

Remembering Alan

One More Call

BY TOM ROBERTS

Tom Roberts was very close to Alan Kulwicki. The two men came together after Roberts wrote a *Kulwicki* story in a local race paper during the early ASA days. From then on, Roberts's was *Kulwicki's* publicist, friend and advisor. The two are pictured here at Atlanta last November, along with Roberts' wife, Joni, Roberts was supposed to be on the plane the night it went down.

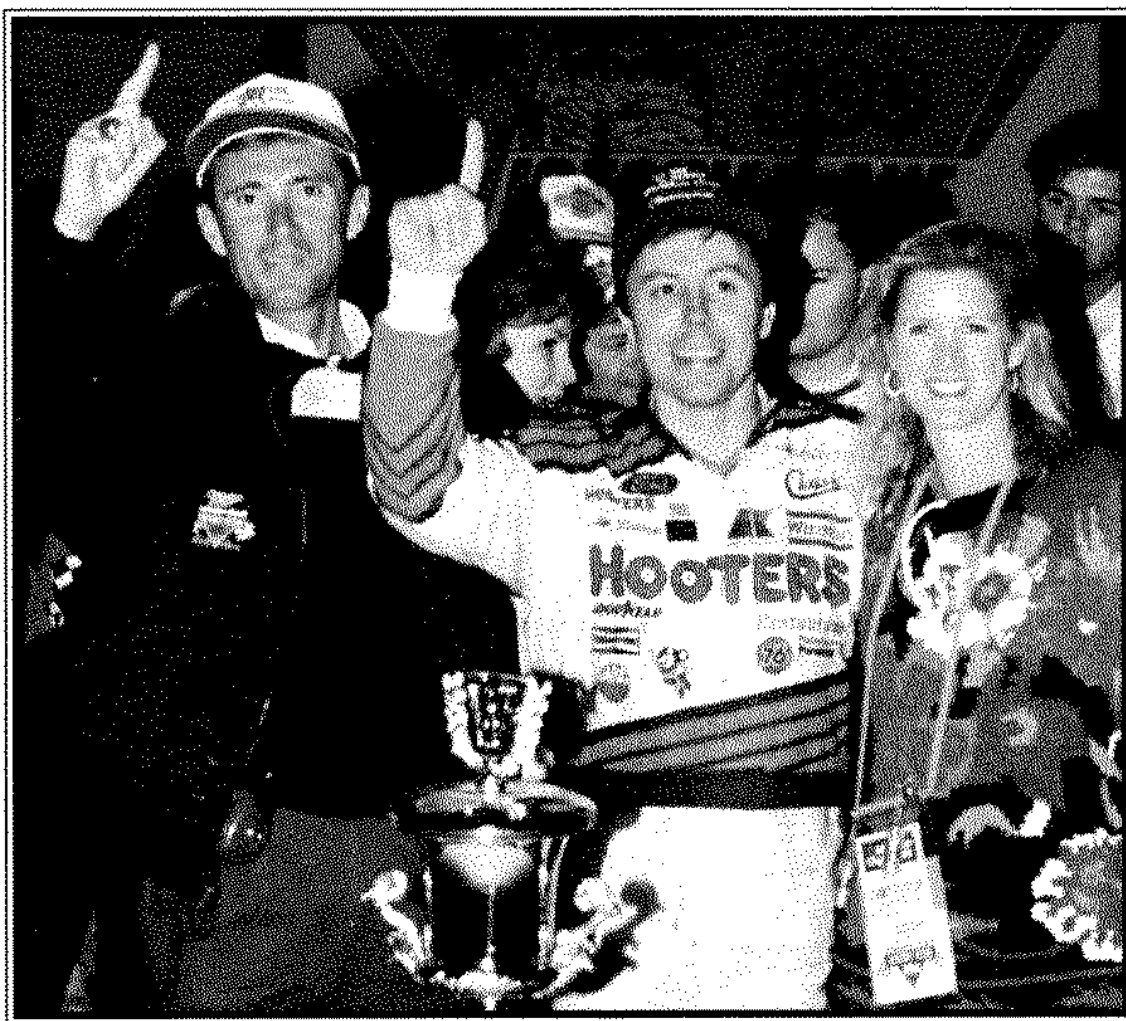


Photo by David Chobart

We knew there was a need for at least one weekly personal chat. It came in the form of a phone call. It was time management-Kulwicki-style.

