

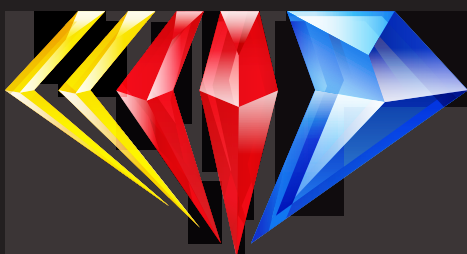


# **NASCAR**

## 75 YEARS

**KELLY CRANDALL | JIMMY CREED | MIKE HEMBREE | AL PEARCE**









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## 75 YEARS

KELLY CRANDALL / JIMMY CREED / MIKE HEMBREE / AL PEARCE





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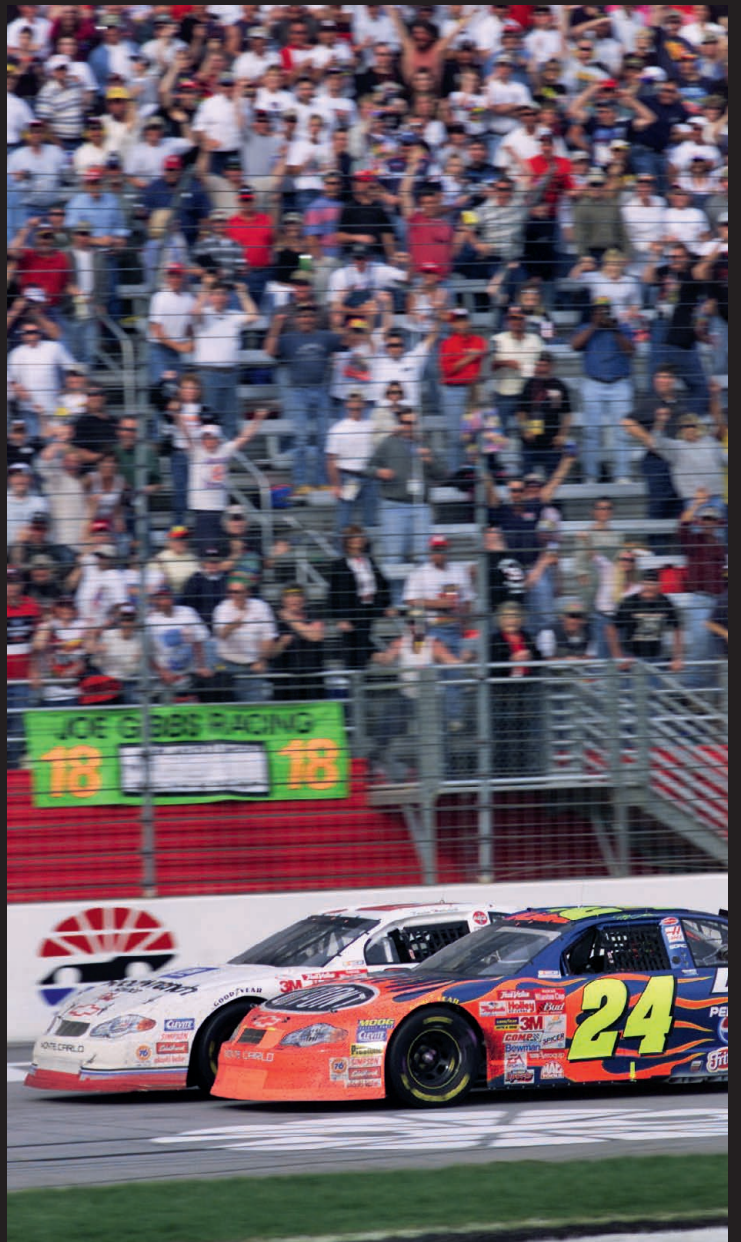
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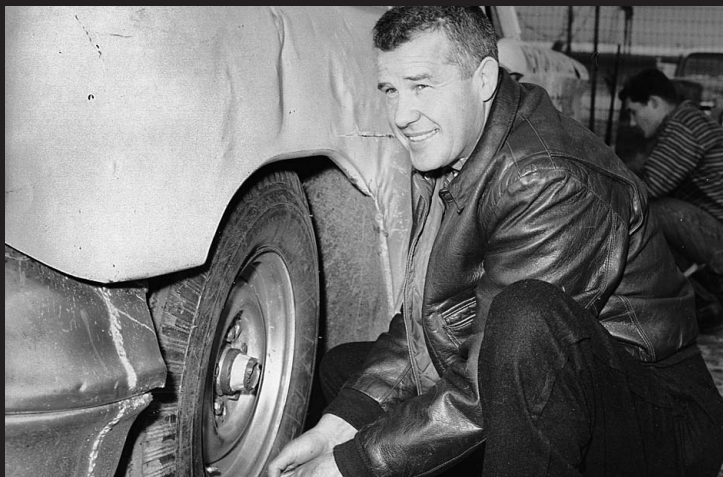
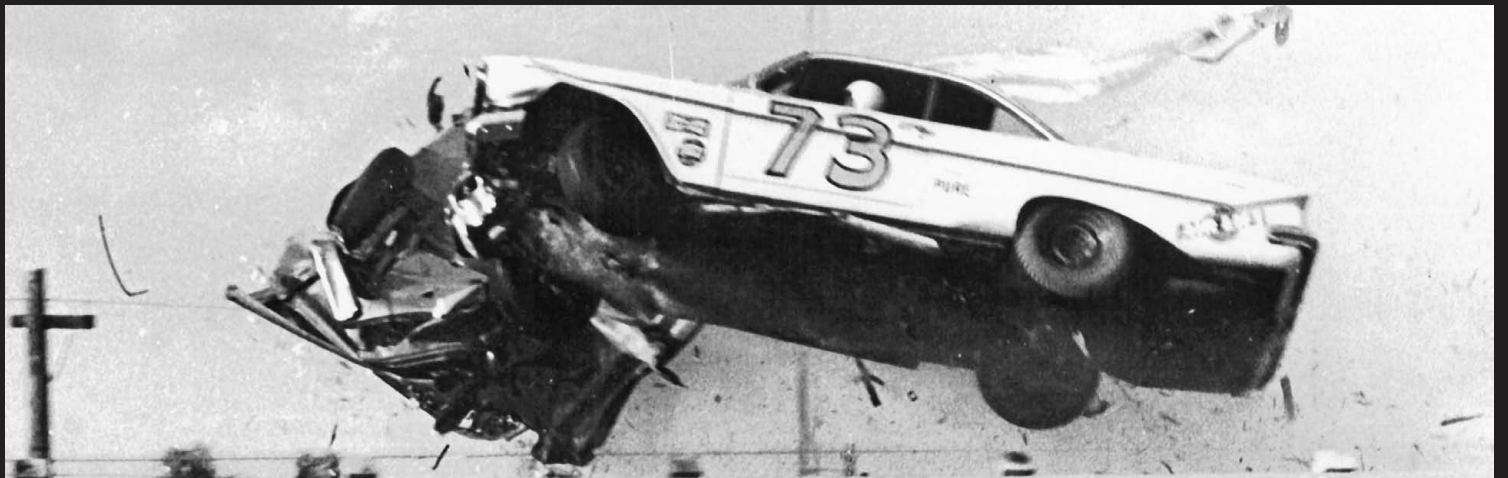
  

