

A SHOUT OUT TO ONE OF TALLADEGA'S OWN

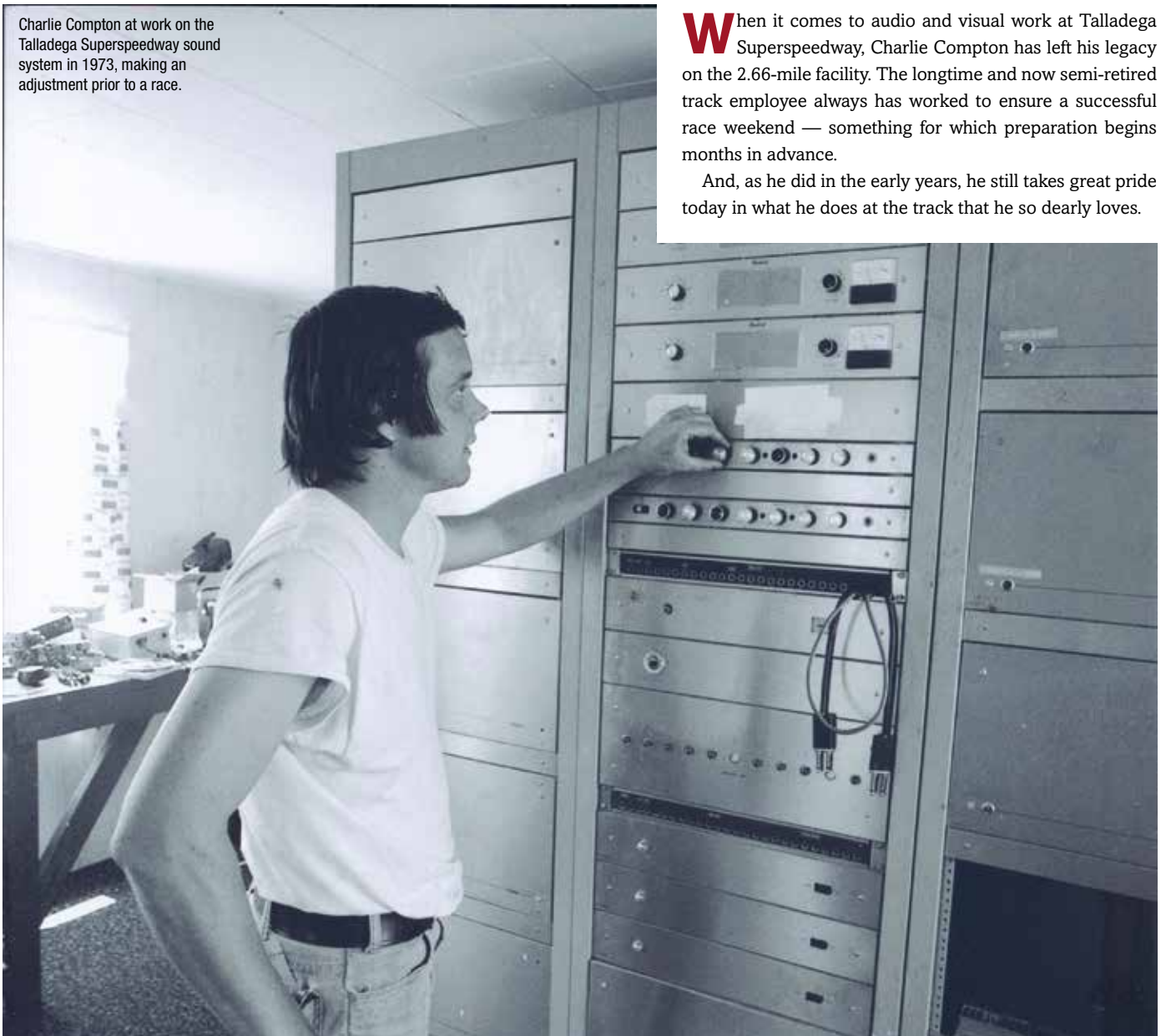
'ELECTRONICS GROUP' GURU CHARLIE COMPTON A
PIONEER AT NASCAR'S BIGGEST AND BADDEST TRACK

PHOTOS TALLADEGA SUPERSPEEDWAY

Charlie Compton at work on the Talladega Superspeedway sound system in 1973, making an adjustment prior to a race.

