

VINTAGE
21.1 JAN/FEB 2021 1967 GURNEY WESLAKE EAGLE MK1 | RAY EVERNHAM | USAC STOCK CAR S-PART 1 | MAZDA MX-6 CTMCA | VINTAGE MOTORSPORT



1989 IMSA IS Champion
Mazda MX-6 GT

USAC Stock Car History
Racin' Up North



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Patriot!

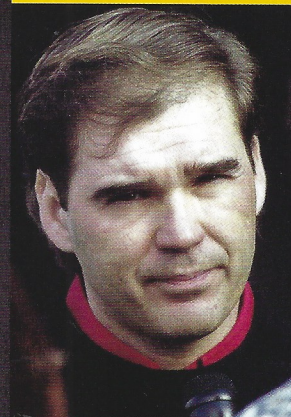
1967 Spa-Winning Gurney Weslake Eagle Mk1



My Favorite Race
RAY EVERNHAM

1995 Darlington 500

The Winston Million



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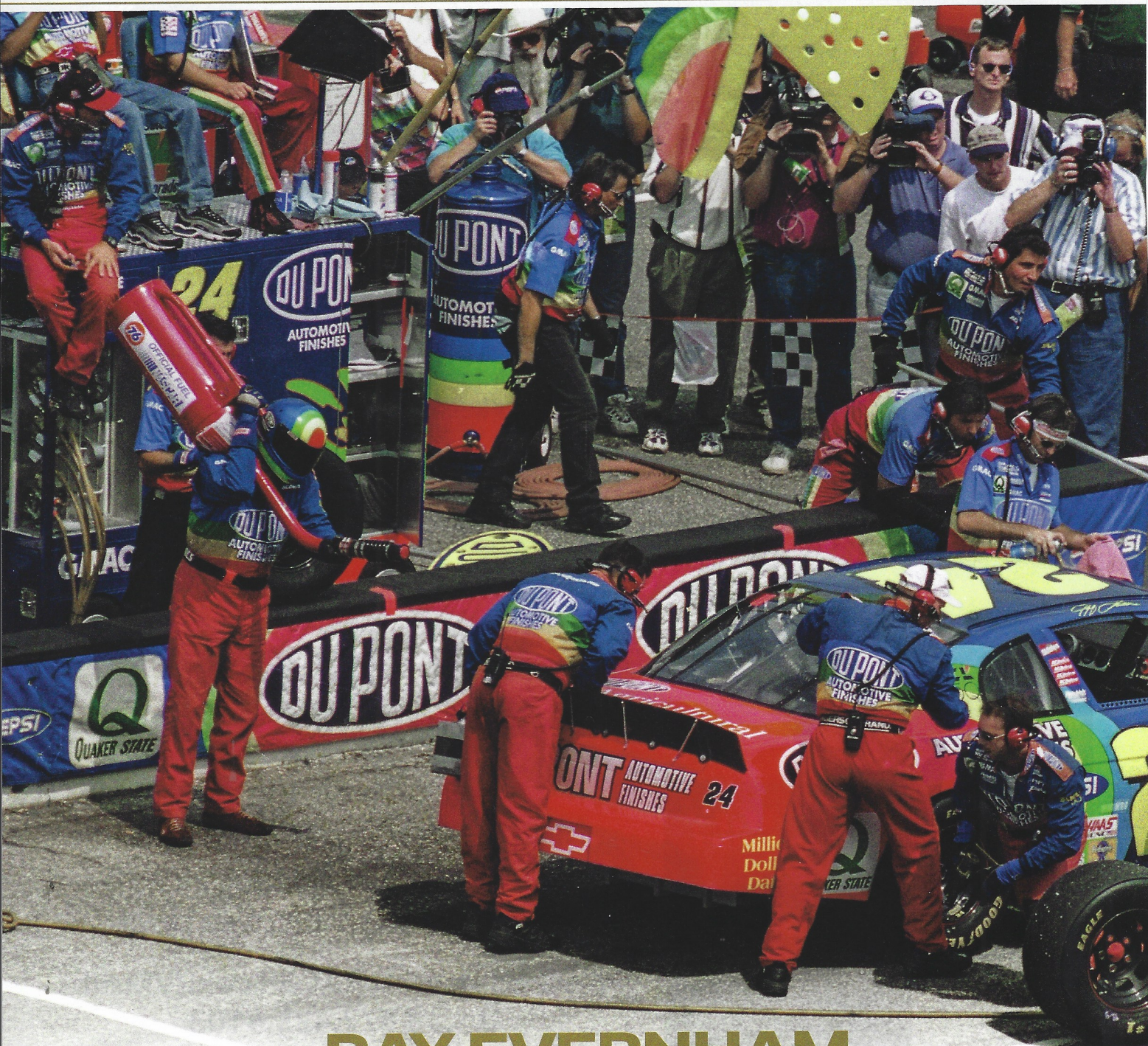


