

The Amazing Racer

Harli White's first sprint race ended in tragedy, but she kept pushing to recover—and to succeed. By Susan Dragoo

IT'S THE FIRST race of the evening at Lawton Speedway. The rumble of 700-horsepower V-8 engines pierces the air, and the sweet, acrid smell of methanol fuel pricks the nostrils. Spectators fill the grandstand and line the fence along the red-dirt track. A pack of cars screams by, slinging marble-sized clods of clay into the crowd.

In the pits, **Harli White** folds her tiny frame into the cage of her black-winged sprint car emblazoned with a yellow "17w"—her father's old racing number and her last initial. Harli's crew pushes the vehicle into the fire lane, where a battered Jeep Cherokee gives it a further nudge onto the track. Harli challenges

the lead cars well into the race but spins out in the fourth turn, ruining her chances for tonight's win. Shedding her racing coveralls, she helps a fellow driver prepare for the main event, making no effort to hide the scars on her arms, legs, and back. For her, they are badges of honor.

At nineteen years old and just five feet tall, the Lindsay native is a sprint car veteran from a racing family. Her father, Charlie White Jr., has raced motocross, stock cars, and modified cars for more than thirty years. Her grandfather, Charlie White Sr., was a dirt track and drag racer for more than forty.

Harli started competing in 2008 at age twelve. In April of that year, at Oklahoma City's I-44 Speedway, she was in a micro sprint car competing in her first race. She had reached fourth position when, on a turn, she skidded along the wall. The car turned over on its side and burst into flames. She was trapped, and efforts by her

father and the track crew to extricate her were unsuccessful. The situation seemed hopeless until another driver, Donnie Ray Crawford, dressed in fire-resistant clothing for the next event, reached through the flames, pulled her from the car, and lay over her, smothering the fire.

Harli was burned over half her body. After three weeks in the Shriners Hospital for Children in Galveston, Texas, and six months of physical therapy, she was released to return to a normal life—scarred but whole.

"Harli's recovery was a miracle," says her mother, Michelle White. "I have always felt there was something special about her. Her faith, hope, drive, passion, and desire to give her all in anything she does all came to play with her recovery. She never once asked, 'Why me?'"

Once her recovery was complete, Harli was determined to race again—to her parents' chagrin.

"We would tell her, 'Let's worry about getting better,'" says Michelle. "Then she overheard us talking about selling all the race car stuff. She said, 'Mom and Dad, if you don't let me race again, I am dead anyway.' I knew I had to let her."

A year after the accident, Harli was back on the track. Now in her sixth season, she is one of few women in the sport, and in 2013, the Tulsa-based Oil Capital Racing Series (OCRS) named her its champion. She has been interviewed more times than she can count, but she sees every encounter as an opportunity to share her message.

"Be okay with yourself," she says. "Don't let something bad in your life bring you down. Keep living and overcome."

She says prayer and determination were critical to her recovery and that she is okay with her scars.

"Hopefully I'll inspire others," says Harli. "People see my scars and ask what happened. I tell them my story, and they always say, 'That's so cool.'"

A return to the sport she loves helped Harli to a quick recovery, and the adrenaline rush keeps pulling her back.

"The speed is what keeps me going," she says. "The more cars you pass, the more likely you are to win."

She passed so many cars that in 2013, the OCRS, in addition to naming her its 2013 champion, presented her with its "Hardest Charger of the Year" award.

"She passed the most cars through the season," says her father, Charlie. "She had to start in twelfth because she was point leader. That's her goal: Pass cars and win."

For the always hard-charging Harli, winning seems inevitable.

Get There: Harli White will race September 7 at the West Siloam Speedway in Colcord; September 12 and October 4 at the Outlaw Motorsports Park in Oktaha; and September 13 at Longdale Speedway in Longdale. Race information is available at harliwhiteracing.net.



Harli White's story has been featured on ESPN, in *Sports Illustrated*, and in newspapers across the country.

JAMES PRATT

Curious minds...

create beauty.

Ted Conley | Fine Arts Major | 2014 | Chickasha, OK

The University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma
 Oklahoma's Only Public Liberal Arts College
 Nationally Recognized for Affordability and Quality
 Rigorous and Distinctive Interdisciplinary Core Curriculum
 Chickasha, Oklahoma | USAO.edu | (405) 224-3140

USAO | college for the curious mind

The castle at the Santa Fe Depot Museum

Visit Shawnee
 visitshawnee.com SHAWNEE OKLAHOMA!

Oklahoma's only mummy, Tutu, at the Mabey-Gerrer Museum of Art

VisitShawnee.com
 for a full fall event schedule

BOO on Bell - Hobgood Manor Ghost Tours
 A Haunting True Story!

405.275.9780 | 888.404.9633

OKLAHOMA TRAVELOK.COM CENTRAL OKLAHOMA FRONTIER COUNTRY OKTOURISM.COM