

## **Wendell Scott: Black, Rural, and Poor in the Early Days of NASCAR**

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### ABSTRACT

Wendell Scott was the most successful African-American driver in the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR). He faced many challenges, both as a man of color and an independent driver. His struggle to succeed as a driver paralleled the civil rights era in the same geographic location. Other than ethnicity, Scott had the credentials to become a racecar driver. A poor man from a rural area who was involved in running moonshine, Scott struggled to compete but succeeded in becoming a fulltime racecar driver. His love for the sport allowed him to face adversity. Despite competing in a sport that did not openly welcome him, he found respect in the racing community. His mechanical ability, driving skills, and determination are being honored years after his retirement and death. Wendell Scott, called the Jackie Robinson of NASCAR, opened a path for diversity in a typically segregated time and place. His family continues to honor his memory and share his experience with the world.

*Keywords:* Wendell Scott, NASCAR, civil rights, racing, Bill France, rural, moonshine, the South

## **Wendell Scott: negro, rural y pobre en los primeros días de NASCAR**

### RESUMEN

Wendell Scott fue el piloto afroamericano más exitoso en NASCAR. Se enfrentó a muchos desafíos, tanto como un hombre de color y un conductor independiente. Su lucha por tener éxito como conductor fue paralela a la era de los derechos civiles en la misma ubicación geográfica. Además de la etnia, Scott tenía las creden-

ciales para convertirse en un piloto de carreras. Un hombre pobre de una zona rural que estaba involucrado en el funcionamiento de la luz de la luna, Scott luchó para competir, pero logró convertirse en un piloto de carreras de tiempo completo. Su amor por el deporte le permitió enfrentar la adversidad. A pesar de competir en un deporte que no lo acogió abiertamente, encontró respeto en la comunidad de carreras. Su habilidad mecánica, habilidades de manejo y determinación están siendo honrados años después de su retiro y muerte. Wendell Scott, llamado Jackie Robinson de NASCAR, abrió un camino para la diversidad en un tiempo y lugar típicamente segregados. Su familia continúa honrando su memoria y comparte su experiencia con el mundo.

**Palabra clave:** Wendell Scott, NASCAR, derechos civiles, carreras, Bill France, rural, moonshine, Sur

## 温德尔·斯科特：纳斯卡赛车（NASCAR） 早期的农村黑人贫民

### 摘要

温德尔·斯科特曾是纳斯卡赛车（NASCAR）史上最成功的非裔美国赛车手。作为一名有色人种和独立赛车手，他都面临过许多挑战。他为成为一名赛车手所经历的奋斗可以与非裔美国人在同地区争取公民权力的时代相媲美。除民族身份外，斯科特有资格成为一名赛车手。作为一名贩卖私酿酒的农村贫民，斯科特奋力（与同行）竞争，但却成功当上了一名全职赛车手。他对运动的热爱让他能够直面困难。尽管在一个未曾公开表示欢迎的体育运动中参与竞争，他却在赛车社群中获得了尊重。在其退休和去世后的十几年，他的机械技能、驾车技术和决心仍然受到尊敬和推崇。温德尔·斯科特被称作NASCAR界的杰基·罗宾森，他在一个典型的种族隔离时空中开创了一条通往多样性的道路。他的家人继续尊崇他的记忆，并将他的经历与全世界分享。

关键词：斯科特，温德尔，纳斯卡赛车（NASCAR），公民权利，赛车，法国，Bill，农村，私酿酒，South

The National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) was developed during the post-World War II era to showcase drivers competing in so-called “stock cars.” Stock referred to a vehicle that could be bought from a local car dealer. It meant a car that might be modified but could be driven on the road. Many of the early drivers hauled illegal moonshine from hidden production sites, stills, to illicit distribution points, often in distant cities. They developed excellent driving skills while learning to evade government officials, the G-men, T-men, and revenueurs, who wanted them to pay taxes. Some of these drivers were war veterans seeking excitement that was lacking in dreary, rural areas. A popular leisure activity involved local drivers meeting together to test their skills in open-road and closed-course races. These races primarily developed in the white, rural, and poor piedmont regions of the American South. Wendell Scott (1921-1990) fit the description of a stock car driver, with the exception that he was not white. As the first African American to win a top-level NASCAR race (1963), he fought discrimination and influenced today’s still-primarily white, but more inclusive racing entertainment. As an African American driving in NASCAR and other races during the height of the civil rights movement, Wendell Scott presents an integration story unique to his geographical and cultural location.

