

CITY OF RACERS: THE GROWTH OF THE NASCAR INDUSTRY IN  
CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA, 1949-2000

by

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## ABSTRACT

BRYAN PAUL GABLE. *City of Racers: The Growth of the NASCAR Industry in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1949-2000.* (Under the direction of Dr. Mark Wilson)

This study explores the development of the NASCAR industry in the city of Charlotte and its surrounding region through the second half of the twentieth century. I argue that NASCAR and Charlotte were seeking the same goals in the late twentieth century: greater national prominence and a strong relationship with corporate America. As a result, NASCAR found a technological and cultural home in Charlotte by proving its worth as a desirable and highly profitable industry. I explain how Charlotte Motor Speedway emerged from bankruptcy and became an exemplary venue for NASCAR by solidifying its reputation as the showplace of NASCAR. I also describe the culture of specialization that the Holman-Moody race team fostered in Charlotte. Later generations of Charlotte NASCAR teams would continue to embrace innovative methods for managing a race team. Finally, I discuss Charlotte's importance as a growing urban center of the Piedmont and NASCAR's contributions to building Charlotte's regional identity.

## DEDICATION

For my grandfather, who taught me that academic excellence is its own reward.

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## INTRODUCTION

On May 11, 1925, the place to be in Charlotte, North Carolina was at the speedway. A year earlier, the one and a quarter mile race track had opened in nearby Pineville to host open-wheel automobile races. The speedway had a surface of wooden planks and steeply-banked turns, which meant that high speeds were possible. Charlotteans owed the existence of their speedway to cyclist Jack Prince, who “was engaged in the business of building automobile speedways.” In seeking out an appropriate site for his next track, Prince “looked about Charlotte and made a guess, to wit, that Charlotte was naturally located, because of its setting in a giant network of fine highways.”<sup>1</sup> The first races at the track, on October 25, 1924, drew a crowd of 30,000 people.<sup>2</sup> Now, the daredevil racers were returning to set more speed records. After all, Charlotte Speedway was “unquestionably, the fastest track in the world, with the single exception of the Culver City plant,” where the racers had broken all the Charlotte records. But now, the racers returned to “the Charlotte bowl” with “new marks to shoot. Their tiny mounts are faster than ever and every indication points to a successful attainment of this ambition.”<sup>3</sup>

The Charlotte Speedway only lasted until 1927, but it paved the way for the city to become a center of motorsports in the United States. While open-wheel racing remained the most popular type of auto racing in other parts of the country, stock car

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<sup>1</sup> “How Did It All Come About This Speedway Should Be?” *Charlotte Observer*, May 10, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> J.J. Wade, “Fourteen Famous Drivers Entered in Second Event of Charlotte’s Speedway,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 10, 1925.

racing captured the attention of working class people in the Piedmont South. The formation of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, or NASCAR, in 1948 launched a new era of professional stock car racing. Just as Prince had observed a generation earlier, Charlotte continued to be a natural crossroads for racers, mechanics, and fans in the sport's early days.

Yet even as NASCAR's influence expanded across the United States, the city of Charlotte remained important to professional stock car racing. Many of the sport's early stars hailed from the Carolinas. Beginning with its opening in 1960, Charlotte Motor Speedway (CMS) hosted NASCAR's only 600-mile race, which remains one of the premier events on the schedule. CMS is also home to an annual 500-mile race in October and the All-Star Race. More recently, a growing number of NASCAR teams established their race shops in the greater Charlotte area. All of these factors have contributed to making Charlotte an increasingly vital place for professional stock car racing. Daytona Beach remains home to NASCAR's corporate headquarters and stock car racing's marquee event, the Daytona 500. Yet Charlotte has emerged as, "without question, the industrial and cultural home of the sport."<sup>4</sup> Even in its largely successful mission of achieving national acceptance, NASCAR's professionals remain highly localized in a city nowhere near the geographic center of the United States.

This study will examine how and why NASCAR increasingly became a defining industry in Charlotte and its surrounding towns. Given NASCAR's cultural roots in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Mitchelson and Derek H. Alderman, "Red Dust and Dynamometers: Charlotte as Memory and Knowledge Community in NASCAR," in *Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South City*, eds. William Graves and Heather A. Smith (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 50-51.

Piedmont South, Charlotte is certainly a logical place for the center of a stock car racing industry. Yet Daytona Beach; Atlanta, Georgia; and Richmond, Virginia are within NASCAR's traditional geographical home as well and, therefore, could have been viable options. Furthermore, the sport's strong ties to the American automobile industry could have made Detroit, Michigan a natural base of operations for competitors. NASCAR has also made concerted efforts, with varying degrees of success, to plant its flag in the biggest American markets, including New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Yet it is primarily the location of race tracks that defines NASCAR's national reach. The teams themselves remain localized in Charlotte. With the exception of Denver, Colorado's Furniture Row Racing, all of NASCAR's major teams operate out of race shops scattered across Charlotte and its surrounding towns. As the stock car racing industry became increasingly professionalized, there must be specific factors that made Charlotte attractive as *the* city for race teams to do business.

The body of academic research on NASCAR has covered topics including the sport's nationwide growth, its southern cultural roots, its reflection of American values, its business model and marketing potential, its founding myths and origin stories, and its combination of racing and entertainment. However, few have examined Charlotte's importance to NASCAR, and vice-versa. Those who have featured Charlotte in their analyses of NASCAR's past have pointed to the city's long history of hosting automobile competitions, as well as the roots of its status as a technological hub. Yet there has been no research on how NASCAR's expansion intertwined with Charlotte's population and industrial growth in the second half of the twentieth century. Scholars have also overlooked the period from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. It was during this time that

NASCAR received increasingly greater exposure and defined itself as a sport that reflected the characteristics and values of America as a whole, not just the South.

During the same decades, the city of Charlotte was transforming as well. The Queen City's acquisition of new, white-collar industries and a growing population lifted Charlotte into the national consciousness. Just like NASCAR, Charlotte was forging stronger ties with Americans outside the South. Yet also like NASCAR, Americans experienced Charlotte's growth as a representative of a new, postwar South. North Carolina's largest city walked on to the national stage in lockstep with professional stock car racing. Consequently, newcomers to NASCAR brought themselves, their money, and their technical skill to Charlotte, boosting the reputation of the city as the stock car racing capital of America. The ability to share ideas with the sport's experts, or the prospect of fielding a profitable race team, made it advantageous for stock car racing professionals to be in or near Charlotte, the city that represented the same growth and national emergence as NASCAR. This arrangement was advantageous for the city as well, which became linked to the national technical and financial economy. The NASCAR industry grew and expanded in Charlotte due to the city's status as a growing commercial center of the New South.

Scholarship on NASCAR reflects the tension of a sport trying to capture a national audience while holding on to its southern roots. However, prior to NASCAR's popularity boom in the mid-1990s, the sport received little scholarly attention overall. One major exception is Richard Pillsbury's 1974 article "Carolina Thunder, A Geography of Southern Stock Car Racing." In broad terms, Pillsbury advocates for an expanded study of American popular culture, positing that understanding popular culture is central

to understanding life in the United States. Turning specifically to stock car racing, he acknowledges that many Americans understood NASCAR to be a cultural product of the South. However, he argues that the proliferation of NASCAR-sanctioned races outside the South suggests that the sport has more national attention than commonly believed. Furthermore, he states that NASCAR never tried to limit its operations only to the South, but that the sport did benefit from having a loyal southern audience.<sup>5</sup> Two questions from Pillsbury's research set the tone for future NASCAR scholarship. Firstly, what made stock car racing appealing to southerners if NASCAR was originally trying to cultivate a national following? Secondly, what effect did NASCAR's southern character have on its national popularity?

Pillsbury's research inspired Derek Alderman, Preston Mitchell, Jeffrey Webb, and Derek Hanak to revisit his work twenty-nine years later. They wrote "Carolina Thunder Revisited" from the perspective of having seen NASCAR's popularity explode across the United States, earning a nation-wide fan following to match its national slate of races. Accordingly, the authors argue that NASCAR is actually "transcultural" in nature. Unlike Pillsbury, who thought that NASCAR's national expansion posed a threat to its southern character, Alderman, Mitchell, Webb, and Hanak see NASCAR as a more fluid cultural product, part of "a cultural exchange in which notions of southern and American culture intersect, influence each other, and perhaps fuse together."<sup>6</sup> In other words, part of NASCAR's success in reaching national popularity had to be tied up in its

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Pillsbury, "Carolina Thunder: A Geography of Southern Stock Car Racing," *Journal of Geography* 73 (1974): 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Derek H. Alderman, Preston W. Mitchell, Jeffrey T. Webb, and Derek Hanak, "Carolina Thunder Revisited: Toward a Transcultural View of Winston Cup Racing," *Professional Geographer* 55, no. 2 (2003): 239.

southern character. The authors also note how the greater Charlotte area, particularly the town of Mooresville, is the home base for most of NASCAR's teams. Alderman, Mitchell, Webb, and Hanak are the first to use the term "knowledge community" to describe Charlotte as a hub of the NASCAR industry. The importance of knowledge in auto racing, they explain, has led "many racing-related firms and industries to cluster closely together, despite the highly competitive and secret nature of the knowledge they use and produce."<sup>7</sup>

"Carolina Thunder Revisited" came on the heels of more widespread NASCAR scholarship in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These studies focus on how NASCAR has captured the attention of a national audience and its emergence as an American cultural phenomenon. Mark D. Howell's book is an explanation of how NASCAR transformed into a widely-accepted sport. He argues that a celebration of American values is at the core of NASCAR's success, reflecting the values that tie the American people together.<sup>8</sup> While NASCAR might have its roots in the mythology of the South, Howell places great importance in the mutability of NASCAR's image as a means of tapping into the national consciousness of America. For instance, Howell describes how Junior Johnson, a moonshine runner and standout racer from the 1950s and 1960s, became a cultural symbol of NASCAR. Johnson's image as a self-reliant outlaw with a rags-to-riches tale relies on southern stereotypes. Howell notes that NASCAR itself is imbued with the same southern cultural folklore, but that corporate America is able to effectively market

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 246-247.

