

NASCAR THE 'BEST OF' THE DAYTONA 500



Best Daytona 500 Finishes, No. 1

Controversial 1959 Finish Perfect Jump-Start For New Event, Ambitious Facility

(Note: This is the final installment in a five-part series on some of the best Daytona 500 finishes in the history of "The Great American Race." Finishes were chosen based on the drama they created — and the historical value that resulted.

Today, we take a look at the inevitable No. 1 in the countdown: Lee Petty's photo-finish victory over Johnny Beauchamp in 1959.)

#1

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (Feb. 12, 2010) — When choosing the best finish in Daytona 500 history, it is too hard to look further than the race's first year.

That's because the whole thing transpired script-like. For the first Daytona 500 to end with a finish that took several days to sort out is hard to imagine, even 51 years after the fact.

But it's also downright appropriate, because the fact that Daytona International Speedway even got built is hard to imagine, all these years later.

Lee Petty won that first 500 but only after NASCAR founder and president Bill France Sr. took several days perusing both film and photos of Petty and Johnny Beauchamp crossing the finish line simultaneously, a process made tougher by the fact that the lap-down car of Joe Weatherly was also in some of the images, on the outside of the two contenders.

When the race ended on the afternoon noon of Feb. 22, 1959, Beauchamp at first thought he had won and so did many others. In fact, Beauchamp was even presented the trophy in Victory Lane. France soon got the trophy back, however, pending further review. When the review was complete, Petty was declared the winner.

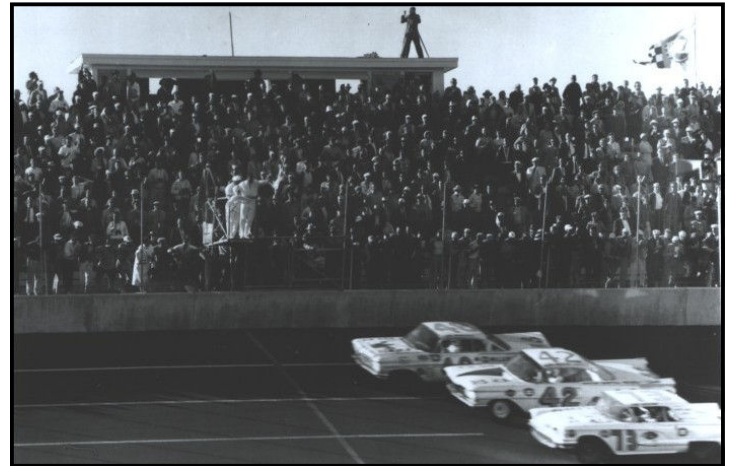
Daytona was off and running, with the first 500's theatre capping several preceding years of drama as France pieced together funding to finance construction of what would be the world's largest stock-car facility. The construction process itself was complicated by the 31-degree banking in the turns, designed to enable stock cars to race at faster-than-ever speeds. The banking was devised through the re-purposing of "transition spiral" techniques first used by the nation's railroad systems to create banked tracks.

The banking would serve two purposes: enable outlandish speeds, and enable spectators to see most of the action, thanks to a finished tri-oval that would create a 2.5-mile "cereal bowl" effect.

Aacerbating the project further was the simple, fundamental challenges of the land the facility was being built upon. Part muck, part sand and shell, it required extensive preparation throughout the speedway's construction.

Bill France Sr.'s dream of building a superspeedway in his adopted home town was not realized easily.

The finish of the first Daytona 500 was only following that template.



Top: Lee Petty (42) and Johnny Beauchamp race toward the stripe, with the lap-down car of Joe Weatherly on the outside, Feb. 22, 1959.

Middle: Beauchamp celebrates in Victory Lane.

Bottom: Petty receives the winner's trophy from Bill France Sr. on Feb. 25.

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