

Who the hell do you think you are? Curtis Turner?

BY BROCK YATES

HIS MOTOR RUNNING
FLAT OUT, POPS
IS DRIVING HIS
WAY DEEP INTO THE
ANNALS OF
AMERICAN FOLKLORE

They call him Pops because he's the roughest, toughest stock car driver who ever lived, and he'd pop some ol' boy off the track and through the fence faster than you could wink your eye, I swear. And when Pops ain't manhandlin' some stock car around, chances are he's having himself one of those world-famous Curtis Turner parties, with the baby dolls and the hillbilly music and enough of that Canadian Club liquor to keep everybody's motors runnin' 'round the clock. Hot damn! Or maybe he's up in the sky, flying his twin Comanche through thunderstorms and hurricanes, his ol' straw cowboy hat tilted on that mop of black hair, peering through that same ol' pair of sunglasses he wears whenever he steps into the light of day—yep, Curtis Turner is in the air! Maybe on a marathon journey to see some baby doll or maybe on his way to a race or maybe going off to buy himself another fifty thousand acres of prime Appalachian timberland. Up there logging more hours on that legend. . . .

The phone rings in the pine-paneled office of his sprawling home outside Charlotte and a reedy little voice on the other end drawls, "Ha they-a, is Curtis in?" This is maybe the eleventh baby doll to call Pops in the past hour and he comes patiently to the phone, grasping the receiver in a hand that seems large even for his thick-boned, six-foot,



three-inch frame. "Hey, c'mon over," he says softly, regarding at arm's length a glass of Canadian Club which is lightly diluted with Coca-Cola. "We gonna start a brand new party in about ten minutes." He hangs up and smiles. "She ain't a bad li'l ol' baby doll," he announces to John Griffin, a weathered North Carolinian with clear eyes who is Pops' partner in the Carolina Atlantic Timber Company. "I swear," he says, "sometimes I wish I wasn't engaged." Engaged? Curtis Turner engaged? Ain't no way you can keep a man like Curtis Turner tied down by marriage, so what's all this talk about bein' engaged?

"Hey Pops," asks John Griffin, "You ain't really going through with that plan to marry Audrey at Charlotte in a stock car, are you?"

"Hell yes, Pops," says Turner (he calls everybody else "Pops," too). "I got me this preacher who says he'll marry me and Audrey while I'm driving a stock car around the Charlotte Motor Speedway at a hundred and forty miles an hour. That oughta be the damndest wedding they ever had in these parts. And that preacher, he's gotta be the bravest preacher I ever did see, I swear."

Audrey Blankenship comes into the room and touches her husband-to-be lightly on the shoulder. Audrey is a sweet, wide-eyed 18-year-old from Marion, North Carolina who is betrothed to this 42-year-old man who's raised more hell in his lifetime than Frank Sinatra, Shipwreck Kelly and King Farouk tied together.

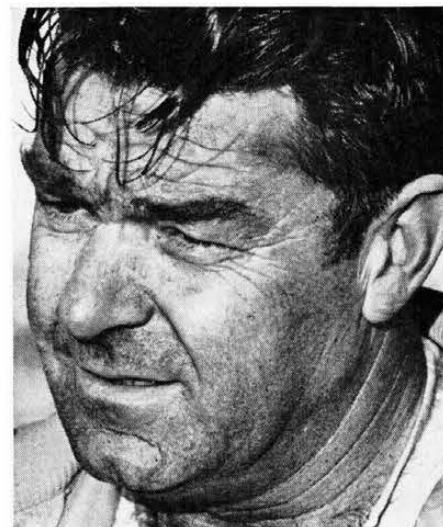
"Who was that who just called, Curtis?"

"Ah, nobody, Sweetie, just some li'l ol' girl I used to know. Hey, everybody! Let's get us another tap, we gonna start us a brand new party!"