I refer to it as a regular call because it was part of a routine that Alan and I established back in January. As busy as both of our schedules were, we knew there was a need for at least one weekly personal chat. It came in the form of that call. It was time management-Kulwicki-style.

Remembering Alan

We would talk about the past weekend's race and then discuss what we had planned for the upcoming weekend. He'd fill me in on the team's preparation and give me his personal insight on what he expected. I would try to confirm the arrangements I had in conjunction with promotional appearances and so forth. He would make light of Rusty's success this year and say, "Man, Rusty sure can be cocky." I sensed a deep-down love and respect between these two guys from day one. Some things go forever verbally uncommunicated. This was one of those things. He'd always end our chat by getting my feedback as to what kind of champion he was being

Alan was concerned about being remembered as a great champion for this sport. The concern was almost to the extreme that I'd label it an obsession. I had worked with Rusty Wallace during the 1990 season, and Alan knew how well Rusty represented the sport. He remembered how Rusty had gotten a standing ovation in the drivers' meeting prior to the season-ending Atlanta race that year. Alan wanted that, too, come November. He knew that I had a "Rusty Scale" in the back of my mind and he wanted to know how he was measuring up as the weeks unfolded.

That last regular call began just as all of them did. "Tom," Alan would say in his nasal Wisconsin tone that seemed to stretch a single-syllable name for a full three seconds. "Yes," I'd say. "Alan," he would say in that same tone. Oddly enough, in the eleven years I spent with Alan, not once did he call me what everyone else in this sport calls me, "T.R." It was always Tom.

I could sense in just his salutation what frame of mind he was in. If it was serious and he had no time for idle chatter, I called him "Alan" throughout the conversation. If he was in a more relaxed and talkative mood, I called him "Kool" during our talk. He really liked that.

The last call came on a "Kool" night. He was in a really upbeat mood. He was pleased with his finish at Darlington. He finished sixth, but he had passed Kyle Petty at the run to the finish and, that added to his satisfaction. He really liked Kyle and car owner Felix Sabates. He was closer to those guys in a socializing kind of relationship than he ever was with anyone else in racing. Kyle always walked to the beat of a different drummer and so did Alan. Alan was fascinated with Felix. He had the utmost respect for the man and his accomplishments. There was a genuine love and admiration that existed among Alan, Kyle and Felix. Their relationship spurred friendly competition on the track. Alan took great pride in beating them. I would love to have heard some of the conversations those guys had when they'd fly back home together after some of the races.

When the subject changed to the upcoming race at Bristol, "Kool" was pretty evasive. He had tested there with Rusty a couple of weeks prior. Buddy Parrott, Rusty's crew chief, had told me that Alan had "busted his ass" in making a final banzai run that day. Knowing Alan as I did, I knew exactly what happened. He already had his primary car ready and tested and was confident about bringing it back to race in the Food City 500. He pulled his backup car out in order to make a final statement that day to Rusty and the Penske Team. He wanted to make sure they knew he was going to be their stiffest competition when they came back to race. That's when he crashed.

"Kool" refused to talk about the Bristol test session, other than to say that he was pleased and felt that the team was ready for the race. I could sense that he really felt bad about crashing the car and creating additional work for the crew. Instead, he talked about winning the race there last year and how his successful runs at Bristol had really helped his career.

He asked me if I was going to meet him at the Hooters appearance in Knoxville on Thursday night. I knew he had been needing some "quality time" with Dan Duncan (Hooters Sports Marketing Manager) to discuss a couple of situations that he saw as problems. I asked

Remembering Alan

him if he wanted me there and he fired back a quick, "Yes, I do." I told him that I'd be there and ended the conversation by telling him that I thought everyone was thinking he was being a great champion. He said, "Thanks, Tom."

