

He's the big man with an even bigger heart. A warrior, a schemer, a spender, a dreamer.

And just how big are Chip Ganassi's dreams these days?

Step inside his suburban Pittsburgh, Pa., office, located down on the left side of Woodland Drive, just off Powers Run Road at the mouth of the Allegheny River, and the dreams grow larger by the trophy case.

The open lobby with its glass walls and glass windows, glass trophies and glass treasurers carries a collection of awards big enough to make the neighbouring NFL Steelers jealous.

Sixty-one trophies line the showcase wall in every variety, size, shape and colour. On the opposite side of the room, just past the Ganassi gift shop, is another case. Completely empty.

"Just waiting to be filled," says a receptionist at Ganassi's racing headquarters known as TCGR. "You just never know what Mr. Ganassi's going to bring home after a weekend."

You never know.

Her words linger over the phone line. The message is all too clear.

Chip Ganassi, the one-time racer and full-time owner, is a racing mystery wrapped in an enterprise. Everywhere he goes he wins. Every circuit he tries, he seems to conquer. And he's quickly running out of tracks.

This year, competing in the Indy Racing League (IRL), NASCAR and Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART); it's conceivable his teams could actually win titles in all three series. And he hasn't even turned 50 yet.

"I guess I'm just trying to stay busy," Ganassi said at a June NASCAR stop in Michigan's Irish Hills.

Busy? Ganassi?

Aside from dividing time between all six of his racing teams, aside from a first foray into the IRL, aside from everything he has his hands in — from racing to telecommunications to the Board of Governors in Pittsburgh's infamous Rivers Club — he is still just a racer at heart. He's a guy who was unable stay in it long enough to taste his own glory as a driver, so he's creating it as an owner. A Penske wannabe. But hardly a chip off any old block.

"Someone recently said to me, 'When are you going to have some fun?' And my answer just rolled out of my mouth. I'm having more fun than ever. Racing is racing. And I just love it."

Racing has always just been racing. It was that way when Chip, then 12, was a Pennsylvania kid serving dinner to NASCAR founder Bill France Sr. at family get-togethers.

Ganassi began racing at age 5 after his father, a contractor in the asphalt business, paved a go-cart track for a customer, then found out the customer couldn't pay.

The reward? Three go-karts, given in trade, which gave Chip a quick start in a sport he instantly loved.

By 19, he was attending the Bob Bondurant Driving School then quickly working his way through the Formula Ford and Super Vee Series. By the time he turned 23, Ganassi had entered his first IndyCar race, received his degree from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and qualified as the fastest rookie for the Indianapolis 500.

"All within a 10-day period," he once said.

Race by race, he worked his way through the ranks by hauling it and riding the wind. All too soon it would come to a crashing end. One season after he was voted the Most Improved Driver by his peers, Ganassi went out and scored a career-high second-place finish, then went out for good after tangling with Al Unser Jr. later that summer. He was seriously injured. Two years later, he was seriously out of racing — for good.

You never know.

"Racing is all I ever wanted to do," Ganassi says. "And I knew I had to stay involved in some way."

And he would stay involved by slowly and surely becoming dominating — combining his family business sense, his driving experience and his spirit to never run out of gas or the will to win.

"Chip's not always the easiest person to get along with," former Ganassi CART driver Jimmy Vasser said during qualifications for the 2002 Indy 500.

"He can be a stern guy to work with. But he's a great manager. He's a great leader. And he's a great winner."

As a team owner, that part was obvious right from the start. Ganassi's first year as an owner, after purchasing a part of Patrick Racing in 1988 led to two CART wins with driver Emerson Fittipaldi. An Indy title followed, then four race wins and the championship a year later. Two more years down the road, with the sponsorship of the Target retail chain, he had his own race team, his own titles — then another — and another — winning an unprecedented four consecutive CART championships from 1996-'99 and

becoming one of the most successful teams of the late '90s.

"A whirlwind," he says.

And it has hardly let up. Two years ago, Ganassi jumped into NASCAR, hiring top-notch people to run Felix Sabates' fledgling team, then became one of only two owners (Penske was the other) to pull off a win on two different circuits on the same day. This year, he has even added the IRL as a possibility with Jeff Ward as his driver. The hard part? Deciding which race to attend. Sometimes he tries to do all of them on the same day.

"Everybody has a tool box. I think it's my job to give everybody the tools they need in their toolbox. It makes everyone's job easier if they have the right tools."

So why does he always seem to have the right ones?

Sponsorships are bread and butter and he has made a healthy diet of securing the best ones — Coca-Cola, Honda, Target. He has also stayed on the cutting edge of technology. He has hired the best. He has hardly settled for less. He has found the equation.

And he's still dreaming.

"In this business," he says. "We can win, but we can never rest."

You never know.

ⁿ Jason Stein is a feature writer and the editor of *Wheelbase Communications' RaceWEEK* racing page. He can be reached at jstein@wheelbase.com. *Wheelbase Communications* supplies automotive news and features to newspapers across North America.



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