2021 1 JAN/FEB \$8.95 US \$10.95 CAN

CSRG Charity
Challenge
at Sonoma

SVRA Heacock
Classic Gold
Cup at VIR

VSCCA Fall
Finale at Lime
Rock Park



RAY EVERNHAM

1997 Darlington 500 Winston Million

BY GARY WITZENBERG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN CLEARY

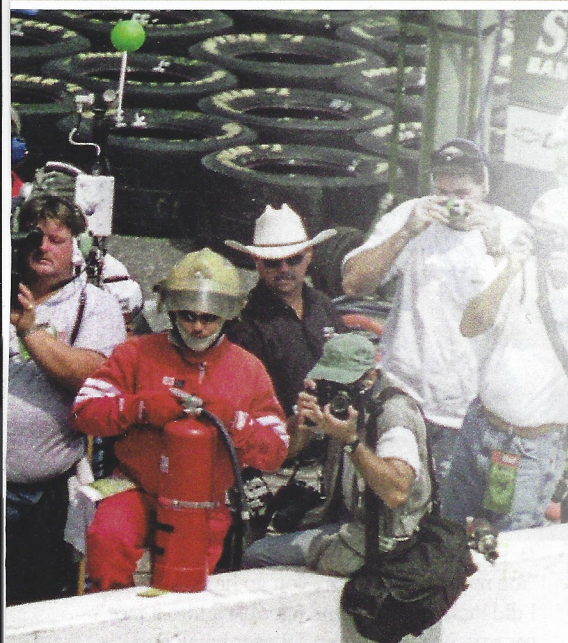
THROUGH A LONG AND successful career as driver, ace NASCAR crew chief and team owner, Ray Evernham's favorite race is the 1997 Darlington Winston Million, which he won with super-driver Jeff Gordon. It was just the second (and last) time that

coveted prize was claimed. The first was by Bill Elliott in 1985 (VM 20.3).

"With all the pressure on, it was really something to win that," Evernham exclaims. "It's my favorite because we did not have a winning car that day. It was a true team

victory. Everyone from Jeff to myself to the tire changers and mechanics came together and worked so hard to win that race, and I think that was one of the best races Jeff Gordon ever drove."

To win the Million, a team had to win



Above: Ray Evernham (in hat) thinks about changes to make the car better.
Left: The exhausted crew dealt with 100 degree temps and worked a total of 16 pit stops for their driver Jeff Gordon.



Gordon had hit the wall so many times, Evernham relates, that it bent a Panhard mount, knocked in A-frame mounts and bent the frame rails front and rear.

'We've got this,' then with two or three laps to go, Jeff Burton runs Gordon down, and on the last lap, Gordon's blocking him into the corners, they're banging and banging, there's smoke, and Gordon crosses the line to win with a car that was basically destroyed.'

