

# **Don Maynard Carlton**

**(1940-1977)**

**Racer**

## **Ronnie Sox Memorial Award**

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5 October, 2012 -- In his school years, Don Carlton stood out as a student  
6 athlete playing and coaching baseball and basketball. A newspaper clipping  
7 in the family scrapbook tells of a baseball game in which he pitched a no-  
8 hitter. Recently, one of Don's crew during the mid-Seventies, Jim Ward,  
9 said, "When Don put his mind to winning, more often than not, we did. It  
10 was remarkable to watch the concentration he had." That must have been  
11 the wary and watchful pitcher still in Don years later. But he would always  
12 tell the story of a midget car that his dad built for him when he was five years  
13 old and, in high school, he was already racing and on his way to becoming a  
14 pro driver.

15 Don's career came to a tragic end in a fatal accident on on July 5<sup>t</sup>, 1977, a  
16 few weeks short of his 37<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was at Milan Dragway in Michigan,  
17 testing a Dodge Hemi Colt that his long-time partner, Clyde Hodges, built at  
18 their shop in Lenoir, North Carolina. The car is remembered for its stretched  
19 nose – adding inches to its wheelbase with the intention that would qualify it  
20 to race in NHRA Pro Stock. Chrysler, the Rod Shop, and engine builder Ted  
21 Spehar were supporting the car's development.

22 With the accident Don left behind his widow, Jonnie; son, Don Alan (Donny,  
23 to the family); daughter, Robin; a brother and sister; his parents (now  
24 deceased), and friends, partners and racing teammates who shared his  
25 interest in racing and admired his talents and personal traits. Fifteen years  
26 old when the accident happened, Donny had learned shop skills and was  
27 helping his dad maintenance, machining, clutch and transmission work and  
28 prepping of the race cars.

29 Remembering Don, Jonnie Carlton says the first time they dated he took her  
30 to the race track. "I should have known better!" she complains with a smile.  
31 "Don taught me to drive in his daddy's car. That was way back. One time I  
32 tore up the rear end because I didn't know how to work the clutch. His  
33 daddy wasn't supposed to know. My stepdad was a mechanic and he fixed  
34 it. But Don's daddy found out anyway. He really didn't say much.

35 "Don's first car was a 1936 flathead Ford. He worked constantly on his cars.  
36 His first shop was in the basement of our house. He was down there until  
37 late at night and there was usually somebody helping him. Back in the very  
38 beginning we used to go to Hudson drag strip, which is now closed. They  
39 would award trophies, but you could have five dollars instead. We always  
40 took the five dollars! We went to a lot of tracks. One even had two lanes, a  
41 lane for the right side and one for the left. Another place, there were cows  
42 grazing all around. One time we went with his '62 Chevy 409 to two tracks

43 in the same day. Piedmont in Greensboro on Saturday morning, and he  
44 won. Then over to East Bend fifty miles away and he won there too.”

45 Don’s first sponsors included two local businesses, a Sinclair station and  
46 grocery run by Phillip Mask, and Springs Road Auto Sales. Don partnered  
47 with Mask in his early days. Eventually they went out on their own, Mask to  
48 race an A/FX car. At local races, Don met and became friends with Charley  
49 Woodard of Springs Road Auto Sales, an African-American-owned business  
50 that specialized in musclecars. “My company wanted to sponsor a drag  
51 car,” Charley says, “and I got them to sponsor Don. He was running a baby-  
52 blue ’66 Chevelle that he called the *Little Thumper*. He ran it for a couple of  
53 years.” Don was the lot’s go-to guy to work on their cars. As his career  
54 shifted into high gear and he began traveling further and further to race -- to  
55 Indiana, to California. -- Charley took it on himself to show up at those  
56 distant tracks to pit for Don.

