

the Road not Taken

Kirk Shelmerdine reached the pinnacle of the sport as Dale Earnhardt's crewchief during four championship campaigns. But he stepped away from Cup racing 14 years ago and headed down a path that eventually placed him back in the limelight **By JERRY F. BOONE**

Kirk Shelmerdine crawled through the window of his black Monte Carlo after finishing 20th in the Daytona 500 and grinned like he had just won the biggest race of his career. Instead of being showered with champagne, Shelmerdine was soaked in perspiration as he waited for NASCAR's tech inspectors to release his car so he could load up and head home to Welcome, North Carolina.

He wasn't in Victory Lane. Jimmie Johnson got to park his Lowe's Chevrolet on that hallowed piece of pavement. Maybe that will come some other day for Shelmerdine, although the odds are against it.

No, the story about Shelmerdine isn't about where he ended up that Sunday afternoon. It is about how he got there.

Newly minted racing fans may not know the name Kirk Shelmerdine, but those who go back more than a decade hold him in awe.

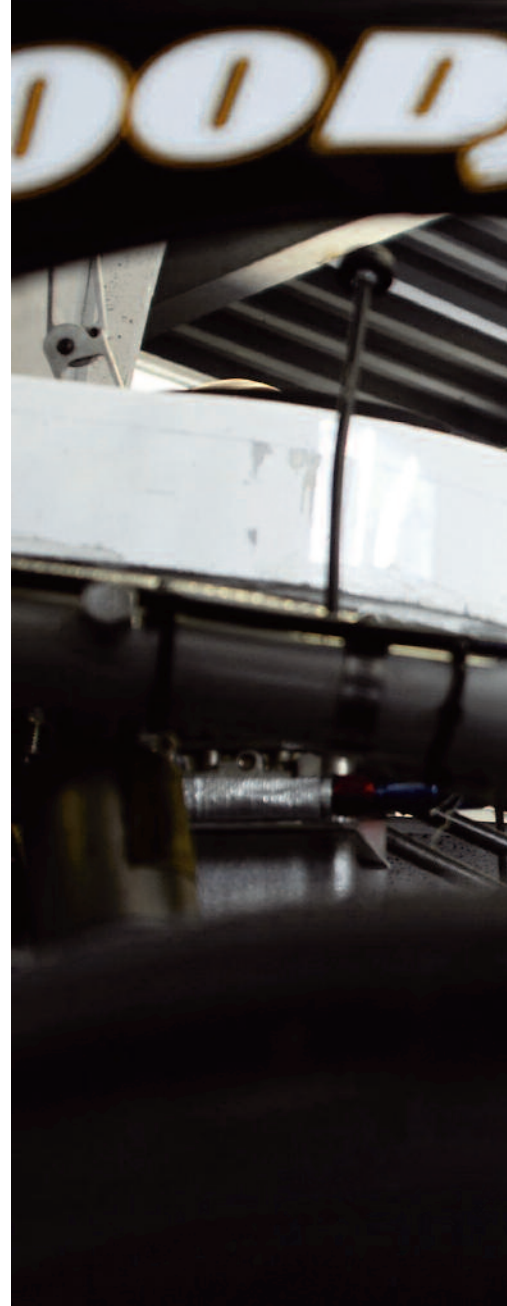
He came south from his Pennsylvania home to race. He was just a kid. To pay the bills, he worked as a tire changer and a mechanic, eventually hooking up with Richard Childress Racing. By age 28 he was among the most successful crewchiefs in Winston Cup. His figures from atop the pitbox include 46 victories, 14 poles, 142 Top-5, and 246 Top-10 finishes. But the most important number is four—the number of Winston Cup championships with Dale

Earnhardt Sr. between 1986 and 1992.

But four titles in six years were not enough to keep the fire inside Shelmerdine stoked. In a decision that rocked the Winston Cup garage, he simply quit.