Gordon had hit the wall so many times, Evernham relates, that it bent a Panhard mount, knocked in A-frame mounts and bent the frame rails front and rear. But they didn't cut a tire or break a suspension part, "and Jeff just kept driving his butt off. That was the Southern 500 in August at Darlington, so it was probably 100-plus degrees that day. Jeff was worn out, could barely stand up. I was physically and mentally spent, and the pit crew guys were wiped out. Vince Lombardi once said, 'I firmly believe that any man's finest hour, the greatest fulfillment of all that he holds dear, is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle, victorious.' That day, everybody on that team had given everything they had, we won that race, and it was a major turning point for that team."

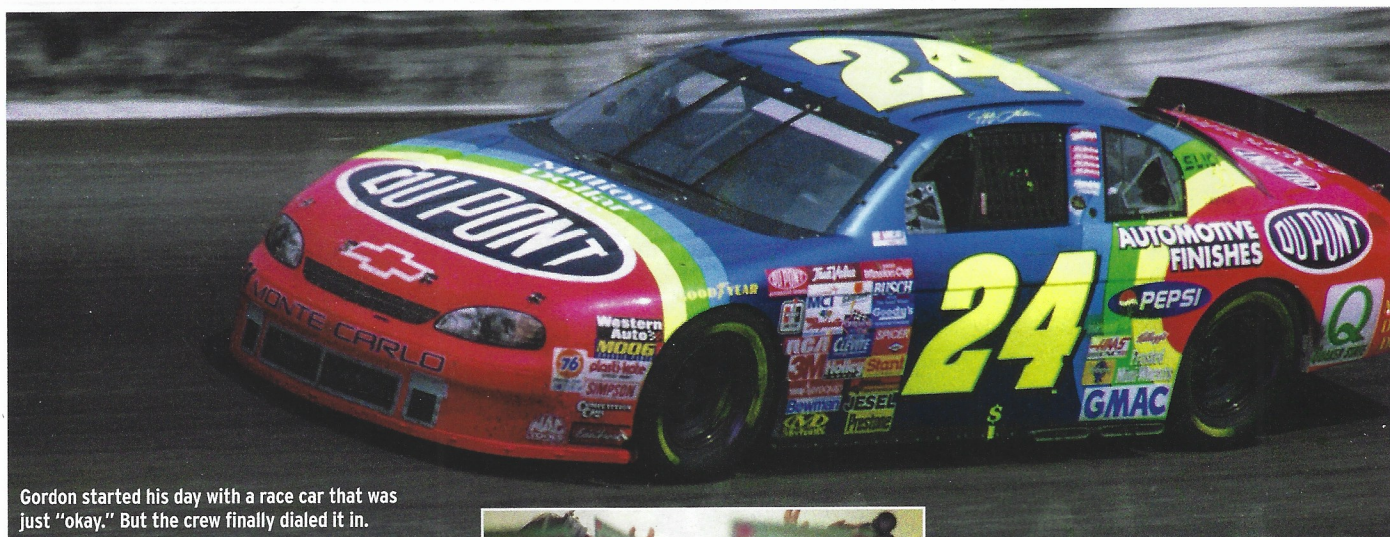
"They shot these play million-dollar bills

three of NASCAR's four "Crown Jewel" events—Daytona, Talladega, Charlotte and Darlington—in the same season. Gordon won Daytona and Charlotte that year, but not Talladega. So, with that on the line, they built a new car and changed a few things. And it did not test well. They "cut it up" and changed it again to make it more like what they had been running. And it was just okay. It had speed, Ray says, but was not good for a long run. So, they kept working and working on it.

"We made 16 pit stops in that race," he relates. "We were unhooking and re-hooking

the rear sway bar, changing spring rubbers, moving Panhard rods up and down and wedge in and out, making wholesale changes three or four at a time, plus tire changes. We had to borrow tires from our teammates and almost ran out of nitrogen to run the pit guns. But we were lucky, we played into the strategy of how many cars were on the lead lap, and there were a lot of cautions that day, so we didn't have to pit under green.

