



The Associated Press
Photo illustration by Mike Orton / Daily Sun
Above: Ronald Reagan, the first sitting president to watch a NASCAR race, congratulates Richard Petty on his 200th win following the Firecracker 400 on July 4, 1984. **Right:** Buster Burt is seen before the first race at Daytona International Speedway in 1959.

25 YEARS AGO, BUSTER BURT WITNESSED RICHARD PETTY'S 200TH WIN –
A RECORD THAT...

NEVER WILL BE BROKEN

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By Keith Chartrand

Although Villager Buster Burt has had a love-hate relationship with Florida, he certainly has been involved with some of the state's most significant racing moments.

Originally from York, Maine, Burt had two stays in the Sunshine State before finally settling into his Village of Country Club Hills home.

"I joined the Air Force in 1951 and was sent to Orlando in '52," Burt said.

Somehow the enlisted man, who started racing cars when he was 20, built a car in Orlando and raced while he was on active duty.

"I got away with it," Burt said. "I probably shouldn't have. If I got hurting (racing cars) I would have gotten killed (by the officers)."

Those were the days that Burt loved. He raced in Orlando, Tampa and Lakeland – even on the beaches of Daytona.

Burt had the thrill of participating in the first race at Daytona International Speedway back in 1959, exactly 50 years ago.

"I was so nervous," Burt recalls of the historic ride. "We raced like eight or nine laps, then we blew up."

Burt's stint in Florida with the Air Force ended quite shortly after the inaugural season at Daytona International Speedway. He was sent to Maine and then to Fairbanks, Alaska, until he was decommissioned in 1971. From 1971 to 1982 he and his wife Zeoann were in Kittery, Maine, before coming back again to the Sunshine State. This time the destination was Oak Hill, a small town just 30 miles south of Daytona, the site of his historic ride.

It was sheer coincidence that they were that close to the Speedway.

"We just liked the location, I guess," Burt said.

Well, not really. This new retiree was bored.

"We bought a place and I hated it," Burt said. "Hated every minute of it. I didn't have anything to do."

The one thing Burt did have to do was go to the races at the Speedway – both of them each year from 1982 to 1987 before moving back to Maine.

That included the most historic win in NASCAR's history which happened exactly 25 years ago today – Richard Petty's 200th at the 1984 Firecracker 400.

Any race at Daytona is an event unto itself. This particular July 4 race included some political fair. President Ronald Reagan became the first sitting president to attend a NASCAR race. In what many consider a monumental event, Reagan gave the 'Gentlemen, start your engines' call as Air Force One was landing at the Speedway.

The 40th president of the United States sat next to Bill France Jr., the head of NASCAR and the owner of Daytona International Speedway. Burt was about 30 yards away.

"We'd turn around and see the top of (Reagan's) head every now and then," Burt said. "There were security guards everywhere."

Petty's Pontiac started the holiday race from the sixth position. Cale Yarborough had the pole with a qualifying speed of 199 mph. There were three caution flags during the race with the most critical at the start of lap 158 of the 160-lap race. Petty, the race leader at the time, was a half car ahead of Yarborough just as they crossed the start-finish line when Doug Heveron crashed in turn one. The yellow came out and three-quarters of lap 158 would be a mad dash to the start-finish line between Petty and Yarborough.

"When you turn at the start-finish line you look into the first and second corner as far as you can see," Petty told TV announcer Jim Lampley in a post-race interview. "And when I saw the car in the infield I hit the pedal to the floor."

It certainly looked as if the race would end under caution. Whoever crossed the line at the end of lap 158 would almost certainly win the race. Yarborough briefly passed Petty on the back stretch but Petty regained the lead. Coming out of turn four, the home stretch proved to be one of the most dramatic finishes as Petty's light blue No. 43 and Yarborough's white and orange No. 28 traded paint as they ran neck-and-neck. Petty's Pontiac edged out Yarborough's Chevy by a fender length to complete lap 158. The final two laps did in fact end under caution and The King had his 200th victory.

In full celebration mode Petty did more than high-five a couple of people and spin out his Pontiac.

"He came running toward us," Burt said. "He ran across the track – they opened the gate for him – and up through the grandstands."

Right to Reagan.

"The thing that I do remember was that (Petty) was on the dead run. He could run," Burt said.

Reagan, a former sports announcer among other things before his political career, called four or five laps on the radio that day.



PETTY'S DOMINANCE

- **No. 1** — Total victories (200)
- **No. 1** — Poles won (123)
- **No. 1** — Consecutive years with at least one victory (18; 1960-1977)
- **No. 1** — Consecutive wins in a year (10; 1967)
- **No. 1** — Wins as the pole-winner (61; 49 percent)
- **No. 1** — Races started (1185)
- **No. 2** — Consecutive years with at least one pole (18; 1960-1977)
- **7-time Season Series Champion** (1964, '67, '71, '72, '74, '75 and '79)
- **Won 7 Daytona 500 races** (1964, '66, '71, '73, '74, '79, '81)
- **Won 3 Firecracker 400 races** (1975, '77, '84)

Graphic by Mike Orton / Daily Sun

Petty's beeline to Reagan seemed to be a gesture of welcoming the president to the world of stock cars.

"With all the presidents that there have been in the United States, this is the first one that has ever showed up at a race track," Petty said to Lampley with Reagan at his side. "Everybody's got to love that from a racing standpoint and I wanted to be the first one to welcome him to racing."

The victory, which came two days shy of Petty's 47th birthday, capped a career that no driver will ever be able to achieve again.

It's one of those records in sports that will never be broken.