



BY ALICE BIXLER

**B**ILL FRANCE is as hard to miss as a mountain. At 6 ft., 5 in., his slightly furrowed brow rises above a crowd like a craggy peak poking out of the clouds.

William Henry Getty France, 56, is a mountain in more ways than one. His height is only part of his resemblance to a towering summit. His position in super-speed racing is equally lofty. As president of the 18-year-old, 15,000-member National Association for Stock Car Automobile Racing, he directs a multi-million dollar enterprise and still manages to appear more like a well-pounded pillow than chairman of the board.

As driving force behind Daytona International Speedway, his talents have turned 375 acres of swampland into the world's biggest, fastest racing plant.

Bickerings and storms of automotive controversy rumble about without seeming to disturb him. Car owners cart their problems to his pleasantly cluttered office. His telephone buzzes constantly with calls from throughout the country. He serves on numerous committees and organizations, yet remains the image of the country store character who whittles wood chips, at peace with the world.

Nothing disturbs Big Bill, be it major crisis or petty annoyance—such as being barred from his own pressbox. At the most recent Daytona 500 race, he was stopped by a woman special deputy as he was about to escort a guest, retired Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Curtis Le May, to the press tower. "You don't have credentials," she told the Speedway president firmly. "I can't let you in."

Gen. Le May was properly tagged, but Bill, who's easily recognizable, was unlabeled. No argument. He reached calmly for his wallet and displayed the gold-plated lifetime pass that gives the bearer unrestricted entry to any spot on the course. The lady deputy, who had never seen one before, remained unmoved. "Sorry sir," she stated. "I haven't been told about that kind of pass. I can't let you in." Unperturbed, Bill shrugged, wandered away and located a friend who lent him proper cre-

entials for admission to his own pressbox.

It would take more than a minor annoyance to bring a frown to Bill's rugged features. If he isn't smiling, he seems about to. His straight, brownish hair is usually a little windblown, even when there's no wind, and he looks comfortably casual anytime, anywhere. His office attire generally is rolled-up shirt sleeves, a drooping belt line and an unanchored tie.

Bill may never be known as a great orator, but he's rarely misunderstood. He thinks rapidly, weighs each word carefully and speaks slowly with the gentlest hint of a drawl. His speech seems as though each word comes from a great depth. Once dredged to the surface, his sentences are complete and factual. He says exactly what he means.

Bill's voice, appearance and manners seem to indicate a lack of ability to get things done. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He often puts in 16-hour workdays because speed is his way of life as well as his business. Visiting press invariably are ushered into Bill's car-of-the-moment and treated to a high-speed tour of the famous Daytona tri-oval with France himself at the wheel, glancing at his passenger from time to time to gleefully gauge the rider's reaction.

As NASCAR president, he is expected to be in a wide variety of places in a narrow space of time, but Bill solved the problem by learning to fly several years ago. Plane schedules never seemed to coincide with his travel plans. Now he just hops into his twin-engined Bonanza and flies to meet an ultra-tight schedule of races, meetings and appointments.

He even relaxes at top speed. When time permits, he escapes to a cruiser powered by "just two Comet engines." Black and red HM initials shine up when the decking is lifted, letting on-lookers know those Fordmen, Holman and Moody, exercised their skill on those engines. "Well, there's not much on the Halifax River that'll pass it," Bill grins.

France developed a taste of speed as a spectator at an old board track in Laurel, Md., near Washington, D.C., his birthplace. The mechanically-minded teen-ager was entranced by this

swift sport and before long was deep in construction of a race car in his Pikesville, Md., garage. He first appeared on the tracks in 1929, at age 20, campaigning in his homemade, one-man, Model T Ford-powered dirt track racer. He ran the car for several seasons, but times were hard and money was scarce during those depression years so Bill listened with interest when an uncle talked of business opportunities in the growing resort town of Miami, Fla.

Bill closed up shop in October, 1934, and headed south with his wife, Anne, and their young son. Miami was his destination, but the ambitious 25-year-old ran short of cash 250 miles north of his goal and stopped in Daytona Beach. Miami lost a mechanic, but Daytona gained an outstanding citizen, a speedway and title to the claim of Stock Car Racing Capital of the World. None of this was outwardly apparent at the time. The newly arrived mechanic went to work in a Cadillac dealership and fell into the Florida way of life that gave him time to fish and to tinker with his race cars.

Daytona was a logical place for the automotive-minded France to settle. The city had cut its eyeteeth on speed and by the time Bill arrived the community could look back on 32 years of racing on the sands.