57 Other local friends included Satch Gragg, Stuart McDade and funny car  
58 racer Pat Foster. Satch was eight years younger than Don and crewed for  
59 him. Satch raced and today is an administrator for two IHRA divisions. He  
60 recalls what may have been Don’s first encounter with Ronnie Sox: “We  
61 were at Piedmont and Don was racing the ’62 Chevy. Ronnie and Don  
62 Nicholson were supposed to match race, but Nicholson had a problem with  
63 his car and had to drop out. The track officials asked Don to race against  
64 Ronnie, which he did, and he won.” Stuart McDade drove a Dodge Demon  
65 that Don built. It ran with the Springs Road Auto Sales name on the rear  
66 quarter. This car was also famously driven by Dick Landy on loan at an  
67 NHRA Springnationals event while Landy’s own Pro Stock racer was being  
68 rebuilt.

69 By 1968, Jonnie Carlton continues, “Don was winning enough that he could  
70 make more money racing on weekends than at his factory job, so he gave  
71 up the job. I worked and I used Don’s cars to commute. The ’36 was fun.  
72 When I drove the ’62 Chevy that he ran in the late Sixties, I never knew  
73 which transmission was in it. With one of the transmissions, reverse was on  
74 the left. With another, first was on the left. I’d put the transmission in gear  
75 and start up, and I’d be rolling backwards. Around the end of ’68, Buddy  
76 Martin hired Don to drive a second Sox & Martin car. Don also drove for  
77 Billy Stepp later on.

78 “I think Don’s first big win was at Piedmont. He was still independent and  
79 racing and winning against factory-backed people. That got the attention of  
80 the Chrysler guys. One day they were at the track with the Motown Missile.  
81 Shirley Shahan, the ‘*The Drag-On Lady*,’ was racing Pro Stock, She was  
82 factory backed and Don beat her.”

83 Engine builder Ted Spehar, operating Specialized Vehicles, Inc., in Royal  
84 Oak, Michigan, was Chrysler’s primary contractor in implementing the  
85 company’s Pro Stock racing program. He hired Don to drive the first Mopar  
86 Pro Stock, the 1971 Dodge Challenger Motown Missile. “I met Don at a Sox

87 & Martin test sometime before 1970. He was well liked and extremely  
88 talented. That's why I picked him. In the early part of 1971, he was driving  
89 for Billy Stepp. I called him right after the Winternationals and offered him a  
90 deal he couldn't refuse. How would you like to drive the fastest car in the  
91 country? I said. When he came to work for me, not only was he the test  
92 driver, but he was involved in car preparation and race strategy. He had a  
93 lot of expertise in the clutch end and transmissions. We were a team, the  
94 Chrysler people, Dick Oldfield, who drove the car initially, and Don."

95 Dick Oldfield says, "Don was a very easy-going guy and he never  
96 complained about anything. We were friends from the start. One time me  
97 and Don took our sons with us to a race at Indy. We told the kids, you know,  
98 when I'm driving you stay awake in the front seat with me. When it's their  
99 turn to drive, you go back to bed with me. Even if it's three or four in the  
100 morning, that's when you get up. So the boys went on the trip with us. At  
101 Indy, we told them to come back to the car after each run because, if we are  
102 finished for the day, we were going to load up and leave. We did some tests  
103 and we qualified pretty well at Indy. So Don says, 'Well let's load up and go  
104 back to the motel and check the car over.' But the kids weren't back and we  
105 left them at the track. They had to hitch a ride with Sox & Martin to get back  
106 to the motel. They got back late and they were hungry. We ate already,  
107 sorry! You've got to follow our schedule."

108 When Don went to work for Ted, he was joining ranks with Chrysler  
109 engineers and mechanics who were members of *The Ramchargers*. Tom  
110 Hoover said recently that he first knew of Don after Buddy Martin hired him  
111 to drive a Sox & Martin Hemi Barracuda. Don was actually original  
112 purchaser of the car, which Buddy bought from him. "I'd say it was 1969,  
113 maybe a little earlier, when I first met Don at a test of Sox & Martin cars,"  
114 Tom recalled. "In 1971, we were evaluating the 'clutchflite' transmission in  
115 the Motown Missile for the Pro Stock program. The car was competitive but  
116 it wasn't dominant. The decision was made to go to four-speed manual and  
117 we therefore needed a four-speed driver. Don was an ideal candidate.  
118 When he first took over for us, it was at the Gatornationals and the Missile  
119 still had the clutchflite. Don was runner-up to Ronnie. I'd like to simply  
120 focus on the fact that, after the move to manual, for an extended period, Don  
121 was number one qualifier every time. I don't mean every other time, two out  
122 of three, or nine out of ten times. I mean 25 or 30 of those national events in  
123 a row."

