

Rusty Wallace pictured at his home in North Carolina with a Ferrari 488 GTB

Back to red

Fresh from his return to the track at the 2016 Finali Mondiali in Daytona, NASCAR legend **Rusty Wallace's** enthusiasm for racing is as strong as ever, especially now that he's developed a taste for Ferrari

Words Andrew Lawrence Photography Mark Hill

New racing drivers can claim a resume to rival that of Rusty Wallace. For more than two decades he distinguished himself as one of NASCAR's very best, earning Winston Cup rookie of the year honours in 1984 on the way to winning the championship five years later. At the time of his retirement, in 2005, he ranked among the top five on-track earners, with upwards of \$50 million (€46m) in total.

Of his 55 career Cup victories, six came on road courses, which, technically, qualifies him as an expert. And yet he hardly felt like one when he entered the Ferrari Challenge at Daytona International Speedway last December – his first big start after a nine-year retirement. Eventually all the old feelings came back, but, as he explains, not without a fair amount of coaxing.

The Official Ferrari Magazine: How did you wind up getting called out of retirement aged 60?

Rusty Wallace: That was a big surprise. I broadcast for the Motor Racing Network, which is owned by International Speedway Corporation. I announce all the Cup races at tracks that they own, and Daytona's one of 'em. So when Ferrari contacted Chip Wile, the new president at Daytona and asked for some NASCAR flair for their Ferrari event, he said, 'We work with Rusty Wallace.' Then he calls me up, says, 'Come to Daytona. Help represent NASCAR. Go to a few big dinners. Do some practice laps. Have a good time.' I say, 'OK, great! Sounds cool.' But then just two weeks before the event, Chip calls me and says, 'I really need to make one thing clear. We want you to race...'

TOFM: Up to that point, you hadn't competed in a race since the 2006 Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona. Was that a long enough lay-off to make you nervous, even

though you've spent most of your life racing cars?

RW: Oh, I was concerned. On the one hand, I'd been out of the car for a long time. But on the other, I don't feel like I have at all. I feel like I've still got all my stuff. People have to understand driving a racing car is not like stick and ball. Stick and ball is about how fast you move, how athletic you are and all that. In racing, it's about how much you know about the track, and how much you know about the car, and whether you know how to drive, and all these things. It's not about how much weight I can lift and all that. So that was my saving grace.

TOFM: Did you do anything to get up to speed?

RW: They took me to Austin, Texas, for a test at the Circuit of the Americas. Had a great time. Learned a lot. Anthony Lazzaro, my driving coach, really helped in terms of getting me the speed I felt I needed to have. Then, when I got to Daytona, I had another instructor, Louis-Philippe Dumoulin – LP, I call him – and he helped like crazy too. So it was an all-out effort.

TOFM: It's interesting to hear someone of your considerable experience admit to feeling nervous about racing in the Ferrari Challenge.

RW: Yeah, I was a little nervous, but I was also smart enough to say, 'I need practice.' And thank God I did that because there was so much I learned it was unreal. But also everything started to come back to me.

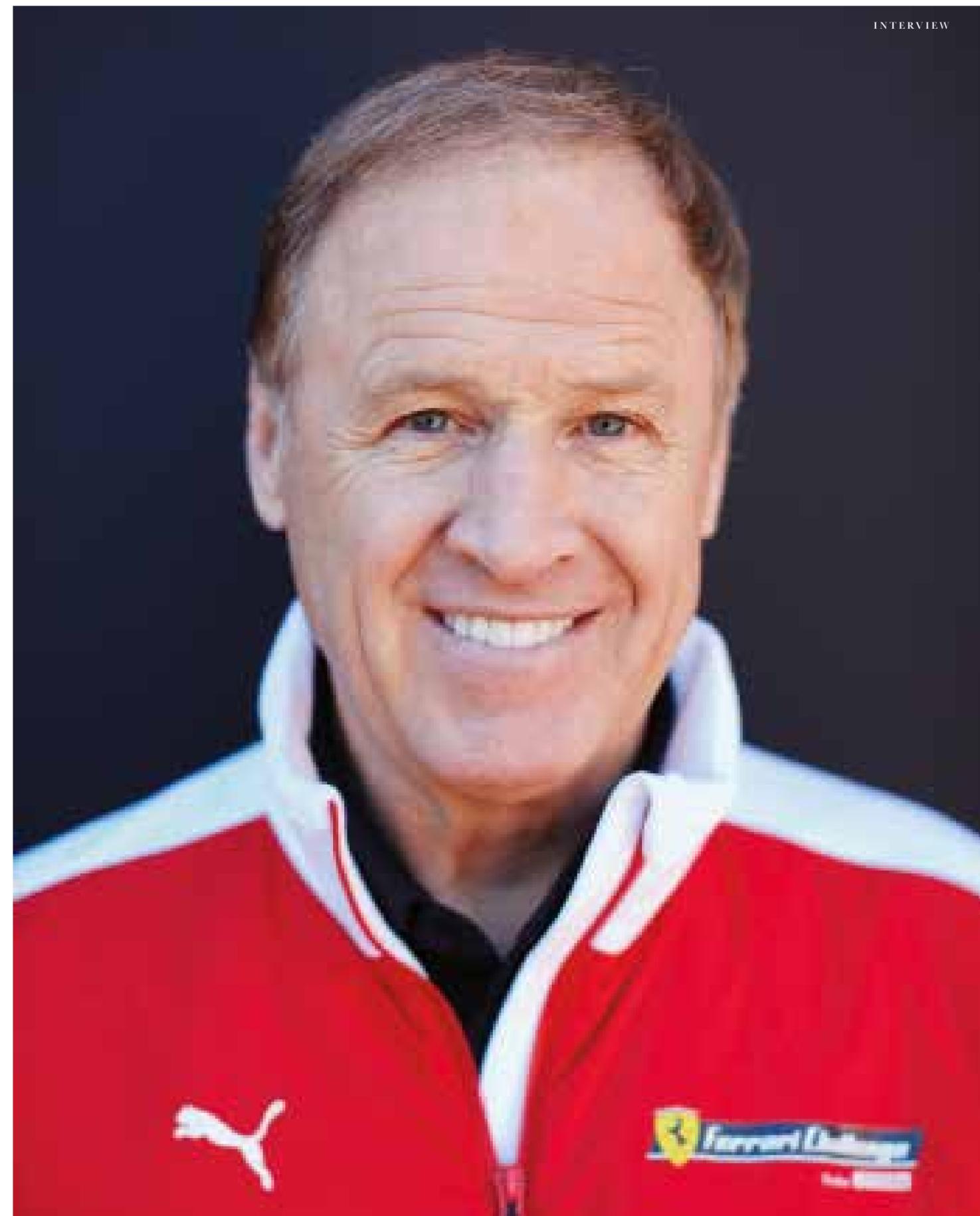
TOFM: Were there nuances to the racing that didn't translate from your NASCAR experience?

