

# **ERNIE IRVAN** *In His Own Words*



- Born January 13, 1959, in Salinas, California.
- One tough racer who emerged from California's short tracks to become one of NASCAR's 50 Greatest Drivers, winning 15 Cup events, including the Daytona and Winston 500s, and honored as one of MSNBC's Top Ten Sports Comebacks of All Time.

## As told to **Lew Boyd**

Like most guys, I just followed what my dad did, and he was a racer. He helped me a lot when I started out in karts at age nine. It went along pretty well, and I won the California state championship six years later. In 1975 I got into stock cars.

That was a little harder, racing each week at places like Madera and Stockton. My dad was still running, but at different tracks, so it was actually my mom who came with me. I really got into it.

I had my own car but was lucky to hook up with a real good racer and builder named Ivan "The Terrible" Baldwin. He taught me so much. He was aggressive on the track, and I was, too.

We started winning a lot of races. I did have confidence in myself, but I was not sure how good I actually was. I've always compared myself to what others were doing, especially my close friend, Tim Williamson. We did everything together, and he was really becoming successful. He had recently signed with J.D. Stacy and was on his way up the ladder when he was killed at Riverside in 1980. That made me think about a lot of things, and I decided to try to make the next step, too. My dad, who had moved to Charlotte after I won the Stockton championship in 1977, urged me to come east if I really wanted to progress.

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## VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

*Soon I was in D.K. Ulrich's car and then Morgan-McClure's. We won my first Cup race at Bristol in 1990 and the Daytona 500 the next year. I was more of a racer than a fan.*

So, in 1981, off I went—my road car, a trailer with some parts, and every penny I had. That wasn't a lot, so I stopped in Las Vegas along the way. You do what you have to do, right? Fortunately, I was able to leave with a little more money than when I arrived there.

In Charlotte, I did whatever I could do, too. I spent a lot of time helping install seats at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Even by then it was becoming clear to me that gaining credibility was everything. My dad taught me to run the dirt. I won a few, and that started to put my name out there. That got me into pavement, and I won at Concord. And that got me to working with Marc Reno.

I was doing odd jobs for Ken Schrader in 1987, and he heard that Mark and I were building a Cup car. He arranged a sponsorship with Dale Earnhardt's new Chevy dealership. How many people has Kenny helped?! But then he mentioned that there would be no money—just that name on my car. It didn't take long for me to realize that was worth a ton in credibility. It launched my career.

Soon I was in D.K. Ulrich's car and then Morgan-McClure's. We won my first Cup race at Bristol in 1990 and the Daytona 500 the next year. I was more of a racer than a fan. I was inclined just to think about where I would be racing the next weekend. But what a boost in credibility the 500 turned out to be. It put my career on stilts.

One day not long afterwards, Richard Petty approached me and said, "Ernie, see all those haulers in the pit area? I can go into any one of them at noontime and get a sandwich. You can't do that because of the unpredictable way you drive. If you're

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# Quote Worthy

serious, you'd better think about that." He was the biggest name in racing, and his message was easy to comprehend. I got it.

I went to (Cup Series Director) Dick Beatty and asked to address a drivers' meeting. He said that had never been done before. But I kept after him and finally he let me do it. I apologized to everyone for being too aggressive. I told them I wanted to be respected—and to be able to be welcome in their trailers. Afterwards, Rusty Wallace came up to me and said, "Good job, Ernie, but let's see what happens now."

*When my friend Davey Allison was killed in that helicopter in 1993, I replaced him in the Yates Texaco-Havoline Ford. But in 1994 I blew a tire early in the morning in practice at Michigan and crashed hard.*

You know, I'm not really sure I changed my driving all that much, but I did notice there were fewer incidents afterwards. In a funny, backwards way, I think Richard ended up giving me even more credibility.

When my friend Davey Allison was killed in that helicopter in 1993, I replaced him in the Yates Texaco-Havoline Ford. But in 1994 I blew a tire early in the morning in practice at Michigan and crashed hard. It was bad—I am told I had a less than 10% chance of surviving through the night.

I was in an induced coma for 21 days. The first thing I remember was hearing that Kenny Wallace was driving my race car.

At first, I had no clue how badly I was hurt, but I actually had to learn to talk, walk—and comprehend once again.

I was always focused on getting back in the car. One day, when I told that to a doctor, he said I would be lucky to be able to drive my daughter to school on a Monday morning. Kim, my wife, heard that. She asked to speak to the doctor privately, and she read him the riot act. She knew how important my passion was to my recovery.

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## Quote Worthy

*"DB: Have you been welcomed in NASCAR or have you been discriminated against here?"*

*WR: It's been great here."*

Dick Berggren Q&A with Willy T. Ribbs  
Speedway Illustrated  
November 2001

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**VOICE OF EXPERIENCE**

*First was a test at a road course in Florida to see how I could do with a patch over my injured eye. It went well. After a couple of more steps, we tested at Martinsville. Robert Yates always told me that when I was ready, he'd have a car for me. He persuaded NASCAR I was okay, and in my first race back I ran a good sixth, ahead of my teammate Dale Jarrett.*

Ford Motor Company stepped up big time and arranged a stepped recovery program for me. First was a test at a road course in Florida to see how I could do with a patch over my injured eye. It went well. After a couple of more steps, we tested at Martinsville. Robert Yates always told me that when I was ready, he'd have a car for me. He persuaded NASCAR I was okay, and in my first race back I ran a good sixth, ahead of my teammate Dale Jarrett.

After a couple of seasons with MB2 Motorsports, in 1999 I crashed the Busch car I owned at Michigan, five years to the day after my last accident there. It involved more head injuries, and I found I was not as functional as I was before. Completely on my own, I decided to quit. My decision. No one else's. I went home and told Kim. She was pretty happy.

Of course, there have been times I wanted to jump back in, but in my heart, I know I made the right choice. Other things began to take over.

We have a farm in Ocala, Florida, and we're a very close family. Our daughter, Jordan, is an equestrian, and there's a lot of activity around here with the horses. And, yes, our son, Jared, has followed his dad and become a racer.

He's doing really well—we have three wins this year. One of them was back out at Stockton, California. We've gone to the annual 100-lap Night of Champions event just three times, and he's now won it twice. How cool for someone with so little experience on that track! 🍀

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