<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), 9.

NASCAR's image by portraying the sport's regional character as indicative of independence, toughness, and courage, traits that Americans value within and outside of the South.<sup>9</sup>

Robert Hagstrom showcases the “intricate financial relationships that connect NASCAR with leading U.S. corporations with drivers who are among the highest paid athletes in the country, and with millions of weekly racegoers.”<sup>10</sup> In Hagstrom's analysis, NASCAR's combination of sport, entertainment, and marketing allow for a strong business model that gives sponsors maximum exposure. His book is among the first studies to demonstrate how capitalism and corporate sponsorships have been critical to NASCAR's rise.

Even though NASCAR reached a place of widespread American appeal, the sport's southern roots remained. Perhaps the most widely-known legend of NASCAR's past is the myth that moonshine runners founded stock car racing during the Great Depression. The imagery of whiskey trippers attempting to outrun the feds in souped-up hot rods became stamped into NASCAR lore. Consequently, another branch of stock car racing-related scholarship set out to separate fact from fiction. Did moonshine runners really invent stock car racing? Did southerners even invent stock car racing? Finally, if the answer to both of those questions was “no,” what effect did moonshine and the South have on stock car racing at all?

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>10</sup> Robert G. Hagstrom, *The NASCAR Way: The Business that Drives the Sport* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998), xi.

Neal Thompson's influential 2006 book, *Driving With the Devil*, tells the story of stock car racing's beginnings and NASCAR's earliest years. While moonshiners may not have been the literal inventors of stock car racing, Thompson's book is among the first to demonstrate how heavily bootleggers influenced stock car racing's development. Bill France might have made NASCAR in his own image, Thompson writes, but the folks who deserve credit for popularizing NASCAR in the beginning are "a bunch of motherless, dirt-poor southern teens driving with the devil in jacked-up Fords full of corn whiskey."<sup>11</sup>

In 2011, Ben Shackleford continued the exploration of NASCAR as a sport, entertainment, and an industry, discussing how all three factors influenced the southern character of professional stock car racing. He explains that Bill France and NASCAR were successful in the 1950s because working class fans could easily identify with stock cars and the people driving them.<sup>12</sup> Also important was the mutually beneficial relationship NASCAR established with its southern audience. Shackleford explains that, during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s, NASCAR's leaders learned that the sport could always fall back on its southern fans for reliable support, particularly because the South was underrepresented in professional sports. Shackleford refers to this phenomenon as the "southern retrenchment" of NASCAR, which helped to solidify the sport's association with the South.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Neal Thompson, *Driving with the Devil: Southern Moonshine, Detroit Wheels, and the Birth of NASCAR* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2006), 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Shackleford, "NASCAR Stock Car Racing: Establishment and Southern Retrenchment," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 2 (February 2011): 304.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 308-309.

Two other recent works of NASCAR scholarship attempt to bring together the sport's cultural roots and late twentieth century marketing power. The first of these is Scott Beekman's 2010 book *NASCAR Nation*, one of the few scholarly works that provides an entire history of NASCAR. Beekman finds himself to be in agreement with his predecessors regarding NASCAR's transcultural nature, writing that "NASCAR and the sport's corporate sponsors actively seek to reinforce this (southern) lineage as part of a campaign to position stock car racing as a traditional, patriotic, family-friendly, and politically conservative sports form."<sup>14</sup> However, Beekman is more cautious about identifying any one group of people as primarily responsible for NASCAR's rise, particularly the bootleggers. He argues that "both the elite and the working class share responsibility for the creation of stock car racing."<sup>15</sup> Beekman's analysis suggests that NASCAR's appeal to southerners laid the groundwork for its appeal to other Americans. Meanwhile, Bob Batchelor uses drivers Dale Earnhardt Sr. and Dale Earnhardt Jr. as his examples to make discuss the importance of consumerism in NASCAR. Batchelor writes that the elder Earnhardt represented "classic NASCAR," the overtly southern working class phenomenon. Meanwhile, Batchelor sees Earnhardt Jr. as part of "corporate NASCAR" due to his personal marketing power. Yet as Batchelor argues, Earnhardt Jr. is a great pitchman because he has cultivated a blue-collar, "good ol' boy" persona that harkens back to classic NASCAR.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Scott Beekman, *NASCAR Nation: A History of Stock Car Racing in the United States* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), xiii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Batchelor, "Driving to Victory: NASCAR in American Culture," in *Blue-Collar Pop Culture: From NASCAR to Jersey Shore*, vol. 1, *Film, Music, and Sports*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 320.

Historian Daniel Pierce has written several works about NASCAR's growth during the mid-twentieth century. Pierce published two articles, in 2001 and 2004. These studies form the basis for his 2010 book *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France*. Pierce's book explores the early history of American stock car racing, with a focus on NASCAR's founding and formative years. He does not ascribe the invention of stock car racing or NASCAR to moonshiners. However, Pierce does stress that many people involved in the sport had connections to illegal liquor, and seems to agree with Thompson that NASCAR would not have taken shape in the way it did without the influence of moonshine.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Pierce argues that NASCAR was not a sport popular in all of the South. He posits that stock car racing "grew out of the Piedmont region of the South, stretching roughly from Richmond, Virginia, in an arc to Birmingham, Alabama."<sup>18</sup> As Pierce explains, the reason why stock car racing resonated so strongly in the Piedmont was because the bootleggers-turned-racers tapped into ideals of southern, white, working class male masculinity.<sup>19</sup> This made NASCAR a product of low southern culture, and a sport with which its audience could easily identify. The placement of NASCAR in its specific cultural context is Pierce's greatest contribution to NASCAR scholarship.

The most comprehensive study of the NASCAR-Charlotte relationship is a 2010 article by Ronald Mitchelson and Derek Alderman, "Red Dust and Dynamometers." Referring back to Alderman's earlier article, the authors once again stress the fluidity of

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel S. Pierce, *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

regional identity, NASCAR's transcultural nature, and Charlotte's status as a "knowledge community" for the NASCAR industry. Mitchelson and Alderman add that Charlotte has become a "memory community" for stock car racing fans, a physical space that embodies the cultural roots and mythology of NASCAR.<sup>20</sup>

The authors continue to explain how Charlotte's history of hosting auto races, along with its status as a moonshine hub, made the city an early center of stock car racing. The added success of Bill France's Strictly Stock (later Grand National) races and the spread of NASCAR-sanctioned events throughout the Carolinas helped to put Charlotte on par with Atlanta as one hub of an emerging industry.<sup>21</sup> According to Mitchelson and Alderman, the tipping point in favor of Charlotte was the partnership between John Holman and Ralph Moody, who built a state of the art racing shop in Charlotte in 1957. The Holman-Moody shop's "scale, technological sophistication, and branding" set the tone for future NASCAR shops in the Charlotte area. The authors also explain that Holman-Moody helped to make Charlotte the top location for the development of Grand National Series technology, as opposed to Atlanta's focus on the modifieds.<sup>22</sup> Beginning with Holman-Moody and continuing through the 2000s up to their writing, Mitchelson and Alderman characterize Charlotte's NASCAR race shops as a technological cluster, supported by "knowledge institutions." They posit that this specialized knowledge gets passed "through the community as the result of technologic

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<sup>20</sup> Mitchelson and Alderman, "Red Dust and Dynamometers," 52.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

component sales, labor mobility between competitors, shared suppliers, observation at practice sessions, and informal communications.”<sup>23</sup>

Mitchelson and Alderman provide excellent analysis regarding the roots of Charlotte’s NASCAR industry. Yet their article jumps from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, at which point “twenty-nine of the forty-two teams that made the lineup for that year’s Coca-Cola 600 had their shops within one hundred miles of Charlotte.”<sup>24</sup> The authors imply that other teams simply followed Holman-Moody’s lead and built similar shops in the Charlotte area. However, this explanation does not take into account the growth of Charlotte itself, or the major changes that took place in NASCAR from the mid-60s to late-80s. Under this framework, it would have been possible for other NASCAR teams to build improved race shops in a different city, thereby moving the center of the industry away from Charlotte, just as the industry had moved to Charlotte and away from Atlanta. As NASCAR’s national expansion ramped up at the end of the twentieth century, Charlotte had to remain attractive to race teams, not just as any technological center, but the number one place in the country to locate a competitive and profitable racing operation that could take advantage of the city’s technological cluster.