"I came down here as a teenager to race," he says. "I never figured on being a crewchief. Suddenly I was in my 30s, and I had spent half my life on my back, underneath one of these cars. Success in this business costs everything you have. It takes that level of devotion to do the job the way it has to be done.

"Still, getting out was the hardest decision I ever made . . . but also the easiest. It got to the point I wasn't willing to give it everything I had, and at that point the decision was pretty much made."





Shelmerdine and Phil Harris, his crewchief, are two-thirds of his full-time team. JUNE BOONE

Shelmerdine says he thought about getting out of the business for almost two years before he finally packed his toolbox and left Richard Childress.

"I didn't really have any plans for when I got out," he recalls. "I was sitting around with time on my hands when a couple buddies talked to me about racing an old Harry Gant car in an ARCA race at Daytona.

"We came back to Daytona just to have fun, and I did really well. I think I finished Second or Third in my first race on the most famous track in stock car racing. I was feeling pretty good."

What he found inside the helmet was what was missing under the hood.

"I knew I wanted to drive," he says. "I've been working toward a crack at the

Daytona 500 for 15 years."

THE SHOW

It was this single-minded stubbornness that put him underneath that car—his own car—in the Daytona garage in

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February.

Making the field has been an obsession with Shelmerdine. This was his fifth attempt to drive his way into the race.

"I tried last year and barely got on the track," he says. "This time I have a much better car and a real engine."

That's about all he has. He arrived at the Speedway with one used car, a couple engines, no big-name sponsorship, not much money, and two crewmen on the payroll.

He raced his way into the Daytona 500 by beating eight other drivers to finish 21st in one of the Twin 150 qualifying races.

No one was more surprised than the man behind the wheel.

"I had the numbers written on my



▲ Harris and Shelmerdine discuss replacing the Chevrolet's A-arm with a new piece before the car goes out for its final practice run. JERRY F. BOONE

hand," he says. "I was trying to figure out if we had made it, and I figured we didn't."

He didn't realize he was in the season's first race until a NASCAR inspector showed up at his garage and told Shelmerdine to push his car into the post-race inspection line for teardown.

"It says something about the unique qualifying system for the Daytona 500," says Benny Parsons, former Winston Cup champion and Daytona 500 winner. "Kirk's is a Cinderella story. It's a

wonderful story. At Daytona, dreams can still come true."

Perhaps. But it helps if you work at them.

It is the final Saturday morning of Speedweeks, and the time is T-minus-30 minutes to the final practice for the biggest race of the NASCAR season.

Most drivers are in their team haulers, huddling with engineers and crewchiefs over their last shot at pre-race perfection or signing autographs for eager fans at a sponsorship breakfast.

Not Shelmerdine.

He is still in his blue jeans, faded T-shirt and a cap that says "Alaska." He is on a creeper beneath the black No. 27

Monte Carlo, hammer in hand, pounding away on a stubborn part until it sees things his way.

His way is the way racing used to be.

The crew works on an '04 Monte Carlo that Joe Nemechek drove two years ago with US Army sponsorship. Under the hood of the black Chevrolet, the hinge supports still have "US Army" laser cut in the aluminum. In a bit of coincidence, Shelmerdine drew the garage bay just to the left of Nemechek's team.

HELPING HANDS

He has a car. He has an engine. But he doesn't have much else.

The tires on the side of the car are marked with the number 27, which replaces the crossed out 8 and 57.

"Some teams, like the 8, just give us the wheels and tires after they've put four or five laps on them," explains Jerry Pennington, the team's tire specialist and gas man. "There's still a lot of wear in them and it saves us about \$1,800 a set."

Under NASCAR's new tire policy, Pennington must keep track of all the tires and wheels he gets. He then has to return them to Goodyear before the teams he got them from can leave Sun-



◀ While other drivers were resting in their haulers or meeting with sponsors and fans, Shelmerdine was working under his car 30 minutes before final practice for the Daytona 500.

JERRY F. BOONE

day night. Each tire carries a unique bar code, and NASCAR insists on accounting for each one as part of its effort to limit testing by controlling how many tires a team can go through in a season.

