

BOB VILVEN AND THE EVOLUTION OF SHOWROOM STOCK RACING TIRES

[Editor: Bob Vilven ran a farm tire operation in Royal, IL, in the 1960s into the '80s. He would become the first commercial showroom stock tire preparation shop in the country securing contracts with most of the tire manufacturers, starting with Goodyear. Vilven was drawn into racing by one of the early showroom stock competitors, Dr. Robert Orr. Here is the Vilven story in Dr. Bob's own words.]

My first year of racing was '73 in an Opel sedan. My crew chief, Richard Marks (the father of the bar code who later went to work for NCR), and I noticed a BFG-shod A Sedan, the "Tirebird" driven by Larry Dent, in SCCA that performed respectably on street radials, even winning a race at Lime Rock. Of course, the Goodyear race-tired cars were faster, but the "Tirebird" was well-prepared and well-driven.

We happened upon some photos showing the tires, which were taken down to half depth by recapping brushes. They looked horrible, and we wondered how many heat cycles it took for the tread surface to have a decent contact patch. That thought in mind, we began searching for an alternative solution in the immediate Champaign-Urbana area. A local Chevy dealership had an Amermac Corp tire-truing machine, but the operator was renowned for his artistic temperament.

Then I heard about a small tire shop in Royal, IL run by Bob Vilven who also had an Amermac truing machine. I was told to let the phone keep on ringing for a really long time when I placed a call for Bob. The shop had a huge bell that tolled with the phone and could be heard across the street at a local bar that sold large Michelob drafts in iced mugs for 25 cents.

A few days later, with a set of Semperit M401's (those were the last set of tires for showroom stock racing that I purchased) in the back of the station wagon, I drove to Royal, met Bob and had an icy Michelob. Bob set about truing the first set of tires for me. This was not a fast process – the first set took a case of beer, which I did my part in helping to consume. The tires were not pretty, but they looked a heap better than the BFG's taken down by brushes.

The first time out for the "Vilvenized" rubber was July at Mid-America Raceway in Wenzville, MO. I was warned in advance by friends not to expect too much of a result at MAR. The local hotshoes in Vegas, Pintos and other Opels were considered untouchable. I qualified 4th in class. Racetime, coming uphill on the main straight, just as we crested the hill the green came out. Apparently, I was the only one looking for it so far from the start-finish line. The flag was visible through the rear window of the car in front of me, so I floored it, taking the class lead into the first turn. End of race. We knocked the former lap record of 2:38 down to 2:35.2. Thus, was a believer in properly trued tires born.

The Opel won and set lap records in all but two races for the rest of the season (one in the rain and the other at the Car & Driver SS Challenge II at Lime Rock where the car suffered the dreaded inner ball joint failure, if my aging memory is correct, but still finished 9th).

With each set of tires he trued, Vilven not only became faster in accomplishing this task but also improved the product along the way. For a while in 1974, we had a separation problem on the outer edge which Bob solved by rounding the edge off, rather than having a sharp edge. We tried different rubber, the Michelin XAS (which we pronounced as downright dangerous with their propensity to experience catastrophic failure) and Semperit 401s with tubes (another bad idea). By season's end, Bob had added a buffing stone into the mix, thereby producing a tire that looked as though it had come out of a mold. There was virtually no break-in period, and they stuck like glue.

In 1975, I invited Bob to the Elkhart Lake June Sprints. My 914 took pole, set a lap record and won. Bob got a real taste of racing for the first time, he liked it. That was a very good year with 12 wins out of 16 races.

Fast forward to 1977, the first year for showroom stock as a national class, Bob started experimenting with different brands of tires. I started the year off with an Alfa. God, I hated that unreliable piece of junk. It was happiest on jackstands resting its tires. My first race of the season was at Charlotte. The first practice sessions were done on Dunlops which felt quite predictable, but they were slow. Bob had sent a set of Klebers for me to try as well. I think I did about five laps, came in and said they felt rotten. Donna showed me her timing sheet. Holy crap! The Klebers were more than 2 seconds a lap faster than the Dunlops. Learning that, I did a mental adjustment, noting that was how tires should feel. I won the national race, blowing a head gasket on the cool-off lap.

