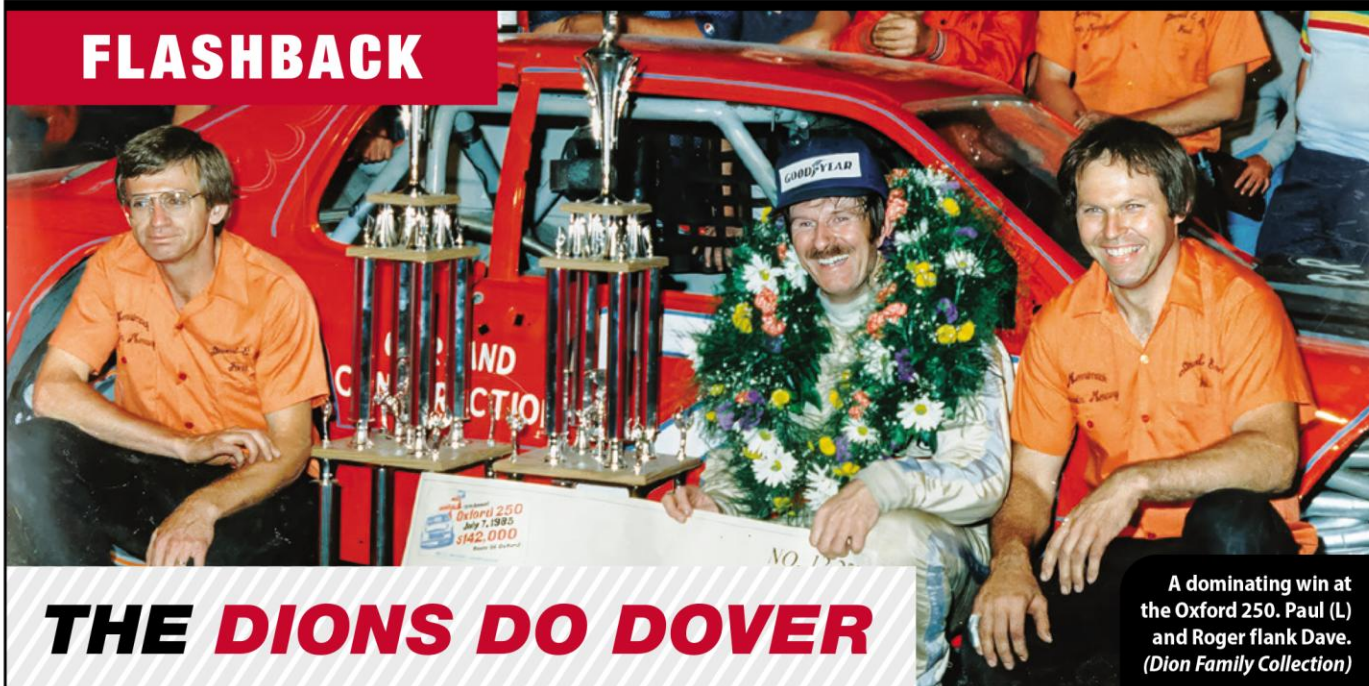


FLASHBACK



THE DIONS DO DOVER

A dominating win at the Oxford 250. Paul (L) and Roger flank Dave. (Dion Family Collection)

By Lew Boyd

It was Christmas of 1977, and you had to feel sorry for Marguerite Dion. Her sons David, Paul, Donald, Wayne, and Roger were all there at the family home in New Hampshire, but the food and presents were quickly dismissed. The guys were already full of beans.

Their Dion Brothers Racing Team, “Dynamite Dave” at the wheel, had gotten it done in grand fashion over the past three seasons. With old-time ingenuity and passion, they’d campaigned a mighty (while mightily underfinanced) Ford in NASCAR North to multiple track championships, the Maine Open title, and their first of three Oxford 250 wins. And that Christmas day, after five minutes of laughter at Paul’s suggestion of going Cup racing in ’78, the wide-eyed planning began in earnest—and, the next morning, the phone calls.