**A**T THE TURN of the century, wealthy hotel tycoons and automobile enthusiasts of the Daytona-Ormond area hit upon the idea of races on the hard-packed stretches of beach as an ideal way to draw tourists. Summarily, they invited Ransom E. Olds and Alexander Winton to bring cars built by and named for themselves to compete in timed runs in April, 1902. Both the Olds Pirate and the Winton Bullet turned the flying mile at 57 mph, leaving the question of superiority unsettled, but the runs proved the suitability of the firm sands as a test site for record attempts.

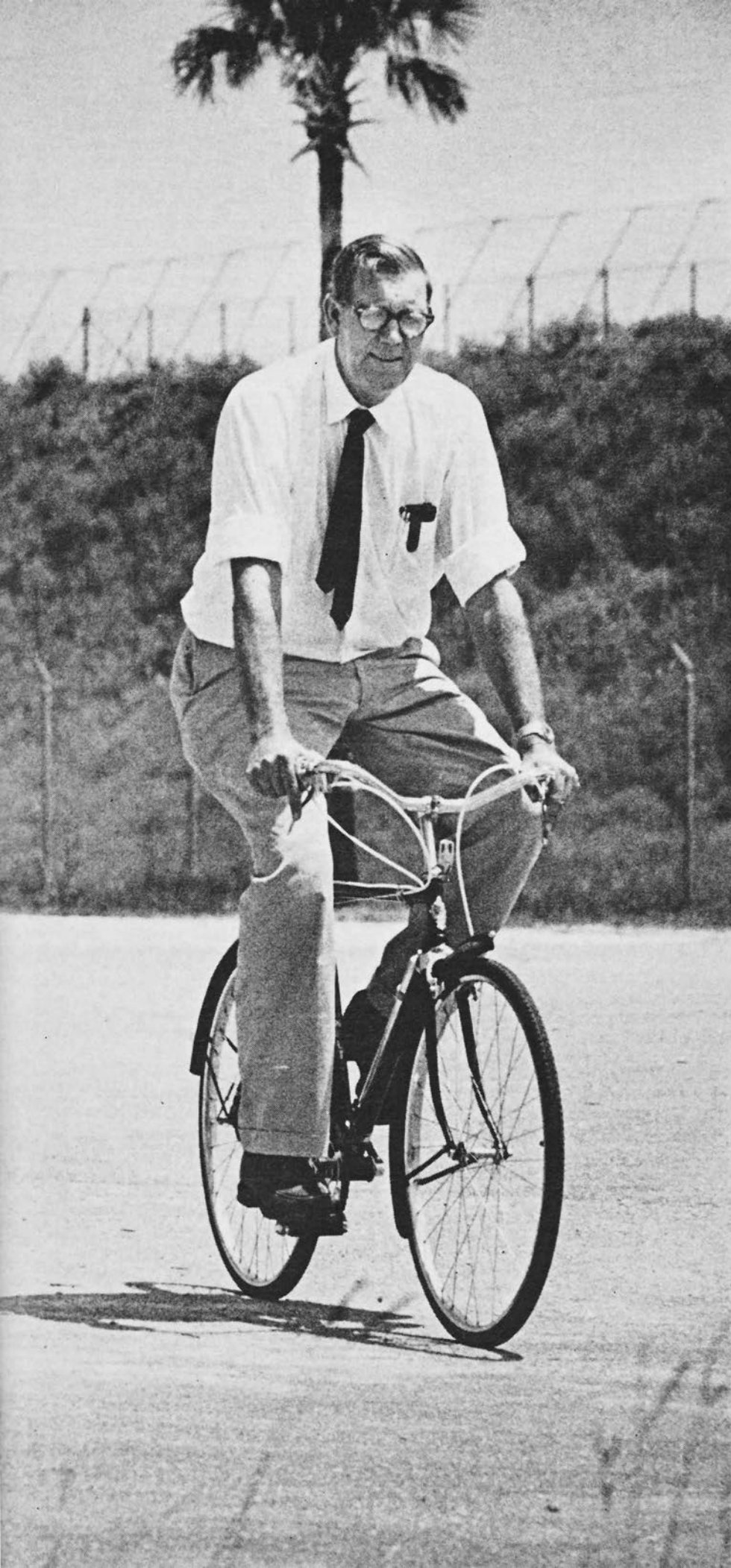
In the years that followed, names such as Segrave, Oldfield, De Palma and Campbell drew the curious, the thrill-seekers and the auto buffs to the beach to view land speed record attempts. Records were rewritten year after year and speeds climbed from

**Bill France, Daytona's Craggy Peak,  
Turned the Tide in Stock Car Racing**

**THE MOUNTAIN AND THE SANDY MOLEHILL**



# BILL FRANCE



92.30 mph in 1904 to a thundering 276.82 mph, a record set in 1935 by Sir Malcolm Campbell. However, blistering speeds had shrunk the beach's seemingly endless stretches to the point that the behemoth machines no longer had room to generate sufficient speed or to decelerate safely. LSR seekers packed up tires and tie-rods and headed west for the Utah salt flats, leaving Daytona without an attraction and the city fathers with a dilemma.

