

In the Fast Lane: Local NASCAR Legends

The history of the National Association of Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) has varied roots that include everything from world auto speed records at Daytona Beach, Florida to transporting bootleg whiskey, or moonshine, in the hills of Virginia and North Carolina. Beginning almost with the advent of the automobile, speed trials were held at Daytona Beach as early as 1905 and by 1935 fifteen records had been set on the wide beach, which lent itself to this purpose with hard-packed sand and low tides. In 1936, a road course race track was established there with the beach as one straightaway and Florida Highway A1A as the other. Meanwhile, in areas such as Floyd County, Virginia and Wilkes County, North Carolina, drivers transporting illicit whiskey modified their cars for greater speed, and maneuverability to help them evade police with heavy loads of liquor. Cars were "souped-up" for optimum speed, handling, and hauling capacity while the bootleggers learned to drive accurately at high speeds. Bragging rights for the fastest car soon developed into informal races.

Back in Daytona, mechanic and service station owner, William France, Sr., entered the first road course event here in 1936. France finished fifth and he began operating the Daytona track in 1938. As the popularity of race events grew, France saw the need for a sanctioning body to establish rules, schedules, and a championship. His idea was simple, yet unique. France believed that people would enjoy watching races of unmodified, roadready cars – stock cars. France, along with influential drivers and promoters, founded NASCAR during meetings at the Streamline Hotel in Daytona Beach in February of 1948.

The first event hosted by the new body was at the Daytona Beach road course on February 15, 1948. Eight tracks were on the first Strictly Stock division schedule in 1949: Charlotte Motor Speedway (then located on Wilkinson Boulevard); Martinsville Speedway in Martinsville, Virginia; Occoneechee Speedway in Hillsborough, North Carolina; Daytona Beach Road Course; Heidelberg Speedway in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; North Wilkesboro Speedway in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina and tracks in Langhorne, Pennsylvania and Hamburg, New York. All of these tracks were dirt. The only track used during the inaugural season still on the modern NASCAR circuit is the Martinsville Speedway in Martinsville, Virginia.

The original Strictly Stock division, renamed "Grand National" in 1951, did not allow any modifications to the cars apart from fine-tuning the engine. Slowly safety concerns brought about an increasing amount of modification to the stock cars beginning with mandated roll bars in 1952. The idea of safety was secondary to the promotion of the thrill of racing stock cars, however, as shown by the introduction of a Convertible Division in 1956. The auto manufacturers played a key role in the advent of this division as the popularity of the fledgling sport showed promise as an advertising venue for new family sedans. An early driver in the Convertible Division was Curtis Turner.

Curtis Turner, from Floyd, Virginia, was one of many drivers in this region who embraced the sport during its early days. Most drivers were only part-time racers. Turner, however, was a serious competitor who won twenty two races in the Convertible Division and seventeen in the Grand National; primarily in the 1950s. Other notable

local drivers were Clyde Lynn and Jabe Thomas who raced the NASCAR circuit in the 1960s and 1970s. They were followed by Jabe's son, Ronnie, who won Rookie of the Year honors in 1978; he raced the circuit through the early 1980s NASCAR, and the Grand National division, proved successful almost immediately upon its establishment. Due in large measure to the identification fans in the Southeast held with the sport. The region lacked representation in major sports; major league baseball and professional football and basketball did not come to the South until the 1960s and 1970s. Even mainstream auto racing scheduled few events in the South, but the Grand National events were viewed as a truly Southern sport.

Growing numbers of fans encouraged local entrepreneurs to build new race venues. Small tracks sprang up throughout Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Among these were the Floyd Speedway, the Radford Speedway, and Victory Stadium in Roanoke. On the larger NASCAR circuit, the Darlington Raceway in Darlington, South Carolina became the first "super speedway" and was then the circuit's only fully-paved track. Built in 1950 by a local peanut farmer, Harold Brasington, the 1.38 mile track was wider and banked higher than any previous track. In 1959, the high-banked, 2.5 mile Daytona Speedway opened and was followed by the 1.5 mile Charlotte Motor Speedway (built by Curtis Turner and Bruton Smith) in 1961. Drivers like Jabe Thomas and Clyde Lynn were common throughout the southeast as the sport grew. While they took racing seriously, investing time and their own money into preparing a car and getting themselves and a pit crew to the racetracks, they rarely earned their living racing. By the 1960s, the NASCAR circuit included a staggering sixty races. Gradually, the demands of travel, the competitiveness of the sport, the trend towards greater modifications to the cars, and increased profit-margins and investments forced out part-time drivers. Jabe Thomas bought his first race car for \$4000 in 1965.

Expenses to enter the races at this time were relatively low. Tires, for example, cost \$15 each. In about 1969, RC Cola sponsored Thomas for one race; the team received two cases of pop. Another time, Nolan's Restaurant in Roanoke sponsored Thomas for \$50, but it cost \$75 to have their logo painted on the car. Throughout the 1960s, NASCAR slowly began moving into mainstream American culture although its roots and much of its fan base remained in the Southeast. In 1960, CBS aired a pair of twenty-five-mile pole position races at Daytona. The following year, ABC televised the Firecracker 250 from Daytona. In 1979, the Daytona 500 became the first nationally televised NASCAR race. In 1985, the Grand National Circuit was renamed the Winston Cup indicating the advances of corporate sponsorship.

NASCAR has grown into a multi-million dollar industry. Drivers are stars synonymous with their sponsors and all races are televised. The Darlington infield, where a jail was once required to help maintain peace, has been divided into the President's Suite, the Azalea Terrace, where tickets cost \$500 and the Fourth Turn Club with a large corporate tent. Fighting incurs a \$10,000 fine and drivers work to personify an image or lifestyle approved of by their sponsors. In the words of Junior Johnson, "It's all been tamed now."