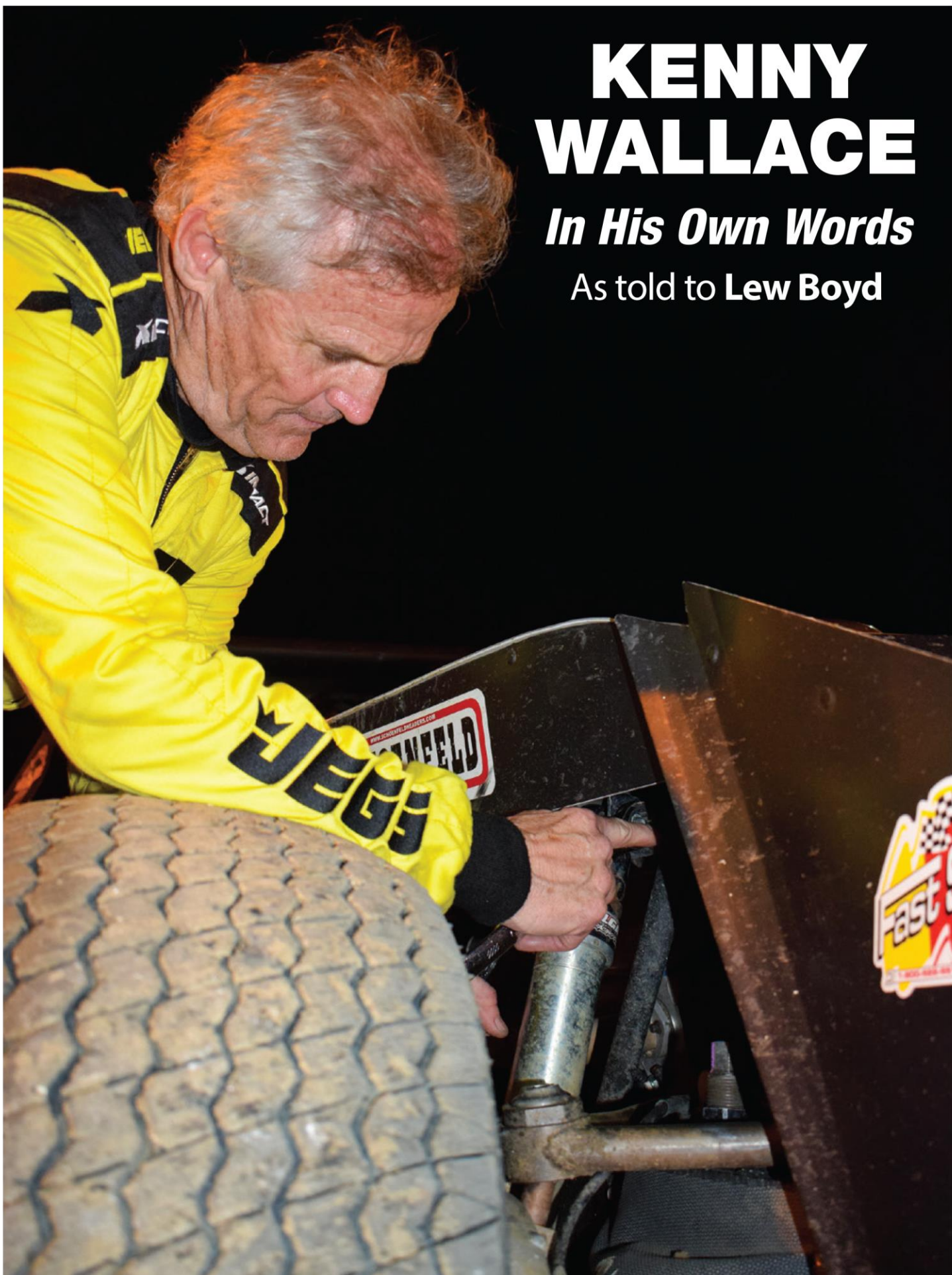


# **KENNY WALLACE**

*In His Own Words*

As told to Lew Boyd



- ***Born August 23, 1963 in St. Louis, Missouri***
- ***Younger brother to champion racers Rusty and Michael, Kenny Wallace assisted in their early careers before racing himself. He won his first time out in street stocks in 1982; became ASA Rookie of the Year in 1986; spent 25 years in NASCAR's Truck, Xfinity and Cup Series, winning a total of nine victories. Lively and engaging, he was also a popular TV personality who stunned the racing world by giving up the national spotlight and returning to the Midwest and local dirt tracks, where he has come to excel.***

**I**t was 2014. I was literally in the shower at home in North Carolina, thinking about our lives—and I made a helluva decision.