When it comes to audio and visual work at Talladega Superspeedway, Charlie Compton has left his legacy on the 2.66-mile facility. The longtime and now semi-retired track employee always has worked to ensure a successful race weekend — something for which preparation begins months in advance.

And, as he did in the early years, he still takes great pride today in what he does at the track that he so dearly loves.



While Charlie Compton oversaw the entire audio and visual operation at Talladega, co-worker John Zimmerman served as a scoreboard operator in 1977.

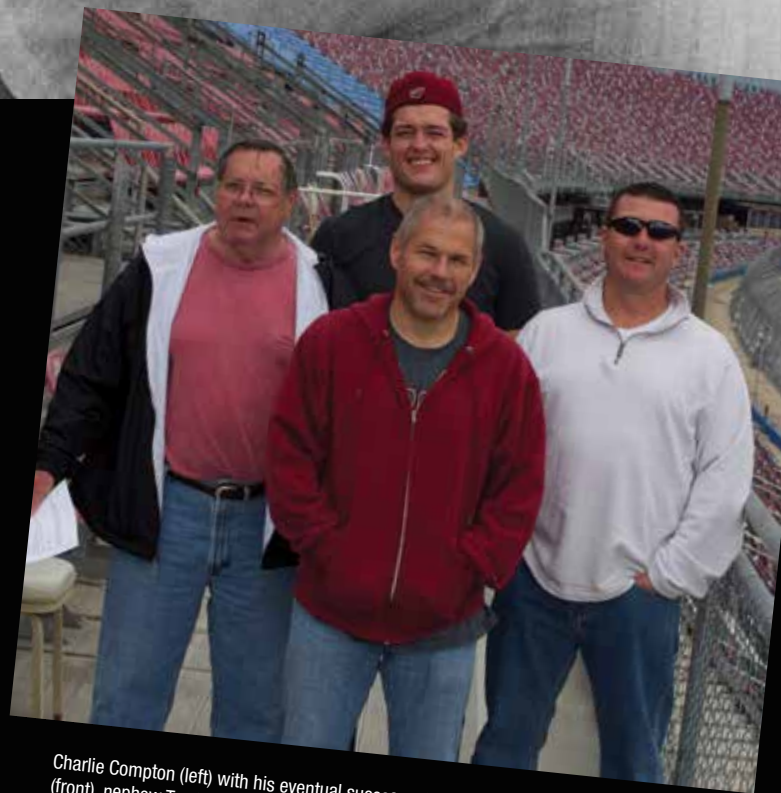


During the last five decades, Compton has worked under four different track presidents as well as the man who built the place, NASCAR founder William H. G. “Big Bill” France. For each, he has showcased the ultimate professionalism and has gone above and beyond to make sure fans and competitors have the best possible experience at Talladega Superspeedway.


Compton’s first NASCAR event weekend at then-named Alabama International Motor Speedway was in April 1971, less than a year and a half after the track’s September 1969 opening. He has not missed an event since.

A self-employed communications engineer in nearby Anniston, Alabama, Compton began by working on two-way radios for both the police and sheriff’s departments, as well as NASCAR. He worked a small number of races alone before being given bigger responsibilities, such as the sound system, scoreboards, design and installation of the cable TV system, wiring, and all electronic-related needs.

“I repaired the two-way radios, sound systems, scoreboards and fixed and repaired anything and everything brought to us by the track, race teams, drivers and NASCAR,” said Compton, now 74. “Purchasing new was mostly out of the question. We fixed it or did without. If someone had an item at home or at their shop which was needed, it got brought to the track. For this reason, we were probably better known just as the ‘Electronics Group.’”



Charlie Compton (left) with his eventual successor David Dean (front), nephew Travis Hoffman (back) and race-week assistant George Stinson (right) in 2008.



This old electronic scoreboard sat in Talladega's infield road course during the 1970s.