The city was known for speed, so racing was the answer. In 1936, the city sponsored a stock car race on the sand—and lost its shirt. Bill entered the event with a '35 Ford and finished fifth.

The race idea still had merit, Daytonans thought, but promotion had been ineffective. Local Elks took on the event the following year—with almost equally disastrous financial results.

Then Bill burst into the promotion business in 1938 when he and another man, Charlie Reese, took over the ill-fated beach races. It was a Bundles for Britain benefit and though it wasn't a smashing success, neither could it be classed as a financial failure. They awarded \$300 in prize money and after all the bills had been paid, the two young promoters were left with \$200 to split between them for their ballyhoo efforts.

There was a lot to be learned in this business of promoting, a lot of tricks of the trade to be digested and Bill began salting away ideas for future reference. Some 5000 people had attended the 1938 race at 50¢ a head. "I figured we couldn't draw any more people so we'd have to raise the price to make money," Bill related. Accordingly, the admission was raised to \$1 in 1939. But their profit, instead of merely doubling, soared up to \$2000 and Bill had his first lesson in practical economics. "The price doesn't matter as long as you offer the fans some excitement," he observed.

Soon stock car races were growing in popularity throughout the South and Bill had his own garage business going, along with his promoting ventures, when World War II intervened. With his mechanical aptitude in demand, he went to work at the Daytona Boat Works, which turned out sub-chasers for four years.

Then, with the war ended and Americans hungry for automotive excitement, Bill returned to the business

of racing. In 1945, he renewed the suspended sport with a race at Raleigh, N.C., and then came back to organize the first of the post-war beach road races at Daytona in '46.

**H**E RECALLS beach racing as "probably the most difficult promotion of all." Today's stock car courses are usually stable things, constructed out of macadam or other firm surfaces. But sand is a whimsical commodity. It's as unpredictable as a woman. So schedules for beach races were planned with a calendar in one hand and a copy of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey's tidebook in the other. The first considerations for finding a suitable race date were simple. They concerned merely the problems of selecting a Sunday when low tide would occur at an appropriate time for a race and last long enough for the final spectator to drive away before the incoming tide swamped his buggy. After that, problems got more complicated. Wayward winds could cause havoc with the course. A strong east wind would bring the tide in more quickly than anticipated, while a sustained west or south wind would make the beach surface rough. In addition, high tides demolished banked turns and they had to be rebuilt before each race. "You never knew what kind of a course you were going to have till the tide went out," France recalls wryly.

But France wasn't the type to wait for time or tide. He had other plans. His foremost objective was formation of NASCAR.

In 1947, the American Automobile Association was the principal race sanctioning body in the U.S., but the austere group displayed a definite lack of interest in stock cars.

"We couldn't get the AAA interested," Bill said later, "so we started our own organization." Wheels were set in motion during that year after much planning and NASCAR was incorporated in February of 1948. Bill had been a driving force in the formation of the new group and it was a proud moment when the first Grand National stock car race was flagged off on a dirt track at Charlotte, N.C., in 1949, before 19,000 cheering fans. Before the year was out, 87 NASCAR races were presented to the car-conscious public at 25 deep-South courses.

NASCAR's methods were trial and error at the outset. A committee of car owners formed the first specifications crews, but they just weren't equipped to cope with all the situations that arose.

Bill was a member of an early inspection crew that faced one of those confounding situations. One entrant protested that a fellow competitor was running with illegal valve springs. "His

are painted red," he pointed out angrily, "and everyone else here has green painted valve springs. They're truck valve springs, I tell you!"

Car owners who made up the tech committee were forced to agree. A check had shown that indeed, everyone else was running green painted valve springs. So the hapless soul with the vermilion valve springs was dropped from the lineup, still protesting his innocence. Several weeks later, someone "in the know" passed along the interesting tidbit of information that valve springs were color-coded to designate which factory had produced them. Red, yellow, green or blue—they were all made to the same specifications—but in different parts of the country.

"After that, we decided this wasn't any way to run a specifications committee," Bill said, and a full-time technical committee was formed.

