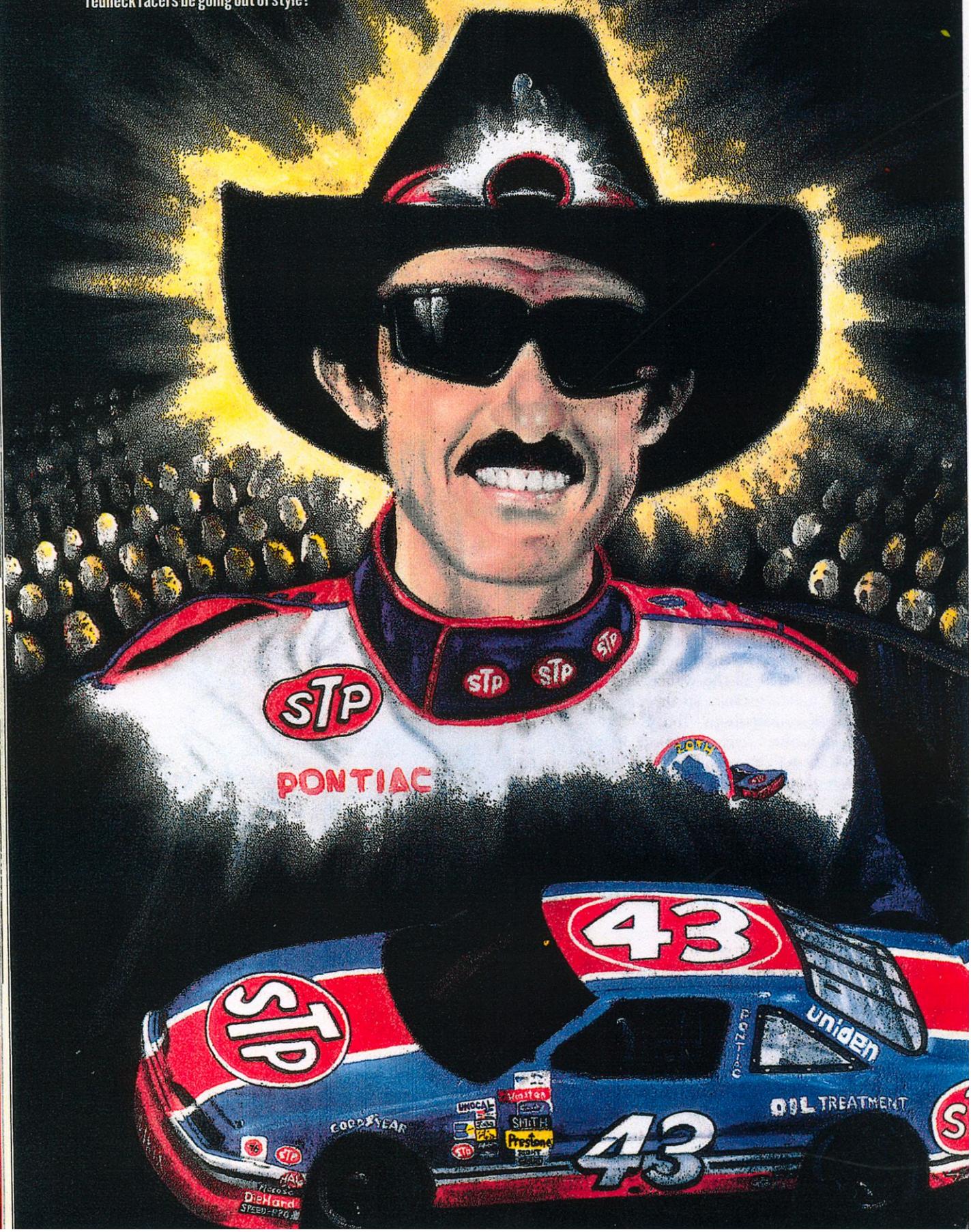


Black velvet: In the South, people feel a need to render Petty's image. But with Nascar going nationwide, will redneck racers be going out of style?



