

Vic Skirmants

Most anyone who has played with 356s for any period of time will be familiar with Vic Skirmants and his wife, Barbara. Vic has been wrenching on and racing 356s for more than 40 years. Along the way, he earned a G Production SCCA National Championship and was listed alongside such notable drivers as Derek Bell, Bob Wollek, and Jim Busby in the Porsche Cup standings (and on factory posters) throughout the 1980s.

Born Viktors Kaupusz, the son of Latvian parents who were separated by the war, Vic entered the world shortly after his mother fled Latvia for Germany. His father stayed behind to fight the Russians. For five years, he and his mother lived in a displacement camp — dire circumstances for the young single mother and child. In 1950, the man who would become Vic's stepfather sponsored their immigration to the United States. Vic's mother remarried, assumed Mr. Skirmants' name, and settled in Illinois. Vic's father, presumed dead, would not resurface for many years. He passed away in Latvia in 1967, having never met his son.

If you ask Vic about his history, you'll find he is more likely to gravitate towards the hundreds of engines and gearboxes he's built for customers than his personal racing accomplishments. We caught up with him at Laguna Seca, and did our best to pin him down on his racing as well as his wrenching.

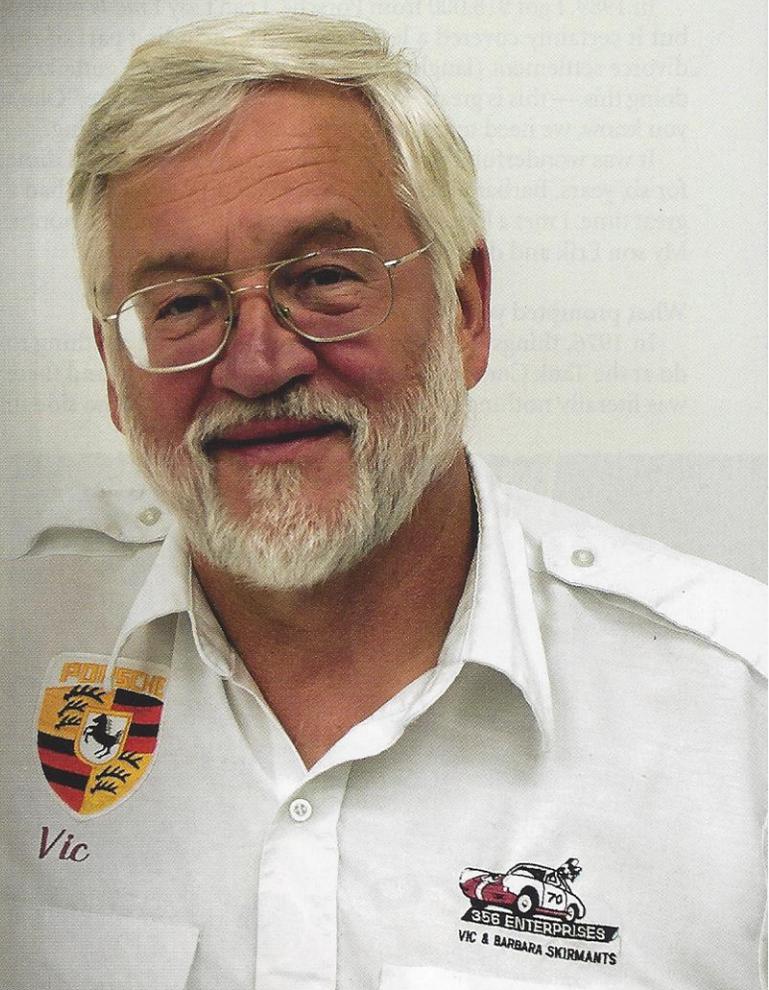


PHOTO DAVID CONKLIN

When did you become interested in cars?

I didn't really discover cars until I was about 15. I was into model airplanes and stuff like that. I discovered cars [during] high school, where I would [read] *Hot Rod* magazine like everybody else. I finally picked up a copy of the December 1961 *Sports Car Graphic*. That was it. I discovered sports cars and that was the end of hot rods and interest in drag cars or any of that stuff.

