

“Rain, Rain, Go Away . . .”

Darrell Waltrip stared out from below the visor of his ball cap through the foggy mist and surveyed the landscape at Daytona International Speedway. It was wet, no doubt about that. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, almost stopped, in fact. But Waltrip couldn't help noticing the large rain puddles that had formed throughout the infield. It was cold and a little too windy for his liking as well. Even though it was mid-February, it wasn't the kind of weather he or any other visitor to usually sunny Florida expected this time of the year.

Like many others at the track that morning, Waltrip had other concerns. The scheduled start of the 1979 Daytona 500 was only a couple hours away, and the stakes of dropping the green flag on time were enormous.

“If this event doesn't go off on time, a lot of people are going to lose a lot of money,” Waltrip muttered to himself and anyone else within earshot.

Waltrip was slated to start on the outside of Row 2 on the starting grid, having won his 125-mile qualifying race earlier during Speedweeks. Sitting on the pole was Buddy Baker, who had the fastest car in the field and a good chance, like Waltrip, to win his first 500. Others who were sure to be contenders included

Richard Petty, who was trying to shake the worst slump of his storied career; the tough-as-nails three-time defending points champion Cale Yarborough; open-wheel demon A. J. Foyt; the feisty Allison brothers, Bobby and Donnie; and other veteran former 500 winners such as David Pearson and Benny Parsons, who could never be counted out. A strong rookie field included the likes of a little-known kid named Dale Earnhardt, a Yankee driver named Geoffrey Bodine, and others who would go on to make names for themselves in Winston Cup racing, including Harry Gant and Terry Labonte.

At the moment, none were sure the race was going to come off as planned.

Certainly the weather hadn't been anticipated by Big Bill France, who at times in his storied life had seemed to control Mother Nature with the same ease that he appeared to command all else when it came to stock car racing. Not far from where Waltrip stood, Big Bill and his son, Bill Jr., were contemplating their dilemma. Big Bill officially had handed over the reins of the family's fledgling NASCAR empire to his eldest son in 1972. But this day was to be the culmination of another of Big Bill's grand visions for the sport he had helped found in 1948, not long after he and thirty-five other men met in a smoke-filled room at the Ebony Bar on the top floor of the Streamline Hotel on Highway A1A in Daytona Beach in December of 1947. With tracks at the time scattered throughout the Southeast, each facility ruled by a different promoter with his own set of rules for races, Big Bill had argued successfully that the sport of stock car racing desperately needed leadership. In the single most impressive move of his long and highly accomplished life, he had generously offered his own. Naturally, he then got everyone else in the room to go along with it.

Thus, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing was formed.

In truth, the younger Bill wasn't really a Junior, even though everyone called him that. His father's legal name was William H. G. France, and he was William C. France. A large man at six feet five and over 210 pounds, William H. G. France soon enough became "Big Bill," and the nickname stuck. Like many things in NASCAR, all was not quite as it seemed—neither with the Frances' names nor their relationship in terms of how much influence one had over the other, and everyone else, in the sport by 1979. Technically, Little Bill was running the show as NASCAR president and Big Bill was only a consultant, although he also wielded considerable power and influence not only as a parent and former NASCAR president but as chairman and president of the International Speedway Corporation, which had built the 2.5-mile Daytona International Speedway under his guiding hand in 1959.

Twenty years later, as father and son looked out together at a rain-soaked facility just hours before what was to be the most important race in the thirty-one-year history of NASCAR, they wondered if the event was going to come off as planned. Others noticed their worried, pained expressions. Had they examined Big Bill just a little closer, they might have noticed something else.

He also wore the unmistakable look of sheer determination.

Big Bill still seemed intimidating when he wanted or thought he needed to be, even at age seventy. He didn't fear anything and certainly had no intention of letting a little rain spoil his special Daytona 500 party. After much arm-twisting the previous spring, executives at the CBS television network had agreed to televise this running of the Great American Race live, from wire to wire. It was the first time any television network had agreed to broadcast a major NASCAR race live from start to finish, but there was a caveat to the deal. The TV folks had wanted assurances beforehand that the green flag would drop on time so the telecast could begin precisely as scheduled and end on time. It was that simple.

Big Bill France and his son had guaranteed they would do everything in their power to see that the green flag would be dropped on time.

