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'I'm not a fearful person. There's no feeling in the world that I've had that's like it. You're driving something that's out of control but you're controlling it.'

R.J. VALENTINE, on racing at Daytona



STAN GROSSFELD/GLOBE STAFF

R.J. Valentine lives life in the fast lane during the Rolex 24 at Daytona International Speedway. Valentine helped lead his team to a second-place finish.

Young at heart

Valentine, 61, enjoys racing against time — and he's still going strong

By Stan Grossfeld
GLOBE STAFF

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — The smell of gasoline and burning rubber triggers memories older than most of the race car drivers at Daytona International Speedway.

"I remember drag racing on A Street in South Boston in my dad's '62 Chrysler 300," said driver R.J. Valentine, 61, of Hingham, who grew up in Dorchester. "I outran a cop car. It was the indiscretion of youth. He didn't catch me but he knew my father and went to him."

Valentine was grounded for a month. He's lucky his father didn't know about his other talent, stripping hub caps off neigh-

borhood cars in record time.

That was then.

Today, Valentine races a 450-horsepower Pontiac GTO.R as part of a four-man team competing in the 44th Rolex Daytona 24-hour Race. He is a multimillionaire and race car sponsor with 11 cars and a private jet charter company, F1 Air, that zips him around the country at 650 miles per hour.

But he is still a kid at heart. His eyes have spark and his frame is chiseled.

This is Valentine's 20th appearance at Daytona, where his racing dream began.

Valentine chose to be a race car driver while on a Palm Beach vacation with his wife in 1975.

"I always wanted to see the race. I stayed

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STAN GROSSFELD/GLOBE STAFF

R.J. Valentine, 61, psyches himself up as he prepares to take the wheel at the recent Rolex 24 at Daytona International Speedway.

Valentine, 61, remains young at heart

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up all night I was so enthralled with what was going on."

His wife, Penny, went back to the hotel to sleep. In the morning, Valentine was still at the track.

"On the flight out, we banked right over the track and I was still looking at the cars. She said, 'You're looking at it so hard, you ought to do it.'"

That was 320 professional starts ago. Although he once totaled a car here, Daytona is sacred ground.

"This is like going to the Vatican for me."

No stopping

Although 27 racers have died at Daytona, including Dale Earnhardt, whose statue out front is a shrine for fans, Valentine has no fear.

"You always think it will not happen to you," he said.

"I'm not a fearful person. There's no feeling in the world that I've had that's like it. You're driving something that's out of control but you're controlling it. What else should I do? Plant flowers in the backyard? Go to a barbecue? I'll do that, but this rocks my world. When you get out of a race car, the grass is a little greener and the sky is a little bluer."

Asmile lights up Valentine's face.

"My wife doesn't buy jewelry or clothes, she buys life insurance."

Daytona officials say Valentine is among the five oldest racers here.

Actor Paul Newman was 70 when he won in his class at Daytona a decade ago. Valentine has raced against Newman seven times.

"He was the only actor I have ever met or competed against that was a real race car driver," said Valentine. We was a consummate pro, fantastic driver, and always one of the boys. A great jokester as well."

Valentine also is aging well, with 11 podium finishes since 2004.

Valentine is a workout fanatic. He begins his training at 5:30 each morning by riding his bicycle from his Hingham home to Cape Cod and back, sometimes a 100-mile round trip. He's got 16.5 percent body fat and very good genes. His mom is 95 and still drives. The secret comes from his Italian heritage. We attribute it all to the olive oil," Valentine said.

Valentine exercises every muscle group, including his eyes. If you see some guy rolling his eyes around his head on Route 3 between Hingham and his F1 Boston track in Braintree, you've likely spotted Valentine.

"It builds up your peripheral vision," he said. "Your eyes are like a muscle. If you move your eyes, you can constantly develop them. I do it all the time. I even practice in a street car."

Valentine's personal trainer said his secret is his heart.

"His resting heart rate is 42, that's extremely slow, like Bill Rodgers," said Art Tagliaferri. "I would bet if we did a cardio monitor, he would be less than guys in their 20s and 30s."

Well-oiled

Valentine's fortune stems from oil, but not olive oil. In the mid-'80s, he invested in 30 Jiffy Lubes, including the No. 1 grossing Jiffy Lube in the world. Then he started buying cars to put the oil in.

In racing circles, Valentine is respected because he doesn't make stupid mistakes and never lets his temper get the best of him.

Well, almost never.