This study addresses these issues, explaining Charlotte’s role as the crossroads of the stock car racing profession and how the city became the place to conduct the whole business of NASCAR. Obviously, CMS is an important component of NASCAR’s relationship with Charlotte. Both the 600-mile race and the All-Star race are events that have a long history in Charlotte and strong association with the city. CMS’s long-time

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 62.

race promoter Richard “Humpy” Wheeler is also renowned in the industry for his creativity and ability to draw crowds to the races. However, before Wheeler became Charlotte’s NASCAR publicity guru, Richard Howard had mastered the craft. Howard is best known today as a financier of Junior Johnson’s championship-winning race team in the 1970s and 1980s. Before his involvement with Johnson, Howard saved Charlotte Motor Speedway from financial ruin, turning the track into an exemplary facility within the industry. Without Howard’s leadership in making the speedway profitable, NASCAR would not enjoy the close relationship it has with Charlotte today.

Another individual who has left an enormous impact on NASCAR and Charlotte is O. Bruton Smith. Smith is the CEO of Speedway Motorsports Inc., the Charlotte company that owns CMS and seven other NASCAR tracks. Smith was one of the original builders and owners of CMS before declaring bankruptcy several years after the track opened. By the mid-1970s, Smith had regained control of the track and used his ownership stake to lay the foundation for SMI. Smith was also responsible for securing CMS’s partnership with Coca-Cola, which would sponsor the 600-mile race for the first time in 1985 and every year since. Yet Smith is only featured in NASCAR scholarship as a young race promoter in the late 1940s and rival to Bill France. Indeed, Smith has had a sometimes-adversarial relationship with the France family and International Speedway Corporation, the company that oversees the tracks the Frances own. However, Smith’s role as an influential figure in NASCAR and a power broker in Charlotte is too big to ignore.

Equally important to Charlotte’s racing industry is Holman-Moody’s legacy as a motorsports corporation. While the company was no longer fielding race cars by the

mid-1970s, its success laid the groundwork for a new generation of owners to seek fame and fortune in NASCAR. Unlike their predecessors, many of the new owners viewed NASCAR as a good investment opportunity, a means of making money in and of itself if they followed the formula for success, which demanded a Charlotte-based race team. None of the businessmen turned team owners have experienced more long-term success in NASCAR than Rick Hendrick. Drawing from his experiences as an auto dealer, Hendrick came up with a more cooperative way of managing a multi-car race team, a method that became the industry standard. Just as Holman-Moody had previously done, Hendrick Motorsports became the standard bearer for a modern NASCAR team.

Stock car racing in Charlotte has benefitted from this pattern of innovators. The work of Howard, Smith, and Wheeler has revolved around establishing stronger ties with the community, in order that CMS be a defining feature of the Charlotte metro area. If the speedway is a landmark of a city with increasing national prominence, then the speedway can market itself to a wider audience, thereby increasing the prominence of the speedway and the city. Likewise, Holman, Moody, and Hendrick have been successful because they found new ways to use Charlotte's specialized racing knowledge to reinvent the concept of a race team. The more success that these Charlotte-based race teams enjoy, the greater ability they have to attract the most talented personnel to the Queen City, contributing even more to Charlotte's national rise. In effect, Charlotte has used NASCAR to become nationally famous, but NASCAR never would have become nationally famous if not for the innovators of Charlotte.

Charlotte's motorsports industry stands today as an example of an industrial cluster, a group of corporations within a single industry located geographically near each

other. The clustering of racing teams and motorsports enterprises in the Queen City relates to broad theories about the development of innovation. For instance, scholar Maryann Feldman has argued that innovation in any industry depends on commercialization and the exchange of specialized knowledge. Geography acts a way to organize the infrastructure of an industry, making the transfer of knowledge easier among its practitioners. As a result of this infrastructure development, innovations tend to gravitate toward a specific geographic area.<sup>25</sup> Within the NASCAR industry, teams like Holman-Moody and Hendrick Motorsports fostered specialized knowledge and commercialization in Charlotte through their approaches to stock car racing. The transfer of this knowledge depends on the hands-on experiences of people who build the race cars working together as part of a team. This study demonstrates how racers in Charlotte brought together the necessary components for the NASCAR industry to flourish in and around the city.

In fact, NASCAR had a major hand in building Charlotte's suburbs and its metropolitan area, quite literally the area around the city. In evaluating the history of suburban development in the United States, scholars like Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue have characterized American suburbs as dynamic places. Kruse and Sugrue argue that the movement of wealth and capital to the suburbs has complicated their relationships with central cities, setting off struggles for political and economic power. It

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<sup>25</sup> Maryann P. Feldman, *The Geography of Innovation* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1994), 1-2.

is therefore important that scholars do not consider suburbs and cities in a vacuum, but instead explore the relationship between them.<sup>26</sup>

Kruse and Sugrue's theories explain the complicated relationship between Charlotte, its suburbs, and NASCAR. Stock car racing professionals recognized the benefits of being near a city like Charlotte, which had the infrastructure to move people and goods throughout the South, the region where NASCAR held a strong presence. Yet in seeking space to build race tracks and garages, NASCAR's professionals often located their operations on the outside of Charlotte's city limits. This arrangement was acceptable for Charlotte's civic leaders who hoped to keep stock car racing's notoriously rowdy competitors and fans at arm's length.

By the 1980s, the demographics of NASCAR fans had changed significantly. Thanks in part to some of the sport's Charlotte leaders, stock car racing experienced growing ranks of white-collar fans who established new relationships between the sport and corporate America. These fans and corporations brought their money to Charlotte, causing civic leaders to change their views. Stock car racing blossomed into a highly-desirable enterprise, one that Charlotte was trying to claim as its own by the year 2000. Nevertheless, most NASCAR teams remain in the suburbs north of Charlotte, towns which have also tried to claim ownership of the sport. The fortunes of Concord, North Carolina remain tied to its status as the home of Charlotte Motor Speedway, while Mooresville, North Carolina features entire industrial parks dedicated to motorsports and has branded itself "Race City USA."

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<sup>26</sup> Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6.

Amid these battles for ownership, the NASCAR industry remains central to the identity of the Charlotte area. Scholars like Mitchelson and Alderman have examined the importance, characteristics, and challenges of the NASCAR-Charlotte relationship as it exists today. Other academics have researched NASCAR's founding and cultural roots, demonstrating why the sport came into the national conscience as a southern cultural product. Still more scholars have looked at how NASCAR achieved national popularity and how it reflects American values. The next step is to fully explain the commercial relationship between NASCAR and Charlotte. This relationship allowed the growing North Carolina city and southern stock car racing to become national forces in the American landscape. This study aims to show how Charlotte developed into the city of racers.

## CHAPTER 1: THE ROOTS OF THE CHARLOTTE RACING INDUSTRY, 1949-1973

Life in the United States was returning to normal by autumn of 1945. For many white, working-class men in the Piedmont South, the end of battles overseas meant that a different kind of battle would resume closer to home. These battles were contests of speed and daring, held within the confines of dirt ovals. In the years leading up to the war, the popularity of stock car racing had expanded across the Piedmont. Cities like Charlotte, North Carolina and Atlanta, Georgia had established reputations as nascent capitals of motor racing in the American South. Atlanta had been the dominant city of the stock car world prior to World War II, but the post-war years presented a new challenge for the growing racing industry. If stock car racing was to really take off, the sport needed organization, professionalization, and respectability. By the 1970s, the sport had all three, and Charlotte had replaced Atlanta as the center of American stock car racing.

The motorsports industry that exists in Charlotte today is not an accident, though it was also not a certainty in the 1940s. Both Daytona Beach and Atlanta had a leg up on Charlotte in terms of skilled automobile mechanics who helped expand motorsports in those cities.<sup>1</sup> Charlotte's advantage was in fostering respectability. Unlike in Atlanta, stock car racing in the Charlotte region took off because the industry was able to establish more positive relations with the community. This chapter will explore the professionalization of NASCAR and how the industry established strong ties with

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald L. Mitchelson and Derek H. Alderman, "Red Dust and Dynamometers: Charlotte as Memory and Knowledge Community in NASCAR," in *Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South City*, eds. William Graves and Heather A. Smith (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 53-54.

Charlotte as a respectable enterprise. The emergence of Charlotte Motor Speedway into a showplace for stock car racing made the city an important part of the NASCAR landscape. The influence of the Charlotte-based Holman-Moody racing team also helped to bring motorsports professionals with specialized skills to work in Charlotte. The structure of NASCAR's schedule also steered drivers, mechanics, and team owners to Charlotte, taking advantage of the Queen City's central location within the Atlantic Southeast. Through commercial success and the exchange of specialized knowledge, stock car racers and their activities became an accepted part of life in Charlotte.

