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REUNION FOR COTTON OWENS and DODGE

"It's like rediscovering your old sweetheart—and marrying her," Cotton Owens, 38 year old Spartanburg, S.C., speed veteran said in announcing that he will operate a stable of Dodge race cars on NASCAR's tough Grand National circuit this year.

Back in 1951 Dodge and Owens made up the hottest speed team of the time.

Now a dozen years later, it comes as no big surprise that these two names are linked again.

The Carolina Dodge Dealers association sought Owens, and they found a willing and very able man.

If there's ever to be a marriage of man and machine, it will come with the union of this veteran mechanic and driver and the 1963 Dodge, a sturdy, streamlined machine with the optional goodies which can make it a big winner, they say.

Working with Owen will be Maurice F. (Pop) Eargle, who for the past three years has been a member of the Bud Moore Pontiac racing stable in Spartanburg. The two will be setting up a team of Dodge race cars for David Pearson and Billy Wade.

In announcing his decision to become Owen's No. 1 mechanical assistant, Eargle said: "In all my years in racing, dating back to micro-midget days, I've never been associated with anything but a winner. And I think we're going to have a real winner with this Dodge this season."

Eargle helped set up the 1959 Chevrolet which Jack Smith drove to records that year. He was also on the Smith team in 1960 which resulted in a Southern 500 winner with Buck Baker driving Smith's car, and a record-smashing win for Smith in the Firecracker 250.

For the past two years he has been associated with Moore, setting up cars for Grand National champion Joe Weatherly. During those years Weatherly was NASCAR's winningest



Cotton Owens, a top racing jockey himself, plans to spend 1963 building the safest and fastest cars on the NASCAR circuit, using his vast driving knowledge to help the drivers he will assign to the racing machines. The Carolina Dodge Dealers association sought Owens to establish a Dodge stable.

driver with 18 victories.

As gentle as he is strong, "Big Pop" is considered the guardian of pit row. As a key member of the Owens-Pearson team you'll be seeing him at all NASCAR races this year. He's the only man in racing who can come over the pit wall with a hydraulic jack under one arm and a racing wheel and tire under the other.

It was in the early '50's when the Owens courtship of Dodge began. Then he drove a souped-up Dodge on the rugged modified circuit. To say he drove it, is putting it mildly. He handled the car, and all of the opposition!

When he raced in a late-season

event at Eight Mile, Ala., a Birmingham paper heralded his entry: "Race Today—Featuring Cotton Owens and the World's Fastest Dodge."

Owens won that day. It was his 54th win of the season, his 24th in succession.

He continued his campaigning, in later years in a Plymouth coupe powered by a Chrysler engine. They called him "King of the Modifieds"—and still do although his activities since 1957 have been focused primarily on late-model racing which has mushroomed into a major sport.

The mechanical touch which helped him set records in souped-up jalopies carried him to more fame in late-



Scene: Darlington International Speedway, when in 1960 Owens received the trophy for shattering the qualifying record on the 1-3/8 mile track. Average speed for the four laps was 126.146 m.p.h.

model competition. First he drove a factory-sponsored 1957 Pontiac to victory in the gruelling 160-mile Speedweeks feature at Daytona Beach, Fla., averaging a remarkable 101.60 miles an hour on the old 4.2-mile beach and road course.

It was the first time a winning car had bettered 100 miles an hour and the record still stands.

Later that year, when Pontiac and most other manufacturers were losing interest in racing, he took the same car and finished second in the rugged Southern 500 at Darlington, S. C. His showing relit the fire which has put Pontiac on the top of the heap in stock car racing in recent years. Call

it coincidence if you will, but Pontiac sales increased with the victories.

He switched off to a Ford Thunderbird for part of the 1959 season, when he was runner-up to Lee Petty for the Grand National championship. He has been building and racing Pontiacs ever since and getting records from Daytona to Richmond, Va.

Dirt-track racing is his forte, and a check of records will show he has won half of the short-track races he has entered in recent years. But Owens has also displayed tremendous skill on the big speedways.

The 1957 Southern 500 is a good example. Owens qualified second to Curtis Turner that year and started

on the outside front row in his Pontiac. Turner, in a Ford, was on the pole. However, at Darlington the outside car is starting nearest the single groove in the first turn and therefore has an advantage.

When the green flag dropped, Owens charged to the front, easing into the groove and forcing Turner to drop back. But Turner, one of the all-time NASCAR greats before his suspension in 1961, was well-known as a rough, hard-charging driver.