How did you end up in Michigan?

I moved to Michigan in 1962 to go to General Motors Institute. I co-op'd out of Pontiac Engineering and, after about three years, I had enough of GM. And I think GM had enough of me. I went off to Wayne State to finish my education and went to work for the U.S. Army Tank Automotive Command in Warren, Michigan.

What hooked you on Porsches?

That magazine [SCG] happened to have an article on the Porsche Spyder, which I thought was pretty interesting. Porsche was a very rare bird in the Chicago/Cicero area, so I bought an MGA in May 1962 when I was 17. At GMI the following year, an instructor had a little '58 Porsche coupe for sale, so I bought that. I bor-

rowed some money from my mother and paid her back when I sold the MGA. From that point on, it was like, "That's all there is." I remember getting in that Porsche, closing the door, and it felt like I just climbed into a bank vault compared to the MGA. It (was) a completely different world.

How did you go from reading about sports cars to racing them?

In 1964, I bought a \$590 Speedster locally. I did a couple things to it and, with Waterford Hills only 35 miles away, I could drive it to the track. I went to driver's school in 1965, ran a couple races, and of course wrecked the car and then didn't get it back out until 1966. I've been racing every year since 1965. The Speedster eventually went from driving it to the track, to having a tow bar and towing it to the track so I could get over to Canada to Harewood, where they accepted Waterford licenses... I just kind of kept improving and improving, just moving on up in the world.

Tell me about your success in the Porsche Cup.

Porsche Cup North America was active 1985 through 1989. In '89, we were second only to John Andretti. That is only because they threw an extra race in for John. Otherwise, they would have

to stick a 356 on the poster. I got a free trip to Germany each year. In 1990, they didn't have the Porsche Cup North America. We amateurs could still earn points for that in 1990 and even after. They took the top 20 (to Germany), and we were 14th that year.

In 1989, I got \$18,000 from Porsche. I can't say I *made* money, but it certainly covered a lot of expenses, including part of my divorce settlement (laughs). In 1990, it was like, "We gotta keep doing this — this is great!" We did, but after that it was like, "Okay, you know, we need to cut back a little bit, do our own thing."

It was wonderful. I went over to Germany on Porsche's dime for six years. Barbara joined me in 1989 and 1990, and we had a great time. I met a lot of wonderful people. It was quite an honor. My son Erik and daughter Mara also made the trip.

What prompted you to start a Porsche business?

In 1976, things were really boring. There wasn't anything to do at the Tank Command. Vietnam had wound down and there was literally nothing to do. I was doing Porsches on the side in

early '80s. Porsche had all kinds of gears for their cars. That is one reason they were so successful. [I had] my own gears made, copying the factory gears (that) weren't available anymore, and it has moved on from there. Two to three years ago, the number of transmissions built finally exceeded my number of engines built.

So how many have you built?

Well, I can tell you exactly because, years ago, I finally decided, being the meticulous engineering type that I am, to go back through my records and try to figure out as best as I could.

Engines: currently 680, (with) five this year. Transmissions: 715, (with) 13 this year and 15 more waiting. That is one reason I turn down street engines unless it is an old customer or a special case or somebody says, "Nobody can figure out what is wrong with my engine. I have been to ten different shops." Then I am like, "Okay, if they can't figure it out, I look at it as a challenge. Bring it on."

Barbara seems to be a big part of your business...

My first wife left me in 1988. I met Barbara a couple months later at Mid-Ohio at a vintage race. I wasn't vintage racing at the time, but on the way to a National race I stopped in to hand out some Xerox catalogs, parts I had for sale and all that. She knew who I was from SCCA stuff. I was renting a car to a friend of mine, so she was impressed that I was keeping two cars running when everybody she knew with British cars couldn't keep one car running.

