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BUDDY ARRINGTON

The Mopar **Marathon** Man

It's been almost 20 years since #67 finished his 25-year run in stock car racing. NASCAR has changed, Mopar has changed, the cars have changed, but Buddy

Arrington hasn't. I had the good fortune to meet Buddy in Martinsville, Virginia, and discovered he's still loyal to Mopar, still making the most of his talent through hard work, still very independent, and still pushes the limits... of his lawn tractor.

Born July 26, 1938 in Penhook, south-central Virginia, 25 miles from Martinsville Speedway, Buddy began racing as soon as he felt the power of a rear-wheel drive Mopar under him. His predilection for Chrysler and Mopar came from his teens, when he used to race Hemis up and down the roads of Virginia with friends, and he quickly became a fan of the Pettys. "Once you start with something, and you like it, you stay with it," says Buddy. There was never an alternative in his mind, until the manufacturer ended its supply of cars, and parts dried up, and there was no choice.

Buddy raced informally on the streets with great success. No one could beat Buddy in his '60 Plymouth Fury, (which still runs today at 68,347 miles), and he loved the feeling he got inside the cars. Without a family connection to any established racers, or the backing of a sponsor or manufacturer, Buddy turned to used racecars, parts, and friends, to launch his racing career. He bought a '62 Dodge from Cotton Owens, then received a delivery from Ray Nichols and Paul Goldsmith. "They had this truck full of parts. It really put us on the map, as far as racing," recalls Buddy. He couldn't believe his good fortune. He brought the car and parts into the garage and began working immediately. It was the fall of 1963.

"Preparing to drive in those days," he told me, "was very different from today. Racers had jobs and lives to support their racing, and Grand National events were held with multiple races per day to make the most of the racers' time and expenses. Without corporate sponsorship, intense media hype, or public popularity, NASCAR Grand National purses were small." Buddy got enough money together for tires and

gas and headed to Savannah, Georgia, to race. That day, Buddy took a few laps around the track before the rain came and the race was cancelled. "I had only been in the stands of a racetrack before. I had never even been in the pits, and here I was, a kid, drivin' in NASCAR," Buddy said.

Buddy's first official laps came at Jacksonville Speedway Park on December 7, 1963. I asked Buddy how he



Buddy Arrington and his 1964 Dodge NASCAR Grand National car.

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felt on the day of his first race and he said, “I been hit so hard, so many times I can’t remember that far back, but I’m sure I felt like the King Bee, racing against the big boys.” Jeanette Arrington, Buddy’s wife at the time, remembers things more clearly. She said he was focused, but not nervous, but that she, “started crying from the start of the National Anthem, and could barely stop through the whole race.” Buddy finished eighth of 27 cars in the field that afternoon. Those were Buddy’s first NASCAR laps in a career that totaled 147,999. Buddy’s warm smile and honest, good-natured character was well received in the racing community. He fit in well with the majority of racers, having the same background and desire to race. Life in racing was hard with all the traveling, but Buddy made life more pleasant for all around him.

Of course, life in racing wasn’t as lucrative as it is now; driving as an independent made life even harder. Buddy struggled to get by because he was never going to drive for anyone else, or take orders from anyone else. In the ’60s, owning, preparing and driving the car was possible, as long as you worked in your sleep and dedicated all your money and time to it. At some events NASCAR even financed drivers who didn’t win any money at the races in order to keep the sport going. “If you didn’t win money racing, you didn’t have the money to get home. I got money from NASCAR once or twice after the races, just so I could get back home,” admits Buddy.

Buddy doesn’t credit his hard work to his success as much as he credits his friends’ efforts. “Sis,” Sam and Brenda Leash, and Jim and Phyllis Willard are high on Buddy’s thank you list, as well as Bob Switzer and members of his family. These folks, and many more over the years, helped Buddy stay in racing and get to as many events as possible with his Mopars, for as long as he raced. Help for Buddy included packing and preparing food for race days, making travel arrangements; Switzer even set Buddy up with cars and crews in far away events like California and Canada. The money that supported

the blue and red #67 came from Buddy’s various occupations. At times during his career Buddy was a Chrysler car dealer, a property manager, and a Union 76 service station owner. However, no job generated as much interest, or as much notoriety, as bootlegging moonshine in rural, southern Virginia.