Bill France fully intended for NASCAR to live up to its name and be a national sanctioning body right from its founding. Yet throughout the 1950s and 1960, stock car racing continued to develop as a primarily southern phenomenon. White, working-class men of the Piedmont South remained the bedrock of NASCAR's audience, and the sport that France founded took on a more regional character than he intended. This sense of regionalism made the NASCAR industry what it is today, and it affirmed Charlotte's status as a hub of American motorsports. As a result, geography is a major topic in the academic research about NASCAR.

The debate about the formation of the stock car racing industry has generated a discussion about who can claim ownership of this type of motorsports. In his article "Carnival of Speed," historian Randall L. Hall argues that the spread of auto racing in the South during the 1930s and 1940s required the backing of northern businessmen and racing promoters. Like Pierce, Hall suggests that modern American motorsports resulted from a meeting in the middle of organizers and financiers with working-class fans. In addition, Hall points out that France's promotional strategies and targeting of Piedmont

audiences mirrored the work of other promoters who recognized the region, and North Carolina in particular, as a growing center of auto racing. France himself found North Carolina appealing “because of the Piedmont’s relatively dense population, hungry for entertainment, and because he could help develop and promote many of (the local) tracks, which gave him substantial control and favorable contracts.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Hall, France succeeded in creating a stable sanctioning body for stock car racing because of how he organized his operations. Unlike earlier sanctioning bodies that functioned under a board of directors, France made himself the ultimate power broker in NASCAR. France “had the keen and ruthless business sense to vertically integrate stock car racing,” and “exercised iron-fisted control and ground down his opposition.”<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming influence of France and NASCAR by the 1950s made the Piedmont America’s center of stock car racing. Additionally, France’s success proved that the best way to hold authority within the NASCAR industry was to act like a mini Bill France and to be a singularly-powerful figure. As a result, the battles that followed during the 1960s to be a powerful figure in Charlotte’s racing scene led to uneasy alliances and individuals who often tried to assert their authority over each other, particularly in the early years of Charlotte Motor Speedway. Likewise, Charlotte’s position as a rapidly industrializing Piedmont city with significant ties to NASCAR laid the foundation for Holman-Moody’s later success. Charlotte’s postwar industrialization and growth as a distribution center gave the city the necessary infrastructure to support

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<sup>2</sup> Randall L. Hall, “Carnival of Speed: The Auto Racing Business in the Emerging South, 1930-1950,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 84, no. 3 (July 2007): 272.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

Holman-Moody, whose accomplishments in NASCAR raised the profile of Charlotte as an industrial racing center.

Charlotte's industrial base and status as a distribution center also made the city an advantageous place for a future racing industry. Historian Tom Hanchett explains that at the beginning of the twentieth century, industries like textile manufacturing, wholesaling and transportation, and banking dominated Charlotte's economy. While all three industries expanded before and immediately after World War II, wholesaling and banking grew faster. Charlotte had also been a trucking center since the 1920s. The opening of Interstates 85 and 77 connected Charlotte with other cities in the South and Midwest, leading to an expansion of the industry in the postwar years. Hanchett argues that by the 1960s, Charlotte's civic leaders were embracing a "distribution economy," especially as the region's textile mills began to decline. Even as the last mills shut down, "Charlotte had long since ceased to see itself as a cotton town. Civic leaders now spoke of the Queen City as a model example of the prosperity of America's southern sunbelt."<sup>4</sup>

NASCAR proved to be a great fit for Charlotte's distribution economy. Holman-Moody certainly took advantage of the city's infrastructure for wholesaling as a Ford parts distributor. The distribution economy also made Charlotte the crossroads of the Piedmont not just for goods, but also for ideas and specialized knowledge. The ease of moving parts, race cars, and drivers to other areas of the Piedmont brought many of NASCAR's professionals to Charlotte in the first place. But many of those professionals who stayed in the Queen City brought technological expertise with them. As a result, the

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 225-226.

Charlotte region became the most important physical location for working on stock cars and learning the intangible skills necessary for a successful career in NASCAR.

### *The Moonshine Influence*

Originally, a more covert industry had helped to expand racing in the Piedmont – the sale and transport of illegal liquor. Many of stock car racing's pre-war stars learned to drive fast while hauling moonshine, and a number of moonshine producers were financiers of motorsports events, particularly in Northern Georgia and Western North Carolina. This connection between moonshine and racing was not lost on Atlanta's civic and religious leaders. The war might have put a temporary end to the scourge of stock car racing, but it was sure to reemerge soon, threatening the moral fiber of the city and its people. For many of Atlanta's citizens, there could be no debate. Something had to be done about those moonshine runners and their race cars.

The anxiety in Atlanta about stock car racing and its criminal element came to a head on September 3, 1945 before a race at the popular Lakewood Speedway. The race's list of entrants included five drivers who, depending on perspective, were either local daredevils and racing heroes or dangerous malefactors who were facilitating the spread of illegal liquor in the city and its environs. Due to the obvious unrespectability of these individuals, Mayor William Hartsfield showed up at the track on race day, flanked by a contingent of police officers, and ordered that the drivers be disqualified. However, a protest erupted from the crowd once the fans caught wind of Hartsfield's decree. The mayor and the police eventually backed down, but only because they were afraid that a full-scale riot might break out at the track if the bootleggers were not allowed to participate. While the racers and their fans won that battle, Atlanta's civic leaders

magnified their campaign against stock car racing over the next year. Lakewood Speedway's operators eventually did ban drivers with criminal records, leading to a decline in stock car races at the track.<sup>5</sup>

Bill France had been active in racing as a driver and promoter before the war. He knew that stock car fans in the Piedmont South were hungry for racing, but that he had to watch out for the kind of local opposition that hounded his counterparts in Atlanta. So, in October 1945, France announced a race at Charlotte's Southern States Fairgrounds. This event included many of the same bootlegger drivers, but France fashioned his event as a return to the race track for heroic war veterans. Days before the race, the *Charlotte Observer* promoted France's contest as "Vets in Stock Car Races." The *Observer* article declared that "nearly all racers entered service or jumped into defense plants where their mechanical skills were valuable." Now these brave men were back home and ready to race at the fair, where the whole event was sponsored by Tar Heel Post Number Three of the AMVETS organization.<sup>6</sup> France's promotional work made his race about veterans, not moonshiners, and in doing so he avoided any showdowns with Charlotte's civic leaders and police officers.

While advertising his AMVETS race in Charlotte, France initially tried to promote the event as a "National Championship Race." However, *Charlotte Observer* sports editor Wilton Garrison questioned France's judgement. In Garrison's view, France could not hold any kind of national race if only Piedmont drivers were competing.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel S. Pierce, *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 72-75.

<sup>6</sup> "Vets in Stock Car Races Vets Stage On Saturday," *Charlotte Observer*, October 23, 1945.

Moreover, Garrison noted that France lacked standardized rules and an accepted system for awarding points. Without these structures, France could not claim a national presence.<sup>7</sup> France's establishment of NASCAR sought to correct these problems by creating a unified set of rules and a consistent points structure for determining a yearly stock car racing champion. Doing so required France to cement his alliances with bootlegger drivers, mechanics, and financiers. Yet even though illegal liquor flowed through NASCAR's veins, France knew that industrialized stock car racing would put the sport on the path to respectability, and that Charlotte would be a major stop along the journey.

Prior to the Second World War, Charlotte hosted races and automotive contests at several different venues. Yet France's plans to expand stock car racing across the United States led to Charlotte being the site of a new experiment. In 1948, its first year of operation, NASCAR sanctioned races using pre-war coupes which were outfitted with racing engines and parts. These vehicles were known as modified stock cars, or simply "modifieds." For 1949, France decided to form a new series for NASCAR in addition to the modifieds. He envisioned a "strictly stock" series in which drivers would race late-model sedans with only minor modifications. France believed that average Americans would embrace his brand of motorsports if they saw drivers racing the same cars that they drove every day. Additionally, the war had been over for nearly four years, so now there were plenty of new cars on the market from which fans and drivers could pick. The first race for the new division would take place at the one-year-old Charlotte Speedway.

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<sup>7</sup> Neal Thompson, *Driving with the Devil: Southern Moonshine, Detroit Wheels, and the Birth of NASCAR*, (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2006), 177.