Metal met metal and sparks flew as he eased Owens high toward the rail and took the lead. But this was no rookie riding in the white Pontiac with the big red No. 6 emblazoned on its sides. One of the cleanest competitors in the game, Owens knew the tricks, too, and could use them if he had to.

Turner felt a jolt, the crunching of metal and felt his wheels break traction. And Owens was alongside him and subsequently back in front.

Southern 500 fans recall it as one of the all-time top driving exhibitions as these two veterans jockeyed for position at top speed, running off and leaving the rest of the field. After 42 laps the tragic accident which claimed the life of Bobby Myers caused the race to be completely stopped because the track was blocked. Under NASCAR rules no cars can be pitted until the race is restarted.

As Owens and Turner pulled their cars to a stop at the front of the line, Turner looked over and winked at Owens: "What do you say we act a little sensible when this thing starts back and follow the leader a while before we get killed?"

Owens looked at Turner's right front tire. It was smoking, worn slick by the terrific early pace.

His face wrinkled as he grinned and replied: "Unh Unh! I know your game. I can see that slick tire."

Turner guffawed.

"Have you seen your own?" he was finally able to ask.

Owens got out and peeked at his right front wheel—almost afraid to look. The threads were bare.

The race was restarted and both drivers ducked into the pits for tires and fuel. The pace had been too fast. Turner later fell out with mechanical trouble and Owens went on to finish second.

In 1959 he made racing history when he helped open the new 2½-mile Daytona International Speedway by driving his Pontiac to a record 143 miles an hour. A year later he was second in the first Atlanta 500 at the new Atlanta International Raceway and returned for the second 500

as crew chief for winner Bobby Johns.

While he built the cars for Johns to drive he also continued his own race chauffeuring in 1960, winning a 25-mile race of champions on national television at Daytona Beach. He set a new qualifying record in the Southern 500 that same year and became only the second driver—Fireball Roberts is the other—to earn a white coat in Darlington's exclusive Pure Record Club.

Owens continued as a front-runner for Pontiac in 1961, winning six of nine dirt-track races he entered. Last season he built and pitted cars for drivers like Ralph Earnhardt, Junior Johnson, and David Pearson, restricting his duties to the mechanics of the sport.

At 38 Owens is still a top-notch driver but his love for racing begins at the heart of the sport—in the garage. He finds it hard to work all night getting his car ready and then having to face the severe test of the super speedways by day.

So this year, with the Carolina Dodge Dealers Association as sponsor, he plans to enter semi-retirement as a driver and build and manage a stable of Dodge racers. From now on, except for an occasional test spin, he'll concentrate on building and tuning the cars and sharing his driving knowledge with the men he puts behind the wheel.

In his modern garage in Spartanburg, S. C., Owens is setting up four



Wearing the white sports coats signifying their induction into the Pure Record Club are Owens, at the right, and Fireball Roberts at the left, with Bob Colvin, Darlington Raceway President, in the center. The two drivers are the only white-coated members of the club for setting records in qualifying runs for the Southern 500 race.

1963 Dodge race cars, two for David Pearson, a bright young NASCAR star, and two for Billy Wade. The fifth racer is a 1962 Dodge built for the November dirt-track races which counted toward the 1963 Grand National championship. It will be used as a "spare" this year.

Pearson will drive all of the races on the NASCAR late-model circuit—more than 50 in all. The other driver will concentrate on the big speedway

events (Daytona Beach, Fla.; Charlotte, N. C.; Atlanta Ga.; and Darlington, S. C.).

Objective? National championship!

It's a tall order. But those who know Owens' ability in the garage and Pearson's courage and skill on the speedways are betting on them to get the job done. Pearson, NASCAR Rookie of the Year in 1960, followed up in 1961 by winning three major events—the World 600 at Charlotte,



Three generations of Owens are shown here at the Spartanburg, S. C., Cotton Owen Garage, now a Dodge stable. At the left is Cotton's father, W. V. Owens, and in the car is Donnie, 16-year-old son of Cotton, who is a member of his dad's pit crew.



Blue coats go to the fastest qualifiers for each make of car. Here are three who put Pontiac in headlines across the nation with their records: left to right, Joe Weatherly, Cotton, and Fireball. Owens now leaves the Pontiac teammates to set up his Dodge stable.

Firecracker 250 at Daytona Beach, and Dixie 400 at Atlanta. He established records in all events.

It was no accident that Owens became a top race mechanic and driver. As a boy he climbed trees outside the Piedmont Interstate Fairgrounds track in Spartanburg to watch races. Little did Promoter Littlejohn know when he chased him out, that the skinny, white-headed youngster would some day be one of his star attractions.

