

Meet J. Harold Seagle.

Perhaps the least risk averse senior citizen we have ever met.

Article by Arthur Treff



Risks Rewarded

Rarely does one receive two business cards from someone, at the same time. Especially when one says Attorney At Law, and the other “Adrenaline Junkie.”

The young man standing near Hyde Park looks puzzled. He’s clean cut. Dressed in a dark business suit he stands out amidst the tie-dyed and beaded hippies. Through their rose-colored granny glasses they spot the handsome Marion, NC native, flash him the peace sign and say, “Hey man, do you need help?”

Harold Seagle joined the Navy in 1965, right after high school. It was the Vietnam era, the draft was in full swing and everyone from town was going to war, so he decided to join them. Besides, military service offered country boys an opportunity to see the world in a different way.

Rather than feeling seasick aboard a ship bound for Southeast Asia, Harold finds himself lost in the London of 1966.

“Yeah, thanks, can you direct me to the US Consulate?” he answers.

“Where’s that, man...?” asks the blonde woman in a floppy hat.

“Ah...the US Embassy?”

“Oh man, that’s far out... you turned the wrong way on Grosvenor Square!”

He’s a kid from McDowell County who clearly feels like he has landed on another planet. Harold is an enlisted man, upon whom good fortune has shone its brilliant light. He has to report for duty at his new post: communications specialist on staff for the Commander in Chief of US Naval forces in Europe...being first in his class at the Naval electronics school has paid off in spades.

This is a rare opportunity. His commanding officer is the four-star Admiral responsible for all the Naval operations in Europe. Harold and his colleagues are responsible for all of the Admiral’s communications. It’s slightly overwhelming but extremely exciting.

The content of all of these messages has to be evaluated by a team of lawyers, which was to be Harold’s introduction to the law.

“Growing up in McDowell County, I had never been exposed to a city the size of London, and I certainly didn’t have the opportunity to meet any lawyers,” says Harold. “I found them fascinating right away. Their

job was to analyze what the admiral was saying in his communications and the ramifications of these words. I was captivated. To me, being a lawyer seemed like a fascinating way to make a living.”

The staff job required him to maintain a low profile, so business clothes were worn in place of uniforms, and he was left to find his own flat in the city. His exposure to the cosmopolitan city of London introduced Harold to more than the Navy and the rule of law.

On weekend sight-seeing jaunts, he discovered Brands Hatch, a prominent British motorsport racetrack. Here, he watched sports car and motorcycle class racing. The speed, the noise, and the competitive

spirit he witnessed awakened an untouched part of his psyche. Harold liked this sport.

When his commitment to the Navy was over, Harold was a married man with a newborn son. He steered the family back to his native NC to attend college. Attaining Phi Beta Kappa in undergraduate studies at UNC paved the way for acceptance into UNC law school at Chapel Hill.

While studying the law, it didn’t take him long to realize that he wanted

to be a trial lawyer: he liked the challenge, and he believed that his competitive nature would serve him well in a courtroom.

Once he had passed the bar, Harold’s near-perfect scores in law school attracted the attention of a well-known general practice litigation firm in Wilmington, NC, where he was exposed to the full spectrum of trial cases. This was to be a smart move, for once a lawyer has success in a few cases of the same type, he begins to specialize and his career is underway.

He tried many cases but gravitated toward environmental lawsuits. Harold liked being able to help people whose lives had been adversely affected by pollution, so he began to specialize in this arena.

In the mid 1990’s Harold and his team were working on an environmental suit brought against a corporation for chemical

contamination of well water for an entire community in NC. Harold was representing 178 individuals, which created its own challenges just in communication with the clients.

A California attorney who was trying a similar environmental suit contacted Harold, seeking his advice in managing a similarly large client base. His name was Ed Masury and his assistant's name was Erin Brockovich (...yes, that Erin Brockovich). They were trying what was to become a landmark case against Pacific Gas & Electric.

Harold collaborated with Masury's team, and together they forged the legal boundaries for a communication system, which would enable each firm to address the needs of a large client population.

Ed and Erin settled their case, but Harold's battle lasted three years culminating in a jury trial, which spanned five agonizing weeks. In the end, his team won and recovered enough money for the community to get the medical care and help they needed.

