

by Larry A. Portzline

It's the day before the grand opening of Bobby Rahal Honda on the Carlisle Pike. Everyone at the dealership seems to be in a state of controlled panic as final preparations are made for the big day: some wall posters have been misplaced, the florist is at the door, and Bobby Rahal, the 1986 Indy 500 winner, has just been washing cars. "There aren't any prima donnas in the group," he laughs, pointing at his rubber boots.

Rahal is a tall, energetic man with a

credits his friends and business associates for helping him get to where he is, and he considers himself "fortunate" that Honda has played such a major role in that achievement: "When car dealers are polled and asked, 'if you could have one car dealership, what would you have?' the number one choice is Honda...Technologically it's a very advanced car for the amount of money you're spending. You get a lot of value for the money, and they hold their resale value very well. It's something that people want."

Rahal explains that Honda's extensive

lucky to land a dealership where he did. "Honda only opens about 10 new franchises a year because they want their dealers to do well. The worst thing you can do is put dealers on top of one another. They only end up cutting each other's throats instead of going after the enemy."

Rahal's business

Bobby Rahal: Can He Win in This Car Business?

superb athletic build and an engaging sense of humor. Despite the excitement going on all around him, and despite having just invested three years and \$2 million dollars in a venture he calls his "dream come true," Rahal seems quite calm. A lesser man should be so lucky. After 16 years in a sport that carries him 225 miles per hour around an oval track, Rahal is familiar with risk.

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demands to be successful in racing," he explains, sitting in an office just off the showroom floor. "Perseverance has to be your middle name. If you try as hard as you can and apply yourself to the fullest extent, then you can be successful, assuming you have a certain level of talent...When you add all of that up, it's really no different."

At 36, Rahal is pleased to see another of his lifelong goals becoming a reality. He

market research is what helped bring him to Central Pennsylvania. "The Harrisburg area was a big factor in our coming here," he says, noting that it was Honda's recognition of the area's rapid growth that helped to influence his decision. He had considered locations elsewhere, but nothing was as satisfactory. Due to the fact that the Carlisle Pike was home to many other dealerships, Rahal believes the location holds promise for his dealership also.

"We're excited about this area," he says, smiling. He compares Central Pennsylvania to his own hometown of Columbus, Ohio—another state capital that is experiencing prosperous times—and stresses that he was

and accountant, Bob Vladem. The three, with the help of their 20 employees, estimate that they will be able to sell between 60-70 new cars a month, but Rahal is hoping to be "even more successful than that," predicting a broad-ranged yearly sales volume of "between \$5-15 million."

It's true that Rahal and his associates have taken great care to insure the dealership's success in Central Pennsylvania. A prime example of their commitment to the region is the attractive building they have erected at 6696 Carlisle Pike (near Cumberland Valley High School). Created by the same architect who designed the Red Roof Inn chain, the building has drawn positive



partners in the venture are long-time friends, Ron Ferris (who is also the dealership's general manager)

comments from nearly everyone—including other businesses along Route 11. "I think a lot of people are surprised, but also pleased," Rahal says. "The building creates that first impression. When people see it they say, 'there's someone who is thorough—there's a group who gave some thought to what they're doing.' There's a public trust, and I think you can gain it by going that little step further."

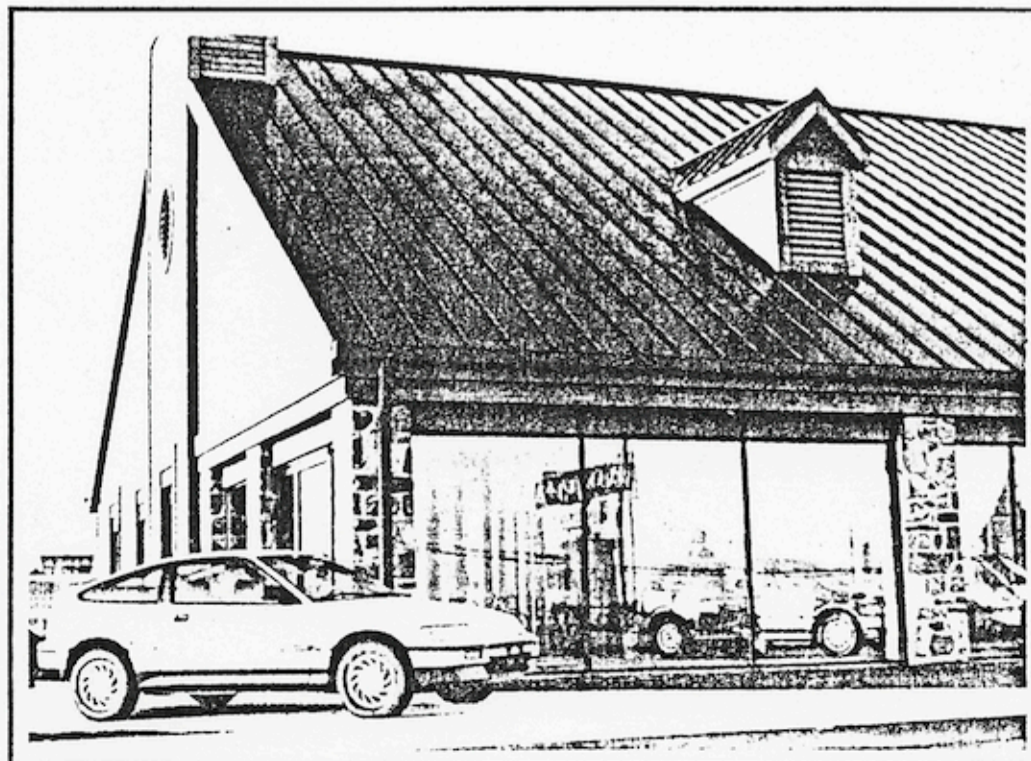
Although Rahal is unsure about the extent of his future activities in Central Pennsylvania, he is certain that he will be "flying in and out" and spending at least one or two days a week at the dealership.

Back home in Columbus, Rahal and his wife keep busy with their three children (ages "three, one and one half, and new," laughs Rahal) and various charities such as Easter Seals, for whom Rahal has been Central Ohio Chairman for the last several years. He says that "when you make a place of business somewhere and a community is good to you, you have an obligation to that community to help as well. I'll be involved as much as I can in this community, because we're here, and because it's our responsibility."

As for auto racing, Rahal admits that he has slowed down somewhat. He is concentrating solely on Indy cars now, mainly because of the trend towards specialization that currently exists in the sport, but also because of his new-found business interests. He's planning, he says, to open additional Honda dealerships "elsewhere in the country" in preparation for the day that he finally decides to quit racing.

"I certainly don't see myself retiring before 40," he insists, however. "Look at Mario Andretti. He's almost 50 years old...As long as it's fun, I'll continue. When it becomes work, I'll step back."

Either way, he says, the automobile business is "definitely" in his future. "No question about it," he says. "This is the start." ■



The new Bobby Rahal Honda dealership, Carlisle Pike.