I called my wife, Kim, and daughters Brooke, Brittany, and Brandy to the back porch and said I had an announcement. “No,” I explained. “We are not in trouble, but I have decided to stop racing in NASCAR.”

You see, I’m from St. Louis, a big union town where \$10 was important to us—“Missouri Frugal,” they called it. Kim and I had been so careful to save over the years, and I’m good with money. The kids were now out of school or in college, so we were fine.

But somehow, I had forgotten that. I realized I’d put myself under incredible stress for a long time trying to raise money for my NASCAR team owners. I’d become obsessed with the wrong priority. It was untenable—and I was exhausted.

Brandy piped right up. “Dad, that’s great.” Everyone agreed. It was a difficult call to Joe Gibbs Racing, but I kept my word.

I was also working what seemed like a wonderful job with Fox in L.A., but it really wasn’t me. I wasn’t ready to be a

## VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

Dick Berggren and give up a racing career to be a TV guy. I kept doing it, but it became wearing, too.

Honestly, I don't know how those TV guys do it. It's like Charlotte and Concord were becoming toxic to me, taking over my identity. If Kim and I went out to dinner, all people would want to talk about was the finish of some TV race. I just really missed hanging out with my high school buddies back in Arnold, Missouri.

Even worse were those 39 weekends each season out on the TV road in lonely hotel rooms without my family. And the commercial airports—they had become the most miserable places in the whole world, with everyone fighting and all that nastiness. I thought, wouldn't it be nice to be back on the highway with a race car and a trailer?

In 2017, I called my friend Steve Craddock at Fox and said the only way I could stay would be if they could pick me up in my yard with a helicopter on race day and bring me home that night. That certainly wasn't in the cards, but he understood where I was coming from.

A lot of people didn't. They carried on that I had been fired. They certainly didn't know the real story.

Increasingly, in the back of my mind, I had had the urge to get back to Missouri and race full time. Sitting in motel rooms I had been so jealous of those dirt racers—all my buddies—on those local racetracks. Even when we were in North Carolina, I kept a little shop with a dirt car back in St. Louis. Previously all I had run on was pavement, and I was determined to learn how to race dirt. My idea of a race car driver is A.J. Foyt, who would be on the pole of the Hoosier Hundred in a Silver Crown car right before the Indy 500.

One afternoon off from TV at Bristol, I went to a movie, but didn't watch. I made a list of everyone who helped me with sponsorships, and I called them to see if they would support me on dirt. I sure was nervous, but they all were wonderful. I told them I'd work harder than ever, do the SEMA show, etc., as well as up my game on social media. It worked.

We did have a big house in North Carolina and selling it allowed us to rebuild in Arnold with a nice garage alongside. I had good success in other real estate, too, and I sold my portfolio to David Ragan, who runs it today.

After our move, I began putting a serious modified operation together. It was not easy. I found immediately that I had to re-learn so many mechanical and fabrication skills. I tried to hire young kids, but it was a disaster. Ask anyone in dirt racing, there just is no reliable help out there. To be perfectly honest, I was scared to death about hiring anyone because they'd be mad when I fired them. So come to my shop, and you will find me all alone.

Making everything even more difficult was rapidly changing technology. I never even tried a dirt car until I was 44, and that was only very part-time, so I really had to learn the basics. Then, on top of it, all the new bird cages, the geometry of the cars lifting and pulling wheelies. Kenny Schrader has been really helpful steering me in the right direction, but he did make me work for it. I'm 60 now, but you could say I'm only 30 in terms of my progress in dirt-tracking.

