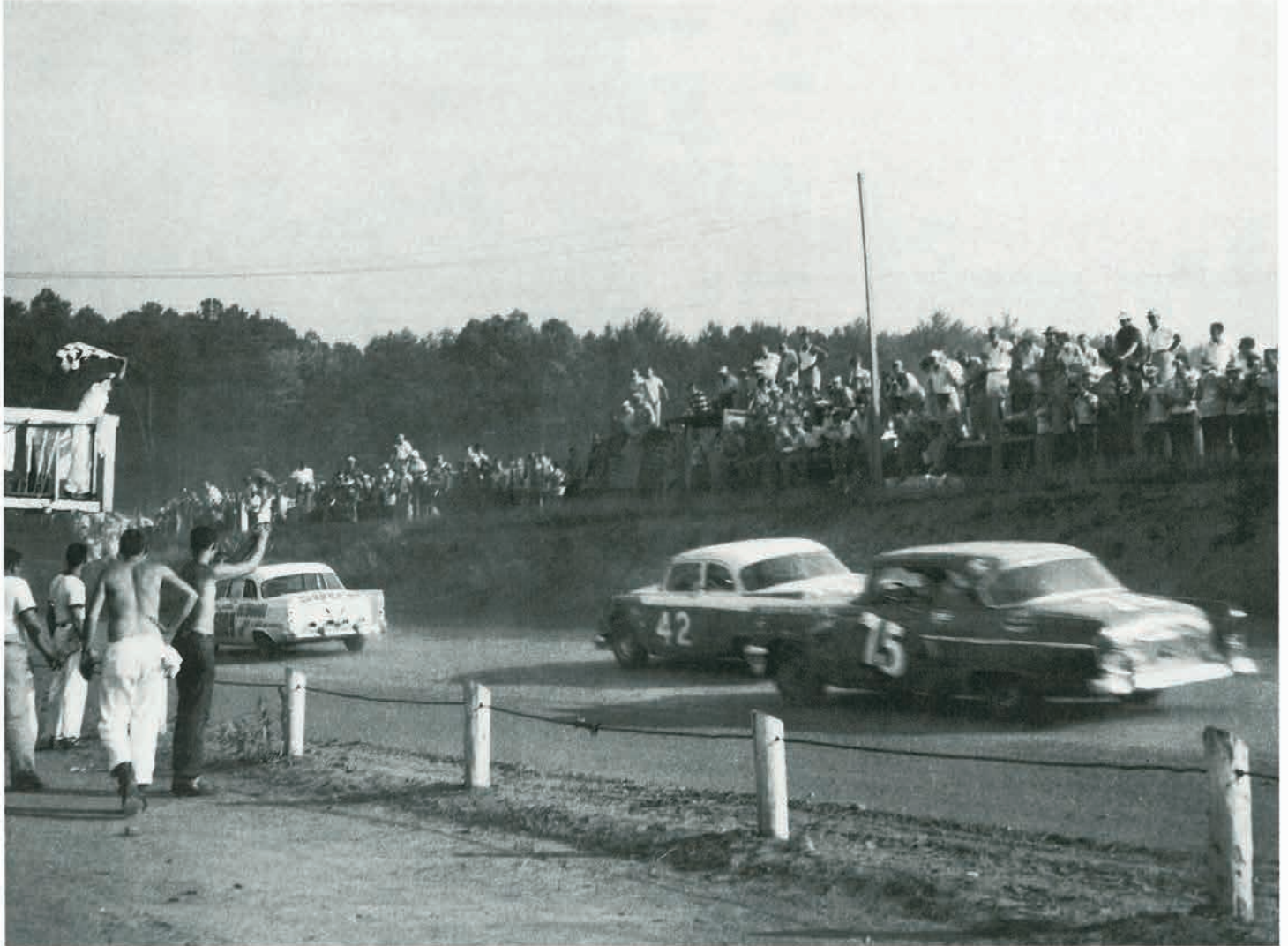


From Good Ol' Boys to Corporate Big Time *The History of NASCAR*

by Paul Winslowe
photos courtesy of International Speedway Corporation/NASCAR



Lee Petty in Number 42 approaches the checkered flag during a 1956 race in North Carolina. Petty's son, Richard, who eventually would become the winningest driver in NASCAR history, is on the left with his hands raised.

During Speedweeks, which seems to stretch through most of February, hundreds of thousands of fans will drive down U.S. Highway 92 and head towards the Daytona International Speedway.

The huge facility spans hundreds of acres and now holds 165,000 people in the grandstands alone. No one knows how many people glut the huge infield during the Daytona 500.

