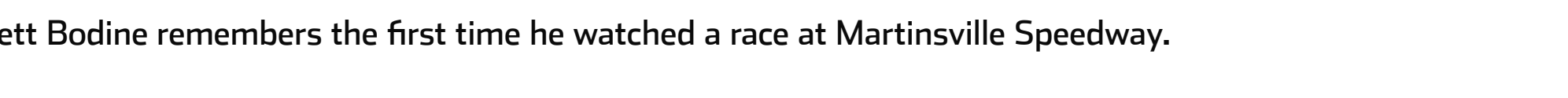




The field of NASCAR Modified stock cars gets set for the start of a race at Martinsville Speedway in the early 1970s. (ISC Images via Getty Images)

## Modifieds bring history back with return to Martinsville



By Paul Lambert | NASCAR.com | March 30, 2021 at 11:03 AM

Brett Bodine remembers the first time he watched a race at Martinsville Speedway.

The Chemung, New York, driver had flown down in a single-engine plane to watch older brother Geoff compete.

His first impression when he walked into the property?

"I was amazed. I had never seen such a pristine piece of property at a race track," Brett Bodine says. "Everything about that track was perfect. It was painted perfectly. The shape of the track, it was a perfect layout of a half-mile race track.

"I said, 'This is heaven. This is a racetrack heaven.'"

Not only was the track beautiful to look at, it raced well, too. It was ideally suited for the Modifieds. Almost as it if had been tailor-made for the division. It's fitting then, that the NASCAR Whelen Modified Tour's return to the half-mile flat Virginia oval on Thursday, April 8, for the Virginia Is For Racing Lovers 200 will represent far more than the start of the season.

It's a return to a tradition that dates back to the founding days of NASCAR.

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### A list of legends

The Modifieds ran the first race held at Martinsville, back on Independence Day of 1948, won by Fonyt Flock on dirt.

The list of winners at Martinsville is a who's-who of Modified legends.

Ray Hendrick and Bugsy Stevens dominated when the Modifieds returned in 1966. Hendrick won nine times from 1966 to 1975, while Stevens won six times from 1967 to 1977. Soon, however, came the era of Richie Evans, who won nine times at the track during his illustrious career.

The 90s saw more parity. Mike Stefanik, Jeff Fuller and Reggie Ruggiero each won three times that decade.

Current Cup Series driver and 2013 Tour champion Ryan Preece got his first victory at the track in 2009. The last driver to win a Modified race at Martinsville was Bobby Santos during his 2010 championship season.

Martinsville is a place where short-track heroes are made. The legend of Martinsville, however, has become mythical.



After winning their respective races in the Cardinal 500 Classic at Martinsville Speedway on Oct. 27, 1974, Ron Bouchard (L) and Ray Hendrick (R) pose with one of the grandfather clocks that are awarded to the victors. Bouchard won the NASCAR Modified portion of the event, while Hendrick took home the win in the NASCAR Late Model Sportsman race. (ISC Images Archives via Getty Images)

### 'This is a race track heaven'

Brett Bodine's first impressions were validated when he got behind the wheel in a Modified.

For Brett Bodine, success at Martinsville requires all three of the elements that make racing a challenge: a lot of horsepower, brake management and two different sets of corners.

Bodine eventually went on to win at North Carolina's North Wilkesboro Speedway in the NASCAR Cup Series, but he still holds his grandfather clocks from Martinsville as the ultimate prizes.

"That's the ultimate trophy in NASCAR racing," Bodine says. "You talk to anybody from Cup to Xfinity to Trucks to Modifieds, having one of those in your possession means everything. When you grew up as a kid in the Modified series, to win at the top level of it, that is huge."

Almost 75 years later, the Modifieds still deliver on the action as they did in the 1960s and 1970s. It's the same flat half-mile paperclip. Cars race largely the same way around Martinsville now as they did 30 or 40 years ago. It's more of a surprise when a race *doesn't* end in fireworks.

Jeff Fuller, the 1992 Tour champion and a four-time Martinsville winner, saw that same challenge.

"Be mindful of your tires," Fuller says. "Say you're starting 10th. Why do you want to be in first on lap 30? It's all about what you're going to have coming to the checkered flag."

**PHOTO GALLERY: Martinsville Modifieds: The Early Years**

### The meaning of Modifieds at Martinsville

Martinsville Speedway President Clay Campbell grew up watching Modifieds slug it out at Martinsville. Ever since he was a boy, Campbell has always cherished ground-pounder action.

"They are real race cars," he says. "The big tires, the sound and everything like that. A lot of those guys were heroes of mine because they were here twice a year."

Through the 1980s, Martinsville was far and away the premier stop for Modified racing. Five times it has served as the season finale for the Whelen Modified Tour.

"You went down there, and for that week, a bunch of part-time racers gathered down at that facility, and you felt like a professional," Brett Bodine says. "You were treated like a professional."

