



## RIP, Craig Breedlove

American five-time World Record setter Norman Craig Breedlove Sr, 86, the first person to surpass speed marks faster than 400, 500 and 600 miles per hour, died peacefully in his sleep surrounded by family Tuesday, April 4, 2023 in Rio Vista, California.

"He was an American treasure," said wife Yadira Breedlove. "Our hearts are heavy letting him go, but we also acknowledge Craig's courage and bravery seeking motorsports honors for the United States of America. For decades, his deeds touched many, many people around the world."

Son Norman credits his father with demonstrating how to shepherd dreams forward. "What I admired most about dad was his tenaciousness," he said. "He simply would not accept rejection and repeatedly went back to people and companies until he got a 'yes'." Equally important was his father's exceptionally high quality of workmanship. "He built things as if they were pieces of art," recalled Breedlove junior. "He taught me to always 'give it my best,' reminding me that 'if you are going to build it, build it to last'."

Breedlove's humble hunt for speed began in his teens, spending four years rebuilding a junked three-window '34 Ford Coupe. In 1955, at age 18 and without any fanfare, he collected his first time slip on the Bonneville Salt Flats at 152.80 mph in Class Coupe and Sedan.

Inspired deeply by the line from JFK's 1961 Inauguration Speech "Ask what you can do for your country," Breedlove put the words into jet-powered action reclaiming world honors for the USA on August 5, 1963, with a 407 mph mark. Dethroning Britain's John Cobb, it was the first time an American's name was on top since 1928, when Ray Keech posted a 207.552 mph record driving his *White Triplex*. "It was the most patriotic thing I could think of," Breedlove often recalled. "I wanted a name every American could be proud of, and *Spirit of America* seemed like a natural."

This ushered in years of record-setting swaps with brothers Art Arfons, Tom Green and Walt Arfons driving their *Green Monster* jet cars. "Their rivalry made each other," offered Tim Arfons, son of Breedlove's long-time rival Art Arfons. "Without each other, I think they might have ended up a historical footnote instead of splashing the front pages of newspapers worldwide."

Breedlove's astonishing accomplishments inspired The Beach Boys to include the song "Spirit of America" as a tribute to him on their 1963 *Little Deuce Coupe* album. All Breedlove's jet-powered cars carried the *Spirit of America* name through his 60-year racing career.

*Blue Flame* rocket car driver Gary Gabelich ended Breedlove's hold on the absolute World Record when he clocked a 622 mph record in 1970, but it did nothing to weaken their bond. In his 1971 book, *Spirit of America, Winning the World's Land Speed Record*, Breedlove inscribed: "To Gary, With my admiration and sincere gratitude for your friendship and help. Always."

Breedlove has been voted into Motorsports Hall of Fame of America (1993), Dry Lakes Racing Hall of Fame (1995), International Motorsports Hall of Fame (2000) and Automotive Hall of Fame (2009). He earned life membership in the Bonneville 200 MPH Club in 1963. ■

—"*LandSpeed*" Louise Ann Noeth