News of his success spread, so Harold's team was invited to work on a similar environmental case for the city of Santa Monica, CA. Working on the West coast would turn out to be a great opportunity for the NC team.

While preparing the Santa Monica lawsuit, the trial team was contacted by a 20,000 member environmental group called Citizens for a Better Environment. CBE wanted them to represent the citizens of the entire state in an effort to force the oil companies to clean up contaminated ground water in California.

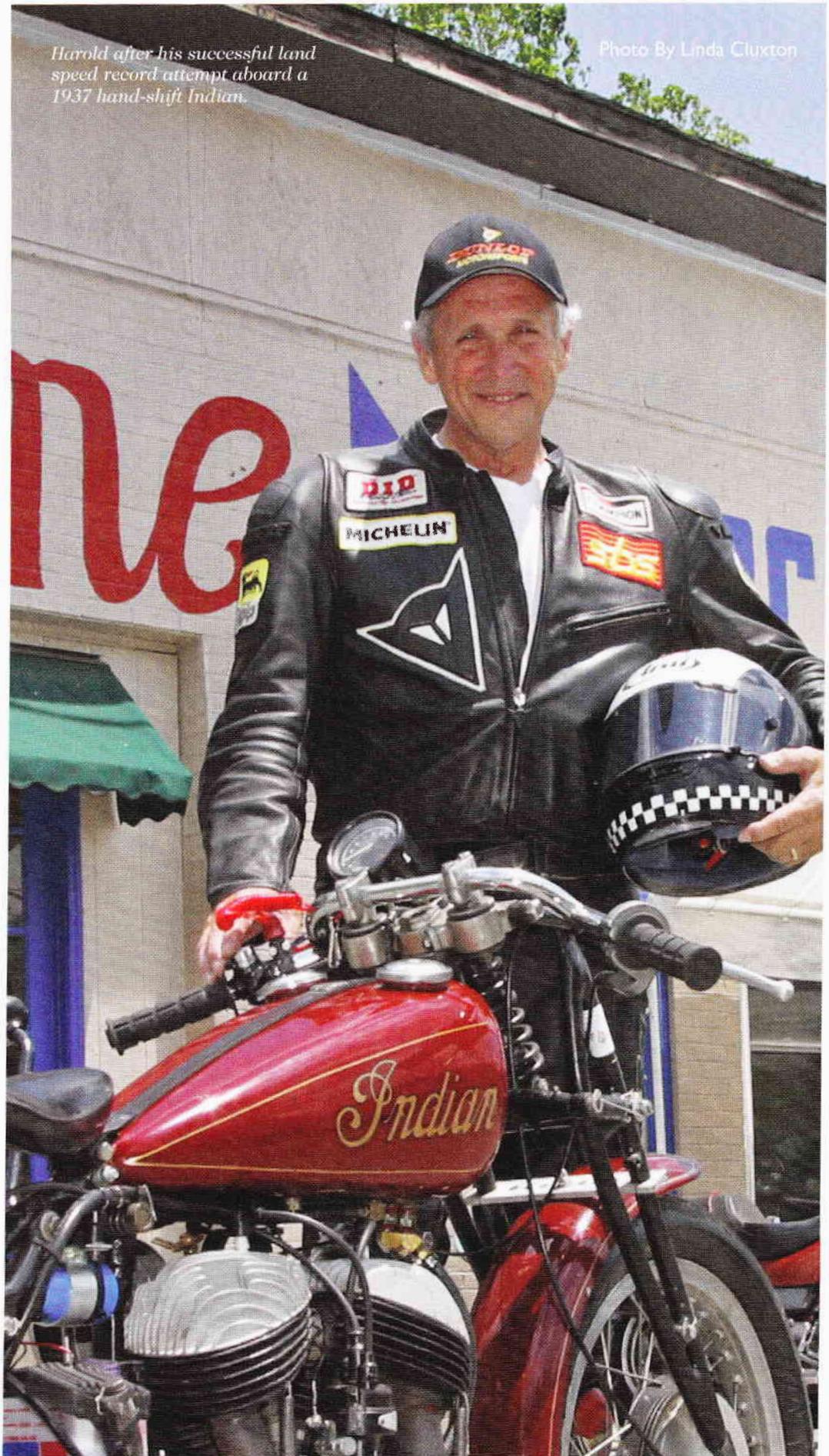
This opportunity was to become their largest challenge yet. The small team would be arguing against the best lawyers that oil money can buy...and not just one corporation, but teams of attorneys from all of the oil companies that did business in California! Harold needed an attorney in California, so he recruited Erin Brockovich and Ed Masury to help on the CBE suit.

