



FLETCHER

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF DAN FLETCHER WORDS/PICS JOHN DIBARTOLOMEO

In the 1989 movie *Fletch Lives*, Chevy Chase plays Irwin M. "Fletch" Fletcher, a reporter who inherits a Louisiana plantation and dons a series of disguises to catch a killer.

While the real life Dan "Fletch" Fletcher didn't inherit anything; having worked for all the successes he's earned; he has donned his own series of disguises over the years. Disguises which include helmets and firesuits embroidered with enough sponsor logos to keep him on the road as a professional sportsman racer; which might be an oxymoron, but a correct one none the less.

With 80 NHRA national event wins to his credit and counting, along with three championships and countless divisional event wins, the fairy tale life some might believe he lives is far from the truth. In fact, it just might be closer to the "clock striking 12" with the fairy godmothers ready to snatch it all away at any time.

"With the level of competition today," he says, "it gets harder and harder to win. It might not look that way but it is. And for someone like myself who doesn't get a paycheck unless I win, the struggles to just survive are always that, a struggle."

Born in November of 1963, by the time Spring of '64 rolled around, his mother "had me on a leash tied to a fence at the race track," he says. His father, Tom Fletcher, was a Mopar guy through and through with a series of Mopar race cars he'd drag around to tracks near their Rochester, New York, home winning more times than none.

"I vaguely remember a phone call he had in 1968 inquiring about obtaining one of the '68 Hemi cars from Chrysler," Dan says. "Being a stick guy, he was only able to get an automatic car and he didn't want that. Eventually a friend of his at a Chevrolet dealership ordered him a '69 Z-28 Camaro." Little did Tom Fletcher know at the time that Camaro would eventu-



Really LIVES

ally become the winningest car in drag racing, bar none.

There are five people ahead of Dan Fletcher who have won more; John Force, Warren Johnson, Bob Glidden, David Rampy and Frank Manzo. But... neither of that group won them all with one car. In all fairness though, only 40 of his wins came behind the wheel of that same Camaro his father purchased back in '69. With wins in Stock as well as in Competition Eliminator driving for west coast racer Rick Braun, Fletcher has still put together quite a resume.

After picking up the Camaro from Taylor Chevrolet in '69, Tom drove it a total of ten miles to his home and the car has been a race car ever since. Racing in the old Modified Production classes with the 302-cubic inch engine,

Dan Fletcher is a serious racer, one who plied his trade well and is able to support his family through a series of support from his many friends and... 80 NHRA national event wins.



DAN FLETCHER



he became quite the hitter, winning often on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons at places like Spencer Speedway and South Butler Dragway earning as much as \$80 (!) in the process. "I watched him for years win twice a week, every week," said Dan.

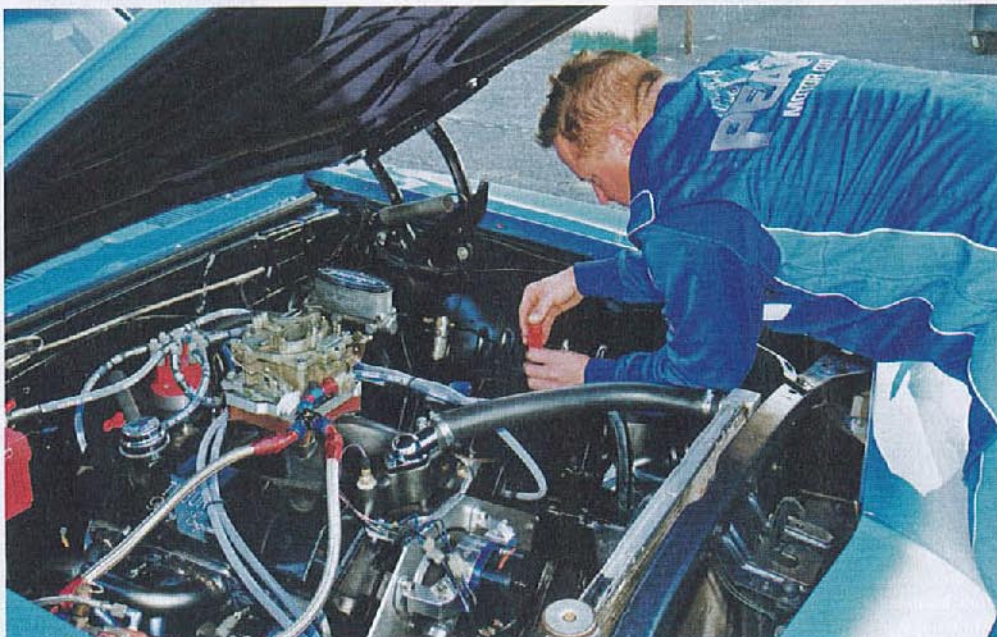
By the mid to late '70s, the normal everyday problems had worked their way into Tom's life and the Camaro was parked. At 16-years old and with a new state driver's license in his hands, Dan dragged his father and the Camaro out of retirement.

