

SCR Tech Report:

# COOLING HOT CARS

# STOCK CAR RACING



60c

FEBRUARY 1971

U.S. Grand Prix  
Holley Fuel Pump  
Grand American Champ  
The Cotton Owens Story  
Flatheads Live



**Mario Rossi  
Leads World's Fastest  
Pit Crew**





**E**VERETT (COTTON) OWENS, his wife of four years, Dot; and their three-year-old son, Donnie, went to Darlington, S.C. to enter a race. Bob Colvin and some others had built a mile and one-quarter, banked oval out in a cotton field and nobody had seen anything like that in the little Southern town, or any other place for that matter. They called it Darlington Raceway and some 75 cars, largely of the passenger variety, entered the first 500 mile race for stock cars ever staged in those parts.

Cotton had a 1950 Plymouth to race. He drove down in a 1940 panel truck. There was only one hotel in Darlington and almost no motels in the surrounding area, so Cotton slept in the front seat of the truck and Dot and Donnie in the back the night before the race. They cooked on an outdoor grill.

In that initial spectacle, a virtual debacle, a monumental tire and engine blowout, Cotton finished seventh behind winner Johnny Mantz, who also drove a 1950 Plymouth.

At that time, it was just another race, just another stop in endless travels for Owens, though it was indeed unusual. That it was. That first Southern 500, Labor Day, 1950 is today the prestige stock car classic in a highly sophisticated and scientific sport.

No, it's not the richest and Darlington Raceway, which has a new coat of black and other improvements and alterations, is not the finest of the superspeedways that have sprung up all over the country, but it is steeped in tradition and there's not a driver and car owner alive who doesn't want to decorate his trophy collection with that Southern 500 hardware.

Cotton Owens went back to Darlington Raceway as driver and car owner for 20 years and never won the Southern 500 in either capacity until the most memorable weekend of his quarter century in racing – Labor Day, September 5-7, 1970.

On Saturday night before the annual Monday classic, Owens was inducted into the Hall of Fame by the National Motorsports Press Association, an organization, that, like Darlington Raceway, started small in the South and has spread nationwide and attained comparable prestige. In a touching ceremony, Owens' friends and competitors and associates, present and past, told of his honesty, devotion and excellence both as former driver and now as car builder and master mechanic. Owens was deeply moved. So many had never lauded him so much in such a short time. Besides, Owens is a serious person who goes

by Bob Myers

# COTTON OWENS

**a champion by any other name . . .**

This has been quite a year for Cotton Owens. Here's a look at one of the great racers.



about his work in a businesslike fashion and never solicits praise or publicity. "I cannot believe this," he said appropriately. He thanked everyone and, not being accustomed to an audience or a microphone, concluded by sincerely saying, his voice choked, "this is one of the greatest nights of my life."

It was. But, oh, that was only the beginning. Those who had been asked to speak of Owens at the induction ceremony had wished him luck in the Southern 500, as might have been expected, but it was not the kind of thing that would have added to Cotton's confidence.

His Dodges, with strapping Buddy Baker at the wheel had led nearly every major race in which they had been entered, but something always happened.

At Talladega, in a 500-miler at Alabama Speedway, where young Baker set the world's closed course record of 200.447 m.p.h. prior to the event, his machine burst into flames and created a TV spectacular. It also eliminated him from the race while leading. At Daytona Beach, in July, Baker was a close second to the Ford of Donnie Allison.

After all, it would be too much for Cotton to expect to win the Southern 500 so close on the heels of being installed in the Hall of Fame and the Ford-Dodge merger, or wedding, between his now 23-year-old son, Donnie and Sara Matthews, the daughter of Penny and Banjo



Owens is a meticulous engine builder and tuner. Here he checks spark plugs for clues to the stage of tuning the Dodge Hemi is in. His careful work contributed to Buddy Baker's win at this year's Southern 500, the most prestigious of stock car races.



