

TAKE A LOOK BACK
AT THE HISTORY
OF "THE GREAT
AMERICAN RACE"
AS IT CELEBRATES ITS
50TH RUNNING.

DAYTONA

50

TURNS 50

IN 1959, a brand-new stock car race known as the Daytona 500 kicked off with a thrilling photo-finish victory by Lee Petty, who wasn't officially declared the winner until a review of newsreel footage confirmed it 61 hours after the race had concluded.

A crowd of 41,000 attended. Some drivers raced in convertibles with minimal safety features. And Petty's first-place finish netted him a cash prize of a little more than \$19,000.

Back then, it would have been impossible to envision that NASCAR, directly descended from an era of bootleggers and moonshine runners, would evolve from its provincial Southern roots into the "it" spectator sport of the new millennium—with TV ratings second only to the NFL, and top drivers like Jimmie Johnson, Jeff Gordon and Dale Earnhardt Jr. achieving rock-star status.

BY GRAHAM
FLASHNER

Few might have expected the Daytona 500 would endure for half a century. But on February 17, "The Great American Race" will kick off the NASCAR season by marking its 50th running.

"It's one of those milestone years where you get to celebrate how successful this race has become," says Lee's son Richard Petty, "The King" of racing. "Never in a million years did any of us think that the Daytona 500 would surpass the Indianapolis 500 as far as popularity. Well, we're at that point now. This is the most popular race in America."

THE HYPE IS NOT just for the fans; the Daytona 500 has also become the signature race by which drivers measure themselves. Kevin Harvick, who won by a hair in 2007, says, "The Daytona 500 doesn't compare to any other race on our schedule. It's our Super Bowl!"

Darrell Waltrip, who won in 1989, likens the prestige of winning the 500 to a golfer winning the Masters. "Everyone wants to win one," he says.

But not everyone does. Two-time NASCAR champ Terry LaBonte never won at Daytona, and Ricky Rudd failed in 32 tries. Two of the greatest drivers in NASCAR history, Mario Andretti and A.J. Foyt, each only won once. It took the late Dale Earnhardt 20 tries to win his only 500, in 1998. And Waltrip's lone Daytona victory came on his 17th try.

"Luck, good or bad, plays a large part in winning at Daytona," Richard says.

Over the years, the 500's iconic place in racing history has given it a sense of mystique unparalleled in the sport. After all, Daytona is the birthplace not only of NASCAR, but also of world-class speed racing.

In the early 1900s, wealthy Northerners fleeing the winter cold began racing specially modified cars on Daytona's beaches, which stretched 26 miles long. Fifteen land speed records were set on the Daytona sands between 1905 and 1935, but the idle rich weren't the only ones racing.

A gritty pack of enterprising young men who drove for bootleggers had built faster cars to evade police on "moonshine" rides. Soon, competitive auto racing took hold in the rural South, but a Wild West spirit prevailed. In 1948, a mechanic named William France Sr., seeing a business opportunity, created the sanctioning body known as NASCAR out of a Daytona hotel room.

MODERN STOCK CAR RACING was crowned at the opening of the Daytona International Speedway in 1959.

With its 2.5-mile paved oval and a 31-degree bank that's three stories tall at its apex, the Daytona track became an instant sensation. Waltrip calls it "the first racetrack built for high speeds to go faster than a flat surface."

Honoring the tradition of racing that had begun in the winter months, the Daytona 500 debuted on February 22, 1959. "I remember pulling into the track and thinking it was the biggest place I'd ever seen," Richard says.

Waltrip would later compare passing through the tunnel onto the infield at Daytona to "entering the gates of heaven."

That first race remains etched in legend. Three drivers—Lee Petty, Johnny Beauchamp and Joe Weatherly—crossed the finish line in a virtual dead heat. Beauchamp was declared the winner, and wasted no

time celebrating in Victory Lane—but Lee claimed he had won.

"This was before any timing and scoring," Richard says of his father's race. "Bill France held us in Daytona for three days while he looked through pictures that fans had sent in." Beauchamp's celebration turned out to be premature: Footage revealed that Petty's car had just nipped Beauchamp's, and the Petty family had the first of their eight wins at Daytona.

As the race evolved, so did the cars. Not surprisingly, the technological advances of today's stock cars leave their predecessors in the dust.

"Back then, cars did not have much modification to the body," says Buz McKim, historian for the NASCAR Hall of Fame, which is still in the works. "A Ford T-Bird looked like a Ford T-Bird... there was nothing close to the aerodynamics they have now. Racing was crude; these guys didn't know what their cars or tires would do. They were the astronauts of their day."



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SPEED MAY HAVE BEEN of the essence in race-crazy Daytona's early days, but canny drivers soon discovered their own aerodynamic techniques to outwit faster cars. By "drafting" behind a car and staying in its slipstream, drivers could reduce drag and conserve fuel.

Daytona winner in 1962, Edward "Fireball" Roberts pioneered another technique. He discovered that if he sped out from a car's slipstream, his car could then achieve an extra burst of speed that "slingshotted" him past the car he had been trailing.

In 1963, Tiny Lund unveiled a different strategy, becoming the only driver in Daytona history to win on a single set of tires. "The less time you spend in the pit area," McKim says, "the more distance you will cover on the track."

In fact, pit crews today have become as highly specialized as the cars they service. "A great pit stop can change four tires and add a can of gas in 12 to 14 seconds," McKim says.