At one time, founder Bill France had to give tickets away to draw crowds to his races. To raise money to pay for the track, International Speedway Corp. was formed and shares of stock were sold. Today, many Daytona Beach residents are living very nicely on the dividends.

Once mostly confined to the South, stock car racing now is the fastest growing spectator sport in the country. The speedway

corporation, which owns 11 tracks after a recent merger with rival Penske Motorsports Inc., is a multi-billion dollar company. It is rapidly becoming a major seasonal employer and community icon rivaling the World's Most Famous Beach.

A lot has changed in the 52 years since the founding of the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR).

Old-time stock car fans still chuckle recalling an anecdote about a driver who was leading a race but suddenly headed to the pits (then located off the track) and continued down the road, hot-footing it away from the authorities who had spotted him and were in close pursuit because of some previous crime. That's supposed to be a true story, one of many in the down-and-dirty era when stock car racing began to inch into American consciousness.



Stock cars line up for the start of the 1952 Southern 500 in Darlington, S.C..

The Early Years

In the beginning, drivers didn't wear fancy suits plastered with sponsors' logos. They didn't drive gaudily painted machines capable of topping 200 miles per hour on the straightaway. They were young men (and a few women) who commonly lived in the rural areas of the South and drove rickety trucks and small cars through the rutted, twisting, muddy roads from one small community to another.

Racing fans in North Carolina have added to NASCAR lore with stories of some of the early heroes of the track having cut their driving teeth on twisting mountain roads outrunning the law with loads of moonshine. It is better documented that some prepared for NASCAR careers by racing their cars in clearings. Tires spinning, mud-splattered drivers might hit 60 to 70 mph on impromptu quarter-mile dirt tracks. No pretty girl showed up on the winner's stand afterwards. There were no trophies, no checks, no bottles of milk or caps with corporate trademarks. Spectators didn't sit in grandstands. There was nothing. Just the pure enjoyment of competing.

Better drivers, those with a desire to match their machines against all competitors, often headed for the Funcoast. From the turn of the 20th century through the 1950s, drivers gathered here to try to set land-speed records on the hard-packed sand of Ormond's and Daytona's beaches. Stock car drivers would test a course that was a little over 4 miles long, half on the sand; half on A1A, with turns at either end. In time, the land-speed enthusiasts found other venues; the sand was reserved for racers who gamely fought each other for the checkered flag.

Daytona's oceanside track was just one of many racing venues created by 1948. During World War II, fuel had been rationed,

which limited racing. When the soldiers came home after victory in 1945, they were introduced to new automobiles. Fancy race cars beyond the financial reach of most would-be drivers still dominated Indianapolis and international sites. Stock cars, the kind anyone could buy in a dealership, were more appealing.

Promoters — some of them located in the North, but more commonly in the southern states — set up races in fairgrounds or anywhere else they could find a site. They drew crowds; they drew racers. And, if they wanted to, they declared their best driver the national champion. No one seemed perturbed if a neighboring race track did exactly the same thing.

Safety wasn't that significant; speed and competition served as the lures.

During those years, the eventual founder of the Daytona Speedway, France was a driver and a promoter in Daytona Beach.

He also owned a service station

and regularly competed in car and motorcycle races. Like many other racers and their fans, he saw the confusing mix of tracks and champions and recognized the need for some kind of organizing body.

On December 14, 1947, he brought together a group of about 22 race enthusiasts to try to add some structure to racing. They met at the Roof Garden of the Streamline Hotel in Daytona Beach and conceived a national sanctioning body, an idea that was ridiculed at the time. The first race under the NASCAR banner was held in Daytona Beach on February 15, 1948. NASCAR was incorporated six days later.

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Daytona Beach's own "Fireball" Roberts in his 1962 Pontiac.

In 1949, a series of races began under the "Strictly Stock" logo. A record 13,000 spectators showed up in Charlotte, N.C. to enjoy that first race. A total of eight races were run that first season, which ran from June through October. The longest race was 200 miles, with most tracks either a half mile or 1 mile long. Red Byron, the first Winston Cup champion, won the 1949 Daytona 166 (40 laps) with an average speed of 79 mph. Lee Petty went up to Pittsburgh and averaged 57.5 mph to win a 100-mile race there.

Fans flocked to watch the drivers. With enthusiasm whetted by the response, NASCAR moved quickly into high gear with a new name – Grand National. That name survived until 1986.

In 1950, the first asphalt-paved track opened in Darlington, S.C. Drivers were concerned that their tires would not endure the heat created by the higher speeds needed to compete in the Southern 500. Some of the better known drivers actually boycotted the track after some hazardous trial runs. In response to their concerns, officials mandated stops every 25 miles to change tires.

