

# JEMMA DENDY

By Rob Griffin



Ever since Jemma Dendy made her debut in Spedeworth's popular 2Litre Hot Rod formula three years ago, she has kept a meticulous record of her achievements behind the wheel. "I've got an album in which I put every scrutineering pass and pictures from all of my meetings," she admits. "You only live once and I certainly want to keep these memories for my grandchildren!"

So far the pages chart a rise to superstar grade, plenty of heat and final victories, a best newcomer award and even a nasty crash at Ipswich which resulted in a fractured foot and substantial damage to her usually immaculate Vauxhall Nova. It already makes impressive reading - particularly when you consider she had no racing experience before joining the 2Litre ranks - and it would be a brave person who bets against the 23-year-old bagging some major titles over the coming years. As is so often the case, Jemma's love of Hot Rods can be traced back to her childhood when her father Derek - who used to race against the likes of George Polley and Barry Lee in the 1970s - took her to watch at the now defunct Aldershot Stadium.

However, it wasn't until they started going regularly to Wimbledon five years ago, that the Dendy clan decided the time was ripe for a return to the short circuits and began the search for a suitable car.

"I absolutely loved Hot Rods from the minute we started watching again and didn't want to do any other formula," says Jemma. "I hadn't raced anything else before in my life - in fact the only experience I'd had was two sessions in a Go-Kart!" Fortunately, Sean O'Leary's race-winning Nova, which had been built and raced by respected fabricator Tim Barnes, came up for sale around the same time. A deal was quickly agreed and the car, which was powered by a Dave Longhurst engine, was soon on its way to the Dendy team's Surrey base.

Three months of practice sessions around the likes of Arena Essex followed before the car made its debut at Ipswich, resplendent in the red and blue colours - and race number 57 - that her dad used 30 years ago.

"I started at the very back so I could get a feel for what it was actually like to be on the track with other cars and had the chance to follow the more experienced drivers around," explains Jemma. "I was obviously a bit nervous, but my first race was absolutely fine."

Buoyed by the experience, she started racing more regularly and, in September 2003, recorded her first heat victory from the white grade at Bovingdon.

"That win was absolutely fantastic and I was totally lost for words when I crossed the line," she recalls. "My dad had told me to keep looking straight ahead and to do my best, so I was trying not to look in my mirror."

Further victories followed until the aforementioned smash at Ipswich in April 2004 put her racing ambitions on hold. "Someone's engine blew up, I skidded on the oil and went straight into the fence," she recalls. "I fractured my foot so couldn't race and it also took quite a long time to repair the car."

By the time the 57 machine re-emerged in the late summer, Jemma was hungry to make up for lost time and scored a string of victories from the front of the grid, having dropped back to white

grade as a result of her enforced absence.

This impressive run of form also saw her rocket up the grades straight to Superstar, which meant lining up alongside legendary names in the sport such as Mark Paffey and Kevin Randell. Not bad work for a relative novice!

"At least I can always say that I've been a superstar," laughs Jemma. "To be fair, it's probably easier starting at the back because you've got nothing behind you and it's just a case of chasing the cars in front. I really enjoyed being there because it was a chance to mix with the more experienced drivers and I picked up so many tips." After spending most of 2005 in the blue grade, the latest points chart shows Jemma comfortably among the red tops, which is no mean feat given the years of experience that many of her rivals have clocked up on the ovals.

"I'm in the red grade and do okay, but I've still got loads to learn," she admits modestly. "You can never know too much about racing and practice makes perfect. The more you do something, the more things you pick up and the better you become."

The key to success, she believes, is being totally focussed.

"It's a very competitive formula and you've got to be on the ball from the minute you get into the car," she says. "You've got to have controlled aggression and be ready to seize on any mistakes to dive up the inside, but without going past the red mist stage and damaging both yourself and someone else."

Jemma is quick to heap praise on dad Derek who, she points out, not only built her current engine - the original Longhurst unit is now used as a spare - but spends every evening during the season working on the car. Considering the team averages 35 meetings-a-year, this is quite a relentless pace.

Other key members of the JD Racing team are

mum Sue and sisters Hattie and Lottie. Jemma is also grateful for the support she has received from her friends, as well as RJH Panels, Redline Racing Developments, Demon Tweaks and Tim Barnes.

Of all the tracks she has raced at, Arlington Stadium in Eastbourne remains her favourite venue - "I love it down there and on a sunny Wednesday evening it's really nice" - while Ipswich has also been a happy hunting ground over the past year. Away from racing, Jemma's other passions are her horse, Mac, who she has owned for 10 years, and her dog, Gucci, a German Pointer. Most of her free time, however, is swallowed up by her Hot Rod commitments. Not that she's complaining.

"My whole racing career has been great and I love the adrenaline rush of racing with all the speed, excitement and getting knocked about," she says. "Unless you've done it yourself, you just don't know what it's like."

While admitting that she'd relish a go in the Superstox if the chance ever arose, Jemma insists she is perfectly happy to remain in the 2Litres for the time being and can't think of any ways to improve the racing.

"It's a very up and coming formula," she says. "As well as a lot of established drivers, such as Jason Wilks and Lee Pepper, there are also a lot of new people coming in, some of whom have used Stock Rods and Stock Cars as stepping stones." Looking ahead, Jemma is once again putting her faith in her trusty Nova for the 2006 season - which will be its sixth year of competitive racing - and is determined to create more memories for the scrapbook.

"I absolutely love racing and just want to do the best I can," she says. "Of course, everyone will say they want to win the World Final, but if I could get a top three position in any championship, then that would make my year!"

Jemma with the chequered flag at Ipswich CB

