, "It'll bring them in 32 million dollars a year to the city of Ennis." So what did I do? I cut it in half, because we're in Lubbock. I can't have the big events he's going to have. Went to the City of Lubbock. Said, "I have a business proposal for y'all, and here it is. It'll bring in 150 million dollars to the City of Lubbock. It does this for the motels, this for restaurants, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. Employ this many people. This much for tourism. They were all excited. All excited. Finally the mayor says, "What kind of business are you bringing to Lubbock that we can help with?" I said, "NHRA sanctioned dragstrip." And I should've said, "I'm bringing in a warehouse." They threw me out. They said, "You need to leave. We have no interest in motorsports in Lubbock, at all." I said, "We're talking about, you know, 150 million dollars revenue for the City of Lubbock.", "If it'll make that much money, just put it in yourself and you pay for it. You need to leave." That was the City of Lubbock. So, I quit. [Laughter] Plainview actually called me and wanted me to put one in Plainview. And I didn't want to go that far. I didn't want to move, for starters. I have a

business. But Plainview would give me the land and furnish me damn near everything I wanted if I put on in Plainview. It's forty-five miles, and I didn't want to do that.

DS:

Yeah, because for a while there, Plainview was really—

AM:

They were booming.

DS:

They were active. When they got that distribution center for Walmart. Was it about the same time when they were—

AM:

Uh-huh.

DS:

—doing all that stuff?

AM:

Yeah. They had that and then—I'm in—they called me and told me who he was. "I'm with the City Council of Plainview. I'm the business director and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. I heard you had a meeting with the City of Lubbock.", "Yeah.", "You want to put a dragstrip in?", "Yep.", "Well, we'd like you to come do it in Plainview." I said, "Dude, I just—I don't live in Plainview. I live in Lubbock." "Well, we'll give you this and this and this, and we'll help do that." I said, "I still live in Lubbock. I don't want to drive back and forth, because it's a daily deal."

DS:

You don't think Plainview's that far, but, you know—

AM:

Every day. [Laughs]

DS:

Forty-seven miles each way at least once a day. You know?

AM:

Yeah. And I was a little disgusted. I was a little disgusted with Lubbock. I'm still a little sore. [Laughs] You know? Because I wouldn't ask—it wasn't like I was asking for the moon, you know. And they just absolutely acted like I—like I said, I'd been better off saying, "I want to put

in a whorehouse.” Because—and I pictured them seeing the cigarette rolled up sleeves, slicked-back hair, greasy hoodlum. That’s what they’re thinking of us as. We’re out here driving trucks and trailers that cost 180 thousand dollars, and a hundred-thousand-dollar racecar. So you’re talking about a quarter of a million dollars per racer that’s at the racetrack. They’re thinking of us as pickup trucks and open trailers, or tow bars. I drive a frigging Freightliner with a fourteen-foot sleeper on it. It’s a 150 thousand dollar truck and a fifty thousand dollar trailer. And I’m going to have a race for fifteen hundred dollars. Like I got brains. [Laughs]

DS:

And you just kind of rolled to what the other aspect—that the way the cost has increased in the street, but also how technology has played a role in everything.

AM:

Oh, technology is—and I wish I’d have kept up with it better than I did. I really do. I mean, technology has just changed the performance of cars, drivability of the cars. I mean, all the “Street Outlaws” do is they—they don’t bring up the fact that most of them are running traction control. And that’s all technology. It’s reading it a hundred times a second, controlling the tire speed and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. Timing. And a lot of cars that are on the dragstrip today can use the grid system, which controls timing to slow it down, pick it up, do whatever you need to do. I’m not smart enough to work it, and luckily the class I run, I can’t run it. So it plays into my favor. But technology is—it’s awesome with what they can do on cars today. My wife drives a new CX9. I can’t even work half the stuff on it. It tells me if there’s an airplane flying overhead, you know, or too close, and cars on each side. It has a three—I can drive down the street and cut on the camera and it shows the 360-degree live view. How the hell does it do that? It’s above my car. There’s nothing drawn above it. [Laughs] But, yeah. I mean, technology’s awesome. I’m just not smart enough to work it. I’m lucky to read email. [Laughs] You can see how long it took me to pull up a video. [Laughs]

DS:

I think it’s—you like stuff instant, and when it drags, you double click it again and just make it last.

