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The Daytona Beach Area's Proud Racing Heritage

Daytona Beach, Fla. -- From the historic timed trial that pitted wintering millionaires Ransom Olds and Alexander Winton against each other in 1903, to the present day, when famous race car drivers such as Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart compete head to head in the glorious race known as the Daytona 500, the Daytona Beach area has been, and continues to be, synonymous with speed.

Automobile racing has grown and evolved in the Daytona Beach area since the turn of the 20th century. The early roots of the sport can be traced back to Ormond Beach, a small beach resort town located north of Daytona Beach, and its most famous resident, oil billionaire John D. Rockefeller.

Though he was too old and frail to race himself, the sport of car racing owes a great debt to John D. Rockefeller. Rockefeller, the richest man in the world at that time, wintered in Ormond Beach and eventually called it home in the last decade of his life. Because of his influence, other high-society playboy industrialists visited Ormond Beach to hobnob with the elite, play golf in the area, and soak up the sun and surf. Some playboys took their sporty cars with them for show and to experience the thrill of opening the throttle to zoom down the beach.

In a historic race between one of those playboys, Ransom E. Olds – father of the Oldsmobile – and Alexander Winton, Winton beat Ransom in the Ormond Challenge Cup – the sport's first sanctioned timed trial. Winton in his "Bullet #1" edged out a victory against Olds in his "Pirate" by a narrow two-tenths of a second. Their battle launched America's love of motor racing and the sleepy little winter resort town garnered its place in history as "The Birthplace of Speed."

That seminal race didn't end Winton's fascination with speed. Determined to set a world Land Speed Record, Winton returned the next year with a faster car named "The Bullet No. 2" and set the Land Speed Record to 68 miles per hour. The event was chronicled in many newspapers and spread public awareness and interest in automobile racing among the elite.

After Winton's feat, 19 annual tournaments of speed were held on the shores of Ormond and Daytona Beach from 1904-1935, advancing the world Land Speed Record 15 times. In 1904, industrialist W.K. Vanderbilt crushed Winton's record, zooming down Ormond's beach at an astounding 92.30 miles per hour in the "No. 1", his specially built Mercedes. Vanderbilt's feat received worldwide media attention and the event became the catalytic spark for associating Ormond and Daytona Beach with automobiles and speed.

Throughout those early years, other pioneers paved the way and accelerated the area's reputation

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as the "Birthplace of Speed". Names like Arthur MacDonald, H.L. Bowen, Frank Croker, the Stanley Brothers, Fred Marriott, Barney Oldfield, Ralph DePalma, and Tommy Milton were featured in newsreels and newspapers.

But it was throughout the late '20s and '30s that new significant historic milestones in speed were made and Daytona Beach became the proving ground for man and machine. Each attempt to break the record garnered worldwide attention, which led to Daytona Beach being nicknamed the "World's Most Famous Beach." On March 29, 1927, Englishman Major Henry Segrave made automotive history by breaking the 200 mile per hour limit while racing down the sands of Daytona Beach in the Sunbeam "Mystery S," a car powered by twin Napier aero engines, which weighed over 6,000 pounds.

But right on Segrave's heels were other dashing daredevils of speed such as Philadelphian Ray Keech, and, another fellow Englishman, Sir Malcolm Campbell. Campbell was the most determined driver to set new speed records. Throughout his 25-year racing career, Campbell broke the world Land Speed Record nine times -- five of which occurred in Daytona Beach between 1928-1935.

Campbell was attracted to Daytona Beach because of its solid racing reputation, which had long since been established, and for its wide, flat beaches. Campbell's most famous run at Daytona Beach occurred in 1935. Like Segrave before him, Campbell was determined to set new speed precedents, and Campbell eyed the 300 mile per hour barrier. He nearly set it.

Campbell's 29-foot long mechanical marvel, the "Bluebird V," weighed 12,000 pounds and was propelled by a monstrous 2,227 cubic inch supercharged V-12 Rolls Royce engine. Despite its enormous size and weight, the "Bluebird V" was capable of reaching speeds up to 300 miles per hour. It was a futuristic, "Batmobile"-looking car, and its design has inspired and influenced modern automobile designs.

On March 7, 1935, just four days shy of his 50th birthday, Campbell posted an unprecedented official speed of 276.82 miles per hour. It would be Campbell's last world land speed run on the sands of Daytona Beach. The following year he attained the 300 mile per hour mark at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah.

That year also marked the final year of the beach speed runs. This chapter of speed would close, but its remarkable history of setting new precedents is remembered and commemorated along Daytona Beach's Boardwalk amusement area. The Boardwalk's Salute to Speed exhibit features more than 30 granite plaques commemorating the area's rich motorsports history. Also located on the Boardwalk, the historic Sir Malcolm Campbell Clocktower stands as a tribute to his record-setting achievements. Memorabilia from the early days of racing can also be found at the Halifax Historical Museum in Daytona Beach in its exhibit – *The Racing Zone*.