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Gober Sosebee (50) in a 1949 Oldsmobile and Woodrow Wilson (12) in a 1949 Mercury lead the pack in a race run on the Daytona Beach & Road Course on July 10, 1949. It was the second race sponsored by the newly created stock car governing organization the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, or, as it is better known, NASCAR.

Chapter 1

# THE 1940s AND 1950s

Hot Wheels and Dirt Tracks

By Mike Hembree



**THE KID'S NAME** was Richard Petty.

The date was June 19, 1949, and he was eleven years old. He wandered the grandstands at Charlotte Speedway with the curiosity one might expect of an eleven-year-old. And then some.

On the racetrack below, his father, Lee, was helping to pioneer a form of auto racing that the Petty family—in particular, that his kid, Richard—would come to dominate in the decades ahead. Over time, Richard's piano-key smile would spread across the continent.

Richard had ridden to the race—a 200-lap, 150-mile event on the three-quarter-mile dirt surface of the pock-marked track—with Lee and Maurice, Richard's brother. Lee, a thirty-five-year-old truck driver who had worked numerous jobs (including occasional transportation of illegal moonshine), was sailing around the dirt track like a madman, his 1948 Buick Roadmaster bouncing over the holes and banging into cars driven by others.

"I remember getting in the car and riding to Charlotte," Richard Petty said, more than seventy years later. "Daddy pulled it up to a Texaco station and put it up on the rack and changed the oil and greased it up, checked the air in the tires and took the muffler off."

It was ready to race.

No one—the father, the son, or the brother—could imagine on that day that all three of them eventually would wind up in the NASCAR Hall of Fame. In fact, none of them could imagine that there would be a NASCAR a year down the road.

It wasn't a grand start for Lee Petty. His tank of a race car broke a panhard bar and crashed hard. He finished seventeenth.

Richard doesn't remember much about the race, but he remembers his dad driving a flatbed truck from the Petty home in Randleman, North Carolina,

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Three of the four cars that took part in one of the earliest drag races on the beach in January 1905. E. R. Thomas (6) and William K. Vanderbilt (1), both driving Mercedes, were challenged by Arthur MacDonald in a No. 5 Napier and Louis Ross in a Stanley Steamer (not pictured). Ross and the Stanley Steamer easily defeated the other trio of challengers.





to Charlotte the next day to haul the remains of the Buick to central North Carolina. "I don't know how Daddy explained it to the guys who owned the car," Richard said. Lee had "borrowed" the car to run the race—an audacious idea, but one no more audacious than the race itself.

Lee had driven the Buick from Randleman to the race site. With the car badly damaged, the family had to hitch a ride home with Lee's brother, Julian, for a reunion with Lee's wife, Elizabeth, who would have questions about the whole affair.

But Lee was not discouraged—the opposite, actually.

"The race paid \$1,500 to win," Richard said. "That got Daddy's attention. He said, 'Hmmm.' He got home and told my mother, 'We could do this stuff.'"

A few days later, Lee, who had driven in some other races but none with the new-car smell, paid \$990 for a 1949 Plymouth and eyed the rest of the schedule of NASCAR's first Cup (then Strictly Stock) season. "And that," Richard Petty said, "was the beginning of Petty Enterprises."

Lee, who set up his racing shop in an old reaper shed on the family property, drove six of the remaining seven races on the schedule, finishing second at Martinsville, Virginia, and North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, and winning at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Lee had found a way to put bread and meat on the family table, and William Henry Getty "Bill" France, the dreamer and schemer who had imagined that first race and what might follow, had discovered gold.

That crazy, dusty, dirty day on a beaten-up track surrounded by weather-worn wood fencing marked the first real mile in a journey that ultimately would revolutionize the still-young world of auto racing and make Bill France the king of a rising sun.



**Spectators assist Frank Lockhart after he flipped his Stutz Blackhawk end over end into the surf while attempting a world land speed record run on Daytona Beach in February 1928. Quick action by the spectators saved Lockhart from drowning, and the only injury he suffered was a laceration on his hand. On Lockhart's next attempt, he crashed once again and lost his life.**

**Bill France Sr. with the Ford coupe he drove to a fifth-place finish in the 1936 Beach Road Race in Daytona Beach, Florida. France and other drivers raced along a course that combined the beachfront and a parallel paved stretch of Highway A1A, which was a two-lane road at the time. France qualified eighteenth with a speed of 63.02 mph.**



## A SUCCESSFUL OPENING

NASCAR, Bill France's fledgling racing organization, had been founded in December 1947 in Daytona Beach, Florida, but the Charlotte race in the closing year of the 1940s was its real birth. NASCAR had sanctioned Modified races—for modified prewar coupes that had seen better days—in 1948 and had other forms of motorsports in mind, but France's compass was centered on the idea of racing cars straight off the showroom floor. This, he said, would attract people because the cars they drove every day on country roads and highways would be thrown into close-contact competition while being driven by legitimate American daredevils.

The first Charlotte race would be the initial barometer of the concept. By any measure, it was a roaring success. Traffic backed up for miles around the tiny speedway, located near the present-day Charlotte airport. There are no reliable attendance figures from that long-ago afternoon. Estimates went as high as 20,000, but the time and place make it more likely that the crowd was between 10,000 and 15,000.

Several cars were destroyed during the race as the drivers tried to avoid bumps and holes and each other. At least seven cars were sidelined because of overheating. There were multiple crashes.

