

# Playing a part in Daytona 500 history

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It was one of the biggest moments in NASCAR history, and Jim Hedlund was smack dab in the middle of it.

The date was Feb. 18, 1979, and the event was the first Daytona 500 ever shown in its entirety on national television. Most of the Northeast and parts of the Midwest were socked in by snow, so a good part of the country was tuned into CBS to check out this hillbilly sport known as stock



Submitted photo  
Jim Hedlund, left, of Spruce Creek South, intervenes during a fight between NASCAR drivers Cale Yarborough and Donnie Allison during the 1979 Daytona 500.

car racing. Sure, many of those viewers were familiar with the popular Indy 500 and its playboy drivers, but these NASCAR guys, they were thought of as good ol' boys – the next generation of drivers who raced on weekends and ran moonshine the rest of the week.

The television viewing world was about to get an education on stock cars. And NASCAR was about to develop a love affair with race fans that is still going strong 34 years later.

On the final lap, Donnie Allison was doing his best to keep the ever-ornery Cale Yarborough behind him. But the two Oldsmobiles started colliding as they came down the backstretch at Daytona International Speedway and headed into Turn 3. Both drivers hit the wall and the mangled cars came to rest in the muddy infield grass. A surprised Richard Petty zoomed past the wreckage and went on to win his sixth Daytona 500.

But back in the infield grass between Turns 3 and 4, an event that was appropriately named "The Fight" broke out between Donnie Allison and Yarborough. And that's when Hedlund, who was serving as an emergency medical technician on the track's safety team, was called into action.

"The crash happened, and we can't move until they tell us from the tower to move," the Spruce Creek South resident said. "Then Mr. (Bill) Gazaway, the chief up in the tower, said, 'Boys get out and break them up. We don't need this. We are on national television live!'"

As Hedlund arrived, things were getting hot and heavy between Donnie Allison and Yarborough. The temperature went up several degrees a few minutes later when Bobby Allison stopped to check on his younger brother and ask if he wanted a ride back to the garage area.

"Cale started hollering that the wreck was my fault," Bobby Allison said in an interview a few years ago as he recalled the infamous event. "I think I probably questioned his ancestry which did not calm him down any," the former superstar driver said with a smile.

Bobby Allison added that Yarborough came at him, yelling, and stopped about 15 feet from his car.

"I think I was dumb enough to question his ancestry a little further, and he lunged at me and hit me in the face with his helmet," Bobby Allison added. "Then he went to beating on my fist with his nose."

While Bobby Allison obviously enjoys making light of the situation so many years later, on that Sunday afternoon in February 1979, Hedlund quickly found himself in the middle of a melee.



Bill Mitchell / Daily Sun  
Jim Hedlund, of Spruce Creek South, holds up a magazine page featuring the fight between NASCAR drivers Cale Yarborough and Donnie and Bobby Allison during the 1979 Daytona 500.

"Bobby got out of the car and everything broke loose," the 74-year-old recalled. "It was a fiasco. We tried to get Cale away from Bobby and it didn't work. They wanted each other and they wanted each other bad."

Hedlund, whose full-time job was safety supervisor at the airport in Rockford, Ill., tried to break up the fight by getting control of Yarborough. The first attempt didn't work out so well, as he was tossed through the air by Yarborough "like a rag doll," with a broken thumb to boot.

Round one might have gone to the hard-charging driver from

South Carolina, who, by the way, had played high school and semi-pro football and was also a Golden Gloves boxer. Round two, however, went to the EMT who would spend more than 25 years working on the safety team at the World Center of Racing.

"I did get the opportunity of flipping one of them. I think his name was Mr. Yarborough," Hedlund said with a chuckle. "It was not an easy fight. But I definitely got him back. I stepped on Bobby's or Donnie's back going at him. That would have been a great picture, because it was a great thing putting him down."

Hedlund and his fellow safety workers knew that they had to get the angry drivers separated and transported to the Infield Care Center to make sure they were OK. The problem – they had one ambulance nearby and Hedlund wasn't about to move the battle into such a cramped space.

"I wasn't putting the three of them in the same ambulance," Hedlund said. "It would be like putting three cats in a cage with a dog."

Eventually, a second ambulance arrived, and Hedlund loaded up with the Allison brothers for the short ride to the care center.

"Bobby was asking Donnie, 'How did all this happen?' He couldn't figure out what had happened," Hedlund said.

Not surprisingly, Donnie was more than happy to clear it very quickly.

"Donnie said, 'He cut me off the track,' which he did. Cale was doing everything he could to keep Donnie from winning the race," Hedlund said. "If Donnie would have won that race rather than Richard Petty, it would have been a great thing for him, because he really didn't race much after that fight that I can remember."

As the years have passed, the legend of "The Fight" has grown. In 2009, on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event, the video footage became popular again as NASCAR tried its best to capitalize on the rough-and-tumble image of the sport. In 1979, however, Hedlund said he didn't realize the significance of the historical moment he played such a key part in.

"Short tracks have fights all the time, and a lot of these guys raced short tracks, so the fight was a common practice," Hedlund said. "But live on national television? That's a different story. NASCAR has played the daylights out of it, so it must mean something to them."

Over the years, Hedlund said he has become close friends with the Allison brothers. His relationship with Yarborough, however, is pretty much the same as it was the day he took the driver down to the muddy ground.

"(Yarborough) has never even been a congenial person to me ever since," Hedlund said. "But the Allisons have just opened up and it's been a great relationship. We've become very good friends since that happened."

Hedlund, who was dubbed "The Ring Master" by The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club in 2009, said he doesn't think about "The Fight" every day. But he added that it's become a bigger part of his life since moving to Florida nine years ago.

"I really thought it was all done, and I moved down here and all of a sudden it seemed like, boom, it came back out and they are showing it on TV more and more," Hedlund said. "That's been in the last 10 years. But it was definitely one of the things that helped build NASCAR. I would say it's one of their top moments."