RW: The cars are totally different from anything I've driven in NASCAR. Not just their weight or how sexy they are. It's the mechanical stuff. I have never raced a car with electronic traction control ever. By the way, >>

Opposite page, Wallace proudly wearing the Ferrari Challenge colours. Below, from left, busy at the wheel during the 1987 Daytona 500; in action at Martinsville Speedway during the 2004 NASCAR season; saluting the crowd at Bristol, Tennessee, on the inaugural lap of his last NASCAR race



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«There was so much I learned that it was unreal. But also everything started to come back to me»

ROBERTO VIVA

Wallace at the wheel of a Ferrari of Houston 458 Challenge Evo at Daytona International Speedway during the 2016 Finali Mondiali



«I felt like if I can get in the top 10, with all these hotshots on the track, that's a pretty doggone good comeback»

things that *aren't* wrong in NASCAR, like trail braking, where I'm kinda on the gas and on the brake at the same time. I found out right away that on these cars you can't do that. You gotta be on the brake and off the gas because if you're on the brake and on the gas at the same time, the computer thinks the car's got

a stuck throttle. And it starts trying to shut the engine down and all this stuff. I'm like, 'What is going on with this car?' And they're like, 'It's not what's going on with the car. It's what you're doing wrong with the car.'

TOFM: Once you got a working handle on the car, was there another pang of nervousness come race day?

RW: Mentally, I felt really good about it. My kids were with me and actively involved, had me really jacked up. Everybody was smiling. I felt like I finally got the car where I wanted, got this brake stuff figured out. I got my seat fitting good. I've got all my environmental stuff inside the car, the mirrors and everything, settled. I really didn't have anything that was bothering me. I started 23rd. Once I got going and started picking 'em off, I went, 'Man, this is happening.' I worked my way up to 10th. When I got there, I was like, 'Man, gimme some cautions. I need a restart!' But the race was over pretty soon after that. I achieved my goal, which was to finish in the top 10. I felt like if I can get in the top 10, with all these hotshots, that's a pretty doggone good comeback.

TOFM: What was the moment in the race when you were like, 'Still got it?'

RW: I really got to feeling comfortable in the car and with my lap times at the very end. At one point I caught this guy, passed him and drove away. The crew chief comes across on the radio and says, 'You know that car you just passed? That was last year's champion.' That made me feel pretty good.

TOFM: What were some of your biggest takeaways from the event?

RW: It was a helluva experience. The thing that stuck in my mind the most was how nice everybody was. You think of Sebastian Vettel being there, you think of Kimi Räikkönen being there. You think of Mr Marchionne – Mr Big, I call him – being there. In the drivers' meeting before the race, everyone stands up and recognises me. I was really appreciative of their kindness. And then I got to meet a whole group of people that I'd never met before. A lot of motorheads, a lot of people who are very smart in business, entrepreneurs who learned a lot [about racing] and who love doing this. I was just like a big sponge, listening to everybody. When I left, it just made me wanna come back. ■

Left, Wallace was inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame in 2012, has twice been invited to the White House, has opened the New York Stock Exchange and had a cameo in the 1990 film *Days Of Thunder*