

RICKY CRAVEN

In His Own Words

As told to Lew Boyd



- Born May 24, 1966, in Newburgh, Maine
- An especially thoughtful and talented performer who, overcoming debilitating injury, worked his way to the top of NASCAR, winning in all three top divisions and achieving national popularity.

You might have thought that the 2003 win at Darlington, the closest finish in Cup history, would have been the pinnacle of my career. That had actually come two years earlier, when I won the Martinsville Old Dominion 500.

You see, back in 1997 I had a bad wreck at Texas. I woke up in a helicopter, and, as they rolled me into the trauma unit at the hospital, they asked me to sign my next of kin. It was the lowest moment in my life.

Finally released, I went home to Maine, to Moosehead Lake, my utopia, where I bought land and a log cabin to recuperate. It was a long way from everywhere. Over time, it became the special place my family would meet on holidays. I'd often fly there after the races, bringing more balance to my life.

As my pain and injuries began to dissipate, that hunger to compete returned. It was fueled by seeing someone else driving the Budweiser Chevrolet for Rick Hendrick. Any sidelined driver will tell you that's death by a thousand cuts.

I returned to Cup racing, but the post-concussion syndrome was persistent. I did have a promising day at my "home" track, New Hampshire, in 1998. I bumped my teammate, Jeff Gordon, to the outside pole. It felt so good running up-front, but by lap 75 on that 92-degree July day, it was over. In rehab I had worked myself into good physical condition, but not into racing

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condition. I wasn't ready. I was tremendously disappointed in myself. It actually took me three to four years to finally get my groove back.

When I joined PPI Motorsports in 2002, I sought advice from Bob Bahre, the crusty owner of New Hampshire, who had watched my whole career. A straight shooter, he said I'd been moping around, hanging my head. Sure, I'd had a bad deal, but the world didn't owe me shit. It was time for me to get it together and see what I could do. And I did.

His advice was the reason I was able to win that Old Dominion 500 at Martinsville. If that hadn't happened, I might have become one of those countless drivers who had gotten close, but never actually punched the ticket at the highest level.

In short, that race was my validation.

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It had all begun at Unity Speedway in Maine in 1981. Starry-eyed at 13, I dragged in this half-built Chevelle with a roll bar. We had a small ranch house with no money, but my folks said, if I finished it, I could race it. Every day all my friends came off the school bus and headed to the garage with me.

I don't even recall the first race. In the second one, starting down back, I passed the whole field, taking a piece of each car with me to the checkered. Every driver congratulated me—and said if I ever raced them like that again, they'd wall me.

Coincidentally, Bobby Allison was there that night. He came over and patted me on the back, saying "Helluva race, kid." He gave me a Gatorade hat. That was so important to me. This was the beginning of my crusade. I've always been determined, charting my course. It was a tremendous advantage knowing exactly what I wanted to do in life. I was then on the bottom left of an 8½ x 11 sheet of paper—and getting to the right-hand top would be becoming a Cup driver.

I won Rookie of the Year and was soon off to ACT, the American Canadian Tour, for late models. Peter Prescott hired me to drive, and I did—as well as marrying his

granddaughter. Our three daughters are my greatest trophies in the world. Meanwhile, we were pitted against some incredible short-track guys like Dave Dion, Robbie Crouch, and Dick McCabe. There's no question that what I learned from them led to my Martinsville win. They rode with me in the final 20 laps that day on the half-mile—the finest laps I ever drove.

That's when I realized you've got to be an asset to survive—I had to contribute to the good of the sport. For me, it really was getting into working with the fans. I had a great New England following—and I realized its importance to NASCAR.

I got into a tussle with Tom Curley, the ACT commander-in-chief, and so I went to NASCAR with Busch North. I was Rookie of the Year in 1990 and champion in 1991.

After winning New Hampshire's Chevy Dealers 250 against lots of Southern drivers, I ventured south, joining the Busch series. I was Rookie of the Year again, but there were adjustments. I quickly learned about NASCAR's authority and was told quite pointedly, "Kid, you're not in New England anymore, are you?" That's when I realized you've got to be an asset to survive—I had to contribute to the good of the sport. For me, it really was getting into working with the fans. I had a great New England following—and I realized its importance to NASCAR.

In 1995, I worked myself into Cup with Larry Hedrick/Kodiak. I was nearing that right-hand top corner of my career page but was so driven I felt no relief in getting there. I wanted Rookie of the Year badly

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

and got it, but it was no cakewalk. There were eight of us, including Steve Kinser, Davy Jones, and Randy LaJoie, among others.

I adapted to the cars quickly, always having been in relatively heavy cars and never running dirt. What I wasn't prepared for were the 500-mile races. I came to realize that I had to divide them into four 125-mile runs to make it manageable. If I ran flat out, I just got messed up.

It's critical that drivers come to understand their own limitations on a certain day, the limitations of the track and the car. In 2002, I was on the pole at Darlington and shot out front. Then I got carried away dicing with Stacy Compton for the lead, and we ended up in a pile of metal. Meanwhile, Jeff Gordon had been cruising in third, just watching, and right on by us he went. What a lesson.

I understood all this a year later at Darlington when I had that big win. I'd started

29th, working carefully to second with 20 to go. Darlington requires more attention than any other track, and I was focused, especially on my own groove up high going into three. I got alongside Kurt Busch with two to go, and that's when things got intense. I slid into him, and he lifted my rear wheels. It was really electrifying, but I beat him by .002 seconds.

But in the background our single-car team was struggling. In 2002, we were Fords, in 2003 Pontiacs, and in 2004 we yet again changed all the bodies to Chevrolet. We plain ran out of steam and money.

Additionally, almost 40 and having lost three to four years with injuries, in my heart I knew I was past my prime. I was done.

I thought I'd quit, when Jack Roush called about driving a truck. If we won, I'd have victories in all three of NASCAR's top divisions. That came to be at the Kroger 200 at Martinsville. The next Monday I went

to Jack's office. I told him this time I was really done.

No way could I wake up in the morning without purpose, so I listened when ESPN called. And what a great 15 years! I felt that same racing adrenaline when the broadcasting light came on. I'd be doing it still, but I felt I lost the ability to contribute when I became unfamiliar with the cars.

As I talk with you today, I'm content and busy, actually sitting in a spiffy, super-charged Corvette with ground effects. Ricky Craven Motorsports is now located in Landis, North Carolina, with eyes on sites in Maine and Florida, between Daytona and Palm Beach. We are selling Corvettes and distinctive 1960s and early '70s muscle cars. I love it, and how I love driving them.

To be honest, I recently earned three tickets within a very short window. I had to put on a restrictor plate! 🏆