The early NASCAR drivers included a cadre of men who drove Thunder Road, a nickname for the routes traveled by those carrying illicit

moonshine. Tim Flock (1924–1998) and Junior Johnson (b. 1931) drove illegal alcohol from its creation point to distributors and sellers. Bootlegging, which boomed during Prohibition, was still common after the Second World War. However, the driving experience was a geographically specialized activity through rural hills and over a variety of road surfaces. While these drivers were a starting point, NASCAR was also a set of tightly controlled rules that made racing competitive

NASCAR’s official foundation began in December 1947 at the Streamline Hotel in Daytona, Florida. This meeting, organized by Bill France, Sr., brought together promoters, drivers, mechanics, and car owners to discuss sanctioning a set of rules for racing. No official records were kept, but the consensus of attendees was that France dominated the group and knew what he wanted; the result was NASCAR. The first official NASCAR-sanctioned race occurred on February 15, 1948 at the Daytona Beach-road course. On February 21, the organization received its incorporation. However, the first premier series event was not held until June 19, 1949 at the Charlotte [North Carolina] Fairgrounds. This event featured stock cars that looked like those driven on the street. This concept put NASCAR on a path to popularity.<sup>1</sup>

Without the forceful personality of France, NASCAR would not have been formed, yet every attempt to present a history of the sport starts well before the 1947 meetings. Racing is a natural human impulse, and car rac-

ing starts with the invention of the automobile. Drivers competed with their skill behind the wheel, and mechanics competed to build the best car. France, the son of a bank clerk, trained as a mechanic and developed an infatuation with racing. He explained it by saying, "I just liked to go fast. I don't think I was unusual. I just wanted to be a race driver, but then everybody I knew wanted to be a race driver. Go out and ask every kid who likes to drive fast if he'd like to be a race driver and he'll say, yes." Speed was synonymous with Daytona Beach, and in 1934 he moved there with his wife and son. Thus, the stage was set for stock car racing to develop into a legitimate sport.<sup>2</sup>

The sands of Daytona allowed cars to obtain high speeds, but most drivers grew up on red clay and raced on dirt roads and tracks cut into fields or pastures. "Southern stock car racing cannot be properly understood without understanding its strong connections to a particular region, to a particular time, and to a particular group of people."<sup>3</sup> Tim Flock admitted that when racing started, it was "Just a bunch of these bootleggers who'd been arguing all week about who had the fastest car would get together and prove it." The first races were held in fields without admission or purses. Flock continued, "Then Bill France came along and he started putting up fences, the whole bit. He made stock car racing what it is today."<sup>4</sup>

The South had all the factors needed to make NASCAR into a sport. The geography and geology allowed tracks to be built easily. There were driv-

ers to perform and people who wanted to watch.

Like the most important and original cultural contributions of the South, NASCAR emerged from the genius of the southern working class, as part of what historian Pete Daniel termed an "unlikely renaissance" of "low-down culture." Born on the beach at Daytona in 1936, the sport was nurtured in the Piedmont South by the mother's milk of white lightning. All of its early organizers, participants, and fans were working-class individuals attracted to the sport as an ultimate expression of freedom in a confining life defined by rural poverty or by the restrictive life of the mill and the milltown. As racing promoter H. A. "Humpty" Wheeler observed, "Guys might have worked in the mill. They might have been an electrician. They might have been a plumber, whatever. But they had these strict rules they had to go by during the week. As soon as they walked on that racetrack ... the rules disappear. Nobody's going to tell them what to do. 'Cause that's what they're getting away from." Their ability to take the sport from its Piedmont roots to a national, and even international, audience is indicative of the creative agency of people attempting to transcend the limitations of life and is an example of the finest expression of the human spirit.<sup>5</sup>

These men were the poor working men of the South trying to find excitement. Perhaps they were a generation removed from the farm and finding the drudgery of mill work monotonous, but they found excitement at the track.

