

## It's Life In Fast Lane For Brunswick County's Tony Caines

BY TERRY POPE

The car in Tony Caines' front yard is a Buick, and it'll go 160 miles an hour. Obviously, it's not your average Buick. Last week Caines was busy switching engines in the machine that had just completed a race at the Charlotte Motor Speedway.

When the No. 89 car heads to Atlanta Nov. 16 for its final race of the season, Caines and his crew of seven men will be dreaming of victory's lane, far away from his Northwest community home in Brunswick County.

On the job, Caines helps operate a trucking business and keeps the diesel engines in operation.

But away from the job, he shares time in the driver's seat of the 1987 Buick La Sabre with driver Rocky Hodges of Indiana. Caines is also chief of the pit crew, which is why the car has found a home port in Brunswick County.

The move from local dirt tracks to life in the fast lane came swift for Caines, who nurtures the car that is owned by Dee and G.G. Bussey of Irving, Texas.

Racing fans know the car better as the former Quaker State car driven by Ricky Rudd in the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) Winston Cup Series. But Rudd has a new car now and is currently seventh in the circuit money-winnings with \$645,905.

The mother and daughter team bought Rudd's car and entered it in the Sportsman's Division, which has been running for three years. The eight-cylinder car has been repainted white with hot pink numbers and is trimmed in aqua.

Sportsman races are held each Saturday before Sunday's Winston Cup races.

But being a part of the crew and getting to drive on the big track is helping Caines inch closer to his goal of becoming a NASCAR driver.

"It's something that I've always wanted to do every since I was a kid," said Caines. "Over the years I had messed with cars, but I had never really gotten into them like now."

He had thought about buying a car. Then he wanted to become a driver. Last March, he attended Buck Baker's driving school in Rockingham for prospective NASCAR drivers. From competition there, he has been named as one of four finalists with a shot of driving in the Busch Grand Nationals.

"Things just fell into place," said Caines. It's also where he met the first driver for the Bussey car and became part of the crew. Inside the No. 89, and also painted on the rear bumper, are the words, "In memory of Bill Bussey: 1949-1990."

The mother and daughter who own the car have made it a memorial to their husband and father, who died last year in a motorcycle accident, said Caines.

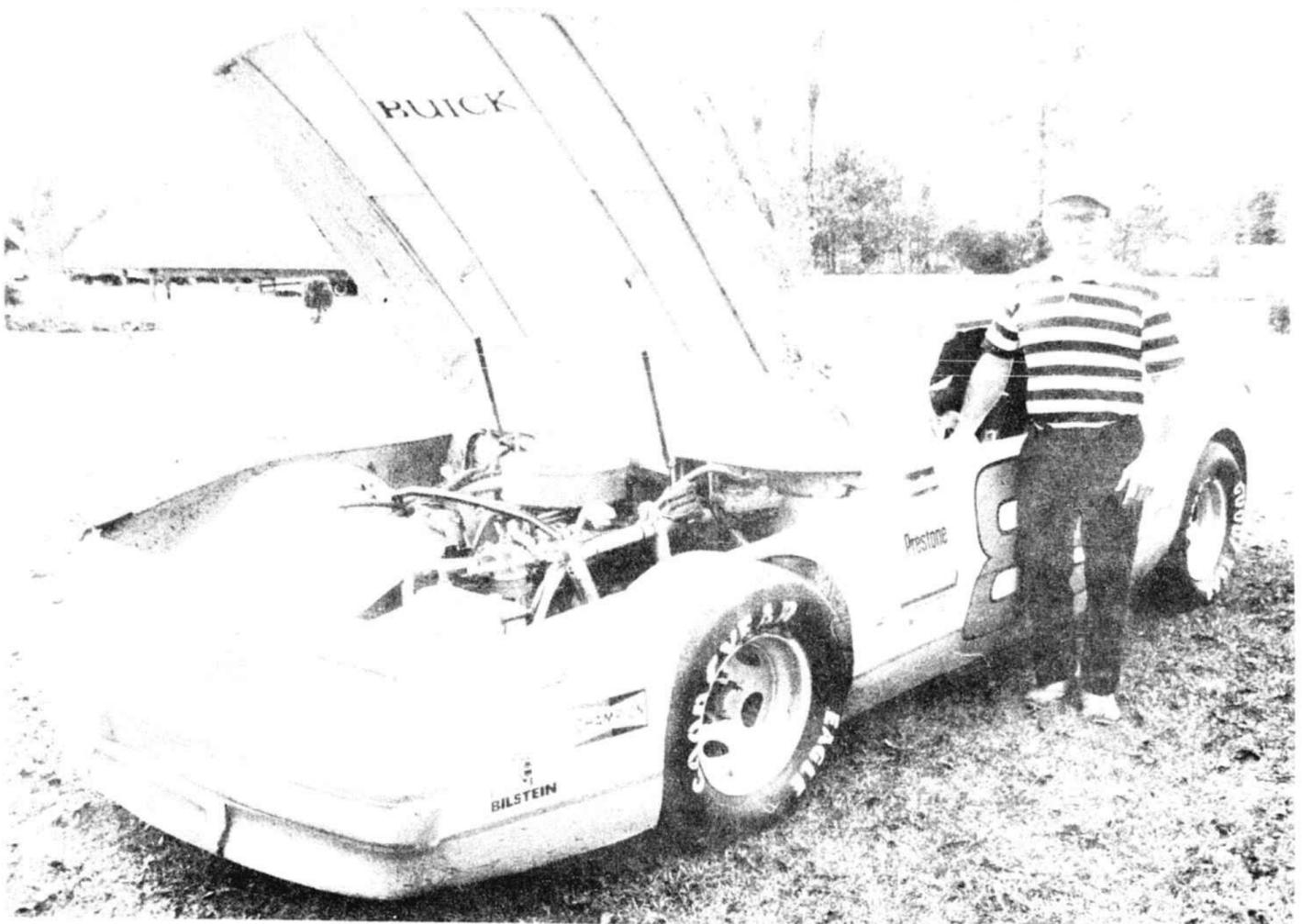
"It takes ambition," he said. "It takes determination. You have to be competitive and have an easy touch. A person that's real rough-handed doesn't drive good on the asphalt."

