

We Remember
Sir Stirling Moss

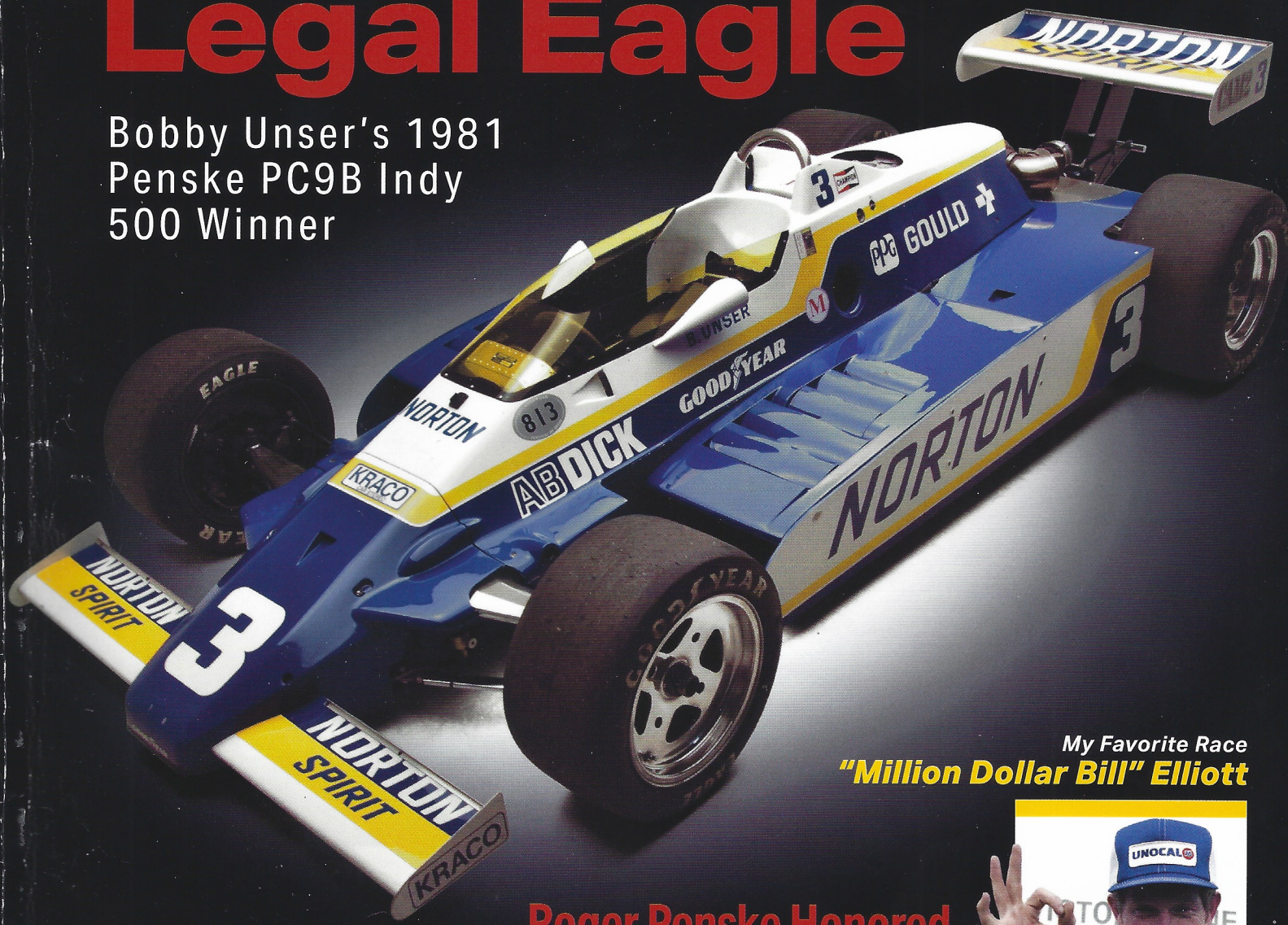
Dan Gurney's Indy Car
"BLAT" Eagles

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Legal Eagle

Bobby Unser's 1981
Penske PC9B Indy
500 Winner



My Favorite Race
"Million Dollar Bill" Elliott



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BILL ELLIOTT

1985 DARLINGTON 500—THE WINSTON MILLION

BY GARY WITZENBURG | Photography Mike Slade and Brian Cleary

WHEN BILL ELLIOTT'S COORS/Melling Racing Ford team arrived at Charlotte for the 1985 Memorial Day race, big-time pressure was on. NASCAR Cup series sponsor Winston had ponied up a prize of \$1 million for anyone who could win three of the year's four "Crown Jewel" contests: the Daytona 500, Talladega 500, Charlotte World 600 and Darlington Southern 500. Elliott's No. 9 Ford had already won Daytona and Talladega, as well as Atlanta, Dover and the spring Darlington race, so expectations were sky-high at Charlotte. The PR machines were running in overdrive with media hype off the proverbial charts.

But that million-dollar Charlotte win was not to be. "We had a good car," Elliott relates. "Good enough to win. But we had a nut break off a brake caliper, and we ran out of brakes, so we lost a bunch of laps fixing that." A soul-crushing 18th-place.

They went on to win four more races: Pocono, Michigan, Pocono again, Michigan again. And when they rolled into Darlington for the Labor Day race, the \$1 million was still on the line. "I sat on the pole and won there in the spring," he says, "so we were under a whole lot of pressure—again! And we all worked extra, extra hard on preparation to make sure we had no failures."

Elliott qualified on the pole, so his chances looked good. But it would not be easy: "I was by no means the best car. A lot of good drivers had done their homework and were running really good there that day. Gant was good, Earnhardt was good, Cale was good. Then Earnhardt wrecked, and Gant blew up. When it came down to the end, Cale and I were racing. He broke a power steering line going into Three, and I passed him. The caution came out. Then we re-started, and Cale was back. I thought he had blown up. But he was having a hard time driving with no power steering, and I was able to hold him off and beat him at the end.

