



Blind Spot
CHRIS FABRY



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Blind Spot

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Blind spot:

A part of an area that cannot be directly observed.

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING. A wonderful story about sports becomes even more meaningful when you understand what's gone on behind the scenes. A young rookie's first game makes a good story, but when it's Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier of the all-white Major League Baseball, it becomes historic. College all-stars banding together to form a hockey team is exciting, but when that team wins an Olympic gold medal in 1980, it's a dream come true.

These stories would command our attention even if we didn't know what went on in the lives of the participants. But when you understand more about the people, their struggles, the overwhelming obstacles they faced in their personal lives, then they become unforgettable.

Foreword

That's why I'm so excited about the RPM series. Rarely do you get to see the authentic beginnings of something so special. So pure. I've covered NASCAR a lot of years. I remember what happened that year like it was yesterday—how Jamie made a mark on the sport at such a young age and the tragedy that hit Tim. As an insider who loves to write about the sport and watch the action on the track, I think this is a one-of-a-kind memoir.

I wish I'd written this story, but I wasn't on the inside. I wish I'd lived half of the adventure, but I didn't. I wish I'd somehow seen what would happen before the curtain ever lifted on the lives of the people of Velocity, North Carolina. But who am I kidding? The story is right here for you. Every bit of it. And the best part is, there's nothing left out.

Read and enjoy their tale. And while you're at it, go and make some history of your own someday.

Calvin Shoverton

Motorsports Senior Reporter, Charlotte Times

THAT OCTOBER SUNDAY afternoon in Talladega, Alabama, changed Tim Carhardt's life forever. After applying the weather-strip adhesive to the lug nuts, securing and covering them, he had moved to the grandstands.

“Too many people in the pits makes a bad day,” his dad had said with the kind of frown that told Tim there was nothing his dad could do. People on the team were edgy. The owner paced from the pit area to the garage, as nervous as a slow mouse in a room full of fast cats.

Instead of chowing down on the food Tim's dad had cooked for the team, the crew picked at it with blank stares and none of the normal wisecracks or practical jokes. Everybody could sense something in the air. Whether it was good or bad, Tim couldn't tell, but you could cut the tension with a butter knife.

Prologue

Maybe it was the fact that the driver, Kenny Overton, had announced his retirement two weeks earlier, and everybody was wondering if another team would pick them up next year. Tim's dad had already found work. It was just a matter of finishing the season and heading north. A good driver who could cook *and* lift a heavy gas can was valuable.

Tim grabbed his dad's beat-up binoculars from the hauler and slipped the grandstand pass around his neck. He liked watching from the pits and helping his dad do the gas runs, but the stands would be okay. At least the crew chief didn't make him sit in the hauler through the race. He'd had that happen a time or two when he was younger.

He passed concessions, and his mouth watered at the smells of bratwurst and onions. Nothing better than a huge corn dog slathered with mustard. Or a cherry limeade to wash it down. But he had only a couple of dollars in his pocket. Maybe if Overton won today, his dad would give him the traveling cash he'd promised, but Tim wasn't holding his breath. Money was always tight.

Tim scanned the stands. The faces were a blur in the sunshine. Women with skimpy outfits, sunglasses, and big hair. Men yelling for their favorite drivers as motorcycles, flags, and celebrities passed by in the parade.

These people had no idea what it was really like to put cars on the track. They got to go home after the race and watch reruns on SPEED and maybe catch a football game. Put their feet up and eat pizza and enjoy their big-screen TV. Tim spent the hours after a race packing up and running around. After the all-day race preparations, bone tired and hungry, he'd spend the night trying to get comfortable in the passenger side of Charlie Hale's 18-wheeler, with the split in the seat and a beagle—Chester—that smelled like the south end of a northbound cow. Actually, he smelled more like a donkey. They'd drive all night to North Carolina and then unload and make preparations for the next race.

