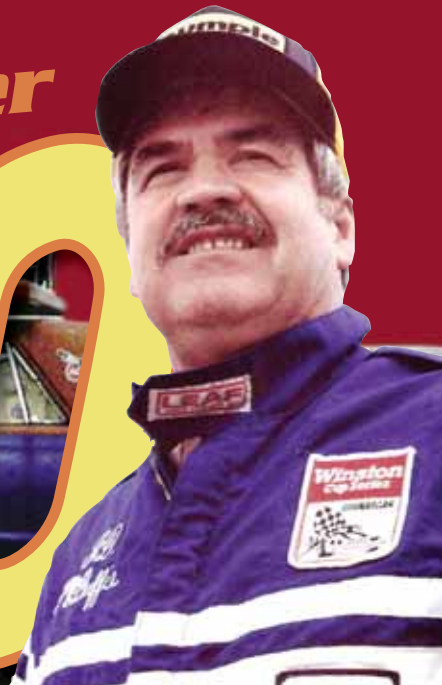


# Old Number

# 70



## The Racing Life of J.D. McDuffie

By Anthony W. Hager

***“When J.D.’s hearse passed by, all activity would cease. Sanford had lost one of its own and was mourning his passing.”***

*—Don Rumple*

*Photos above: J.D. McDuffie’s hauler and a photo of him at Watkins Glen not long before he was killed at Turn 5. (Photos courtesy Ima Jean McDuffie)*

A stock car race in Winston-Salem in 1949 is far removed from the bright lights of the modern NASCAR circuit. Doesn’t it follow that a driving career launched at that race would be just as different from today’s celebrity drivers?

A 10-year-old John Delphus McDuffie attended that event with his Uncle Reuben and his brother Glenn. They watched the iconic legends of racing’s by-gone era compete for supremacy: Curtis Turner, Glenn Wood and Billy Myers. Glenn McDuffie remembers Myers winning the race, but J.D. wasn’t there to see it. He had become sick from the exhaust fumes and was long gone when the checkered flag waved.

Nausea notwithstanding, the experience had lit a fuse within the boy from North Carolina’s sandhills. Beginning that night, J.D. McDuffie knew what he wanted to do with his life. When he attained the age and the means, he and his father-in-law built a racecar from junkyard parts, and he began racing on the local dirt tracks. He won races at small speedways throughout the eastern portions of both Carolinas, eventually winning the 1962 championship at a small dirt track near Rockingham, N.C. His success spawned a desire to hunt the big game: NASCAR’s Grand National circuit.

McDuffie took his first crack at the big time on July 7, 1963, at Rambli

Raceway in Myrtle Beach, S.C. His racecar was a 1961 Ford, which once belonged to Curtis Turner, with a refurbished roll cage and a big “X” painted on the door. Ned Jarrett won the race. J.D. started 14th and finished an uneventful 12th, earning the handsome total of \$120 for his efforts. However, that event launched a career that saw J.D. McDuffie start 653 Grand National and Winston Cup races over a 27-year span.

J.D.’s successes on the dusty local tracks never materialized on NASCAR’s top circuit. His best career finish was a third place run at Albany-Sarasota Speedway in upstate New York in July of 1971, a race won by Richard Petty.

Yet, the fact that McDuffie never visited victory lane in a Winston Cup car doesn’t mean he enjoyed no success in racing. J.D. twice finished in the top 10 in driver points and won the pole for the 1978 Delaware 500, which earned him a spot in the inaugural Busch Clash at Daytona the following February. His best overall showing was the 1979 Music City 420 in Nashville. A ninth place qualifying effort turned into a fifth place finish during which he led 111 laps, the most of any single race in his career. But, and perhaps fittingly, his performance was a mere afterthought in the media.

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Early in his career with his 1969 Mercury Cyclone at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, home of the World 600.

That was typical for the dinosaur known as the independent driver, for whom McDuffie could've been poster boy. Seldom did such men attract the wealthy sponsors or the fame and notoriety that racing held. But the lack of media attention was no indicator of the owner-driver's talent, knowledge and determination. J.D. possessed all three qualities, and they brought opportunities to drive better and faster equipment for other car owners.