Matthews, the builder of Allison's Fords. (For two times in a week, Cotton had to put on coat and tie and that's some sort of a sartorial record.)

Cotton looked back over his Darlington record in the few spare moments he had before the race—second in 1957 after winning the pole in a Pontiac as a driver. In 1960, he made the record book by setting a track record in a Pontiac, becoming the second driver to post the fastest speed by a specific brand of automobile and thus be selected to the Darlington-Union Record Club. At the time, he and the late Fireball Roberts wore the symbolic white jackets, "for a long time," said Cotton. He joined Roberts and another close friend, and competitor, the late Joe Weatherly in the Hall of Fame. Stock car racing, because of the human and mechanical elements is perhaps the most unpredictable, fickle and downright scourages of the professional

time battler of Owens on the tracks, won it three times, a feat achieved by only one other driver—retired Herb Thomas.

Cotton said many things, going back to the frustrations and the inflationary costs of building machines and not having won a big race in nearly two years—the 1968 National 500-miler at Charlotte with Charlie Glotzbach at the wheel.

But he said it best this way, "I can't possibly do anything for an encore—especially within two days."

Racing, as with many of the people who started with him, has been Cotton Owens' life. His father was an automobile mechanic in hometown Union, S.C. At age 12 he came to Spartanburg, S.C., in 1936 to stay, getting to what was to become the state's headquarters of auto racing at the onset.

Of course, Everett Douglas' hair was God-bleached, hence the nickname, Cotton. The family built a house on White

I might have been if I had one." (Daughter is 18-year-old Debbie, who missed the first 500 and the truck bed, but who is a pretty and brown-haired college freshman, pride and joy of Poppa Owens.)

Money was something other people or nobody had in Owens' youth. But that turned out to be an asset, rather than a liability—after a fashion. Cotton went to work for J. H. Griffin & Sons Grocery as a delivery boy. There came a Saturday in 1939. The racers came to Joe Littlejohn's Fairgrounds track, people such as Bill France and the late Alvin Hawkins. Cotton had never heard of any of them except Littlejohn, the man credited with bringing the first stock car race to South Carolina, but he had to see the race. He wheeled his jewel, a 1934 Ford, which incidentally had never been outrun, to the track. Owens (money being scarce, we said) climbed a tree and found a vantage perch. He does not recall who won the race, but he does recall that Bill France (now president of the NASCAR empire he built and seldom a loser) turned over in qualifications in a new 1939 Ford.

Cotton lost, too. Playing hooky from the grocery store cost him his job, but he was too enthralled with what he had seen to care. "I knew absolutely I had to

## COTTON OWENS



*Car owner and chief mechanic Owens talks to driver Buddy Baker after a day of practice at Daytona International Speedway.*



*David Pearson was another driver to win fame and glory driving race cars prepared by the master, Cotton Owens. Here Mario Andretti (l.), Pearson, and Owens get ready for racing at Daytona.*

sports. But not this time for Cotton Owens.

Buddy Baker took that Dodge and outran them all, 367 laps to glory, presenting himself with the first supertrack win since the rain-shortened 1968 World 600-miler at Charlotte Motor Speedway in North Carolina. But more than that, it gave Cotton Owens his first Southern 500 triumph, Dodge a prestige victory and Cotton some funds to work with the remainder of the season in times of financial trial though purses are richer than ever.

For the first time, as well, the triumph kept the Southern 500 in one family four times, for Buddy's father, Buck, long-

Ave.

Cotton shadowed his father, and gained his knowledge sheerly from observation and experimentation. The only mechanical schooling he ever received was in the early 50's when he enrolled in a one-week course in transmissions.

His formal education ended one day into the ninth grade when he was "more or less disgusted," perhaps the most regrettable segments of his 46 years. "People didn't realize what an education was for then," said Cotton. "I realize it now and I have for a long time."

"This is what led to my son going to college and I suppose my daughter, too. I showed them the mistake I made, where

be a part of what I saw," Cotton said, "but there was another kind of battle—World War II."