Before becoming a national sport, NASCAR was confined to the South. "NASCAR, in its origins and early growth, was not a sport popular in all of the South. For much of its early history it was nurtured and grew out of the Piedmont region of the South, stretching roughly from Richmond, Virginia, in an arc to Birmingham, Alabama. Indeed, the 'NASCAR South' is the South of red clay, not black loam; yeoman farmers, not plantation slavery; and cotton mills, rather than cotton fields."<sup>6</sup> The geography gave the sport a physical location; the necessary elements of drivers, mechanics, and fans; and a forceful personality to unify them into a sport.

The sport was ready, but was Wendell Scott ready to be a part of NASCAR? A basic overview of his career can be found on the historical marker located in Danville, Virginia. The text reads,

On 1 December 1963 in Jacksonville, Florida, Wendell O. Scott Sr. became the first African American to win a NASCAR Grand National race. He lived here in the house he built after his return from World War II. Persevering over prejudice and discrimination, Scott broke racial barriers in NASCAR, with a 13-year career that included

20 top five and 147 top ten finishes. He retired in 1973 after an injury suffered during a race in Talladega, Alabama. The International Motorsports Hall of Fame, among 13 Hall of Fames, has inducted him as a member.<sup>7</sup>

Scott is acknowledged as overcoming prejudice and discrimination. In the Jim Crow South, he received his NASCAR license in 1950s before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that invigorated the Civil Rights movement.

Scott's background was little different from any other racer or fan. He came out of the bootlegging tradition found in the Virginia hills. He told Sylvia Wilkinson, "I know every back road within a hundred miles of here—well, maybe not a hundred, maybe fifty or sixty, and I remember them to this day. The truth is, I never drank a drop of liquor in my life. I just hauled it." He explained the difference between Mason and Kern jars and the economics of profit: it mattered how much he hauled and how far he took it. As a mechanic, Scott made sure his car could handle the pressure of liquor hauling. "My liquor car would do 95 in second gear, and 118 in high. Back then there wasn't a police car in Danville that could do over 95. The police did outrun me one time, though, and caught me .... They give me three years probation."<sup>8</sup> Like fellow Hall of Famer,<sup>9</sup> Junior Johnson (from mountainous Wilkes County, North Carolina), Wendell Scott was a convicted bootlegger.

Being a bootlegger did not mean that a man would be a racecar driver, but many early drivers honed their skills with a liquor car on the back roads. When Scott started driving, he had a reputation for outrunning the police. "The fellow who ran the track at the Fairgrounds was looking for something to get the people to come to his races, so he went down to the police department to find out which black boys had speeding records. He walked in, and they told him if you're looking for a black boy to drive a car, then you're looking for Wendell Scott."<sup>10</sup> In the Jim Crow South, the thirty-one-year-old Scott was a "black boy." He was also a racing fan. The Danville Fairgrounds had a dirt track, and since the late 1940s, Wendell Scott had been one of the few people watching the races from the Negro section of the stands.<sup>11</sup> When he was offered a chance to be a racecar driver, Scott had the right background. He was in the right geographical area. NASCAR's oldest Grand National track is located approximately thirty miles away in Martinsville. He had the driving experience. Most of the roads driven by bootleggers were dirt, as was the track in Danville. He had a car since his brother-in-law technically had title to the liquor car that Scott had been using, a 1935 Ford. For the novelty of the promotion, he was black in a white man's sport. He had an opportunity and was ready for the challenge.

However, the promoter did not plan to start a racing career for Scott; he was trying to fill the seats. Scott had to finance and develop his own racing career. The drawbacks were huge. His race

was a major barrier. He would have to find ways to remove those barriers or find a way around them. It was not easy to be a black man in the South in the first place; to be a black racecar driver was even harder. This led him to struggle down the path of an independent racer. In a time when the car manufacturers of Detroit were supporting many teams, being an independent meant poorer equipment and less opportunity.

