

David Pearson

NASCAR racing might not have always been the prime-time feature it is today, but the Silver Fox driving, at least it was always competitive and exciting

By OTTO STEIN
FOR WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

Anyone who thinks contemporary stock-car racing is as good as it gets should turn off the hype and turn on their video recorder.

Pop in that fuzzy old NASCAR highlights tape that came with the magazine subscription renewal. Put it on rewind. Let it wind all the way back to, say, 1976.

When you see the number 21 painted on the side of a race car followed by the number 43, hit the stop button. Then hit play.

Settle back. Pop open a cold one. You're about to witness the thrill of stock-car racing at its fender-bending best.

Start with the Daytona 500 and watch David Pearson as he takes the checkered flag with a smashed up front end, while Richard Petty tries to push his wreck across the finish line.

For many, this was the greatest Daytona 500 in the history of stock car racing — by two of the greatest drivers in history, finishing one-two, they way they did 63 times in their careers.

The two had more shootouts than a bad western movie, driving like they had a trunk full of moonshine and posse of revenue agents on their tails. Bumping and grinding through every turn. Running in the high groove or darting down low. They were like two roosters fighting over the same hen house.

One thing is certain, if it hadn't been for Petty, the guy with the big sunglasses and the wide cowboy hat, David Pearson would be considered the most successful Winston Cup driver of all time.

"Writers were asking me ... who was the best driver I ever raced against," Petty told Stock Car Racing Magazine in 1993.

"I told them David Pearson. David and I ran more first and seconds than anybody else and we raced together on dirt tracks, superspeedways, road courses, big tracks and little tracks. It didn't make any difference, you had to beat him every week."

In a career that spanned nearly three decades, Pearson accomplished just about everything there was to accomplish in stock-car racing.

He won three out of the four National Championships that he competed in — a record that may never be matched. And while Pearson is second to Petty in total wins, he competed in only about half as many races as Petty.

Like Petty, Pearson won the Rookie of the Year award. He also became the first driver to take home the checkered flag at three of NASCAR's Big Four tracks in the same year.

And while he won a single Daytona 500 compared to Petty's seven victories, Pearson is one of only a handful of drivers to have been victorious at all four majors in Winston Cup racing: the Daytona 500, Winston 500, Coca-Cola 600 and Southern 500.

The crowning touch came in December 1999 when Sports Illustrated named him Driver of the Century.

The panel of judges included

names like Earnhardt, Petty, and Allison: drivers who shaped stock-car racing and knew the best from the rest.

Pearson was born on December 22, 1934, in Whitney, S.C.

He was bitten by the racing bug as a kid and began driving at the age of 10. He quit school while in Grade 10 to work in a local cotton mill so he could earn enough money to buy a car.

Pearson won his first race at 17 driving a 1940 Ford in a hobby race in Woodruff, S.C. The victory put \$13 in his jeans. But the money was secondary to the victory. From that moment on, the rest of his life would be spent in the fast lane.

For the next few years, Pearson cut his teeth at local dirt tracks. But in 1960, with donations from a fan club which recognized his driving skills, he bought his own late-model Chevrolet race car and headed for Daytona where he finished 18th. That same year he raced in his first World 600 in Charlotte, N.C. and finished 10th.

But The Silver Fox, as he had come to be known, was still fine-tuning his skills.

A year later, after winning three of four big-track races, he was named NASCAR Rookie of the Year and his career was picking up speed.

In 1964, Pearson won eight races while grabbing a dozen pole positions. Two years later he won the first of his three Winston Cup Championships while taking the checkered flag 15 times.

Red-line fever was running high. Pearson won 16 races in 1968 and finished in the top five 36 times to win his second driving title.

But the best was yet to come. Pearson let everyone know that he was set to defend his title in 1969 when he blistered the track at Daytona at 190.029 mph to grab the pole en route to this third championship. It was the first time anyone had ever gone over 190 at Daytona.

Pearson's most memorable race, the one most often replayed on NASCAR telecasts every year, came on February 15, 1976, at the Daytona 500. It marked the first time a Daytona 500 was shown on live TV.

Driving for the Wood Brothers, Pearson tangled with Petty as they headed for the finish line. Both cars were spinning down the front straightaway into the infield grass.

But Pearson had enough presence of mind to stomp his clutch to keep the engine running and so was able to limp across the finish line for the win.

Pearson's final season with the Wood Brothers came in 1979. Competing in only five races, he posted one pole position and one second-place finish.

Though he would return to racing on a part-time basis over the next couple of years, the Silver Fox would not race a full schedule ever again.



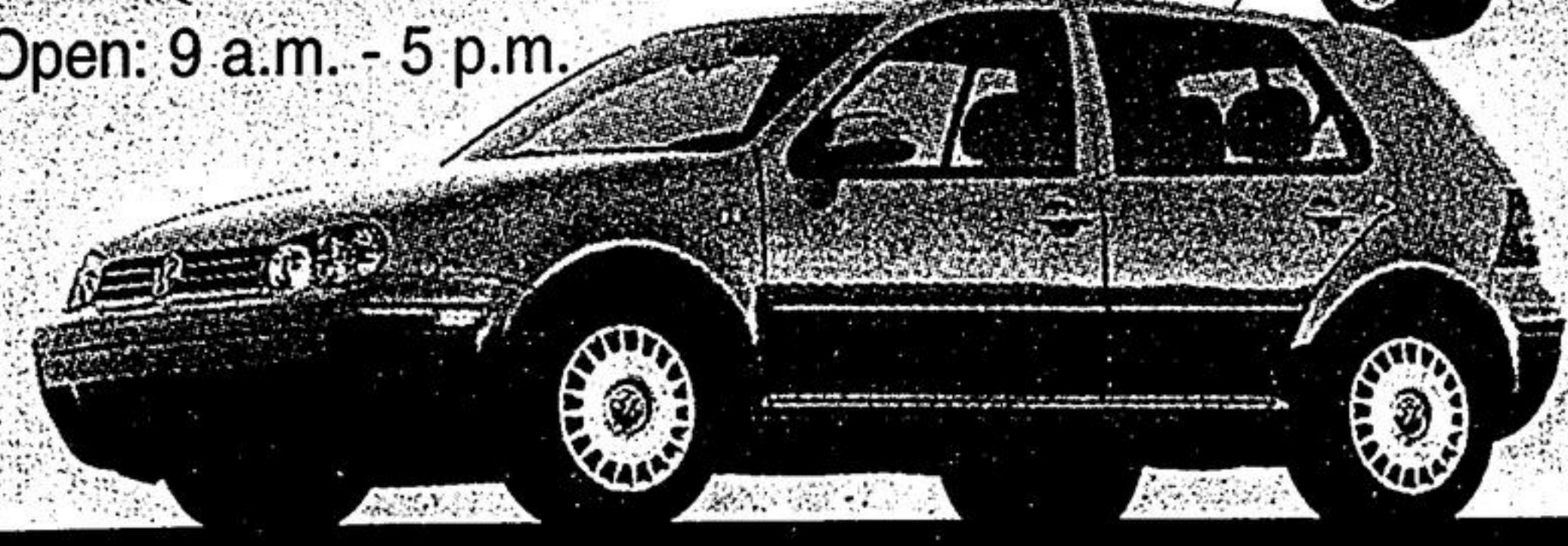
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