She started keeping an eye on me clandestinely (but) never made a move until I met her at the vintage races and indicated I was on my way to a divorce and "Ah Ha!" So we got to know each other. We are absolute siblings under the skin. She has been a gearhead longer than I have, pretty much, and she is a big factor in my business. Without her help with shipping and all that stuff, I couldn't get one fourth done that I get done.

How has your racing career changed?

I was really absorbed in the racing thing and that was all — I was living for the next race. Now it is like, "I need to get some customer training done. I will try to get my race car ready in time."

There was always the challenge of getting a car as good as I could for the next race with the limited funds I was working with. I would run tires way beyond what other people would because I didn't have the money to buy new tires. Things have changed now. Barbara is always asking, "Don't you want new tires for the next race?" I will say, "No, they are good for one more weekend." Then Barbara says, "We don't go to the races to lose!"

The thing is, I help my customers to the point where we go to races to finish second to my customers sometimes. They know they are getting a good product when I can't beat them. We go down the straight at the same speeds. They stay in front, and it turns out better for me. They know I am not keeping the best for myself. Everyone receives the same stuff.

Any big plans for the next couple of years?

At this point, I'm satisfied with what I have. I don't have the money to try to build a 911 and develop it. I like what I am doing and [my] aspirations [are] just to stay vertical and stay healthy. I don't have any plans to retire, because I don't know what I would do. I just hope to stay healthy enough to keep doing what I have been doing and buy the occasional project 356, fix it up a little bit, sell it for a few extra bucks, put some money in the bank, and that is about it. I am a very simple person." ■

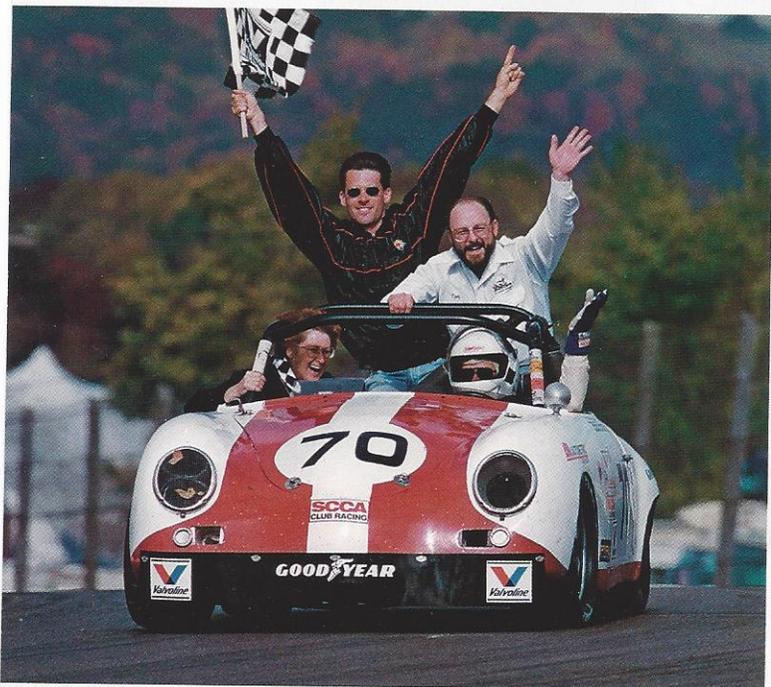


PHOTO GORDON L. JOLLY

Skirmants wins the 1994 SCCA Runoffs at Mid-Ohio in his 356.

the evening and I decided to try it full-time. I just took anything that came in the door, and that included rust repair and putting floors in these cars — back when they weren't worth much. It kind of grew and grew from there. Of course, that gave me the freedom to start running SCCA Nationals and all that without having to ask the boss for time off to get to a race. It has just grown from there. I have customers literally all over the world now.

You're known for 356 gearboxes. Would you say it's your specialty?

It has turned into that. I also do race engines. I developed my own style of race cylinder head, and a lot of very successful people use them. It's something I basically developed on my own because I wasn't that crazy about other people's work. I have a flow bench and used to have a dyno. I learned what I needed to learn and unlearned some myths we had been using that didn't really work. For transmissions...we had special gears made back in the