Glenn Dunaway finished first, but his car was disqualified by NASCAR officials because the rear end had been strengthened with powerful springs—not specifically to improve its racing posture but because it was a moonshine delivery vehicle in a former life. Dunaway's team challenged the decision in court, but NASCAR won the day, setting an important precedent—France could make and enforce his organization's rules.

Jim Roper, a Kansan who had learned about the race in a newspaper comic strip, finished second but was declared the winner. He had driven to Charlotte from Kansas in the 1949 Lincoln that won the race. He never won again; in fact, he raced only one other time in NASCAR before turning his attention to his horse farm.

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**Palm Beach millionaire and sportsman John Rutherford prefers the inside line as he leads a pack through the north turn in the No. 29 supercharged Auburn during the 1936 Beach Road Race staged in Daytona Beach, Florida.**





The real winner on that June day was France.

A giant of a man, at well over 6 feet tall, France had relocated to Daytona Beach in 1934, moving south from Washington, D.C. A mechanic of sorts and a lover of fast cars, he immediately became interested in the timed speed runs and later the races taking place on the hard-packed oceanfront sand of Daytona Beach and nearby Ormond Beach.

Racing began on the Florida east coast in the early years of the twentieth century, as a collection of mostly rich adventurers hauled speed machines to the sandy shores of Ormond Beach and ran against the clock. They registered some crazily fast speeds—in the 300-mph range—and ran along the beach into the 1930s, when residential and commercial development made such activity increasingly difficult. The speed demons moved their fun to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah.

That left Daytona Beach without an annual speed carnival, and city leaders filled the void in 1936 by sponsoring a stock car race on a patched-together course combining the beachfront and a parallel paved stretch of Highway A1A. Drivers raced along the sand, then had to make a hard left turn onto A1A—at the time a two-lane road—before returning to the beach part of the course.

Although spectacular in its own way, the event lost money, and after a second try in 1937 the city moved on to other tourism-related ideas. France competed in the 1936 race, finishing fifth, and was convinced that racing along the beach had a future. He promoted a similar race in 1938 and, showing his talent for bringing in sponsors, awarded drivers with bottles of rum, boxes of cigars, and cases of motor oil.

France's first beach race was generally considered a success, and it gave him enough encouragement to push forward. Slowly but surely, he was moving from driving race cars to driving a sport. He had found his niche.



**ABOVE: The site where it all began: the Streamline Hotel in Daytona Beach. Preliminary meetings for the formation of NASCAR were held here in December 1947, with many of the negotiations for the formation of a national stock car racing governing body taking place on the rooftop of the Ebony Bar. After this meeting of drivers, promoters, track operators, and other racing stakeholders, NASCAR was incorporated the following year.**

**ABOVE LEFT: A group shot of the principals who gathered at the Streamline Hotel at the invitation of Bill France Sr. to discuss the formation of a national stock car racing organization in December 1947. Among the group were Louis "Red" Vogt, an Atlanta garage owner and racing mechanic; Joe Littlejohn, a driver and promoter from Spartanburg, South Carolina; Bill Tuthill, a promoter from New Rochelle, New York; and drivers such as Robert "Red" Byron and Marshall Teague.**



**Lakewood Speedway was originally a 1-mile horse racing track built around the lake located at the Lakewood Fairgrounds just south of Atlanta. The first automobile races were held there in late 1917, and the track went on to become known as “the Indianapolis of the South” because it held an annual race of Indy cars.**

## DUST AND DIRT

A garrulous sort who tended to dominate any room he entered, France became fast friends with many of the drivers and hangers-on who converged on Daytona Beach for the beachfront races, giving him a foundation to expand his concept of motorsports competition to other venues.

Particularly across other Southern states, a raw form of stock car racing was being developed as men—and the occasional woman—toyed with their street cars and turned them into fast jalopies. They challenged each other on desolate highways and crude “racetracks” carved out of pastureland or backwoods acreage. Along the way, short oval tracks sprang up, and stock car racing moved into a period of ragged organization.

Drivers from those days battled awful conditions. “We raced at one track where it got so dusty that the only way you knew where to turn going into the turns was to count the telephone poles as you went by,” said pioneer driver Jack Smith of Spartanburg, South Carolina.