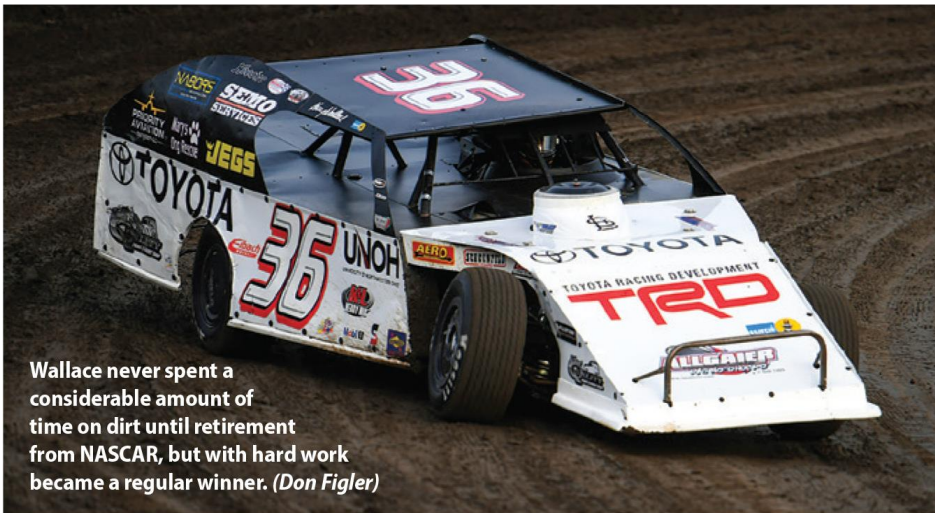
Being able to drive a dirt modified properly has been a challenge. With NASCAR and TV, my brand, with the "Herman the German" nickname and constant laughter, was playful, on the edge of zany. I'm still referred to as Herman, and I carry on a bit, but things are much more serious. They have to be.

When I got going on the dirt, I messed up a lot. I started to realize people weren't coming to watch me race; they'd come to make fun of me. It was often really embarrassing, but because I was so determined, I wouldn't let it in my head. I just kept going.

When I started running a little better, the chatter became "There's Wallace with all that NASCAR money!" Soon they had to let that go, too. As I won a little, they noticed I was driving into the pits alone, unloading, mounting my own tires, doing my thing. I think they were a little shocked. And I think that made my brand a little cockier—and me little faster.



## VOICE OF EXPERIENCE



Wallace never spent a considerable amount of time on dirt until retirement from NASCAR, but with hard work became a regular winner. (Don Figler)



NASCAR obligations, both as a driver and broadcaster, are more than just on-track activities. Wallace often went beyond the call of duty, as he does with his dirt-track sponsors today. (Jeff Zelevansky/Getty Images)

These days, I'm as busy as I've ever been and happier than ever. In my mind, I'm on my chassis 24/7. We run on black mud, brown mud, red clay—and you're never done with your chassis, most especially if you are the driver. I love it. I'm in constant touch with my good friend and chassis builder Nick Hoffman.

In my body, I am in the shop every morning at 9:30, often until 10 at night. It's been a useful workout and has kept me skinny for the last 5-7 years.

The only thing that interrupts me during the day is something fun. The phone rings for me to do the *Kenny Wallace Show*, so I go in the house for 30 minutes and give opinions on racing, aspiring athletes, and whatever. Then I close my laptop and am back with my  $\frac{9}{16}$  wrench.

I've been on the starting grid of the Daytona 500, competing with their 40 or so teams. But, when I pulled into Volusia this February, there were 113 of the fastest modifieds in the country, three times more. That's what intensity is. My heart was pounding all week.

The racing was the greatest I've ever seen, all about trying to get into that final feature. Saturday night was incredible. Winning a Gator on dirt was probably the proudest moment of my whole life. The pinnacle came when I called Kim from victory lane and said hi to her and everyone in St. Louis, where my heart resides.

As everything began to settle down, I had a rejuvenating feeling deep inside. I could acknowledge to myself that I had buried it into turn one at Volusia without lifting to get my fast time. In the race I ran three deep, whatever I had to do on that slippery track.

All of us older drivers talk with each other about how long they think they can keep going. I'm in good shape, but I mentioned to Kenny Schrader that I do have a float-er in my eye. He says nothing to it—I'm all set. He's got several and considers them friendly reminders of sprint-car flips past.

I think I'd better get back to the shop. **FSW**