They go into the enormous bar in the front of the house—a space some innocent architect designed as a dining room. Its giant picture window is covered by satin draperies and the walls are covered with paintings of frolicking nudes. The room is lit with weird fluorescent "black" light that makes teeth and white shirts glow in the dark, and the caricatured baby dolls have these, uh, well, parts that glow too. Over in the corner is a stereo console, its mahogany top covered with a teetering pile of records. It is blaring an old Rolling Stones number. Domer Reeves and his wife, "Big Red," come in. And here comes Pee Wee, a mechanic buddy of Pops', and a few more ol' boys and baby dolls and

pretty soon the room is full. Everybody gets a tap (a "shooter") of C.C. and Coke and all of a sudden, their motors are runnin'! Hot damn! The music gets louder and them ol' boys and the baby dolls are fruggin' away and Curtis gets himself another tap and announces over the din, "Hey, Pops, everything is gonna be all right!" And it is.

Curtis Turner didn't just all of a sudden, one day get to be one of the most famous men in the south-east. People up around Floyd, Virginia, will tell you Curtis Turner was the best liquor-haulin' driver ever in those parts, and there were a lot of pretty good ol' boys running with Curtis in them days. Curtis Turner was so good he could do a full-speed 180-degree bootleg spin with a 1½-ton pickup on a two-lane bridge and never touch the sides. The police would run him all over the state, but there was no catching him in



that McCullough-supercharged, 1940 Ford coupe with the big springs in the back. No way you could catch Curtis, running through the night at 110 mph, up and down through the gears, broadsliding the turns. "Some ol' state trooper ran me 39 times," says Curtis, "but he never came close. In those days there was this rule that if they didn't catch you on the road, you were safe, and I used to talk with that ol' trooper and he'd say, 'I'm gonna catch you if it's the last thing I do, Curtis.' Later that ol' boy committed suicide, and some people say it was because he could never catch me. I don't know about that, but 39 times sure is a lot."

They caught Curtis once—after he crashed the Ford through the gate of the Little Creek (Virginia) Naval Station with a load of sugar. He had this deal, you see, where he'd take a load of Navy sugar into the hills and trade it for white liquor, which

he'd in turn sell to the sailors. It was a very satisfactory arrangement until certain members of the government heard about it and set a trap for Curtis and his contacts at the base. This one night they let Curtis inside and let him load up with 500 lbs. of sugar and tried to arrest him when he came through the gate. But this was Curtis Turner they were trying to stop, and he just crashed through their barricades with the Ford in second gear. They unloaded their forty-fives and their carbines into the trunk, but sugar stops bullets like sand and Curtis fled unharmed into the Norfolk suburbs with a mob of prowling cars and jeeps in pursuit. By the time he hit the Nansemond County line and headed down Highway 58 for the hill country, the flashing lights of the law had receded into an otherwise dark horizon. Curtis ran on, free for the moment, but fully aware that every law officer from Norfolk to Charleston, West Virginia was mobilizing to block his way into the sanctuary of the mountains.

The Ford would burn its pistons after more than fifteen miles of full-throttle running on the supercharger, and Curtis motored quietly through a network of short cuts and back roads, trying to conserve his engine and a dwindling gasoline supply. He made it into the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains before another patrol car spotted him at an intersection and resumed the chase. Lights exploded in the rear-view mirror and the cacophony of engines and tires protesting against the rising speed was punctuated by the dull, wind-lashed reports of pistol fire and the whine of bullets around the cab. Curtis floorboarded the Ford down a narrow road that crested a series of low hills and managed to open a several-hundred-yard lead on his tormentors.

Suddenly the engine faltered. His gas tank was running dry. At that moment the police car dipped out of sight into a hollow and Curtis, still running 100 mph, snapped off his lights and veered into the darkness along the edge of the road. The Ford leaped and bucked through a thicket of scrub pines, finally shuddering to a stop as the lawmen thundered by at full blast. Curtis got out and found himself on the edge of a farmyard, with a school bus parked near his battered Ford. In addition to being out of gas, his lights had been knocked out by the sortie into the underbrush and Curtis immediately set to work siphoning gas out of the bus and scavenging one of its headlights. This done, he extracted him-