# THE KING'S LAST LAP

**Richard Petty mastered the fine art of hugging the wall at 200 miles per hour. Now that stock-car racing is the fastest-growing sport in the country, he's trying to master the art of cashing in. By Shaull Assael**

**E**LECTION EVE IN ERWIN, NORTH CAROLINA. A hot-dog-and-hallelujah rally is under way at the Triton High School. The gymnasium is packed with party faithful who've braved this rain-soaked night to be reassured that the tednecks still rule. Halfway through, racing legend Richard Petty, a candidate for secretary of state, glides in under police escort. A candidate for Congress who's been carnival barking stops long enough to acknowledge the new GOP star in the cowboy hat and shades, then resumes his screed. "Do we want Hollywood homosexuals deciding our morals? Do we want a First Mother who's gonna be raising her child from jail? Do we want another four years of that skirt-chasin', pot-smokin' draft dodger in the White House?"

The loud chant "No!" dances off the cinder-block walls.

Petty gets up next. His face looks like a parched map, each line a road crisscrossing its surface. It is taut and tanned, rugged in the manner of Clint Eastwood, of the outlaw gunslinger. He gazes at the bedsheet by the hay bale, on which two brothers have written RICHARD FOREVER. He sees the fans who've heard he'll sign the T-shirts he sells for fifteen bucks and who have begun forming a long line. He nods to the shriveled old man in the front row, who'll stop him later and say, "Around here, people have opinions about three things: dogs, the land, and women," and he'll ask sensibly about the old guy's dog.

Petty has no notes as he leans into the microphone, for his campaign is simple. It's about keeping North Carolina in

the family. Who better to elect than its legendary racer, the son of its back-road bosom?

"I wanna thank y'all for everything you done," Richard starts, sincerely, "and promise I won't mess up the office of secretary of state." Here he smiles. "'Cause I won't spend all my time there. I'll be at the races." The room breaks into gales of laughter.

The next evening, he, along with the half dozen other candidates on the stage, will be defeated. All these rootsy Republican campaigns, with Petty as their standard-bearer, will run into a mammoth roadblock in the suburbs. And when Richard Petty can't get elected in North Carolina, you know it's time for a new map. That, or a moment of silence for the quiet passing of the redneck South.

The local Republican party had seen Richard, the winningest stock-car racer ever, as its translucent star. And for evidence of why they were right and wrong, back up to a few hours before the preelection rally. Richard, deciding to tweak the Democrats, parked his campaign bus in front of their Raleigh headquarters, a postbellum mansion on a quiet, leafy street. A Catholic-school playground lay next door, and as he got out, a gaggle of gits in checkered skirts began to squeal, "That's him. That racer man." Delighted, Petty started signing unsolicited autograph cards beneath a shade tree. Several of the girls told him he was their dad's favorite racer.

The problem is, North Carolina is becoming one big NationsBank mall, and the guy driving the paver is the father of those pigtailed gits. Call them pool-and-patio suburbanites, people with Range Rovers, Panthers season tickets, and a taste for Thai food who don't think of themselves as southerners. They have outregistered Democrats six to one since 1990, and they-not the Democrats-are the ones who turned Richard's political career into roadkill.

There's a saying in North Carolina that the state is a valley of humility between two mountains of conceit. Pretty enough words, but that valley produced the moonshiners, who, having to do business in a hurry, produced stock-car racing, which in turn produced the Petty family. But Pettys are not accustomed to humbling experiences. Richard figured that public service would be his for the asking when he retired. Hillbilly *oblige*. He was wrong. On the morning after Election Day, he awoke in a suburbanized Republican southern state that had defeated him by eight points. After the shellacking he got, you'd expect Petty to be contemplative, exhausted, sullen. But he's positively bouncy in defeat. "Only three men got more publicity than me," he grins, "and they were all running for president."