France and NASCAR managed to drum up a field of thirty-three drivers for the event. More importantly, 13,000 spectators arrived to watch the race, a crowd that, according to NASCAR, was the strongest for any auto race of the season besides the Indianapolis 500.<sup>8</sup> After 200 laps around the three-fourths mile dirt track, Gastonia's Glenn Dunnaway took the checkered flag three laps ahead of Kansas native Jim Roper. However, NASCAR's post-race inspection found that Dunnaway's Ford was not "strictly stock" after all. The car had a reinforced suspension with stiffened springs, a modification that would have allowed the car better performance while hauling moonshine.<sup>9</sup> As a result, France disqualified Dunnaway and awarded Roper with the victory. Although it ended in controversy, the Charlotte race marked the birth of the division that would become the top echelon of NASCAR.<sup>10</sup>

*Charlotte Motor Speedway: Ambitious Beginnings*

Following the first event of the new division, Charlotte Speedway continued to hold NASCAR races through 1956. By that time, stock car racing was beginning its transition away from dirt tracks to paved superspeedways. The success of Darlington Raceway in South Carolina, and eventually Daytona International Speedway, gave NASCAR the modern look that France sought. France was not the only one who realized superspeedways were the wave of the future. In April 1959, star driver Curtis Turner announced plans to build a superspeedway in Charlotte. Known as the "Babe Ruth of

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<sup>8</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 113.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>10</sup> By 1950, NASCAR called the new series the Grand National Division. This name lasted until 1971, when R.J. Reynolds Winston brand cigarettes became the series' first entitlement sponsor. NASCAR's top division has had an entitlement sponsor ever since and is known as the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series today.

stock car racing,” Turner was a favorite among fans for his hard driving and hard partying ways. He was also a lot like Bill France – a racer turned business man who wanted to have a hand in directing the future of stock car racing. Turner was well aware of how France’s connections with and support from track owners allowed him to climb to the top of the stock car racing mountain. Building and maintaining a new track would be a major personal and professional challenge for Turner, but he wanted to leave a legacy and have a future in NASCAR beyond his accomplishments as a driver.<sup>11</sup>

However, Turner was not the only one who had plans for building a superspeedway in Charlotte. Race promoter Ollen Bruton Smith had the same idea as Turner. A native of Oakboro, North Carolina, Smith caught the racing bug as a young man in the late 1940s and teamed up with fellow promoter Sam Nunis. Nunis was the founder of the National Stock Car Racing Association (NSCRA), which sanctioned races in the Carolinas and Georgia in direct competition with NASCAR.<sup>12</sup> Nunis and Smith’s activity promoting stock car events in the Piedmont was a major thorn in France’s side until the outbreak of the Korean War. When Smith got drafted into the army, Nunis lost his most capable lieutenant. Once Smith’s tour of duty had ended, he came back to the United States to find that NSCRA was no more and that NASCAR now dominated the stock car racing scene in the South.<sup>13</sup> Smith still wanted to promote stock car races but doing so now required working within the NASCAR framework. Yet Smith also had great ambitions for how he could shape the sport. Even if he had to join Bill France’s

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Edelstein, *Full Throttle: The Life and Fast Times of NASCAR Legend Curtis Turner* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2005), 126-127.

<sup>12</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

party, Smith was going to make himself the guest of honor. To that end, he announced his own plans for a superspeedway in Charlotte.

Both Turner and Smith recognized the lucrative possibilities for a new Charlotte superspeedway. The fact that France and NASCAR relied on Piedmont audiences was no great secret. Turner was a former moonshine runner and had watched how France had organized the support of the Piedmont bootleggers. Smith, as one of France's former competitors, had seen for himself the great support for stock car racing throughout the Southeast. Track owners knew that Charlotte would be a great place for a superspeedway as well. Darlington Raceway founder Harold Brasington commented that Charlotte was "the best site" as a growing metropolitan area that could accommodate the large crowds that the speedway would draw.<sup>14</sup> As a result, neither Turner nor Smith was willing to yield to the other. After over a month of squabbling, the two men decided to merge their race track plans and build the new facility northeast of Charlotte in Cabarrus County. The track's first event was slated to be an unprecedented 600-mile stock car race on Memorial Day weekend in 1960. Turner expressed confidence in the plan, referring to Smith as a "definite asset" and promising "a speedway second to none in the whole country." Smith called the merger "the logical thing to do" and stated that he was "tickled pink to be part of such an undertaking."<sup>15</sup>

Once construction began, those rosy feelings were replaced with hard reality. The excavation crew uncovered a layer of solid granite beneath the track site, causing

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<sup>14</sup> Don Gray, "Super Race Track Planned," *Charlotte Observer*, April 10, 1959.

<sup>15</sup> Larry Harding, "Smith, Turner Merge Tracks," *Charlotte Observer*, May 31, 1959.

construction costs to skyrocket.<sup>16</sup> Turner and Smith had to scramble to come up with the money to pay the builders, not to mention the finances to cover the purse and NASCAR's sanctioning fees. The construction issues forced the duo to push the race back to June 19, but it looked like Charlotte's new superspeedway would become a reality. Then, one week before qualifying sessions for the race, Turner and Smith ran into serious trouble. Excavation contractor Owen Flowe became concerned that he and his crew would never see the \$74,000 that Turner and Smith still owed him. As a result, Flowe parked his construction equipment on the track and refused to do any more work until he had been paid.<sup>17</sup>

Turner decided to take matters into his own hands, exhibiting the same style of forceful leadership that had made France successful. Wielding a shotgun, and with Cabarrus County police officers in tow, Turner demanded that Flowe's employees move the equipment that was blocking the track. While he was successful in getting Flowe's associates to back down, Turner discovered that some of the machines had been sabotaged to prevent him from driving them off the track surface. So, Turner simply pushed the equipment off with whatever machines he could get running. The next day, Turner declared that Flowe had threatened to cut a hole in the track, and that he was not going to let a contractor stand in the way of a project into which he had sunk so much time and effort.<sup>18</sup> Despite its chaotic construction, Turner and Smith were confident that

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<sup>16</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 208.

<sup>17</sup> Rolfe Neill, "Speedway Spokesman Says Current Debts Will Be Paid," *Charlotte Observer*, June 11, 1960.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

being the track owners of a Charlotte superspeedway would give them the influence and power that they dearly sought.

The first World 600 at the new Charlotte Motor Speedway did take place as rescheduled on June 19. Yet Turner and Smith were still not out of the woods once the festivities commenced. From the moment drivers took to the track for qualifying, the pavement began to crack and peel up. Driver Tom Pistone said that, given the track's conditions, "the people want blood, and I'm afraid we'll give it to them Sunday."<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, the bloodshed that Pistone predicted did not come to pass, although the inaugural World 600 was an action-packed affair that left many race cars a mangled mess. Just ten laps into the 400-lap contest, Johnny Wolford spun out and got hit by Cotton Owens and Johnny Allen. Wolford's car erupted in flames, and the driver had to jump out to avoid getting burned.<sup>20</sup> Pole winner Fireball Roberts lost a wheel, ending his chance at victory. Driver after driver crashed out of the race as the afternoon went on. Unluckiest of all was Jack Smith, who took control of the race late in the running, opening up a five-lap lead. But with forty-seven laps to go, debris ripped a hole in Smith's gas tank, and he too was done.<sup>21</sup> Smith's troubles allowed Chattanooga native Joe Lee Johnson to take the lead and clinch his second victory in NASCAR's Grand National Series.

After the race, many of the competitors were less than complimentary of the track. Emanuel Zervakis called the track "rough as hell" and declared that "all the cars

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<sup>19</sup> George Cunningham, "Roberts (Who Else?) Wins Pole Position," *Charlotte Observer*, June 17, 1960.

<sup>20</sup> Herman Helms, "'Demolition Derby' Takes Heavy Toll On Big Field," *Charlotte Observer*, June 20, 1960.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

will have to be rebuilt after this one.” Jarrett commented that the track surface had “a lot of holes but you can dodge them.” Pistone offered his thoughts again, explaining that “the things that are happening to the cars today – ball joint suspensions giving away, front and rear wheel bearings collapsing, differentials and axles breaking – those things are caused by track conditions.”<sup>22</sup> In an additional bizarre twist, NASCAR disqualified six drivers from the race, including Lee and Richard Petty, for what race officials described as illegal pit entry. In the case of the Pettys, Lee and Richard had both blown tires coming out of the fourth turn, spun into the infield, and cut through the infield in order to get back to pits. Richard had recovered to finish fourth with Lee in fifth, but the disqualification effectively scratched the father and son duo from the race. Not wanting Bill France to dictate the finishing order of Charlotte’s first big race, Bruton Smith publicly objected to the rulings, saying that “it is ridiculous to disqualify a man for such a minor thing” and that he “disagree(d) with the NASCAR decision wholeheartedly.”<sup>23</sup>

Smith and Turner forged ahead with CMS, holding a 400-mile race in October and a second World 600 in 1961. Once again, accidents were the storyline of the marathon race. The worst incident was when driver Red Kagle smashed into a guardrail, causing the barrier to break and pierce his race car. Kagle survived the incident, but doctors had to amputate his left leg. CMS’ grisly accidents were enough of a headache for Turner and Smith, who were still struggling to come up with enough money to pay all of their creditors. By the summer of 1961, they still owed \$800,000 to various parties.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> George Cunningham, “Pettys, 4 Others Disqualified From 600,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 21, 1960.

Facing the looming threat of foreclosure on the speedway and a potential auction of the property, the board of directors fired Turner as president of the track.<sup>24</sup>

However, Turner would not go away quietly. Desperate to regain control of the speedway, Turner sought a loan from a risky source, the Teamsters Union. The Teamsters agreed to provide Turner with the \$800,000 he needed in exchange for organizing NASCAR's drivers into a Teamsters-supported union known as the Federation of Professional Athletes (FPA). Turner initially received good support from his fellow drivers, arguing that a union would be a useful check against Bill France's one-man domination of NASCAR. Yet France clearly recognized the challenge to his authority and, once he got wind of Turner's plans, set out to crush the union. Addressing the drivers before a race in Winston-Salem on August 9, 1961, France declared that "before I have this union stuffed down my throat, I will plow up my 2 and ½ mile track at Daytona Beach. I will also tear up all the tracks I have an interest in in the state of North Carolina." France further decreed that "no known union members can compete in a NASCAR race, and if this isn't tough enough, I'll use a pistol to enforce it." He also charged Turner and the Teamsters with trying to institute pari-mutual gambling in motorsports. Describing auto racing as "a clean sport" that has "never had a scandal," France insisted that he would "fight any pari-mutual attempt to the last tilt."<sup>25</sup> France knew that if he played up his role as NASCAR's protector from the corrupt Teamsters, he would be able to win over the support of the drivers who were on the fence about

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<sup>24</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 212.

