

Little Big Al

The last time Albuquerque Monthly talked with Al Unser, Jr. and his wife, Shelly, was in September 1991. Things were different then: Little Al was racing with Galles-Kraco, he'd never won an Indianapolis 500, and he had tied the Championship Auto Racing Tour/PPG record with six victories in one year. Three years later, he's racing for Marlboro/Penske, he's won Indy twice, and he's just finished the most triumphant year of his career with eight victories. We thought it was time to catch up with him again.

Q: In hindsight, it was a great career move for you to switch from Galles Racing to Marlboro Team Penske, but back then...

AL: Everything pointed to its being a good move, but it was a difficult thing to do because Rick [Galles] took me to Indy and gave me my first ride there. We were with each other for two years, then another six years. At the end of that deal, we had just grown apart professionally. What I wanted from a race team was more than he was capable of giving. He was giving his best, and he *always* gave me his best. We're still friends, the Galleses and the Unsers; our friendship never changed.

Q: What's it like being part of Marlboro Team Penske?

AL: It's great. I'm very proud to be there. Roger Penske is the first car owner that really has the same desire and the same dedication that I have as a driver. You know, he'll put his life on the line in order to win a race. I like that. I think more about my driving now. I was thinking more about car setup with the other teams. Now, the car setup is just better.

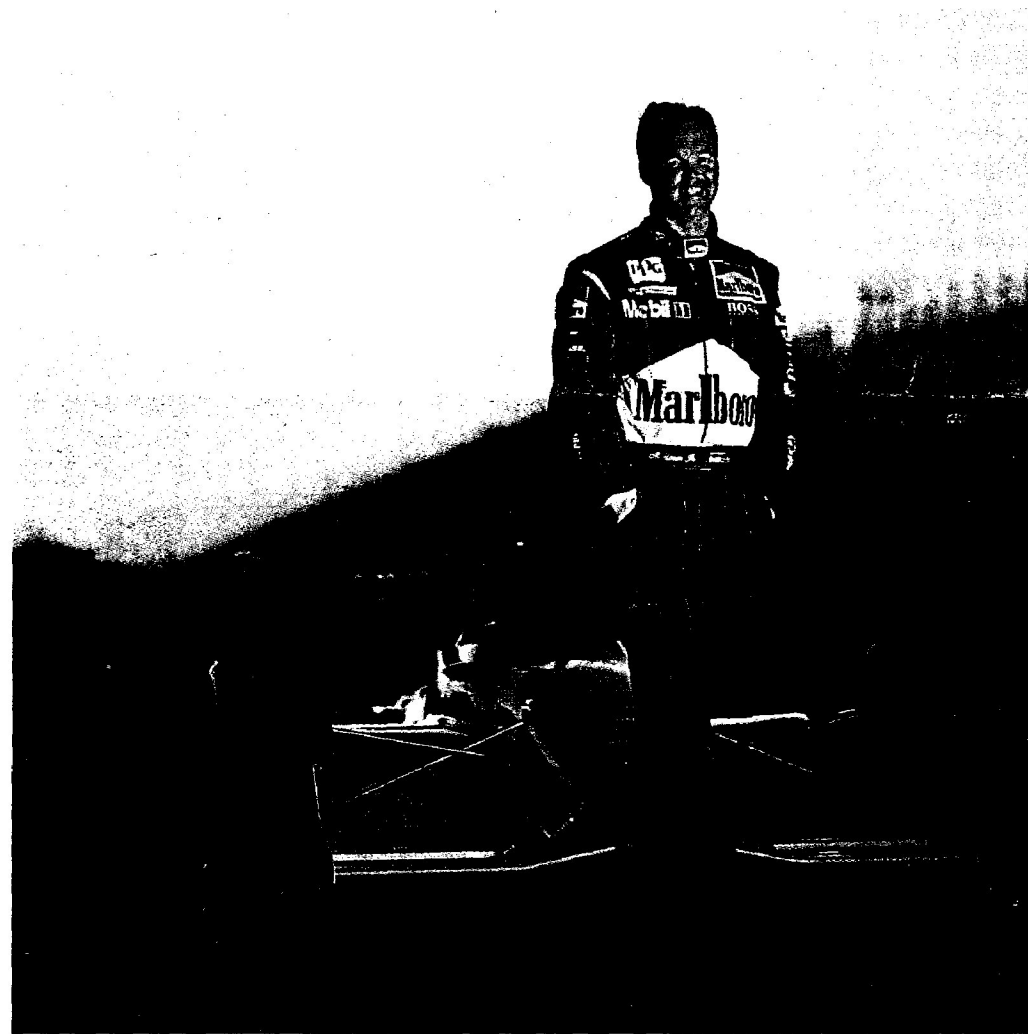
Q: I'm sure you've heard other drivers saying, "Of course the Penske team dominates. Look at the money they have. Just put me behind one of those wheels, and I'll do just as well!"