Shelmerdine's crew is as low-profile as his car.

Outside the garage door, a crewmember pulls furiously on the hand starter for the generator needed to power the car's oil warmers. He yanks and yanks, but the rope refuses to engage the engine.

Skip McKenzie came from Ottawa, Ontario, to help Morgan Shepherd. But when Shepherd didn't make the race, the burley Canadian walked over to Shelmerdine's garage and asked, "What can I do?"

McKenzie races open-wheel modifieds, and says he knows what it is like to fuel a season on little more than passion.

"If you've ever been in a race car, you just can't walk away from a team like this," he says.

Jarad Kellis came with the engine.

It was Pro Motor Engineering, the Mooresville, North Carolina, shop where Kellis works, that built the Chevy engine for Shelmerdine.

The builder supplied four teams, but three of them went home after crashing in the Twin 150s.

"Kirk's our last best shot," Kellis says. "I went with them for testing and asked to come down here to help. You just have to love these guys and what they are doing."

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Kellis grabs a wheel chock and thumps the end of the engine. The spool engages and the motor fires up with the next pull.

He puts the chock back on the pit cart. "All it takes is the right tool for the job," he says with a grin.

And the right tool doesn't have to be the latest piece of high-tech hardware.

"Racing has changed so much since I left Childress," says Shelmerdine. "The biggest difference isn't the technology, but the number of people it takes to run a team. When I was with Dale, we had only about eight guys working for us, and we did everything. Now everyone is a specialist.

"There [are] a lot of teams shaking their heads at what we are doing because we don't have all the fancy equipment. The most important tools in my box are a tape measure and a ball of red string."

And Phil Harris.

"As far as we are concerned, any car that qualifies is capable of winning," says Harris, Shelmerdine's crewchief. He has been with Shelmerdine for

almost nine years, but his resumé includes more than 20 seasons with Bud Moore Racing.

"For us, just making this race is a victory," says Harris. "I don't think the guy who finishes first will feel any happier than we did when we made the field. Given what we've got to work with, for Kirk and me, it's that big a deal."

Harris pulls the alignment equipment off the top of the toolbox. It consists of four used brake rotors with steel shafts screwed to the center of them—and Shelmerdine's ball of red string.

Then he goes to work aligning the suspension just like he did when he began wrenching on cars decades ago.

Most team owners budget about \$1 million for the race. Shelmerdine arrived in Florida deep in debt, with less than 10 percent of that available for Speedweeks.

"It's about everything I have and everything my friends could come up with," he says.

He gets money from a few local businesses and the executives of a Tennessee oil company who formed a promotional business to raise funds for small teams.

He also has perhaps the most unusual sponsor in racing.

Mike Feezor, one of his crewmen, was with Shelmerdine a few years ago when the financial end of the team was circling the drain. He called his mother and mentioned the money problems. She rushed to the shop and gave the team \$50,000 to carry on.

It got him to Daytona in 2003. She helped again in 2004 and in 2005.

Winifred Feezor passed away last November, but before she died she told

▼ Shelmerdine and his crew check suspension movement after changing the car's upper A-arm. JERRY F. BOONE



▼ Richard Childress offered sponsorship from his winery to help his former employee pay the bills for 200 laps around Daytona. JUNE BOONE





her son to make sure Kirk got his money to make it to Daytona this year. So Shelmerdine got \$60,000 from her estate, and his car carried a large decal featuring a buffalo and sponsorship from the Minnesota Mdewakanton Dakota Oyate, which represents the tribe.

ON A SHOESTRING

Still, though, it's not enough. It hasn't been for years.

If Jimmie Johnson wads a car up against the wall on Sunday, Hendrick Motorsports simply rolls a replacement off its assembly line.

"And he still gets his check," says Shelmerdine. "I've got zero cars ready. If this one gets destroyed, I've got to find \$80,000 to get another one. That's a huge hit for a guy like me.

