Marvin Panch, 17-time NASCAR winner, visits The Villages

1961 Daytona 500 champion to speak to Villages fan club

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The twinkle in Marvin Panch's eyes belies his 85 years.

Even when he's sitting in a rocking chair.

For you see, there was a time when Panch was one of the fastest guys around when he squeezed himself through a car window and into the seat behind the steering wheel of an overpowered, roaring machine that was the heart, soul and noise of NASCAR.

Panch, who in 1998 was voted one of NASCAR's 50 greatest drivers, will be the guest of honor tonight at the meeting of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club at Colony Cottage Recreation Center.

"He's quite a guy," said Glen Carter, the founding father of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.

Yes he is. The NASCAR record book says so.

Over his career, he started 216 races under the NASCAR banner. He finished in the top-10 126 times. He finished in the top-5 96 times. He took the checkered flag 17 times.

He won on superspeedways, short tracks, dirt tracks and road courses.

He won four Grand Slam races – on the four tracks (Daytona, Darlington, Charlotte and Atlanta) that have been on the NASCAR schedule longer than any others.

He won the World 600 in 1966.

He won the Daytona 500 in 1961 – just the third year after The Great American Race moved from the beach to the track.

He drove cars for some of the biggest teams in the history of automobile racing – the Wood Brothers, Petty Enterprises and Holman-Moody.

He was the star of Ford Motor Company's factory-backed team.

And given one wish, he would love to turn back time and do it all over again.

"I wish I was young and running now," he said Saturday, while sitting in the New Dixie Racing garage of Wildwood short-track racing legend Dick Anderson.

"Because if I was paid then what they are getting paid now, I wouldn't have to talk to some people I talk to now."

His remark brought peals of laughter from the small crowd in Anderson's garage who had been entertained and regaled by Panch's tales of races and race drivers that are still yesterday in his memories.



The Associated Press Marvin Panch waves to the crowd after winning the Daytona 500 on Feb. 26, 1961, in Daytona Beach.

"Those guys today are laughing all the way to the bank."

He retired from racing in 1966 and since has been inducted into a half-dozen various racing halls of fame – most notably the Living Legends of Auto Racing Hall of Fame and the Daytona Beach Stock Car Racing Hall of Fame.



And all of it almost didn't happen.

Because there was a day when he probably would have become an Indy-car man – and only a mistake by one of the greatest Indy-car drivers in history put an end to Panch's run toward that checkered flag.

"I was scheduled to take my driver's test for the Indy 500," said Panch, who grew up racing in his native California. "Eddie Sachs (of Indy racing fame who was killed in a fiery crash at the 1964 Indy 500) took his Indy driver's test right before me and spun the car and got dirt in the injectors so I couldn't take the test. So that night I painted my

(stock) car a different color and raced at a little track across the street and won the trophy dash using the name Wild Sam Davis."

"But a lot of the big wheels at AAA (the governing body of the Indy 500 that had little use for the upstart NASCAR and its drivers) saw the race, and when I told them I would be back for my Indy driver's test the next year, (they) told me 'no you won't.' If that hadn't happened, I probably would have been an Indy-car racer."

Instead, a NASCAR legend was born. He won his first NASCAR race in 1956 at the Montgomery Speedway and really moved into the big time when he captured the '61 Daytona 500, putting a Pontiac in the winner's circle for the first time in the history of NASCAR's biggest event.

"I had run at Daytona when we raced on the beach," he said. "And it was a wonder we didn't kill a lot of people back then. Fans would sneak onto the beach and we would come around some of the corners – they were more like swerves- and we would be three-wide on a two-lane track.

"And if you weren't leading the race on the beach you couldn't see what was ahead of you because all the sand that was being thrown up would pit your windshield. We had to cut a little hole in the windshield so we could see where we were going."

But beyond winning on the pavement at Daytona where he did cross the finish line, he also got credit for two other wins – but wasn't behind the wheel of the car that took the checkered flag because he gave up his seat to a pair of backup drivers in the later stages of the race.

Those two drivers were A.J. Foyt at the Atlanta 500 in 1965 and Richard Petty at the Charlotte National 600 in 1966.

"The car that I won Charlotte in was the No. 2 Petty car," he said. "It was really set up for dirt tracks and not speedways."

Panch turned the car over to Richard Petty on lap 348 of the 400-lap race because of pain left over from an injury Panch had suffered in a crash at Daytona in '63. Petty, who had been driving the team's No. 1 car that had gone out of the race at the midway point with a blown engine, took the team's No. 2 car to the finish line.

"Panch put the car in front," the man called "The King" said. "All I did was keep it there."

Marvin Panch kneels in front of his Masurati-Ford on Feb. 14, 1963, in Daytone Beach, Later that day, Panch flipped the car during a practice lap and the car caught fire, leaving Panch in serious condition.

And while Panch pulled the plug on his racing career in 1966, his love for the sport and his sometimes need for speed hasn't waned.

"I actually got in a race car earlier this year," he said. "There is a guy in the Midwest that has a deal where he lets people drive race cars," he said. "It's like the Petty Experience at Disney World, except they have races. He asked me if I wanted to race and I let my big mouth get in the way."

"He even had a car painted like the one I had won with in Daytona, so I climbed in. That was my first mistake because when I got in I couldn't get out. So I went ahead and drove the car."

So what happened?

"I had the third quickest time of the day," he said.

But he didn't have to laugh about doing that in his 85th year.

The twinkle in his eye said it all.