One of the spectators at Campbell's 1935 run was a man named William "Big Bill" Henry Getty France, a former Washington banker who had moved to Daytona Beach the previous year. It is France who would usher in a new era of speed.

Though he was a banker, Bill France was also a skilled mechanic who was fascinated with

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the newspaper and newsreel accounts about new speed records broken year after year in Daytona Beach. Though he had intended to move to Miami with his wife and son, he enjoyed the beauty of Daytona and Ormond Beach so much that he remained. He set up shop, purchased an Amoco Gas Station, and became a permanent resident.

In the mid-1930s, stock car racing on the beach became popular, and France was one of those original stock car drivers, finishing fifth in the inaugural beach race in 1936. During World War II, the nation's attention shifted to the war effort. France labored in the boatyard located off South Beach Street, building submarine chasers for the U.S. Navy. Though there was no automobile racing in any form from 1941-1947, interest in the sport re-awakened and evolved in the post-war prosperity.

Starting in the late '40s, France climbed out of the driver's seat and began a successful career as a race promoter, beginning with a motorcycle race which drew 184 riders and the largest group of spectators ever seen on the beach. The event also piqued the interest of other race promoters.

Meeting in a Daytona Beach motel on December 14, 1947, France and 18 other members of the racing industry formed the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), the sanctioning body for stock car racing. France served as the organization's president.

The following year France opened a new 4.1 mile stretch of beach track located near Ponce Inlet which also utilized a paved straightaway portion of Highway A1A. Today, racing fans can view the site of the original first turn at Racing's North Turn, an open-air seafood restaurant chock-full of racing memorabilia. Beach racing artifacts and videos can also be viewed at the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse Museum located at the southern-most tip of the area.

France's beach-road course was a roaring success and large crowds congregated at the site for a decade to see the races. Over time, France maintained a vision of stock car racers professionally engaging in the sport on a specially designed challenging course.

In 1959, France's vision became reality with the completion of construction of a high-banked 2.5-mile tri-oval track known as Daytona International Speedway.

The first Daytona 500 was run on February 22, 1959. More than 41,000 fans witnessed a race with a similar ending to the race run between Olds and Winton in 1903. Initially, the race was too close to call and Johnny Beauchamp celebrated the "unofficial" victory that day, but Lee Petty was named the winner three days later after countless reviews of newsreel film.

Over the last four decades, NASCAR racing has continued to grow in popularity. More than 200,000 race fans attend the association's premier race, the Daytona 500, which is now nationally televised. Competition remains fierce, with the margin of victory often just fractions of a second.

In addition to the Daytona 500, which is held each February, and the Coke Zero 400 held annually in July, major motorcycle races are staged in both March and October at the speedway. In December, go-kart racers from around the world zoom around the speedway's road course.

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In 1996, the Daytona 500 Experience opened. A year-round attraction dedicated to auto racing and its rich legacy, it features a historic walk of fame that chronicles milestone events in racing and the evolution of speed. Included in the walk is Campbell's Bluebird V, which has been fully refurbished to its former glory after an intense restoration effort.

The motorsports attraction also features a 15-minute feature film, a "do it yourself" participatory pit stop and a video "interview" session with popular NASCAR drivers. In addition, the attraction also features the racecar of the current Daytona 500 champion.

Visitors to the Daytona 500 Experience may also take a tour of Daytona International Speedway. The speedway tour is a splendid opportunity for visitors to experience the live roar of the track during testing runs or to use their imagination and hear the whispering ghosts of past races. While at the speedway, race fans can ride along with a specially trained instructor around the world-famous super-speedway via the Richard Petty Driving Experience. The RPDE takes fans on three high-speed laps around the track in an authentic NASCAR Sprint Cup Series-styled stock car.

And on the rare occasion when Daytona International Speedway falls silent, racing remains at two nearby tracks - the Volusia County Speedway in Barberville and the New Smyrna Speedway in New Smyrna Beach. Both tracks offer a full racing schedule every Saturday night.

Even kids can take a spin at one of the area's many go-kart tracks! Speed Park Motorsports in Daytona Beach has three tracks, including a drag strip where speeds reach 75 miles per hour. In addition, kids of all ages will enjoy visiting Ormond Beach's new Birthplace of Speed Park which commemorates the 1903 race between Winton and Olds with replicas of their history-making beach racers.

The area's historic love affair with the automobile is still evident as antique and classic car shows are staged throughout the year. The Daytona Turkey Run, an event for collectors of vintage automobiles, is held at the speedway each November. Also in November, Ormond Beach's Antique Auto Gaslight Parade and Antique Car Show commemorate the city's role in the development of sports car racing, as does its January Birthplace of Speed celebration. In March, Daytona International Speedway is the site of the annual Spring Daytona Beach Car Show & Swap Meet presented by the Daytona Beach Racing and Recreational Facilities District.

For more information on the Daytona Beach area, contact the Daytona Beach Area Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-854-1234 or visit www.daytonabeach.com.

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