

University of North Carolina at Asheville

The Rock: The Legacy of North Carolina Motor Speedway

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by  
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Introduction: "They started out with \$250,000 and they wound up with a sandpile..."<sup>1</sup>

"NASCAR is a southern sport. It's the only sport that was born in the south, maybe outside of coon hunting."<sup>2</sup> This quote from Charlotte Motor Speedway's Humpy Wheeler shows how deeply ingrained NASCAR is to the people of the South. Reading it gives just a slight clue of how southern NASCAR fans feel about the modern incarnation of "their" sport which is now popular all over the world. NASCAR, as a sport, has moved away from the southeastern United States and throughout the nation. That growth is not without its victims. One of the winners and losers in NASCAR's history is North Carolina Motor Speedway in Rockingham, North Carolina.

North Carolina Motor Speedway held its first race in October 1965 in front of a sellout crowd. Legendary driver Curtis Turner won the first race giving the 1965 season a storybook ending.<sup>3</sup> The speedway was at the top of the heap in NASCAR for thirty years. While the short tracks that NASCAR came from fell to the wayside (Asheville/Weaverville Speedway in Weaverville, North Carolina; Ontario Speedway in Ontario, California; Piedmont Interstate Fairgrounds dirt track in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and others) North Carolina Motor Speedway continued to be a favorite stop for fans, drivers, and teams. Fans enjoyed the close racing, drivers loved the ability to control their own destiny, and teams benefited from the close proximity to their homes in the Charlotte area. As NASCAR continued to grow in the late 1990s, North Carolina Motor Speedway suffered from bad luck. To keep up with the new track explosion, North Carolina Motor Speedway became North Carolina Speedway as it left the DeWitt family

<sup>1</sup> Gene Granger, "Lindsay Guy DeWitt...", *Grand National Illustrated*, March 1984, 66-72.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Pierce, "Bib Overalls and Bad Teeth: The Southern Piedmont Working-Class Roots of NASCAR," *Atlanta History: A Journal of Georgia and the South* 46 (2004): 26-41.

<sup>3</sup> "Thousands View Turner's Victory In Inaugural American 500 Race," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 1 November 1965.

and became part of Roger Penske's family of tracks in 1997. Bad weather haunted the track and hurt ticket sales. Just as more and more tracks were being built in larger markets, Penske combined his tracks with those of International Speedway Corporation which is owned by the France family who also owns NASCAR. Rumors began to fly about what tracks would be sacrificed and North Carolina Speedway was at the top of the list. Rockingham lost its fall date in 2003 to California Speedway. A lawsuit from Speedway Motorsports Incorporated and one of its investors, Francis Ferko, sealed the track's destiny. Ferko sued the France family alleging that Texas Motor Speedway (a Speedway Motorsports Incorporated track) was promised a second date on the schedule by NASCAR. Ferko won the suit and NASCAR took the date from Rockingham. Matt Kenseth won the last race in February 2004.<sup>4</sup>

Len Batycki, vice president of marketing at North Carolina Speedway from 1990 to 1995, compared the reaction if NASCAR was absent in Rockingham to what would happen if the Green Bay Packers stopped playing at Lambeau Field because the community is so intertwined with the sport.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1979 Daytona 500, the first race to be nationally broadcast on television, NASCAR has grown in leaps and bounds to become the second largest spectator sport in the United States behind only the National Football League. Southerners are more car conscious than the rest of the country and NASCAR fans are the hardest and roughest in sports.<sup>6</sup> With tracks like Daytona,

<sup>4</sup> Dick Berggren, "The Rock Splits," *Speedway Illustrated*, June 2003, 8-10, "Steeped in History," *Winston Cup Scene*, 21 September 2000, 72-73, Scott J. Bryan, "The Rock loses NASCAR race," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 12 June 2003, and Jeff Owens, "The Rock is gone, but not forgotten" *NASCAR Scene*, 20 May 2004, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Pope, "Times are changing at The Rock." *Fayetteville Online*, February 19, 2003, <[www.fayobserver.com](http://www.fayobserver.com)> (24 February 2003).

<sup>6</sup> "Superspeedway Racing, South's Major League," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 2 November 1965.

Charlotte, Atlanta and Indianapolis taking precedence in the consciousness of sports fans it is hard to see how important Rockingham is to the history of NASCAR.

The Piedmont of the southeast United States is where modern stock car racing originated. Rockingham is in the heart of the southern Piedmont, a piece of land between the Coastal Plain and the Appalachian Mountains stretching from Virginia to Alabama. Eight to twelve inches below the sandy topsoil in the southern Piedmont you will find the greatest natural racing surface in the world, piedmont red clay. Piedmont red clay, mill town life, affordable automobiles, southern boys, and moonshining supplied the beginnings of modern stock car racing. The cultural identity of the Piedmont south evolved to shape the attitude of the racers in the early to mid twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Racing historians Karen and Donald Rybacki believe "[t]hese young daredevils were the lineal descendents of the poor whites who had rilled the ranks of the Confederate Army a few generations earlier," meaning poor southern whites had the same contempt for authority that tried to tell them how to live. The same attitudes their grandfathers had in 1861 when they went to fight "Yankee officialdom."<sup>9</sup>

Stock car racing may have sprouted up all over the country in the post World War I era but "only has the South and the Southern dominated NASCAR Grand National division (Nextel Cup as of 2004) been able to project itself into a national image".<sup>10</sup> Part of that national image included the string of speedways measuring one mile or better that popped up throughout the southeast in the 1950s and 60s. It started with Darlington

<sup>7</sup>Pierce, 26-41.

<sup>8</sup>Karyn Rybacki and Donald Rybacki, "The King, the Young Prince, and the Last Confederate Soldier: NASCAR on the Cusp," in Patrick D. Miller, ed. *The Sporting World of the Modern South* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 299. <sup>9</sup>Ibid

Richard Pillsbury, "Carolina Thunder: A Geography of Southern Stock Car Racing," *Journal of Geography*, 73 (1974): 40.