124 Tom Coddington described Don's dual role as racer and test driver. "At the  
125 race track on race day Don was the boss," Tom Coddington said. "We, the  
126 engineers, were along to advise and he made the decisions. But on test  
127 days, we ran the test and he drove for us. He was to make as many  
128 repeatable runs as he could. We'd run a baseline, make the change being  
129 tested, then we'd do three or four runs until we had consistent numbers.  
130 Finally we'd go back to recheck the baseline. A test would consist of  
131 between 9 and 12 runs. If we had four things to test there would be between  
132 40 and 50 runs for the day. We wanted at least three runs within several

133 hundredths of a second. Don's performance was key to that kind of  
134 consistency."

135 Chrysler's Missile cars were known to be very advanced due in part to  
136 aerospace technology the company was able to adapt for use in race  
137 testing. Chrysler engineer Ron Killen had worked on instrumentation and  
138 telemetry at the company's Aerospace Division in Huntsville, Alabama. After  
139 1969 NASA layoffs, Ron found himself in Detroit assigned to adapt those  
140 techniques to testing the company's NASCAR and Pro Stock cars. "Getting  
141 racers to accept the instrumentation we put in their cars, and to trust our  
142 data, was often near impossible," Ron said. "That was not the case with  
143 Don. He was one of only a few drivers who were constantly asking me to  
144 explain the data. When the Missile was running a four-speed, we  
145 instrumented the clutch pedal and shift lever. We always recorded engine  
146 speed and it was easy to correlate the three rates to analyze his shift  
147 pattern. Don asked me, did I see anything about his shifts? The data  
148 showed his third-to-fourth gear shifts were always the slowest. After a few  
149 more passes he came back and asked if the data looked better. The runs  
150 were consistently a few hundredths faster. 'I fixed the problem,' he said. At  
151 the line he was focused on the launch. By the time he made the third-to-  
152 fourth shift, he had relaxed enough for the instruments and clock to catch  
153 the difference. 'Don't tell Mr. Hoover that I was relaxing during the run!' he  
154 said to me, smiling. A lot of Don's success was simply God-given talent, but  
155 he also had a sense of the value of science and technology."

156 Some stats on Don's racing at Bristol Dragway in Tennessee have been  
157 reported by track historian, David McGee. In 1971, driving Ted Spehar's  
158 Motown Missile Barracuda, Don was runner-up to Ronnie Sox at the first  
159 IHRA Pro Stock race ever run at Bristol, the Spring Nationals. Sox won,  
160 9.56, 141.06, to 9.63, 141.20. In the three years, 1971-1973, Don went to  
161 four Pro Stock final rounds at Bristol, including three straight. He won the  
162 1972 IHRA All-American Nationals and 1973 IHRA Spring Nationals. In the  
163 '72 race, Don defeated Ronnie Sox with a giant holeshot, 9.39, 146.10, to  
164 9.16, 149.00. In '73, Don, racing the *Mopar Missile*, defeated Dyno Don  
165 Nicholson's Pinto, 9.25, 147.29, to 9.43, 145.30. Nicholson avenged the  
166 Spring loss later in 1973, ending Don's bid to repeat in the All-Americans.  
167 Dyno won, 9.14, 150, to 9.16, 149. All of those were 16-car qualified fields.  
168 IHRA founder Larry Carrier had great respect for Don and established a *Don*  
169 *Carlton Memorial Award* that was presented each year for several years to a  
170 professional driver exhibiting outstanding sportsmanship. And finally, Don is  
171 one of 13 drivers to post multiple Bristol wins in Pro Stock.

172 Don had apparently been experimenting with clutchless transmissions  
173 around the time that the clutchless Lenco© transmission became available  
174 for Pro Stock cars. *Mopar Missile* mechanic Joe Pappas tells what he  
175 remembers of that work as of late 1973: "Don and Joe Liberty got together  
176 on the concept. We actually tried one in the *Missile* but it broke. We didn't  
177 have the capability of building the gears, so Don had to work with Joe  
178 Liberty to make that happen. I think that put Joe Liberty in the frame of mind

179 to build what has now evolved into the premier clutchless transmission on  
180 the planet. We had our Lenco in the *Missile* by the Winternationals that year  
181 so our testing halted."