So as he looked out at the track through the light rain early that morning of February 18, 1979, Big Bill considered his promise. "Yes," he thought, "this race will go off as scheduled." He was sure of that. In fact, he told himself that he personally would make sure of it.

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Waltrip remembered back to the previous spring, when he had flown to Los Angeles along with popular racing broadcaster Ken Squier to meet with television executives from CBS affiliates about the possibility of their individual stations carrying the Daytona 500 live, from the dropping of the green to the waving of the checkered flag at its conclusion. The meeting hadn't been an immediate success.

"All the people from the affiliates thought we were crazy," Waltrip said. "I'll never forget. I was with John Madden. He was just starting his career as a football analyst. He was there. I sat at the table with him. And people were looking at Ken Squier and I, and we got up and told everybody how great NASCAR was and what a great event this was going to be and how it was going to change the way people thought about racing from that Daytona 500 on.

"We got up, and Ken, in all his eloquence and all the things he could do, he was selling away. He's telling them like only he can do. I get up, and I'm a guy that's kind of the hot guy in the sport at the time. I'm young and I had the silver tongue. I could sell anything. And we're up there doing our dog and pony show, and people were looking at us like we had lost our minds."

If anyone had the ability to sell a race to a roomful of skeptics, it was Waltrip. By the time the running of the '79 Daytona 500

rolled around, he had just turned thirty-two years old but was still well in the prime of his driving career.

Waltrip had burst onto the NASCAR scene seven years earlier, immediately running his mouth, if not his cars at first, wide open. His first victory came in May 1975 in a car that he had built himself, and that started getting him noticed more for his abilities in the garage and as a driver on the track than for his often annoying habit of tireless self-promotion. Until he started racing with the proper financial support, the native of Owensboro, Kentucky, was known more for his fast talking than his fast driving.

By the mid-1970s, however, Waltrip had begun backing up all of his boasts with victories. He began winning regularly in 1977, when he made six trips to Victory Lane, doubling his career total. He even guided one car there that season without getting official credit for it in the record books, driving the final twenty-three laps for Donnie Allison in the Talladega 500 after Allison had to retire because of heat exhaustion.

Waltrip had bowed out of that race after 106 laps when the engine blew in the No. 22 Chevrolet he was driving for DiGard Racing. He was milling about the garage area, thinking of leaving the track early, when he suddenly heard himself being paged on the public-address system.

"I heard my name on the P.A., so I hurried on down to Donnie's pit," Waltrip said. "The heat had gotten to him. So I was glad to help him out."

That was the way it was in NASCAR most days. Fierce competitors on the track, drivers were known to assist one another any way they could after their own chances of winning had been dashed. But only after that and usually not a moment before.

It was one of the few times early in his career when Waltrip actually endeared himself to his fellow competitors. Oftentimes he upset them with his rare combination of skill and self-serving savvy when the television lights came on and someone thrust a

microphone in his face for an interview. "I'm gonna make these folks forget all about Richard Petty," he boasted once.

That comment in itself was downright scandalous in a sport that had been dominated for years by the Petty family in general and by Richard in particular. Heading into the 1979 Daytona 500, Richard Petty owned 185 career victories—the most in what was then known as Winston Cup Grand National history, and 170 more than Waltrip could claim at the time.

Despite his far loftier achievements, Petty was a different animal in front of the television cameras than Waltrip. He came across as humble, gracious. His goal seemed to be to promote the sport itself. Waltrip seemed more interested in lauding his own accomplishments, which initially turned off fans and fellow drivers alike.

Yet Waltrip made no apologies for his brashness. When he arrived on the scene, television was just beginning to make what would ultimately be a huge impact on the sport. Whereas many of the old-timers and even many of the newcomers to the garage lacked a grasp of that, or shunned the spotlight because it just wasn't their deal, Waltrip leaped at every chance to take center stage. Others might have joked that every time he saw a camera in the garage area, he saw an opportunity; but to Waltrip, that wasn't a joke. It was fact, and one that he was proud to say he wouldn't deny.

He also became one of the sport's greatest ambassadors, eventually learning that helping popularize it any way he could might ultimately benefit him and the other drivers in future ways they couldn't yet imagine.

"I'd watch some of the other guys get interviewed on TV and I'd say to myself, 'Man, if they would just look at the camera, open their mouths, and talk, maybe people would get to know them better and the sport a little better.' Maybe they'd get their message across," Waltrip said.