Raceway in the Piedmont of South Carolina in 1950. Daytona (Florida) International Speedway followed in 1959. Atlanta International Speedway (now Atlanta Motor Speedway) and Charlotte (North Carolina) Motor Speedway opened in 1960. Rockingham would get its chance in 1965.<sup>11</sup>

Since the Piedmont south is the birthplace of modern stock car racing, it makes perfect sense to build, what was then, NASCAR's fastest and most technologically advanced track in the middle of that culture, North Carolina Motor Speedway in Rockingham, North Carolina. North Carolina Speedway was the first track in North America to be engineered by computer<sup>12</sup> and Richard Petty grabbed the first pole in 1965 with a four lap average of 116.260 miles per hour, a record for a one mile track at that time.<sup>13</sup> L.G. DeWitt supervised reshaping the original mile track into the present 1.017-mile oval in 1969.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1960's, Rockingham, North Carolina had the ingredients in place where NASCAR could survive, mill town life and stock car racing. Rockingham was a successful textile mill town in the southeast corner of North Carolina's Piedmont. Nearby Hamlet was the hub of the Seaboard rail line. In 1965, Rockingham already had a thriving stock car racing heritage with Rockingham Speedway, a dirt track with weekly racing and the annual Rocket 100 which brought in some of the Carolina's best dirt track drivers such as J.D. McDuffie, Tommy Bostick, John Sears, Bill Bostick, Glen McDuffie, and Ralph Earnhardt.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Superspeedway Racing, South's Major League".

<sup>12</sup> Granger, 66-72.

<sup>13</sup> "Petty Nabs Pole," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 28 October 1965.

<sup>14</sup> "Steeped in History," *Winston Cup Scene*, 21 September 2000, 72-73.

<sup>15</sup> "Tommy Bostick Takes Final Race of the Season," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 1 November 1965.

North Carolina Speedway was home to some of NASCAR's most memorable and historic moments. Legendary drivers took wins and championships home from Rockingham. Races were won by inches and drivers loved the track because of its demand for talent. Long time crew chief James Ince argued, "The [Daytona] 500 is a big deal, but the 1.017-mile track between Rockingham and Aberdeen is a true racer's speedway. You have more opportunity to control your destiny there."<sup>16</sup> North Carolina Motor Speedway offers drivers and teams the chance to show their natural ability which provides the fans with great racing.<sup>17</sup> Historiography: "It is a sport rooted in cultural mythology -the stereotypes of rural

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America and the agrarian Southeast."

It is a challenge to find scholarly works on North Carolina Speedway's importance to NASCAR but it is not challenging finding information illustrating how important NASCAR is to the southern piedmont. Paul Hemphill's *Wheels* shows how the sport has moved from one man who might work on a farm, in a hardware store, liquor store, or a mill, building his own car and trying to earn enough winnings at local dirt tracks to pay for tires and gas to the multimillion dollar, corporately driven, mainstream sport. Paul Hemphill follows what was then the Winston Cup series throughout the season and points out the changes that the sport has come through starting as a southern dominated sport to an international phenomenon. Hemphill notes the feelings of NASCAR purists who want to keep the sport out of New York and California and would

<sup>6</sup> "Why NASCAR Should Keep Racing at The Rock," pamphlet, Richmond County Board of Commissioners, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Pope, *Fayetteville Online*.

<sup>8</sup> Mark D. Howell, *From Moonshine to Madison Avenue: A Cultural History of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997).

rather have North Carolinian Dale Earnhardt as their champion rather than Californian Jeff Gordon.<sup>19</sup>

Dan Pierce also looks at NASCAR's connection to the southern Piedmont in "Bib Overalls and Bad Teeth". Dr. Pierce explains why the Piedmont south was where modern stock car racing had the biggest effect. While stock car racing took hold all over the country in the middle of the twentieth century, the culture of the Piedmont south allowed it to really get on track in the southeast. Moonshining, mill town life, affordable automobiles, and southern rebel mentality were the right ingredients for NASCAR to take hold. Drivers and tracks in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina dominated the early years of the sport. NASCAR finds its roots in the red  
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clay of the Piedmont.

Mark D. Howell's *From Moonshine to Madison Avenue* takes a look at how the spectator sport phenomenon that is NASCAR rose from the culture of the South.

It is a sport rooted in cultural mythology -the stereotypes of rural America and the agrarian Southeast, the outlaw nature of folks forced to break the law in order to put food on their tables, and the eventual transition that turned regional folk heroes into national sports heroes.<sup>21</sup>

This quote illustrates Howell's main idea of the unprecedented rise of NASCAR from a regional sport in the southeast to one of the most popular sports in the United States and the world. Unlike "stick and ball sports", stock car racing has a regional identity despite

its universal appeal.

Jim Wright's *Fixin to Git* thrives on stereotypes of NASCAR fans which, in turn, means it thrives on the stereotypes of southerners.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Hemphill, *Wheels* (New York: Berkely Books, 1997) 7.

<sup>20</sup> Pierce, 26-41.

<sup>21</sup> Howell, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

Who'd ever think that NASCAR fans would be attractive as role models for children? Or that a racetrack would be a good place to troll for America's Promise volunteers? A church -sure. A college campus -no doubt about it. But the Texas Motor Speedway on a NASCAR weekend?<sup>23</sup>

However, Wright's focus on the stereotypes can be a testimony for how amazing it is that NASCAR started in the south and spread throughout the country and even overseas.

Along with the belittling of NASCAR fans, Wright does make note of the sports ties to the south and southern culture, the good aspects along with the bad.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout NASCAR's popularity explosion, North Carolina Speedway remained significant to the series. Dick Berggren, NASCAR analyst and editor of *Speedway Illustrated*, wrote in his piece "The Rock Splits" that "Rockingham is what the sport should be about. Its steep banks [22 degrees in 1 and 2, 25 degrees in 3 and 4] combine with the abrasive surface to yield multiple grooves." Berggren loved the type of racing in Rockingham. "For some, the bottom is fast, for others it's the middle, and others lust for the top. As Mike Joy (television racing commentator) would shout into his microphone, 'Three wide!'" Berggren also thought Rockingham was a wonderful fan experience. Berggren felt the speeds of 150 mph were fast enough and the track was small enough where fans could see their favorite driver's car without binoculars. The fans saw lots of passing. The track averaged 22 lead changes over its first 76 races. The fast way around Rockingham was to come off turn two and get inches away from the wall. Drivers had to finesse their cars off the corners, lesser drivers ended up in the wall.

<sup>23</sup> Jim Wright, *Fixin to Git* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Dick Berggren, "The Rock Splits," *Speedway Illustrated*, June 2003, 8-10.

Berggren believed Rockingham was where the "truly great drivers are separated from the just damn good drivers."<sup>26</sup>

David Newton was sad to see the track lay dormant after 2004 as he reported, "For 39 years, the speedway in Rockingham, N.C., hosted a NASCAR event. Not anymore. Instead, the second weekend of the Nextel Cup racing series will be staged in Southern California while The Rock sits as empty as a ghost town."<sup>27</sup> Rockingham was important to NASCAR and its fans. It was a superb symbol of racing in the south, where

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stock car racing called home.