Caines also drives a dirt track car, owned by Albert Bass of Wilmington, from April to October. For each of the last six weeks, he has finished in the top five.

At Baker's driving school, trainees run races in groups of 20 cars on what Caines says is one of the toughest tracks on the circuit, named "The Rock" at Rockingham, for its treacherous turn No. 2.

During the three-day course, instructors explain the track and what it takes to become a driver.

"What they're looking for is smoothness and consistency," said Caines. "Some people have that touch,



TONY CAINES' love for racing has him inching closer to the NASCAR circuit. In his Leland area garage Caines keeps the former Ricky Rudd Buick ready for action on the Sportsman's competition.

STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

and some don't. They're pretty blunt in telling you if you have a chance."

The Bussey car has run eight races this year and is scheduled for 10 races next year, on the road from the Poconos in Pennsylvania to tracks in New Hampshire, Richmond, Va., Charlotte and Atlanta. The season runs from February to November, which means Caines and the crew must spend a lot of time traveling.

"It's quite time consuming," said Caines. "This entire winter, we'll be working on this car, getting it ready for February."

He learned to work on race cars "mostly by just hanging around the tracks," he said, "learning set ups and stuff like that."

Since each race track is different, the car must be adjusted before each race.

In time and dollars, the race car can become a costly hobby, Caines said. The Buick is valued at \$35,000 while each of its two engines cost \$14,000.

"They (Busseys) kind of put their trust in me," said Caines. "I look after it like it was my own. The crew enjoys working together. It's like a family."

Radio communication helps the crew stay in contact with the driver at all times during the race.

"They can tell you if there's a wreck up ahead," said Caines. "The driver can also let the crew know what the car is doing on the track so they can be ready to make adjustments when the driver comes in."

When the car does wreck, it makes the crew's job even more difficult in preparing for another race.

"When that happens, we work all week just getting it ready for the next race, working day and night," said

Caines. "You have to love it to want to do it." Earlier this year, Caines drove the car at the Atlanta track, reaching speeds up to 160 mph.

"You get a little bit nervous before a race," said Caines. "But all of that leaves. Then you're just thinking about getting to the front of the pack."

Drivers also can't afford to think about wrecks and injuries, he said, for mental attitude can be the difference between success and failure.

"Even though the possibility is there," he said, "if you think about it you'll never be a good race car driver. It'll stay in the back of your mind."

Young drivers crave "seat time," lingo for driving in races on the big tracks. Caines is no exception as he continues his race for success.

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