

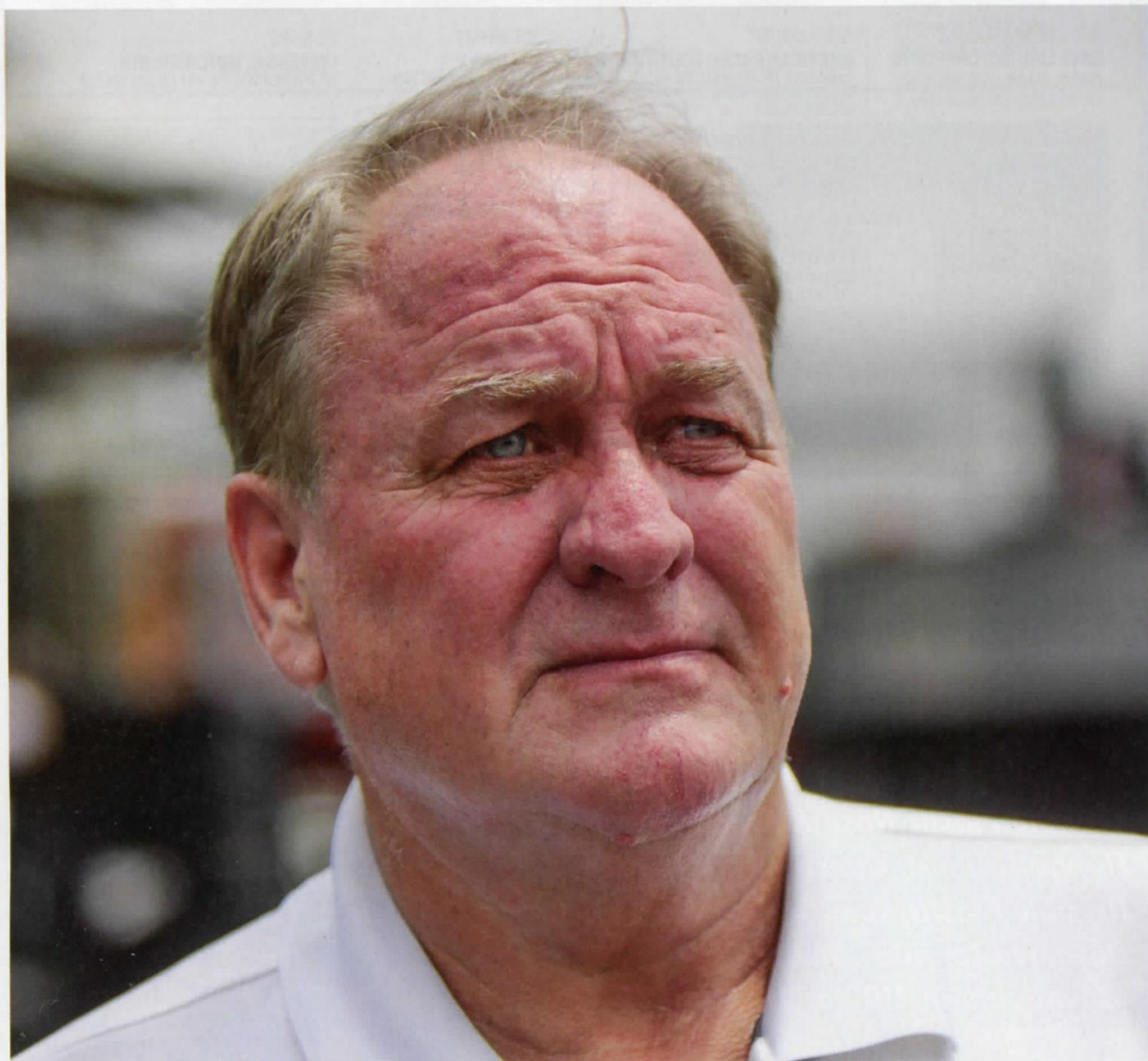
Kyle Harvey

In His Own Words

PRESENTED BY:



As told to **Lew Boyd**



- *Born February 4, 1954 in Blue Island, Illinois*
- *Semi-retired. Former crew chief, racer, driver coach, spotter—a long career in racing that included a 10-year stint with JR Motorsports.*
- *His perspective, from the top of the roof of the sport's biggest venues to behind the driver's seat at some of short-track racing's gems.*

Growing up in Blue Island, Illinois, during the 1950s could get a little rough. Six months after I was born, I was stricken with polio. Fortunately, it did not land me in an iron-lung ward, but the handicap did give me a big chip on my shoulder. I was kind of the neighborhood hellion.

GLEN STAREK

A few years later I was stricken again—this time by Raceway Park, the local track. I was mesmerized, and it actually helped grind off that chip. A nearby racer, Paul Bauer, took me under his wing and into his shop. He kept me in school. “A good mechanic is a smart mechanic,” he’d say.

I began crewing for lots of guys—motor work and fabricating. Soon I was hot-lapping race cars and then running my own. I raced locally at Grundy County and over in Indiana at Illiana and then reached out to ARCA and ASA. All in all, I won about 100 races.