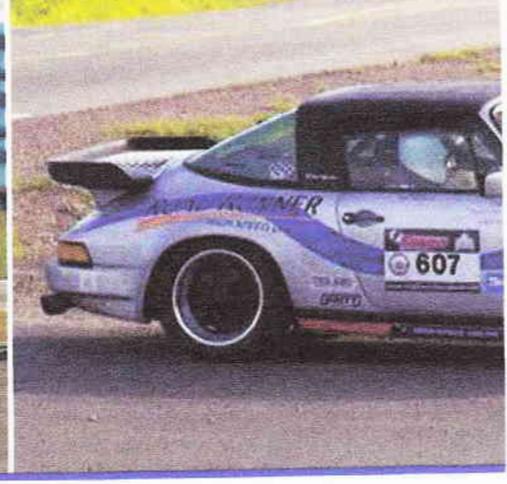
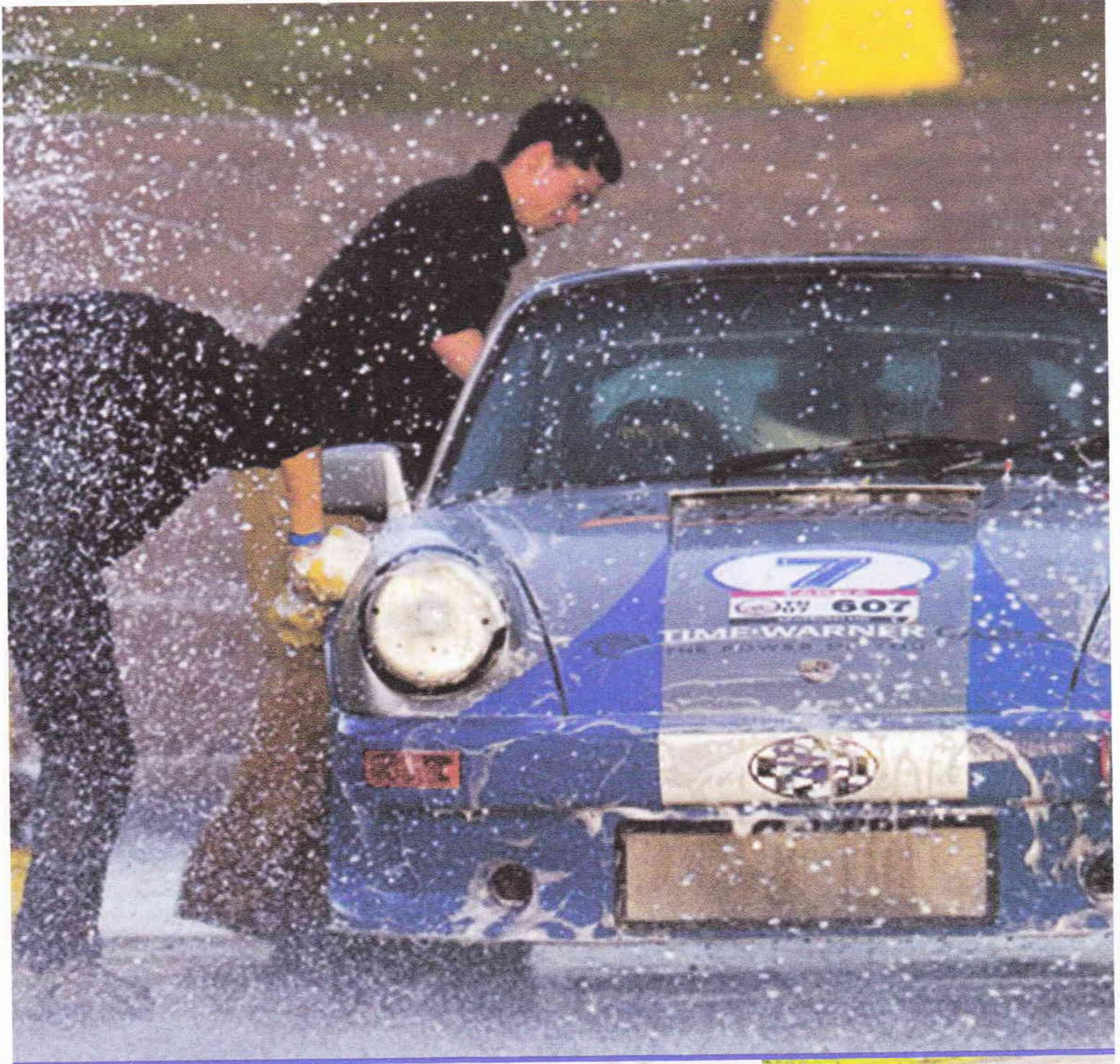
Harold's team needed an edge, and it wasn't going to come in the form of more money or more attorneys. They decided to argue the case on the basis of unfair business practices, not environmental law.

