

The million dollar man says success hasn't spoiled him yet

IF THERE WAS ever a man who didn't let a few bucks go to his head, then it has to be Bill Elliott.

Back in the late 1970s, Elliott was just another of the many country bumpkins trying to make it in the elite world of stock car racing -- the NASCAR Winston Cup circuit.

But there was something about this young lad from Dawsonville, Georgia and his family-owned and operated racing enterprise that caught the eye of Michigan businessman, Harry Melling.

At the urging of former national champion Benny Parsons, Melling purchased the fledgling Elliott racing team back in December, 1981, simply hoping he would recoup his investment.

What Melling got, was a million dollar man who would eventually become the sport's next superstar thanks to looking a lot like Opie Taylor on the *Andy Griffith Show*.

With his "my gosh" good-natured attitude and his Georgia drawl, Elliott was an instant media hit when he took the racing world by storm during 1985. The superspeedway races -- those on tracks 1.5 miles in length or longer -- virtually belonged to the Elliott clan that year, as he swept 11 of them, including the Daytona 500, the Winston 500 and the Southern 500 for a cool million dollar bonus from R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.

The newspapers, magazines and television stations couldn't get enough of the guy who had won a record 11 superspeedway races occasionally got mad by saying "gosh dam."

Despite all the pretty girls who flocked to the fence of pit road to see this red-haired wonder, all the countless interviews and all the greenbacks that had piled up along the way, Bill Elliott hadn't changed very much.

"Naw," as he might say. "I'm still just a Georgia boy who loves to work on race cars."

He forgot to mention one important word detail -- now he's filthy rich.

ELLIOTT STRODE INTO the Ramada Hotel in downtown Winston-Salem last week, returning an occasional smile from members of the hotel staff. He later signed autographs for them.

A look at his sweater, Levi's and dark loafers would suggest that Elliott could pass easier for an employee at Reynolds than he could for a millionaire.

After he concluded interviews with the local television stations, Elliott promptly proclaimed -- "Well, let's eat."

My kind of fellow. By the way, millionaires carve their steak the same way I do -- with a knife and fork. It was a cheap cut, though. No fillet mignon for this guy.

"I'm just like anybody else," Elliott insisted to the group of media on hand for pre-race festivities at North Wilkesboro Speedway's First Union Bank 400.

The media has hounded Elliott during the last several years for failing to win on the short tracks. He silenced their cries two weeks ago with his first short win at the Bristol 500.

"What a lot of people don't realize is that I started my career on the short tracks like everyone else did," he replied.

"I was a regular at Dixie Speedway and drove on a few others, too. It's not like I've never won on a short track before.

Though the statistics might suggest otherwise, Elliott says he has no qualms about rubbing fenders somewhere like Bowman Gray Stadium.

"I kind of like the short tracks," he said. "It really doesn't make any difference where I'm running.

"I like running them all. The short tracks are sort

of like driving downtown. The big tracks are like getting on the expressway in the fast lane. The road courses remind me of driving down the Blue Ridge Parkway on the way back to Georgia.

"I just like working on and driving race cars. That's really my favorite thing to do. It also happens to be how I make a living."

Yes, Bill, and a rather nice living at that.

THOUGH MOST OF the crowd asked Elliott questions about the upcoming race or other such boring topics, I managed to pop a real zinger to liven up the conversation.

"With all the talk of minority hiring in baseball and other sports, what kind of opportunities are available in NASCAR for minorities -- particularly blacks and women," I inquired, using my best Tom Brokaw imitation.



ON THE SIDELINES

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"Well, I don't know," Elliott replied, pausing to make sure he would not be the next Al Campanis or something of the like.

"It (the sport) is open to anyone," he said. "There are a few women involved right now, but quite honestly, it's hard for anyone to break into the sport these days.

"It's hard to get the experience you need to land a top ride on the circuit. Like a lot of other things, you have to start at the bottom and work your way up.

"But I think the opportunities are there for anyone if they play their cards right."

Though the subject was quickly changed, Elliott was at least gracious to tackle the subject of minorities which has been all but avoided on the tour for years.

Patty Moise and Karen Shultz are currently the only women who compete regularly in NASCAR's scheme of things. But since the demise of Danville's Wendell Scott, black men and women have been left out of the million dollar sport completely.

And with all the million dollar sponsors, Elliott says it would be hard for a new team to survive.

"Just about all of the little guys are gone," he noted.

"There is so much money being spent, the independents have almost been driven out entirely. It's very hard to break into this business these days."

BUT IF ANYONE knows about starting from scratch, then it would be Elliott.

"That's what makes our accomplishments so significant," said the Georgia native who is frequently known as "Wild Bill from Dawsonville."

"There's no way I would've ever thought we could do the things we have so quickly," he said.

"We started with one race car and a 4000 foot shop. Now we have a different car for every race sometimes. It's hard to imagine how far we've come."

Now, Elliott grudgingly admits there is a price to pay for success. Like the hectic schedule of public appearances and banquets he frequently encounters.

"I'd rather be back at the shop under the hood of a race car," he concedes.

"But with all the money, it's hard to say no."

The success of the Elliott family and of the nearby Richard Childress - Dale Earnhardt team has proved that a small racing team can still make it to the big time.

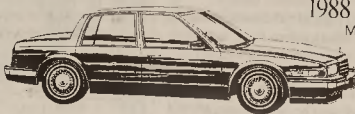
So, yes, the dreamers who seek to race can still hope someday their lucky break will come.

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Lindsay and Ladson to square off for title

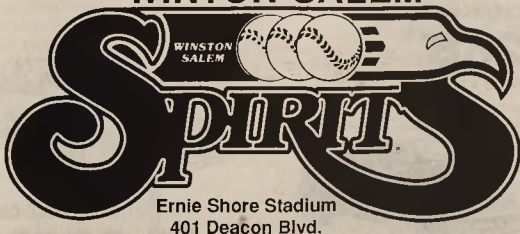
"Big Tom" Lawrence has announced that Steve Lindsay, a native of Camden, New Jersey, will fight Marvin Ladson for the vacated Southern Welterweight Championship in August.

Lindsay, who is under contract with promoter Don King, is 6-0 and will take on the Twin City native in the main event of a big card scheduled for the Benton Convention Center on August 15.

Ladson recently lost his North Carolina belt to Kent Hardee in a knockout loss, but has been working hard to regain a title according to Lawrence.

Lindsay has sparred with the likes of former WBC Light Heavyweight Champion Dwight Brackston and should give Ladson his money's worth insiders say.

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