In ASA I ran into another major influencer in my life, Bobby Dotter. Of all things, he asked me to spot for him at the Pontiac Silverdome, in Michigan—indoors. That’s how the spotting all started. Bobby appreciated that I had seat time and that I liked to talk.

I loved the role, and it just kept growing. In the early days, it was pretty straightforward. Dale Earnhardt Sr. explained to me, “Don’t tell me things like someone’s outside me. I can hear that. Just tell me things I don’t know.” All Kenny Schrader wanted to hear was “where are the wrecks and who’s on my left rear.”

But, hands down, my best relationship was with Dick Trickle. We really studied spotting. With the car sitting still, he’d strap in and I’d move around the car, understanding exactly where he could see and where he couldn’t. And, we’d look at in-car videos. He showed me how he could see nothing through the smoke typical of wrecks. So, we devised a system to pretend that the steering wheel is a clock with five-minute settings. If I thought he should turn the wheel a quarter turn, I would say “left three.” Now, I’m getting emotional. Dick was such a great friend.

Things really changed when Eric Martin was killed at Charlotte during an ARCA practice, when spotters couldn’t see he was still on the track after a spinout and he got hit by another car. From then on, a spotter could no longer just be on a truck in the infield—it was now up on the roof for every lap the car was on the track. Before that, spotters were mandatory only on race day. Spotting became a full-time job.

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Quote Worthy

“[Racing is] the ultimate test of man. You’re always working to drive faster and make your car better.”

*Greg Burgess, North Carolina pavement late model driver
Speedway Illustrated
August 2018*

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

The technology of spotting became really serious, too. I now often have six radios to deal with: One, for just the car and the team; two, to listen to myself to make sure number one is working and to make sure that I am enunciating properly—there needs to be a very big difference between “no!” and “go!”; three, to monitor the NASCAR tower for instructions/infractions; four, to communicate with another teammate and work together; five, for getting competitive intelligence from other teams; and six, for monitoring FanVision when at Cup events.

The atmosphere up in the spotters’ stand sure can get thick. By far the most challenging venues are Talladega and Daytona. You’re on every second, with so much going on in every direction and in every ear. It just plain wears you out. It’s pass-out time on the plane home. Curiously, though, a place like Bristol is far less stressful. You can take in most everything there with peripheral vision.

You just can’t take it lightly. Once when Brian Ickler was racing ARCA for Kyle Busch at Michigan, Kyle made a big deal out of wanting to spot for him—and it was picked up by television. But Kyle had to qualify just before Brian went out. The TV guys covered Kyle hurrying up to the roof and me handing him the headphones. After about three laps, Kyle was all stressed out. “I’m done. You can bet I’ll never do this job again!”

Obviously, the responsibilities a spotter must undertake are huge, and the results of a poor call can be disastrous. It can be so tricky. One day I was at Vegas spotting for the up-and-coming Austin Theriault in a Brad Keselowski Racing truck. [See *Speedway Illustrated*, February 2018.] Austin was behind Tyler Reddick, also in a BKR entry, who got sideways off turn four. I knew Tyler was an accomplished dirt tracker and I had seen him pull out of these before. I told Austin to go hard to the inside. But this time Tyler was unable to straighten out; down the bank he came into Austin’s right rear, sending him into the frontstretch wall head-on. It was a devastating crash, so violent that the transmission shaft hit Austin’s shoulder. His back was broken. So was my heart. As soon as he was out of the hospital, I took him out for

a nice New England dinner and explained just what had happened. And I admitted I would have to make the same call again. A gentleman, he understood.

There is some fellowship among spotters—it’s even a little cliquish among some of the top teams, but it is still a part of racing and very competitive. The money is much better in Cup, and everyone wants to get there. And everyone is constantly being headhunted. It’s been said that when things seem to be souring with a team, the first to be fired is the spotter, then the crew chief, then the driver.

Through all this intensity, though, especially among the cooler heads, there can be amusing moments. I was spotting for Danica Patrick in Montreal. She kept complaining about the heat. I told her these stock cars can get hot and she’d better try to get used to it, as it was her job. She was quiet for a couple of laps and then said, “You’re right. I better do my job.” Then, after a couple more laps of silence, “But I do wish someone would blow up my skirt.” Tony Eury Jr. was listening in and responded, “Danica, you’d better not talk more like that. There’s a line here already.”

Like everyone semi-retired, I suppose, I’m thinking back on my life. Somehow after that shaky start in Illinois, I have been everywhere, done so much in NASCAR, spotted at Indy, worked the Rolex 24, and won in Texas with Scott Goodyear. The other day someone commented to me that he will remember me as the driver with polio who was so determined to race that he taped his left foot to the brake pedal. I guess you could say that I was handicapped before it was cool. Paul Bauer taught me to get to work, to just get after it. Never a slacker be.

This spring I was asked to spot at Indy again, this time for Spencer Pigot. I had to turn it down because with my handicap I knew I couldn’t possibly get over to the turn-three spot on race day given the massive crowds. But, wouldn’t that have been something? Teammates Ed Carpenter and Pigot were starting in the middle and the outside of the front row respectively.

I guess you could say I did make it to the top. To the roof, anyway. 🏆