"It was a good, hard-fought race. We raced everybody hard. I can't remember if it was Earnhardt or Gant who spun off in Turn 2, and I almost hit him. Then when Cale's power steering line broke, I was right behind him. I thought he'd put oil on the track, so I thought it might be over right then.

"The coolest thing was after the race. I don't think a single fan left the grandstands. It was the craziest moment that I've ever experienced in all my years of racing. Everybody just hung around, and it was like, 'Holy crap, we won this thing!' When they announced that Winston Million the year before, there was no way in my wildest dreams that I could believe that I would be in a position to do what we did, and the way we did it. The guys made no mistakes in the pits, and we just had one hell of a good run."

The Early Years

Born in 1955, William Clyde Elliott grew up the youngest of three boys in Dawsonville, GA, an hour north of Atlanta but "about as rural an area as you could possibly imagine," he says. "We had our own cows and chickens and gardens and were totally self-sufficient." His father, George, was an avid racing enthusiast who owned a building supply business. "We grew up working very, very hard and very long hours and kind of living in our own little world. We milked cows and did chores before school, then came back and worked in the afternoons."

His brothers went to college, but Bill chose not to. He told his mother, "Why waste your money and my time?" His dad co-owned local race cars and started a speed shop where he and older brother Ernie sold parts to local racers, and they went to races every weekend night and Sunday afternoons. For transportation, they salvaged cars from junkyards. "We'd go find a body we liked, drag it out of the junkyard, put our flavor to it, and drive it up and down the roads. My brother was big into street and drag racing."

Bill drove his first race while a senior in high school after his dad bought him an old, beat-up racer. But he didn't do much lower-level racing. "My dad said, 'If you're ever gonna make it, you need to go NASCAR.' He realized that was where we needed to be and steered us to that early on. He'd buy an old used race car, we'd work on it and try to make it work, and I pretty much went right to Cup. My dad sacrificed a lot for me to get where I was."