One of those offers eventually carried Benny Parsons to the 1973 Winston Cup championship. According to Glenn McDuffie, J.D. had twice declined the driver's seat. When Glenn asked his brother why he didn't take the ride, J.D. responded simply, "I don't want anybody telling me what to do."

Such a reply was indicative of J.D.'s dogged resolve, and his determined attitude brought him respect in the garage area.

### **Dale Earnhardt's helping hand**

One of his greatest allies was a fellow North Carolinian, some guy known as "The Intimidator." Dale Earnhardt assisted J.D.'s lonely struggle several times, even to the point of donating the winnings from pre-race poker games to McDuffie Racing. There was a time at Pocono when McDuffie's only engine went sour prior to the race. He approached Earnhardt about borrowing an engine for the weekend. Dale readily obliged and J.D. made the field for the Sunday's race. Whenever J.D. tried to return the engine, Dale would wave him off, promising to get it later. J.D.'s wife Jean recalled a similar situation at Daytona.

J.D. was on the edge of qualifying

for the race, so Earnhardt passed the hat around the garage. He raised enough money to buy another engine for McDuffie Racing. Unfortunately, as Jean tells it, "That engine wasn't any faster than the one J.D. had, so it wasn't much help. But he appreciated the effort."

The admiration for J.D.'s resilience went beyond the

other NASCAR teams. Jean remembers seeing volunteers at every track who were ready to pitch in with anything the number 70 car might need. "He never had to ask," she says.

The volunteers' faces are too numerous to recall and their names are obscured by the passage of time. But there was one man, known as "Big John," who stands out in Jean's memory. He was "Big John" in both strength and stature, and he helped pit McDuffie's car at the California races. "I can still see him," Jean says, "walking through the garage with a mounted tire and wheel in each hand."

For all the help received from willing fans and other race teams, J.D. himself was arguably his best and most dependable asset. McDuffie was an excellent mechanic and his knowledge of race cars might've made him another Richard Childress. Don Rumble—son of the late Tom Rumble, founder of McDuffie sponsor Rumble Furniture—saw J.D.'s expertise firsthand. "He was a great mechanic who would've made a good crew chief," says Don. "But J.D. liked to do his thing and was happiest behind the wheel."

Don remembers an incident in the garage at Daytona that highlights not only J.D.'s mechanical abilities but also the hardships he faced and the resourcefulness that kept him going. Maybe you remember how your grandpa taught you to straighten a bent nail. You roll it slowly and tap it with a hammer until the shank is again true. Don witnessed J.D. using that principle on a much larger scale.

McDuffie had bent his car's rear axle during a practice session. The better financed teams would've tossed the

damaged part in the scrap heap. But that wasn't an option in the McDuffie Racing stable. When Don Rumble poked his head inside the garage stall there sat his driver gripping a borrowed torch. The bent axle lay over a couple of old tires and J.D. was heating the metal, rolling the axle and banging it with his hammer. Eventually, the axle was as straight as your grandfather's nail and the McDuffie Pontiac raced on it that weekend.

### **As NASCAR changed**

Such resourcefulness was indispensable for J.D., and it indicates the mountains he conquered to remain a part of the Winston Cup Series. Racing was seldom easy for J.D. McDuffie and by the late 1980s it was becoming even more difficult, if not downright impossible. NASCAR was changing rapidly. The independent drivers --like the dirt tracks NASCAR's top level had once called home—were little more than musty relics consigned to the corner of racing's basement.

To complicate matters, J.D. suffered serious burns from a fiery crash during a qualifying race for the 1988 Daytona 500. Contact with another car sent J.D. into the outside wall, rupturing the oil cooler. The ensuing fire engulfed the car as it slid to a halt on the track's apron. Fortunately, he was able to escape the inferno under his own power and was taken to the hospital with second and third degree burns, especially to his hands.

The fire was so hot that it melted the steering wheel in McDuffie's car. Worse still, someone had taken J.D.'s brand new pair of fireproof gloves from his driver's seat the very morning of the 125-mile qualifier. He raced anyway. Somewhere, someone had a prize racing souvenir. J.D. got the scars.

During the Daytona 500 a few days later J.D. spoke to the broadcast crew from his hospital room. "All I ever done is race, it's all I know," he said. "I still love to do it and I'll be back. This ain't going to get me down."