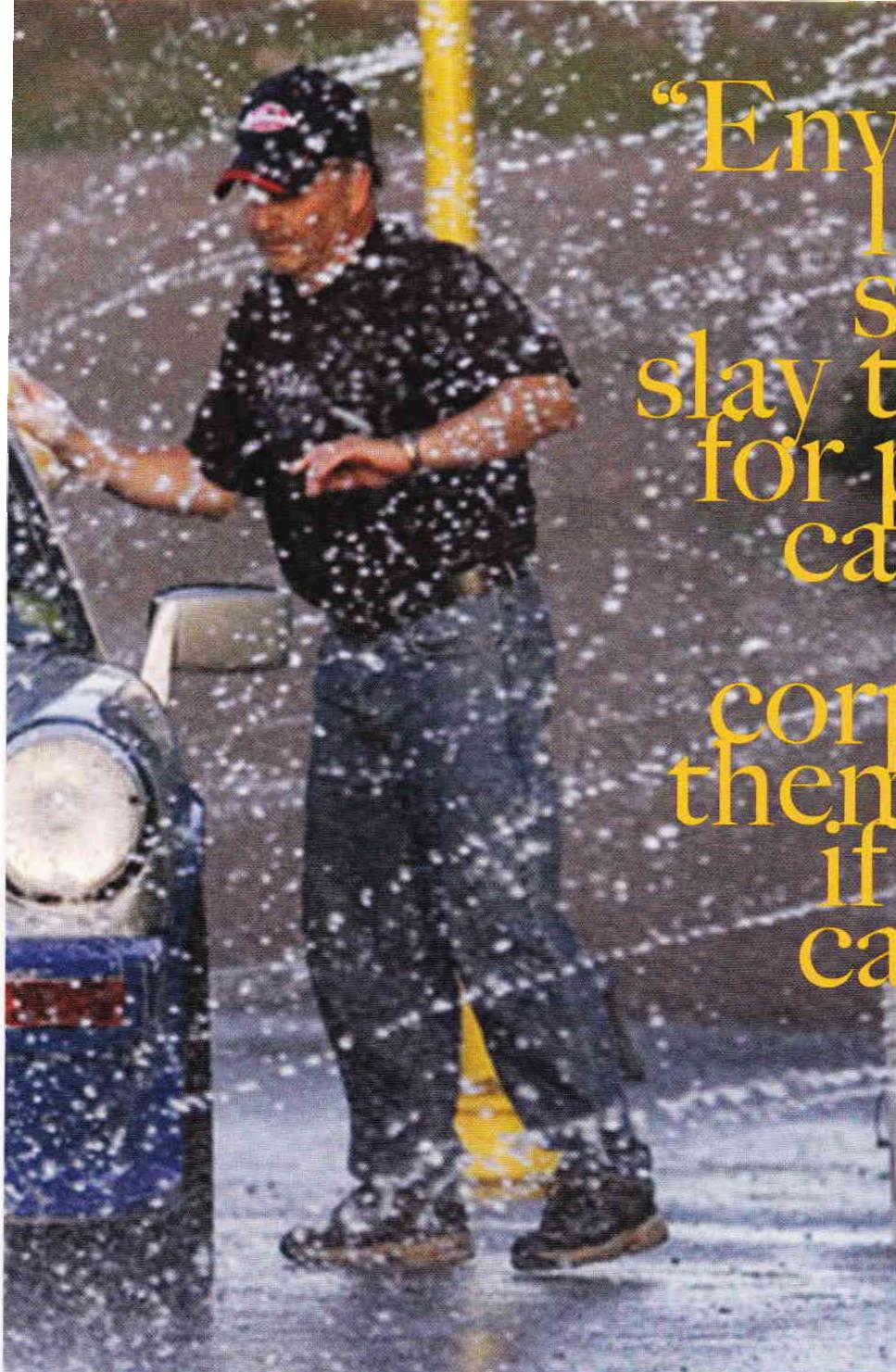
The preparation was relentless. Years later when they walked into court, Harold's team had amassed 37 boxes of evidence. The trial was lengthy and draining, but they were successful. It was for his work on this landmark suit that Harold and teammates were named California Attorney of the Year in 2002.

