



Waddell Wilson

In His Own Words

- Born on December 29, 1936 in Bakersville, North Carolina
- His engines won 109 NASCAR Cup races, including seven Daytona 500s and 123 poles
- Crew chief for 22 Cup wins
- 2020 inductee into NASCAR Hall of Fame

As told to **Lew Boyd**

Ever since I was a little kid in Bakersville, North Carolina, all I dreamed about was being around cars and flying a fighter plane in the Air Force. But when I was eleven, the mumps settled in my left ear and flying was out. So, after high school, I went off to Nashville Auto and Diesel College.

Then I traveled the country and wound up in Miami building engines for Cummins Diesel. One Saturday night, I went to the old Hialeah Speedway. I thought, "I can do that." With some friends, I built a '40 Ford coupe in one day. There wasn't too much to a race car back then—to mine anyway. But soon I started winning races. I just loved it.

Eventually, I headed back to North Carolina and married in 1961. Two years later a friend called. "Why don't you go over to Holman-Moody to see about working there." I gave it a shot. The reception was not too warm—I was told they were doing no hiring whatsoever.

As I walked out the door, I ran into John Holman. He asked what I was doing, and I told him I was looking for work. He said to come back into his office, and we talked about racing. Then I mentioned diesel engines, and he lit right up. He must have seen something in me. He said to be back in the morning ready to go.

He put me in the engine room. There was a real clique in there, and they didn't want me to join the club. So, I stuck to myself, trying to do my job. I worked on an engine Fireball Roberts won the Southern 500 with in 1963. Meanwhile, John Holman always expected us to win every race and not to cheat doing it. I was scared to death of that man, but he taught me so much.

One day Fred Lorenzen asked me if I would be jack man on his car. I'd never done anything like jacking a car before, but I was fairly athletic. We had try-outs, and I won.

Fred gave everything he had to racing. He was very hyper but smart. I ran around a lot with Freddy and had a lot of respect

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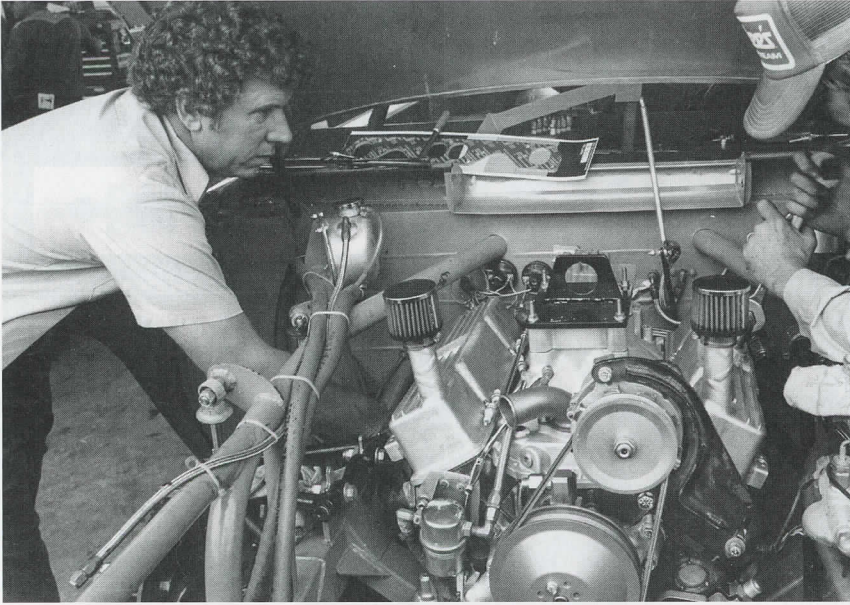
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racing dictionary

Wedge /wej/ Noun

Also known as crossweight, wedge is a percentage found by adding the weight of the right-front and left-rear corners and dividing that number by the total vehicle weight. Lower the percentage to loosen the car, raise it to tighten the car.



for him. He didn't chase women or booze it up; he had a one-track mind—that race car. We won the Daytona 500 in 1965. I was also doing engines for Dick Hutcherson.