AM:

[knocks on desk] Come on. [Laughs]

DS:

I know, because I suffer from the same thing. It’s like—you know.

AM:

Well, you know—you've been there. When you first get computers that had the [makes whirring noise]—dial-up. And now it's, click, it's on. Now you want it to be faster than that.

DS:

Yeah.

AM:

"That's not fast enough, because it took a second to load up. That's not fast enough. Come on. What's wrong with my internet?"

DS:

It's a good thing you don't work at Tech, because at Tech, it's a research-level type connections. And so you get used to those [snaps] really fast connections. You get home and it's like—
[laughs]

AM:

I've always said, "I want whatever internet the Border Patrol has." Because you could drive through there, and from here to our showroom, they'll take a picture of your license plate and you, and before you get up there, they know who you are, what you're driving, what you look like, your date of birth. They have everything in a four-second span.

DS:

Yeah, those little cameras that they've got set up, yeah.

AM:

Yeah. Yeah, I've heard people at Tech said, "Oh yeah, it's just click that, there it is; click, there it is." He said, "You can have fifteen windows open and it don't make any difference." I have to have—I can have three open, and I better quit or—or if everybody gets on at one time, you might as well just go have a cigarette, because this shit's done. [Laughs]

DS:

It spoils us. When you get home, you're just going, "Ah."

AM:

Yeah, I love out in the country, and I have a satellite internet, and it's like click, and then go get me a Coke, because—

DS:

Oh really? It's that bad?

AM:

It's not that bad.

DS:

But it's just bad, yeah.

AM:

Yeah, it's just—it's not as fast as I want it to be. I want instant results.

DS:

And, you know, that's the way our society has gone. And maybe it's because of this, you know. We get instant results here, so we expect that in everything.

AM:

Yeah. Yeah, "I want it now." Because I'm that way. But, you know, I earned everything I got. I mean, when Dad started the car business in the seventies, we worked seven days a week. I fixed the cars—I was fifteen, and I was fixing the cars and washing cars and cleaning the cars. And when we got off Saturday night, we drove to Dallas, and we'd buy four or five cars—four cars; me, my brother, my dad, my uncle, my mom. We'd go on down and he'd buy some cars, and we'd drive them back Sunday, and then I'd get to work. And my pay was I had a bed to sleep in and food on the table. That was my pay. I got five dollars a week for gas. And that's how I—that's how I learned to work.

DS:

Well, you and your brother had to take over the business at a fairly young age, didn't y'all?

AM:

We were—I was forty—

DS:

Okay, older than I thought.

AM:

Yeah. We worked here all our life. But like I said, we went in different departments. Dad pretty much retired when Mom died. And then we started buying—buying him out. Because, contrary to popular belief, it wasn't handed to us in our lap. We paid for it, because that's the way my old man is. Like he said, "I may die and you may get it back, but you're paying for it now." [Laughter] And I didn't have a problem with that. I don't—I don't—I earned it, so I appreciate it. That's what's wrong with people: they're given everything and they don't appreciate nothing. They didn't earn it. If you don't earn something, you know—"Somebody gave me this phone,

and I dropped it and broke it. I don't care. I didn't pay for it." If you earn it, you respect it. I paid for my cars. I paid for my truck. I paid for my trailer. Company doesn't pay for that kind of stuff. That's mine. Company and personal is different. I mean, when I bought that Freightliner, I saved the money to buy that Freightliner. And when I bought the trailer, I paid for that trailer. It wasn't like, "Oh, let the company pay for it. No, I don't do that. You can break a company doing that stuff.

DS:

A lot of people have.

AM:

Oh yeah, a lot of people have. Look at Bart Reagor.

DS:

Are you allowed to talk about him? [Laughs]

AM:

Not with that tape recorder on. [Laughter]

DS:

We've talked a little bit about the business. You want to talk about your business and what it's like to run a business like this? It's totally up to you.