Cotton entered the Navy in 1943, serving on two destroyers and a cruiser in European waters. He was discharged in late 1945 and returned to Spartanburg, where he worked for his dad and D. N. Tinsley, operator of a wrecker service. Cotton wanted to build a race car.

He consulted with Bud Moore, another master mechanic from Spartanburg who needs no introduction. Joe Eubanks was also in on the 1937 Ford venture. But Bud was supposed to be the driver.

The new team went off to Hendersonville, N.C. Moore made a lap or so in

STOCK CAR RACING



practice and returned shaking because he was running against the pros. And he suggested hiring a pro to drive the car. "Not until I have had a crack at it," declared Owens, who drove the race and finished second in the feature.

On the way home from Hendersonville, Cotton was deep in thought. While he is thinking, let us inject here that on January 26, 1946, he married Dot. She married an automobile, a wrench was the best man. A jack bore the rings and a carburetor performed the ceremony. To put it bluntly, she didn't relish this craze of driving a race car in some dusty old bullring.

Cotton arrived home. "I could tell they (Dot and his parents) knew I'd driven. I was covered with dust. I explained that by saying I'd been to a race. I had a roll of bills in my pocket, which was quite unusual. So, I said I was going to borrow some money to buy a car (in case the money was discovered). But you can't fool a woman. Two hours after I had gotten home, I told them I had driven," he said.

He might have told them he was out with another woman. The reaction was traumatic. "Racing was quite dangerous. We didn't have roll bars and the doors weren't even bolted. I proved racing was unsafe the second time I went out. I lowered the roof to the seat, but I wasn't cheating. I just turned over," Cotton said.

Cotton and Dot drove as many miles as the bus company until 1950, passing up motels in favor of to and from trips and steaks in favor of hot dogs and soft drinks. In 1950, Cotton became King of the Modifieds, a title he still holds.

Driving modified Dodges, Cotton entered 54 events and twice posted streaks of 24 victories, winning nine-tenths of the races he entered. His most satisfying moments came in the Mobile, Ala., area, a hot circuit, with his victories along the Gulf Coast. "Nobody beat those guys very often, but we did," said Cotton proudly.

Dot ate steak in 1950, but she almost lost a husband in 1951. It was Friday night at Old Fairgrounds in Charlotte, N.C., half-mile of dirt on which Owens was at his best, today buried by a large shopping center, including the little shack by the lake where some people fell in because of fear, or too much spirits.

"Willie Thompson turned over in the fourth turn," recalls Cotton. "This was before we had warning lights on the track. I passed two cars on the outside, then ran right through the wrecked car."

Buck Baker, who saw Cotton, said, "I thought he was dead. His face looked like somebody had covered it with catsup."

Owens had no conception of how badly he was hurt. His face smashed into the steering column, ripping his face and damaging his left eye. His neck was broken.

He spent 15 days in the hospital, the chief concern the sight in the left eye, his broken neck undetected by examinations. While he had double visions of being through, he was out of action only three months, but the injuries would be far-reaching.

The neck was stiff for years and responded to no treatment. One night in 1963, Cotton flipped his car in a race at Spartanburg Fairgrounds. His neck not only was intact, but unbelievably moveable. "It reset itself," he marveled, and he still talks about his corrective therapy.

Though beset by double vision from the eye impairment, Owens was still tough on the dirt and sand surfaces, yet his career was beginning to diminish because of the rise of superspeedways all over the South. Asphalt he did not fear, but abhorred.

He had been a terror on the old sand-packed beach course as late as 1957 when he battled with such contemporaries as Tim and Fonty Flock, Lee Petty, Roberts and Jack Smith.

In 1959, Bill France opened Daytona International Speedway, the first big monument in his emporium and a testimony to the fact that he had recovered from his earlier flip in Spartanburg.