182 Jim Ward recalls seeing bins of Chrysler four-speed parts modified by Don,  
183 or by Detroit, in the storage loft of the shop in Lenoir. "You know, teeth are  
184 missing and synchronizers are modified," Jim explains. "As long as you're  
185 under power, once you pull it part of the way, it actually pulls itself into gear."  
186 Donny Carlton says his father, ". . . started with a red-stripe Chrysler  
187 gearbox. When he got it to work, he used for match racing. It would last  
188 three or four runs before it would grenade! He took standard gears and  
189 fixed the sliders in them, where they would change without a clutch. He  
190 figured it out using the standard transmission and makeshift parts. After his  
191 death, Doug Nash and Joe Liberty ended up coming up with some way of  
192 making it bullet-proof. But it was a while before Liberty came out with their  
193 transmissions."

194 Jim Ward, met Don when the *Mopar Missile* went south to new owners  
195 whom he worked for in Florida. Don was racing a Dart, and, by the time Don  
196 went with Nationwide Rod Shop to drive the Hemi Colt, Jim was working for  
197 him in Lenoir. He recalls match racing with Don: "We beat poor Lee  
198 Edwards to death. It seemed like every weekend we were racing him. He  
199 didn't have a real good record against Don. Nobody did. Ronnie Sox,  
200 Nicholson, Jenkins wouldn't run him. Warren Johnson, Roush, with the  
201 Ford, Glidden. The only Ford that would run him was Nicholson. He'd  
202 match race anybody. He'd have everything he could unbolt out of his 385  
203 Mustang. He sat on a kind of bowling alley chair. It was scary. If that car  
204 ever went over, he was not going to survive. But Don became real good  
205 friends with Lee Edwards after all, and Lee got a good suspension system  
206 under his Vega out of that friendship. He couldn't get it to go straight. It had  
207 a ladder-bar suspension. We put the same four-link as on Don's car, with  
208 the same measurements, bars and everything else and Lee went out and  
209 was two-time IHRA World Champion."

210 *Car Craft* magazine published an article about Don in May, 1977: *Terminal*  
211 *Man--Don Carlton, Computer Consistency from a Chrysler Crusader*. The  
212 text was accompanied by an original portrait representing Don, deep in  
213 thought, his imagination a montage of electronics and engine parts. Jonnie  
214 says she loves the drawing, but, she asks, "Where am I in Don's brain?"

215 "For awhile after Don went with Chrysler," she relates "we were driving back  
216 and forth between Lenoir and Detroit. The trip took about fifteen hours. We  
217 would travel all night. Once we got caught in Ohio in a snowstorm and we  
218 had to spend the night in a parking lot. We moved to Detroit in 1972 where  
219 Chrysler set Don up in a shop and he worked on the *Mopar Missile*. I went  
220 with him to race most of the time, to California, to Texas, to Canada for  
221 Nationals events. I was at Milan on the day of the accident."

222 In the tower when it happened, a Chrysler test engineer described what he  
223 saw: "The run seemed normal until the car came near the traps. I heard  
224 Don let up on the accelerator, and the car drifted off the left side of the track.  
225 It started to spin, but then it flipped high in the air several times. It hit the  
226 pavement hard and came to rest in grass off the right side of the track."

227 The broken car was examined at Milan for possible causes of the accident  
228 by Clyde Hodges and Colt project adviser, Dave Koffel, but no technical  
229 issues were found. July 5<sup>th</sup> had been a hot day, with Don making many  
230 runs. Jonnie says, "The cause of that accident, he had a heatstroke! He  
231 looked white as a sheet getting in the car for the run, he had hosed himself  
232 with water. I didn't say anything because I didn't think it would have made  
233 any difference. I regret that to this day." Dick Oldfield trucked the car back  
234 to Lenoir where he disassembled it in another fruitless attempt to find a  
235 cause of the accident. He then took the car's remains to where they were  
236 buried by an accommodating road crew under an old highway being  
237 widened.

