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## Racing through the years

By [Tara Sullivan](#)

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Clad in school bus yellow polo shirts, complete with racing-checker trim and an embroidered red racecar on the breast, the three Pylant brothers make weekly trips from their Crosby and Houston homes to Tomball for the Nifty 50's auto show.

Their midnight blue El Camino turns more than a few heads, though the Pylant brothers - Kenny, Donny and Ronny - just grin and wait to turn a corner.

Once a parking space is had, eager eyes zoom past the striking El Camino to its bed-cover. Fastened there, a metallic-red, quarter midget racer, noted with a yellow number five stands unassumingly. Though a fraction of the size of the other show cars, it doesn't take long for "The Racer" to draw in a crowd.

Little flecks of ruby and crimson twinkle in The Racer's paint as the Texas sun begins to wane. By nightfall, the brothers have regaled the legendary tale of the tiny "number five" dozens of times, though they never tire of sharing their story.

Packing in more than five decades of races, wrecks and ingenuity, The Racer has withstood the tests of time.

It was when Kenny was 7, and twins Donny and Ronny were 3, that their father Kenneth E. Pylant gave life to The Racer.

A devout father, husband and craftsman, Kenneth drew upon the popularity of Midget Racers that fluttered through the post-war 1950's era.

Less than a decade prior, Kenneth had returned home from service as a U.S. Army infantryman, married and started a family of his own. He was a painter by trade who worked on ships, houses and even milk trucks for Borden.

Full of spirit and ingenuity, Kenneth decided to build his boys a child-size midget racer, technically classified as a quarter-midget racer.

A midget racer is a tiny racecar that packs in the power. American racecar driver Roger Ward, who won the Indianapolis 500 in 1959 and 1962, is known for beating expensive sports racers in his own midget racer. The midget racer first entered the commercial arena in the late 1930's and gained in popularity following World War II, when boys and men everywhere obsessed over speed.

When Kenneth began his racer endeavor, there were no go-cart stores or build guides. He conceptualized The Racer on his own and began collecting old car parts in his spare time. Bondo hadn't hit the commercial market quite yet, so with all-leaded seems, Kenneth pieced together the tiny racer.

Fender extensions from a 1948 Chevy fender and 1948 Oldsmobile fender forged The Racer's front and rear frame. A 1939 Buick headlight bucket, fastened atop the rear, formed a headrest. The Racer's tiny hood was taken from a 1948 Buick; complete still with the hood ornament, and its grill was salvaged from a 1940 Cadillac LaSalle.

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Internally, a system of pulleys, belts and rods were assembled by hand, Kenneth's imagination serving as the only assembly guide. A 3-hp washing machine motor (washing machines used to be gas-powered) formed The Racer's beating heart.

Kenneth painted the entire construction bright red with yellow interior and detail. Fake exhaust pipes were fastened to The Racer's side, assembled from kitchen sink drainpipes.

Finally, a number five was painted on The Racer's rear, symbolic of the five-member Pylant clan. Three eager young boys welcomed The Racer into the world in 1952. They saw nothing but speed and freedom in the reflections cast by the little red racer's shiny paint.

Though other boys in their east Houston neighborhood had go carts, none were quite like The Racer.

Capable of thrusting up to 30 mph, the boys had their fair share of spills and wrecks. Kenny remembers running into the school building, Donny flipped and Ronny hit a tree so hard that a scar on his brow still survives. For the most part, the boys kept The Racer antics secret from their mother, though a family gathering revealed some of their mischief when Kenny accidentally ran over his uncle.

"I remember looking right underneath me and there was my uncle," Kenny laughed. Fortunately, the boys' uncle was unharmed, though their mother was far from pleased.

Kenneth soon built a special trailer for The Racer and brought Kenny along while painting houses. When Kenneth was working, Kenny would cruise the neighborhood in The Racer selling sodas out of the back.

"People would buy a coke just to get a look at The Racer," Kenny said.

As the Pylant boys aged, they outgrew The Racer, which has only room enough for a skinny 9-year-old.

But through 50 years of growing and moving, The Racer was never lost.

A decade after Kenneth's 1993 passing, Donny found himself reminiscing about The Racer's heyday.

"We played an old Christmas video from 1990 and for one reason or another, my dad was just going on about The Racer," Donny said. "An overwhelming feeling came over me that we needed to do something."

At the time, The Racer was sitting in a shed, rusting. Thanks to Kenneth's handy work, no holes had yet formed through the sturdy, metal body. Donny decided that it was only right that Kenneth's craftsmanship be restored. He called on his brothers, and before he knew what hit him, 50-years of rust had been sandblasted from The Racer.

"That sealed the deal," Donny said.

In May of 2004, the Pylant brothers officially began their restoration project. It took them six months to get The Racer back in working order, but they said it was as much a memorial experience as it was hard work.

"After restoring it, when you see how much time it takes, we came away with a new appreciation for what our dad and mom had done for us," Kenny said with a twinkle in his eyes. "While we were restoring The Racer we talked about all the things we did with our dad, all the fishing trips, racing, hot rods."

Lighting up at the thought, the brothers recalled their first cars, which they had all worked on with their father's help. The Racer was given a new lease on life in November of 2004, though the Pylant brothers decided to take one extra precaution.

The fixed The Racer so that it couldn't travel beyond an idol.

"We didn't want the grandkids to do with it what we did," Kenny laughed.

To date, three of their 11 grandchildren have graced The Racer's seat. The little red car has seen about 20 different shows since the restoration and has been featured in various magazines, including "Cruisin' Times," "Journey with Olds," "Hemmings," "Popular Mechanics," "Wheels and Keels," and "Classy Chassis."

Though Kenneth never got to see The Racer restoration, the Pylant boys feel he's been with them in spirit.

"He was a creative, artistic, patient man and we honor his memory with The Racer," Kenny said. "He didn't get to see the restoration, but we think he'd be proud."

Looking from The Racer to the evening sky, Donny took a deep breath.

"Well, maybe he did get to see."

Hoping that The Racer will never be lost again, the Pylant brothers hope to one day retire The Racer to a museum, where Kenneth's memory can carry on.

For now, The Racer makes appearances at Baytown's Annual Hot Rod Rally and many other local shows, but is best known for weekly appearances at the weekly "Nifty 50's" classic car show. The show is held every Saturday from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. in the parking lot of the Kroger Signature store located on the corner of Spring Cypress and Champion Forest roads in Tomball.

To the brothers' delight, The Racer weathered Hurricane Ike "without a scratch."

For more information on The Racer, email Ken Pylant at [kpylant\(at\)r-t-i.com](mailto:kpylant@r-t-i.com).

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