Harold after his successful land speed record attempt aboard a 1937 hand-shift Indian.

Photo By Linda Cluxton







“Environmental lawsuits are special. We slay the dragons for people who cannot afford to battle a corporation by themselves, but if we lose we can lose big.”

Top Photo: Harold and Porsche take a bath during the Targa Newfoundland Rally.

Bottom Row, from left to right:

(1) The 'Ironman of Motorsports' punishes the car, driver and navigator on the back roads of Newfoundland.

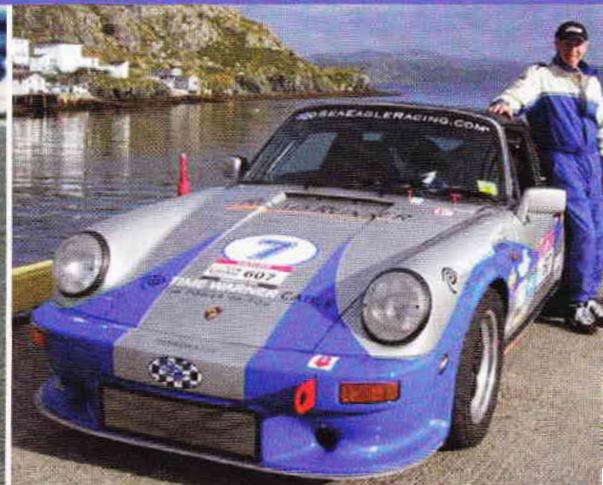
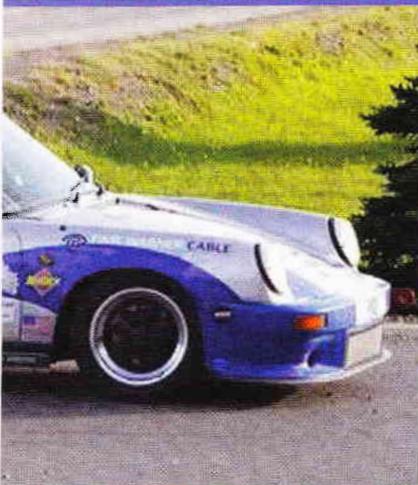
(2) Making the International Horseshoe turn at Daytona look easy.

(3) Navigating at speed... Dramamine anyone?

(4) Decompressing from a tough week in court.

Harold 'relaxes' at Daytona.

(5) Calm before the storm: Sea Eagle Racing right before the start of Targa Newfoundland.