Other changes also were necessary to accommodate the higher speeds and greater stress. No one could just drive a car off a lot and onto a track anymore. Larger radiators were necessary; so were bigger oil reservoirs. Drivers could use safety tires. Still, cars were similar to those sold in dealerships. That would change as safety requirements forced immense alterations. Eventually, only the exteriors would look familiar.

In 1950, the Daytona race was shifted toward the beginning of the season, although it didn't become the first race until 1982. It was extended to 500 miles in 1959 when Daytona International Speedway was erected and quickly evolved into the most prestigious race in the Winston Cup series.

As stock car racing's popularity increased, so did the number of races. In 1951, drivers competed in 41 races – almost all 100 to 150 miles long. Only the Southern 500 went beyond that limit. Tracks were located in 15 states, including Michigan, Ohio, New York, Connecticut and California as well as in the southern states.

The number of races peaked in 1964 with 62 races, gradually beginning to drop off until today, drivers compete in 34 races. NASCAR officials may tweak that total a little in the future as new tracks come on line.

Modern drivers use the latest, most aerodynamic vehicles. In the early years, drivers often drove older cars. Dick Rathman won a 1954 race in a 1952 Hudson, for example. Other makes of cars often made cameo appearances in victory lane – a Studebaker in 1951; a Jaguar in 1954. Hudsons were the biggest early winners, but, by 1957, Fords and Chevrolets began to dominate the races with only an occasional Pontiac, Chrysler and Oldsmobile mixed in. Plymouths would have some big years in the early 1960s. Overall, cars bearing 16 brand names have participated in the races.

"These cars must have weighed 4,500 to 5,000 pounds," recalled John Ervin, an International Motorsports Hall of Fame mechanic who worked for two-time NASCAR Winston Cup champion Ned Jarrett. "With no power steering, you had to be really strong in your upper body to drive one of those things," he told a national sports magazine.

In the mid-1960s, cars were no longer taken off the showroom floor, stripped down to add a roll cage and then reassembled with heavier springs. Instead, mechanics devised fabricated chassis that forever changed racing.

With the new, expensive equipment came the need for bigger

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That's just one difference between racing in 1950 and racing in 2000. There are many more, including:

Younger competitors. The higher payoffs have attracted athletes who might have chosen other sports. Dale Jarrett, for example, is an excellent golfer. Hoping to share in the wealth, racers are entering the sport at a younger age. The many different NASCAR series, which allow competitors to race in tracks around the country, have honed the skills of youthful drivers, given them a chance to prove themselves and offered them ever-increasing levels of competition.

"There's a lot of good young talent coming in," says Elliott Sadler, who is just 24 and started his Winston Cup career in 1998. NASCAR is getting younger, he adds. "I think the one who really opened the door was Jeff Gordon.



Cale Yarborough drives to victory in the 1977 IROC race at Daytona International Speedway. Yarborough's car averaged more than 165 miles per hour.

Gordon, who will be 29 this year and has won three Winston Cup championships since 1995, moved from the small tracks of Indiana to the high banks of Daytona with ease and confidence.

"He came in and did such a great job that car owners are willing to take a chance on a young driver," says Sadler, whose older brother, Hermie, also is a driver. "I'm glad to see it. I think that's what's gonna keep this NASCAR sport a healthy one."

Better equipment. A visit to Daytona USA, the entertainment center next to the Speedway, will provide a glimpse of how much race cars have improved in safety, aerodynamics and comfort. Seats are molded to fit a particular driver. Built-in communication equipment ensures a driver maintains constant contact with his crew. Rollbars and other equipment increase safety.