Born Everett Owens, Cotton got the name that has become his trademark while perched on a limb watching the races. It was Littlejohn, who has remained a close friend and chief booster of Owens over the years, who tabbed him.

"As I looked out beyond the fence into the trees all I could see was his head, a little white ball that looked like cotton in bloom," Littlejohn recalls. "I'd tell one of my guards to

go get that cotton ball and chase him inside."

Owens grew up around automobiles — working in his father's garage.

But it was not until 1946, when he returned from three years of wartime duty with the Navy, that he realized his dream to become a driver.

He had taken a job with a wrecker company owned by a racing enthusiast, D. N. Tinsley, who built cars driven by Gober Solesbee. Cotton had an opportunity to work on the car, in the garage and at the track.

One day at Hendersonville, N. C., the car was not handling properly. Tinsley asked Owens to try it out. He not only tried, he drove the race and finished second. From that time on he has never had trouble getting a ride for any race.

He campaigned in a Ford at first but soon switched to his famous Dodge. In 1949 he entered 23 races and won 19 of them. His success continued in 1950 when he won the Gulf Coast championship race. Then in 1951 he sped to victories all over the South, racking up 54 wins

Switching from Dodge to the Chrysler-powered Plymouth he continued to dominate the modified circuit, winning the big modified championship race at Daytona two years in succession in 1953 and 1954, and capturing the United States Modified Championship Race three times.

Owens' racing career hasn't been all checkered flags and victory lanes. He



Friendliness has won Cotton Owens the crowd of admirers surrounding him here after he won his fourth straight 100-mile Grand National race during the '61 season. Through the years Owens has established a reputation for building the cleanest, safest cars on the circuit.



Happy pose with a smile for fans has won Owens many admirers. Here he washes off the dirt and grease after driving to victory in a hard race.



A study in contrasts is this picture of Big "Pop" Eargle, cigar-chewing NASCAR mechanic, and "Little Bidy Pete," Roanoke, Va. TV star. Eargle, a 342 pounder and one of the best-liked and most respected mechanics in stock car racing, has left the Bud Moore-Joe Weatherly Pontiac stable and will work with Cotton Owens in setting up Dodge race cars this year.

has survived terrifying crashes and financial heartbreaks. He learned how loyal sports fans can be when his followers passed the hat for a collection to buy him a racer and keep him in running for the Grand National title in 1959.

In 1951, he was involved in a serious accident in a race at Charlotte on the old clay speedway. He had come from last place to the front in just seven laps when he roared up on a slower car which had wrecked in a turn. Fans began pouring onto the track to help the driver of the wrecked car, oblivious to the fact Owens' car was bearing down on them—fast.

Cotton had two choices—try to clear the wreckage and take a chance on hitting a spectator, or smash into the helpless car. He bulldozed into the wreckage and as a result suffered serious face and eye injuries. His cheek bone was crushed.

He was in the hospital 15 days and out of action three months. While he now has perfect vision, his left eye has

never regained full muscular control.

In 1955 he was involved in the four-car pileup at Daytona which took the life of Al Briggs, of Lake Worth, Fla. The mishap occurred on the asphalt strip of the old beach course. As the racers crunched to a halt, Briggs' car burst into flames. Owens risked his life to pull his fellow driver free. He rolled him in sand to put out the flames engulfing his clothes. But Briggs died in a hospital the next day.

In a state of shock and suffering from minor injuries, Owens fought police and ambulance attendants who tried to get him away from the scene of the crash. "My car," he kept saying. "I've gotta' save my car."

The man who will head Dodges' first serious bid for a stock car racing championship is a man in love with racing, but devoted first of all to church and family.

"If there's anything I dislike about racing it's the fact we have to do it on Sunday," Cotton has said many times. "But it's my livelihood and, if

I'm going to race I'll have to do it on the days they have the races."

Owens has the blessing of his pastor, who is one of his most ardent fans. He is a member of Spartanburg's Bethany Baptist Church, which gets 10 per cent of all his winnings.

He is married to the former Dollie Moore and is the father of two children, Donnie (16) and Debbie (10).

Whenever Cotton goes racing Donnie is an important member of the pit crew, Dollie does his scoring and Debbie—well she's his No. 1 rooter.

Owens' reputation for clean, safe race cars and clean, tough competition is unequalled in racing. It is such a man that the Carolina Dodge Dealers Association chose to carry their banner in 1963.

And the fact he began it all in a Dodge a dozen years ago? Perhaps a coincidence. But reunited, Owens and Dodge could be the big winner in 1963.