But what was this political thing really all about? In the sixties, Petty was the kid star with matinee looks. In the gas-starved seventies, his number 43 single-handedly carried stock. In the eighties, he was the icon who had President Reagan bowing before him at his two-hundredth win. And in '92, the King was the legend whose rock-star-size retirement tour sparked a merchandising boom that has yet to crest. Now he's the fifty-nine-year-



The King gets FAT:Petty reinvented Nascar with 1992's Fan Appreciation Tour.

old patriarch racing the clock in his empire-building days.

A sponsor used to be the guy who didn't take your furniture if you were late on the payment. Now a sponsor is Du Pont or Tide or the Cartoon Network, Kellogg's, Kodak. Just five years ago, it took \$1 million to finance a competitive racing team. Now in order to dominate, you need \$8 million, and to get money like that you need to drive a car that looks like a box of Frosted Flakes or Fred Flintstone, or maybe the Hooters car. And the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing is building new stadiums in cities such as Fort Worth, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Miami, and it's selling them out, even though they have nearly twice the capacity of NFL stadiums. The oval in Texas, which will be one of the largest venues in the world, has a planned capacity of 163,000.

And here's the irony: The same suburban families that shelled Petty at the polls will shell out four hundred bucks to fill up those seats. When they get there, he will get them into his souvenir trailers. He'll get them into his new driving schools. He'll get them to buy Pontiacs, Pepsi, Goody's headache powder, and, of course, STP. And if they leave untouched, he'll get them in their malls when they get home. Richard has married his son, Kyle, to Mattel's Hot Wheels, sponsor of his new race team. Petty action figures can't be far behind.

Let the people Petty calls "Yankee rednecks" come-the bankers who've traded their Armani for checkered leathers. "Those people from Boston," he says, "who come down here to yell *yahoo*." As Nascar enters its fiftieth year, and stock-car racing is being called the fastest-growing commercial sport in the country, and drivers are now unscarred and glowing corporate spokesmen with all their own teeth and stock portfolios and television accents, all Richard Petty wants is his piece.

**P**ETTY COUNTRY IS BRANSON MILL ROAD, A winding, hilly stretch that cuts through the family's homestead in Level Cross, North Carolina. You can acquire many useful things on Branson Mill: a Weedwacker with a microwave cheese sandwich thrown in at Whitt's Grocery, a cow at Reg Holstein's Coltrane farm, a horse at one of the pastures with picture-book picket fences, spiritual salvation at the Welcome Baptist Church, or the Shania Twain look at Delphine's Beauty Shop. At the end of the road is a white-plank farmhouse next to a small, stately home right out of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This is where Richard and his brother, Maurice, were raised by Elizabeth Petty and her racing husband, Lee.

Lee quit his small trucking business at thirty-five to become a stock-car racer, and he took his boys with him. He had a generous spirit, but he stoked his bubbling blood by dusting moonshiners, whose livings depended on outgunning revenuers in the hills. These races colored suffocatingly similar cotton-mill towns. They also schooled a boy of twelve in the rules of the road.

"I was fortunate starting young, not having any habits

as far as eating and sleeping," he says. "I never got. . . what kind of clock you call it? A body clock? Yeah. My body don't know what time it is. Don't care what time it is. I eat to refuel. Sleep the same way. If I went to Alaska and it stayed light for three or four days, I'd probably stay up that long."

Petty was made worldly by the small world, having traveled across the country when boys from Level Cross were lucky to have been to Charlotte. Even today, he sees its old face in the new facades. A campaign rally took him to a ball field in Asheville, North Carolina, where the minor-league Colorado Rockies team, the Tourists, play. As well-coiffed ladies balanced plastic plates of barbecue on their arms and hoi polloi danced beneath burnished brick arches, Richard stared at the outfield.

"Daddy didn't come to my first race in '58, 'cause he had one here," he says abruptly. "The field was the same, but ..."

He pauses, as if rerunning a thirty-eight-year-old race. "There was tires all around. Every time some ol' boy flipped up over 'em, the owner went after him, shakin' his fist, 'cause it messed up the grass."