But Tim wouldn't trade being this close to the action, where people in the stands could only dream of being. Early one morning, as he was helping his dad set up for breakfast, two drivers in the top 10 in points had been talking about conditions at the track as Tim walked by with bags of ice for the cooler. One of the drivers asked Tim for a couple of sodas. Tim knew which ones to bring because these guys wouldn't be caught dead drinking anything but their sponsor's soda. The logos were all over their fire suits and the quarter panels of their cars. One driver gave him \$20 when he came back with the sodas. That was the kind of thing that could happen if you were in the right place at the right time.

But Tim wanted to do more than just fetch Coca-Cola. He wanted to drive. He dreamed of seeing himself in one of those suits someday, racing around the track, taking the checkered flag, shaking a bottle of champagne until it fizzed all over everybody. If that ever happened, the first people he would thank would be the guys who did all the grunt work. Guys like his dad. They never complained. Just did their jobs and made things comfy for everybody else.

The closest Tim had ever gotten to racing was riding go-karts at an amusement park. But he was sure if he ever got the chance, he could show people he was something special.

The people in the stands wore the numbers of their favorite drivers and cheered when they were introduced and walked across the makeshift stage, but they had no idea how important the team was. The crew. Without them, the driver was nothing. Of course, without the driver, the crew was nothing too. Tim felt like the fans talked about teamwork and gave credit to the crew chief or the spotter, but they didn't really know that everyone wearing the uniform had to work together like pistons in an engine. And everything had to fire just right, at the exact moment, in order to win.

Drivers and crew members lined up for the prayer and the national anthem. Then it was some

guy from Hollywood or Nashville or New York saying, “Gentlemen, start your engines!” He was probably another celebrity whose first trip to the track was today.

Switches flipped and engines roared. The track came to life. Tim turned on his scanner and locked in to the right channel. With his headphones in place, he could hear every word the spotter and crew chief said to the driver.

“Come on,” he whispered, focusing on Overton’s #12 car. “This is it. This is the big one.”

The crowd yelled as the cars picked up speed, the pace car veered off, and the green flag waved. The engines whined like a million screaming fans, and it overwhelmed him as always. It made him feel like he was caught up in something bigger than himself. Something huge and unbelievably earsplitting.

Tim was high in the stands, focused on #12 as the car hit the back straightaway. Already the cars had to be going somewhere between 190 and 200 mph.

Fans yelled their favorite drivers’ names as the train of cars roared by. *Ffft, ffft, ffft, ffft*. Hats flew off at the railing seconds later.

“Outside, at your shoulder,” the spotter said. “At your door. Clear. Clear.”

Tim looked at the stands again. The crowd moved like a living thing, an undulating ocean of people. It

was a multicolored sea of hats and shirts with every number of every driver from 30 years ago to the present. Some were faded. Some were right off the rack from the vendors outside. A face caught his eye. A woman moved in the stands, crossing a few rows in front of him, staring. Hat pulled low. Sunglasses. Red and black T-shirt. Brown hair flowing from under her hat and down her back.

Tim stood, his binoculars dropping to his chest. Was it the same shirt he'd seen in the pictures?

The woman disappeared into the tunnel below.

He wiped sweat from his brow. Should he follow her? She looked so much like her. Maybe it *was* her. But what would she be doing here? He shook it off as a coincidence, but the eerie feeling stayed.

Finally Tim couldn't stand it any longer, and he ran down the stairs and into the tunnel. It was a little cooler here. The smell of food was overpowering.

Women were lined up near the bathrooms and stood shifting from one foot to the other. Talking. Laughing. A few of them headed out to the green Porta Potties. Several men straggled out of the bathroom, hurrying back to their seats, getting their ear-plugs in place.

Tim looked both ways at streams of people. Hundreds of them. Some were latecomers. Others were just hot-dog hounds or beer guzzlers. He couldn't

shake the sight of the woman, and he started weaving in and out of the crowd. He neared another women's restroom and saw brown hair.

"Hey, watch it!" a burly guy shouted as Tim bumped him. He balanced two drinks and a mustard-covered pretzel.

"Sorry," Tim said, still moving.

He ran as the woman turned the corner and ascended the steps. A roar from the crowd. Something was happening.

The woman stopped at the top by a security guard. She clapped and hopped, her hat falling to the ground as a gust of wind caught it.

Tim picked it up and handed it to her. His heart fluttered as she turned and looked him full in the face.