AM:

You know, it's—like I said, we grew up in—I grew up in the business. I worked in the parts department. I worked in service. I worked as a sales. I worked in the office. I worked every detail. I worked it all. And my brother did the same thing. Dad trained us. I mean, you can't tell somebody if they're doing job right or wrong if you hadn't done their job. And I really appreciate what he did. At the time, I really didn't, but today I really do. Car business has changed so much in the last twenty years. Used to—it was fun. We ordered the cars, they came in, we fixed the cars and sold the cars, and we'd repeat. Now selling the car is the least of the whole aspect. And I can't—I couldn't fix a car if I tried. I won't even open the hood of a new car. It's all electronic. It's all computer-controlled, and I don't understand it. And that upsets me a little. It doesn't upset me enough to learn it, but it upsets me a little. It's all about trying to please the factories anymore. This building's thirteen years old. Mazda wants us to tear it down and build a new one. They want to spend three million dollars. I'm sixty-two. I can't reach the return in investment to tear this down and build a new one. Why? So they can look good. They don't care if I make money or not. All they care about is they look good. Same thing with Volvo. Volvo wants us to put in a separate showroom, with separate bathrooms, because the Mazda people and Volvo people can't use the same bathroom, heaven forbid. I guess the Mazda people

pee on the seat. I don't know. [DS laughs] They want all separate stuff. And they can't support themselves. Mazda and Volvo are great cars. And we're in the—in a town of great pickups. Everybody wants a pickup. Mazda and Volvo doesn't build a pickup. Start paying attention drive around. It's all pickups. Me? I drive a Ford truck. Why? I race. I carry drums of fuel. I carry parts. I can't put in the back seat of a Volvo. So I drive a used truck that we have. We traded for a truck, and I drive it for a little bit, because—you know. And I've told the reps—I said, "You need to come to Lubbock and look. You're not self-supporting in Lubbock, Texas. If you had a nice pickup truck, maybe. But you don't. I carried them to eat. Went over to Texas Roadhouse. Parked in the parking lot. Got right in the middle of the parking lot and I said, "Y'all stop, and I want you to look." I counted. "There's fourteen cars in this parking lot—fourteen vehicles in this parking lot. Two are cars and one of them's ours. The rest of them are pickups. Welcome to pickup country." But they don't care. All they care is they look good. So, that aspect of it's changed. It's taken some of the fun out of it. Still love the customers. I love talking with the customers. [phone vibrates on desk] Because we're home-based, you know. We're, honest to God, a local dealership. And there's—what's left of that? Us, Scoggin, Brent Brown. That's it. The rest of them are owned by Group 1 or AutoMax or CarMax, you know, all that. They don't care about you. No. I've had a great life. I've had a great life doing it.

DS:

So Brent's about your age, right?

AM:

Um-hm.

DS:

Yeah.

AM:

Yeah. [Phone vibrates on desk] Brent's a good guy—I've known Brent forever.

DS:

I was going to say—because he probably got into the—into his dad's business about the time you got into yours.

AM:

Yeah. Of course, Frank had Honda. And Honda was a good product.

DS:

Well, he had Pontiac when Pontiac was still around.

AM:

Yeah. I mean, he had Pontiac and he had Honda. He had GMC. He had some great franchises. Unfortunately, we had the two worst franchises you could really own. [Coughs] Just for the fact of the lack of product. Volvo is a fantastic car. Its technology is beyond the space shuttle, tenfold, okay? I mean—and it's great for the farmer's wives. The farmer's driving the truck and she's driving the Volvo, because they can. Used to they all bought Cadillacs, and they've kind of switched over. We sold a lot of Volvos to the farmer's wives. Because the—Cadillac doesn't build a cool SUV, and we do. Two things you could say about a Volvo you couldn't say twenty years ago is it's pretty and it's fast. Used to, "It's a shoe box and it's safe." That's all you could say about a Volvo. [Laughter]

DS:

It's where Honda started, isn't it?

AM:

Yeah. I mean, back when it was Honda, Toyota, Mazda and Nissan, they were all Japanese—what we—everybody called "Jap Crap." Cheap, beer can, tin cars. They're better cars than what's built now. I compare them to anything. I mean, the technology, the attention to detail, the fit, the finish, the safety aspects—they have Chevrolet, Ford, Dodge, all of those, beat. Hands down. But we all started somewhere. I started in the car wash, and they started building beer-can cars. So everybody moved up. [Laughs]

DS:

Everybody has, huh?

AM:

So, anyway, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

DS:

Okay. [AM laughs] Well, before you say anything that'll get you in trouble, [laughter] I'm going to cut it off. Thank you, Andy.

AM:

Absolutely. I appreciate you.

DS:

Thank you.

End of Recording