



## **LEGENDS OF THUNDER VALLEY**

### **DON GARLITS**

In the world of drag racing, one name has become synonymous with speed, innovation and success.

“Big Daddy” Don Garlits, named the National Hot Rod Association’s top driver of all-time, won his debut drag race with his first crudely built car. Since that time, Garlits raced his radically designed Swamp Rat dragsters to 144 national event wins and 17 World Championship titles.

During his storied career, Garlits experienced the thrill of victory three times in Thunder Valley. He collected the 1972 International Hot Rod Association Spring Nationals and swept the 1975 Bristol Dragway season, claiming both the Spring Nationals and All-American Nationals.

After driving his first car to victory in 1955, Garlits began work on Swamp Rat I. Swamp Rat I helped Garlits take home many titles, including the 1956 Florida State Championship. After the retirement of his first Swamp Rat, Garlits built and raced more cars designed to push the envelope and the speedometer. In 1957, Big Daddy became the first person to pass 170 mph; he reached 180 mph the next year. His quest to become the first to reach 200 mph began.

The 1960s saw Garlits pick up the first of many NHRA event titles. In 1963, Swamp Rat arrived at the track with a wing mounted over the engine, the first for a dragster. The wing worked and Garlits drove the car to his first NHRA victory at the Winternationals. Garlits broke the illusive 200 mph barrier in 1964 and showed the world he would not slow down. He closed the decade with multiple wins and dragsters capable of reaching speeds nearing 240 mph.

What could be considered as Garlits’ greatest design breakthrough occurred after a horrific accident in the early 1970s. In the final round of an American Hot Rod Association event, the transmission in Swamp Rat XIII exploded, cutting the car in half and mangling Garlits’ right foot. Tired of sitting behind the nitromethane-burning behemoths that powered his car, Big Daddy switched to a rear-engine dragster. The newly designed dragsters helped push Garlits past the 250 mph mark. After a couple of years, the old front-engine dragsters were obsolete.

During the 1980s, Garlits experimented with new ideas designed to streamline his cars and give his engines added power. He became a three-time NHRA national champion, picking up wins in the sport's most prestigious events. On his way to winning the 1986 national championship, Garlits drove his streamlined Swamp Rat XXX, now located in the Smithsonian Institute, in excess of 270 mph.

After running only a handful of events during the 1990s, Garlits borrowed a Top Fuel car from a friend and entered an event in 2001. The competitive desire that had fueled his career was still burning inside. Just a few months short of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, Garlits drove the car to a 4.720 elapsed time at 303.37 mph.

To honor Garlits for his lifetime of contributions to the world of drag racing, Bristol Dragway inducted him into the Legends of Thunder Valley during the 2007 NHRA Thunder Valley Nationals.