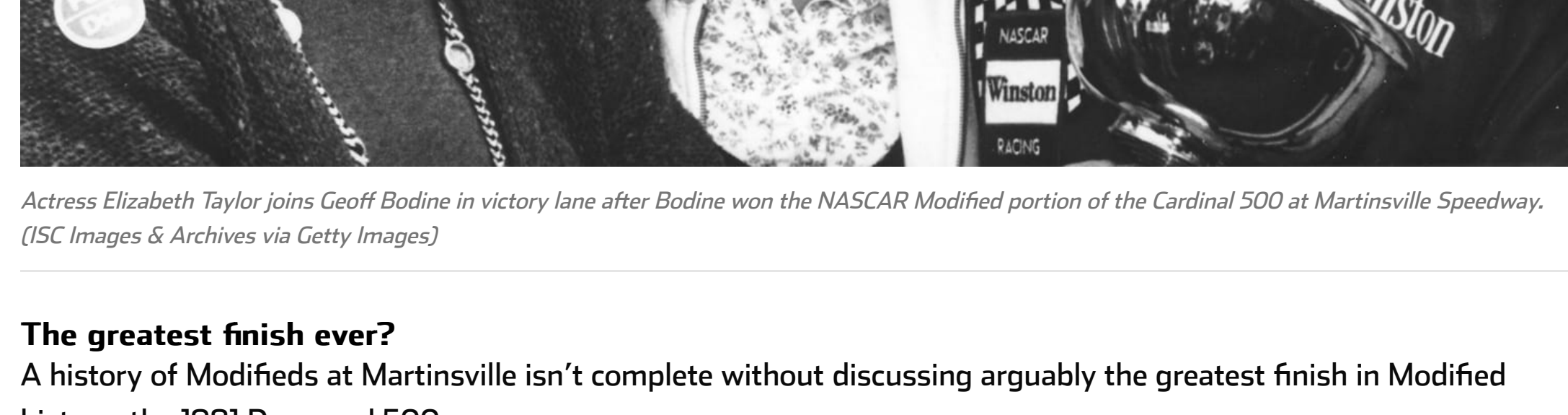
"It was their Daytona 500," said Campbell.

Stars from outside the racing world showed up, too.

In 1978, Elizabeth Taylor went with then-husband John Warner to the track for the Cardinal 500. Warner was campaigning for a U.S. Senate seat in Virginia at the time. While Warner was supposed to stay for only part of the race, Taylor wanted to watch it all. Geoff Bodine won, and Taylor was sent to Victory Lane to present him with the winner's trophy.

During the presentation, Taylor gave Geoff Bodine a kiss.

"She kissed me," he says. "My wife says Elizabeth kissed a lot of guys. But I'm one of them guys."



Actress Elizabeth Taylor joins Geoff Bodine in victory lane after Bodine won the NASCAR Modified portion of the Cardinal 500 at Martinsville Speedway. (ISC Images & Archives via Getty Images)

### The greatest finish ever?

A history of Modifieds at Martinsville isn't complete without discussing arguably the greatest finish in Modified history: the 1981 Dogwood 500.

The race came down between two of the best: Richie Evans and Geoff Bodine.

Geoff Bodine was trying to make history as the first driver to win both the 250-lap Late Model feature and the 250-lap Modified feature in the same day. He had dominated the race, but in the closing laps, Evans was within striking distance. He bumped Bodine out of the way and took the lead at the white flag. Bodine, however, wasn't finished.

"I got him sideways off of 4," Geoff Bodine says. "I should've kept spinning him out, but I let him go. That was my mistake. I was too nice a guy. I didn't want to wreck him, I just wanted to beat him."

Evans' car jumped in the air and rode the catchfence to the checkered flag. The last lap was the only lap Evans led all day.

"Richie and I both handled it good," Geoff Bodine says. "We looked at each other. Everyone thought we were gonna run over and fight each other, but we didn't fight. We just looked. Even though it happened, we respected each other. It was racing. Good hard racing. I bumped him, and he ended up winning."

Campbell calls it the greatest finish in the history of the track.

"All the emergency personnel went up to him when everything came to a halt, and [Evans] asked 'Did I win it?'"

"They looked at his tach and he never came off the throttle," Campbell says. "We've got a picture of the flagman. He was waving the checkered flag the whole time, but he had his arm up in front of his head like he was trying to block something from coming across."



On the final official results chart for the modified division Dogwood 500, the first two finishers were ironically listed as "wrecked." Richie Evans (No. 61) wrecked ahead of rival Geoff Bodine, and was credited with the victory. (ISC Archives/CQ-Roll Call Group via Getty Images)

### The resurrection of a tradition

After an 11-year absence, the Modifieds will return to Martinsville a week from Thursday.

"I tell people time and time again, there's two questions I'd always receive," Campbell says. "One was 'when are you going to put up lights?' Well, we've done that, so I don't get that question now. The second question: 'When are you bringing the Modifieds back?' Check the box on that one.

"If I have anything to do with it, they're here to stay."

With racing being such a family sport, Brett Bodine plans on attending this year with his family.

"I plan on taking my kids up there to watch it," Brett Bodine said. "Only on YouTube videos can they watch me race in Modifieds.

"This is one I want to be in-person to watch, because it means so much to me and my family."



NASCAR Hall of Famer Mike Stefanik won the NASCAR Whelen Modified/Whelen Southern Modified race at Martinsville Speedway in 2009. He holds the trophy with the late Phil Kurze (left) of Whelen Engineering and Martinsville Speedway's Clay Campbell (right). (Tom Whitmore/NASCAR via Getty Images)

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### Manufacturers make strides with Next Gen test at Martinsville

Chevrolet, Ford and Toyota each brought prototypes of their Next Gen models for the 2022 Cup Series to the track for the first time this week.

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