"I spent a lot of time last winter asking myself, *How long can I keep this up?* This race gets me in the black. It gets me out of the debt from last year and gives me enough to keep the doors open at the shop. We still don't have the money to run the rest of the season—certainly not to go to the races out West—but it will keep us in business for a while."

The success of Shelmerdine's team became the feel-good story of Speedweeks. It was a welcome diversion from

the political intrigue, financial maneuvering, and conflicts with the rule book that have become the norm for the Daytona 500.

As a driver, his resumé is unimpressive. He has a trio of victories in the ARCA stock car series and three Top-5 finishes in the Daytona ARCA race. He's made sporadic attempts to run in Cup, qualifying for a few races here and there. In 2004, he attempted 30 of the season's 36 races and started 18 of them. He never finished better than 37th that year, and ended the season with just a bit over \$1 million in winnings.

Daytona could have been Shelmerdine's check to solvency. But it is one he declined to accept. He has been asked about selling his spot so often that he

"There's a very short list of men who have driven in the Daytona 500," he repeats. "My name on that list is not for sale. You couldn't put a price tag on that."

▲ It took Kirk Shelmerdine almost 15 years to return to pit road for the Daytona 500, this time as a driver. JERRY F. BOONE

doesn't pause to think of the answer.

The 47-year-old driver has muscled his way into the Daytona 500, putting teams with big-name drivers and huge sponsor packages in the trailer.

Has someone offered to buy his ride? To put in a substitute driver that would carry the colors of a high-profile sponsor? Or maybe accept a big enough check to convince Shelmerdine to load up, go home, and clear a space at the back of the 43-car grid?

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That makes Shelmerdine's reputation one of the few things in NASCAR that apparently isn't for sale to the highest bidder. On Sunday, it was time to see if he made a wise investment in himself.

Race day dawns cold and damp, with the constant mist threatening to turn to rain. Shelmerdine doesn't have time to notice the change from Saturday's blistering sun.

"Don't try to keep up with me," he shouts over his shoulder. "You won't be



▲ Shelmerdine's hastily assembled crew was quick enough to keep the No. 27 on the lead lap for 500 miles. JUNE BOONE

able to do it."

He works the garage like a politician three days before an election. He's lining up crew, trying to find drafting partners, and shopping for uniforms for his tossed-together over-the-wall squad.

One of those to suit up for Sunday is Brandon Hall, who, besides Harris, is the only other man on the team payroll. Hall looks at the grandstands, where the crowd is already beginning to fill the seats, and says, "I just can't believe we made it. This is the most exciting day of my life. This is a day I will never forget."

Back in the garage, things are coming together for the little team that could.

Tampa businessman Tim Lopez shows up with a promise to buy all the tires during the race. He also volunteers his son, Tim Jr., to work behind the wall.

"My wife and I have always been big Earnhardt fans and we knew what Kirk's part was in winning those championships," he explains. "We were in a motor coach in the infield watching an interview with Kirk when he was talking

about having to race on used tires.

"She turned to me and said 'You go write him a check,'" he says. "It took me a day to get him on the phone."

A second old friend turns up Sunday morning with sponsorship from Childress Vineyards.

"I remember what it was like to come to Daytona when I was starting out and had no money," Richard Childress says. "I had a lot of people help me out back then. This is payback time."

The clock ticks toward deadline. A pair of NASCAR inspectors lean on a stack of tires to watch progress on the No. 27 Chevy as the garages empty. Shelmerdine's crew was the last one to push its car into the inspection line.

Tony Eury Jr., crewchief on the Budweiser car driven by Earnhardt's son, watches the black car work its way through the inspection process and comments on the effort it has taken his old friend to get there.

"It's just wonderful," he says. "I've known Kirk a long time, and to see him come down here and make the race—especially when drivers from multi-car teams went back in the trailer to be sent home—says everything about his determination. This is how the sport was created.

"Kirk's here because he deserves to be here." 🏆

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► Shelmerdine and Terry Labonte run side by side as the Daytona 500 begins. JUNE BOONE