"I was racing in Detroit at Belle Isle," Valentine said. "This guy deliberately rammed me on the right rear quarter in practice. It caused \$7,000 of damage. Basically it was an intimidation move. If you let that slide, it's only the beginning of consistently being pushed and shoved around."

"I went into the pits and told the crew to take every corner off the car, and put on old fiberglass. I followed behind him at 120 miles per hour. I hit him and he spun the car and hit every wall. I knew he was going to come looking for me. I kept my back to him. I told the crew, 'Let me know when he gets 3 feet away.' So he comes running and then I turned around and pinned him against my car and said, 'Don't even think about it. You do it again and both of us are going to die.' In this sport, if you get intimidated, you're toast."

Johnny O'Connell, Valentine's teammate in the blue and silver No. 65 Pontiac, marvels at his friend. "He's got the enthusiasm and passion for the sport like a 16-year-old kid. He's a great competitor and team player."



STAN GROSSFELD/GLOBE STAFF

Race car driver R.J. Valentine had a hyperbaric chamber installed in his Hingham home because he believes it helps increase his circulation.

Valentine estimates it costs the team's owner, The Racing Group, \$1.5 million to build and run a car for a year. That doesn't include lodging and travel. The No. 65 Pontiac has the huge F1 Air emblazoned on the driver's door, but Valentine won't divulge the sponsorship cost.

"You don't do this for the money," he said. The 65 car has personality. They left enough room on the rear end for some humor. "Don't hit this car — Ed Ruzak, Litigation consultation."

Valentine routinely brings high rollers along on VIP trips and entertains them with highlysought-afterpitpasses to benefit his MBA Group, which invests in 18 companies.

"It works better than even baseball tickets because it's unique," he said.

He also works business deals as aggressively as those Daytona banking curves. He's touting an expanding locking bolt and a super-sized luxury hospitality trailer to bring to major sporting events.

In between practice runs, he corners O'Connell and explains how carbon dioxide attracts mosquitoes, who are then lured to death in his latest investment product. He's going to rid the world of bloodsuckers, but O'Connell isn't interested. He's reading the local sports section.

Valentine spends much of his downtime doing business, which doesn't bother O'Connell. "They help pay the costs," he said.

Valentine said he has the best of both worlds.

"The problem with being a race car driver today is you don't get paid a lot of money," said Valentine. "I love the art of the deal. You're able to drive a race car but you're also able to build a business. Racing can use you up, but I use racing."

On the way to the pit, he hugs about a dozen drivers from other teams. Like a good comedian, he always leaves 'em laughing.

"He's anything but typical," said TRG hospitality director Carole Carter. "He's just a character. He always wants somebody to punch him in the stomach to show how tough he is."

Start your engines

The Rolex race is the US version of the legendary 24 Hours of Le Mans. It is the equivalent of racing from Daytona Beach to Los Angeles in one day with four drivers. Almost half the cars in the 70-car field will not cross the finish line.

The 2.56-mile course is altered from the Daytona 500 course. There are hairpin turns — drivers call them "bus stops" — where drivers must stomp on the brakes not long after they have reached top speeds of 170 m.p.h. It can beat up the body and the mind. That's why you have to be an athlete: said Valentine, who loves to imitate a car shifting from first to fifth.

The race is complicated because it's really two races at once. The GT class — Pontiacs, Porsches, BMWs, Mazdas, and

Ferraris — shares the track with the faster Daytona prototypes — a new formula race car developed by NASCAR.

"It's like 13 knife tights going on at the same time," Valentine said. "You're fighting for every inch."

Valentine is racing for Kevin Buckler of Sonoma, Calif., the only team owner who has won at Le Mans and Daytona twice. The other drivers are Andy Lally, Mark Bunting, and O'Connell.

Buckler has Valentine scheduled for several stints, including the 24th hour of the race.

"R.J. is better this year than ever," Buckler said. "He's the total package."

During TRG's pre-race dinner, a waiter brings Valentine a covered crock of soup. But instead of soup, he finds a \$12,000 gold Rolex watch, a good luck present from Buckler. "That was the most expensive bowl of onion soup I ever bought," said Buckler, laughing.

There are drivers here from all over the United States and 22 other countries, but Valentine is the only driver from New England.

TRG racer Steve Johnson, who played sparingly for the New England Patriots in 1988, knows why.

"They just don't get enough practice up there. They're in the snow too often."

Valentine said the 15-man pit crew wins races. The night before the race, the TRG crew has already replaced the engine of the 65 car, which was running down on power.

