

# BUCKLE UP!

## Local drag racer keeps on winning

Story by JEN CALHOUN



Martin Connelley, pictured with his wife, Michelle, races cars throughout the country.

**Y**ou'd never know it to talk to him, but Martin Connelley is kind of a big deal. By day, the Salyersville native is a friendly, hardworking delivery driver for UPS. But when he's finished with a long day, he takes off. Literally.

Connelley is known as one of the premier drag racers in the country for his class. A few months ago, he even made the April cover of "Drag Illustrated," the definitive source for drag racing news and information. Last year, the Connelley Racing Team did something few — if any — in their class of drag racing have ever done. At a February event, they raced two different cars and won both races. Later that year, they did it again. "It's almost impossible to do that," Connelley says. "It's how I got on the cover of Drag Illustrated."

### THERE'S NO 'I' IN TEAM

Interestingly enough, talking about the magazine is one of the few times that Connelley uses the word "I." And that's probably because it's his picture gracing the cover. In almost every other instance when talking about racing, Connelley uses the word "we." He always includes the hardworking team that helps make everything happen. "We won," or, "We go to a race with a target and an intention," he'll say.

"In this sport, there are drivers, tuners and crew," says Connelley, who competes in Ultra Street and NMRA Renegade events. "That's typically the way it goes. There are guys that make a living going around to racetracks and tuning cars, which is basically running the laptop and making chassis adjustments. It's a big

ordeal, actually. Everybody that sees it for the first time can't believe how much work it takes."

Connelley Racing Team includes Eric Mitchell, Dalton Winfield and Cory Brooks, all of whom live in the Lexington area. The team also gets help from Jason Waterman. And Connelley's wife, Michelle, who works at Foothills Communications, has been a driving force behind the team since the couple first started dating 20 years ago. She actually bought the silver 1990 Mustang he races.

But it's a little different today. Now, the vehicle includes a high-powered engine and transmission, as well as other high-tech components. "Our cars look similar to street cars, only ours make, like, 2,000 horsepower," Connelley says. "These things are way more complicated than

a regular car. They practically need an electrical engineer to run them, and they live and die by the laptop. Literally, you can punch a wrong button on the laptop, and you can kill the engine.”

## HOME BASE

These days, Connelley competes in events from Florida to New England and beyond. His time in the drag racing world has brought in fans from all over the country. People ask for his autograph. They want to take pictures with him. But Salyersville is home, and that’s that. “I grew up on the same farm I live on now,” he says. “I was born and raised in Eastern Kentucky, and I don’t want to live anywhere else.”

When he was around 11 or 12, he competed with go-karts on dirt tracks. When he got older, he became interested in cars. His family supported his passion, but they never took to it the way Connelley did. “But that helped, because I learned a lot on my own,” he says. “I knew how to do things other people might not know.”

He also developed a competitive streak that helped drive him. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing,” he says. “But even when I played sports in school, I didn’t want to lose. I wanted to win.” Even today, Connelley says it’s not the recognition or the size of the purse that drives him. He likes the competition. He likes the game of it all — figuring out the different pieces of the puzzle and putting them together into a single, winning combination. And he wants to win.

“To do this right, you can’t fake the effort or the ability,” he says. “I love that about it. When you come to a race, nobody here is faking this. They’re good at it, and they have to be. In other things, people can say, ‘Oh, it’s too hard. I’m tired. I quit.’ I don’t get that.”

But he also knows what he does might not be for everybody. Racing cars is intense, in and out of the driver’s seat. “It’s a big ordeal to do this,” Connelley says. “It’s a dumb adventure, really. But when I’m old and sitting around, I’ll have some good stories to tell.” 📱



In Connelley’s workshop, he and his team spend hours working on cars and fine tuning them.

Photography by John Michael Laney/Images by John Michael



Martin’s wife, Michelle, bought the 1990 silver Mustang Connelley races.

# FOLLOW THAT CAR!

To find out more about Martin Connelley and the team, follow Connelley Racing on Facebook. Racing information, photos, videos and stories are updated often. To get a feel for the strong connections made in the racing community, visit the Facebook page for Krusty’s Race. The page is dedicated to Brent “Krusty” Ramsey, a friend of Connelley’s who is fighting stage 4 colon cancer.