"So that's what I decided to do. And man, whenever that red light on the camera went on, I went to work."

In the spring of 1978, Waltrip was being asked to go to work in front of the guys who had to be convinced to give the green light to the live TV broadcast of the following February's Daytona 500.

"It'll be a fantastic event," Waltrip told them. "Lots of excitement."

"These races are packed with great drama. It'll be riveting," Squier offered.

The TV executives sat there stone-faced, completely unconvinced.

"There's no way," one of them replied.

"A three-and-a-half- or four-hour live event on a Sunday afternoon? Nobody's going to watch that," said another.

Waltrip had his own doubts. "They may have been right, except for a couple of things that made this very interesting," he said years later. "The TV people were worried about the time it was going to take to run a five-hundred-mile race at Daytona. Because they knew it could take five hours. Well, you couldn't block off five hours of television on a Sunday afternoon at that time. They were real concerned about it starting on time and having a pretty small window of ending it when they wanted. And so Mr. France guaranteed 'em that the race would start on time, without exception.

"Well, guess what? We get to the racetrack on Sunday morning and it's raining. It had been raining all night, it was raining Sunday morning—and this race had to start on time, or the deal was off."

Actually, the deal would not have been off. But it likely would have been altered in such a way that its impact on the history of the sport was negligible. Certainly many of the higher-ups at CBS would not have ended up being enamored with the sport as a live TV offering, as evidenced by their attitude upon being greeted with heavy rain showers when they arrived at the track the morning of the race.

"We don't have to pay for this if it rains, do we?" one of the high-powered executives asked Neal Pilson, who had helped

negotiate the deal for CBS. "Yes, we do," Pilson replied. "And if it gets rained out, we have to run it live tomorrow. That's our commitment."

The CBS bigwig frowned. He did not look pleased at all.

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It wasn't the first time NASCAR had stuck its toes in the fickle waters of television. Dating back to the earliest days of the super-speedway at Daytona, Big Bill France had an understanding of what the relatively new medium might do for his sport. It was with this in mind that France began staging a variety of short races at Daytona International Speedway shortly after the facility opened. Among them were a pair of 10-lap "pole position" qualifying races that were run two weeks before the Daytona 500, with the winners of the two 25-mile sprints earning spots on the front row for the Great American Race.

In 1960, the big automobile manufacturers in Detroit also began mass production of "compact" cars such as Ford Falcons, Chevrolet Corvairs, Plymouth Valiants, Pontiac Tempests, Mercury Comets, and others. Never one to miss an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of anything that had the potential to develop into a promotional tool for his sport, Big Bill immediately slipped into the pre-500 program, now called Speedweeks, two races for these types of cars in addition to the two qualifying events. Then he started looking for a television network willing to televise the four short races.

Big Bill knew then that television wasn't anywhere close to being ready to televise a longer race. He needed to start small and build on what he was certain would be the successes of the smaller races, once they caught on with TV viewers.

As would be the case nineteen years later, it was CBS Sports that responded to France's pleas for attention to the sport. In

January of 1960, CBS officials sent a technical crew to Daytona to scout out the territory. They began to set up to televise the four short races on January 31, making history in the process. It was the first live network television coverage in stock car racing history.

Greg Fielden wrote of the significance of this in volume 4 of his series of books, *Forty Years of Stock Car Racing*. "CBS was venturing into uncharted waters," Fielden wrote.

The four events which were run at Daytona on January 31, 1960 seemed to be an ideal set-up. The races were short—the pole position races were both less than 10 minutes in length—and network executives could conveniently slip commercials into the programming without cutting much, if any, of the racing action.

The experiment was termed a success. CBS packed up its gear and headed back to New York—14 days before the running of the second annual Daytona 500. They didn't dare attempt a telecast of a four-hour marathon.

Big Bill France realized at least some of the difficulties of televising long stock car races that needed to be overcome. But he vowed to eventually get the gem of the Winston Cup Grand National race schedule televised live and in its entirety. He continually pushed for other events to be televised as well, at least in part if not entirely, and at least on a tape-delayed basis if not live.

His persistence worked to only a very limited extent on this occasion. Over the next four years, CBS merely dabbled in the sport, usually airing heavily edited versions of Grand National races during the *CBS Sports Spectacular* show.

