

Kelley's dream: pro auto racing

By MIKE BRUDENELL

Dick Kelley thinks he has a place in American motor sport. Ask him about his driving and you'd better be prepared to talk a few hours ... and then some.

But the Formula Ford racer, one of the Midwest's best hopes, doesn't come on like Muhammad Ali or Reggie Jackson; it's just that Kelley, a 27-year-old photojournalist, is a racing fanatic, dedicated physically, psychologically and financially to the exotic business.

And his total commitment could very easily wipe him out at the bank unless he gets a break soon.

If you want to be a racer of the winning sort, you first need reflexes of a cat, the nerve of a skydiver, and cash, or at least know where to get your hands on a roll.

Kelley has loads of cash and daring, but he'll tell you straight that he hasn't struck gold yet, either. And they hit you for about \$400 for just a set of tires, which are good for one practice session

and a race.

So where does a driver like Kelley, who has shown enough potential to run next season in the prestigious Formula Atlantic series in North America and Mexico, go from here?

"Maybe it's part of the natural selection process which eliminates drivers not good enough to compete on the national or international level," says Kelley, who grew up in Indiana but now lives in Troy.

"I know what I want to do and what I can do. I've

been described as a thinking driver," and I'll work on a problem until I've solved it.

"I want to go first-class, and I think that's the only route for a driver who thinks he can be among the best."

But who doesn't think he deserves the best? What makes Kelley any different than the hundreds of young Formula Vee, Formula Ford and stock racers all over the country who are waiting for that break which could mean sponsorship, a competitive car, and survival?

"Of course my expectations are high ... and to many people they may seem impossible to achieve and live up to," admits Kelley. "But I'm not a glory seeker in a helmet and racing suit who looks at himself in the mirror. I'm intrigued by racing as a whole ... its technical side, its promotional value to a sponsor, the consumer excitement it creates."

"I'd like to groom myself as a corporate race driver — the type of competitor who can win on the track and then take over marketing responsibilities for an individual or company that backs me. In other words, I could be a walking advertisement for someone around the country."

"Racing today isn't just putting the pedal to the floor and getting your hands greasy. You need a business brain, and I like to think I have."

There's no doubt Kelley, a regular winner at Michigan's Waterford Hills road racing track, believes in himself — "I'm not in it for the fun" — but what chance does he really have of ever cracking the barrier which now stands between him and drivers of the calibre of A.J. Foyt, Mario Andretti, Al Unser, and Richard Petty?

Is there really rhyme and reason for staring bankruptcy in the face for a fast trip around a concrete track?

Says Kelley: "It's a lot tougher at the bottom — I know; that's why I'll succeed. I've got talent ... the funds have to come."

"Win, lose, black or

white — there's no halfway mark. I'm not prepared to look back now."

Whether a driver like Kelley is lucky enough to get among the new breed of American open-wheel aces, no one can predict for sure.

The competition on the track and the search for sponsorship off it can reduce even the strongest and best driver to the point of despair.

But everyone can associate themselves with something. Howdy Holmes — Michigan's 1979 Indianapolis Rookie of the Year — once told Kelley:

"The worst situation

is to see the other side of the river and not be able to get there."

So Kelley, articulate, intense, and driven by an urge to prove he is better than the next racer, goes back to his 140 mph Formula Ford and starts replacing a damaged rear suspension.

While the racers of the Formula One circuit sip their champagne in cocktail bars across Europe and the good ol' boys of the rich NASCAR circuit down shots of bourbon, Dick Kelley rips the top of a can of pop and goes back to work.

He's got a whole lot of that.

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