The way we ended that conversation struck me funny. In the eleven years with Alan as a friend, PR rep and most important, his chief defender, he had verbally thanked me probably less than a dozen times. His thanks were special and were reserved for special occasions. There was a thanks for writing news releases about him when I worked at Nashville Raceway in the early '80s and was just really getting to know him. There was a thanks when I'd introduced him to key people in the sport back in 1984 and 1985. There was a thanks when I agreed to help with the PR during his rookie year back in 1986. There was the public thanks he gave me in his speech at the NASCAR Awards Banquet in New York that year when he won the rookie title. There was the most personal and emotional thanks that he ever gave me, the one in Atlanta last November after he'd won the championship. He followed that up with another Public thanks during the Awards Banquet last December. I understood Alan and accepted his unique way of handling things and expressing himself. That's why, because they were so few in number, his expressions of thanks were immeasurable in value to me.

I never talked to Alan one-on-one again. I left a message on his answering machine at home on Tuesday night. He fully expected me to be at the Knoxville Hooters when he arrived on Thursday night

. Mark Brooks (Hooters CEO Bob Brooks' son, who was Hooters PR rep) called me Wednesday morning to make sure that I was going to be at the Knoxville store on Thursday night. He suggested that I take a commercial flight to Knoxville, take a cab over to the restaurant and then fly with their group on the Hooters plane to Bristol. I told him I would. I never told him otherwise even though my plans changed.

Thursday morning, April 1, I was in my office just after 4:00 a.m. attempting to fax Rusty's and Alan's Bristol race advances to some of the media. Beth Tuschak, the motorsports beat writer for USA Today, told me that she was going out to Phoenix to cover the Indy car race, but she wanted me to be sure and fax my materials to Steve Ballard back at her office. I had tried unsuccessfully to get through all day and into the night on Wednesday. I had promised her that I would get the information to Steve, so that is the main reason I was back in the office that early.

I dialed the phone number and finally got through. I heard the beep and began the transmission. I turned around to my briefcase and got out the plane ticket my travel agent had sent. It was for travel from Huntsville, Alabama to Tri-Cities Airport, the airport that serves the Bristol, Tennessee area.

I had only missed one of Alan's appearances over the last year. It was the Augusta, Georgia appearance the Thursday prior (March 25). I missed it because I wanted Alan to have "quality time" alone with Dan Duncan.

My college sociology and basic psychology classes were extremely useful in dealing with Alan. He would call me unexpectedly in the office or odd hours at home and talk for 45 minutes about little things that were bothering him., Enough little things could compound to the point that he would just about be ready to blow up. That's when he'd call me. I had always tried to tell him that if something cropped up that bothered him, find a solution immediately. "Nip it in the bud," I'd say. But he would never do that. He'd just sit there for weeks and let things fester. Then I'd get

Remembering Alan

the call. I'd try to give him the consolation he was seeking, assure him that I'd work to help resolve the problems and attempt to get him in a better mood. I would never let him hang up until he assured me that his frustrations would not affect the performance of the race team. He always did that and things seemed to always work out.

The last such call I received from Alan came on the Tuesday prior to the rescheduled running of the Atlanta race (March 16). He was a powder keg about to explode. His list of complaints (I often told him to write them down and I'd try to tackle each one individually, but he only did that one time) included topics ranging from his percentage of souvenir sales to his feeling that he was having to "beg" in order to use the airplane. Alan had made a "lease" arrangement with Bob Brooks prior to the start of this season for the use of an airplane. Bob repainted the twin-engine Fairchild Merlin 300 in the Hooters colors. The plane's FAA registration number was changed from N-300-EF, representing Bob's other company, Eastern Foods, to N-500-AK, representing Alan Kulwicki.

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I had advised Mark through a phone call on Thursday, March 18, that I felt the time had again come for Bob to have another long pep talk with Alan. Bob Brooks had the knack of accomplishing more with Alan in ten minutes than most people could in ten hours. A scheduled dinner with Bob while in Atlanta had fallen through because Alan already had something planned. I had hoped that without me along, Alan would open up with Dan on their flight to and from Augusta. Bob had hired Dan to run the racing program at the beginning of the year and I was hoping that he could have the patience and sometimes-necessary mental fortitude it took in dealing with Alan. Mark told me at the Darlington race that they never talked the situation out.

When all is said and done, that is the real reason that I did not attend the Knoxville Hooters appearance that Thursday night. That is why I was not aboard that plane. I saw the situation as another opportunity for Alan to communicate with Dan or Dan to attempt to communicate with Alan. I'll never know if they ever did.