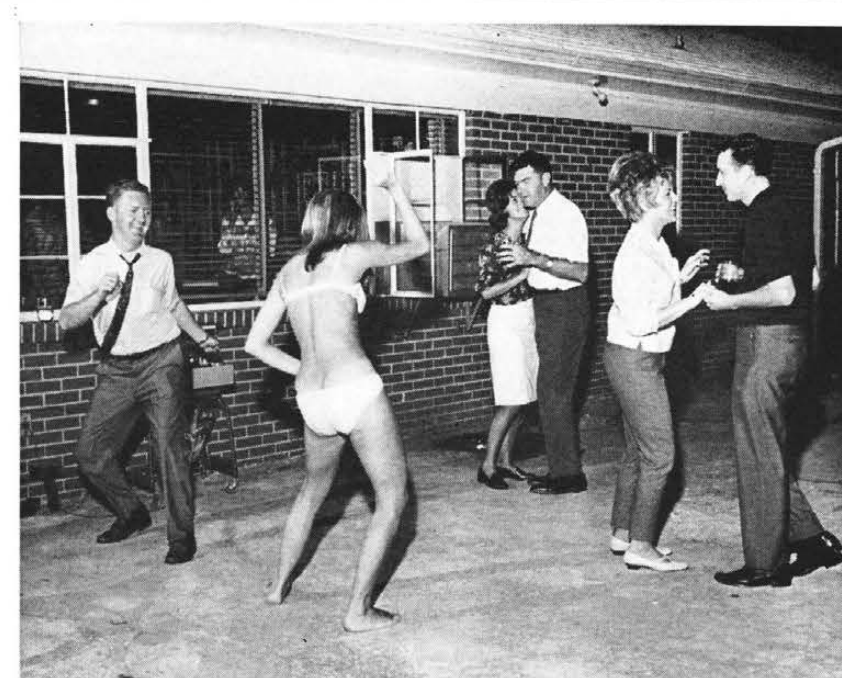
self from the pines and drove home unmolested . . . smack into the arms of the police, who had the foresight to post a guard around his daddy's place in Floyd.

They carted him back to Norfolk where he went up before a wise old Federal judge who knew a great deal about the business of making and hauling liquor. Curtis explained to him that, what with the war effort and all, there were a bunch of ladies up around Floyd who couldn't make no jelly or bake no pies, and "well, Your Honor, I was just carrying a little sugar up there to help them ol' gals out." The Judge, being as understanding as he was wise, fined Curtis \$1000 and gave him a two-year suspended sentence.

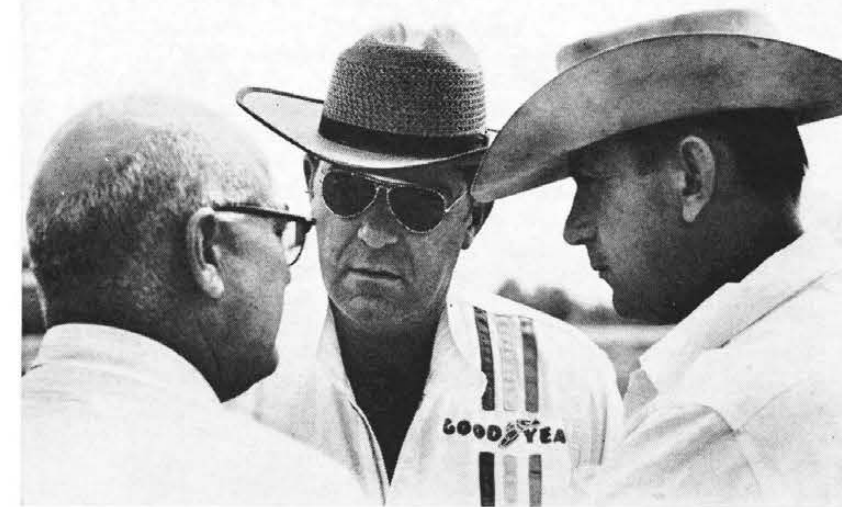
About that time, Curtis heard that some ol' boys were out racing their liquor-hauling cars every Sunday afternoon in a cornfield near Mt. Airy, North Carolina, and he went down to take a look. The next Sunday he had a go himself. They were a rough bunch of boys, and a lot of metal got bent up in the course of a race, but the cluster of folks who stood on the bank and watched got bigger every week and pretty soon a fellow could make more by racing down at Mt. Airy than he could hauling liquor. Before long, Curtis Turner was racing on other tracks in Virginia and the Carolinas, rubbing fenders with the likes of Fonty Flock, Frank "Rebel" Mundy, Buddy Shuman, Buck Baker, Marshall Teague, Gober Sosbee and Red Byron. Very tough boys, they were, but Curtis Turner could beat them—using a broadsliding, wickedly aggressive style that exploited every last bit of his monumental courage and uncanny coordination.