As races got longer and drivers faced the reality of being on track for several hours, some mounted a rubber hose and a funnel on their floorboards so they could take care of bathroom business while racing. Buck Baker raced with a plow line from farming as a seat belt and wore the inner liner of a tank helmet for head protection. In a race on the Charlotte Speedway track, he used a pair of vise grips to “steer” after his steering wheel broke. Champion driver Herb Thomas remembered playing the radio in his car during races.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, virtually all racing was shut down. France and other promoters who were trying to make something real out of a bare-bones idea, resumed racing after the war. In 1947, France announced the formation of the National Stock Car Racing Circuit, one of a handful of similar organizations popping up around the country. Fonty Flock, one of several members of the Flock family who would shine in racing’s early years, won the 1947 seasonal championship and \$1,000 prize money. There were a few other sanctioning groups scattered across the country, and the American Automobile Association ran events for stock-type cars in the 1930s.

The cars competing on France’s circuit and on most other embryonic racing tours in the early years after the war were mostly rehabilitated prewar coupes. Car manufacturers had diverted their factories to the war effort and needed a few years to catch up with street vehicle production.

France was already looking to the future. With a keen eye on the way racing was evolving, and having concluded that the sport, which was being mismanaged by shady race promoters who often grabbed the purse money and ran, needed better structure, France made the move that made his name. He called a series of meetings in December 1947 in Daytona Beach for drivers, promoters, track operators, and others who might have a stake in the sport.

The men—and they were all men, unless we count the occasional woman invited to share a drink with the participants—gathered in the Ebony Bar atop the Streamline Hotel in downtown Daytona Beach. The meetings, which lasted four days, were advertised in racing publications as the annual convention of France’s National Championship Stock Car Circuit. But he had much bigger





On July 10, 1949, Robert Nold "Red" Byron was the winner of the first-ever NASCAR-sanctioned national points race run on the Beach & Road Course in Daytona. Byron, shown here with the trophy, outran Marshall Teague and his own car owner, Raymond Parks, who finished third with relief from Bob Flock.



In the early years, the flagman was down on the track in the middle of all the racing action. Here Ed Samples takes the checkered flag, winning a Modified stock car race at Lakewood Speedway in Atlanta sometime in the late 1940s.

plans; he wanted to start a new organization that would bring in some of the racers and promoters who had been involved in rival groups, creating a big motorsports organization with national ambitions.

France's reputation attracted significant names to the meetings. Among the group were Louis "Red" Vogt, an Atlanta garage owner and racing mechanic; Joe Littlejohn, a driver and promoter from Spartanburg, South Carolina; Bill Tuthill, a New Rochelle, New York promoter; drivers Robert "Red"

Byron, Marshall Teague, Ed Samples, and Sam Packard, a Midget racer from Providence, Rhode Island.

Years later, Packard, who worked at a Daytona Beach service station owned by France after serving in the 82nd Airborne in World War II, defined the group as “Yankees and Southerners and bootleggers. But everybody went along pretty good with what needed to be done.”

As the men gathered around tables in the bar, France began the meetings with a long speech outlining the current state of racing and proposing a new umbrella organization to develop standard rules and a national schedule. After hours of discussion and more than a few cocktails across four days, the organization had a framework and—finally—a name. Vogt is given credit for suggesting the NASCAR name, and the participants voted to accept it after originally choosing National Stock Car Racing Association.

To no one’s surprise, France was elected NASCAR president. Two months later, on February 21, 1948, NASCAR was established as a privately owned corporation. The organization’s first race—a 150-mile Modified event at Daytona Beach—was held six days earlier.

“On the outcome of his meeting and the decisions reached here rests the future of stock car racing,” France had said in opening the meeting. His prediction bore fruit.

## SHOWROOM TO SHOWDOWN

NASCAR was up and running. The first office was established in France’s house on Goodall Avenue in Daytona Beach. The first NASCAR memberships were sold for \$10 each and included a car decal and a membership card.