History of North Carolina Motor Speedway: "I can't recall any track that I've run at quite like this one."<sup>29</sup>

The history of "The Rock", as North Carolina Motor Speedway was affectionately known by competitors, fans, and the media, was interesting from the beginning. The track was built in the early 1960s on Bill Land's acreage 10 miles north of Rockingham in the Sandhills of the Piedmont of North Carolina. The contractor for the speedway was Harold Brasington, who had previously built NASCAR's first superspeedway, Darlington

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Raceway, in the Piedmont of South Carolina which opened in 1950. Brasington and Land started building North Carolina Motor Speedway in 1964. Financial problems began almost immediately. "They started out with \$250,000 and they wound up with a sandpile," said L.G. DeWitt, president of North Carolina Motor Speedway from 1972 until his death in 1990.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Berggren, 8.

<sup>27</sup> David Newton, "Goodbye old friend, thanks for the memories," *The State*, 25 February 2005, sec. C.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> "'No other track like this one' Comments Petty," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 26 October 1965.

<sup>30</sup> "Steeped in History," 72-73.

<sup>31</sup> Granger, 66-72.

Former North Carolina Motor Speedway president Lindsay Guy "L.G." DeWitt was the fifth of five children. When he was twelve years old his family moved from the low-country of South Carolina to the North Carolina sandhills. The children had to work picking cotton and worked in the potato and sugar cane fields. DeWitt felt it was a good experience that his parents made he and his siblings work. Most of DeWitt's family finished high school, but did not go to college. Even without a college education L.G.

was, at one time, "the 'man' behind 25 corporations" . Those included a trucking company, many peach orchards, real estate, and two NASCAR sanctioned speedways, North Carolina Motor Speedway and Atlanta International Speedway (now Atlanta Motor Speedway). It was ironic that DeWitt would make such a commitment to the racing community. DeWitt commented more than once that no one hated racing more than he did. The main reason was because every time there was a race, DeWitt's drivers wanted to park their trucks and go to the race.

When the relationship between Land and Brasington became strained, they went to see local attorney J. Elsie Webb, who was a close friend of DeWitt. They wanted to buy each other out. Mr. Webb called a few local leaders to a meeting in January 1965. DeWitt felt he had an opportunity to do something for Richmond County. The prominent people Webb called together were DeWitt, banker E. Vernon Hogan, Sheriff R.W. Goodman and Hubert Lathan. The five of them took on the responsibility of turning the sandpile into a race track. Mr. Webb was named president and DeWitt was named vice president. Since they already had a (NASCAR) sanction for October, the group went to work. The group financed and supervised the building of the new track, and had the track

"Steeped in History," 72-73.

ready for the American 500 on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1965. When the first race was run, Webb and DeWitt's group had a million dollars invested.<sup>34</sup>

DeWitt's primary motivation for getting involved with the new speedway was to help the community. DeWitt tried to continue his commitment to Rockingham and the rest of Richmond County when he started his own race team in by luring local drivers John Hill and "Big" John Sears into NASCAR. Sears drove for DeWitt in the inaugural American 500 in 1965. However, Sears was part of the first caution in the speedway's history when he hit the wall in turn one of the second lap. In 1970 Sears and DeWitt parted ways after four top ten finishes in the final point standings.<sup>35</sup>

The first American 500 at the new North Carolina Motor Speedway did not disappoint NASCAR or, more importantly, the fans. Rising star and defending series champion Richard Petty sat on the pole after missing most of the season and the race was won by the Virginia driver Curtis Turner. It turned out to be the last win in Turner's legendary career. Turner had been banished from NASCAR four years earlier by its autocratic leader "Big" Bill France. Turner and fellow driver Tim Flock spearheaded an attempt to unionize the drivers in the Teamster's Union. Turner agreed to the Teamsters' terms in return for funds he desperately needed to save his investment in Charlotte Motor Speedway, a struggling track he built with O. Bruton Smith.<sup>36</sup>

France expelled the two drivers for their attempts to unionize because, as he put it, "any support from the factories would be withdrawn. And all of you car owners, if you hire a mechanic, as you will, then you'll have to pay him time and a half on Saturday and

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Steve Waid, "Final fall Rockingham race will be remembered," *NASCAR Winston Cup Scene*, 20 November 2003, 8.

double time on Sunday." He also argued that drivers were not employees of NASCAR. They were "independent contractors" and therefore responsible for their own insurance and pension.<sup>38</sup>

The opening of an exciting new track and the return of the sport's most popular driver was what NASCAR needed in 1965. Circumstances led North Carolina Motor Speedway to be the site of one of NASCAR's biggest triumphs. The inaugural American 500 was at the end of the 1965 season, which had not been a good one. The season was full of squabbles between manufacturers, teams, and the sanctioning body. Manufacturer boycotts hurt race attendance and speedway owners were considering switching their loyalty to the United States Auto Club (USAC) in 1966 unless things improved.<sup>39</sup> France made rule changes at the end of the 1964 season that he thought would level the playing field among the manufacturers and make the sport safer for drivers. Ford and Chrysler dominated the 1964 season so both were affected by the new rules, but Chrysler took the biggest hit of the two. Chrysler, Plymouth, and Dodge cars could no longer use their powerful 461 cubic inch Hemi engine that had helped them to twenty-six victories and the Grand National championship with fan favorite (and North Carolina Piedmont native) Richard Petty the previous year. The angered company retaliated against France and NASCAR by boycotting the 1965 season. The absence of Chrysler and its Hemi meant the absence of some of NASCAR's biggest stars still on the rise -which included Richard Petty, David Pearson, and Bobby Issac.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Dan Pierce, "The most southern sport on earth," *Southern Cultures* 7.2 (2001): 8-33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Waid, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Edelstein, *Full Throttle: The Life and Fast Times of NASCAR Legend Curtis Turner* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2005) 211-57.

While North Carolina Motor Speedway was moving toward completion, Ford's stars still shined. Wilkes County native Junior Johnson, Conover native Ned Jarrett and fan favorite Fred Lorenzen continued to drive and win in the nation's premier stock car circuit. However NASCAR lost some of its luster without Ford and Chrysler's ability to do battle during the season. This unfortunate situation led *Charlotte Observer* writer George Cunningham to pen his season preview article entitled "Ford versus Nobody".<sup>41</sup> Many Chrysler drivers went on to race in some of NASCAR's rival series including the United States Auto Club (US AC), the Automobile Racing Club of America (ARC A), and the Grand American Racing Association (GARA). GARA's biggest draw was expelled driver Curtis Turner. NASCAR fans showed their irritation by staying away from the track. Daytona 500 attendance dropped by over 11,000 from 1964 to 1965, 13,500 fewer fans attended the spring race in Martinsville, and Darlington's Rebel 300 only sold about 15,000 tickets down from nearly 30,000 the previous year. Bill France was booed during pre-race introductions and the cheers were reserved for a spectator, Richard Petty, who longed to be on the starting grid.<sup>42</sup> This did not bode well for the new track. Not only was construction going slowly in Rockingham, but it was eating up money and NASCAR was declining in popularity.<sup>43</sup>

The first good news for Rockingham came when France compromised on the rules in order to bring some of NASCAR's more popular drivers back. On July 25, 1965 Chrysler returned for the last quarter of the season. As part of the compromise, a 1966

<sup>41</sup>Edelstein,211.