Next it was ABC's turn to dance more regularly with Big Bill's dream. Beginning with the 1961 Firecracker 250 at Daytona—a summer race that was the circuit's second visit to the new track

each season—ABC started showing extended race highlights on the *ABC's Wide World of Sports* program. Such shows as *CBS Sports Spectacular* and *ABC's Wide World of Sports* seemed perfectly suited to auto racing at the time. Although France wanted more, network producers found these shows attractive outlets for racing because they could edit out as little or as much of the race as they wanted, depending on which time slots they had allotted for the footage and which parts of certain races they thought were exciting or boring. Most times, they condensed an entire race into packages of thirty to forty-five minutes of actual footage, with the majority of races being televised a few weeks after the running of the events.

It is important to point out that NASCAR was not alone in craving, but not necessarily receiving, live love from the television folks at the time. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that ABC, by then the undisputed American leader of auto racing telecasts, began televising the open-wheel Indianapolis 500 in prime time on the same day it was run. And even then, ABC delayed its telecast by several hours.

There were occasions when the networks whetted the appetites of France and race fans who yearned to learn more about what was happening during a race on the day it was run. For instance, ABC showed portions of the 1962 Daytona 500 live. Legendary print and broadcast journalist Chris Economaki covered the event from pit road and later related to author Mike Hembree an incident that illustrated the lack of understanding many had of the sport in those days.

"The ABC crews were all union," Economaki told Hembree in *The Definitive History of America's Sport*. "A lot of them were older guys. When there came an assignment in Florida in the middle of winter, they all wanted it. So I had a lot of old guys down there with me, including my cable puller."

Unlike in later years when TV equipment would become more portable, easier to haul around, and eventually altogether wireless, pulling cable and moving cameras and other gear for a roving reporter in those days was heavy-duty hard work. Sitting on the pole for the race was Glenn "Fireball" Roberts, one of the sport's biggest stars at the time (he eventually would win the race as well).

"The race started, and Fireball Roberts came off the corner and into the pits after about ten laps, which, of course, was surprising," Economaki told Hembree.

It also seemed newsworthy to Economaki. But when he started to move toward Roberts's pit area, the guy pulling cable and carrying equipment for him stayed put at first.

"Let's go!" Economaki shouted.

"There's a car coming!" his coworker shouted back.

"I know," Economaki said. "That's why we're going!"

All the while, France kept pushing for one of the networks to televise one of his Winston Cup series races live and in its entirety. He finally found his first taker not in 1979 at Daytona, as so many would later come to believe, but in 1971 when ABC agreed, again with some reluctance, to televise from start to finish the Greenville 200 from the half-mile Greenville-Pickens Speedway in upstate South Carolina. The catch? The race had to be packaged to fit into the ninety-minute window offered via the *Wide World of Sports* format.

How they arrived on running the historic race in Greenville, not one of the Cup circuit's more well-known tracks, is interesting and significant.

"About a month before the race, a guy from ABC in New York called," the late Pete Blackwell, who operated the track for years, told Hembree. "They had talked to [Big] Bill France, and they were looking for a race they could get in on *Wide World of Sports*

in an hour and a half. They had gone through results sheets and saw that we had finished a race in about an hour and twenty-five minutes.”

The ABC man on the other end of the phone line got right to the point.

“Do you think you could do that again?” he asked.

Blackwell did not hesitate in answering.

“I said, ‘Sure,’ although there was no way I could be sure.”

Eager to make it happen for their own benefit and ABC’s, the governing body of NASCAR trimmed the starting field from thirty cars to twenty-six, the idea being that fewer cars on the track should mean fewer wrecks, fewer caution flags, and, as a result, a faster race that would neatly fit into the tight *Wide World* window of opportunity.

“This is great. This could lead to bigger things,” Blackwell told Richard Petty before the race.

Petty nodded.

“Please, then, no cautions,” Blackwell added.

“You won’t have to worry about no cautions,” Petty replied. “I’m going to lead all the way. Just tell everybody to follow me.”

Petty was confident, and why not? He had won five of the first nine Winston Cup races to that point in the ’71 season, including the Daytona 500 for the third time. Making it even sweeter, Buddy Baker had finished second in the 500 while also driving for Petty Enterprises.

But folks were going to be watching live racing at Greenville-Pickens, and Blackwell was hoping to make it special. He directed scaffolding to be erected at various locations around the track for ABC’s cameras and worked with the network to have a portable studio hastily constructed near the first turn to serve as a temporary home for announcers Jim McKay and Economaki. Quarters were cramped, as one technician handling the feed from the track back to New York soon discovered when he realized he would be working out of one of the track’s small restrooms.