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**NASCAR was open to women drivers from its outset. Sara Christian competed in six of eight races in NASCAR’s inaugural season in 1949 while Louise Smith took part in three. Christian ran just one other race in 1950 while Smith drove in a total of eleven races over the course of the 1949, 1950, and 1952 seasons. Smith is shown here with the 1947 Ford she wrecked in a race at Occoneechee Speedway in Hillsboro, North Carolina, on August 7, 1949. She finished twenty-seventh in a twenty-eight car field.**







**In a 1949 Plymouth, Glenn Dunnaway (49) battles the 1948 Buick of June Cleveland during a Grand National race at Charlotte Speedway on April 2, 1950. The race was won by Tim Flock, with Dunnaway finishing sixth and Cleveland seventeenth.**

In 1948, NASCAR's first year, the organization sanctioned fifty-two races, opening doors for Modified competition across the country. But France had bigger fish to fry. With car builders ramping up production and Americans taking to the road in the newfound freedom of the postwar years, he wanted to put showroom-fresh sedans on race tracks—in part to give NASCAR something that other racing organizations lacked—and so he began planning for the first race. On February 20, 1949, France staged an experimental race for stock cars at Broward Speedway near West Palm Beach, Florida, and the results were encouraging.

Everything came together on the June day in Charlotte, a growing city that eventually would become a NASCAR capital. A band of road warriors, men who would form much of the pioneer class of Cup racing, rolled onto the track in hulking stock cars. Minor changes (headlights and bumpers were taped for protection, and metal plates were used to reinforce wheel strength on the rutted track) were allowed.

"The cars were pretty much just like they came from the dealers," said Tim Flock, one of the drivers and a future NASCAR champion. "No roll bars. No nothing. No one had ever run brand-new cars, and people came out just to see what was going to happen."





ABOVE: **NASCAR great Tim Flock with “Jocko Flocko,” the rhesus monkey who was Flock’s co-driver when he won a Cup Series race at Hickory Motor Speedway on May 16, 1953. The monkey was retired two weeks later at a race in Raleigh, North Carolina, when it pulled the device to allow Flock to observe the right front tire and was hit by a pebble. At the time, drivers used a device to lift the wheel well to observe tire wear. Flock had to make a pit stop to remove the monkey and finished third. (He likely would have won without the complication.)**

RIGHT: **Norm Nelson in a Chrysler (299) races with Speedy Thompson in a Ford (297) during the Cup Series race at Memphis-Arkansas Speedway on October 9, 1955. Thompson went on to win the event.**



France scheduled seven other Strictly Stock races that year. Oddly, in what would be labeled for years a Southern sport, two of the first season’s races were held in Pennsylvania and another in New York.

Among the winners in that first abbreviated season was Virginian Curtis Turner, a sawmill operator who had his hands in a number of businesses but who had only two true loves: Racing and partying. With blue eyes and wavy brown hair, he was a racing star in the years before NASCAR. Driving on the ragged edge, he perfected the art of broadsliding through dirt-track turns, slinging the rear end of his car into the turn and letting the car settle into a straight line to tear down the backstretch. Turner’s sidekick, Joe Weatherly, was another star of the 1950s and drew attention by racing in saddle Oxford shoes.

Turner won at treacherous Langhorne (Pennsylvania) Speedway in the first Cup season, conquering a tough track that claimed many lives over the years. In fact, the first two deaths in NASCAR-sanctioned events occurred at Langhorne. Larry Mann was killed September 14, 1952, and Frank Arford died in an accident while qualifying at the track June 20, 1953.

“Because the [Langhorne] track was round, you couldn’t see very far ahead of you,” said Rex White, the 1960 Cup champion. “If you suddenly ran up on cars, it was hard to dodge them. You were running pretty fast, so if you hit there was a lot of impact.”

In racing’s early years, cars had very few safety modifications, and accidents were sometimes fatal or resulted in gruesome injuries. Fire was a constant threat. Among others who died in the 1950s were Lou Figaro, John McVitty, Clint McHugh, Thomas Priddy, Bobby Myers, and Gwyn Staley.

# SERIES GETS A SIGNATURE RACE

The biggest event of NASCAR's first decade occurred in the last year of the 1950s as founder Bill France Sr. ushered in what would become the sport's most important race—the Daytona 500.

The wildly fast 2.5-mile Daytona International Speedway track replaced a decade of racing on the beach-road course on Daytona Beach, Florida's oceanfront. The beach races, which tested drivers on a double course that included the sands of the beach and the parallel asphalt highway A1A, were popular, but continuing construction in the area made it clear motorsports competition there couldn't continue.

France had dreams of challenging Indianapolis Motor Speedway for speed and prominence, and DIS gave him his first big chance to score on a national level.

The first 500 did not disappoint. Cars reached speeds—Bob Welborn started on the pole at faster than 140 miles per hour—far faster than at any other stock car track, and drivers and mechanics marveled at what they considered the new “wide open spaces” of racing.

