



Dodge: Then & Now

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Bobby Isaac Had Record-Setting Success with Dodge

By Bill Hamilton

AVONDALE, Ariz., Oct. 24, 2001 – Bobby Isaac came from humble beginnings but before he died in 1977 he had reached the pinnacle of the racing world and set dozens of records along the way. Many of his biggest triumphs came at the wheel of a Dodge.

Born in 1932, Isaac grew up in the country about 40 miles from Charlotte, N.C. He suffered the loss of both parents before he was a teenager and was raised by eight brothers and sisters who had trouble keeping him in school. He quit at 16 to work in a sawmill so he could earn enough to buy a pair of shoes.

Once he saw his first stock car race at a small dirt track near home, Isaac was hooked. Buying his own car was not an option, so it's probably a miracle that Isaac ever had the opportunity to prove himself on the track. He somehow talked his way into a hobby stock ride one Saturday night and lasted all of two laps before flipping the car.

Amazingly, he got more opportunities and this time had better success. He soon found himself racing several nights a week and earning enough in prize money to make racing his fulltime job. Isaac broke into the NASCAR Grand National Series as a relief driver. His first full season was 1962, but crashes and mechanical failures kept him from showing his true potential.

Isaac's big break came in 1963 when Ray Nichels signed him to drive for the factory Dodge team. Isaac's first start in a Nichels Engineering Dodge came in the second 100-mile qualifier for the 1964 Daytona 500. He made the opportunity count as he won his first NASCAR Grand National race by a foot, beating the Plymouths of Jimmy Pardue and Richard Petty. The finish was so close NASCAR officials waited until photo-finish pictures were available before declaring a winner. When the track camera produced blank film, NASCAR solicited photos from trackside photographers. Three hours after the race ended, Isaac was named the winner. The victory also made the two Daytona 500

qualifying races a sweep for Dodge as Junior Johnson won the first one driving a Ray Fox-prepared Dodge.

Isaac went on to record 37 wins and 51 poles in NASCAR Winston Cup Series competition. He also set a single-season record by winning 20 pole positions in 1969. Isaac was voted the Winston Cup Series' most popular driver that year.

But the high point of his career was certainly the accomplishments of 1970-1971 when Isaac etched his name in record books from Martinsville, Va., to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. By then, Isaac was driving the K&K Insurance Dodge owned by Nord Krauskopf. His crew chief was Harry Hyde. They won at Martinsville in 1970 on their way to 11 Grand National wins and the first NASCAR Grand National Manufacturers Championship for Dodge.

But that wasn't enough for Isaac and the K&K Insurance team. Krauskopf and Hyde took Isaac and the winged K&K Dodge Charger Daytona to Talladega in November to break Buddy Baker's 200.447 mph closed-course record. Despite cold and windy conditions, they broke Baker's record with a run of 201.104 mph. That still wasn't enough, so in September 1971 they took the No. 71 Dodge to Bonneville and set 28 records in four days.

Retired Dodge engineer George Wallace went along with Isaac and the K&K Insurance Dodge team when they set the records at Bonneville. Known for riding along in race cars during practice to check instrument readings, Wallace took advantage of the opportunity to ride with Isaac on the salt flats.

"Normally at Bonneville for long distance records, they run on a circle, but with the condition of the salt that year, they had to run an oval," said Wallace. "It was basically two-mile straightaways and three-mile turns, for a 10-mile lap. I rode with Bobby while they were setting the car and it got to about 205 at the end of the straightaway. He wouldn't lift. He'd throw it into that three-mile-long turn like he'd throw it into a half-mile dirt-track turn.

"From inside the car it felt like the rear end was hanging out at 30 degrees. It wasn't, when you saw it from outside; it was out maybe five degrees. But he would go through the whole turn sawing at the wheel like you would on a dirt track, never lifting. We'd enter the turn at 205 and grind off some speed down to maybe 191 at the start of the next straightaway. Then accelerate back up to 205 on the straightaway. All of this without lifting."

"The turns are such a large radius and the coefficient of friction of the salt is so low, I mean, it's not like riding in a racecar really, because the forces acting on you are next to nothing compared to running at Daytona. You don't really need to hold on even, plus it's almost impossible to hurt yourself crashing at Bonneville, because you've got to go five miles before you can hit anything.

“Initially, Bobby was concerned that if he lost the car, he might get into trouble,” continued Wallace. “We tried to convince him that he wouldn’t. Eventually, he did lose it and spun about a half mile. He came back and said, ‘You’re right, it doesn’t matter.’ Around the inside of the oval, about every 100 feet, they had a wood lathe put into the salt, and when he lost it, he took about 10 of those out and put a minor dent in the nose of the car, but other than that, he did no damage at all.”