Here, you wait for him to sound sentimental, but he disappoints. "Eighty percent of the tracks we ran on are gone, but the only people who care are old-timers, and, hell, they can't see, anyway."

The Pettys have always been pragmatic, which in some quarters is read as cheap. But NASCAR furnishes neither pensions nor disability coverage, and more drivers than you'd think are one head-on away from being broke. Just look at NASCAR's working-class hero, Bobby Allison, over in Hueytown, Alabama. Last March, he had to auction off everything he owned, including the newspaper clippings about his two dead boys, Davey and Clifford, because he couldn't pay the medical bills from the horrifying 1988 crash that left him in a coma for three weeks and in therapy since. And he was Petty's greatest rival, the third-winningest driver in racing history.

After Richard and Maurice rode shotgun for Lee through three titles and his winning of the inaugural Day-



Driving a car that would "kick your ass standing still," Petty reigned in the gas-starved '70s. Below, in 1984, President Reagan lauds win number 200.



were getting bald after all your foolish banging, he'd come down off the high groove like the devil himself, and you'd be passed, son.

"When they start the next race," he says matter-of-factly, "I won more than all them put together. Next was David Pearson. Then Bobby Allison. Dale Earnhardt may have won seven championships, but he ain't won but seventy-four races. He ain't but an honorable mention. After that, there's guys who won ten. And I won two hundred." How did that two hundredth feel, coming on July 4, 1984, with fireworks and a personal embrace by President Ronald Reagan? "Just another day in the life of Richard Petty," he says.

He could be as smooth as his smile when in the lead, but he'd use his car like an Everlast glove [continued on page 144]

tona 500 in 1959, they still had just a couple of house payments in the bank. Then Lee's Pontiac went airborne at Daytona in 1961, sailing over the third-turn guardrail. The sickening sound of a front end being mashed into the cockpit could be heard in the cheap seats.

Lee didn't so much encourage Richard to drive as not stand in his way. As he lay in a hospital bed, with a punctured lung, fractured chest, and broken left thigh, he told Richard the family car was now his to ride. He wondered if his boy's blood bubbled the same as his.

By then, the speedway era was in full swing. The debut of the 2.5-mile Daytona Speedway was followed by 1.5-mile tracks in Charlotte and Atlanta. Racing was about two-hundred-mile-per-hour speeds. It needed a new, more calculating driver. Lee bluntly drove the bullrings. His son decided to try something different. He seduced the speedways.

Richard drove closer to the wall than anyone, which is like leaning into a Mike Tyson punch, except that the wall hits harder. But Richard got along well with the wall. He was economical, deliberative, patient. When he saw that your tires

# THE KING'S LAST LAP

[continued from pagnosl] wlllen behind. "Toughest son of a bitch I ever met," says his longtime crew chief and second cousin, Dale Inman. How could you not be to come through the 1960s, the bloodiest decade in racing, when speed passed safety, when cars that were the aerodynamic equivalent of your fat aunt Ethel were pushing two hundred miles per hour?

"In '980, I broke my neck in Pocono," Richard says. "It hurt so bad, I knew something was wrong. But I didn't know how bad. So I come to the hospital, and the doctor comes in for the X ray. I could see my neck was an eighth of an inch off. The doctor asked me, 'When did you break your neck before?' I said, 'Huh?' I never knew I broke my neck. I was probably hurtin' so much from somethin' else, I didn't notice."

Richard's good looks and tufts of thick black hair also made him stand out from the other broken and soiled men, many of whom would not make it through the 1960s. **Most of these men were poor, and many were illiterate. If you asked for an autograph from one of those racers, you got back a gnarled, angry scrawl, maybe just an X.** But Richard, who'd taken a business class that taught penmanship, gave them a beautiful incongruity: a flowery, curling signature that looked as if it belonged to a king.

And so it was that the King, that wonderful creation, that alter ego, that smiling, relentlessly polite autograph signer, was born. He was no doubt born of economic necessity, but no one would deny that Richard developed a strong physical craving for these kinetic bursts of contact.