As a mechanical engineer working at Xerox Corporation, Tom was meticulous with his race car preparation, genes which Dan probably inherited. "Dad was a meticulous freak," says Dan. "He did all the work on the car and I didn't know my a\$\$ from a hole in the ground. When he died in '93, the cylinder heads were off the car and I remember me and a couple of my (laughingly) idiot friends putting the heads back on the car and waiting for the lightning strike to hit. 'What are you guys doing touching my car,' is all we could think."

While still in high school, Fletcher passed by this '69 Camaro which was for sale. "With \$500 my parents chipped in and my \$500, I bought it and drove it to school," he says. Not one to quickly get rid of his possessions, that same Camaro was turned into a Stocker several years ago and has garnered numerous national event Wallys today.

Without much thought and little more than a business degree from college, Xerox looked to be the place for Dan to be in the employment world. "I originally went to college to be a mechanical engineer," Dan says. "I was pretty smart and it was very easy for me to get A's in high school so I tried to apply the same study skills in college, which was absolutely no studying at all. That didn't work out too good and I ended up bailing out of that after a year, finally getting just a two-year business degree."

And while apologizing for not completing a four-year degree, it's possibly the business degree which would eventually serve him well.



"I'm a one-man band," Fletcher says. But prior to the early '90s, every bit of maintenance on his cars was performed by his father, Tom. When Tom passed away in 1993, Dan had a crash course in race car maintenance, a class he has since passed with flying colors.



"There are not a lot of companies willing to invest big money in sportsman racing," Fletcher says, "and that's what makes the PEAK Performance Team so special." Fletcher joins (left to right) Sherman Adcock, Jay Payne, Duane Shields and TJ Zizzo as part of the new PEAK sponsorship announced at Indy last year.

The "safe" job working at Xerox as a technician beckoned and provided a weekly paycheck to support his then young family consisting of wife, Donna and two sons Thomas and Timothy. A daughter Taylor had yet to be born but nonetheless has turned out to be equally important in the Fletcher household.

Racing also continued every week. "We would still race and traveled to a lot of the bigger bracket races around the country, using up every bit of vacation and sick time I had from Xerox.

"We went to the Moroso 5-Day Bracket Championships for the first time in '86 or '87, which was the last year before delay

boxes came into being," he added. "I finished second in their points chase that year, but by the next year delay boxes had come in and we didn't know anything about them, getting our a\$\$ handed to us."

Realizing that the Camaro was like bringing a knife to a gunfight, Fletch says, "I was pretty good off the bottom-bulb but we knew that if we were going to continue a diet of bracket races, we were going to need a better 'tool,' which is a dragster. A ten-second Camaro wasn't going to cut it. But then I started to look at Super Stock eliminator as being basically a bottom bulb bracket race, something that I could be competent at."

By 1991, Fletcher was on the Super Stock tour with the very first national event attended being the NHRA Grandnationals in Canada. "I runner-upped to Joe Covert at the race, breaking out by one-thousandth in the final," he says.

Employment at Xerox continued as he accrued enough vacation and sick days to travel to the races. The year 1994 might have been the break-through year as he won his first national event, the Columbus, Ohio, Springnationals. "That was at a time when you could win a good bunch of money in contingencies, unlike what it is now," says Fletcher. "So after that win, we had a little bit of money and decided to put it all down and run the western swing. I had a couple of my buddies take the car out to the Denver race mid-summer. I flew back and forth for those three races, Denver, Seattle and

Prior to his new sponsorship from PEAK, Fletcher received support from K&N, whose Vice President Steve Williams, Fletcher says, "Is a big supporter of sportsman racing."



DAN FLETCHER



When Dan Fletcher wins, as he has done 80 times on the NHRA tour since 1994, it's always a time to celebrate with family and friends.

