



**STAND UP!**

**WE HAVE LIFTOFF:**

Jim Ronan gets all four wheels off the ground during a dramatic launch at Pacific Raceways. Because the motor is mounted backwards, Ronan says the engine is easier to start with the pickup body on the car (shown at right) than with the sedan back (shown below), though the two are interchangeable.



**FACING PAGE:** Ronan stumbled onto a piece of NHRA history when his search for an interesting new vehicle led him across the mountains to Spokane and the "Berry Wagon" wheelstander made famous by drag racing legend "Wild Bill" Shrewsberry.

# Jim Ronan harvests history with Berry Wagon

■ **Steve Herb**

Jim Ronan's history with racing goes back to the mid-'70s and the Edgewood, Wash., resident says he's done a lot of crewing over the years.

"Back in high school it was the thing to do on Friday nights," he says of racing at Pacific Raceways "I had a root beer brown '55 Chevy two-door wagon."

He recalls discovering the sport of drag racing.

"I got hooked up with a neighbor that had a bracket car," he says. "One thing led to another."

Along the way, Jim drove a truck for Mark Hentges and spent some time competing in the Thundercar ranks at Spanaway Speedway.

"Then the Junior Dragsters came out and I got involved with that through the kids," he says of helping sons Jeremy and Jason race. "I've been doing that for more than 17 years."

When the youngest son Jason was through with the Junior Dragsters, Jim set him up with Tom Gresham's 230-inch wheel base Super Comp dragster to run on an 8,900 index.

"And our friends' kids drive for me," Jim says of supporting the Junior Dragsters class. "I help probably 15 drivers in the Junior Dragsters."

In 2005, Jim began searching for something different.

"I thought it was time for a change," Jim says of beginning a search that would last more than a year. "I wanted a wheelstander. But I didn't want to step on any toes."

He certainly wasn't looking to stir up bad feelings with drivers like Ed Jones, whose flame throwing fire truck is a popular Northwest attraction.

"Since I didn't know what I was doing I wanted something proven," he says. "Something Old School."

In August of 2007, Jim found his answer for sale in Spokane.



Though the notable wheelstander was in overall black during the Motorsports 2008 show, Ronan says his plans are to repaint the car in the familiar yellow and pink paint scheme that it had during its tenure as the "Berry Wagon".

"I drove over and looked at it," Jim says of the car in question. "I knew it seemed familiar."

He did not buy it at that point although he was intrigued.

The car was in Rick Markham's "MidNight Delivery" paint scheme, but its real identity didn't strike Jim until after he had left Spokane.

"It didn't hit me until about Moses Lake on the way back," Jim says of solving the mystery. "This was Wild Bill's last ride."

Drag racing legend "Wild" Bill Shrewsberry is well-known for his exotic vehicles during the '60s and '70s including a the Batmobile and ground-breaking wheelstanders like the L.A. Dart and Heml Under Glass.

The car that Jim had discovered once bore the bright yellow and pink paint of the Berry Wagon Shrewsberry drove under sponsorship from Knott's Berry Farms in the '80s.

"I went back to make sure it would work for me," Jim recounts. "I am 6-foot-3 and Wild Bill was a short guy."

Adjustments obviously were needed, but Jim eagerly bought the car and brought it back across the mountains.

"We had to drop the seat five inches and move the pedals four inches for me to fit in," Jim laughs.

The car was ready to run, powered by a 468-cid big block Chevy with a blower and a Powerglide transmission. It sported a homemade V-drive.

Of course, the motor is mounted in back, just behind the 34x17x15-inch stiffwall Mickey Thompson tires.

"I can lift the front end of the car myself," Jim says of having the center of gravity shifted so far back in the car. "And sitting in the center is strange. Just do anything and the front wants to come up."

He says the car came with a fire show set up - titanium pads for producing sparks - but the previous owner had never used them.

Jim's first outing in the car was last July at Pacific Raceways.

"Ed Jones had told me it was like taking off in an airplane," Jim says of making the first run. "I think it is more like sitting on a teeter totter."

He has become more familiar with the feeling, having made seven passes in the car by the end of 2008.

"I got comfortable pretty quick," he says.

Of course, a wheelstander exhibition of any type is not to be taken lightly from a safety standpoint.

For protection, Jim wears a 20-layer fire suit and there is a fire bottle in the car.

the plan," Jim says seriously. He says there is quite an art to making a pass on the rear wheels only.

"You need to keep your foot in it when it gets in the air," Jim emphasizes. "And keep the wheel straight. Once I crossed from lane to lane at 112 mph. It happened so quick. I just wanted to keep it off the wall."

The incident caught Jim's attention.

"I want to be known as the guy who owns the Berry Wagon," Jim says. "Not the guy who crashed it."

Jim plans to return the car to the yellow and pink paint scheme that had when Shrewsberry was driving it in the '80s.

So far, Jim has run exhibition shows, but plans to get officially licensed in the car so he can start charging for his appearances.

"The best I've done is stood it up and walked it 1/8th mile on one run," Jim says of one outing. "I bounced the car and my foot hit the throttle. I lifted it again for 50 feet. You gotta be crazy I guess."

"I think he is crazy," son Jason agrees with a laugh.

In addition to racing his own dragster, Jason serves as crew chief for his dad.

Russ Smith and wife Darla also help out on race days.

Jim also credits support from Security Race Products, Anderson's Welding and Freeway Trailer Sales.

Of course, Ed Jones and Rick Markham rank pretty high on his list as well.

Jim also gets plenty of family support from wife Joann, mom Gloria and stepdad Lee Heemink.

Jim says he had a good time showing the car at the Motorsports 2008 show last November in the Tacoma Dome.

"It's been a blast seeing the reaction from guys that have seen this car in action before," Jim says. "It's a piece of NHRA nostalgia history."