Atypical of me, that Thursday I never telephoned Alan, Mark, Dan or the Knoxville store to advise them that I would not be there. That's why the flight plan showed that there were five passengers aboard. Alan, Mark, Dan and pilot Charles Campbell fully expected me to meet them at Hooters and fly on to Bristol in that plane. I was content with going on to Bristol, giving Alan and Dan the opportunity to talk, and then meeting them at the lounge in the Sheraton Inn in Johnson City, Tennessee, the place that had become our hangout while in the, area for the Bristol race.

Remembering Alan



Photo by Don Thies

Dick Trickle (99) was both friend and advisor to many of today's Winston Cup drivers, including a young Alan Kulwicki (97). They are shown here on October 17, 1982 at IRP in an ASA race.



With Tom Roberts at his side, Alan Kulwicki signs autographs at a Hooters restaurant. It was on the way to the races after such a function that Kulwicki's plane went down and all aboard were killed. It was one of the few times Roberts didn't accompany him.

Remembering Alan

Everyone knows the rest of the story. The plane crash. The tragic deaths of Alan, Mark, Dan and Mr. Campbell (I this didn't know him well enough to ever call him Charles or Charlie, like the others did).

NASCAR racing lost its champion and three friends that night. I lost much, much more. I lost three friends in Mark, Dan and Mr. Campbell. I lost a hero, one of the best friends I'll ever have and my eleven-year project in Alan Kulwicki. Even though I wasn't aboard that plane physically that night, a portion of my heart died, too, on April 1, 1993.

I have missed my regular Monday talk with Alan more than anyone can ever imagine.

If I could only have the opportunity again....

It would be one of the "Kool" conversations. But I would see to it that it got extended into one of those 45-minute sessions that we had through the years. Things would be a little different time, however. I'd been on the receiving end of the conversations ever since I met Alan. This time he'd just have to shut up and listen. I have an eleven-year list of little things that I want to tell him.

Listen to me, "Kool."

Even though I wasn't aboard that plane physically that night a portion of my heart died, too, on April 1, 1993.

Thank God for Rex and Becky Robbins, Steve Stubbs and the ASA. I'll never forget sitting in the lounge at the Holiday Inn in Muncie, Indiana back in 1981, when they brought up your name. Rex said, "Keep an eye on this Kulwicki kid because he's going places." Stubbs, then the ASA PR man, said, "He's unique, and can you believe that he has a college degree in engineering?" Becky then fired back, "I've already told Alan that he's way too smart to be a race car driver." That conversation and those people led me to you.

Thank God I was privileged with the opportunity to witness the level of competition that existed on the short tracks back then. You, Rusty, Mark, Trickle, Senneker, Eddy ... wow! Bobby Allison, a man we respected on the race track as a driver, but admire even more off the track as a human being, knew that and that's why he enjoyed racing with you guys so much back then. So did Darrell Waltrip and others. Someone could write a complete chapter of a book just on the rivalry at Gerry Gunderman's shop in Franklin Wisconsin back in '84 and '85. With your team and Mark's team sharing the same building, there was ultimate competitiveness between two short-track teams. It even got dirty on a couple of occasions. I witnessed that competitiveness transcend into the top level of mutual respect and admiration between you and Mark when you both achieved your rightful roles in Winston Cup racing. Mark is among the drivers that I admire the most today. You guys could afford to be a bit more affable with your personal friendships back in the short track days. Winston Cup racing is big business and, unless you can have mutual interests such as hunting and fishing, the level of competition forbids a "chummy-chummy" relationship. In short, the degree of mutual respect and admiration is the closest thing available to equate into love and friendship. I remember seeing Trickle come around to you guys back in ASA and sort of act as a tutor. He'd give you guys all of his secrets then get the greatest pleasure in beating you on race day.

It's in that same line of thinking that I know that Rusty had the warmest spot in his heart for you. He never made a big deal out of it and never will, but his relationship with you was modern day "Trickle-ism." He admired and respected you for what you were able to accomplish in. 1986;

Remembering Alan

going against the odds and winning the rookie title. That's why he introduced you to the BASF people at the, end of the year, He knew they could provide the sponsorship you needed to continue your progress, It turned into a four-year Zerex sponsorship deal that produced pole and race wins and brought your team to the top of the competition. Rusty sent Paul Andrews your way back in late 1987. He knew that it took a special kind of crew chief to fit in and provide for your needs. The addition of Paul, I'm convinced, was the single most important ingredient that eventually led to the 1992 championship.