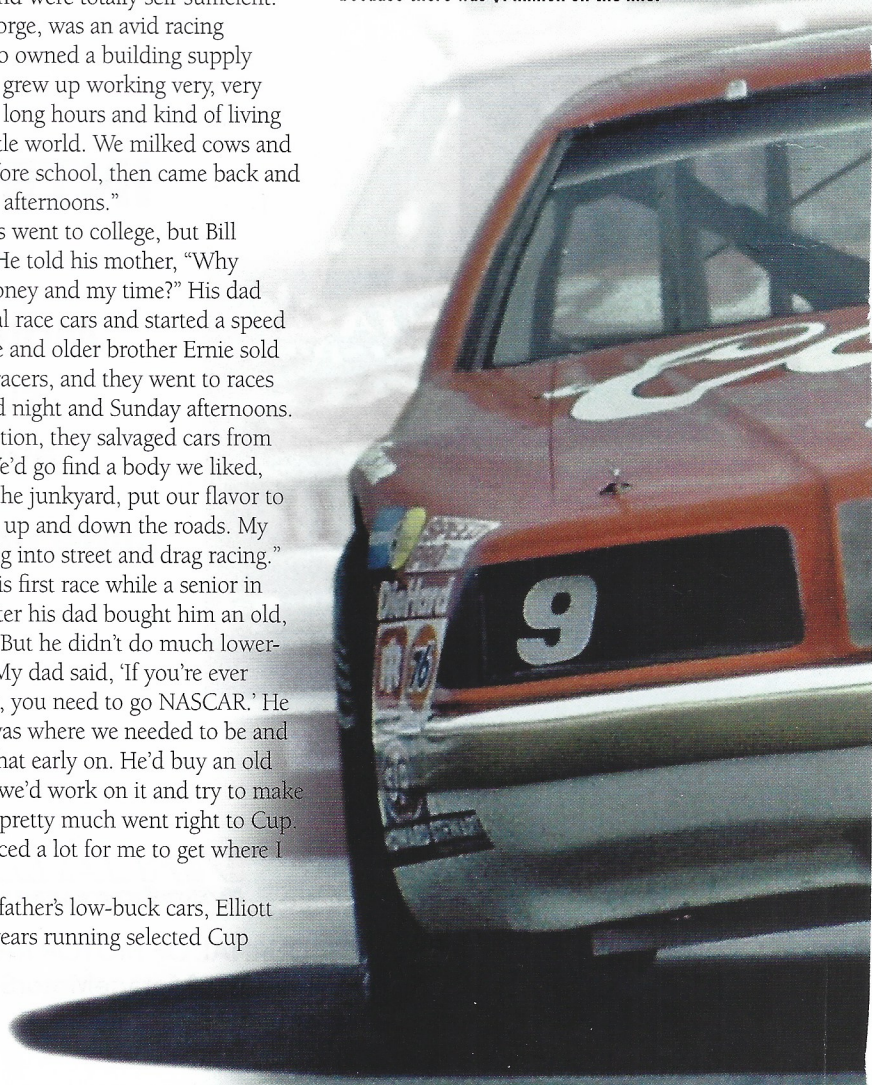
Driving his father's low-buck cars, Elliott struggled for years running selected Cup

races. "Those were tough years. Our cars were junk," he laughs. "I was shocked that we even made races in that time." The first one he (barely) qualified for was Rockingham in 1976, where his car dropped out with a failed oil pump. "That was a Richie Panch car from 1972 that my dad traded Bobby Allison out of, and it was a pile of crap, absolutely junk. We just tried to make races and tried to run, with a little bit of help from different people."

Did he feel that he was better than those cars, that he could do much better, maybe run up front, if he had better equipment?

"No," he responds modestly. "I was just glad to be there, glad to be a part of it, taking it a day at a time."