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## DON CARLTON TIMELINE

- 241 1958-1968 -- Hometown racer, A/Gas to Super Stock, Lenoir NC (Caldwell Co.).  
242 1968 -- Don among racers getting one of 70 drag-package '68 Hemi Barracudas;  
243 hired by Buddy Martin as backup Sox & Martin Pro Stock driver (through 1970).  
244 1970-71 -- Brief stint driving for Billy "The Kid" Stepp.  
245 1971 -- Hired by Ted Spehar to drive *Motown Missile* Dodge Challenger; contracts  
246 with Chrysler as Pro Stock test driver; member of United States Racing Team  
247 with 15 other Pro Stock drivers (through 1972?).  
248 1971 PRO STOCK Results  
249 Runner-up to Ronnie Sox, NHRA Gatornationals, Gainesville FL.  
250 Runner-up to Ronnie Sox, IHRA Springnationals, Bristol TN.  
251 Defeats Bobby Yowell, IHRA U.S. Open Nationals, Rockingham NC.  
252 Defeats Reid Whisnant, IHRA World Finals, Lakeland FL.  
253 1972 PRO STOCK; Don campaigns Spehar's *Motown Missile* Barracuda.  
254 Defeats Melvin Yow at NHRA Gatornationals, Gainesville.  
255 Defeats Ronnie Sox at IHRA Longhorn Nationals, Dallas TX.  
256 Runner-up to Ronnie Sox twice, at IHRA Pro Am Nationals and at U.S. Open  
257 Nationals, both Rockingham.  
258 1973 PRO STOCK -- Named IHRA Pro Driver of the Year; sets Pro Stock record in  
259 *Mopar Missile* Plymouth Duster (Don is owner) with 8.58-second run  
260 (152.28 mph) at IHRA Pro Am Nationals; Chrysler halts Pro Stock support.  
261 Runner-up to Don Nicholson at NHRA Winternationals, Pomona CA.  
262 Defeats Butch Leal, NHRA Springnationals, Columbus OH.  
263 Defeats Ronnie Sox at IHRA Winternationals (Lakeland); Bob Riffle at IHRA;  
264 Longhorn Nationals (Dallas); Dick Landy at IHRA Pro Am Nationals  
265 (Rockingham); Don Grotheer at IHRA Northern Nationals (Muncie IN); Don  
266 Nicholson at IHRA Springnationals (Bristol).  
267 Runner-up to Don Nicholson at IHRA All-American Nationals (Bristol); to Wayne  
268 Gapp at IHRA U.S. Open Nationals (Rockingham); and to Don Nicholson at  
269 IHRA Nationals (Lakeland).  
270 1974 Races in new NHRA class, COMP ELIMINATOR; continues with Chrysler as  
271 test driver for Hemi Colt development.  
272 Defeats Gene Terenzio at NHRA *Le Grandnational*, Montreal.  
273 1975 COMP ELIMINATOR  
274 Defeats Anthony Terenzio at NHRA U.S. Nationals, Clermont IN.  
275 1976 COMP ELIMINATOR -- Named to Car Craft Magazine All-Star Race Team;  
276 hired to drive for Rod Shop.  
277 Defeats Scott Shafiroff at NHRA U.S. Nationals (Clermont); Don Nicholson at  
278 NHRA Summernationals, Englishtown NJ.  
279 Runner-up to Scott Shafiroff at NHRA *Le Grandnational* (Montreal).  
280 1977 COMP ELIMINATOR -- Voted Car Craft "Most Popular Pro Stock Driver."  
281 Defeats Jimmy Jones at NHRA Springnationals (Columbus).  
282 Runner-up to Dennis Ferrara at NHRA Sportsnationals, Bowling Green KY.  
283 Tragically, Don succumbs after fatal test-run accident with "stretch-nosed" Rod  
284 Shop Hemi Colt at Milan Dragway, Michigan, July 5<sup>th</sup>.  
285 1992 -- Named to International Drag Racing Hall of Fame, Gainesville.  
286 2007 -- Named to North Carolina Drag Racing Hall of Fame, Greensboro NC.