By the 1980s, with stock cars exceeding speeds of 200mph—and with serious crashes on the rise—NASCAR clamped down, introducing restrictor plates that reduced the flow of air and fuel into the engine's combustion chamber, a safety measure that Waltrip compared to "putting extra weight on a runner."

Today, drivers agree that pure speed alone is not enough to win at Daytona.

"MOST OF THE TIME the fastest car doesn't win the race," Harvick says. "You have to play in the factor of gas mileage and avoiding the big wreck." Adds NASCAR driver Mark Martin: "Even if you do all that, you have to hope it all comes together for you just right in the end. It's a pretty tough assignment."



IMPORTANT EVENTS IN **DAYTONA 500** HISTORY



1959 The inaugural race is one of the closest in history. Three drivers crossed the finish line at virtually the same time. Johnny Beauchamp (73) celebrated, but 61 hours later, Lee Petty (42) was declared the champ.

1964 Richard Petty wins his first Daytona 500 in dominant fashion, leading for 184 of the 200 laps.

1967 Mario Andretti earns the only Daytona 500 win in his career, before going on to become one of the most celebrated drivers in racing history.



1979 The Daytona 500 becomes the first 500-mile race to be broadcast live, from flag-to-flag, on national TV. The race is overshadowed by a fist fight between drivers Donnie Allison and Cale Yarborough, a brawl that propels NASCAR to national recognition.

1988 In the first race under the new restrictor plate rules, Bobby Allison becomes the oldest driver to win (at age 50), edging out son, Davey, who came in second.

1997 Jeff Gordon becomes the youngest driver to win the Daytona 500, at age 25.

2001 Dale Earnhardt Sr. is killed in turn four of the final lap, triggering a renewed NASCAR focus on safety.

2007 In the closest finish since '59, Kevin Harvick defeats Mark Martin by .02 seconds. Martin led for the final 26 laps, but a wreck stoppage helped Harvick catch up.

**DAYTONA
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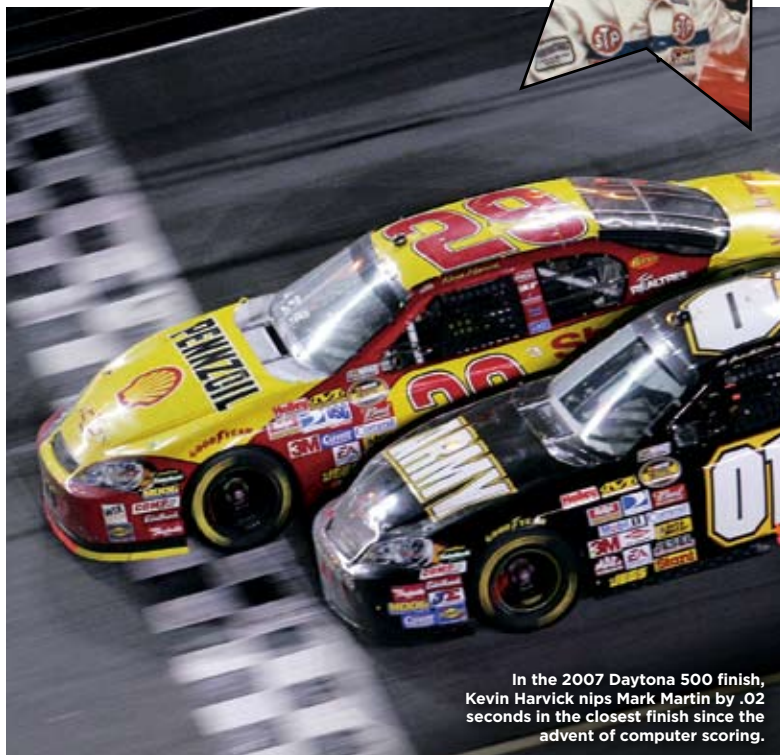
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Much else has changed since the inaugural Daytona 500. A sellout crowd of 200,000 is expected this year, with an estimated 35 million more people watching on national TV. And the winner's prize money: a cool \$1.5 million.

Twenty-four winners of the 500 will be at the 50th race, and 30 of the original winning cars—some of which still run—will be on display. To commemorate the anniversary, the Speedway and the normally silver-plated trophy will be awash in gold.

"I've been going down there for 50 years, and I still get that feeling that I've always had when I pull in there," Richard says. "You know you are in the presence of something special. It's one of those places that has a soul." ✂

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In the 2007 Daytona 500 finish, Kevin Harvick nips Mark Martin by .02 seconds in the closest finish since the advent of computer scoring.



RACE WEEK ACTIVITIES

The Daytona 500 is the culmination of Speed Week, a 10-day festival of stock car and sports car racing that offers nonstop action for the serious racing fan.

Daytona's Speed Week kicks off with the Rolex 24 at Daytona sports car race, and includes the Chevy Silverado 250 Craftsman Truck Race, Budweiser Shootout (an all-star, non-points race) and Gatorade Duel at Daytona, two 150-mile qualifying races that help determine the Daytona 500 lineup.

The Daytona International Speedway also hosts the Daytona 500 Experience, a theme park that includes track tours, braking simulators and an IMAX theater. At

the Sprint FANZONE, racing buffs can view their favorite teams and drivers at work in the garages.

And golfers can head to the famed Legends course of the LPGA International at Daytona Beach.

At the pre-race show, expect performances by musical superstars and a special flyover by the US Air Force Thunderbirds.

For more information on Speed Week events, visit www.daytona500.com.