"Thanks, young man." The woman was a lot older than his mother, with bronze skin—like a lizard's. She wore enough lipstick to paint Interstate 20 all the way to Atlanta. Her eyes crinkled, and she drawled, "Is there something wrong, sweetheart?"

Tim looked down. "No. I thought you were somebody else. Sorry."

A hollow feeling dogged him as he hiked back to his seat. He checked the lap count and the leader. They were 25 laps into the race, and so far there hadn't been a crash. Talladega was the longest track

for cup races, the scene of horrendous crashes. The fans around him seemed antsy, anticipating the big one, the worst crash of the day.

On the back turn a car spun out, sending a plume of white smoke in the air. The yellow flag came out.

“Crash in turn three. Back it down,” the spotter said. “I don’t see many pieces out there—just follow the car in front of you.”

Tim looked at the Overton pit crew as they sprang to life. Another lap behind the pace car and the race for the pits would be on.

Tim found his dad in the flurry of activity among the red suits. They were the second stall coming off the track—a difficult position. The fireman was just behind the wall with an extinguisher nearby. The race officials were there too, ready to eye the stop.

Tim clicked the black button on his watch until he came to the 00:00 on his stopwatch. Car #12 veered onto pit road and screeched to a halt, three tires inside the box.

“That counts,” Tim whispered, watching the official. “Come on, guys.”

The crew was over the wall before the car stopped, and Tim pushed the button. Precious seconds ticked by as Tim’s father moved into position. He was the catch can man.

The rear tires were off. They were having a good stop. The jackman let the car down and raced around the front, carrying the jack as if it weighed nothing, which Tim knew wasn't true. He had lifted the thing with one hand—or at least tried to.

:09

They might have him out in :13, a serious pit stop!

The crowd gasped and Tim looked up, away from the binoculars. Another car barreling toward pit road had lost control, its back end swerving. It was coming too fast to stop, too fast to gain control. Then came a sickening crunch and people scurrying. Smoke and debris.

Tim's heart beat wildly as he stood, straining to see what had happened. An ambulance parked at the other end of the track pulled out and made the long trip around.

"Did somebody get hit?" Tim said to a guy beside him.

"I didn't see it," the man said. "My wife said she thought there was somebody caught between the two cars."

He ran up the grandstand and sprinted for the path that led him to the infield. He knew he couldn't get back inside, but he had to do something. His headset crackled, and he heard the spotter cutting

in and out, saying #12 was out of the race and so was the other car, #14. Were the drivers hurt? someone on the crew?

The ambulance raced toward the track hospital as Tim reached the security guards.

“Timmy!” someone called. It was Charlie Hale, another member of the Overton crew, his face ashen, eyes red. “You can’t go back there, son.”

“Who was it?” Tim said. “I saw that car come flying in there out of control.”

“You haven’t heard?” Charlie’s chin puckered and he looked away. “It was a mess all right.”

When the man shoved his hands into his back pockets, Tim knew. “How bad is he?”

“Aw, Timmy,” was all Charlie could say. He put an arm around Tim and pulled him close. “I’m real sorry.”

“He’s at the hospital, right? I mean, they’ll be able to help him there.”

Charlie didn’t answer.

The rotors turned on the medevac helicopter. Two men with security badges came toward them. “Are you Tim Carhardt?” one of them said.

The men stood on either side of him, holding him up as if he was going to collapse. A police car was waiting for him in the parking lot, its lights flashing. The chopper took off, and Tim got in the cruiser.

As they pulled away, a rumble of engines sounded as the green flag came out. The race was under way again.

THE SNOW BOLL IS HELD mid-January each year near Enterprise, Alabama. The title comes from a statue in the middle of the town—a white-gowned lady holds a black bug over her head, and a fountain around her sprays water. The bug is a boll weevil, and the town pays tribute to the pesky critter that destroyed cotton crops in the early 1900s. The boll weevil forced farmers to turn to other crops, like peanuts. At the bottom of the statue is a plaque that reads, “In profound appreciation of the Boll Weevil and what it has done as the Herald of Prosperity.”