Bill Elliott's pitstops were flawless at Darlington's Labor Day race. Good thing, because there was \$1 million on the line!

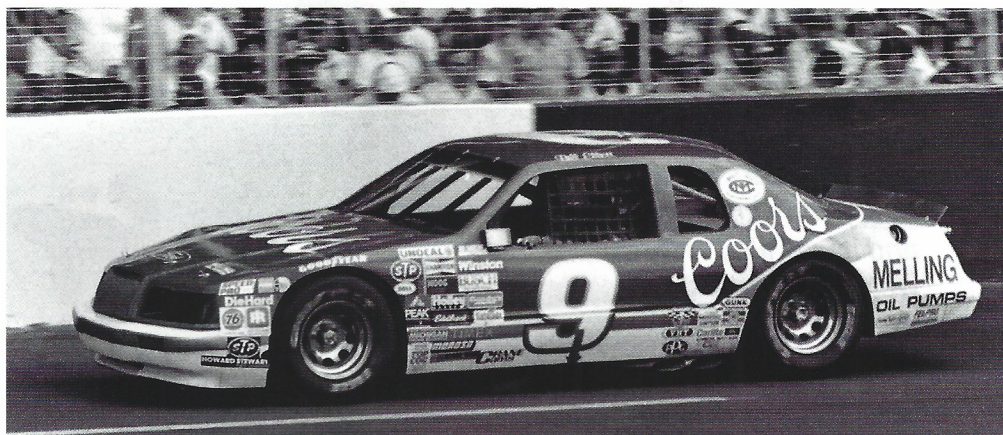


The Good Years

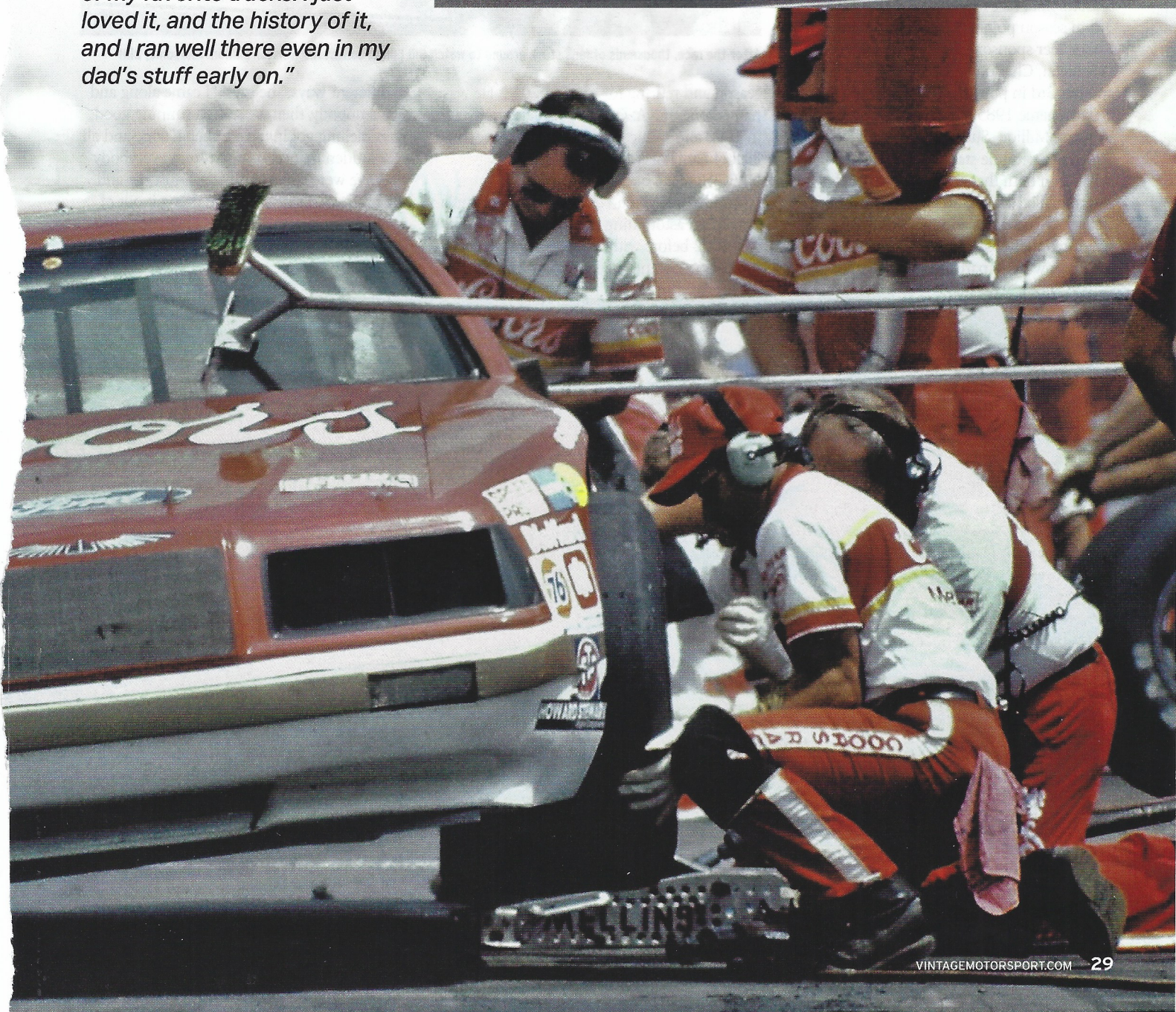
After a 10th at Charlotte in 1977, top 10 finishes began to come more frequently, and Elliott scored an impressive 2nd to his boyhood hero David Pearson at Darlington in 1979. "Darlington was always one of my favorite tracks. I just loved it, and the history of it, and I ran well there even in my dad's stuff early on. You had to go do a rookie orientation, run fast and consistent while older drivers watched you. I thought that was the coolest thing on the planet."