<sup>42</sup>Edelstein,212.

<sup>43</sup> Jim Demski "NCMS, South's 5<sup>th</sup> Superspeedway, Opens Sunday with 500-Mile Race," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 26 October 1965.

Plymouth Belvedere was named as the pace car for the 1966 Daytona 500.<sup>44</sup> Fans planning to attend the American 500 could now expect their favorite Ford drivers as well as their favorite Dodge, Chrysler, Plymouth, Chevrolet and Pontiac drivers. North Carolina Motor Speedway still had to worry about filling the seats. Attendance remained low at larger tracks, causing Atlanta International Raceway president Nelson Weaver to think about abandoning NASCAR for USAC.<sup>45</sup> Other track owners and operators shared in the sentiment.<sup>46</sup> A meeting was held in Atlanta among France and several leading speedway owners late in the season. The owners convinced France that his only option he had left to salvage a miserable year was to bring back Curtis Turner. France obliged, lifting Turner's suspension.<sup>47</sup>

Turner received the news during the rain delay of a GARA race at Concord (NC) Speedway on his "car phone", a contraption that Turner's friend Charlie Williamson once commented, "You ever seen all the equipment he needs to make that phone work? Shit takes up half the trunk." Hard-partying Turner immediately had the liquor flowing with friends and reporters at his home. "I feel like a fellow who just got out of jail after a four year term," Turner tells the reporters. "You know, I never was interested in the union, I was desperate for money. Bill France did what he had to do and I'd have probably done the same. He had his interests to protect, and so did I."<sup>48</sup>

France and NASCAR issued a less enthusiastic statement. "We feel that Turner has paid the penalty for his actions by sitting out for four years of NASCAR racing. If he

<sup>44</sup> Bernard Khan, "Chrysler -NASCAR Make Peace for 1966," *Illustrated Speedway News*, October 26, 1965,5.

<sup>45</sup>Edelstein, 212.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup>Edelstein,213.

<sup>48</sup> Edelstein, 213-214.

desires to become a NASCAR member, all he has to do is apply for membership through the normal channels. He will be treated as any other driver and enjoy the full privileges of NASCAR -as long as he is a good boy."<sup>49</sup>

Until the American 500 in Rockingham, Turner's comeback did not go the way he had envisioned. As a self-described "Ford man," Turner could not find a factory ride with his favorite manufacturer. Turner blamed his age, 41, while the more likely explanation points to the fact that Ford could devote only so much money to its top rides. Fred Lorenzen won the Daytona 500, the World 600 at Turner's beloved Charlotte Motor Speedway, and another race at Martinsville (VA). Between Lorenzen, eventual champion Ned Jarrett, Marvin Panch, Dick Hutcherson, North Carolina moonshining legend Junior Johnson, and a young and feisty Cale Yarborough, Ford's 1965 dominance was in hand. Because Curtis Turner's skills had not been tested in NASCAR in four years, hiring him did not seem smart. It was not clear if Turner would even be able to race in the American 500 or any other race before the end of the season.<sup>50</sup>

Fortunes seemed to change for Turner when Lee Petty, Richard's father and Turner's rival in the 1950's, offered Curtis a chance to drive his son's number 43 Plymouth at the Piedmont Interstate Fair Grounds dirt track in Spartanburg, SC. Curtis totaled the car in qualifying. Turner then qualified eighth at Darlington in a sub-par Ford for the Southern 500, a race Turner dominated in the past. Bad luck struck on lap 51 when one of his wheel bearings gave way. Turner was getting the rides but nothing in the

<sup>49</sup>Edelstein,215. <sup>50</sup>  
Edelstein, 216-219.

future was guaranteed for the legend with the new North Carolina Speedway waiting in the future.<sup>51</sup>

Although Turner ended up finishing 35<sup>th</sup> at Darlington, Bill France's decision to bring Turner back was paying off. Over 50,000 fans packed the South Carolina track, 35,000 more than the Rebel 300 at Darlington earlier that year. After the Southern 500, Ford finally gave the Wood Brothers team permission and the funds to give Curtis a factory ride.<sup>52</sup> Not only was Curtis Turner back in NASCAR, but he now had a guaranteed ride. Turner ran the next two races at Hickory (North Carolina) and Richmond (Virginia) fairgrounds in cars owned by Junior Johnson. While he qualified well for both races (2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> respectively) an overheating engine would end Curtis' day early in both events. Attendance was up thanks to the return of Chrysler and Curtis Turner. The pieces were falling in place for a great race in Rockingham.<sup>53</sup>

Things began to turn around when Turner got behind the wheel of Glen and Leonard Wood's factory funded Fords. Although he was put out of the Martinsville race after a wreck and a shouting match with Chrysler tough guy Bobby Isaac, he posted finishes of fifth at North Wilkesboro (NC) and third at Charlotte (NC) in October. The shocks went out on the car at Charlotte but that did not stop Turner from participating in a late race battle for the win with Dick Hutcherson, Indy Car legend AJ. Foyt, and eventual winner Fred Lorenzen. When a reporter mentioned Turner to Lorenzen in victory lane, "Fast Freddie" interrupted the question with the announcement, "Curtis Turner is back. His physical endurance is amazing. His reflexes and skill have not been

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Turner had recommended that Ford hire the Wood Bros, as one of their teams when Ford entered the series in the mid 1950's.

