



LEGENDS OF THUNDER VALLEY

GENE FULTON

How can you forget your first love?

Gene Fulton, a five-time world champion for the then Bristol-based IHRA, loved his first trophy – a three-tiered beauty emblazoned with the designation, champion. He loved this first trophy so much that he added 14 more to the mantle of his Spartanburg, SC engine shop.

Fulton's successful drag racing career was bookended at Bristol Dragway. Then known as Thunder Valley Dragway, Fulton won his first career national event in the fall of 1973 at the All-American Nationals. Fourteen years later he added his final victory, also in Bristol, by winning Modified eliminator driving an A/Gas Camaro.

Fulton made sure his first win was a learning experience for the competition. He proved pretty cars aren't a recipe for victory.

A returning Vietnam veteran in 1970, Fulton purchased a Plain-Jane, refrigerator white 1964 Chevy II wagon from a used car lot in Abilene, TX. What makes this an integral part of Fulton's story is that he flat-towed the car from Spartanburg, SC to Bristol and raced it.

The rain poured the entire trip north on the old two-lane Hwy 19/23 into Johnson City leaving the wagon filthy with the highway dirt, some mud and grime painted along the side. The thought of washing the car before the first run never occurred to Fulton. Only when his fellow competitors began to ridicule him, did he consider and quickly push the notion aside.

He had a point to prove and Thunder Valley provided the object lesson. Show cars don't win races. Determined drivers and consistent race cars do.

"How could I ever forget that weekend?" Fulton said. "It had rained and the car was completely dirty from the road dirt. I remember some of the guys laughed at me and said my car was a joke. No one was laughing on Sunday when I took home all of their money."

This humble beginning would lead to a total of eight Bristol wins, an accomplishment which has yet to be beaten, according to the major series stat books and one which qualifies him as the latest inductee into the Legends of Thunder Valley.

"There was something special about racing Bristol," said Fulton, who becomes the first pure sportsman racer inducted into the track's exclusive club. "I loved racing here because I always did well here. When you look at drag strips, there are some that are

just beautiful. Bristol was in a category of its own. Back in the day, it was one of the major places you wanted to race and win around here.”

Fulton admits Bristol provided both his best and worst memory in drag racing. In 1978, after winning three world championships with the wagon, he was involved in a two-car crash which nearly killed him. The wagon was a total loss.

Fulton, in tribute to the wagon’s faithfulness, buried the race car behind his Fulton Competition shop. He staged a funeral with his closest friends and adorned the grave site with a tombstone which read, “In tribute of the competitive spirit of men. In honor of the White Wagon, 1971 – 1978, killed by a hit and run driver.”

Fulton rebounded from the accident to win Bristol five more times (1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986), winning the fall race three times consecutively.

Fulton’s induction this weekend adds to a resume which also includes induction into the North Carolina Motorsports Hall of Fame and a Car Craft All-Star Team appointment.

“This is one of the greatest honors I’ve ever been given,” Fulton said. “When you look at the names up there already, Bruton Smith, Jeff Byrd, Don Garlits, Wally Parks, Shirl Greer, Dale Pulde, Rickie Smith, and Larry Carrier, you can’t help but stand in awe. To have your name in this group goes beyond what I could ever describe.

“I want to thank the great people at Bristol Dragway, my wife Kay and family, my customers and friends for their support over the years. This is for them as much as it is for me.

“I’m just a guy who tried to win drag races every time I went drag racing. In the end, I guess it all paid off.”

Fulton currently owns Fulton Competition in Spartanburg, S.C., a company which builds and supplies engines to drag racers around the world. He began the business in 1972 and retired from driving in 1987 to devote his time to building it.

For his numerous contributions to drag racing, and his unique experiences at Bristol Dragway, Gene Fulton is the 2012 Legend of Thunder Valley.

Gene Fulton’s Bristol wins:

1973 All-American Nationals
1974 Spring Nationals
1975 All-American Nationals
1981 Spring Nationals
1982 Spring Nationals
1984 Fall Nationals
1985 Fall Nationals
1986 Fall Nationals