You still see it at the racetrack. He will take the issue of Hot Rod magazine you've handed him, the one that shows his '67 Plymouth or '70 Super Bird, and tell you "that was one hell of a race car," and this makes you feel **you know something more about him, something deep.** Then he'll hug the wife and say to the kid, "Howyadoin', buddy?" as he settles down to sign. You watch his impossibly long fingers. Somehow, you expect them to be gangly or scarred, but they're perfectly manicured and smooth, which is a fair enough description of the man. They grip **the pen, and then you notice his secret: He pushes it with his arm, as he was taught in that business class.** That's why he can sign for so long. His fingers don't tire. Each autograph is exactly the same.

Fans stalk him like a zoo animal, jabbing him with autograph cards as if they were food pellets to see if what they've heard is true, to see if he'll grab them. And he always does. "I have to say, after thirty-five years, I still feel good about being recognized," he says. And why not? The King giveth away his name and his soul so we may all know him. All he asks is that we go forth to collect his kitsch.

Half the town of Eden is at the Railroad Cafe, a small luncheonette on the Virginia-North Carolina border. It's a summer Saturday night, and they're drinking strawberry moonshine and dancing to the country jukebox. **Someone shouts to the owner, "Show them new boys the museum, Homer,"** and so he does. It is little more than a white-washed concrete room, but the bearded cook, Homer Wood, has filled it with all sorts of number 43 cars, cereal boxes, figurines, cardboard cutouts, all signed by Richard. His prized possession is a limited-edition print of Petty staring godlike into a powder-blue sky, and he keeps it

**meticulously wrapped in tissue. Homer leans it beside a milk crate and lets Richard's eyes follow him as he drinks and talks.**

Traveling through the Nascar South, you see endless paintings like this, bung in homes next to pictures of the kids, Jesus, occasionally Elvis. People feel oddly compelled to render him, as if only by creating him with brusbstrokes can they understand the frozen, feel-good face. His used tires sit in more dens than you might think. His crash debris was always a hot item to walk away from a race with, like a caught foul ball. Richard can't leave his leather jacket, sunglasses, even his ever-present tin of chew out for long. **Someone always steals it.**

With mania such as this, he could have withdrawn into a huge, gated Graceland, with plenty of room for tacky gift shops, bus tours, and your basic Lourdes-like shrine for the freak parade. Instead, he's crammed his career into that homey little white-plank farmhouse at the end of Branson Mill Road. For three dollars, you can see the jumpsuit Richard wore when he won his two-hundredth race, the King with Ronnie Reagan, the nation's Medal of Freedom, the cases of apostolic kitsch—a number 43 electric guitar, a rhinestone jacket of Richard's face—the walls of trophies, the photo of Richard sitting on the hood of a 19SO Plymouth by the Coltrane Feed Mill, the wax statue of Petty with the blue Richard Petty rocking chair **to rest your tired bones.**

Why not something larger, something, you know, big and flashy and interactive? Petty gives an answer one day as he's riding in his private plane. "Look down there," he says. "What do you see?" There is nothing to see beneath the clouds. "From up here, no one is bigger than anyone else."

**T**HE PETTYS CAME VERY CLOSE TO LOSING IT ALL. And it happened when Richard was flying on top of the world and shouldn't have had to worry. We have to go back to the early eighties, when Richard, then closing in on the two-hundred-win mark, decided to break his son, Kyle, into the business. The boy was raised to be humble. When President Nixon invited Kyle's fatbet for an audience at the White House, his teachet had to read about it in the papers. "How come you didn't tell us?" she asked. "I didn't know I was supposed to," he answered.

Kyle was also raised to take over the family business, as Richard had been at his age. And so when he reached his twenties, **Richard ceded him more and more control** and expected him to become the driver in the family. But running a two-car shop in 1983 was nothing like it had been in 1963—Richard began losing. His brother, Maurice, was near the breaking point from building engines for both cars. Dale Inman, his crew chief, defected for better pay. Lee, who was in his late sixties, became a dyspeptic presence. And Kyle had somehow turned into a liberal! Lord, how he would argue with everyone. "If you stood still for a minute, I was gonna argue with you," he says.