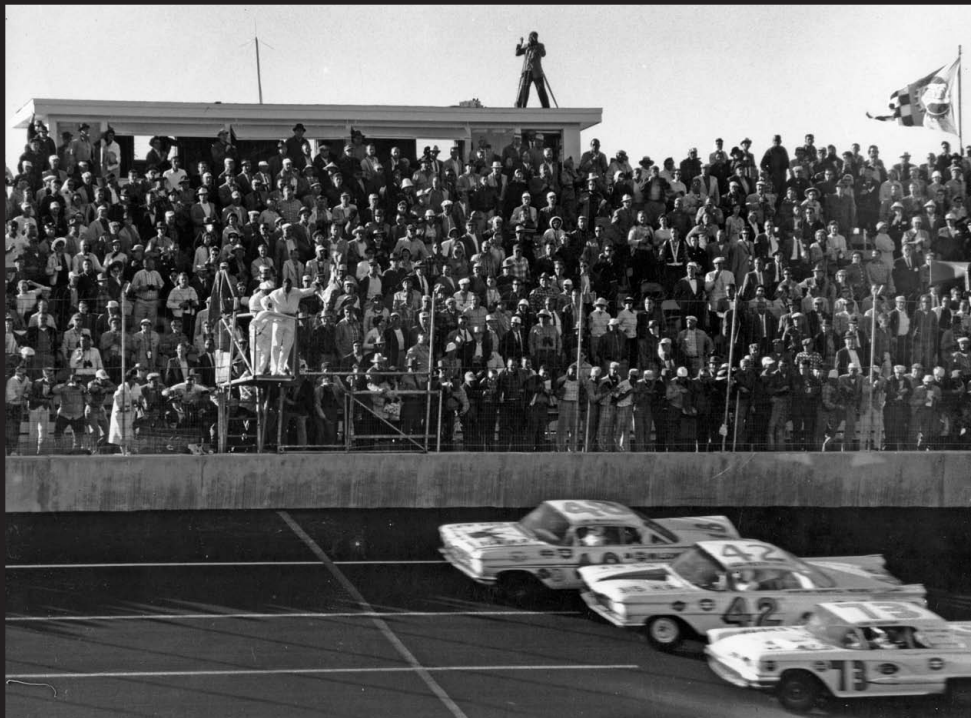
Incredibly, the 500 miles were recorded with no caution

flags, and it became clear late in the afternoon that, barring incidents or mechanical problems, the race would be decided between Lee Petty and Johnny Beauchamp.

The two crossed the finish line side by side, with the lapped car of Joe Weatherly making the finish three-wide. Photographer T. Taylor Warren, whose classic photos would define NASCAR's early years, was in perfect position to record the finish. Beauchamp originally was declared the winner, but France decided to review film and still photographs of the finish and announced three days later that Petty had won. The delay earned France and his new speedway a long run of publicity and helped give the 500 an extra boost out of the gate.

Petty won \$19,050, a staggering amount for the time. He and Beauchamp were the only drivers to complete the race's 200 laps. Fifty-nine drivers competed in the race, including Petty's son, Richard, who finished 57th after engine problems and won \$100.

His earnings would multiply over the next decade, and he would win the 500 seven times.