Cotton distinguished himself by setting a world record of more than 143 m.p.h. in trials for the inaugural Daytona 500-miler. He did not figure in the finish, but was runner-up to Lee Petty in the point chase that year. Cotton was second to Jack Smith in the 1960 Daytona Firecracker 250, but that was about the end

year, Bobby Johns drove Owens' car to victory.

Owens then took under his wing one David Pearson, also of Spartanburg, though Cotton had not yet quit. Pearson had won three races on supertracks in 1961 and was destined for stardom, which he has achieved. Cotton ran his last two races in 1964, beating his protege, Pearson, at Richmond and finishing second at Hillsborough, N.C.

Owens signed a contract with Dodge to field Pearson—for the championship. They won the title in 1966—the first of three in Pearson's still very active, but now curtailed, career in Ford machinery. Owens and Pearson never shared a supertrack victory, though they were almost unbeatable in the overall picture.

Pearson joined Ford in early 1967 and along came Glotzbach, an unproved Indian who knew more about bulldozers in his construction business than high-speed race cars. But they won the 1968 National 500 at Charlotte, a victory that Cotton sorely needed. They also lost the Daytona 500 of 1969 by a mere .01 of a second to Ford-Mercury king LeeRoy Yarborough.

After the Atlanta 500-miler in March, 1969, Glotzbach became fed up with NASCAR rules and quit. At the same



Cotton's son, Donnie, knows that his father is just the man to teach him the ropes in the racing business. Donnie listens in as Cotton discusses engine building with another well-known Hemi man, Keith Black.

of the road.

"My vision—depth perception—was getting way off. I thought it was from the wreck, but it wasn't. It was from overwork. A fellow just couldn't build and work on his car and drive it, too," Cotton said.

In 1962, Owens surrendered his ride in the then Firecracker 250-miler at Daytona to Junior Johnson and the Wild Man from the North Carolina mountains near Ronda finished second and went on to become one of the all-time chargers and most colorful characters before he retired in 1966. Today, Junior holds a similar position to Owens, but with the opposition—Ford. At Atlanta, the same

time, Buddy Baker and veteran mechanic Ray Fox were disagreeing privately. Owens selected the rugged, go-or-blow Baker, and that's the way it has been since.

Owens, like the sport to which he has devoted his life, has changed through the years. He is a small man, 5-4, 155 pounds. Gray is creeping into his hair and there are lines in his face—mileage grooves: like those on the track.

The Owens live in a majestic white house at the original address in Spartanburg. The home, antebellum in taste, is exceedingly comfortable. It is behind the first place in which his in-laws now live.

*Continued on page 51*



# Southern Strategy

Voters in Darlington County, S.C., obvious home of Darlington Raceway, approved in October a referendum for allowing Sunday racing in the province. The matter now goes before the South Carolina Legislature in January for final action.

Barney Wallace, Bill Kiser and the Darlington people are virtually certain the law forbidding "no Sunday recreation" will be amended to permit the running of the Rebel 400-miler on the Sabbath.

If all goes well, the Rebel will be run May 2 instead of May 1 in 1971, but the prestige Labor Day Southern 500 will not be changed.

The Saturday afternoon race—the Rebel—has been a financial dud for several years because people just can't get away from the farm and the wife and business on Saturday.

It was a close, but wise decision by the Darlington voters, no thanks to the Hartsville folks who are forever against anything Darlington does. But if the good people think there isn't any recreation in Darlington County on Sunday, then here's a personal invitation to go infield of the speedway on Sunday before the Southern 500. Lots of people think the Southern is held on Sunday.

Incidentally, those reports that Darlington Raceway would be sold and a new speedway built in the Myrtle Beach, S.C., area are false. So says H. A. Wheeler Jr., who knows.

Pretty soon, in January I believe at Joe Littlejohn's and Cotton Owens' places down in Spartanburg, S.C., the National Motorsport Press Association convenes for its annual banquet. At this time, the Myers brothers award, after drivers Bobby and Billy Myers (no relation to me, I couldn't have carried their helmet) will be made to one who has contributed most to the sport in the past year and years.