If you were a driver in the South and needed to supplement your income, you knew what to do. He knew the risks, but racing was at stake. He collected the famous Franklin County “white lightning,” and ran it across county and state lines. On his last run, in November 1969, he started in Martinsville and headed east on Virginia’s route 58 toward Burlington, North Carolina. He hadn’t been in the bootlegging business for long, he was nervous and drove cautiously. The police pulled him over and arrested him, not 20 miles from where he had started. The Chief Magistrate for the 22nd Judicial District of Virginia, James “Pops” Osborne, let him leave jail that night after Buddy promised to appear before him the next day. Buddy did as promised, as usual, and came to the courthouse prepared to pay for his crime. (Buddy is still friendly with “Pops” to this day, and recently bought back the car he drove that night). Buddy isn’t proud of the incident, and doesn’t talk about it, simply stating, “I paid my fine and didn’t do it anymore.” However, in those days, the racing community was still deep-rooted in southern, country traditions, so his occupation and subsequent legal problems gave him more credibility with the other drivers. He recalls being welcomed back to the racing fold with more pats-on-the-back and camaraderie than in years past. As he puts it, “It was like I was Junior Johnson.”

How does Buddy describe his driving style? “I laid back in most races. I drove ahead of myself so when I came out of a turn, I was looking at the next one. I had to. If I tore up the car, I had to fix it, and that cost money,” he says honestly. Finishing races in one piece was a must for the independent driver. A wreck could be season ending on the budget

Buddy had to work with. “I could’ve run harder if I had more money,” he says, looking back. Despite taking care with his car, Buddy did hit the wall...hard. In the 1969 Firecracker 400 Cecil Gordon spun out and left a wake of wrecked cars behind him. Buddy got caught up in the fray and landed in the hospital for two weeks, returning to Martinsville in the NASCAR plane. His worst wreck came the next year in the famed Daytona 500 when his winged, red Daytona got into trouble and he hit the outside wall at full speed. Hospital records show a ruptured spleen and numerous broken ribs. Buddy remembers it as the worst accident of his 25-year career.

With the Mopar connection, the blue and red paint, and the close proximity between their shops, Buddy’s strongest ties were with Petty Enterprises. Maurice “Chief” Petty, engine builder and younger brother of Richard, was a great friend to Buddy, and helped him through some rough financial times. Maurice is quoted as saying, “We helped him out. He was one of the nicest guys around. He is just a prince of a guy. We just done our best to help him when we could.” With donations and sales of parts and items the Pettys deemed unfit for racing, they kept Buddy in the driver’s seat. Maurice was drawn to Buddy’s honesty, dedication to racing and his good nature. “If Buddy Arrington said he was gonna do something, he would do it. He was as honest as the days are long. He was just a super guy. He still is,” said Maurice in a recent interview.

The relationship between the two teams did cause controversy on the circuit. In 1975, at Dover International Speedway, in Delaware, Richard Petty, “The King,” was two laps behind the lead with 20 to go, and in need of a caution. Buddy was having trouble keeping his car running due to a faulty steering box. Buddy’s car stalled on the high side of the track, bringing out a caution flag. Richard used the caution to catch up, and ended up with the checkered flag and a spot in Victory Lane. Critics discovered Buddy had bought a truck

RIGHT: In the worst racing accident of his career, Arrington hit the wall HARD, at full speed, in his #5 Dodge Daytona during the 1970 Daytona 500.

CENTER: For 1986, Chrysler didn't have a car that would be eligible to race in NASCAR. Buddy had to choose between turning away from Mopar, or walking away from NASCAR. He switched to Ford—and his Mopar fans understood.

BELOW: Again in 1982, Buddy's #67 Imperial, the last Chrysler product still competing in NASCAR, carried the Pentastar proudly to eight top-10 finishes.

from Petty Enterprises prior to the race, and supposed Buddy staged the caution in order to repay the debt. "We was good friends, but there was no deals. I bought and paid for that truck before the race and still have the receipt, and the truck. I wouldn't do that for anyone, anyhow," says Buddy. Bill France and Bill Gazaway looked into the matter in their typical swift, and unilateral manner. They found no complicity and closed the investigation. Buddy's relationship with the Petty family did more than keep Buddy in NASCAR, it also developed his son, Joey's, interest and skill in engine building.

If there ever was a person who truly grew up at a track, it was Joey Arrington. He watched his father work on, and drive





cars since the day he was born. He was a constant presence at the tracks and spent a lot of time riding on the shoulders of drivers, and being entertained by the likes of Curtis Turner. Jeanette Arrington hardly remembers seeing her son without a tool in his hand. Maurice Petty peaked Joey's interest in engine building, spent time answering his questions, and gave him freedom to test his ideas in the Petty's shop in Level Cross, North Carolina. "I think Joey used a ladder or a stool to work on his first engines with Maurice," says Buddy. By the time Joey graduated high school, in 1975, he was Crew Chief of Buddy's operation, but not because he was family and came cheap. "Joey could get more out of an engine than anyone else I have ever met. He could also manage the team well, and I never saw him stop working on something until he fixed it good," recalls Buddy of his son. The apple didn't fall far from the tree, and Joey is still working on race engines, and still loyal to Mopar and Dodge.