<sup>53</sup> Edelstein, 219-221..

hampered by age".<sup>54</sup> Even though the busted shocks had given Turner a broken rib, he set his sights on the brand new, million dollar North Carolina Motor Speedway.<sup>55</sup>

North Carolina Motor Speedway made an immediate impact on the NASCAR community. Richard Petty, who was the first official entry and the pole sitter for the inaugural race, was quoted as saying "I can't recall any track that I've run at quite like this one."<sup>56</sup> Petty won the pole with a speed of 116.260 miles per hour. The pole winning lap was a new record for a one mile track.<sup>57</sup> Due to blown engines, Jim Paschal and Bobby Isaac had to start ninth and tenth. Both Chrysler factory drivers ran over 115 miles per hour. The top sixteen drivers qualified with speeds over 110 miles per hour.<sup>58</sup>

Winning at NASCAR's newest big event was important for different drivers for different reasons. David Pearson had won at all of the current superspeedways and wanted to add Rockingham, but NCMS was not like the other tracks and Pearson was out of it before it was over. Bobby Isaac was one of NASCAR's most successful drivers of the 1960's and early 70's but by 1965 Isaac had not won at a superspeedway or in the south. The Newton, NC native pointed out "that's where it means the most to me".<sup>59</sup> He continued,

You haven't really arrived in stock car racing until you win at a superspeedway. That's where the prestige and money are, and now that I've scored short races up north, a superspeedway win is the only thing missing. Wouldn't it be nice if my first one came in the first race at Rockingham. °

<sup>54</sup> Edelstein, 227

<sup>55</sup> Edelstein, 225-227.

<sup>56</sup> "'No other track like this one' Comments Petty" *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC).

<sup>57</sup> "Richard Petty Wins Pole For American 500 Event". *Asheville Citizen Times*, 28 October 1965.

<sup>58</sup> "Paschal and Isaac Top Rockingham Qualifiers". *Asheville Citizen Times*, 29 October 1965.

<sup>59</sup> "Pearson and Isaac Have Special Reasons For Wanting To Win American 500 Race" *Richmond County Daily Journal*, 26 October 1965.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

As early as its first race, Rockingham was seen as a drivers track. Power was unimportant, handling and driving skill were seen as what was needed to win. Even though the hemi powered cars of Richard Petty and Jim Paschal dominated the week of time trials, there was no clear cut favorite for the win. While names like Pearson, Isaac, Petty, Yarborough, and Lorenzen came up, no one was giving Turner a chance.<sup>61</sup> Although the drivers and crews agreed that the best handling car would be the one to win, they had a hard time finding the perfect setup the one mile, high banked track. The most important of which was the gear -horsepower ratio. Crew chiefs had to find the right balance between how much horsepower to give the engine with how the car should be geared to handle North Carolina Motor Speedway's highly banked turns. Junior Johnson, Fred Lorenzen, Cale Yarborough, and Ned Jarrett all suffered from blown engines due to gearing problems.

The American 500, the 54<sup>1</sup> of a grueling 55-race season, was Curtis Turner's seventh and final start of 1965. The newest jewel in NASCAR's growing empire and the fastest one mile track in the nation attracted the biggest stars of the day: Richard Petty, David Pearson, Bobby Isaac, Junior Johnson, Fred Lorenzen, Ned Jarrett, Cale Yarborough, Dick Hutcherson, Marvin Panch, Neil "Soapy" Castles, and Buddy Baker.<sup>63</sup> What is even more impressive is that all of the major manufacturers were there. Ford, Mercury, Chevrolet, Pontiac, Plymouth, Dodge, and Chrysler were all together for the first time that season. Forty-eight thousand fans sold out the first race at the new track and ignored the hot and windy conditions of the day to enjoy the only race that year that

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<sup>61</sup> "Power 'Unimportant' In Rockingham 500". *Asheville Citizen Times*, 27 October 1965.

<sup>62</sup> "Shattered Engines Sweep Leaders At Rockingham". *Asheville Citizen Times*, 26 October

<sup>63</sup> 1965.

Waid, 8.

was set up to satisfy all fans. The most popular drivers and all the makes were together for the first time all season.<sup>64</sup>

Forty-eight thousand fans flooded into Richmond County to see the Turner's comeback completed.<sup>65</sup> A Seaboard Air Line Railroad special train was made up to carry race fans from the Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia to the race. The train left Washington five minutes after midnight and arrived in Hamlet at 8:20 the morning of the race after making six stops along the way.<sup>66</sup> Traffic jams plagued the area on race day. The North Carolina Highway Patrol's only suggestion to alleviate the problem in the future was more road space to handle the estimated 20,000 cars that made it to the race. Traffic was still bumper to bumper on US Highway 1 and NC Highway 177 at seven o'clock that night. At that same time, some cars still had not been able to even get out of the parking lot.<sup>67</sup>

The heat began bearing down on the track early in the morning. Turner took a nap on top of his car, trying to sleep off the partying that he had participated in the night before. While the Wood Brothers worried enough about the rib to have relief drivers on hand in case Curtis cannot make it through the 500 miles. Leonard Wood was concerned that the sand on the track is going to eat up the brakes during the course of the race. He told Curtis, that the driver with the best chance of winning would be the one who

<sup>64</sup> Edelstein, 211-57. and "Competition Will Be Lively," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 23 October 1965.

<sup>65</sup> "Thousands View Turner's Victory In Inaugural American 500 Race," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 1 November 1965.

<sup>66</sup> "Special Train Brings Fans to Race From Va.-Md. Area," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 26 November 1965.

<sup>67</sup> "Race Fans Fill Sandhills Area," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 1 November 1965.

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conserved their brakes. Curtis held back during the race. He could have passed Johnson for the lead early, but he continued to save the car.<sup>69</sup>

The attrition rate climbed as the day went on. With 75 miles to go, Sears, Petty, and Pearson were collected in wrecks, Johnson, Lorenzen, Isaac, and Jarrett all lost

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engines and Jim Paschal gave way to the heat. Petty took over Paschal's car and put it into a position to win but a lengthy late race pit stop took him out of contention.<sup>71</sup> The battle was between Turner and Cale Yarborough. Although the engine temperature climbed, the brakes kept loosening, and Turner hit the wall twice in the last ten laps, the car never quit. It was Turner's first win since the 1958 Rebel 300 at Darlington.<sup>72</sup> Curtis

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Turner pulled into victory lane to the sound of cheering that was so loud it shook the ground.

The inaugural race at North Carolina Motor Speedway was a huge success. Turner won the race by 11 seconds over a young Cale Yarborough, who declared afterward that Turner might have been 41 years old, but he still had all his skills.<sup>74</sup> "He is still a great driver; I don't think there is much doubt about that. He showed that out there today," Yarborough told reporters after the race.<sup>75</sup> Yarborough went on to win seven races at North Carolina Motor Speedway in his career but finished second in Rockingham's inaugural race to his idol. North Carolina Motor Speedway's first race was a success in all aspects, ticket sales, great racing, star power, and it set the stage for the 1966 season. A legend completed his comeback, NASCAR and the manufacturers

<sup>69</sup>Edelstein, 211-57.

<sup>70</sup>ibid

<sup>71</sup> "Curtis Turner Drives Ford To Win American 500," *Asheville Citizen Times*, 1 November 1965.

