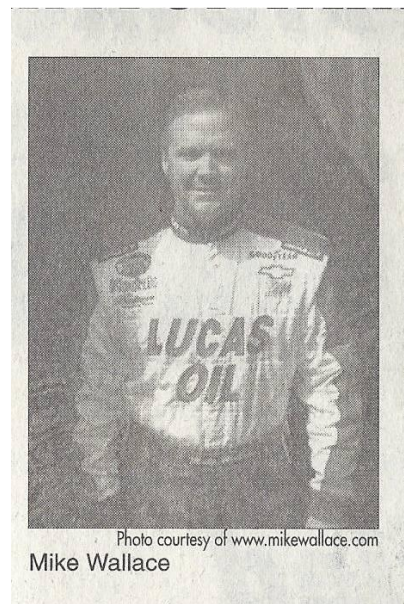


NASCAR driver Mike Wallace gets humble start at I-44

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The Lebanon I-44 Speedway has seen several top drivers roll through the track on their way to bigger and better things.

NASCAR driver Mike Wallace is just one of the big-name drivers to leave his mark on the speedway. In 1990, Wallace won the Mid-America NASCAR Region Championship held at I-44 Speedway. That season, he won 21 out of 29 feature races. During that year, Bradley Willard sponsored Wallace. "I had a great time driving for the Willards," Wallace said. "Brad Willard owned my car." "It was the creation of a wonderful friendship," Wallace said.

Living in the St. Louis area at the time, Wallace would drive to Lebanon and race Saturday night, spend the night with the Willard family, then race the following evening at Bolivar. He said he would travel home Sunday evening to be at work Monday morning. "It was actually the first time I had driven a car for someone else. I had always driven my own cars," said Wallace.

Wallace said he met the Willard family at a race one evening, and the rest progressed from there. "I was at the point in my career," Wallace said, "I had done a lot of dirt track racing and it was to the point where I needed to go asphalt to further my career."

Bradley Willard, who was recovering from a broken neck due to a racing accident in 1989, recalls that he wasn't initially very keen on sponsoring a driver at the time. He said it was his dad, racetrack owner Bill Willard, who talked him into doing it. "Dad came to me and said, 'I want you to have a car for one more year' and I said, 'I don't want one,'" Willard said. "I worked on them day and night since I was 29 to when I was 39; 10 years. And I really didn't have any desire and I was getting over where I had full movement (in my neck) and it wasn't sore all the time. Dad talked me into it, which he could do very easily.

"I knew Mike pretty well, you know, but not like I got to know him that summer. He is one nice guy."

Wallace said his wins at Daytona could possibly be his most memorable. He was the inaugural Craftsman Truck Series winner at Daytona in 2000 among other truck series wins. He has more than 300 short track wins in his career. Wallace, as of June 23, 2005, is 35th in NASCAR points standings with 1,156 points.

Wallace was interviewed via the telephone while he was driving to his shop to prepare for the Nextel Cup Series race Dodge/Save Mart 350 in Infineon Raceway in Sonoma Valley Calif. In 1999, Wallace traveled to Motegee, Japan, for a NASCAR race where he started the race in the pole position. "Those are the highlights of your life, to sit on the pole in a race in a foreign country..." Wallace said. Wallace was in the lead that race until, with 20 laps remaining, he blew an engine.

Like many professional race car drivers, Wallace grew up on the dirt circuit. "I grew up dirt racing in the Midwest when I was growing up in St. Louis," Wallace said. Wallace said his first race car was a 1957 Chevrolet that he raced in the Sportsman division. Wallace drove many races at tracks such as Capital Speedway in Jefferson City, Tri-City Speedway in Granite City, IL. And I-55 Speedway in Pevely, MO. He said he also made a few appearances to I-44 Speedway in 1988. He said his best dirt races came from Tri-City Speedway, winning 12 races in a row, but he wanted to try other competition that season.

Wallace said in the early '80s, he took a break from racing, but came back to drive a race at the speedway at Lake Ozark and hasn't looked back since.

On Saturday, July 30, Wallace and his brothers Rusty and Kenny will travel to the Gateway International Speedway in Madison, IL for the Wallace Family Tribute 250 presented by Shop 'n Save. Wallace said the race will be the first time the family has raced in a Busch race together. Brothers Rusty and Kenny complete the NASCAR racing family trio. But the family affair is beginning to run a little deeper now. "My daughter's incredibly fast," Wallace said about his middle daughter Chrissy. At 17, Chrissy currently is the points leader in the Legends class of racing at Lowe's Motor Speedway. Wallace said Chrissy may soon be driving a Late Model car with tentative plans to go NASCAR. He also said his 9-year-old son, Matt, is beginning to race in a 20-horsepower Banderlara car division.

When asked about his popularity and fame, he responded humbly. "I don't consider myself famous. I consider my brother and Jeff Gordon (and those guys) as famous," Wallace said. "I am the same person I was in 1990 in Lebanon, MO." He said.