### **The crash at Turn 5**

J.D. raced only 17 times between 1988 and 1990. By the time he arrived at Watkins Glen, N.Y., in August of 1991 McDuffie had made the field in only four of the season's 17 events. But the night before the Budweiser at the Glen, J.D.'s frustration turned to

jubilant. He won an all-star race at the Shangri-La Speedway in Owego, N.Y. Less than 24-hours later, on August 11, John Delphus McDuffie lay dead in the driver's seat following a violent crash at Watkins Glen International's dangerous Turn 5.

Ricky Rudd, perhaps Winston Cup's best road racer at the time, and Harry Gant had wiped out in the same turn during the practice session a few days earlier. Tommy Kendall had also suffered severe injuries in Turn 5 during a sports car event the previous June.

Opinions vary on what caused that fateful accident. The news accounts say that the right front wheel had broken loose, which is plainly evident in video of the wreck. Other observers claim that contact with another car started the incident, or that brake failure or a stuck accelerator was the culprit. Whatever the cause, McDuffie had died instantly of brain injuries after his Pontiac slammed into a tire barrier, flipped, and landed on its roof.

The L.C. Whitford Company of Wellsville, N.Y., sponsored J.D.'s ride for the Watkins Glen race. It was the company's first and only foray into Winston Cup racing, a one-time deal made at the request of a Whitford employee who had previously worked on McDuffie's pit crew. Company president Brad Whitford never had the chance to meet McDuffie and wasn't even at the race. But, in a chilling quirk of fate, he turned on the television

just in time to see a replay that he said, "made me sick to my stomach."

### **Sanford's hometown hero**

It's been said that a person's worth is undervalued until they're gone. J.D. received little recognition during his career, but it seemed everyone understood the void he left behind when he died. "J.D. was just a humble man that everyone liked," said Tommy Bridges, who conducted J.D.'s wake for the Bridges-Cameron Funeral Home. In fact, the number of mourners who paid tribute to Sanford's favorite son was among the largest he has witnessed during his 50 years in the field.

Race fans transformed Sanford, N.C., into an RV campground that resembled the race day infield at Charlotte Motor Speedway. News crews rolled film. Winston Cup drivers and car owners—out of respect for their fallen competitor—spurned interview requests as they filled the Grace Chapel Church beyond capacity, leaving hundreds of mourners standing in the churchyard. The outside interest was enormous, but it wasn't the out-of-town fans or the racing celebrities that caught Don Rumple's eye.

Rumple rode third in line behind J.D.'s hearse in the funeral procession. There was little fanfare, just an eerie silence hanging over Sanford's streets and businesses. It was as if the President of the United States was being laid to rest. "People were



*Often his own mechanic, J.D. kept a Tampa Nugget working whether the engine did nor not.*

stopped, quiet and somber," Don recalls. "When J.D.'s hearse passed by all activity would cease. Sanford had lost one of its own and was mourning his passing."

To race fans, J.D. McDuffie was a sports figure, somewhat of an icon on the Winston Cup Series. To the people of Sanford he was far more than a hometown hero; he was their neighbor and their friend. He was a brother, a father and a husband. His success was certainly modest, especially when measured against racing's current standard. Yet, in a way, he was more successful than today's brightest and wealthiest stars. J.D. never had to bow and scrape for the suits and ties of an image-conscious corporate sponsor. He never had to mince words nor pander to anyone.

J.D. was his own man; a man with an easy smile, a brushy mustache and a thoroughly gnawed Tampa Nugget cigar. He maintained his independence and his resourcefulness in a sport where both qualities were destined for extinction. Along the way he earned the respect of competitors who routinely defeated him on the track. He also won the allegiance of fans who could relate to his struggles, silently hoping against all hope that stock car racing's Don Quixote would someday topple a windmill.

Ultimately he remained the same J.D. McDuffie whose dreams began on a summer night in Winston-Salem. He was the regular guy down the street who just happened to earn a living at nearly 200 mph. **G**

*Anthony W. Hager is a Gaston County writer whose work has appeared in the Gaston Gazette, the Lincoln Times-News and the*

*Rumple Furniture and Tom Winkle Pontiac sponsored McDuffie and his 1986 Pontiac Grand Prix during the 1986 Winston Cup series.*

