

Villager Leaves His Winning Mark on Car Racing

Mark Rife continues to race his iconic 1963 Corvette Stingray all over the country

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By Frank Ross

Note: Mark Rife is a member of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.

Inside the spacious, sparkling clean garage of Mark Rife's home in the Village of Bridgeport at Miona Shores stands a towering hydraulic car lift with a vintage Chevy Impala nestled between its stanchions. He has installed a new motor and is waiting for fabric to arrive that will restore the seats to their original look.

In the third stall sits another vehicle shrouded with a protective cover. Once that is removed, the key is turned and the full throated rumble of 600 horsepower vibrates through the air. It was the stuff of dreams in 1963 and remains so today.

As a young man, Rife's dream was to race sports cars and he had a young wife who supported his passion. Her level of support was revealed when they found what they considered to be a perfect race car in a classified ad for \$1,500.

"My wife, Carol, always supported me in everything, although sometimes I scared the hell out of her," Rife said. "I was working as an electrician and had saved up some money from jobs I did on the side. We took that money, cashed in my wife's life insurance policy and bought the car."

The car was a 1963 Corvette Stingray, one of the most iconic of the American high-performance muscle cars.

Mark, Carol and their son took turns racing the car for 39 years until they lost Carol to cancer in 2010. In many ways, the purchase of the Corvette was emblematic of their relationship. Their life revolved around the scent of racing fuel and smoking tires.

"I was working hard building my electrical contractor business, giving up time with my family, but on the weekends we'd pile into the RV and pull something on a trailer to race," he said. "I worked and played hard."

Over the years, Rife and family have competed in all of the major road racing events in the country, from coast to coast, and the car, featured on the cover of Hot Rod Magazine, has become so famous for winning that he recently drove it in an invitation-only race in Las Vegas.

He attended the event after completing a western tour of races in honor of his late wife.

"We had talked about racing the West for a long time," he said. "I did it for her."



Mark Rife, of the Village of Bridgeport at Lake Miona, poses with his 1963 Chevrolet Corvette, split window coupe, race car. The Corvette has been modified with a 427 cubic-inch Corvette LS7 engine cranking out 600 horsepower. Rife purchased the Corvette in 1971 and converted it to a race car over that winter.

When asked how many races he has won, he said he really didn't know as he walked over to an array of medals splayed across a table in his study.

"For me it's not about winning, it's about the race," he said.

His many victories in high-speed competitions have not been without pain. He has had two shoulder surgeries and broken his back twice, with one serious accident during the 24 Hours of Sebring race, where he found his car nose down in a lake.

"I was in third, moving up to second when my brakes failed," he said. "It's strange how the mind works. I was going about 170 miles per hour, but everything happened in slow motion in my mind. I could see there was a concrete wall on my left and another ahead on my right. There was a grass field between that. I chose the grass and ended up in a lake, but that was the best choice at the time."

Rife, who recently returned from his last race of the season at Watkins Glen International in New York, can now be found in The Villages with a radio controller in hand, racing one of many RC cars he has in his fleet. He has a car for every racing class offered in The Villages RC Model Race Car Club, which races Saturday mornings at Rohan Recreation Center. For him, there is no difference in the thrill from large track to small.

According to his longtime racing buddy Mike Hailer, of the Village of Bridgeport at Lake Miona, Rife is an extremely competitive driver, equally as adept at turning a wrench as a steering wheel. Both have worked as crew members in support of the others' track time.

"When I was on the radio and Mark was racing, I had to keep reminding him to back off and save the brakes and tires," Hailer said. "He's a real hard charger."

Betty Hobbs, of the Village of Bridgeport at Lake Miona, and her husband, Gary, met Rife in 1986 and became fast friends. They share the bond of Vietnam veterans, Gary as a Marine and Rife in the Army.

They also share the love of racing. The two couples first met in a Corvette club doing autocross races. Betty also an accomplished race driver, was asked about Mark's driving tendencies. She laughed and didn't hold back.

"He's 16-year-old aggressive," she said. "He has been passionate about racing since he was a teenager and doesn't like to lose."

Although her husband, Gary, gave up racing Corvettes when he started racing Formula One cars in Europe, their friendship never has wavered.

"We just love it here in The Villages, living so close together after all these years," she said.



Rife has won numerous medals with his Corvette from the Sportswear Vintage Racing Association.