Wendell Scott's racing career spanned from 1952 to 1973. This was the heart of the Civil Rights era, and race relations were changing. In 1952, the first year of Scott's racing career, a paper presented at the Institute on Mental Hygiene and later published discussed race and culture. The author suggested how the contemporary culture should be changed.

Discriminatory laws are the first targets in the campaign of amelioration, for they are the cornerstone of other discriminations. The second target is discrimination in employment and up-grading. Other targets may receive concentrated attention as strategy and tactics later may indicate. The strategic overall objective is an equalitarian society resting solidly upon individual worth and respect for the human personality.<sup>12</sup>

This plan was enacted by the actions of many people who worked to change the racial situation, particularly in the Jim Crow South. Discriminatory laws prevented Scott from doing many things.

In 1964, even after passage of the Civil Rights Act, integration was slow to change how things were done. Scott had blown his engine and was rebuilding it at his hotel. Fellow drivers Larry Frank and Tiny Lund drove by and stopped. They were not surprised that Scott was working on his car, but they did question him on his location and why he was staying so far from the track. He had to explain that he was staying at a black motel. For Frank it was a revelation; it had never occurred to him that Wendell, his colleague, was so outside what was normal for other drivers and crews.<sup>13</sup> Some slights were minor; others were significant.

Discrimination was a part of daily life and related to skin color. Scott's daughter, Sybil, recollected,

Daddy worked to two, three o'clock in the morning and had himself timed to get to whatever track by deadline time when you had to sign in. And he would be so tired. We might have stopped several times for gas, food, and whatever, and he may never have even woke up during a long trip. My mother she always made sure she carried actual meals you know, at the tracks and while travelling. Daddy was very, very light skinned, so he could very easily pass for not being a black person. So he would be able to get in places that the rest of us couldn't.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the standard discrimination faced by all Southern

blacks, he was in a unique position. He and his crew might be the only African Americans at an event. They could be tolerated or hated. In the heyday of Civil Rights marches and boycotts, the Scotts were headed to the racetrack and competing. In a later interview, the younger son, Frank Scott, recalled, "The time-frame that we were in the South racing, you know, in the early sixties, all through the early sixties, the demonstrations, the thing that Martin Luther King was doing for our people, things were going on in Montgomery, Birmingham, we'd be actually racing in those cities." While some African Americans were staging sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters, Wendell Scott was making laps to desegregate the racetrack. For doing so, he faced the same threats presented to many Civil Rights activists. Wendell Scott, Jr. shared, "I remember us getting the call, "If you come to the track tonight, we're going to kill your family while you're on the track."<sup>15</sup>

Wendell Scott was not a Civil Rights activist but as a racecar driver, who wanted to do what he loved, he had to take action. He preferred the action to be on the track. If necessary, he could speak up and react. The other drivers saw this, and some of them respected him for what he was trying to do. Some of them were willing to help a fellow driver. For example, Leonard Wood of the Ford-sponsored Wood Brothers team was generous. He would tell Scott that if he drove the fifty miles to Stuart, Virginia, he could get some used parts. His son, Wendell, Jr., noted that this might include new parts or the exact part that they needed. The obser-

vant Wood might provide a new differential with the right gear ratio amidst the discards.<sup>16</sup> Frank Scott recalled a story about Bobby Allison bumping and spinning his father five times. After the race, Scott confronted Allison; he directly and profanely told Allison to leave his car alone. Before they left the track, Allison would give Scott sixty dollars and call him “a hell of a man.” It was a rare confrontation, but the car bashing stopped.<sup>17</sup>

Other racers, promoters, and fans were not so respectful. First run in 1950, Darlington International Raceway’s Southern 500 was a prestigious race.

After the first year’s difficulties with fans finding accommodations, track officials began to allow them to camp in the infield. Soon the infield scene at the Southern 500 became as legendary as the race itself for its drinking and carousing, barbecues, makeshift viewing platforms, and ever present Confederate battle flags. For the stock car racing community, especially in the Piedmont South, Labor Day and the Southern 500 became inextricably entwined.<sup>18</sup>

It was a race that did not want Wendell Scott in the field. In a 2015 interview, Frank Scott explained, “He was denied entry to races because of his race. For three years he was denied entry into Darlington Raceway, [both of the annual] races at Darlington Speedway. It wasn’t until 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, that he was actually allowed

to race there.”<sup>19</sup> Darlington was an extreme case of discrimination, and it should be noted that it was a track not owned by Big Bill France.