**A**S NASCAR grew, it took the lead in making a variety of safety devices mandatory and has been rewarded in recent years with the best driver-safety record of any of the major racing organizations. Through regular bulletins and questionnaires, the group maintains a pipeline to members to search out their feelings and ideas on matters. Bill credits some of the best safety suggestions to drivers and car owners who have made their thoughts known.

At NASCAR's inception, France became president of the 40-member group. He guided it through its fledgling years and has remained in the driver's seat all the 18 years of its existence.

Despite all his organizational and promotional occupations in the late '40s, Bill found time to do a few fast laps at an occasional stock car race. His last bit of competition running was in the first annual Pan American Road Race in 1950. His co-driver was the stock car venerable Curtis Turner and Bill recalls with delight that the car was a Nash ("Go ahead, call it an Abernethy."). "We were doing good," Bill remembers, "running third at 700 miles and then we put the fan through the radiator at San Cristobel." Bill shelved his helmet after that. He had something else on his mind.

And the foremost matter was his dream of a super speedway for Daytona, a place unaffected by tides and winds and the whims of weather. The days of beach racing were numbered. Daytona had mushroomed. Glittering motels were reaching along the sand. Once-deserted beaches were being devoured by the growing resort city. But racing was growing, too, and no room remained in which it could grow. As many as 100 cars often appeared to start on the 4-mile course and the

crowds that turned out to watch the sand-spraying stockers grew in size until the beach could no longer contain them.

Bill took his dream to the city fathers. "Racing is Daytona's winter-time economy," he pointed out, "and we're about to lose it because there's no beach left to contain the sport."

The city fathers nodded agreement, but Bill needed more than an "Oh, you're so right." Under his urging a public body, the Daytona Beach Racing and Recreational Facilities District, was established. It all took time, but a suitable location west of the city was found for the speedway and Bill set off to get the approval of everyone concerned (and it seems that almost everyone was concerned) from the Federal Aviation Agency to the Defense Department.

The shovels finally gnawed into the swampy sod in 1958. Only a year later the multi-million dollar racing complex resounded to the pounding thunder of racing engines as the first Daytona 500 got under way.

"And all this," says Bill, "with no money." Funds for construction of the "Big D" were collected from the sale of stock and from the healthy sum of \$600,000 borrowed from a life insur-

FRANCE and Cannon Ball Baker, famed driver and first NASCAR Commissioner, chat at first 500.



PARKING problems, tides and city growth forced sand racing demise and birth of Speedway.



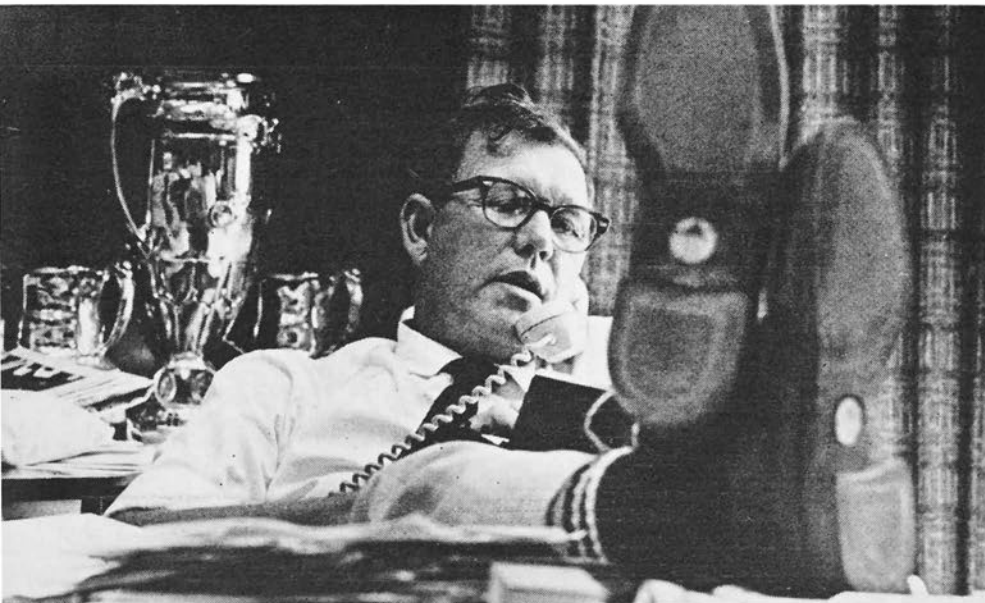


# BILL FRANCE

ance company, of all things. But it was worth the work and years of waiting. Out of the acres of wilderness, Bill created an unparalleled racing plant. The steeply banked 2.5-mile tri-oval has been the scene of the Grand National stock car races, which last year out-drew even Miami's famed Orange Bowl football game to attract the largest sports crowd in Florida history. The winding road courses through the infield have added spice to the circuit for sports car and motorcycle races. Dozens of speed runs have been made at the course, including the closed track record, set this year. In addition, the Speedway has been used as a proving ground for everything from tire tests to such things as the Pure Oil Performance and Economy Trials.