"People thought we were rich, but I was brought up in a very down-home way."

AL: I think that's fair. I mean, I made the same kind of comments—you know, "Put me in a Penske car—I'll do good!"

Q: What was it like growing up an Unser?

AL: There was nothing *bad* about being an Unser. A lot of people thought that we were rich, but we weren't. I was brought up in a very down-home way—I had to earn my own money to buy my car. The first time my dad won the Indy 500, I was eight years old, and at first I showed off. As I got older, Dad taught me



Spinning out at 210 mph is "when you're thinking, 'Man, I hope this thing stops!'"

we were nothing special. We were just people that raced, and we were like any other people. You know, my dad and uncle Bobby still live where they were raised—my uncle Bobby still lives on the property that my dad was *born* on. So it goes pretty deep.

Q: It's not a big secret that you didn't care for school. What kept you attending?

AL: My dad making me! If I didn't do well in school, he grounded me from my race car. I got my diploma, but I just couldn't see the tie-in, so school became a secondary thing for me. Later on, I found out that was a mistake. You know, *nowadays* I get 30-page contracts put in front of me, and knowing how to read them and all that is important. You know, you're *going* to pay for it some time: either you go to school even though

you don't want to, or you end up paying an *attorney* to read those 30-page contracts.

Q: How did Shelly enter the picture?

AL: I was racing sprint cars over in Phoenix. I was a senior in high school. And she was at one of the races. Afterwards, I took her out to dinner—well, breakfast, I guess, because the races get over at about midnight. It was pretty funny, because I didn't have any money, and she ended up having to pay for it!

SHELLY: My girlfriend was taking pictures at Manzanitas Speedway in Phoenix and I went with her. I was standing there and he came up and said, "Hi, my name's Al." I was never the type to do proms or anything. I had always dated older guys, and Al is two years younger than me. I kept thinking, "This isn't gonna work. He's too young." He was really persistent for a while, but then he quit calling—and I missed him! So one day I was sitting in class and

I got up, got my books, went and got part of my tuition back, got on a plane to Dallas—where he was going to be racing—landed, got in a cab, and had the driver take me to the race track. My parents thought I'd kind of lost it, but we've been together for about 14 years now.

Q: What do you most want your kids to learn from you?

AL: To try their best at whatever they want to do. They can do *anything*, and the only thing I care about is that they put their best effort towards it. Whether they win or lose, as long as they've tried their best, they've won in my book.

Q: What was the scariest accident you've ever had?

AL: One in Michigan in '84. I was lapping another car, and it spun out and just took me with it. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were running over 210 miles an hour, and we slid for a long time. *That's* when you're thinking, "Man, I hope this thing stops!"

Q: Your little Al is already racing. How do you feel about that?

AL: It scares me to death. There've been a couple of times that he spins out, and he'll be sitting there right in the middle of the race track, and I'm thinking another kid's gonna run him right over. It's almost happened a couple of times, and it just scares me to death. But *all* of my kids'll be racing here in a little bit, and as long as they use their heads, I'm all for it.

SHELLY: I don't like it! You know, the first time he raced he crashed right in front of me. But I need to figure out how to cope with this, because now the *girls* want to race! Shannon is probably the most like her dad—a daedevil.

Q: What are your goals for the future?

AL: In racing, it's just to continue to have fun and enjoy it.

SHELLY: My immediate goal for this year is the charity foundation that Al and I started.

AL: It's the Al Unser, Jr. Children's Charitable Foundation. I wanted to bring new money into the state for the kids of New Mexico. We want to help in all areas. This year we're helping the Safe House Program, which is part of All Faiths Receiving Home and helps kids who've been sexually and physically abused. But we want to eventually be able to help all of the children's hospitals, and so on. Anything to do with the kids of New Mexico, we want to get involved. If people are interested in helping, they can call our office here in town [344-7873].

SHELLY: We chose children because we both love kids. We also didn't want to limit ourselves to one group, or have it be political.

Q: What about career changes? Al, would you ever consider Formula One?

AL: I've thought about it. Sure, I'd love to do Formula 1. First, for myself—because it's a car that I haven't raced in competitively. And to win the world championship would be something the Unsers have never done—and never even *thought* of doing until me. I have the capabilities to do it.

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