I'm normally quiet publicly, but this year I have some names—Bob Montgomery, the splendid, late voice of the Universal Racing Network; Richard Howard, promoter unmatched at Charlotte Motor Speedway; Joe Littlejohn, first and foremost of the old guard of promoters; Alvin Hawkins, the only man I know who could make anything out of Bowman Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem, N.C. Wake Forest College couldn't; and someone I know I'm forgetting.

Then there's the driver of the year award by the same group: 1. Bobby Isaac; 2. Pete Hamilton; 3. Richard Petty; 4. Donnie Allison; 5. Bobby Allison, enough.

Next year there'll be the Hall of Fame inductions by the NMPA, and

there is only one name to start with—Curtis Turner, who died in the Oct. crash of his plane.

Which reminds me, and is a happy note on which to end. A couple of weeks after Turner died, wife, Bunny, gave birth to Curtis M. Turner Jr., more than seven pounds worth, "looks just like him," she told friends.

God Forbid.

But God Bless.

## Publisher's Letter

Gas and Oil is another area that makes for poor sponsor potential. Again, NASCAR Grand National racing lives with only one company with very tight controls over the situation. In all fairness to this company, it must be pointed out they got involved many years ago when stock car racing was not heard of out of the south, and realized the promotional advantages as well as helping the sport when it needed help. However, this is 1971 and stock car racing is a major sport with its influence reaching to all corners of the nation. Again we wonder if the fan wouldn't tend to believe a company that won in competition with others rather than with a monopoly?

Next month I would like to carry this discussion into the two remaining areas as I stated earlier. Herein lies some very real sponsor potential with financial resources that can help the sport to continue to grow.



# COTTON OWENS

At first, in 1957, the garage and home were back-to-back, separated by four menacing German Shepherds. In 1962, the new shop went up on Glenn Road.

In one significant respect, Cotton has not changed. He has long been a God-fearing man, a clean liver, a man of the church who does not use tobacco or alcohol. He does, occasionally, curse, but under his breath. The give-away is that his face turns red when he does it.

"When I came along," Cotton recalled, "most people thought you had to be a criminal to be a racer, and most of the guys did have records. They were all running moonshine whiskey. It was just a way of life. That's how so many people got into racing so easily. They were always racing somebody. Fortunately, I never got into trouble. Today, 95 percent of the racers are clean.

"There wasn't too much law and order back then. It might be described as the survival of the fittest or the luckiest. Racers lose their tempers easily because it's such a competitive sport. I had my run-ins in the early days. There for a while me and another guy went at it for three months. One week he went through the fence and the next week, I did."

Cotton says the two major changes in racing are safety and cost. "When I first started, we could take a car and get it ready in four to five hours. Back then, after the war, it was entertainment. Now it's big business. You can't run a race for less than \$3,000-\$4,000. We used to go to Charlotte for 100 bucks," Cotton said.

The Dodges that Owens and his crew build today carry a price tag of nearly \$25,000. That's a far cry from the \$5,000 car he raced at Daytona in 1960.

"The entire image of stock car racing has changed," added Cotton. "It is scientific. It is no longer in the gutter reeking with alcohol, inhabited by bums, run by the brave. You don't bend too many fenders at 190 m.p.h. without someone getting hurt."

Racing is still a thrill with Cotton, and he says the tension is worse than as a driver. "The driver is tense only on race day. I'm tense all week. I spend a lot of sleepless nights. I lose my desire for food."

Dot and Debbie have asked him countless times to get out of racing. Both must take a backseat to the race car. "Wait 'til next year," he says.

Only for Cotton, next year never comes, but after 1970, what can he do for an encore?

**If you can make a French visitor feel more welcome, do it.**

One foreign visitor's most unforgettable American memory might easily be you.