Led by a tub-thumping, Barnum-like promoter named Bill France, this band of racers in bib-overalls became the biggest sports sensation in the southeastern United States. The National Association of Stock Car Automobile Racing was formed and the word spread from Tennessee to Florida about how that big ol' boy from Floyd, Virginia, could drive a race car. He raced—and won—at places like Bowman-Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where the crowd was so rabid that sometimes he had to beat his way out of the race car with a tire iron, or at Mt. Airy, where he crashed through a board fence twice—once after spinning out and again while re-entering the race. And at the nasty half-mile in Charlotte where he broke his back—the only serious accident he encountered in his two

CONTINUED



Curtis (center) begins a "brand-new" party on the patio outside his house in Charlotte.



Curtis talks business with Darlington promoter Bob Colvin (left) and Smokey Yunick.



Curtis was almost unbeatable on the NASCAR convertible circuit in the late fifties.

(continued from previous page)

decades of racing. Sometimes he ran for months at a track without being beaten, piling victory upon victory. A southern sports writer recently calculated that Curtis Turner has won 354 feature races, plus an unending string of qualifying heats and minor events. He won so many trophies that the den of his fancy house in Roanoke got plugged to the ceiling. Fed up with the clutter, Curtis began to give them away to friends and casual acquaintances so that now the mantles of hundreds of shoe clerks and insurance brokers who never drove over 65 mph in their lives are sporting giant pieces of silverware awarded for winning contests they would never enter themselves. "Why not?" asks Pops, who may be one of the most generous men alive. "They get a big kick out of 'em and I didn't have any room for them around here. And besides, I sent the best ones down to the Stock Car Racing Museum in Darlington."

By the middle 1950s, Curtis had accumulated a sizable personal fortune in the timber business. Using his vast knowledge of the southern Appalachian timberlands and a bold but sound approach to high finance, he rose rapidly in the South's rugged, *laissez faire* business circles. He remained unchanged through the transition, except for the big house he bought in Roanoke, the better brand of liquor he drank and the flashier clothes he wore. But money didn't alter the deep hill-country drawl or the grand, uninhibited gregariousness that gave him friends and admirers wherever he traveled. A group of Negroes around Richmond are still talking about the day Turner arrived on the scene.

Curtis had just completed a \$75,000 timber deal in Richmond and got himself "about tuned" in a post-sale celebration. On a whim, he and a few friends drove out to the fairground's dirt track and bought grandstand tickets for the stock car races. Turner had barely settled into his seat when he spotted the Negro fellows struggling over what appeared to be the poorest car in the whole world. "I believe them boys need some help," said Curtis, leaving his seat in the grandstand. Still wearing a dress shirt and tie, he vaulted the fence and arrived in the pits. Without identifying himself, he made repairs on the exhausted engine, then climbed into the cockpit and drove the car to a convincing win in the feature. After handing over the winnings to the

bewildered but delighted car owners, Turner disappeared into the crowd. It is said that another driver approached them the following week, offering to drive the car, but the owners were firm. "No sir," they said, "this machine is reserved for the big man in the white shirt and the cuff links."

* Pops and Joe Weatherly teamed up when the Ford Motor Company got serious about racing in 1955 and they became inseparable buddies. Weatherly was a chunky little Virginian whose good-humored zaniness made him a perfect match for Curtis. It was Joe Weatherly who gave him the nickname "Pops." Nothing was more fun for either than to give the other's car a clout that would knock it off-course during a race. Once, before a 100-miler, Weatherly filled the water bottle in Pops' car with mint juleps and, when Turner was about to take a sip through the rubber tube during a caution flag slow-down, Little Joe pulled up alongside and yelled, "Hey Pops, pass that tube over here and give me a swig."

