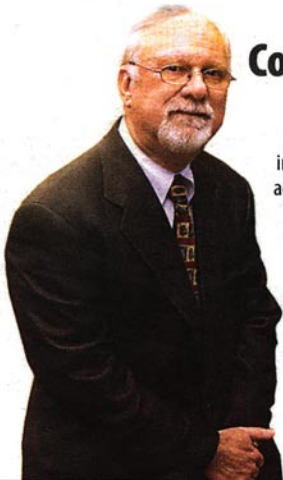


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Competitive

Insurance executive **William Sleeper** says independent insurance agencies are 'competing like crazy,' despite a growing consolidation trend.

SPECIAL REPORT,
P21

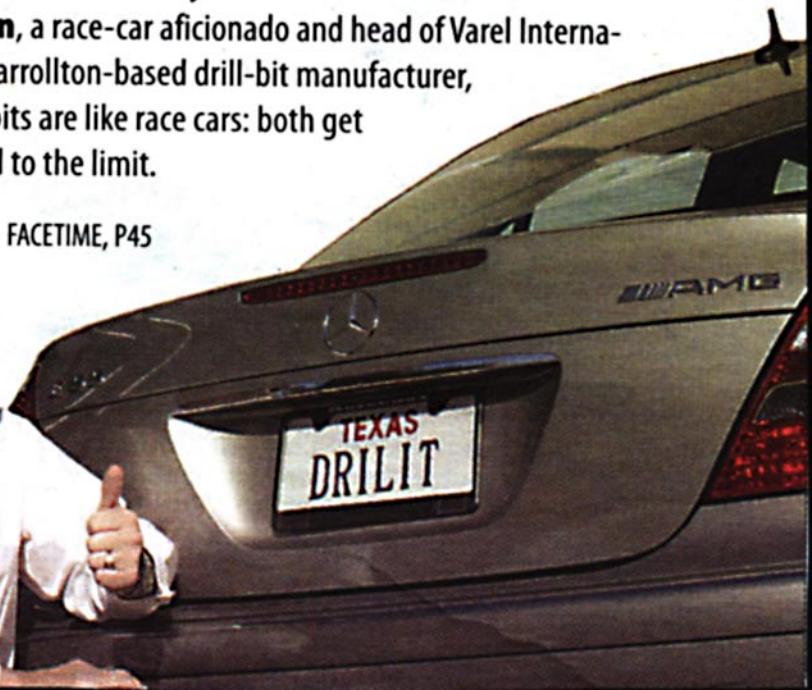
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Going all the way

Jim Nixon, a race-car aficionado and head of Varel International, a Carrollton-based drill-bit manufacturer, says drill bits are like race cars: both get pushed to the limit.

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FACETIME

Bit by bit

JIM NIXON DRILLS THE COMPETITION

Jim Nixon says drill bits are like race cars: They get pushed to the limit. As president and CEO of Carrollton-based Varel International and a race car aficionado, he should know. Following the \$45 million management buyout he orchestrated in June, 1998, he turned a sleepy family-owned company into the world's fifth largest manufacturer of drill bits for the oil, gas, mining and industrial sectors. The secret, says Nixon, was gaining more overseas customers, which now account for 57% of sales compared with 20% six years ago. Now Varel is projected to have \$87 million in sales for fiscal 2005, up from \$35 million when Nixon first joined the company. In his spare time, the 48-year-old is restoring a 1957 Triumph TR3A and recently completed a four-day racing school at the California Speedway in Fontana, Calif. He was interviewed by Cynthia D. Webb.

FAMILY: Caroline — my childhood sweetheart — and I have been married 29 years. Our sons are James, 25; and Derek, 22.

EDUCATION: I have an associate's degree in mechanical engineering and production engineering from Stow College of Engineering in Glasgow, Scotland.

HOMETOWN/CHILDHOOD: I grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, the youngest of eight children. I've got six mothers, because my five sisters are all older than me.

HOBBIES: I like to run a three-to-five — mile race every Sunday. Besides tinkering with my 1957 Triumph TR3A, I ride my two Triumph motorcycles. I have a 1996 Adventurer and a 2004 Rocket III. It's the biggest, baddest cruiser out there.

FIRST JOB: When I was 11, I had a newspaper route. I'd wake up at 5:30 in the morning and deliver about 90 papers. Every week I had to get the money from the households — it was about a quarter a paper — so I could pay the supplier. It taught me how to manage cash.

MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOK: I continue to revisit Steven Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," at least once a quarter.

ROLE MODEL: Sir John Harvey Jones, the retired chairman of London-based Imperial Chemical Industries, who became a troubleshooter for companies. He could quickly identify what needed to be done and motivate

people in that direction. My dad, James, who managed a butcher shop and died when I was 12, instilled a good work ethic and the ability to succeed.

ASPIRATIONS: I'd like to be president, CEO and chairman of a publicly traded company before I'm 55.

CAREER INSPIRATION: I have this inherent curiosity on how to make things better. As a child I ended up taking apart a steam iron. I wanted to know how the steam came out of it.

BEST BUSINESS DECISION: The international market is much more stable from an activity point of view. The globalization of our company has effectively neutralized us from the dramatic swings of U.S. and Canadian drilling activity.

WORST BUSINESS DECISION: Trying to start a joint venture in China.

FIRST CHOICE FOR A NEW CAREER: I'd become involved in industrial conflict mediation.

PET PEEVE: Fingerpointing and pollicking

FAVORITE WEB SITE: etrade.com

DREAM CAR: A 2005 British racing green Aston Martin DB7

WORD THAT BEST DESCRIBES YOU: Intense

TOP THREE PASSIONS: My wife and family, business, and health and fitness