France, Sr. was the most influential personality in NASCAR. Most people associated with NASCAR remember him, positively or negatively, as the man who was NASCAR. He controlled the organization and owned several racetracks, including Daytona and Talladega. No one has reported hearing him use a racial slur, and Wendell Scott respected the man. France did not object to Scott’s appearance in NASCAR. The official opinion was that Scott was a driver and should be treated as one. France’s politics were those of a good-ole-boy, and he supported George Wallace’s run for the presidency. This type of politics and backroom dealing left Scott outside the mainstream and driving as an independent.

In addition to the struggles that came with his race, Wendell Scott faced the challenges of being an independent driver in the era of factory teams. A 1960s documentary proclaimed that the mechanics who worked on the cars needed imagination and mechanical ability. Footage shot at Holman-Moody, a Ford-sponsored garage, showed how parts were discarded, replaced, or reinforced. They needed equipment that could take the same amount of punishment in one afternoon as that in a year of standard driving. Stock cars were modified but required a stock chassis and stock engine, a standard requirement for all car makers. The difference was that Holman-Moody was a factory

garage, while Wendell Scott worked in his own personal garage.<sup>20</sup> Because an independent racer did not receive factory money or parts, he worked by and for himself. Automakers provided better equipment, pit crews, and guaranteed salaries for the drivers they backed. These teams and their situations allowed the sport to expand into different parts of the country. While Holman-Moody had dedicated space, paid employees, and hundreds of parts, Scott was on his own to find, make, or buy the parts that he needed.<sup>21</sup>

Scott started racing at local tracks and worked his way up to the NASCAR Grand National circuit by financing his own car. His pit crew was usually family and friends, and he was his own mechanic. He was proud of that fact and wrote on his car: "mechanic: me." It was not easy and required a certain type of personality. Sybil Scott remembered, "Daddy was a very quiet and unassuming. He wasn't a conflicting person. He had his goal in mind of always being able to return from a race and meet whatever that next bill was. He was very disciplined, very good-natured person .... He was a genius of a mechanic."<sup>22</sup>

Many of the factory drivers knew how hard it was to race as an independent and respected those who travelled the harder path. It is significant that he won any race. His ability as a driver meant that he was often the fastest independent when the factory teams took the top spots. His ability is reflected in his record of 147 top ten finishes with only one victory.

One of the important themes that come from Wendell Scott's legacy

is diversity in NASCAR. As the only African-American winner of a Grand National race, Scott has become the touchstone for diversity. His children have become his spokesmen and are often interviewed about race in NASCAR. Every potential African-American driver is compared to Wendell Scott. He has also begun to receive his due recognition.

As NASCAR expands from its Southern roots, it has attempted to move away from some traditional symbols of the South, particularly the Confederate battle flag. In his time, "Scott was a rebel racing in a sport represented by the rebel flag."<sup>23</sup> The Confederate battle flag has become a racially charged symbol, and NASCAR has responded by bringing its policies in line with twenty-first century societal norms. The association between racing and the battle flag began with early races and was closely associated with Darlington in particular. On June 26, 2015, NASCAR began to request that the Confederate battle flag not be brought to races; they earlier had banned the symbol from cars and official merchandise. Scott's son recalled that the flag was not the most important issue for his father.

He prepared us for the flag and the other things like insults, the snares, the comments, and things like that. Because it was a business for us. He taught the family; he taught the children and anyone who was associated with his team to avoid, you know, problems, not to create a problem because of the flag. We mostly ignored it because there were

things more serious. He had to deal with matters that were much more serious at the time.