Every year an ice sculpture of a boll weevil is made, and a snow machine sprays slush on the grandstands at the “Coffee County Speedway,” a three-quarter-mile racetrack. Young and old travel to the race on foot and tractors, and there’s even a school bus

Chapter 1

The Snow Boll

competition. But the premier event is the Saturday night Legends race called the Snow Boll. Cars from 25 states qualify in the afternoon, and the excitement builds to a crescendo as the sun goes down.

Everyone's favorite driver is a local 63-year-old furniture salesman who does TV commercials in his racing suit and helmet, sitting on one of his patented "comfortable recliners." However most of the entrants are younger.

This year the pole-position and second-place drivers were kids of current NASCAR drivers Butch Devalon and Dale Maxwell, and it was clear that the rivalry of the fathers had been visited on their offspring.

After the National Anthem, sung by the First Baptist Church choir, the cars revved their engines, and the race began. Some of the drivers, like the furniture salesman, were content to stay in the back of the pack, but it was obvious from the moment the green flag waved that there were two who were serious about winning the Boll.

Car #13, Chad Devalon, zoomed around the track, a good four car lengths ahead of #76, Jamie Maxwell. The two had led every lap of the race.

A man in black jeans with a black jacket and #13 on both shoulders hooted, "You got it, Chad! Pour it on, buddy!"

A female fan approached with a folded T-shirt and a Sharpie.

“Not now, darlin’; I’m watchin’ my son,” the man said. Then he yelled, “Take it to ’em, Chad!”

Each time he yelled, the people around him inched away. The tension seemed to float through this roped-off section like bad exhaust through a garage. He pumped a fist in the air and rattled the chain-link fence with the other hand.

Several rows away, studying the race like a hawk watches a field for movement, a woman with long red hair focused on #76. Anyone who knew racing could tell she was studying the line of the car as it settled into the black groove of the track—the best path for the fastest speed. As the car rounded the far turn, the woman’s body swayed, as if a part of her were in the car. “Come on, Jamie,” she whispered through clenched teeth.

Beside the woman was a small boy with darker skin than hers, brown eyes as big as saucers, and a NASCAR hat pulled low. He rolled his eyes and frowned as Butch Devalon yelled again. The boy looked up at the man next to him, who was scrolling through messages on a cell phone. “Which is worse, Dad? Driving against him or sitting near him during a race?”

The man smiled. He had an understated *MM* on his hat and a tanned, weathered face. “Not sure. Both are pretty frustrating.”

“Punch it, Chad!” Butch Devalon hollered. “Take it!”

The nearest car to the two leaders was #88, driven by a local kid who barely fit into the car. His helmet looked tight, pushing his cheeks out like a chipmunk’s with a full winter’s worth of stored nuts.

The announcer’s voice blared over the loud-speaker. “Ten laps to go and Chad Devalon has a slim lead over Jamie Maxwell.”

Cheers went up around the stands as the names were called. These two were only in high school, and they already had a following.

The announcer ran through the rest of the field, with the furniture salesman getting the biggest applause.

“Here comes Jamie,” Kellen said to his dad.

Jamie’s dad looked up from his phone to the first turn, where #76 moved to the inside and shot past #13. He smiled and whistled as the crowd responded.

“Come on, Chad!” Butch Devalon shouted. “Show us what you can do!”

The smells of engine oil, gasoline, and exhaust hung in the air, mixed with corn dog batter and chicken. The moon rose over the horizon like a white face looking down on the race from the best seat in the sky.

The #76 driver wore a yellow fire suit a couple

of sizes too big and an orange helmet marked and scarred from use, as if both were hand-me-downs. In car #13, the driver wore a black helmet that reflected the track lights like a shiny mirror.

With six laps to go, the #13 car bumped the leader in turn two, but #76 gained control and, it seemed, more speed and shot into the straightaway confident.

Butch Devalon cursed and didn't seem to notice the angry stares around him.

"Jamie's gonna do it, Dad!" Kellen said.

Jamie's mom bounced on her seat, balling her fists and smacking the fence just in front of her. "Come on, Jamie!"

The two cars ran inches apart, screaming around the turns, and the crowd roared. The white flag came out as they approached the start/finish line.