<sup>72</sup> "'American 500' To Curtis Turner". *National Speed Sport News*, 2 November 1965, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Edelstein, 211-57.

<sup>74</sup> Waid, 8.

<sup>75</sup> "American 500' To Curtis Turner," 14.

showed that they could bury the hatchet, and the superspeedway era was now in full swing.<sup>76</sup>

Over the years "The Rock" became one of the favorite stops on the circuit among drivers and fans. In 1973 David Pearson, driving for the Wood Brothers, won October's American 500 by a lap over Buddy Baker. The real story though was 28<sup>th</sup> place finisher and Richmond County resident Benny Parsons. Parsons entered the last race of the season with a 194.35 point lead on Richard Petty for the 1973 championship. Under the former point system, that wasn't a lot. On lap thirteen Parsons was involved in a seven car pileup that should have ended his race and his hopes for a championship.<sup>77</sup> The right side of the car was torn off, the wheels were gone, and the axle was broken.<sup>78</sup>

The other teams rallied to the underdog. Scavenging parts off of another car that didn't make the field, Parsons' crew and members of other crews put the car back on the track. Parsons' crew along with members of other teams cut the roll cage out of Bobby Mausgrover's car and welded it into the number 72 Chevrolet. Mausgrover was nowhere to be found.<sup>79</sup> Parsons did finish the race but was 84 laps down to Pearson. Petty had problems of his own. Petty bowed out of the event after 138 laps when the engine failed in his Dodge. Petty wound up out of the race and the title chase after finishing 35<sup>th</sup>.<sup>80</sup> Parsons squeaked by Cale Yarborough by 67.15 points for the championship (7,173.80-7106.65). "I was lower than the gutter when I first came back to the pits," Parsons said.

<sup>76</sup> NASCAR, *The Official NASCAR Preview and Press Guide 1997*, UMI Publications, 1997 and Edelstein, 211-57.

<sup>77</sup> "Parsons Is NASCAR Champ; Pearson Takes Final 500". *National Speed Sport News*, 24 October 1973, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Bob Myers, "Benny Parsons," *Stock Car Racing*. March 1974, 27-31.

<sup>79</sup> Jim McLauren, "Rockingham: a special place," *The State*, 1 November 2003, sec. C.

<sup>80</sup> "Parsons Is NASCAR Champ; Pearson Takes Final 500". *National Speed Sport News*.

<sup>81</sup> McLauren, *The State*, 1 November 2003.

<sup>82</sup> McLauren, *The State*, 1 November 2003. and "Parsons Is NASCAR Champ; Pearson Takes Final 500". *National Speed Sport News*.

"We were out of it. ... But I really got inspired when I saw everyone swarming over my car. What they did was a real miracle." L.G. DeWitt was the owner of Parsons' number 72 car. It was a local victory for Richmond County. A local team won at their local track.<sup>84</sup>

"The King" Richard Petty won his eleventh race at North Carolina Motor Speedway on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1983, and still holds that record for most wins at the facility. The victory was the 196<sup>th</sup> of Petty's record 200.<sup>85</sup> The race took over a week to complete thanks to a common problem for Rockingham races, rain. The track's late February/early March and late October/early November dates made its races susceptible to unpredictable weather which caused the races to be postponed or stopped and continued later. The spring race in 1983 was the only 500 mile race (up to that point) to be split into two parts. The Warner Hodgdon Carolina 500 ran 143 laps until Rockingham became

"Rainingham" with Cale Yarborough leading Bobby Allison and Neil Bonnett. A week later, Richard Petty, a Level Cross, North Carolina native, scored a very popular win by

half a car length over Bill Elliott. The win snapped a 42 race losing streak for the sport's most decorated driver. Yarborough and Bonnett had dominated the race until the last forty laps when the duel between Petty and Elliott took center stage. After the race the grandstands were full of standing, waving, and cheering fans. The fans in the infield all moved toward victory lane. Petty's fans surrounded victory lane and chanted his

<sup>83</sup> Myers, 27-31.

<sup>84</sup> Granger, 66-72.

<sup>85</sup> McLauren, *The State*, 1 November 2003.

<sup>86</sup> "Two Part Carolina 500 Will Resume On Sunday," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 11 March 1983.

<sup>87</sup> Gary Greene, "King Richard Reigns On The Throne Again," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 14 March 1983.

<sup>88</sup> Benny Phillips, "Half-Length Petty Win Ends Long Losing String," *National Speed Sport News*, 16 March 1983, 3.

name and then waited outside the press box so they could walk with him back to the garage area.<sup>89</sup> Petty stood before long lines of fans for hours after the checkered flag fell; signing anything they put in front of him from pictures and tee shirts to bare skin. This was the quality that drew fans to Petty. He one of the most accessible drivers in the history of the sport and on this day, and many others, the fans at Rockingham loved him for it.<sup>90</sup>

NASCAR and "The Rock" continued to grow in popularity. In 1991, North Carolina Motor Speedway's spring event was the first event broadcasted live by The Nashville Network (TNN, now Spike TV).<sup>91</sup> "When it comes to ratings the Rock delivers."<sup>92</sup> Rockingham was always one of the most popular races with the fans. Its on-track action always drew high ratings. Even in its final years of NASCAR racing, races at the Rock had over seven million households tune in to each of its races. It was surprisingly popular in Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Tampa. In 2002 Rockingham was behind only the Daytona 500 and Las Vegas' race in the Nielsen ratings. In 2003 the number of households that tuned in to see racing at "the Rock" increased by 11 million and went up double digits in key demographics. This proved that fans that wanted to watch NASCAR wanted to see NASCAR at North Carolina Speedway because of its demand for driver talent and the close racing action.<sup>93</sup>

Mill town life is a common thread among piedmont residents. Rockingham and Kannapolis, a mill town outside of Charlotte, shared that thread. These mill town residents were, more times than not, Dale Earnhardt fans. Dale Earnhardt was from

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<sup>89</sup> Greene, *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 14 March 1983.

<sup>90</sup> Phillips, 3.