<sup>25</sup> George Cunningham, "Union Drivers Banned From NASCAR Races," *Charlotte Observer*, August 10, 1961.

Turner's plan. Yet there is no doubt that France was also trying to keep the image of NASCAR safe and make sure the public saw his enterprise as a respectable one.

As historian Daniel Pierce explains, France's forceful opposition to the Teamsters, as well as his network of supporters, helped him turn the tide against Turner's unionization efforts. France's speech, along with several of the track owners, convinced most of the drivers that the Teamsters' involvement in NASCAR was only one step away from having organized crime run the sport. Turner and veteran racer Tim Flock were the only drivers who refused to rebuke their union memberships, so France banned both of them from NASCAR for life.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, NASCAR executive Pat Purcell called it "a well-known fact," that Turner wanted to "retain the presidency of Charlotte Motor Speedway" and needed the Teamsters' loan to do it. Purcell charged Turner with using his fellow drivers for his own ends and questioned how much he actually cared about their well-being.<sup>27</sup>

France ultimately lifted Turner's "lifetime" ban in 1965, but Turner never regained control of CMS. The board of directors also blamed Bruton Smith for the track's financial difficulties and ousted him shortly after Turner's departure, leading to the end of Smith's affiliation with the speedway for the time being. What the board could not get rid of was the track's debt to its contractors, who attempted to foreclose on the speedway. To prevent the track from going to the auction block, Charlotte Motor Speedway filed for Chapter 10 bankruptcy in November 1961. Under Judge J. B. Craven

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<sup>26</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 217-219.

<sup>27</sup> "Turner Seeks Local Track, Says Purcell," *Charlotte Observer*, August 10, 1961.

Jr., the speedway spent the next year raising money to pay the track's debts and reorganizing the corporation.<sup>28</sup>

Turner and Smith were successful in bringing a superspeedway to Charlotte. Yet their plans rested more on Charlotte's potential than what it already was. Fueled by big dreams and a lot of ambition, Turner and Smith must have had some idea of Charlotte's status as a growing hub of the NASCAR industry. The trouble was that both men were determined to run CMS in their own way, sometimes in opposition to each other, but most dangerously, in opposition to Bill France. While they never lacked determination, Turner and Smith failed to work within France's framework for doing business in NASCAR. As a result, they could never fully tap in to the potential of the Queen City. There may have been a physical race track near Charlotte, but the speedway's troubled early years prevented the track from fully integrating into the community. The track's next general manager, Richard Howard, would change that.

#### *Richard Howard Rescues Charlotte Motor Speedway*

It was up to Howard and the new ownership group to improve the track's financial situation. Howard had initially bought two thousand shares of stock when Turner and Smith founded the track. After the board of directors appointed him the new general manager of CMS, Howard spent the next three years guiding the track through Chapter 10 bankruptcy proceedings. Howard kept the track open and hosted two Grand National events each year. On May 30, 1967, Howard was able to fully pay off all of the speedway's debts. Howard and the other CMS executives celebrated on June 9 by

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<sup>28</sup> Porter Munn, "Speedway Reorganization Plan OK'ed," *Charlotte Observer*, November 9, 1962.

holding a ceremony to burn the mortgage.<sup>29</sup> Yet weathering the bankruptcy storm was only the beginning for Howard and CMS. Howard's leadership began the push to make the speedway a true showplace for stock car racing, a venue that could rival Daytona itself.

Howard was part of a team of stockholders and other investors who helped to reorganize the track's finances. Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, the speedway's board of directors usually included small business owners who lacked a background in racing but did have experience managing other enterprises. Furniture seller Albert Clemon Goines was one of CMS' original stockholders and took over as track president during the bankruptcy proceedings. Goines had "semi-retired" in 1957, but his "highly successful business career in Charlotte" made him a natural track president.<sup>30</sup>

Huntersville car dealer Dwight Cross was more familiar with racing airplanes than automobiles.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Cross put up \$300,000 of his own money in an effort to help pay off the speedway's debts.<sup>32</sup> Later in the decade, the board included Dr. Fred Wilson, a dentist and the mayor of Monroe, North Carolina, as well as lumberman G. R. Nalley from Easley, South Carolina and Earl, North Carolina's Bobby Austell, a poultry farmer.<sup>33</sup>

Yet Howard was the one who became the public face of CMS's leadership. Unlike other board members who served for a handful of years, Howard had a longer

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<sup>29</sup> Gene Granger, "Richard Howard and Charlotte Part," *Stock Car Racing*, February 1976, 28-29.

<sup>30</sup> "Goines Turned Track Into Going Concern," *Charlotte Observer*, May 15, 1966.

<sup>31</sup> Valinda Jones, "Fly-In Honors 'Old Birds' – Airplanes and Their Pilots," *Charlotte Observer*, July 9, 1973.

<sup>32</sup> Porter Munn, "Speedway Group Meets Saturday," *Charlotte Observer*, February 22, 1962.

<sup>33</sup> "Dr. Wilson Succeeds Goines as President of Speedway," *Charlotte Observer*, February 16, 1967.

tenure with the speedway as vice president, general manager, and eventually president. Additionally, Howard's range of other businesses made him more active in the community than CMS' other leaders. Perhaps most importantly, Howard worked hard to be a good representative of Charlotte's racing industry, both within NASCAR's circle of professionals and to those outside it.

Howard was not initially famous for his involvement in racing, but he was no stranger to the Charlotte region or its other industries. Born in Catawba County in 1924, Howard grew up on his parents' farm before joining the Marines. After serving in the Pacific during the Second World War and earning two Purple Hearts, Howard took a job at a textile mill as a machinist in 1945. He also used his savings to invest in his father's hardware store, which provided him with an entry into the furniture industry. Howard made a deal to assemble and sell furniture, paying a friend for the cost of the materials plus five percent. What started as a side project grew into full-time work when Howard realized he was selling more furniture than his friend.<sup>34</sup>

In 1954, Howard established Howard's Furniture, opening an assembly plant and showroom near Denver, North Carolina.<sup>35</sup> His business ventures expanded rapidly from there. By 1971, in addition to seven furniture stores in the Piedmont area of North Carolina, Howard had his hands in a menagerie of businesses, including "eight Mom and Pop's Ham Houses, a bunch of car washes, real estate, a resort, camp grounds, bowling

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<sup>34</sup> Bob Myers, "Richard S. Howard: Vice-President and General Manager, Charlotte Motor Speedway, or Chapter 11 of the CMS Success Story," *Stock Car Racing*, September 1971, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Howard's Furniture Company remains in business today as Howard's Furniture and Decorating Center. The company is still based in Denver.

houses, and many other corporations.”<sup>36</sup> He was also a visible figure in the greater Charlotte community, serving as a local bank director and the overseer of the finances for his church, Mt. Pleasant Methodist. Along with racing, Howard was passionate about softball. During his tenure as the general manager of CMS, he sponsored two softball teams and a Little League team, building them into fierce regional competitors.<sup>37</sup> It seemed that wherever Howard invested his time and money, success was sure to follow.

Howard envisioned his business ventures, and particularly his work with CMS, as a kind of community service. Doing his job effectively meant that he was ensuring the prosperity of NASCAR, and if NASCAR prospered, then Charlotte would as well. In order to be successful in racing, Howard explained, it was important to have “close communications with the persons involved.” He welcomed the opinions of NASCAR officials, drivers, mechanics, team owners, other track promoters, and the media. In Howard’s eyes, what really moved racing forward were “ideas that will improve the sport and will bring people into your race tracks.”<sup>38</sup> His overarching goal for CMS was to have all the stakeholders in racing, including the fans, leave the track feeling satisfied.