While he helped you behind the scenes, just like Trickle did in the old days, Rusty enjoyed beating you on race day. The success that he saw you have last year has a lot to do with the personal competitiveness and drive found in Rusty this year. You would have gotten a kick out of seeing Trickle and Rusty talking after the last practice session at Bristol on Saturday. Rusty had won the pole. Trickle had left the, pin out of the steering wheel and crashed your buddy Butch Mock's race car during practice. They went to the backup car and got into the field using a provisional spot. We were leaving the track and Trickle called Rusty over for a chat. He told Rusty that he had been watching him during practice. He told him that he thought Rusty's line in three and four was just fine, but Rusty didn't need to pinch the car down so tight coming out of two. Rusty listened like a fourth-grade student.

Rusty's win in the Bristol race was the most meaningful, emotional and satisfying that I have ever been associated with. Rusty and his team were on a mission. They wanted to win it for you. NASCAR started 35 cars and that moved Rusty into your champion's first pit spot. That even added to the emotion and determination. When he won, Rusty did your "Polish victory lap" that we debuted in Phoenix in '88. Believe me ... there was no cockiness this time ... just sincere admiration, respect ... and love. I was the first to get to Rusty after the race. As usual, just like I did with you on five occasions, I stuck my head and arms into the passenger side of the race car, holding the sponsor's hat and a cool drink. Rusty removed his helmet, shook my hand and said, "Mission accomplished." Rusty said that he was 150 percent as a driver during the race. I'm convinced he was and much of it was due to the additional energy your spirit provided.

Remembering Alan

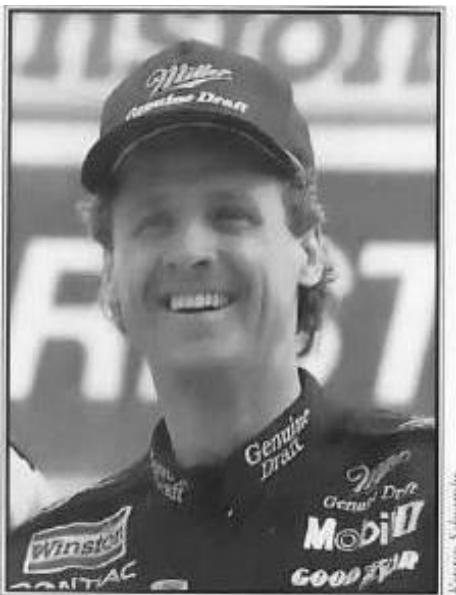


Photo by Kristin Schwenke

Rusty Wallace wanted to win Bristol for Alan. He won the pole, won the race took a Polish victory lap and then told Tom Roberts, "Mission accomplished." "He drove 150% all day."

There was a special magic in the air that day. Everyone wanted to win so bad. Davey Allison told me later he had "special help from somewhere" that allowed him to race a seven-cylinder race car to a fifth-place finish. Ted Musgrave was a candidate for the Goody's Headache Award after only 50 laps when he hit the wall on the front straightaway. He somehow held on and finished fifteenth. He showed me his blistered hands after the race. I can remember back in 1987 when he slept in a truck at the race shop in order to drive Terry Baker's ASA car. He has your level of drive and determination. With a wife and family, he stopped along the way to smell the roses. You never did. I told him back in 1988 that he'd be the next Alan Kulwicki. I remember him battling you for the 1981 track championship at Kaukauna. He's a racer out of the same mold as you, Rusty, Mark, Trickle and Bobby Allison.

Thank God for Humpy Wheeler and his positive influence on you, personally and professionally. I'll never forget you calling me back in '85 after your first big pep talk with Humpy. When I asked you what Humpy's advice was, you simply said two words: "Be spectacular!" That became a source of inspiration for you, and our official motto. After you won the rookie title in '86, we took great pride in those two words. After your first pole, Richmond in '87, I remember Eddie Gossage, our close friend, and me taking you to the media center for the post qualifying interview and saying, "Be spectacular!" I remember spotting for you during the Phoenix win in '88 and reminding you to do the "Polish victory lap" afterwards. The only thing that I could say on the radio was, "Be spectacular!"