<sup>91</sup> "Steeped in History"

<sup>92</sup> "Why NASCAR Should Keep Racing at The Rock" Richmond County Board of Commissioners, 2003.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid

Kannapolis, North Carolina, and was just like his fans. On race day the grandstands at "the Rock" were filled with paraphernalia covered in forward leaning threes. Dale's father Ralph was a dirt track legend in the Carolinas. Dale was seen as a rough and tumble character who talked the same way as his fans, acted like his fans, and drove like his fans only wished they could. Earnhardt was hugely popular with fans that frequented races at "The Rock". It was a happy day when Dale Earnhardt won the October 1994 AC Delco 500 in Rockingham. The win locked up his seventh Winston Cup championship, tying him with Richard Petty for the most all time. Earnhardt won the race by only 0.06 of a second over Rick Mast. Earnhardt led 104 laps on the day including the last 77. The record setting day was marked by two huge roars from the record crowd, the first for Rusty Wallace's (Earnhardt's closest competitor) blown engine and the second when Earnhardt took the checkered flag.<sup>94</sup> It was not until the end of the race that Earnhardt's team told him that Wallace's car was in the garage and the championship was his. Earnhardt clinched the 1987 title at Rockingham as well, and just like 1994, there were still two races remaining in the season.<sup>95</sup>

However, on this day in Rockingham there "was an odd mixture of Earnhardt swagger and genuine humility about him that he had tied perhaps the only man who would ever hold a loftier place in the pantheon of NASCAR gods."<sup>96</sup> In the postrace interview, Earnhardt spoke eloquently about his place in the sport; He commented on the respect he had for the sport and for men like Petty who set such a high standard.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> "Earnhardt Takes Race Here, Clinching Winston Cup Title" *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 24 October 1994. and Benny Phillips, "Dale's Big Day, Win & 7<sup>th</sup> Title At Rockingham". *National Speed Sport News*, 26 October 1994, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Phillips, 3.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> McLauren, *The State*, 1 November 2003.

Another popular personality for fans of "The Rock" was Richard Petty. At the 1997 AC Delco 400, Bobby Hamilton was a lame-duck driver with Petty Enterprises owned by Richard. A year to the day earlier, he had given the team its only win since Richard Petty retired in 1992 and the team's first victory since 1984. "Most people thought he didn't owe them a thing. OK, so Petty sweetened the pot. As the racing season wore down, Petty bet Hamilton \$100,000 that he couldn't win a race before he left."<sup>98</sup> Hamilton restarted third for a 22-lap run to the end. Hamilton passed Dale Jarrett for second on lap 376 and Ricky Craven for the lead two laps later." The last race Richard Petty won at Rockingham was after a rain delay, and the first race he won at Rockingham as an owner was after a rain delay too. The AC Delco 400 was rained out on Sunday and completed Monday morning. On Tuesday the headline read "Sun comes out for King Richard". It was a popular win for fans and the entire NASCAR community.<sup>100</sup>

The week between the Daytona 500 and the spring race at Rockingham was usually an exciting time for NASCAR and the residents of Richmond County. The drivers loved making the trip north from Florida. The hype surrounding the 500 was over and the circuit would move to a driver's track where, as Tony Stewart put it, "you really felt like the season had officially started".<sup>101</sup> Not in 2001. NASCAR's biggest superstar and the man that ushered the sport into the new millennium, Dale Earnhardt died on the last lap of the 2001 Daytona 500. The racing community was devastated. Earnhardt's death cast a somber mood over the NASCAR community.<sup>102</sup> On February 23, 2001, the

<sup>98</sup> Ibid  
<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> "Sun comes out for King Richard" *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 28 October 1997.

<sup>101</sup> "Why NASCAR Should Keep Racing at The Rock," Richmond County Board of Commissioners, 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Jacob Russo, "Drivers heading for Rockingham in somber mood," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 19 February 2001.

day after Dale Sr.'s funeral<sup>103</sup> in Charlotte, the Winston Cup circuit headed 75 miles east to Rockingham for a race no one was in the mood to run. "In what seemed like a message from above, rain postponed the Dura-Lube 400 for a day. When the green flag fell on Monday morning, [Dale Earnhardt] Junior hit the wall on the first lap, ending his day."<sup>104</sup>

The fans were able to find solace in an exciting finish. Steve Park, driving for Dale Earnhardt Inc., bumped his way by defending Winston Cup champ Bobby Labonte and won by two car lengths. "I did what Dale Earnhardt would have done." argued Park. Park's big break came when Earnhardt gave him a Busch Series<sup>105</sup> ride in 1997. He was understandably emotional. Late in the race the tears were flowing so fast that he had to wipe his nose with his hand. "It's been a tough week and this has been a dream finish," he said. "Dale's gone but he's not forgotten, and he's going to be with all the DEI drivers the rest of the year."<sup>106</sup> It was one of the most emotional victories in NASCAR history. For once the rain that fell at Rockingham did not turn the track into "Rainingham" again but made it a day to remember a legend. On Monday, "the clouds that cast grey pall over NASCAR -both figuratively and literally -since the death of Dale Earnhardt Sr. and that rained out the Dura Lube 400 at North Carolina Speedway parted." Blue skies broke through for NASCAR and its fans.<sup>107</sup>

The Pop Secret Microwave Popcorn 400 on November 2, 2003 was the last fall NASCAR race at "The Rock". However, the final fall Winston Cup race at Rockingham has its place in NASCAR lore. Matt Kenseth and Jack Roush won their first

<sup>103</sup> Earnhardt is referred to as Dale Sr. here because his son, Dale Earnhardt Jr., joined the Cup circuit full time in 2000.

<sup>104</sup> Mark Bechtel, "The Son Rises," *Sports Illustrated Special Commemorative Issue*, 5 December 2001, 36-37.

<sup>105</sup> The NASCAR Busch Series is NASCAR's second tier national touring series that can be best compared to Major League Baseball's Triple A.

<sup>106</sup> Bechtel, 36-37.

<sup>107</sup> "The sun comes out and the race goes on" *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 27 February 2001.

championship. The Pop Secret 400 was won by veteran Bill Elliott at the speedway

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where his Winston Cup career began. Hotels in the area were booked solid for the week by fans who wanted to see the last edition of North Carolina Speedway's fall classic.<sup>109</sup> In June 2003, NASCAR announced what had been feared by Rockingham for years. North Carolina Speedway would lose its fall race date, a blow to a community whose economy badly needed the \$25 million per race.<sup>110</sup>

It's bad for the Carolinas, where racing was supported long before corporate big wigs took the good ole boy sport and developed it into suits and engineering degrees. It's bad for the fans who after years of following NASCAR in the Carolinas, have watched what they built be slowly taken away.<sup>111</sup>

North Carolina Speedway only had one race on the 2004 Nextel Cup Series schedule. The Subway 400 on February 22" and the rumors were flying all weekend. Many felt it would be the last race ever at The Rock. It was. The tracks date was given to Texas Motor Speedway for 2005 as the result of Francis Ferko's lawsuit against NASCAR. On the day of the race all parties involved, International Speedway Corporation<sup>112</sup>, Speedway Motorsports Incorporated<sup>113</sup>, and Chris Browning<sup>114</sup>, denied that the track was going to be sold to Bruton Smith's SMI as part of a lawsuit settlement. What was admitted during race weekend was that Chris Browning was still lobbying NASCAR, as he had for years, for a better date.<sup>115</sup> In what became the last Cup race at North Carolina Speedway in February 2004, defending champion Matt Kenseth survived

<sup>108</sup> Waid, 8.

