TV HIGHLIGHTS
NHL: Rangers-Bruins, 1 p.m., NESN
PGA: FBR Open, 3 p.m., Ch. 4
Australian Open: Men's championship, 3:30 a.m., ESPN2
Listings, C2

Sports

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This was Valentine's day

Valentine celebrates Rolex 24 Hours victory

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AUTO RACING NOTES

It's been a week, but R.J. Valentine can still feel the rush of taking the checkered flag at Daytona International Speedway. He can recall the thrill of pulling into Victory Lane after helping the TRG Porsches fielded by car owner Kevin Buckler record a 1-2 finish in the GT class of last weekend's Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona.

Most of all, the 65-year-old entrepreneur from Hingham can still feel the shivers that went down his spine when teammates Jorg Bergmeister, Patrick Long, Andy Lally, and Justin Marks exuberantly celebrated their collaborative triumph behind the wheel of the No. 67 TRG Construct Corps/CRG Porsche GT3 by dousing "the senior citizen" of the team with champagne.

"I think it was Jorg or Patrick who took a whole bottle and poured it down the back of my [fire] suit," Valentine said yesterday. "My underwear was soaked, my socks were soaked, my whole suit was champagne. I could've gotten drunk just from the absorption."

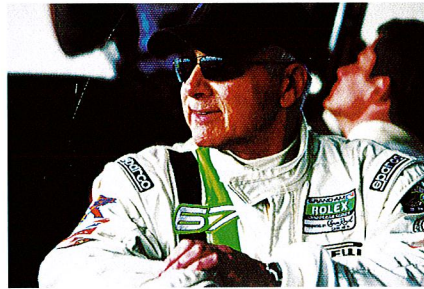What better way to toast the oldest winner in Daytona history?

"It's a dream come true for me," said Valentine, who won the Rolex 24 at Daytona in his 23d attempt. "In '06, we got second and were one lap out of first place after 24 hours, but had an issue on pit road that put us back. In '07, we were in first place at 8 a.m. and a [Daytona Prototype] car hit us, and in '08 we were fourth and that was a Ferrari deal, a Ferrari drove us off course."

After driving three separate shifts behind the wheel of the No. 67 TRG Porsche, Valentine was asked by Buckler to do the honors of crossing the finish line.

"I don't even remember how many laps were left, but I was so overwhelmed," said Valentine. "At the end, I was pretty emotional. Kevin said to me, 'You still there?' and I told him, 'Still here, buddy.'"

Valentine's victory capped a dominating weekend for TRG, which led 301 of 695 laps and never looked back when Lally, who teamed with Valentine in 2007 to win five Grand-Am races for TRG, inherited the lead on Lap 553 after the Farnbacher Loles Racing Porsche GT3, driven by Kevin Roush, pulled off course with a broken drive shaft.

The Rolex 24, though, "is the hardest thing in the world to win, because you've got 24 hours of beating the car beyond belief," Valentine said. And that says nothing of the physical and mental toll it can take on a driver.

Valentine credited his peak condition with a rigorous fitness regimen, cycling some 3,800 miles last year. He works out with weights 3-4 days a week, then spends time after races and workouts recovering in a hyperbaric chamber.

So when he was greeted in Victory Lane as the oldest driver to win the Rolex 24, Valentine said he felt half his age.

"The problem is I don't look at myself as 65," he said. "I don't want to sound like I'm bragging, but I work out with buddies who are a lot younger and I don't have any trouble keeping up. As someone once told me, 'Old age and cunning will always outwit youth and enthusiasm.' At my age, how many more years have I got?"

With several business interests in racing to keep him busy, including a principal share in the year-old New Jersey Motorsports Park, does Valentine see himself coming back for more?

"You know what? I'm thinking I'm going to do 3-4 more races this year, but Kevin was already saying, 'Why don't you do 6-7?' I'm trying to wean myself off it, I really am. I went to Hurley Haywood, a seven-time champion in endurance racing who's semi-retired, and I said, 'Hey, help me retire,' and he said, 'Well, you still got it. Have fun. If you can still drive, you don't have to do as many [races], but you can still do it.'"

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