I'll never forget you calling me back in '85 after your first big pep talk with Humpy. When I asked you what Humpy's Advice was, you simply said two words: "Be spectacular!"

The runner-up finish and championship at Atlanta last November provided the final "Be spectacular!" I'll never forget Humpy's personal congratulations to you when you two talked at the party held in your honor that night at the Hilton.

Remembering Alan

You were always the underdog, even with me and the time I could allocate to you and your program. You knew that as business priorities go, my Miller guys always came first. But you always knew that, as personal priorities go, you were always on equal billing. The greatest compliment you ever paid me-make that the greatest compliment anyone has ever paid me-was when you told me that you'd rather have any percentage of time that I could give you than a hundred percent from someone else.

You were always a source of inspiration for me. I admired you so much for overcoming your childhood grief and becoming such a strong person. I had lost my dad the first year out of college. Handling that grief had made me stronger, too. I think it helped me understand you better. The advice you; gave me when my brother died back in '86 really helped me deal with losing you. When I asked if you thought I should return home with what was left of my family or stay and spot for you as planned, you said, "Be strong. Do what you think is right. But be sure to make the best of the day." I stayed and spotted for you and you finished twelfth. You took the rookie points lead and never looked back after that day. Your words were my source of strength in getting through the Bristol weekend. There was a job to do and we had to do it to the best of our abilities.

You'll be glad to know that Felix and I finally had a chat. I revealed to him the real reasons I chose to maintain a no relationship stance with him. I told him how I was resentful of you cutting me short in important conversations because you were in a hurry for a meeting or to have lunch with him. I also told him that I was afraid that his free spending method of racing might be a negative influence on you and the way you wanted to achieve your goals. I told him about the "official 1992 Alan Kulwicki Racing incentive plan" and how I knew after its introduction, no outside power would ever change your way of doing things. I thanked him for being your friend, businessman hero and advisor. I thanked him for adding a dimension to your life that only he, could provide. We shared a laugh, shook hands and I now consider him a friend.



Photo by Robin Hartford

Remembering Alan

Alan liked Kyle Petty and his present car owner Felix Sabates and had as close a relationship with them as anyone in the sport. This photo shows Alan and Kyle at Pocono in 1986, the year Alan won the serie's 'Rookie of the Year honor.

Thank God for Father Dale Grubba. In such a trying time, he was the nucleus that held us all together. He loved and admired you. He is a man of the cloth. I finally confessed to I fondly refer to him as the "Racing Padre" behind his back. I won't take credit for the nickname, however. I got it from another hero of mine; a guy resides in Hueytown, Alabama and won the '88 Daytona 500. You would have loved the eulogy Father Grubba provided.

Rest assured that you will go down in racing history as one of the most loved competitors ever-

At the funeral home reception, I told Peggy what you would have wanted me to tell her.

The reception, the funeral in Milwaukee and the Charlotte memorial service were all done to your liking. The gathering at the funeral home was much more of a reception than a wake. Tears of sadness mixed well with chuckles brought about by discussing your many adventures. It was interesting to me personally to be chatting with two people and not realize that they came from two different facets of your life. I was proud to be a common denominator and introduce many who knew you, yet didn't know each other. It was an honor when Gary and Thelma asked me to be a pallbearer.

The reception made me realize what a lucky guy I was. I had known Terry Jeffords, Doug Mayr and Dennis Reeves, your best friends back home in Milwaukee, for years. They had helped bring me up to date on you and your career prior to our meeting. They had told me things that I would never get out of you. I saw your entire Winston Cup career unfold right before my eyes. You took me along for the entire ride. All except for that flight April 1. Maybe it was meant for me to stay behind and continue to be your chief defender. Only God knows the answer to that one.

I do know this much, though. If that is the case, I will have an easy job now. Like I said earlier, in this sport you have to equate respect and admiration into love and friendship. With that in mind, rest assured that you will go down in racing history as one of the most loved him that competitors ever. You had many, many two people and not realize that they friends

And before I hang up, I want you to know that you don't have to worry any more about how people will remember you as the champion. Everyone agrees you were a spectacular champion. Good-bye, "Kool."