We had basic machinery and a dyno back then, but things were nowhere near as elaborate as today. I spent so many hours experimenting. If the result didn't make power on the dyno, I'd work all night—I didn't want Lorenzen complaining. Blueprinting the engine was also real important because speed wasn't enough. It had to go for 500 miles.

You know, racing was and still is a small circle. Word gets around. A.J. Foyt called. He wanted to run some NASCAR events, but only if I would build the engine.

The Daytona 500 in 1967 sure was memorable. I built an engine for Mario Andretti, but I was crewing for Fred. We thought Mario was a wreck waiting to happen. I have been going to the races for 50 years, and I have never seen a driving performance like Mario put on that day. Fred was second. They lapped the field.

In '68 and '69 my engines won two championships with David Pearson. I was also on the pit crew as the right-front tire guy. That really wore me out.

By 1972, it was over to the L. G. DeWitt team and Benny Parsons. We won the title. But what I really remember from

those days came in '75. We had just come back from Riverside, California, where we had blown up and we were out of money. For Daytona all I could do was to assemble something with a bucket of blown-up parts. We started 32nd, and, as the race wore on, I was thinking, "How is it possible that engine even made one lap?" Then he won. DeWitt and Parsons tried to squeeze my heart out in victory lane.

In 1978 I joined Harry Ranier, first with Lenny Pond and then Buddy Baker. We went for it with Buddy for the 1980 Daytona 500. I rebuilt the engine three times with the dyno. By now I was also crew chief. When I was first asked to do that, I said no. But then I thought I wouldn't have to argue with a crew chief anymore, so I agreed.

Harry told me to do whatever I reasonably could to give Buddy a car he could put in victory lane. I had learned about the importance of aerodynamics back with David Pearson. He used to take Gatorade out on the track with him and toss some out. I'd watch how it had run down the side of the car. So, I sent the car to a shop in Charlotte for body work and along with it came a \$10,000 bill. I was worried I'd be fired. But the car was really something. It became known as the "Gray Ghost" because it came up on the competition so fast. Buddy sealed it with an all-time record of 177 mph and a record payoff of \$103,000. Harry forgave me that he only ended up with \$93,000 of that.

In '82 with Benny Parsons we broke the 200 mph-lap barrier qualifying at Talladega. We didn't win the race, so I didn't



think much of it until I saw all the excitement and heard about all the tickets that were sold.

The next year at Daytona I had high hopes that we could get Cale Yarborough even faster. I worried in practice, but he had been sandbagging. He told me he'd never been that fast. "It's like threading a needle going into that turn three. Don't do a thing to it!" In his time trial, he turned 200 mph the first lap and was going for 203 on the second. That's when he flipped in turn three. Afterwards he joked, "Waddell, you did everything right except that you didn't give me controls so I could fly." We decided not to fix the car for the race, something I always will regret. Cale wasn't bothered; he won in our backup car. The next year, he qualified comfortably at 201 mph and won again.

By 1987, I was with Hendrick and Darrell Waltrip, then with Geoff Bodine and Ricky Rudd as a crew chief. I subsequently went to Hendrick's R&D department.

My last job was as a consultant with Jerico Racing Transmissions, where I did some sales and technical consulting. My work at the speedways was over.

To be honest, I never felt I was that good. I just had to work harder to catch up. I wasn't into managing people. I'd prefer just to do things right—by myself. I couldn't believe what some people thought, though. One day a guy came riding into the pit area in a Ferrari. I said, "Nice car." He said, "It's yours if you come to work for me." Another guy wanted to hand me a blank check.

In 1975, I did something different—publishing a book with Steve Smith, *Race Engine Preparation*. A.J. Foyt agreed he'd endorse it if I sent him some copies. That was a mistake. He called me up and scolded me about giving away all those secrets.

Other than that book, I wasn't too much of an outspoken person. A lot of guys, they'd see a camera coming, and it was like a magnet. Me, I went in the other direction.

I just couldn't believe I ended up in the NASCAR Hall of Fame. I was just programmed as a quiet perfectionist, trying to do a good job. 🍷

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