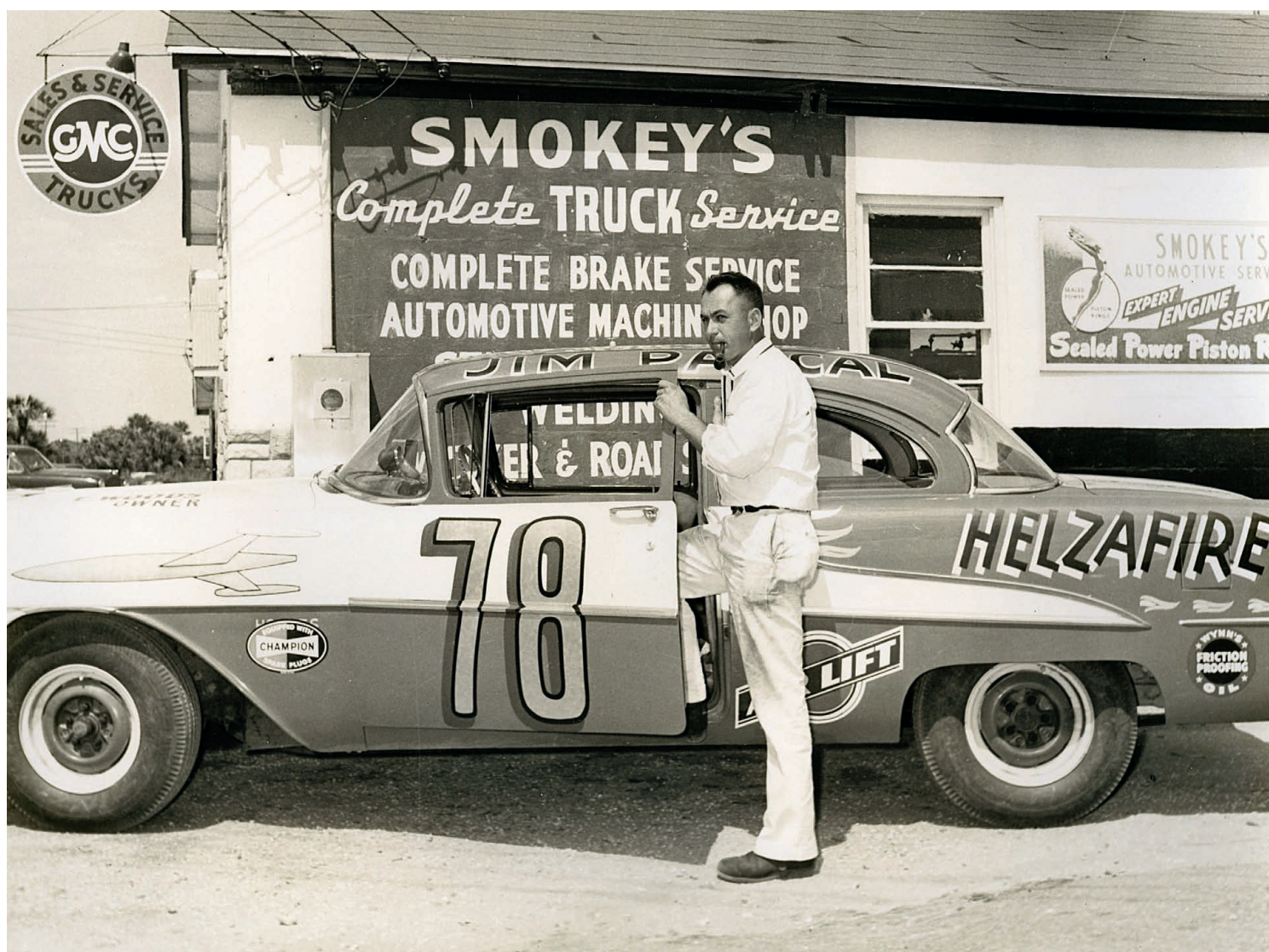
**Running three wide, Joe Weatherly (48), Lee Petty (42), and Johnny Beauchamp (73) thrill fans at the inaugural Daytona 500 on February 22, 1959. Petty would go on to win. Beauchamp and Weatherly finished second and fifth, respectively.**



One of NASCAR's all-time greatest minds was rule-bender, car designer, and master mechanic Henry "Smokey" Yunick, seen here outside his Daytona Beach garage with the 1955 Oldsmobile owned by Ernest Woods and driven by Jim Paschal.

Byron, a Virginia native who had won his first race competing against friends in a cow pasture, was the first Cup series champion. A flight engineer during World War II, he was wounded over the Aleutian Islands and wore a steel stirrup over his left leg while racing.

There were drivers who could have been NASCAR stars but didn't make it to France's big show. Lloyd Seay, one of the big guns of racing's early ragtag years and a winner at Atlanta's Lakewood Speedway in the 1930s, died at the age of twenty-one. He was shot in an argument over a delivery of sugar to a moonshine operation. Seay raced for Atlanta car owner Raymond Parks, a sharp dresser who brought stylishly painted cars to the track. More than a few drivers who succeeded in NASCAR's formative years learned how to drive fast cars skillfully while outrunning law-enforcement vehicles on twisty backroads as they made moonshine deliveries.







Drivers Speedy Thomas (M-1), Fred Fryar (492), and others streak past the roaring surf of the Atlantic Ocean in a Modified race in 1956.