The Pettys had turned into a soap opera. To save the family farm, Richard left Petty Enterprises for a high-paying driving job elsewhere. Kyle had to start selling his laod in the Carolina hills to pay bills. Three weeks after Richard won his two-hundredth race, Kyle announced he was leaving Petty Enterprises, too.

**He became a racing version of Shakespeare's Prince**

Hal, carousing to escape the burden that one day he'd be King. First, he went to drive for the Pettys' archrivals, the Wood Brothers, for the princely sum of \$50,000, and he dabbled for a while in country music. With Richard at the very pinnacle of his career and Kyle off finding himself, Petty Enterprises went dormant. For the first time since 1947, there wasn't the sound of Richard's car buzz-sawing the silence around Branson Mill Road.

"It was always 'the Shop.' Those words," Kyle says. "The Shop was where you went to get your Coca-Cola. The Shop was where you went when your bicycle broke, or where you got gas when you were sixteen. Your whole life revolved around the Shop, and all of a sudden it wasn't there."

In 1986, Richard decided that he'd had enough of driving somebody else's car and returned to Branson Mill Road. "When they closed that place up, when there was nothing there, it tore Richard's heart out," his wife, Lynda, remembers. "He said, 'I can't stand this. I'm going home.'" But the road back was long, and Richard didn't help matters by going off on odd, self-indulgent tangents. At the age of forty-nine, with nothing more to lose or gain, he became something of an eccentric, hiring engineers with far-fetched ideas about redesigning the most basic elements of the race car. His new crew, made up of inexperienced Level Cross locals, watched helplessly as one idea after another failed, as number 43 became punch-drunk. The sight of him needing oxygen after races didn't do the image proud.

"If I'd looked at what the fans thought, I woulda quit in 1986," Richard says. "Yaknow, when I was born, God said, 'You've got twenty-five years of good luck.' I just tried to stretch it to thirty-five."

Then something remarkable happened. Just when it looked as if the King was going to hang on too long, becoming a cheap ornament used to dress up bad awards banquets in second-rate hotels, he decided to throw himself a yearlong farewell tour. In doing so, Petty single-handedly reinvented Nascar as a modern commercial juggernaut.

He called it the Fan Appreciation Tour (FAT), which in and of itself suggested that the time had arrived for everybody to pay Richard back for all the free face he'd given us over the years. Petty issued a different souvenir model car for each race of the tour and charged twelve dollars. Do the math: twenty-five thousand units for each of the thirty races at twelve dollars a car. A pretty nice 401(k) plan, right?

The first souvenir car sold out five days before the 1992 Daytona 500. By race Sunday, speculators were selling them for three times the list price. Suddenly, every licenser with kneepads was at Richard's door. He lent his name to knives, trading cards, shirts, caps. Pepsi came out with twelve commemorative longnecks. There was even Richard Petty Chicken on a Stick.

The tour raked in staggering amounts of cash, but more important, it demonstrated just how narrowly the sport was being managed. There existed no stock-car equivalent of NFL properties, no central branding arm. Nascar was America's fifth-largest sport, yet it was still a corporate backwater. Petty's tour, modeled after the Olympics, with sponsors paying between a hundred grand and half a million dollars for official logos, awak-

ened Nascar's sleeping giant.

"The memorabilia was so mind-boggling, it staggered all of us," says the racing promoter Humpy Wheeler. "And everything sold. If we'd have seen it coming, a lot of us would have made much more money than we did."

Nowadays, you can't watch television without getting blown back by the wind shear of racing-product pitch. There's RPM 2Night daily on ESPN2, RaceDay on TNN, Road to the Championship on TBS, and a Nascar-produced show called *This Week in Nascar*. In all, there's close to thirty hours of Nascar programming created each week for you to look at on your basic cable, fueling a \$600 million souvenir and collectibles industry. You can shop in Nascar Thunder stores, eat in Nascar restaurants, and buy everything from Nascar water to Nascar motor oil. The market is so active that Dale Earnhardt, who sells more T-shirts than the Rolling Stones, has licensed his name for \$30 million. Nascar probably sells more die-cast tchotchkes and painted plates than *Star Trek* and *The Civil War* combined.