Howard’s all-inclusive approach to track management and race promoting earned him the admiration of his associates. It was common for Howard to welcome visitors into his office at the track who sought his advice or had suggestions for him. *Stock Car Racing* Reporter Bob Myers noted that the visitors came from a wide range of social strata, including “men with millions of dollars and those with a few pennies in their

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<sup>36</sup> Myers, “Richard S. Howard,” *Stock Car Racing*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

pockets, bankers and ditch diggers often sitting side-by-side.” One Charlotte banker declared that he had “never dealt with a more fair and honest man” than Howard.<sup>39</sup> Another peer in the racing industry even said that Howard should be the one in charge of NASCAR instead of Bill France. Yet Howard, who had a net worth of over two million dollars, likely felt comfortable with the jobs and business interests he already held. Therefore, he did not aspire to climb through the ranks of NASCAR. The essence of his plan for CMS was to spend big money, get big crowds, and put on a great show for the Charlotte community. This combination of business sense and promotional flair prompted Myers to describe Howard as “operating like a Wall Street banker and talking and acting like the down-to-earth country boy.”<sup>40</sup>

Close communication with competitors and fans gave Howard the ability to host entertaining races at Charlotte Motor Speedway. Shortly after taking over the track, Howard was able to consistently raise large purses for the World 600 and National 500 through sponsorship and ticket sales. The potential to win big money ensured that NASCAR’s top racers would come to Charlotte twice a year. Occasionally, Howard furnished cars so that popular drivers could compete, often with the goal of ensuring parity among the manufacturers. In 1966, NASCAR prohibited Ford teams from using the company’s new overhead cam engine without adding additional weight to the race car.<sup>41</sup> Ford boycotted NASCAR as a result, meaning that no teams would be able to receive factory support directly from Ford. To ensure that Ford was well-represented in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>41</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 250-251.

the World 600, Howard arranged for Turner and Ned Jarrett to race in the event in Fords as an independent effort.<sup>42</sup>

For the same race, Howard also convinced Lee and Richard Petty to field a car for veteran driver Marvin Panch. Panch had been unable to race due to the Ford boycott, but Howard arranged for Panch to drive one of the Petty's Plymouths as a teammate to Richard. In the race, Richard Petty dropped out with a blown engine. Panch fared much better, taking the lead with a little less than one hundred laps to go, but the seat in his car began to rub against his back, irritating a racing injury he had suffered three years earlier. Panch turned the car over to Petty on lap 319, who went on to win the race.<sup>43</sup> Since Panch was the one who started the race, he received credit for the victory per NASCAR's rules. Thanks to Howard's suggestion to the Pettys, Panch was able to win one more race in his NASCAR career, and his seventeenth overall.

Howard's biggest triumph in drumming up excitement for the World 600 came in 1971. In the weeks leading up to the race, Howard hatched a plan to field a Chevrolet in the Memorial Day weekend event, built by former driver Junior Johnson and driven by Charlie Glotzbach. Chevrolet, along with all the other General Motors brands, had not been actively supporting stock car racing since 1957. In June of that year, the Automobile Manufacturers Association (AMA) passed a resolution that banned American auto companies from "participating in or engaging in any public contest, competition event or test of passenger cars involving or suggesting racing or speed." The

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<sup>42</sup> Myers, "Richard S. Howard," *Stock Car Racing*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Higgins, "Marvin Panch Had No Car – And Then The Phone Rang," *Charlotte Observer*, May 23, 1966.

resolution was an industry reaction to a rash of deaths and injuries across multiple disciplines of motorsports.<sup>44</sup> While GM, Ford, and Chrysler abided by the AMA resolution at first, all three manufacturers were conducting their auto racing business under the table by 1960. Two years later, Ford and Chrysler disavowed the resolution in order to openly return to motorsports. Yet since Chevrolet, a division of GM, continued to distance itself from racing, any NASCAR team that chose to use Chevy equipment received no factory support, and thus was at a disadvantage. Chevrolet had not won a major NASCAR speedway race since 1963, and the long dry spell had caused GM fans to abandon the sport. Howard knew that seeing a competitive Chevy on the track would bring those fans back.

Johnson and crew chief Herb Nab set to work building a Chevrolet for Glotzbach, financed by Howard. Johnson publicly declared that the car would be competitive, and that the team was building six engines for potential use in the World 600. Rumor had it that Johnson also received assistance from Chevy personnel in Detroit, creating a buzz that General Motors might return to racing in full force after all.<sup>45</sup> Anticipation for the event only increased when Glotzbach won the pole, and it became obvious that Johnson and Howard were not just blowing smoke. The World 600 now offered fans a chance to see the most competitive Chevy in NASCAR in eight years. As a result, a crowd of 78,000 showed up on race day, a record for CMS at the time.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 181-185. Pierce discusses these incidents and Bill France's response to safety concerns.

<sup>45</sup> Bob Moore, "A Competitive Chevy," *Charlotte Observer*, May 9, 1971.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Higgins, "Chevy Fans' Hopes Dashed By Wreck," *Charlotte Observer*, May 31, 1971.

The race itself did not turn out well for Glotzbach. Although he led eighty-seven laps, his race ended with a crash while running in the top five. After the race, Glotzbach acknowledged the support of the Chevy fans and declared that he had never driven a better handling race car.<sup>47</sup> Howard's plan did not result in a win, and Chevy did not actively return to NASCAR until the end of the decade, but Glotzbach's performance and the excitement it created was a boon for CMS and one of the best storylines of the 1971 season.

Helping NASCAR's competitors put on great racing was only part of Howard's plan for CMS. He invested plenty of time, energy, and money on the other side of the catch fence, working to improve fan amenities. For the 1969 World 600, the speedway introduced an "awning-type structure" designed to shade the fans in the topmost rows of the main grandstands. For fans camping in the infield, the race was also the first for a new restroom facility.<sup>48</sup> Even bigger was the 1974 season, during which Howard began a five-year program that would bring \$2.5 million worth of improvements to CMS. The plan called for the widening of US route 29 past the speedway, as well as the construction of new access roads and concourses around the track for fans. The speedway also built a new, elevated victory lane near the pits that would allow fans to see the winner celebrate. For the media, the track began an overhaul of the press room and other facilities.<sup>49</sup>

Howard also promoted initiatives that fostered cooperation between the city, the speedway, and the NASCAR community. For the 1968 World 600, several drivers made

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "Grandstands Improved," *Charlotte Observer*, May 16, 1969.

<sup>49</sup> "\$2.5 Million Marked for Improvements," *Charlotte Observer*, May 19, 1974.

a pledge in the weeks leading up to the race to donate ten percent of their winnings to fund a new children's hospital in Charlotte. When Howard heard about the drivers' pledges, he declared that he would match the donations of Bobby or Donnie Allison if either of them placed highest among the pledge drivers. More drivers got in on the game by offering to pledge a portion of their winnings, and soon Howard was getting other businesses to participate by picking a driver to support and matching his donation if he won. Race car drivers, as Howard explained, "are open-hearted people, especially where children are concerned."<sup>50</sup>

CMS even worked in conjunction with the city of Charlotte to put a landfill behind the track, a project that the *Charlotte Observer* declared would be "of mutual benefit to both the city and the track."<sup>51</sup> Charlotte city official Bill Guerrant noted that a landfill on the north side of the city would be more convenient for garbage collectors, who would no longer have to drive across town to empty their trucks. Guerrant said that the city had "been seeking additional landfill sites for some time," and that the speedway location "could save us a tremendous amount of gasoline" by not having to make the cross-town trips. Howard noted that the landfill would increase the speedway's taxes to Cabarrus County, but that was fine with him, because filling the hole near the race track up with dirt would be costlier. Finding a cheaper way to fill the hole "is all I want to do anyway."<sup>52</sup> The landfill project demonstrated that the track was taking responsibility for

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<sup>50</sup> Kays Gary, *Charlotte Observer*, May 17, 1968.

<sup>51</sup> "\$2.5 Million Marked for Improvements."

<sup>52</sup> Helen Arthur, "Speedway Crater Offered to City for Use as New Garbage Landfill," *Charlotte Observer*, November 24, 1973.

disposing waste in a way that would be beneficial for CMS and the city – quite the respectable thing to do.

The flurry of improvements lifted Howard into rarefied air among race track promoters. In ten years, Howard took a speedway that appeared to be heading for financial ruin and turned it into one of NASCAR's premier venues. CMS' journey from bankruptcy to racing showplace mirrored Howard's own life story as a country boy who built himself into a multi-millionaire against seemingly impossible odds. Just as Howard viewed his work as service to the community, his leadership of Charlotte Motor Speedway proved that NASCAR's professionals could be good neighbors whose activities added value to the city. The track's success countered the image of stock car racing as a shameful affair rife with outlaws and renegades. The respectability of Howard made CMS a point of pride, and his efforts laid the groundwork for the nascent motorsports industry to establish more permanent roots in Charlotte.

*Holman-Moody: A Reinvented NASCAR Team*

As Howard worked on the growth of CMS, NASCAR teams sought to make their own operations bigger and better. In the never-ending quest to put the best race cars possible on the track, one team came to dominate the Charlotte motorsports scene. John Holman, a California parts dealer for Ford Motor Company, first went into partnership with Ralph Moody, a Massachusetts-born race car driver and expert mechanic, in 1957. Their race team, Holman-Moody, would become the number one Ford team in NASCAR during the 1960s. Holman-Moody's approach to stock car racing had an enormous impact on the industry. While the team built cars in a similar fashion to its peers,

Holman-Moody established a parts distribution network that made the organization essential to Ford's NASCAR program, doing it all from the team's shop in Charlotte.

