

Author off to the races

Former race car champion to launch book on Thursday

By LAURA TESTER
Advocate staff

A former Alberta race car champion is taking another turn in life, but this time it's at a much slower pace.

Richard McDonell, who won the Calgary Race City Motorsport Park championship in 1995, has written a 320-page book.

The Red Deer man will launch his book, *The Speediest Land Traveller: A History of Alberta Auto Racing*, at the Red Deer Public Library, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. in the Snell auditorium on Thursday.

For McDonell, it's been a labour of love.

Since the age of nine, when he attended his first stock car race, McDonell has been captivated by the sport.

He started watching Formula One racing and sports car racing in the early 1960s, before getting behind the wheel.

McDonell competed in road races from 1965 to 1972, when he took a 17-year hiatus to focus on his family and career.

McDonell switched to oval track racing in 1990, where he stayed for six years.

"I've always enjoyed going fast," said McDonell, 58. "I love running a car to its absolute limits of performance."

McDonell's modified sports cars have reached about 210 km/h.

With the help of a good mechanic, McDonell placed well in many races

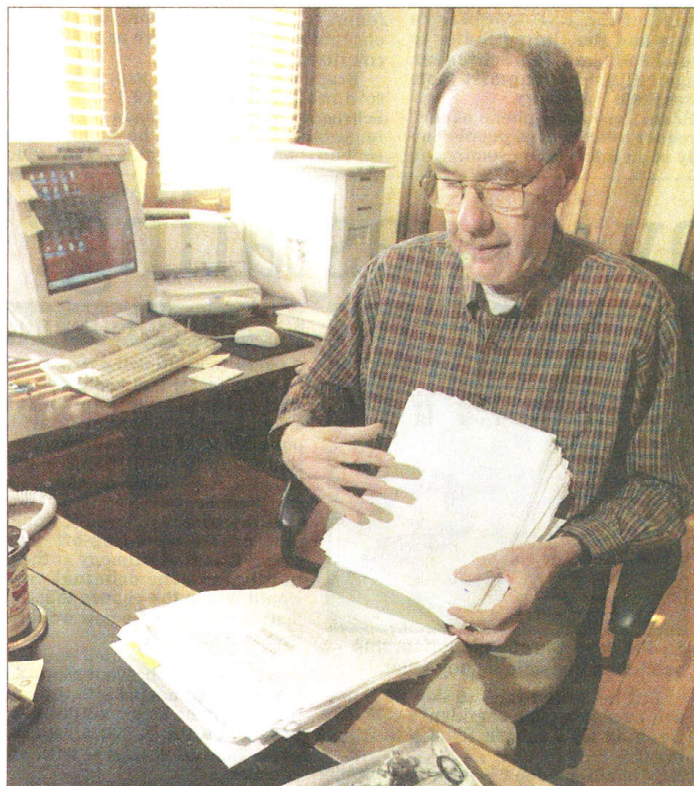


Photo by JEFF STOKOE/Advocate staff

Writer Richard McDonell looks over the manuscript of his soon-to-be-launched book, *The Speediest Land Traveller*.

across Western Canada.

"At the end of 50 laps, you know it. Your neck just kills you," said McDonell, who said his collar size grew by nearly two sizes during his racing days.

He competed against 16 to 32 modified car racers during his last sea-

son.

After winning the championship in Calgary, McDonell retired and sold off his modified race car.

"I think I won a few hundred dollars, a trophy and a free jacket," McDonell said of his victory. "It's an expensive hobby. Even winning that

year, I probably had a loss of \$15,000 over the season."

He didn't want to lose contact with the sport because of the remarkable people in it who put their lives on the line each time on the track.

A few years ago, the condominium reserve fund planner and father of two grown children started writing and researching his book.

"At first, I was going to record every race in Alberta, but there are too many of them — and who cares," McDonell said.

It evolved into 26 chapters, half of which centre around chronological events and the other half around people who made an exceptional contribution to the sport.

Some built and raced cars against the best on the planet. Others helped to promote the sport.

"Alberta drivers have won 34 national hot rod events," McDonell said. "That's incredible."

McDonell interviewed race car drivers who progressed to the elite Daytona 500 and Indianapolis 500 races. He travelled to Indiana to interview ex-driver Frank Weiss, formerly of Calgary, who moved to Indianapolis to race.

Weiss now runs a successful race car parts manufacturing business in Indiana.

McDonell also adds some humour, including when British race car driver Barney Oldfield came to race in Calgary in 1912.

"You can't just write about facts," he said. "You have to write about characters."

And interesting tidbits: the first Alberta auto race was in 1906.

McDonell said the book should appeal to all sorts of people, not just the racing crowd.

"The role of women has changed, smoking has changed, safety has changed — and I try to explain these things," McDonell said.