"The deal is, I went downhill in winnings, but I didn't go downhill as far as popularity," Petty says. "In fact, I might have gone up."

Here he stops and grins coyly.

"People feeling sorry for me and all."

■ IS OCTOBER 27. AND RICHARD PETTY IS WATCHING his number 43 Pontiac disappear into the fust tumb of the Phoenix International Raceway for the DuraLube 500. He is at the office, on his chair, a Goodyear radial standing on the pit-toad wall. A grandstand with fifty thousand people spreads like a pair of condor wings before him. He keeps his eyes on the asphalt.

Retirement hasn't been easy for him. The problems that his celebrity papered over in the latter eighties didn't disappear. In fact, they were exaggerated as he tried to find a driver to fill his size-11 shoes. Like his father, Richard is known for paying poorly, so he couldn't lure veterans who earn half a million dollars or more. They giggled when the old man said, "You win and the money takes care of itself." He briefly hired racing scion John Andretti, but the marriage of two great racing names ended when Richard wouldn't pay Indy-size wages to the jockey-size upstart.

So he hit a low-profile Nashvillian named Bobby Hamilton on a handshake. Hamilton has never won a race. But at present, he is blazing out of the fourth turn. In the lead. There is one more lap to go, thirty more seconds. It's been said that there will be riots in North Carolina when the Petty Pontiac finally wins again.

Number 43 spills out of the flat fourth turn again, 1.2 seconds ahead of the nearest machine. Amid the war-torn smoke of cars giving out all around him, Hamilton bellows under the checkered flag, the winner. His crew spills onto the track. Forty-three teams watch their ritual delirium with envy.

This is the first time Petty has won since July 4, '84. And as the action moves to the reviewing stand of victory lane, the photographers are ravenous for Richard. But no one can find him. Where is he? Still sitting on that tire. Head down. The winningest driver in the world, tasting the win on dry lips.

Richard spends less and less time with these men.

When he wasn't tuning his office in 1996, he was managing his Nascar truck team, collecting \$15,000 for appearances, or working for his dozens of sponsors. No longer intimate with the cars that bear his number, he's become distant from the day-to-day details that once obsessed him. He nearly has to be pulled to victory lane and, once there, wanders like a visitor. "That was their moment," he says, not quite sadly. "I wanted them to enjoy it."

**T**HE WALDORF-ASTORIA IN NEW YORK IS DECORATED for Christmas. A green crushed-velvet sleigh in the lobby is buried beneath shiny boxes with red ribbons. The ladies who lunch are all coming back from saks Fifth Avenue trailed by bellhops and their bags. Standing beside the four-sided Waldorf clock, the 1893 model with the Statue of Liberty on top, Kyle Petty, his long hair pulled into a ponytail and wearing a flowing khaki duster, takes in the scene. He has a bemused, they-don't-make-these-in-Level-Cross expression on his face. Out of nowhere, a family of four runs toward him from behind a pillar, and the eight-year-old son, who's looking for an autograph, screams, "Mr. Petty, Mr. Petty!"

The scene seems a bit off in a place like this, absent big-haired chicks in painted pants, roaring engines, and the pungent smell of petrol. But Kyle is unfazed, as if families in Nascar caps always find him in the lobbies of five-star hotels. Compared with Richard, he's the MTV Petty, urbane, funny, accessible. But since his split with his father, his career has been uneven. Now, at thirty-six, a dozen years delayed, he's accepting his inheritance and rejoining Petty Enterprises. That's why he's in the Waldorf-Astoria, of all places. Nascar's having its big awards wingding, and this hotel is filled with drivers and mechanics who could fix the New York City bus fleet if set loose for half a day.