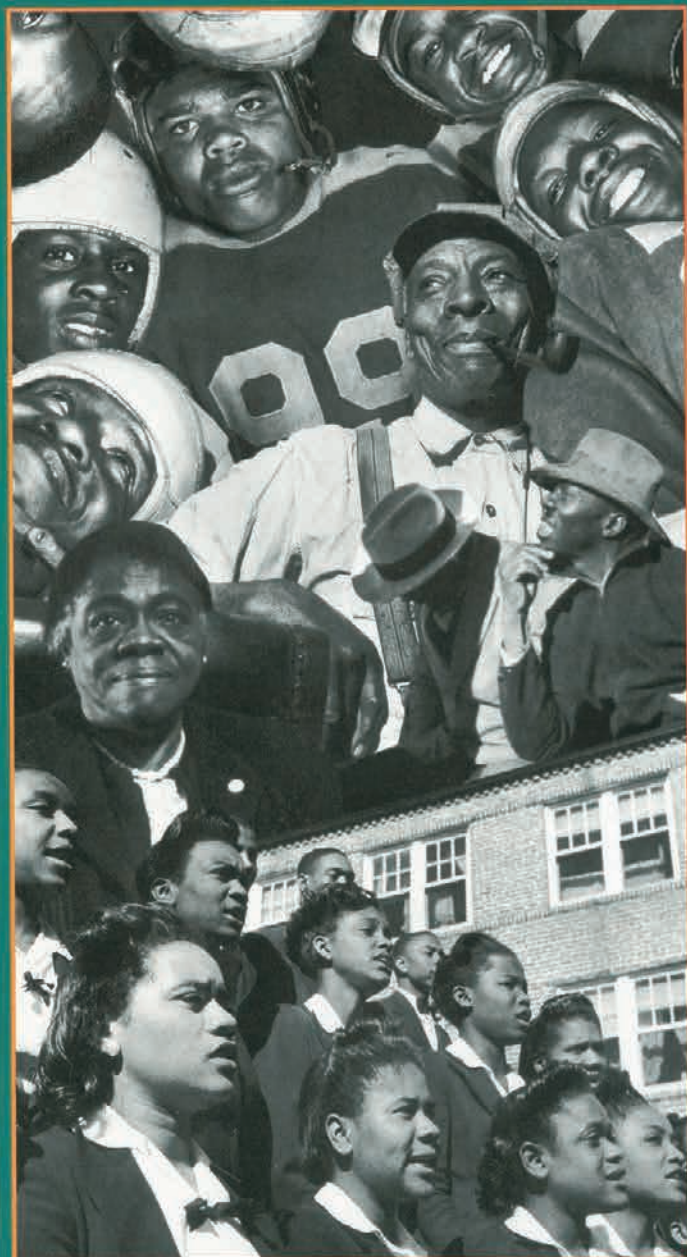
Ernie Irvan, for example, endured a horrific crash in 1994, but was back racing about a year later. Other drivers have flown hundreds of yards, been spun upside down or smashed into walls, yet walked away with little more than a bruise or two.

Changed venues. As public interest has soared, NASCAR has gradually moved away from tracks located in small, usually southern communities to focus on major metropolitan areas.

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Midway: A Place In Time

A WCEU Production Celebrating Black History Month



In 1943, Photographer Gordon Parks came to Daytona Beach to document the vibrant African-American community centered in the Second Avenue/ Mary McLeod Bethune Boulevard area – collectively called Midway.

WCEU and the Southeast Museum of Photography revisit this same area today, and through the stories and recollections of residents, take a trip back in time to the heart and soul of the community called Midway.

Wednesday, February 2 at 10 PM

Repeats: Sunday, February 13 at 5 PM; Thursday, February 17 at 9:30 PM; and Wednesday, February 23 at 3:30 PM



HISTORY OF NASCAR CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

In 1994, the historic Indianapolis Speedway embraced stock cars with the Brickyard 400. New tracks are scheduled for New York, Chicago, Kansas City and California.

NASCAR also is looking at additional overseas possibilities in the near future. Since 1996, Winston West drivers have competed in demonstration races in Japan. Other races have been held in Canada.

The newer tracks highlight speed. Banked, paved tri-ovals in Daytona and Talladega have created opportunities for so much speed that NASCAR had to require restrictor plates in the car-

buretors to improve safety. That has affected racing, too.

"Restrictor-plate racing is sort of like a chess game," explains Dale Earnhardt Sr., a seven-time Winston Cup champion. "There's a lot of thought that goes into it, a lot of planning. You've got to end up at the right place at the right time. I think a driver works harder planning."

The many changes have altered the exterior of racing, but not its heart and soul – competition. "The biggest change as you move up to Winston Cup is the level of competition,"



Jeff Gordon wins his first NASCAR race – a 125-mile qualifying run for the 1993 Daytona 500

says driver Lepage. "You have 43 of the best drivers in the United States week in and week out."

As a result, victories are harder to accumulate. Darrell Waltrip, entering his last season as a competitor, has won 84 races, the most of any current driver, but he hasn't see the checkered flag since 1992. Of the top 10 winningest drivers in Winston Cup history, only Waltrip and Earnhardt Sr. still are active. Earnhardt, with 72 victories entering 2000, is 6th. Even Gordon, who has dominated NASCAR since 1995, ranked only 10th on the all-time list at the end of 1999.

Meanwhile, public enthusiasm continues to soar. Racing now draws fans from around the world. "There's no other sport like it," says Jerry Nadeau, who finished third in the Winston Cup Rookie of the Year standings in 1998.

"The fans are able to meet the drivers and speak with the drivers," Nadeau adds. "There aren't many sports where fans have the access they have in NASCAR."

Every day, the fans can drive up the huge Speedway, park their vehicles and walk into the pits where drivers are getting ready for the Daytona 500. Fans may not see evidence of the racing history there any more, but they can certainly take a good, close look at its future.

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