Beginning in 1973, Compton took over the complete sound-system operations and maintenance. At the time, Talladega was in dire need of new speakers on both the frontstretch and backstretch. Leave it to Compton to come up with a solution. He went to Talladega's sister track — Daytona International Speedway — and removed all the speakers from its backstretch (DIS had purchased new speakers).

"I came back with a pickup truck loaded with used and salt-corroded speakers," he said. "Heck, we used the trip to Daytona Beach as a mini-vacation for my family (wife Carol and sons Chuck and Chris). We rebuilt, refinished and tested all of those speakers, returning them to factory specifications, and received excellent service from them until the entire speaker system was replaced in 2009, which was the only major, one-time upgrade of the sound system in the history of the track.

"There is no telling how many miles of wiring for the PA system (plus wiring for the live network television and radio productions) we have underground and above ground at this place after all these years."

In 1974, Compton added another job responsibility: scoreboards. For the first year of the track, scoreboards were manual. Workers stood on a catwalk to update them, walking along the bottom edge of the display and changing the top-five positions by physically changing the numbers held by hooks.

In 1974, new electronic boards were installed. For race weekend help, Compton used temporary workers and gave them credentials for their work, ensuring that he spent minimal money on labor.

"We were all trying to operate profitably, and we were a close-knit family and would help each other without specifically being asked to do so," Compton said. "I always thought that a company takes on the personality of its leadership and that certainly was the case here at Talladega. It all started with Bill France Sr. He said to do what is 'for the betterment of the customer.'"

Compton's first interaction with France came unexpectedly. While sitting on the floor in the middle

of a pile of twisted microphone cables that had not been properly put away, the tall shadow of a man with a booming voice entered the doorway. It was France.

"Son ... all I want to know is ... are you gaining on it?" Compton said of what France asked him. "I was told by more than one person that if Mr. France called you 'son,' it meant he liked you. He called me 'son' up until his last trip to Talladega. There is no way anyone could be around him without coming away with a good lesson of just doing things right and treating people fair. I might not have been the best student, but I tried to be."

In 1986, Compton met the man he eventually chose to take over his position nearly 30 years later — David Dean.

"When I first graduated college, I worked at an avionics company that specialized in repairing electronics on F-16s for the Air Force," Dean said. "I told him I'd be glad to come out and help him at the track. We got to be such good friends, and in 1995, he invited me out to help him."

One of Dean's first major duties was working on televisions (for suites, the media center, timing and scoring and other locations.), before being mentored by Compton on the audio system.

"That was really when he took me under his wing," Dean said. "Everything that he did from that point forward, I was part of. Since then, it's been just like a father-son relationship."

In 2013, Compton "semi-retired" from his duties at the track, handing the reins over to Dean, who now is in charge of all race-week electronic and audio-visual needs.

"We come out to the track in the off-season and start our preparations for race weekend, ensuring that it runs smoothly," Dean said. "If something comes up during the races, we troubleshoot and fix it. All of my guys are trained to fix things in-house. I learned that attitude from Charlie."

While he is semi-retired, Compton still comes to the track weeks, sometimes months, in advance to assist Dean in making engineering changes and improvements.

“He is a major part of what we do, and it means a lot,” Dean said. “I just tell him it’s me who’s going to sink or swim now. He is always thinking how to make things better and I’ve tried to adapt that same mindset. There are not enough words to say what Charlie means to this track.”

When Compton thinks about why he has stayed around the sport for so long, he remembers a quote from his good friend, the late Barney Hall, who was the voice of the Motor Racing Network for many years (and for whom the MRN Booth at Talladega is named).

“It’s not the work and certainly not the money, but it’s the people,” Compton said.

So, when fans listen to the Motor Racing Network and PA announcers on the 600 grandstand and infield speakers this weekend, or glance at the 200-plus televisions throughout the property — or take a look at the 7,440-light bulb scoring tower managed by Dean’s crew, or anything electronic — they can think about and thank Talladega’s good friend Charlie Compton. ◀◀



Charlie Compton in the PA Booth, where he has spent countless hours ensuring the highest-quality sound reaches Talladega Superspeedway fans from the property’s 600 speakers.



Charlie Compton in action managing race-day electronic systems during the early part of his career.