Kyle flashes his father's smile at the delighted boy and signs a photo of himself with his daddy's big, looping letters. He writes only KYLE, the y and l running together to form a racetrack figure eight.

"The sport will cool off at some point," he says after the boy and his family have skipped out to Park Avenue. "But with Kyle Petty and Mattei's Hot Wheels, Richard Petty and Bobby Hamilton, all coming together, the pieces are in place for Petty Enterprises to get back where it once was. We should be fine. Theoretically."

Kyle disappears down the hall to attend a press conference in the Empire Room, just missing his parents walking up the red-carpeted entrance. The place is swarming with Pettys. Elvis is in the building, wearing a black topcoat unbuttoned just enough to hint at an Italian tie underneath. An aide hands him a schedule, and Richard flips open his Christian Dior bifocals to read it. "Okay," he whispers from the side of his mouth. "So I get this award and I'm out in five minutes, right?"

The press conference has been called to announce some "special awards" in anticipation of the larger ceremony in the Grand Ballroom tomorrow night. It's supposed to be for the stock-car press, and you can imagine what that might mean, but the line of people to get inside looks more Fifth Avenue than Fayetteville. Nascar has just opened an office two blocks away, right across the street from Major League Baseball and within four blocks of

both the NBA and the NFL, so most are probably invited. guests who'll take the train home to Long Island. Everyone else lives in Charlotte, which might as well be Atlanta, which might as well be Long Island.

AS Richard gets noticed, VIPs peel off the line toward him. "I got a sweet deal I wanna to think about, King."

"There's this boy I think you gotta meet, King."

"Now, about that trading-card deal, King."

People do actually call him King. Petty considers each request equally and earnestly. "Sounds good, buddy," he says to every one. He started calling people buddy after too much time in number 43 blasted his hearing away. Now the King calls almost no one by name.

The lights blink on and off, beckoning Richard inside. On the stage is Terry Labonte, this year's Nascar champion. A quiet Texan with twenty years in the business, Labonte stopped being a loner when his career went slack a few years ago. He hired himself out to a racing conglomerate run by the nation's largest car dealer and reigning Nascar moneyman, Rick Hendrick. The operation made \$40 million last year when Hendrick's other driver, Jeff Gordon, won the title. Labonte, whose all-American face has already graced a Kellogg's Cornflakes box, will make at least that.

Richard, whose last title in '97 was celebrated in a somewhat smaller, boozier Daytona Beach affair, joins in the standing ovation for Labonte. The longer the meo in the suits clap for the reigning earner of the Nascar universe, the more the room takes on a decidedly Predator's Ball feeling. There's talk of renting out Radio City next time, because the Waldorf's gilded Grand Ballroom is now too small to contain the sport.

But as Nascar realizes its commercial potential and makes its corporate machinery indistinguishable from that of its new sports neighbors on Park Avenue, it needs Richard Petty more than ever. It needs him to summon its past, that big, brawling Juniot Johnson circus that sprang from the clay gulches of the Carolinas. No one will ever touch his record. Even now, at fifty-nine, he looks as if he could race for four hours and then drink until dawn and deck any Yankee who gets cheeky.

With the applause for Labonte dying down, the room begins to buzz with excitement about the next award: the most exciting moment in Nascar history, decided by a poll of fans. And the winner is ...

*Richard Petty, two-hundredth victory!*

Petty strides to the stage and cradles the crystal cup. "That was what racing's all about," he says. "We ran four hundred miles, and I beat someone by three feet. That was a heck of a deal for us. I'm glad the fans still remember it, 'cause it's the last thing I done."

And then the King walks off with an expensive trophy for a twelve-year-old victory, reminding you of William Faulkner's line about the South: "The past is never dead. It isn't even past."

He reaches the back of the Empire Room and says, as if continuing his thought, "I mean, hey, buddy, the Fords and Rockefellers haven't lasted as long in their granddaddy's business as us Pettys."

And fifty years after his daddy, Lee, started the Petty family business, city boys and corporate visionaries finally cotton to the American love of hot rods. All Richard Petty wants is his piece. ♣