

Daytona 500 – Looking Back

Front-row Seat at Famous Fracas

Never come between an angry Yarborough and his prey, local man says of NASCAR brawl

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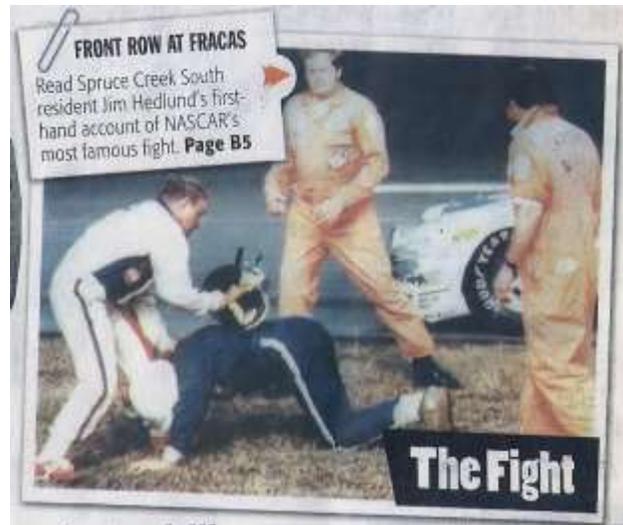
Cale Yarborough and Donnie Allison were side-by-side, both vying for the Daytona 500 win in 1979.

But neither would walk away the winner year. Instead, a crash on the backstretch on the final lap would give Richard Petty, who was half a lap behind, his sixth Daytona 500 win.

But Yarborough and Allison have gone down in history for that race, the first one fully broadcast on television, because of a fight they got into following the crash.

Spruce Creek South resident Jim Hedlund had the best view of anyone at the track as the events unfolded.

“It was all really Cale Yarborough’s fault,” Hedlund said. “It was 100 percent his fault as far as I’m concerned.”



Front-row Seat

Hedlund was working as an EMT for the Daytona 500 in 1979, positioned at a corner where he could see Turns 3 and 4 as well as the backstretch, different from his usual position between Turns 3 and 4.

“It was good because I saw everything happen,” Hedlund said.

The accident started in the backstretch, Hedlund said. Yarborough was on the inside, Allison on the outside. Yarborough bumped Allison on the left corner.

“I’m thinking it’s going to end up in Turn 3,” he remembered. “Cale turns his wheel to the right to run Donnie up into the wall. Well, they’re going to run right into the bank.

“Cale got back on the track and ran (Allison) off of Turn 3. (Cale) has his wheels cranked to the right where he did that on purpose,” Hedlund said, adding that he even has pictures he took to prove it.

Once the cars hit the wall, Hedlund was required to take the drivers to the medic building, even though he could tell by the angle at which they hit the wall that they weren’t in trouble.

However, as he made his way over to the men, one of the most historic moments in NASCAR took place: the fight between Yarborough, Allison and Allison’s brother, Bobby.

“We were actually right there when the first one hit,” Hedlund said, referring to himself and his partner at the site. “We had to get them separated so no one would get hurt. We had to get them into the care center.”



George Horsford / Daily Sun
Jim Hedlund of Spruce Creek South, in one the most lasting images in NASCAR history, separated Cale Yarborough from Bobby Allison during the final lap of the 1979 Daytona 500. The hot-headed Yarborough didn't want to be restrained and threw Hedlund like a sack of potatoes.

Hedlund said it wasn't a shock that the men got into the fight. He said tempers tend to fly when crashes occur, especially Yarborough's.

"(Yarborough) was just such a hothead," Hedlund said. "He was the past champion the year before and he thought he was going to win the race, I guess."

However, what surprised him was that the men were willing to get into it like that on national television.

"I didn't think it was going to be pretty, but I didn't think they were going to go at it the way they did," he said.

And as Hedlund watched it happen, he saw Yarborough make two mistakes.

"If I was going to get in the fight, the first

thing I'd leave on is the helmet," Hedlund said.

The first thing Yarborough did, though, was take off this helmet.

"So it wasn't a smart fight at all."

Then came mistake No. 2.

"Cale hit Donnie first," he said. If Yarborough didn't hit him, Hedlund said the whole fight would have been avoided. "(Yarborough) was really hot and upset, went over to Allison's car and started swinging at him."

Then Bobby pulled up to the crash site, and Yarborough ran over to his car swinging his helmet, Hedlund said.

Bobby remembers the helmet hitting him in the face, cutting his lip and giving him a bloody nose.

"It stunned me and surprised me and I said, 'I got to get out of the car and address this right now or run from him the rest of my life,'" he remembered. "So I had to get out and address it right now. So I got out of the car and the guy started beatin' on my fist with his nose.

"That's my story and I'm still sticking to it"

It took about ten minutes to break up the fight, and in there, Hedlund got a broken thumb.

"I went to get a hold of (Yarborough), put a hold around his neck from the back," Hedlund said. In one of the most infamous pictures from the fight, Hedlund can be seen heading toward Yarborough. "Shortly after that picture was snapped, I grabbed him around the neck and he threw me like a sack of potatoes.

"I didn't know Yarborough used to play semipro football."

A Lasting Effect

Hedlund said the fight got people really excited about NASCAR.

"I think it was one of the best performances they could get," he said.

Today's NASCAR racers feel it helped kickstart the sport's national popularity.

"That made the Daytona 500 a lot more popular than it was before," said 2007 Daytona 500 winner Kevin Harvick. "Everybody loves a good fight."

Mark Martin said the fight took NASCAR from a regional sport to something that was followed by the nation.

"They were the heroes, the he-men, of the racing world," he said.

And it left a lasting impression on Hedlund's life.

"I'm glad to be part of it because it's my picture all over the country and I've met a lot of people over it," he said. "This should get your five minutes of fame."