Sonoma, using up all my vacation time along with calling in sick and coming in late. But I ended up sweeping the swing, winning all three."

With daughter Taylor being born in '95, the Fletchers might have been in hog-heaven but it was still a struggle. Besides towing a race car to the races, toting three small children around posed its own concerns along with trying to stay one step ahead of the "man" at Xerox. Fletcher says, "I learned real quick all the tricks like leaving your coat on your chair to make it look like you were still there. But all I thought about was racing every minute I

was at work. When I won those three, we had a little bankroll to work off of. And like I said, today you can't win the money you used to win years ago.

"I can easily remember winning \$20K at a lot of them in the '90s and early 2000s, while today you're lucky to walk away with \$12K for a win. It all comes down to the contingency dollars and we don't have the contingency sponsors we used to have. And to add to that, back then, gas was a dollar a gallon, when today diesel fuel for the motorhome is over \$4 and the price of everything else has gone up too. As a professional sportsman racer, I'm still able to keep the lights on here but it has gotten harder each year."

In 1997, Valvoline representative Mike Gruber took a chance and mentioned to Fletcher about the possibility of a Valvoline superteam, "something I will always

be thankful to Mike for," he said. That dream came to pass and with it came enough sponsorship funds to continue on the tour.

Fletcher said, "There are not a lot of companies who are willing to make a big investment in sportsman racers but I've been fortunate to be connected with a couple of them starting with Mike Gruber and Valvoline. When the Valvoline team went away, I was lucky to be associated with Summit Racing Equipment followed by K&N Engineering and now PEAK. Between Jon Hedges and Scooter Peaco who were at the time with Summit, Steve Williams at K&N and now the group at PEAK; these are fantastic guys who have championed sportsman racers for a long time.

"When the Valvoline deal came about, Ken Warner had just risen to the helm at Mickey Thompson Tires, putting me on the program there and continuing to help me to this day. Of my 80 wins, 76 of them have come on Mickey Thompson Tires. And I could never forget ATI Performance, VP Racing Fuels and a host of others who have supported me since I started." All a far cry from his early racing days.

"I can remember my very first 'sponsor negotiation,' " he said. "I was at Dan Delany's shop having my car lettered and he always to this day reminds me of it. I was on the phone in his back room with Pontillo's Pizza and Wings. It got me \$500 and a free pizza and wings every week. I thought I hit the big time."

Despite his success on the NHRA trail, Fletcher finished second in points at the first Moroso 5-Day Bracket Championship he attended in the late '80s before the age of delay boxes. However, footbrake and bottom bulb racing has always been his forte.





Mickey Thompson Tires has been a Fletcher supporter from way back and still maintains an associate sponsorship with the Fletcher family. For 2013, in addition to Fletcher's Super Stocker and Stocker, Fletcher sons Thomas will be wheeling this wagon while Timothy will sit behind the wheel of a Nova. "Both of my sons are great drivers, but I worry where NHRA drag racing is going," Fletch comments.

"We didn't go to too many races back then," he added. "But after I won that first one and then swept the swing with three wins... It's like playing Blackjack. All of a sudden you start hitting 20 all the time and it just rolls on." But it isn't all just luck.

"Sometimes the odds are in my favor," he says. "I'm always going to go out there and do a pretty good job at hitting the tree, dial the car right, but even though you do it all right, everybody has gotten so good these days that it doesn't work so much anymore. But it still works half dozen or so times a year. I mean I race a lot. When you go to 18 national events a year and I'm driving two cars that essentially gives me 36 chances to win.

"Am I as happy as I was 15 years ago," he posed as a question. "It's still the best way I know to provide a life for my family and put food on our table."

"I do worry though, where is the sport headed," he added. "Sure, you could go the open trailer and pick-up truck route, but forgetting the cost of the equipment, every time you leave the house, it's still \$1,000 or more in entries, fuel, etc. And then I'm concerned about the lack of young people in NHRA racing. Let's face it, without family and nepotism, where are the kids going to get the ability and interest to go NHRA racing? I don't know whose fault it is, but the economy surely plays a part.

"As I mentioned earlier about the lack of money won these days, you could go bracket racing where they're racing for some big money at most events. However, if you don't turn on some win lights at those races, you could go broke real quick with the entry fees."

Fortunately for Dan Fletcher, he does know how to turn on those win lights and there is little reason to believe anything will change in the near future. **DRR**