They rented a house at Daytona Beach together during the annual Speed Weeks and it became the scene of some of the maddest debauches in the Western hemisphere. They traveled everywhere carousing and chasing baby dolls, laughing and ramming each other off race tracks, until that black day in 1964 when Joe Weatherly died in a crash during the Riverside 500. The combination was broken, and Curtis has not teamed with a driver since.

Joe's death was the culmination of a nightmarish four years that cost Curtis all his money and even worse, a four-year suspension from NASCAR. The source of his troubles was a brilliantly-conceived white elephant known as the Charlotte Motor Speedway. It was Curtis' idea from the beginning, and it was his energy and creative talent that were responsible for its design and original financing. It was to have been the best 1½-mile super speedway in the world, but was dogged by bad luck from the moment the first shovelful of dirt was turned. To start with, an inaccurate geological survey failed to reveal a massive ridge of Carolina granite that straddled the building site. It took \$70,000 worth of dynamite alone to clear that particular obstacle, and there were more problems, both natural and manmade, so it wasn't long before Turner's original one-million-dollar budget had bal-

(Continued on page 132)

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WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? CURTIS TURNER?

(continued from page 64)

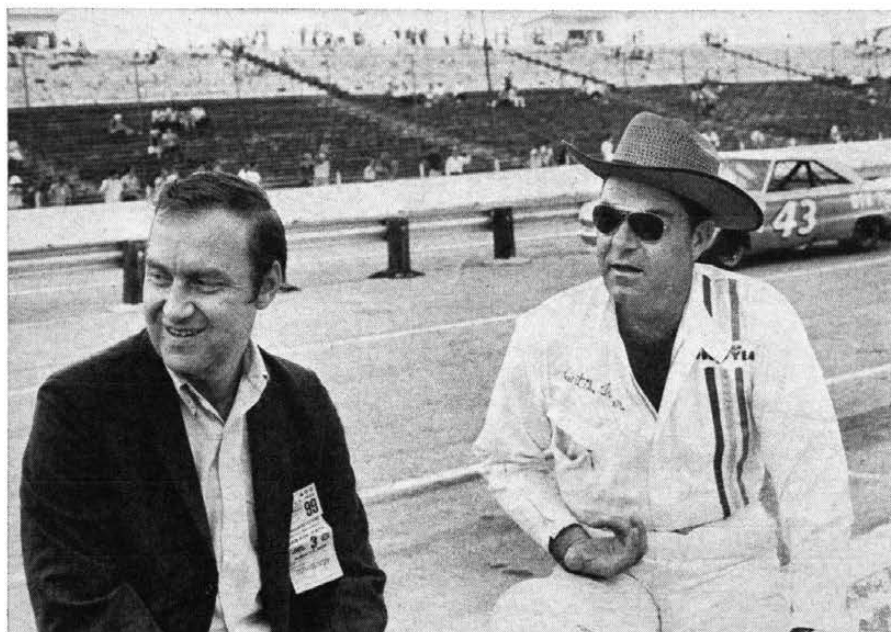
looned to 1.9 million. Creditors began to scream and Pops went through \$200,000 of his personal savings in an effort to keep the payments up. He held out for a miraculously long time, managing to reduce the debt to \$800,000 before somebody lost patience and went to court.

In a final act of desperation, Turner attempted to float a loan with the Teamsters Union, who were known for backing long shots. As part of the deal, they stipulated that he organize the NASCAR Grand National drivers into the Union. This he attempted to do—not out of any commitment to the Teamsters or to the proposition that race drivers should be involved in trade unionism, but only to get the cash for his speedway. He was signing up drivers by the dozen until NASCAR boss Bill France caught wind of the affair and suspended Turner indefinitely. In fact, Pops had *every* major Grand National star on the roles except, ironically, his buddy Joe Weatherly.

The Charlotte Motor Speedway debacle would have broken the spirit of most men. Turner came away from the affair penniless, black-balled from the racing organization that made him famous and, worst of all, widely accused of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars out of the track's till. Fortunately, the Justice Department and the Internal Revenue Service spent two years investigating the Speedway's tangled ledgers, and in so doing cleared Turner's name.

