

Buster's Story

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By Joe VanHoose

Arthur "Buster" Burt watches NASCAR races on television almost every Sunday. He sees the cars draped in colors of Fortune 500 companies thunder by grandstands packed with 100,000 fans. He can't believe this is the same sport he got into in 1949.

"It was so different then. We were just farm boys who did it as a hobby," he said. "Now, it's this big corporate business. I would have never thought it would go this far."

The races he watches now are a far cry from a small dirt track in Maine where he got his start. Sitting in the grandstand with a couple of friends, Burt heard the announcer call for anyone who had a car in the parking lot who wanted to race. Burt stood up and grabbed his keys.

"I knew I shouldn't do it, and my buddies thought I was crazy," he said. "But I finished fifth, and I didn't hurt the car."

"From that point on, I had the bug."

Burt raced regularly from 1950 to 1963 and has stayed close to the racing business for more than 50 years. Earlier this year, he was inducted into the Maine Motorsports Hall of Fame. Last Wednesday, he spoke as an honorary guest at a meeting of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.

"It's so great to have a guy like Buster who was there when this sport began," said club president Glen Carter. "We are losing a lot of these people these days, so we need to celebrate them and learn from them."

Burt's career stands out, begging the question of what might have been. After racing at Oxford Plains Speedway in Maine, he joined the Air Force and transferred to Orlando. He quickly became a favorite at tracks in Orlando, Lakeland and Melbourne.

"The first time I raced down here, I rolled a car over the fence," Burt said. "But I learned quickly how to make the car stick in the corners."

"We figured out that handling was more important than speed, and we got our car handling great."

Burt also raced in two of the last races held on Daytona Beach in 1957 and 1958, and at the first race at Daytona International Speedway in 1959. He competed in the sportsman division and ran nine laps before his engine expired. Still, the high-banked 2.5-mile superspeedway – the only track of its kind in 1959 – left an impression on the dirt-track driver.

"I remember we were going through inspection, about to go out on the track for the first time, and my leg was shaking so bad I couldn't stand," Burt said. "I never raced on a track where you could mash the accelerator the whole way around, and that's probably what blew the engine."



Arthur "Buster" Burt holds a plaque commemorating his induction into the Maine Motorsports Hall of Fame.

Burt got an offer to run the NASCAR series in 1958 but couldn't because of his military commitments. The Air Force took him away for 90 days at a time, meaning he could never race for a track championship.

"If the Air Force would've known I was racing, they wouldn't have let me do it," he said. "I would've loved to go race with the big boys, but it never worked out."

Burt married in 1979 and stayed away from the sport until 1992, when he got a chance to drive a transport hauler with his wife for NASCAR driver Mark Martin. Burt's wife, ZoeAnn, needed some convincing to go through with it.

"I had a problem with the whole thing because I wasn't that big of a race fan," she said. "But it turned out being a great time, and the race fans loved us."

ZoeAnn had more reservations when her husband got back behind the wheel of a racecar. He raced legends racecars in Maine in 1994 and 1995.

"I always worried about him, but I knew it was in his blood," she said. "In the end, I had to let him do it."

Burt hasn't raced since 1995, but the 78-year-old Villages resident says racing is still in his blood.

"It's one of those things where the bug will always be there," he said. "I'd race today if I could find something to race."

"I didn't really do anything before racing. That's what I do."