**D**AYTONA SPEEDWAY is a driver's delight and a pit crew's idea of paradise, as far as comfort is concerned. Covered pits, generous sized garages, complete with power and water, a pleasant and competent office staff, a cafeteria and many specialized services from dynamometers to tire mounting make it evident that a driver's hand was in the planning. In addition, safety-conscious Bill has provided the Speedway with its own small hospital, its own fire department and its own ambulance fleet. Each year, thousands of dollars are spent on additional improvements and Daytona Speedway continues to grow.

**MOUNTAINOUS MAN** in a mountainous job describes Bill France and his duties as coordinator of Speedway activities and chief of NASCAR.



Bill has his capable elder son, Bill Jr., to assist him in running the Speedway. The junior France is vice president and general manager. (A younger son, James, is studying pre-law at Florida Southern College.) But all the help in the world would make no difference to Bill. He's likely to attend to any task.

People still recall one occasion when the Speedway access roadway was a river of cars, rippling along toward the entrances, bound for one of the Daytona 500 races. Though traffic was in motion, it wasn't flowing smoothly enough to suit one particular individual. The tall man moved out amid the machinery and started setting things right—motioning one lane toward a less-crowded entrance, doubling up traffic at another spot and sending cars into openings as they appeared. Fans who recognized the Daytona president were surprised to see him out there in the street directing traffic—unless they happened to know him well.

"Why shouldn't I do it? Directing traffic is one of the most important jobs at a track," Bill said when the incident was mentioned. "You've got to keep the cars moving and get the customers into the course to make money."

His sound theory is that fans who spend long hours in lines waiting to get in and out of race courses won't be so anxious to return for the next race. And he blames a lack of feeder roads as a contributing factor in the unpopularity and eventual demise of many tracks.

It's not by accident that his speedway is located on a multi-laned highway and only minutes from U.S. 1.

Bill hasn't bothered to use his prime post with NASCAR as a stepping stone to popularity. He hasn't had to, for the

most part. He's a naturally likeable person who has taken his successes in stride and marked his mistakes up to experience. His warmly persuasive personality is equally warm for gate keepers or corporation presidents. His humor is of the offhand quip variety and rarely biting or sarcastic—except when defending his favorite sport. And then he comes on strong.

**W**HEN AMERICAN Motors President Roy Abernethy criticized other auto manufacturers for advertising speed and horsepower two years ago, Bill had an answer for him. In a speech in Detroit two weeks later he said, "This gentleman (he never mentioned Abernethy's name) reminds me of the little boy who thought baseball was a horrible game because he didn't have a bat to swing," and added he believes Abernethy was "as wrong as smoking in church" to blame organized racing and powerful cars for accidents that were, in reality, caused by careless drivers and suggested the establishment of "The Car Is Not the Culprit Week." It doesn't pay to downgrade the sport within earshot of Bill France.

Grand National stock car racing is more than just a sport. It is a business and, more than that, it is big business. NASCAR is where the money is. Princely purses often go to the winners and manufacturers offer accessories money to lure potential winners into using their products. Hundreds of thousands of fans crowd to the tracks and millions more watch special telecasts of important races. Small wonder that new car sales (especially in the South) often reflect the current winning make of car.

But the South, stronghold of the stockers, does not display the same enthusiasm for sports car racing. Crowds are painfully small by comparison with NASCAR spectator totals, yet Daytona continues to be the site of several sports car races each year—the biggest being the 2000-km., 12-hour-plus Daytona Continental, the lengthiest race in the U.S.

"Sure, the crowds are smaller, but I'm for all kinds of racing," Bill says and considers it an encouraging sign of growing interest that attendance has increased with each Continental.

He regards the interchange of drivers between NASCAR, SCCA and USAC as another healthy omen and takes special pride in his work with the American Competitions Committee of the United States (ACCUS).

Bill is likely to be found where the cars are—whether stockers, sprints or sports cars. The genial giant of NASCAR and Daytona went as a spectator to a recent Nassau Speed Week and ended up as a scorer.

That's the kind of guy he is. ■