Blackwell told Hembree years later that he was worried the crowd would be smaller than normal. Needlessly, as it turned out. Shortly after opening the gates, he realized that the grandstands were going to be packed to capacity. A crowd of more than fifteen thousand jammed into the venue.

"I felt like everybody might stay at home because it was on TV. But it worked the other way around. Everybody wanted to be here to see it," Blackwell said.

Hembree later described how it unfolded from there:

The field was circling the flat half-mile on the parade lap when *Wide World of Sports* opened. After receiving a signal from a technician that the broadcast had started, flagman Bill Blackwell [Pete's cousin] unfurled the green flag.

Although track, television and NASCAR officials were nervous, the event went well. There was only one caution, and Bobby Issac zoomed under the checkered flag first to finish the race in one hour and sixteen minutes, well within ABC's prescribed time period. The purse, boosted by television money, was twenty thousand dollars, a record for a NASCAR half-miler.

Despite the confidence he professed beforehand, it wasn't Petty's day. He battled mechanical problems all afternoon and ran seventh, four laps off the pace that was set by Issac, who finished two laps ahead of second-place finisher David Pearson.

"They squeezed that one in. That was the important thing," Petty recalled many years later. "That was one of them ABC deals. We all had a chance to go on TV, and we were excited about it. But all I remember is that we ran terrible, and Bobby Issac blew everyone away. We ended up seventh, but we weren't even in the race."

Pete Blackwell fielded a phone call during the race from a fan who said he was watching the event on television from a bar in Kentucky.

"I made a bet with another fella here about who was going to win," the caller said.

There was a pause on the line.

"So tell me," added the caller, "who wins?"

Only then did it dawn on Blackwell what the caller was really thinking. As he later told Hembree, "He wanted to know who was going to win because he was sure the race was recorded."

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Hours before the 1979 Daytona 500, Big Bill France and Bill France Jr. were still confident that this first major race to be televised from start to finish would go off as planned. Others weren't so sure.

Meanwhile, the weather was playing a role in the bigger picture far to the north of Daytona Beach. Much of the eastern portion of the United States awoke on the morning of February 19, 1979, to find itself in the icy grip of a massive winter snowstorm. Nearly twenty inches of snow fell in parts of North Carolina, about the same or more came down in parts of South Carolina, four inches closed the Atlanta airport, and four of the five Great Lakes were frozen for the first time in modern history. Prolonged freezing temperatures in the Northeast and Midwest made going out of the house not only nearly impossible but highly dangerous, and in New York City the thermometer plunged to zero degrees Fahrenheit. Other cities along the East Coast not only had to cope with the snow still falling but also with high winds that produced snowdrifts taller than most human beings.

Humpy Wheeler awoke Sunday morning to the pitter-patter of rain in Daytona and had heard the weather was worsening toward the north. As much as he wanted to stay for the race, he had a scheduled speaking engagement for the next day in Charlotte and didn't want to risk missing it. So he decided he would try to drive back to Charlotte, even though it meant leaving Daytona Beach before the 500 started.

"I knew something bad was going to go on [with the weather] and I had that speech the next day in Charlotte. So I took off at eleven o'clock in the morning and hit sleet in St. Augustine," Wheeler said.

St. Augustine is only fifty-five miles north of Daytona.

"Oh, shit," Wheeler thought to himself. He stopped at a pay phone and placed a call to Ken Squier at the track.

"I have some bad news for you. It's sleeting in St. Augustine," Wheeler grimly told him.

Wheeler climbed back into his car and kept driving.

"And it was ice big-time by the time I got to Savannah [Georgia]," he said.

Soon he was driving through heavy snow, which only increased in volume and severity the farther he pushed to the north.

"I got to Columbia [South Carolina] and couldn't go any farther. By the time I got to Columbia it was twenty-three inches of snow and nothing was moving," Wheeler said.

While Wheeler at first thought it was bad news for the running of the Daytona 500 as well as for those caught in the maelstrom such as himself, the fact was that for NASCAR, the perfect storm was brewing. With impassable roads and brutally frigid temperatures forcing millions of people to stay inside from Columbia to Chicago and most points in between, many other sporting events that might have been televised or attended in person that Sunday were canceled. And those millions who were forced to curl up on the couch in front of a fire and their television sets suddenly had only one viable sports option to tune in to that afternoon.