<sup>109</sup> John Myers, "Last fall race fills Richmond hotels," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 6 November 2003.

<sup>110</sup> Scott J. Bryan, "White flag for racing at The Rock?," *Richmond County Daily Journal* (NC), 11 November 2003.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> ISC owned North Carolina Speedway at the time. ISC's CEO was Bill France Jr.

<sup>113</sup> SMI would later acquire NCS in a lawsuit settlement and give the dates to other tracks owned by SMI.

<sup>114</sup> Executive vice president and general manager of NCS.

<sup>115</sup> Jeff Owens, "Last Stand?," *NASCAR Scene*, 26 February 2002, 12.

a last lap charge by eventual Rookie of the Year Kasey Kahne and won by .010 seconds. It was the fourth closest finish in Cup series history.<sup>116</sup>

It was hard for fans and the media to think about "The Rock" losing races. "North Carolina Motor Speedway is going to be part of Winston Cup for a long time. Rockingham, naysayers insist, is a small market that won't be able to keep pace as NASCAR raises the bar on race purses." The truth was that Rockingham was ahead of most tracks in money paid per lap and how much the lower finishing cars earned. North Carolina Speedway's VP/ general manager Chris Browning said, "Markets are important, but so is what you have and how you use it." The track also had a lucrative contract with General Motors whose Goodwrench and AC Delco brands sponsored the two races. Winston Cup Illustrated's Thomas Pope told fans to "Take Rockingham off your hit list- you've missed the target."<sup>117</sup>

Many were upset by NASCAR's decision to take Rockingham off the schedule for the 2005 season. The Rock survived NASCAR's popularity explosion of the 1970's and 1980's but it had bigger problems looming in the 1990's. While the racing itself was still some of the best NASCAR could offer and TV ratings were still high, ticket sales slumped. Tracks began popping up in larger markets starting with a track in New England. New Hampshire International opened in 1993; Indianapolis Motor Speedway joined the circuit in 1994, Texas Motor Speedway (in the Dallas- Ft. Worth market) and California Speedway (in the Los Angeles market) opened in 1997, Las Vegas Motor Speedway in 1998, Miami-Homestead Speedway in 1999, and Kansas Speedway (Kansas

<sup>116</sup> Keith Parsons, "NASCAR not just an N.C. thing," *Salisbury Post*, 9 June 2005, sec.C.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Pope, "Don't Look for Rockingham in the Rearview Mirror," *Winston Cup Illustrated*, May 1997, 10.

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City market) and Chicagoland Speedway in 2001. With all these new tracks vying for dates someone would have to give theirs up. The small market names immediately came up. The NFL's Green Bay Packers is the only example outside of NASCAR where major sport has survived in small markets. '

In the 1990's, rumors began to surface that tracks in small markets were at risk to lose their races. Rockingham along with Darlington, South Carolina, Bristol, Tennessee, Martinsville, Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, and Talladega, Alabama were all tossed in the rumor mill. Thanks to Talladega's 2.667 miles length and high banks that breed speeds of 200 plus miles-per-hour speeds, it was quickly taken off the list, leaving six of NASCAR's most storied tracks. Bristol, Martinsville, and Richmond are perennial sellouts so Rockingham, Darlington and North Wilkesboro were left. Bill Bahre (the owner of New Hampshire) and Bruton Smith (chairman of SMI) bought North Wilkesboro Speedway and shut it down in 1997. The two cleared dates were then used to award New Hampshire a second date and to give Texas its first date.<sup>120</sup>

Conclusion: "NASCAR officials will never completely rid the sport of the stain of the red

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clay in which its seeds germinated and flourished."

Media and fans were angered by the loss of dates for North Carolina Speedway. Many believed "The Rock" is what the sport should be about. Multiple grooves and an abrasive racing surface bred great racing. David Newton, motorsports writer for *The State*

<sup>118</sup> NASCAR, *The Official NASCAR Preview and Press Guide 1997*

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> Keith Parsons, "NASCAR not just an N.C. thing," *Salisbury Post*, 9 June 2005, sec.C.

<sup>12</sup> fierce, 26-41.

in Columbia, South Carolina wrote, "For 39 years, the speedway in Rockingham, N.C., hosted a NASCAR event. Not anymore. Instead, the second weekend of the Nextel Cup racing series will be staged in Southern California while The Rock sits as empty as a ghost town."<sup>122</sup> "With the push for tracks in New York and Seattle and a commitment not to grow past a 36- week schedule, NASCAR could be looking to clear more dates on the calendar. It has been said that "There is more NASCAR history at Darlington and Rockingham than at all tracks west of the Mississippi combined"<sup>123</sup>. At the entrance to North Carolina Speedway, a large rock engraved with the names of past champions is a testament to that history."<sup>124</sup> Richard Petty, Bobby Allison, Cale Yarborough, David Pearson, Darrell Waltrip, Dale Earnhardt, Rusty Wallace, Dale Jarrett, Jeff Gordon. They've all won at The Rock.<sup>125</sup>

NASCAR continues to grow even after "The Rock" was taken off the Nextel Cup Schedule in 2005. However,

Even before Bill France met with a group of men in a smoke-filled Ebony Bar at the Streamline Hotel in Daytona Beach in 1947 to create NASCAR, stock car racing had become deeply ingrained into the culture of the piedmont working class. France, and later his son Bill Jr., took piedmont stock car racing to a national audience and created something that bears little physical resemblance to the rough and tumble, ramshackle world of the piedmont dirt track racing. However, try as they might, NASCAR officials will never completely rid the sport of the stain of the red clay in which its seeds germinated and flourished."<sup>126</sup>

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NASCAR, *The Official NASCAR Preview and Press Guide 2007*, UMI Publications, 2007.

<sup>126</sup> Pierce, 26-41.

<sup>122</sup> Newton, *The State*, 25 February 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

<sup>124</sup> Ibid

<sup>125</sup>

North Carolina Speedway was home to some of NASCAR's most memorable moments and fans were entertained. From 1965 until 2004 "The Rock" helped bring big time sports home to its roots. On October 4, 2007 Speedway Motorsports Incorporated auctioned off North Carolina Speedway. The track had been appraised at thirty million dollars. Former NASCAR driver and racing school owner Andy Hillenburg won with a bid of four million. In addition to placing his driving school there, Hillenburg wants racing to return to "the Rock". Maybe one day it will add more to NASCAR's history.<sup>127</sup>

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