

PRESENTED BY:



Brett Bodine

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- Born January 11, 1959, in Elmira, New York
- From cleaning the restrooms at his father's dirt track to winning in NASCAR's big leagues to now working for NASCAR, he has seen the sport from many angles.

It just seems incredible that three country boys from New York like Geoff, Todd, and I could end up here in NASCAR. I guess the only other example of this would be Missouri's Kenny, Mike, and Rusty Wallace.

Our dad and grandfather opened a little track on our dairy farm in Chemung in the early 1950s. I grew up picking up stones when it was dirt, cleaning the restrooms, and painting lines on the track when it was paved. Dad and Grandpa Eli are gone now, but the track [Chemung Speedrome] is still chugging along.



I guess there must have been a little of Big Bill France in them back then because they were so focused on treating the local racer fairly. Like Big Bill, they had good rules and paid enough so the guys could keep racing.

Mom and Dad always took the family to Daytona's Speedweeks for vacation. I was there a month after I was born and missed the 500 only once—for a high school basketball game. Camping down there in the infield was one huge, new horizon for us kids. Frankly, if I hadn't seen that unbelievable speed—and Lorenzen, Allison, and the rest—I don't know if I ever would have gotten the fire to be here today—and to have run 15 Daytona 500s.

Geoff is 10 years older and worked his way into NASCAR using his success in pavement modifieds in New England. I watched and did the same thing. But, knowing the odds of me actually making it weren't great, I had a backup plan. I went to Alfred State College and got a degree in mechanical engineering. Then I gave myself five years to see if I could make it as a professional race car driver.

Fortunately, I've never had to take a real job. Things just kept building, especially with the Corazzo family modifieds in New England, the 1984 championship at Stafford [Motor Speedway in Connecticut], and all the wins that year were stepping stones.

I knew I had to get south to get a Busch [what is now called the NASCAR Xfinity Series] ride, so I got a job working for Harry Hyde. At the '85 Dogwood double-header at Martinsville, there was a rain-out and Geoff couldn't get back for the makeup. He persuaded the team to let me drive the Busch car.

There was no time to be nervous. Good thing. I climbed out of the Sherri Cup modified (we got fourth, I think) and right into the Levi-Garrett Pontiac No. 5. And, wouldn't you know, I got their first win with Hendrick. Everyone was ecstatic, and we all got grandfather clocks. That was the day I realized I could actually cut it against the best.



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The next Monday I had lunch with Rick Hendrick. He hired me for 12 more shows and asked me to take care of my car, Geoff's, and Tim Richmond's. I got three wins. It was quite a year. Along the way I also won the Race of Champions at Pocono in the modified.

After some time with Bud Moore in Cup cars, I went with Kenny Bernstein in 1990 and we won at [North Carolina's] North Wilkesboro [Speedway] in the Quaker State Buick Regal. I couldn't believe I had just made my goal. I was so revved up I couldn't sleep.

I set out after my next bar—the championship. I drove for Junior Johnson and for myself with the help of Hooters. But, really, the end of the road came at Michigan in 2003. I blew a right front in warm-ups and hit the wall—hard. Broken shoulder, ribs, concussion.

In my heart, right there in the car I knew I was done. It seemed God had told me that I was good enough to do this, but in the end, He wouldn't let me. It was difficult. Ricky Craven and I commiserated a lot about the unexpected end to our times behind the wheel.

I had no job and I was bummed, but there was a bright light. I met Kathi Lirette at a car show, and we were married in 2004.

I went down to Daytona and ran into Mike Helton. He invited me to a meeting with Bill Jr., and they offered me a job at the R&D Center. But they said, "You'd better be sure you are done with racing." I was. I've been there ever since.

It's been interesting to watch what has happened from my vantage point. There is no question that all of racing seems to be in transition. So are other sports, like stick and ball.

The biggest challenge we have in NASCAR is to be on the upside of technology. We cannot allow Cup racing to become Formula 1. We are on it. There is a huge effort to get it right—and history says NASCAR will. My work during the week is focused on finding cost-cutting measures for our team owners. Much of the rest of my time is focused on the Driver Approval Com-

mittee. That committee, which I chair, is responsible for being sure drivers are experienced enough to compete in all the different series and at the various-sized tracks in NASCAR. And on weekends I've spent a lot of laps driving the Cup Series pace car.

On the other end of the spectrum, I just love short-track racing. I go to Bowman Gray [Stadium in Winston-Salem, North Carolina] when I have the time. My kids love it and are doing some racing themselves. But many short-track promoters have their challenges getting things right.

They, too, have to control the increasing costs of technology. They need to nip things in the bud and to keep the rules consistent over the seasons. In general, dirt tracks have been better with this than pavement tracks. The top drivers—the heroes—must be able to race and make a living from it. And competing in the lesser divisions cannot drive a racer's family to the poorhouse.

And safety. Promoters must be demanding. For example, so many people who raced back in the day have concussion-related problems today. When Dale Earnhardt died, only seven of us in the field were wearing a HANS device. Maybe you have to lose something valuable to make real gains. You can bet my kids have all the restraints and a good seat every time they get in a race car.

Promoters also have to really focus on the show itself. It has to be short and exciting. I just hate to see time trials with the fastest cars starting up front. Short-track racing is not Cup racing. On a short track, heads-up starts result in speed shows, not races. When I grew up racing at Stafford, I'd usually start 16th and have just 30 laps to get to the front. And in those days, you had to do it right—without tearing off anyone else's wheels. If not, you might be tapped on the nose when you got back to the pits.

Yup, to grow up picking up stones when Chemung was dirt, to cleaning the restrooms, and painting lines on the track when it was paved.... Then racing with some of the finest modified drivers ever, then winning on NASCAR's top rung, and now working on securing the future of our greatest sport....

I still can't quite believe it. ♪