Pops turned away from racing for awhile and devoted his energies to

the timber business and amassing another six- or seven-figure bank account. He ran in a few outlaw events around the south—generally on dirt tracks, against second-rate drivers, and his name slowly disappeared from the headlines. Nevertheless he continued his full-throttle approach to life, complete with the parties that generally staggered on for days at a time. Life was good and business was booming, but he missed the action and exposure of the major Grand National events. His position as the most famous stock car driver had ostensibly been taken by the aloof, analytical Fireball Roberts, but the hard-bitten fans hadn't forgotten him. Turner still remembers an exquisitely reassuring moment on the dark and deserted beach course at Daytona. Pops and John Griffin had been in town on business and, following a few "taps," decided to take their rented car on a couple of laps around the circuit for old time's sake. Daytona racing had long since been transferred to Bill France's famous speedway, and the beach track was in a state of ruin by the time Curtis began his nostalgic race through the darkness. He thundered around and around, swinging wide in the sand so the rear wheels rode in the surf, then broadsliding through the neglected banked turns and screeching out onto the macadam back stretch that served as a public road. It wasn't long before one of the neighbors called the cops, and here comes Pops, with the rent-a-car heeled over and its tires folded under, only to find his path blocked by a Volusia County sher-



BROCK YATES (LEFT) FOLLOWS HIS STAR (RIGHT) TO DAYTONA INTERNATIONAL SPEEDWAY.

CAR and DRIVER

iff's cruiser. Pops managed to stop in time and sat silently behind the wheel while two deputies approached. A flashlight beam burst in his face and an angry voice yelled, "Who the hell do you think you are? Curtis Turner?"

No, they hadn't forgotten.

The timber business had grown to a point where he had transacted deals on two million acres of land by the time Bill France reinstated him to NASCAR in late 1965. Chrysler was boycotting NASCAR and the all-Ford festival was keeping the crowds home in droves, so France cannily tried to inject some punch into the late-season races by bringing back his biggest name. By then Pops was rich again, what with the timber and the tire franchises and the fleet of trucks and the interests in the shrimp processing plants, but he still wanted to race so bad he could taste it. He accepted France's peace offer instantly.

He'd put on some weight during the layoff and the first few races in his Glen-Wood-prepared Ford left him on the edge of collapse. But he refused to reduce his social schedule, telling baffled reporters that "I race better with a little hangover," and he was as likely to arrive at the race track straight from an all-night party as he was in the halcyon days of the Fifties. Some people said he was too old and too rusty to ever run competitively again, but two months hadn't passed before he won a major 250-mile race at the Rockingham, North Carolina super speedway. He then added a brilliant drive in the Riverside 500 and a win in the 300-mile modified stock car race at Daytona. The doubters were silenced. Curtis Turner was

back in force.

He keeps the house in Roanoke exclusively for parties, and nowadays spends most of his time in Charlotte. Regulars in the enormous ranch-style house on Freedom Drive include his three children by a previous marriage and a long-time maid, but the excess beds are generally kept full by a constant flow of old friends who appear unannounced, generally hang around for a few days of partying, and then wander away to nurse their hangovers, catch up on lost sleep, and replenish their precious bodily fluids.

But Curtis rolls on, sleeping two or three hours a night, often restricting his daily food intake to a late-evening sirloin. He has the constitution and physical endurance of a grizzly bear, and countless good men have been reduced to quivering hulks trying to keep pace with his schedule for more than a week at a time. "Hell, if I go to bed without drinking nuthin,' I wake up with a hangover, I swear," says Pops solemnly.

So on he goes, getting rich, flying high, driving fast, his motor runnin' flat out. Like he says, "If I was to die tomorrow, I'd be the happiest son of a bitch who ever lived."

And if you've got any sense at all, you'll forget about putting the weed killer on the front lawn and stop worrying about keeping up the car payments and take the next bus, airplane or train to Charlotte, North Carolina, because Pops says he's going to start a brand new party in about ten minutes.

Come on boy—git your motor runnin'!

c/p



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☐ 5 years \$21
☐ 3 years \$15
☐ 1 year \$6

Specify

- ☐ Payment enclosed
— You get 1 extra issue per year FREE!

- ☐ Bill me later.

AFFIX LABEL

If you have no label handy, print OLD address here.

name
city
address
state
zip-code

please print

name please print 0049

address

city

state zip-code