That result caught the attention of Harry Melling of Melling Tools, and he gave the

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Bill Elliott's slippery Thunderbird was prepared out of the family shop with brothers Ernie and Dan along with Harry Melling's support and Coors sponsorship.



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team enough money for a 12-race schedule in 1981. They scored one pole, one top-five (4th at Darlington) and seven top-10s. Then Melling bought the team, and it tallied 20 top-fives in the next two seasons—including a 2nd at the Daytona 500 and a first win in the season's final race at Riverside—and finished 3rd in season points. The next year brought Coors Beer sponsorship, three more wins (Michigan, Charlotte and Rockingham) and another 3rd in points.

Then came 1985: 11 wins and that coveted Winston Million. Suddenly, "Million Dollar Bill" was a genuine star. Media and fans called him both that and "Awesome Bill from Dawsonville." He would go on score to a stellar 55 Cup poles and 44 wins (including two Daytona 500s) and the 1988 series title before slowing to part-time after the 2003

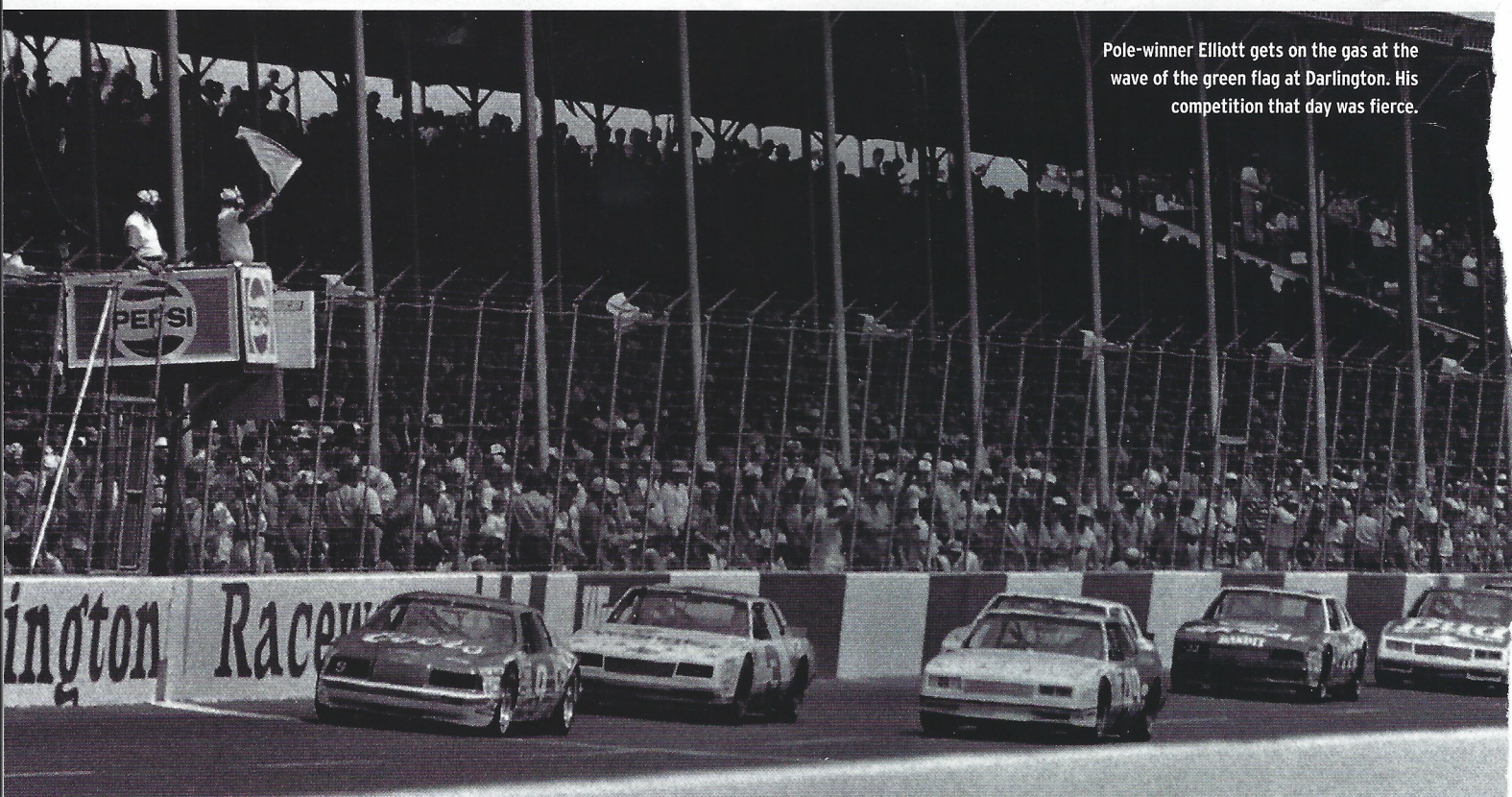


After the race, thousands of fans stuck around to watch Bill Elliott collect his Winston Million. Awesome, Bill!

season and retiring for good in 2018. He was named one of NASCAR's 50 Greatest Drivers in 1998 and inducted into the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 2007 and NASCAR's Hall of Fame in 2015.

And he was voted NASCAR's "Most Popular Driver" an astounding 16 times between 1984 and 2002 before withdrawing his name from the ballot: "I think the fans connected in a lot

of different ways," he says. "I came along and was a nobody, then we started running good, then Melling got involved, then Coors, and all of a sudden that set us apart from everybody else. We were still a family deal, just me and my brothers, Ernie and Dan, doing it out of our own shop with Harry Melling's help and Coors sponsorship. That was a cool time back then." 🏆



Pole-winner Elliott gets on the gas at the wave of the green flag at Darlington. His competition that day was fierce.