Buddy stayed with Chrysler through criticism of their aerodynamics and lack of participation in NASCAR. After driving a '64 Polara, Buddy drove a '68 Charger, then a winged '69 Charger Daytona, a '73 and '74 Charger, a '78 and '79 Magnum, and an '81 Imperial, even when he was the only Mopar driver, and the corporation no longer had a hand in racing. According to Buddy, Chrysler cars ranked as high with aero as anyone else's. No one could dissuade his point of view, and he had no time for people



who detracted from the cars he had been successful with. He thought the Imperial was the most aerodynamic car Chrysler had put out; he was sure of it because of the way it performed for him on the speedways.

The most memorable, and financially rewarding race of Buddy's career, was the 1979 Talladega Race in the Magnum. The weather was clear, and the car felt as good as it could get. Of his '79 Magnum he says, "It was honkin. It felt real good. My Magnum was the fastest car out there. I could pull out and pass them anytime, anywhere I wanted." Buddy also remembers the fans going crazy for him. "You could hear the fans over the noise of the cars, and fans were climbing the fences with banners for me, and cheering me on," he says. Buddy was running out front, when he pulled into the

pits, a clear favorite. It was, unfortunately, not-to-be for the legendary Mopar marathon man. When Buddy drove into his pit box, he didn't recognize some of the crew because members of other teams had come by to help him pit. When the #67 pulled out, the gasman had left the can still mounted in the hole. Buddy was forced to come back to pit road and lost a lap. The #67 lost the race to Bobby Allison and Darrell Waltrip, finishing third. The twist of the story is, he finished ahead of the manufacturer-supported field, and ahead of Richard Petty, the man who gave him his car, after Petty no longer wanted it.

"As far as I'm concerned, I won that race," says Buddy to this day. Not many would disagree. On returning home to Martinsville, his hometown fans thought so too. Service stations were decorated in



ABOVE: In 1982, Buddy (at podium) had his best season ever, finishing seventh in Winston Cup points. Seated, left to right are: Bill France Jr., Dale Earnhardt Sr., Ely Gold and Richard Childress.

FAR LEFT: Although Richard Petty was never very complimentary regarding the Dodge Magnum's aerodynamics, Buddy's Magnum was the fastest car on the track during the 1979 Talladega race until a pit miscue put him a lap down. He recovered, and finished third—in the car Petty had given to him.

LOWER CENTER: In 1972, a mishap put Buddy out of the race at Talladega. Son, Joey Arrington (right, in the blue shirt) was his dad's very young Crew Chief.

banners and there were people outside his house to welcome him. The attention was great, but Buddy never forgot that fans' memories are short, and you're only as good as your last race. In Winston Cup, the next race was a week away, so glory could only last a week. I asked him if he forgave the man who left the gas can in the car and he said, "I never worried too much about that, and don't even know who he was."

The '80s brought new Mopars to Buddy. He and Joey campaigned an '81 Dodge Mirada for all of the 1981 and 1982 NASCAR seasons. For superspeedway races in those years he used the '81 Imperial, alternating between the Mirada and Imperial in the 1983 season. For 1984 and 1985, Buddy continued to use Imperials on superspeedways and a Cordoba (a Mirada Joey converted by

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changing the nose cone and bumper assembly) for short tracks.

In 1982, Buddy had his best overall season in the thirty-race schedule. He attributes the success to the investments he made in his engines. "We bought new blocks, cranks, rods and pistons that year." With the new components, and hard work, Buddy showed the world he had the skill to win races if he had the equipment. Only Cup-winner Darrell Waltrip completed more laps that year, and Buddy finished seventh overall in the NASCAR Winston Cup Series with eight top-10 finishes, an amazing accomplishment for an independent racer in that era.

With the influx of big corporate money from R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, and the creation of the Winston Cup Series in 1972, the popularity of stock car racing increased, as did the stakes. Manufacturers spent more on development, sponsors gave more to the teams, and teams needed to spend big money to compete. Independents like Buddy were out of the loop and tried to catch up to the money. By the mid-'80s, "it was awful for the sport to get as big as it got, and you had to go out and get a big sponsor to make ends meet on those racecars," said Buddy. He was a driver, not a PR guy, so getting sponsors and doing public appearances wasn't what he wanted to do. Things got harder for Buddy when Chrysler took less of an interest in performance engineering, NASCAR racing, and therefore, Buddy. Buddy and his team worked through the trouble, staying loyal to Chrysler and accepting whatever they could occasionally offer. Sometimes he'd get a block or two; other times he received sheetmetal. But he never saw the spare parts he needed. The dilemma for Chrysler was, it had race fans, and race drivers, but didn't want to spend money to produce parts for cars they no longer made. Buddy understood that, but said at the time, "there are a lot of Chrysler fans left out there; if you could see my fan mail, you'd see that. They don't care whether we're racing the Imperial, a K-Car, or a Daytona. They just care because it's a Chrysler car, got Chrysler's name on it, and that's what it's all about!"