Frank Scott concluded that he was pleased that NASCAR was making strides for diversity and welcoming a variety of people.<sup>24</sup>

One commentator recognized the reason NASCAR has been working on diversity when she stated, “The perception exists that people of color are not welcome at NASCAR events. That’s rubbish. When it comes to race, NASCAR is colorblind. The only color that interests NASCAR is green. Keeping their hearts—and cash registers—open to a rainbow of race fans helped the France brothers amass their fortunes.”<sup>25</sup> Like many businesses, NASCAR has learned that women and minorities spend money; it does not need to depend on white men.

The diversity that has developed in NASCAR has grown slowly. The change was not an artificial scheme like bussing school children, but rather a cultivated organic growth. Journalist Warren Brown, who grew up in segregated New Orleans, talked about loving racing but hating NASCAR. “It was a Southern white man’s thing, replete with Confederate flags and rebel yells, both of which, to me, translated to ‘Blacks not welcome here.’” Yet he praised the faith of the Scott family who preserve in maintaining their father’s legacy and the actions taken by car owner Joe Gibbs. Gibbs, encouraged by Reggie White, developed a Drive for Diversity program in 2003. Tracks and sponsors were supportive of the pro-

gram. It has had official NASCAR support since 2004.<sup>26</sup>

The legacy of Wendell Scott, promoted by his children, is to encourage NASCAR to develop into a sport that would have welcomed their father. A beneficiary of this legacy is Darrell Wallace, Jr., often called Bubba. With five truck series wins, he has been successful in NASCAR’s top levels. Often referred to as the first African American to win since Wendell Scott, he was a full-time driver on the junior circuit for Roush Fenway Racing and substituted for Richard Petty Motorsports on the Grand National level in 2017. Since then, Wallace has moved to the Grand National level, finished second in the 2018 Daytona 500, and, like Scott, was runner-up for Rookie of the Year.<sup>27</sup>

The media has compared Scott and Wallace, yet there are many attributes that separate them. Scott and the early racers often learned their skills by driving moonshine; Wallace started with go carts. Scott was an independent who struggled to beat the factory teams while Wallace is a team driver. NASCAR’s official position was to neither hinder nor abet Scott’s racing career. In 2009, Wallace entered NASCAR’s Drive for Diversity program. These men are drivers from different eras, each benefiting the other. Mutual publicity has enhanced each driver’s reputation, and until more African Americans are in the sport, they will stand as representatives of their race.<sup>28</sup>

It is only decades after his single win that Wendell Scott is beginning to receive the acknowledgement due to

him. Jackie Robinson integrated baseball with official aid and protection; he is duly honored by Major League Baseball. By contrast, Scott drove as an independent and remained a driver through his own financing and skill. More than fifty years passed between his one Grand National victory and his induction into the NASCAR Hall of Fame. At least fourteen halls of fame have inducted Scott, most posthumously. During his life, the movie, *Greased Lightning*, starring Richard Pryor, showcased Scott's career. He was also the inspiration for the character of Rivers Scott in Disney Pixar's *Cars 3*.<sup>29</sup> The Commonwealth of Virginia has honored Scott with an historical marker. The city of Danville declared April 5, 2013 to be Wendell Scott Day in the city, and the marker was dedicated. Speakers at the event included the mayor of Danville and other city luminaries, the president of NASCAR, and Wendell Scott, Jr.<sup>30</sup>

From its beginning, the United States has had an uncomfortable balancing act in regard to race. A country that proclaimed that all men are created equal held some men in bondage. Although freed from slavery, African Americans were still denied their rights. The twentieth century found people moving toward legal desegregation in education, accommodations, and employment. Wendell Scott sought equality on the racetrack and found both discrimination and respect. His story includes being denied the chance to race as well as winning at the top level of his sport. Like many African Americans of his generation, his life had highs and lows. He was not a top name in his

sport, but he was a contender who persisted in racing and outdid many white challengers.

Wendell Scott was one man, competing in a particularly segregated time and place. He was black in a sport created and dominated by white men. That one characteristic, his race, separated him from his competitors and most fans; however, in his other attributes, he was cut from the same pattern. He was a bootlegger from a mill town in the Piedmont of Virginia, a typical pedigree among men who loved to race stock cars and found a way to make a living following that dream. Scott made his mark on history by driving fast and chasing the checkered flag of NASCAR.

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