Admittedly, the mid-1970s were challenging times for Northerners gazing south. Some, like Pete Hamilton and Don MacTavish, had wandered down a few years earlier, and Ron Bouchard and Jeff Fuller would a few later. Everything, especially technology, was dynamic. Pricy chassis and engine builders had become the norm in the Cup Series, while major advertisers were stepping up to pay big-time for placement on shiny new quarter panels.

The Dions dug in. In a sweet but improbable deal, they traded all their

short-track equipment to a friend, who in turn funded the parts for the new Cup car. They found a burned-out Torino in Maine and began welding. Meanwhile a sympathetic Tommy Turner at Holman Moody patched together a Ford engine, and a group of Vermont Ford dealers scraped up a grand total of \$7,500 for a five-race season.

For years the brothers had scaled the Green and White Mountains of New England in an arthritic school-bus hauler. Aboard once again on the weekend of May 21, 1978, they headed overnight to the Mason-Dixon 500 at Dover, Delaware. It was about halfway that the exhaust system fell off.

In his book *Life Wide Open* with David Moody, Dave recalls, “We pulled over on the breakdown lane of the New Jersey Turnpike and literally crawled out of the bus, laying on the side of the highway, drinking ginger ale, trying to clear our heads. I was dizzy, my vision was fuzzy, and I couldn’t feel my feet hitting the ground, suffering a major case of carbon monoxide poisoning. We eventually climbed back in, went down Route 13, and arrived about sunrise.”

They met an unwelcoming detour when they chugged up to the pit gate. The authoritative attendant, surveying what he assumed to be some kind of hippie camper, pointed insistently toward the backstretch area. Finally, proving there really was a race car inside, they were grudgingly let in.

Dazzled to be there, but still in a carbon monoxide stupor and careful not to run anyone over, they were directed right into the pit next to Richard Petty’s expansive presence and transporter.

Worried still that they might be tossed out, they opened the back door and busily began unloading. That too brought unanticipated attention. On the ride down they’d shared a block of Vermont cheese with sardines, sausage, and crackers. It smelled like a deli in New Delhi, and a curious crowd began to assemble. That’s when one of the brothers unhooked the chain binder so Dave could ease the car out. Unfortunately, they’d forgotten to bleed the brakes, and out came the car, faster than it had been on the Turnpike. Dave was able to keep it from hitting the rod holding the bus door open. Had he not, it would have taken out Richard Petty, Benny Parsons, and about a dozen others. They scattered. When Dave was finally able to stop, Parsons ambled over and asked, “What exactly are you trying to do?”

Dave told him about the brakes.

“I’d say that’s obvious,” said Benny. “And what’s that smell anyway?”

“That’s Vermont cheese and sausage. Would you like some?”

“I don’t think so.”

All the other teams taken care of, it finally was their time for inspection. Seemingly 15 NASCAR inspectors had the car on jack stands. Told that the Dions had built it themselves, they said, “Oh you

did, did you?” and presented a Roman scroll of mandated changes. Some seemed specially crafted. The brothers were told they needed to weld up their firewall because it was only tacked. A peek over at Petty’s showed the tacks in his engine compartment.

It now seemed obvious that the brothers wouldn’t be allowed to run. Suddenly, though, the temperature changed. They were ordered to get out to practice immediately, to just ride one lap around the apron and come right back in. That accomplished, and, after thrashing on the changes, they were told to time trial the car. That brought out the troops to see how these school bus hillbillies could do. Dave managed to time 29th.

Encouraged but still not understanding what was actually going on, they shook their heads and prepared for Happy Hour. Dave was able to fall in behind Bobby Allison and was pleased by the way the Torino was running—until the motor blew.

Back in the pits, he told NASCAR officials what had happened and said they were headed back to New Hampshire. “You’re not going anywhere,” the officials replied, and the light went on for the Dions. NASCAR had realized it needed them: There were not enough entries for a full field.

As instructed, the brothers pushed the car to the starting grid so David could have his driver introduction. Then he was to climb in and, when the “Start your engines” command was given, he would wave his arms frantically to signal that he couldn’t fire off. “After that,” officials said, “we’ll have a wrecker take you back into the pits.

“Then you can go home.” **FSW**