In June 1985, Buddy was again the only Mopar in the field, and he faced a difficult decision. Ford and Chevy were spending a lot of time and money on their performance engines, while Chrysler's V8 engine development program had

moved away from NASCAR racing. The Arringtons had learned how to harness enough power from the older Mopar small blocks, and they were willing to stay with Mopar a few more years. However, for 1986, Chrysler didn't have a car that would be eligible to race in NASCAR. Buddy had to choose between turning away from Mopar, or walking away from NASCAR. The Budweiser 500 at Riverside, California, was the last race Buddy ran with Mopar, but it wasn't his last race.

I asked Buddy why he thought Chrysler left NASCAR. "I think it was over the Hemi stuff. The Hemi was so far ahead of everyone else, and NASCAR just kept taking stuff away from Chrysler, that they got tired of it. The Chrysler people and France never got along so good to start with anyhow," Buddy recalls.

Buddy used his friendship with Bill Elliot to procure Ford Thunderbirds and parts to race. Mopar fans understood why he switched, and still supported him. In 1986, Ed McDowell, of the *WPC News*, a publication of the WPC Club, Inc., wrote, "All Chrysler fans owe Buddy Arrington their thanks for holding out as long as he did. Maybe, one day, Chrysler will go back into NASCAR. In the meantime, every die-hard Chrysler fan will probably wish Arrington and #67 the best of luck with his new deal." Those words were spoken out of genuine respect and admiration for a man of character, talent, and loyalty to Mopar.

In 1986, the Martinsville newspaper announced Buddy's retirement from NASCAR. Buddy was apparently tired of owning, preparing and driving in Winston Cup. Driving now seemed less of a sport, than a media event, and he didn't want to face it on a fulltime basis. "In the late '80s and today, a driver has a full-time job handling driving and PR work," says Buddy. Instead he hired a young man who could be a media darling, attract sponsors and still drive a car. Buddy chose Eddie Bierschwale, a young journeyman driver to take the wheel of the Thunderbird. Bierschwale saw the opportunity to ally himself with Buddy as a great opportunity to learn from a true NASCAR legend. Of course, Buddy had a backup plan in case he missed driving. "I'll drive some races, probably Martinsville, but it won't be in one of our cars. It will be for another team," said Buddy. In reality, he wasn't ready to retire, and he raced 20 races in

The Arringtons had **learned how** to harness **enough power** from the **older Mopar** small blocks, and they were willing to **stay with Mopar** a few more years. However, for **1986**, **Chrysler** didn't have a car that would be eligible to race in **NASCAR**.


1987. In 1988 he only raced 4 of the 29 races, but still finished with an average finishing position 9 places higher than his average starting position. At age 49, Buddy finished his 25-year driving career in Daytona at the Firecracker 400 on July 2, 1988. He was finally ready to stop driving, but he didn't leave NASCAR just yet.

At Daytona, in 1989, Buddy owned a car in NASCAR with Joey as his crew chief, and Brad Teague as his driver. The team qualified for the Daytona 500 on Thursday and was ready to race. Another team, sponsored by GMAC out of Ohio, failed to qualify, and Buddy made them an offer. He gave them a chance to buy his starting position, his car, and his motor


right there on the spot. They accepted, and with that deal, Buddy Arrington left NASCAR and never returned. Joey, however, didn't leave racing. He walked out of the Daytona garage that Thursday evening and bumped into some Mopar people. "They were just standing there looking a bit troubled. They were just starting in ARCA racing, and having trouble getting their engines ready. They asked me to help them. It was like getting fired and hired in ten minutes," says Joey. That was the beginning of Joey's engine building for the Mopar organization, and the break he needed to stay in the sport that was his life.

Today, Joey is still building performance Dodge engines, active


with Dodge R&D racing programs, and is still close with his father. Buddy's still a favorite among people in Martinsville, and his warm smile still hasn't left his face. He owns a Dodge used car lot, but never goes to the Martinsville Speedway or any other NASCAR event. Mopar is back in NASCAR, "but stock car racing is nothing like it was, and I want no part of it," he says. I asked him if he missed it and he said, "no," very quickly. He's also stopped working on engines, and stays out of Joey's 100,000 square-foot engine shop. He still works seven days a week, and has no intention of slowing down. His normal car is a Jeep Grand Cherokee, to have room for his dogs, but he's happiest driving his lawn tractor. ■



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