"We have a dream team," Valentine said. "Johnny O and Andy Lally are among the top 10 endurance racers in the world. Lally has the most podium appearances of anybody ever in Rolex history. Mark Bunting is money in the bank."

Valentine is the cagey veteran.

"He's been doing this forever, over and over. He's one of the rocks on the team," said Lally.

Valentine predicts that on the first lap, some hot-blooded driver will be eliminated. He hopes his No. 65 car won't get tak-

en out. "It's about your ability to watch out for cuckoos."

Ready to roll

The race — in late January — starts under perfect conditions (70 degrees and sunny) at high noon. On the first lap, one car is eliminated.

In the pit, Valentine paces, watches the leaderboard and lap times, stretches, and does chin-ups and push-ups before his turn.

"Put me in, Coach," he said.

The 65 car is seasawing with a Porsche 911 for the GT class lead.

Valentine inherits the car at nightfall but not without problems. The water system has malfunctioned. The drinking tube doesn't work and it cuts the electrical system out. The crew rigs a water jug to Valentine's helmet.

He doesn't use it despite temperatures in excess of 120 degrees.

Valentine later said the heat was not as bad as the time he raced in Addison, Texas. "It was 120 degrees on the tarmac," he said. Talk about putting the pedal to the medal. He suffered second-degree burns on his left heel.

"It was like a griddle," he said. "They had to cut the shoe off, the foot got swollen. I had bad blisters. I had to cut a hole in my \$300 shoes to be able to wear them."

Valentine's turn is flawless with the exception of a quickly recovered spinout.

"It could have been cold tires, some oil or dirt on the track," Valentine said as sweat poured off him. "I'm doing OK. We're still in the lead lap."

Buckler orders Valentine to get some rest. "We need you to be ready."

Finishing kick

On Lap 328, with O'Connell at the wheel, the No. 65 Pontiac takes the lead. Small bonfires burn in the infield as fans party, ride a Ferris wheel, or watch "The Rocky Honor Picture Show."

Valentine lies down in a trailer parked so close to the track that racer's headlights

shine in the windows as he hies to rest.

At dawn, with his team still flip-flopping the lead with the pesky Porsche team, Valentine gets ready to drive.

But today is not exactly Valentine's day. He gets severe cramps and turns the color of the Everglades. The big race is no longer the Daytona 24. It's about finding a bathroom. Valentine checks into the track infirmary and the diagnosis is food poisoning.

Nurses administer medicine and attach Valentine to an intravenous machine to rehydrate him. As a patient, he's not patient.

When he threatens to leave, they put a blood pressure pump around the saline solution and force the liquid into his veins quicker.

"You have made a remarkable recovery," said nurse Judy Clayton. "You looked terrible when you came in."

On his return, No. 65 is in second behind the Porsche, but Valentine is through for the day. "Kevin [Buckler] said, 'You want to get in. Get in.' But I know Lally and O'Connell are a little faster than me. It's a team sport. It's not about ego."

The 65 car never quits. But on one lap, a safety feature gets stuck for one eternal lap, effectively costing the team any chance to win.

"It turned out to be a 60-cent part," said Valentine, shrugging. The car limps to a second-place finish, three laps behind the Porsche. "The transmission was dying at the end," Valentine said. "We only had fourth and fifth gear."

Still, Valentine's team had a podium finish. That's better than NASCAR stars Tony Stewart and Danica Patrick, whose cars did not finish. Teammates splash champagne around but Valentine outruns them. The veteran knows the bubbly stings his eyes.

"If I can be competitive in a car, then I'm happy," he said.

He gathers the trophy and heads to his rental car. Before he leaves, a little business.

"I need some land in South Florida for a track," he tells a driver. "We need to talk."

At 1:50 p.m., Valentine leaves the speedway for Daytona International Airport. Like rock royalty, he drives on the tarmac directly to his jet. The pilots are ready to roll.

We had to make an executive decision for you, sir," said Rick David, a 20-year veteran Marine pilot. "We went with Corona and limes."

Valentine smiles and sinks into the cushy leather seats. He nurses a beer and fresh hit to Hanscom Field in Concord. The valet has his 750 BMW idling on the tarmac.

Two hours and 15 minutes after take off, he is just another guy Sunday driving on Route 128. Except, of course, with his eyes darting from side to side.



STAN GROSSFELD/GLOBE STAFF

R.J. Valentine shows off the hardware from his team's second-place finish at the 2006 Rolex 24 at Daytona International Speedway.