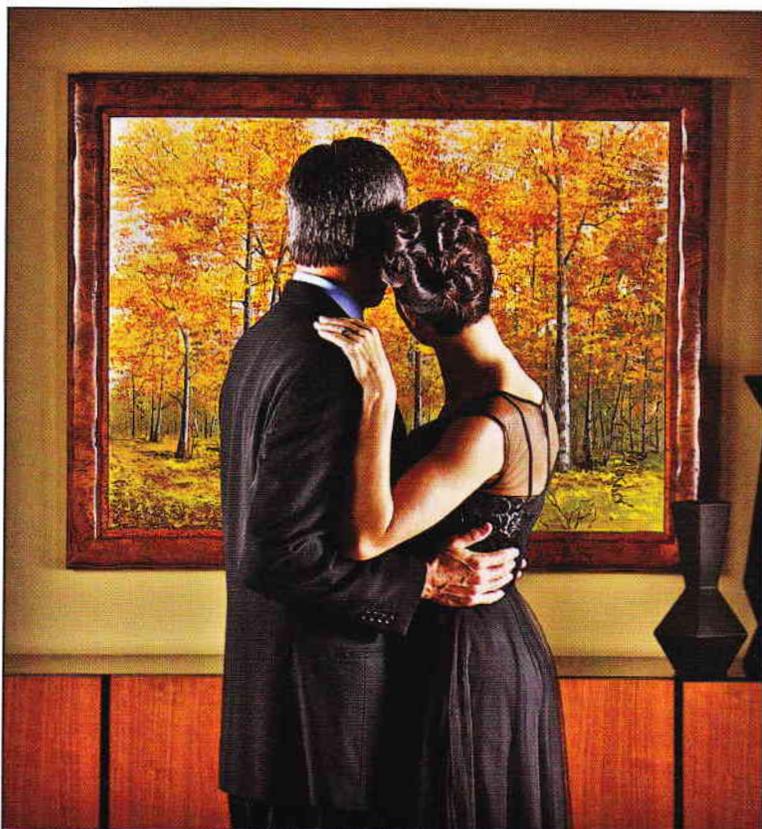




Upper: Harold on his way to second place at Daytona.



Lower: Targa Rally: when the driving is over for the day, repair work commences.



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All this talk of successful lawsuits and settlements has glossed over a very important fact. Harold and the other lawyers on his team are entrepreneurs in the riskiest sense of the word. All of the above mentioned cases were taken on contingency: the victims of the contaminated water do not pay any fees; the lawyers advance all the costs and work for free.

If they win, the team earns a percentage of the settlement, out of which they cover the costs of preparing evidence as well as paying employees and themselves for the years of work. If they lose the case, they also lose all the costs incurred as well as lost opportunity, not to mention damage to their collective reputations.

The costs incurred preparing a sound case can mount exponentially over the years. Geologic surveys need to be conducted, flows of chemicals through aquifers need to be mapped. Teams of PhD-level geologists need to be paid. Exploratory drilling may need to be performed. Entire communities may need to be medically screened. In a large ground water contamination suit it is not uncommon to have the costs of preparation rise into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Harold works hard to help the victims of pollution whom he represents. Many are poor country folks whose lives look similar to that of his own back in Marion. The work is risky and stressful but emotionally rewarding.

Contingency fee litigation is really the only way most Americans can battle with large corporations that have done harm to their families. The attorneys that choose this line of work risk not only their personal finances; they also risk their reputation, which in the end can limit their livelihood.

"Environmental lawsuits are special. We slay the dragons for people who cannot afford to battle a corporation by themselves, but if we lose we can lose big. The 'hired gun' is of no interest to future clients if he gets shot."

The zeal with which Mr. Seagle approaches his craft and the risks he takes to help victims of pollution have been rewarded.

The law can be an unrelenting master, particularly if one pursues environmental contingency litigation as his path. The financial risks are stressful, especially when stretched over the years it takes before a settlement or trial forces closure. This stress pushes attorneys like Harold to work long hours every day of the week including holidays.

HOW DOES HE RELAX?

"I tried golf a few times," says Harold. "It was peaceful and pretty to look at the course, but it's a passive sport, so my mind wandered. In the time it took to play 18 holes, I worried myself to death about all the work I was ignoring by sitting in a golf cart."

Clearly the links weren't the decompression he was after, so Harold turned to motorcycle racing, because it offers what he calls 'active relaxation'. Going fast in a car is one thing, but tipping a bike into a corner at high speeds can be life changing.