Wallace says Isaac and the K&K Insurance Dodge made their run at the land speed records during a three-week break in the NASCAR Winston Cup Series schedule. “August and September are the time when the salt is good,” said Wallace. “They went after three basic sets of records: the flying mile and kilometer, the standing-start 10-mile and 10-kilometer, and the standing-start 100-mile and 100-kilometer records.

“We set the 100-mile record at 194.290 mph, and the 100-kilometer record at 193.168 mph, and those were not just stock car records, they were the absolute world’s records for those distances,” continued Wallace. “Since they were from a standing start and the acceleration was limited by the salt, each lap improved the average speed. As I recall, Bobby was lapping at about 195-196 mph after the first standing-start lap. They (Isaac and the K&K Dodge) held those records for eight years before Mercedes broke them again with a very sophisticated race car. But the car as Isaac ran it at Bonneville was stock, NASCAR configuration, other than running about an inch-and-a-half lower.

“The engine they used was what Harry called his good qualifying engine. This was one Harry built and had been using for the past two or three years to qualify at Daytona and Talladega. He’d never run it in a race because he didn’t want to put miles on it, but that was the engine that he put in the car for Bonneville. He took along four or five spare engines and they took along two four-barrel manifolds and all because stock Hemis ran with two four-barrels, while NASCAR required one four-barrel. Two four-barrels was worth 30 to 40 horsepower, but the car ran so well with the single four-barrel and broke all the records so handily that he never bothered changing the manifolds.”

Larry Rathgeb is another Dodge engineer who got to know Isaac well. They worked together at the track and spent time pursuing their hobbies off the track. “We were exceptional friends,” said Rathgeb. “We hunted together. We did a whole lot of things together. Went to races together, drove there at times. I just liked him as a person. He was an excellent driver, a really good driver.”

As an engineer, Rathgeb tried to analyze Isaac’s driving style and figure out what made him so good. Eventually, Rathgeb concluded that it couldn’t be analyzed. “He had kind of an inherent capability,” said Rathgeb. “I don’t know that he knew why he did things, he just did them because they felt right. I don’t think he ever did things because he was taught that by any science. Perhaps other good drivers might have taught him, but he just had an inherent capability to drive a car.

“I asked him, ‘Why do you go at this point on the track and that point on the track,’ and he just kind of shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘I don’t know; that’s the way around.’

But when you talk about maximizing radii and those kinds of things, he couldn't talk about it in that sense, but he just said, 'That's the way around.' I'd say, 'Well, this way would be shorter,' and he'd say, 'Yeah, but you can't get around that way.'"

Isaac left Krauskopf and the K&K Insurance Dodge team in September 1972, after an accident in the Southern 500 at Darlington. He had collected 37 wins and 48 poles in 207 starts with the team. Isaac drove for Bud Moore in 1973 until Isaac abruptly retired from racing while leading the Talladega 500. Isaac radioed Moore during the 90th lap and told him to find a relief driver. Coo Coo Marlin, father of current Dodge driver and winner Sterling Marlin, got in the car and brought it home in 13th place. "Something told me to quit," explained Isaac, "I don't know anything else to do but to abide by it."

Isaac did return to racing but his career was never the same. He had some good runs with Banjo Matthews in 1974, the six races in 1975 and two in 1976. Isaac's last Winston Cup race was the spring race at Charlotte, where he finished 38th. On August 13, 1977, Isaac again pulled into the pits before the end of a race, this time suffering from the heat in a Late Model Sportsman event at Hickory Speedway in North Carolina. As he exited the car, he collapsed from a heart attack and died at a nearby hospital.

The boy who had to quit school to earn enough money for shoes ended up winning \$585,297 in the NASCAR Winston Cup Series. Isaac ranks 16th in wins but sixth in poles and seventh in laps led with 13,229. In 1979, he was inducted in the National Motorsports Press Association's hall of Fame at Darlington Raceway. He was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame at Talladega in 1996.

Rathgeb says he liked Isaac as a person as well as a driver. "He was a quiet person and if he liked you, he was your friend forever, whether you did things that he liked or not," said Rathgeb. "He was just a good person, a wonderful man. We just enjoyed being together. I miss him."

This week in Dodge history:

- **10/28/56** – Jack Smith became the 19th winner of the 1956 season by taking the Mixed 400 (hardtops and convertibles) at Martinsville Speedway in Virginia. At the time, he was the newest driver in the Carl Kiekhaefer stable of Chrysler and Dodge drivers. Smith was driving a Dodge Grand National hardtop. Born in Illinois but raised in Georgia, Smith went on to record 21 Winston Cup wins.
- **10/24/76** – Richard Petty and his Petty Enterprises Dodge took the lead with 70 laps to go and won the American 500 at North Carolina Motor Speedway in Rockingham. It was only the third win of the season for NASCAR's all-time race winner, who arrived at the press box after the race saying, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Richard Petty."

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