Doug Rice was well aware of that phenomenon. Having grown up in North Carolina, Rice was living in Salisbury, near Charlotte, at the time and had been looking forward to watching the race on television in the mobile home he shared with his wife adjacent to the home of his father-in-law, Ben Mitchell. Rice had somewhat

reluctantly become a race fan at the urging of his brothers several years earlier, and by 1979 was really into it.

“There was anticipation about it because there was no [live] racing on television,” said Rice, who would go on to work in racing as a play-by-play race announcer and as president and general manager of Performance Racing Network. “I vividly remember after I got into [being a fan of the sport] trying on Sunday when ABC would do updates and they would cut into the *Wide World of Sports* program. It might be the race at Darlington or Talladega, and they would give you ten minutes of the race and literally go to these taped packages of log rolling and figure skating.

“Then maybe forty-five minutes later they would come back and give you ten minutes more of the race. It was simply the most agonizing way to watch a race.”

That day, it was going to be different. Rice was sure of that—probably even more so than Big Bill France.

“You wanted to see it because you never got to see it,” Rice said of his desire to watch the 500 live. “It was so the opposite of what it would become in later years. There was no racing on television. So even those little snippets you got on *Wide World*, you would plan your day around that.

“There was so much anticipation around this race because we were going to sit down and watch it on television.”

Not in his mobile home, however. It was too cold to watch it from there. Shortly after waking up to find themselves pretty much snowbound, he and his wife bundled up and trudged the short distance through the snow to his father-in-law’s warmer house.

“Nobody went to church that day because there were like thirteen or fourteen inches of snow on the ground in Salisbury,” Rice said. “The storm started the night before. We got up the next day, and it not only snowed a lot, but it was ridiculously cold.

Normally when it snows [in North Carolina], it's twenty or thirty degrees, but it was like ten and it was like blizzard conditions.

"My father-in-law had a pickup truck and he took me to the grocery store because that is what you do in the South when it snows—you go buy bread and milk. It was one of the few Sundays he wasn't in church, and he was real strict about going to church. But he drove me to go pick up some groceries and we talked about the race and getting back to watch it. On the way back it was so cold that he had the heater on in the truck and it was still blowing snow through the vents. It was that bad; the snow was blowing right through the vents."

A man of few words by nature, Ben Mitchell growled disapprovingly.

"This is like Yankee snow," he told his son-in-law.

Rice had heard the expression. But for the first time in his life, now he believed he understood what it meant.

Many miles to the south, it wasn't snowing. Better yet, Big Bill France and his son saw that the rain was beginning to cease. In truth, they had been nervous about this day all along. Despite all of the years of work leading up to the landmark television agreement that was struck after Waltrip and Squier and others had directed their sales pitch for the sport at the CBS executives, there had been much lobbying within NASCAR's own inner circle for having the race deliberately blacked out in a large region covering several southeastern states. The thinking was that many of the sport's most loyal fans would stay at home and watch on television instead of making their usual trek to Daytona to watch the race in person.

It was sort of a be-careful-what-you-wish-for moment for the France family. This was what they had always wanted: the Daytona 500 televised live from start to finish. But they weren't sure what it was going to mean. They were confident it could

draw respectable TV ratings, but would live TV damage the live gate revenues? After all, this was all about money—money and increased exposure. The Frances didn't want to win one at the expense of losing the other, or vice versa.

"We were scared to death that it was going to hurt the crowd [attendance]," Bill France Jr. admitted to Hembree years later. "We originally had probably the biggest blackout plan in the history of sports, something like seven southeastern states. But we relaxed the blackout as we got closer to the race. Finally, we left Florida in it for a while, then just dropped the blackout, period."

As he looked out over the rain-soaked track and infield, even as the rain slowed to a drizzle and then stopped altogether, the younger France and his father finally allowed themselves small smiles. Not only would the race go off as scheduled, but lifting the original blackout plan had been brilliant. There were well over a hundred thousand fans in attendance despite the bad weather and legitimate questions about whether the race would go off on time. For the first time since they awakened early that morning to the sounds of raindrops, the Frances who ruled NASCAR were certain—really certain—that it would and that this was going to be a watershed day for their sport.