People stood and moved closer to the fence, grabbing on, straining to see, whooping and yelling and pumping their fists.

"Looks like he's gaining ground," Jamie's dad muttered to Kellen.

Butch Devalon shook the fence and yelled, "You got it! Now take it, Chad!"

The cars ran like mirror images around the first two turns. In the backstretch, #13 went low and tried to pull even, but #76 followed down, blocking the

move. Into turn three, #76 followed the groove perfectly, accelerating into turn four and shooting out like a bullet.

It looked like #76 had a lock on the finish line until #13 also shot forward and low, barely pulling up enough to reach the back end of #76, then swerving right, clipping the back of #76 and sending the car into a slow spin. White smoke rose from the tires, and #13 swerved left and crossed the finish line as the checkered flag flew.

The #76 car spun completely around and veered onto the infield, creating brown marks in the grass. When it came to a stop, the driver slammed the steering wheel with both fists and spun the tires.

The crowd groaned, stunned by the move, but Butch Devalon pumped his fist in the air and cheered. He looked down at Jamie's family and flashed his patented smirk as #13 took a victory lap, then spun in the infield grass near where #76 had stopped.

"That's dirty racing," someone said behind Jamie's mom.

"Just like his daddy," another said.

"Uh-oh," a man said, pointing. "Looks like there's gonna be a fight!"

The #76 driver had almost climbed out of the car and was pointing at the #13 driver. Chad Devalon just waved at the crowd, half of them booing him,

and took off his black helmet. When he saw the other driver coming, he put the helmet under his arm and gave a smirk frighteningly similar to the one his dad had given the family.

“What’d you say?” Chad said, one arm out, as innocent as a baby. He was taller than the approaching driver but not by much.

The orange helmet came off and a ponytail fell. “You did that on purpose and you know it!” Jamie Maxwell yelled.

“Hey, it’s just one of those racing things,” Chad said, moving back toward his car. “If you can’t take the heat, don’t get on the track.”

“I *can* stand the heat. I can’t stand a *cheat*.”

Chad shook his head. “Face it, Maxwell. You’re just like your old man. You don’t have what it takes to be out here.”

By now the section for fans had opened, and people poured onto the track, led by Butch Devalon. “Better get her away from my son, Maxwell. Hate to see that pretty little girl of yours get a black eye.”

“You should teach your son not to drive dirty!” the boy yelled back.

“Kellen, that’s enough,” Jamie’s mother said. She called her daughter over to them.

Jamie was near tears, but she steeled her face and fought them back. “I can’t believe he did that.”

Jamie's dad patted her shoulder and walked with her, inspecting the damage to the car. "You gotta learn to just walk away. You can't waste your rep on a guy like that."

"Hey, Maxwell," Butch Devalon called. He was signing T-shirts and leaning against his son's car. "You should have her stop driving and start babysitting. You could use the sponsorship."

"See what I mean?" Jamie said. "It's hard not responding to that."

Jamie's father wiped his forehead and knelt on the ground by the car's mangled rear end. He nodded to the fans streaming onto the infield. "You see all those people? You never know when one of them will turn out to be a scout. And one slipup, one time that you let your emotions get the best of you, and you can bet somebody'll get it on video, and then it's all over."

"His reputation doesn't seem to be bothering him," Jamie said, nodding toward Butch Devalon.

"It's gonna catch up with him one of these days," Jamie's dad said. Several girls were running toward Jamie's car. "Now shake it off and go say hi to your fans."

Jamie took a deep breath and blew it out.

The girls held out scraps of paper, and one of them said, "I just know we're gonna see you racing someday in NASCAR."

“I hope so,” Jamie said.

Butch Devalon walked by and the girls swooned, pushing their paper in his direction. He ignored them and looked right at Jamie. “Not half bad for a girl,” he said. “Now you gotta learn how to finish.” He faced Jamie’s dad. “But you’ll have to get a new teacher if you want to do that.”

Jamie wanted to turn back and tell him off, but she couldn’t think of anything to say. Tomorrow she would. Some snappy comeback that would put the guy in his place. But nothing came now. She was too mad about what had been taken away.



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