Bob's business began to pick up. He provided an excellent product at a good price, and he would try different brands in search of the fastest street rubber. Kleber's #2 came from France to meet Bob, and Bob's future as a tire prep grand artiste was assured. After a couple of races including a win at the last national race at Talladega, I became frustrated with the Alfa and bolted the rollbar back in my 914. The result was three wins—the June Sprints where I had my first bump-drafting experience, Road Atlanta and IRP. At the runoffs, Bob's tires garnered a first place in SSB with Tom Kersey.

For 1978, I drove a Datsun 280Z. At Charlotte, I started off in practice with Kleber's new 70-series aramid fiber tires. The Z was downright treacherous with those tires on the banking – not undriveable, but certainly unraceable. I had a set of Dunlop Steel Max tires to try, as an afterthought. They were excellent and my tire of choice for most of the season. Dunlop looked upon those tires with disfavor, because they were not supposed to be sporting in nature. So, I tried their most sporting line of 70-series. Very interesting in that they blistered, and their tire surface took on a greenish tinge.

At a Road Atlanta regional late that summer, Bob gave me a set of Vredestein winter tires to try in the rain. It rained all right, but not until the start of the race. Going into turn 1 while in the lead, the Z snapped. I got off the brakes and let the steering self-center. The Z righted onto its course, actually coming pretty close to taking a normal line through turn 1. Behind me, many of the others crashed together as they went straight off under heavy braking in the rain. I put the Vredesteins on and went for a drive on the local highway during a heavy rain. In a straight line, they were amazing. I could even chirp the rear tires on 1-2 and 2-3 upshifts. However, any attempt to slalom down the highway was not good. The tires felt like they were simply falling over their edges. I asked Bob to please put his buffing stone to them and round off the outer edges. The net result was a national win at IRP in the rain. Somewhere in this mix, Goodyear introduced their new 70-series performance tires. Instantly, the Dunlop Steel Max was uncompetitive.

There is a point to this meandering trip down memory lane. Bob Vilven was a competitive, curious person who was always interested in finding the new hot setup in tires. He was always sending me new stuff to try. I became a tire junkie. The smell of freshly trued tires was almost like an aphrodisiac. Bob and his son, Bobby, went to more and more races, promoting their product and gaining a following among those who were willing to try them.

It is at this point in time, a Goodyear major domo proposed a true-off competition of Bob versus their own in-house truers. Of course, Bob did a much better job, faster with greater consistency. This led to him becoming the Truer-of-Truers for Goodyear. The business prospered and diversified with Chuck Ulinsky, a former IMSA street sedan series champion, later partnering with Bob in a new offshoot business, known as CUTS (Chuck Ulinsky Tire Service), located across the street from Bob. They were the purveyors of General Tires for assorted racing series.

During the fall of 1985, Bob's health took a nosedive. He was diagnosed with lung cancer and passed away after Christmas.

Gosh, Bob had fun in his business, starting with just his personal inquisitiveness and a competitor's spirit. He grew his business, employing his son Bobby and daughter Bonita and probably half of Royal. He developed a niche market and enjoyed doing it. I lost track of the business after Bob passed away, with my career at the university taking a new international turn. That said, Bob the younger, developed the business even further, handling race tire prep and distribution for several professional and amateur series. He recently told me that at its height, he had three warehouses filled with tires – 73,000 tires in one year. His dad would have been very proud of him.

However, as all things do, the business ended. With the great recession, Toyo tires would only give him a small chunk of the biz, not enough to make it sufficiently profitable. So, in 2008 or 2009, he left that business. He had already taken up the former position of Bob the Elder as Lord High Mayor of Royal, a position he recently relinquished. At age 66, Bob is now the Ogden-Stanton Township Assessor. – *Dr. Robert Orr*