"Jeff hit the wall more than two or three times, so we were repairing damage. But we kept playing our strategy, trying to get the car better, and we finally did. And we thought,



Gordon started his day with a race car that was just "okay." But the crew finally dialed it in.

"Jeff and I had a special relationship. He's been like a little brother to me. We had a connection with the kind of magic where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

into the air, everybody was wiped out in Victory Lane looking at those million-dollar bills coming down out of the sky, and my six-year-old son was running around picking them up. First to get his cut of the prize was Uncle Sam, then Jeff, and Rick Hendrick was very generous to spread the rest through not just our 24 car team, but his whole organization. Those bonuses were not that giant, but it was more about the fact that we were all able to experience that. In your lifetime, you don't get many opportunities to be part of an accomplishment like that. I'm sure when you win a Super Bowl or a World Series or a gold medal in the Olympics, those are pure moments in life, and everyone who was part of that Darlington race that day had that feeling."

Growing up in a small town on the New Jersey shore, Evernham was car nuts from an early age and fell in love with racing when an uncle took him to a local track. After that, he says, "I don't remember wanting to do anything else but racing." He learned a lot by working on a nearby racer's modified dirt car as a high-school sophomore, then at 17 started building his own car. He had art scholarship offers but chose racing over college. "My passion was racing, and I put everything into following that dream." And he was good. "I moved up through the ranks



Four-time NASCAR Cup Champion Jeff Gordon wound up winning three of NASCAR's "Crown Jewel" races to claim the "Winston Million" prize.

locally," he says, "winning at Hobby Stocks, Late Models, Modifieds and Sportsman. I'm proud of that because I was able to work my way up through a lot of classes with zero money."

Then, in 1983, Evernham was hired by Penske to help build third-generation IROC Camaros for the revived 1984 series. "I put my driving on hold for that," he says, but felt it would be worth it. My goal was to be a professional race driver. I wanted to drive Indy cars and race at Indy, and I just knew that when I met Roger Penske and when he saw me drive my Modifieds, he would immediately hire me like Danny Sullivan and Rick Mears."

When that didn't happen, he returned to racing Modifieds and, in 1991, suffered a head injury in a crash that sidelined him for quite a while. "I thought that was the worst thing that could happen to me, but that's when I met this Gordon kid. Somebody said,

"You're hurt. Why don't you go help this kid?" I did, and the next time I got back into a race car was 2009. I took an 18-year break and got involved in NASCAR, and it worked out okay."

Yes, it did. He and Gordon partnered for 47 of Gordon's 93 NASCAR Cup wins and three of his four championships. "I'm very fortunate to have worked with a lot of great drivers—Andrettis, Unsers, Foyt, Earnhardt, Petty, Elliott—through my IROC and NASCAR careers," Evernham relates, "but Jeff and I had a special relationship. He's been like a little brother to me. We had a connection with the kind of magic where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. He is a phenomenal race car driver with a very high racing IQ and the ability to put that into language that you can understand to make the car better. He's amazing at giving feedback, processing what he feels in a car and explaining it in a way that no one else I've ever worked with could."

Evernham left Hendrick to form his own team in 1999, which was purchased by George Gillett, Jr. in 2007 and merged with Petty Enterprises (then Yates Racing) in 2009. Since winding down his NASCAR involvement, he has done TV analyst and studio work, which he loves, and vintage racing, which he loves even more. He runs a '65 427 Corvette roadster, in which he scored a class win at the November HSR Daytona 24-Hour Classic, and a 2011 tube-frame Trans Am Corvette, and a very quick '36 Chevy Modified that he calls The Ghost.

"I've been blessed," he says. "As a crew chief and car owner, I think I have over 70 NASCAR wins and probably another 40 or 50 wins as a driver. Someone asked me how long I can do that, and I said as long as I can climb in and out of the window." 🏆