While attending law school, he and his wife lived for a time in a mobile home. An out building on the property did double duty as the young family's laundry and Harold's makeshift office: washer and dryer table and chair. It was here that he overhauled his first racer: pushing the chair aside he had just enough room to revive an old motorcycle he purchased for a song.

“Racing clears your mind,” says Harold. “Nothing evaporates your thoughts like piloting a motorcycle that’s going 160 mph...it is clarity personified.”

For years, he managed to race motorcycles an average of 3 times per year and remain competitive. Racing has provided him a respite from the stress of his law practice. It clears his mind and has enriched his life with a tapestry of experiences and friends with whom he shares the same passion.

Recently, at the urging of his sponsor, Harold has switched over to auto racing. He has competed in Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) sanctioned road rallies as well as hill climbs, where he campaigns a Porsche 911. He has competed in the Targa Newfoundland Rally three times; a grueling 6-day, 2200-kilometer race along the rugged coastline of Newfoundland, it’s called the “Iron Man of Motorsport Competition.”

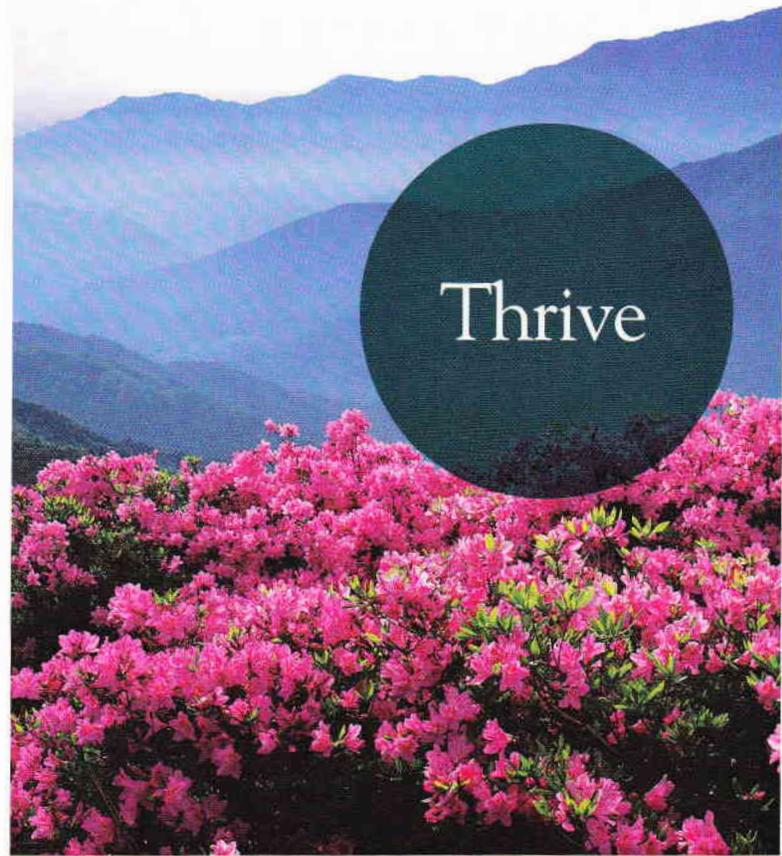
When Harold was a young attorney, a seasoned colleague said that a lawyer must have the blessing of his peers to be successful. Being helpful and cooperative to your opponents goes much further than being selfish and underhanded. Both sides benefit from this positive attitude.

He has clearly earned the blessing of his courtroom peers, for this

“Everyone out there wants to win, but no one wants to hurt anyone either. When winning becomes more important than honoring your adversary, you’ll never find success, on the track or in the courtroom.”

June, Harold was inducted into the North Carolina Bar Association’s Hall of Fame. This honor is bestowed on individuals who have completed a lifetime of exemplary service and high ethical and professional standards as a general practitioner of the law. Only 135 other attorneys have been inducted into the NC Hall of Fame.

“Everyone out there wants to win, but no one wants to hurt anyone either. When winning becomes more important than honoring your adversary, you’ll never find success; on the track or in the courtroom,” says Harold.



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