Scholars Ronald Mitchelson and Derek Alderman have noted the influence of Holman-Moody on Charlotte as a technological center for stock car racing. They describe the Holman-Moody race shop, located on the west side of the city near the airport, as "a glimpse into NASCAR's future." The team's success made its headquarters "a model for NASCAR shop development, with scale and technical innovation at the heart of shop success."<sup>53</sup> Yet an equally-important piece of the puzzle was Holman-Moody's close relationship with Ford, which allowed the team to function more like an automotive performance business than many of its competitors. The organization not only served as a model for future teams, it also frequently conducted business with other racers, especially those who relied on Ford equipment. Holman-Moody's success on the track, and the benefits that they could offer other teams, lured more racing professionals to the Charlotte area.

Ironically, Holman-Moody might never have existed if Ford had not pulled out of racing in 1957 due to the AMA resolution. Two years earlier, Holman was working as a Ford parts distributor for DePaolo Engineering in California. DePaolo tasked Holman with moving to Charlotte and running an eastern branch of the team. The new DePaolo stock car team would continue the company's affiliation with Ford and would be much closer to NASCAR's main speedways by moving to the Piedmont. Seeking someone with car-building expertise, Holman hired Moody, who had been working on race cars in

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<sup>53</sup> Mitchelson and Alderman, "Red Dust and Dynamometers," 61-62.

Florida, as both a driver and to oversee the team's mechanics. Ford's withdrawal from racing shuttered both branches of the DePaolo team, but after pooling their resources, Holman and Moody decided to continue their partnership without factory backing, essentially forming their own team. After finishing out the 1957 season, Holman-Moody began hiring new personnel. Some of the new hires would eventually become the team's crew chiefs, who often doubled as kinds of middle managers.<sup>54</sup> This type of team organization was unique to Holman-Moody, and the company benefitted from employing specialists who were responsible for preparing different components of the cars.

One of those new hires was Howard DeHart, who would go on to have a long career with Holman-Moody. DeHart had worked on race cars as a young man, and in 1958 he was an engineering student at Virginia Tech. During winter break of his senior year, DeHart made a trip to Charlotte to visit his friend L.O. Stanley, another mechanic who had taken a job with Holman-Moody. Upon arriving at the race shop, DeHart found a group of people outside, looking over a Ford Thunderbird. The team was preparing the car for a tire test at the brand-new Daytona International Speedway. DeHart recalled that the team could not decide what gear ratio to use, so he offered a suggestion. Later that day, Holman asked Dehart if he wanted to accompany the team to the test in Daytona. DeHart agreed, and he wound up making several trips to Daytona before his break ended. After the tests had concluded, and just as he was preparing to go back to school, Holman reached out to DeHart again and offered him a full-time job with the team. DeHart remembered that he "went to Blacksburg the next day and got a leave of absence for a

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<sup>54</sup> Howard DeHart, interview by Christina Wright, March 20, 2008, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

quarter, called (Holman) up and told him I'd be there. The only trouble was I never went back to Blacksburg.”<sup>55</sup>

Instead of getting a degree, DeHart got to be in charge of Holman-Moody's engine department. Under his direction, the team's engines improved, and by the early 1960s Holman-Moody became one of the top organizations in NASCAR. Yet the real turning point for the team came in 1962 when Ford returned to active participation in auto racing through direct factory support. DeHart explained that Ford's involvement made Holman-Moody a “warehouser” of racing parts and equipment for all of the United States.<sup>56</sup> For the next ten years, Holman-Moody acted not only as a race team, but also as a distribution arm of Ford. Any motorsports organization that used Ford parts would purchase them through Holman-Moody, making Charlotte the central point for all of Ford's motorsports operations.

During Holman-Moody's height, the parts department and exchange operated under the direction of Charles “Slick” Owens. Prior to joining Holman-Moody, Owens worked as a mechanic for driver Rex White, and was part of his championship-winning team in 1960. As was typical for teams of the era, Owens was one of about five full-time employees, including White and crew chief Louis Clements. Each member of the team would have had several different roles, meaning that White's team would not have operated with specialists like Holman-Moody did. For instance, in addition to being a mechanic, Owens also acted as salesman for the team. To make extra money for the organization, he began selling tires to competitors at the race track, making Owens, in his

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

words, “the first parts man.”<sup>57</sup> Owens’ sales experience led to a standing job offer from Holman. When White curtailed his racing schedule and ultimately quit driving in 1964, Owens took Holman up on the offer.

By the time Owens went to work for Holman-Moody, the team was operating on a much broader scale than any of its competitors. The organization’s race shop near the airport had grown into a collection of buildings that handled the individual facets of the company. Along with the Ford parts warehouse, the team maintained separate buildings for engines, rear end components, and dynamometers. Holman-Moody also had buildings for drag racing equipment, watercraft and boat engines, and other engines that the company produced for Ford vehicles. These other side projects were uncommon for NASCAR teams, but Holman-Moody was able to undertake them due to its relationship with Ford. Most NASCAR teams only built equipment they would use directly for stock car racing. Holman-Moody operated more like a Ford assembly plant, producing equipment that the team itself did not necessarily use. Although the organization did not sell cars to the public, Owens still described Holman-Moody as a “Ford dealer” organized into different buildings which included “everything we needed to race.”<sup>58</sup> While the auto manufacturers returned to racing and provided factory support to several teams in the 1960s, no organization could boast a relationship like the one Holman-Moody shared with Ford.

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<sup>57</sup> Charles “Slick” Owens, interview by Christina Wright, May 6, 2009, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

As the team's chief parts salesman, Owens wielded serious power within the NASCAR world. He had the authority to sell any parts provided by Ford to other racers, unless Ford had furnished the parts specifically for Holman-Moody. Otherwise, Owens would sell parts to different drivers and teams, keeping records of who got what. Eventually, the other drivers were supposed to bring back the now-used parts in exchange for new ones. Owens could then sell the used parts at a discounted rate to "independents" – drivers who did not have factory support and usually fielded their own cars. He recalled keeping records of all the parts transactions with the other teams, which included about ten other factory-backed teams and around fifteen independents. Owens even remembered that he "tried to save – for the guys that were really trying hard, I saved the better parts for them."<sup>59</sup> Holman-Moody would also sell entire race cars to other teams from time to time. DeHart explained that the company "manufactured all the cars as rolling chassis, then it was up to individuals to make them go around the race track." Yet the cars that Holman-Moody itself raced sent the most powerful message about the company's abilities. DeHart described the team's race cars as "strictly an advertisement for us. It was an advertisement for what we could do."<sup>60</sup>

Holman-Moody's role as Ford's official supplier reveals how the organization operated as a new kind of race team. Most teams in NASCAR were single-car entries usually operated by the driver himself. The driver's winnings and wages from other jobs were what sustained his racing career, but, in most cases, that money was only enough to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Howard DeHart, interview by Christina Wright, March 20, 2008, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

get drivers to the track for the next race. Only a few fortunate teams had factory support, and large-scale sponsorship was virtually non-existent. Holman-Moody, however, operated more like a corporation than its competitors. Ford's backing gave the team the financial security that many others lacked. The support from Ford also allowed the team to branch out into motorsports ventures beyond NASCAR. Most importantly, Holman-Moody's close ties to Ford and broad reach across the motorsports world allowed the team to hire specialists like DeHart and Owens who could maximize the performance in their own areas of the company. This is the model of operation that made Holman-Moody successful, and the team's status as an auto racing business is what future teams would try to emulate.

Before Holman-Moody, only one NASCAR team had relied on hiring a team of specialists to prepare its race cars. In 1955, Carl Kiekhaefer began fielding cars on the Grand National circuit and took the sport by storm. Kiekhaefer was the owner of the Mercury Outboard Motor Company, and he had gotten into racing as a hobby and as a way to advertise for his company. Kiekhaefer's race team benefitted from its connections to Mercury Outboard. Just like Holman-Moody, Kiekhaefer's team produced engines and other products that he did not use for NASCAR competition, which generated extra money for the team. Additionally, Mercury Outboard's engineering work gave Kiekhaefer had a much bigger pool of resources from which he could draw. The scale of his operation allowed Kiekhaefer to attract the top drivers in NASCAR, and his team won two Grand National championships and fifty-two races in just two years. However, Kiekhaefer often butted heads with Bill France. France considered it part of his job to make adjustments to NASCAR's rules to keep the competition relatively even. Seeing

these rule revisions as unfair to his team, Kiekhaefer shuttered his organization after the 1956 season.<sup>61</sup>

Although Kiekhaefer's success was short lived, he proved that a businessman's approach to running a race team could work in NASCAR. Holman and Moody would embrace the same philosophy a decade later. DeHart explained that Moody's background as a mechanic made him "the racer of the group." As the mechanical mastermind behind the team's fast cars, Moody's primary concern was with doing anything he could to give his drivers the best equipment possible. Holman, meanwhile, was the businessman. DeHart recalled that Holman "was always looking for something new to get into, some big scheme to make money, which he normally did. And to Holman, racing was the means to get to the end of what he intended to do."<sup>62</sup> By combining their knowledge, Moody and Holman were able to create a team that was successful on the track, was profitable, had first dibs on all of Ford's latest racing technology, and was at the center of a parts distribution network that made other teams dependent on them. All of those factors turned Charlotte into the home of the most powerful team in NASCAR. In fact, Holman-Moody's reputation became so great that the team had the power to draw motorsports professionals to the Queen City. Owens marveled at how Holman had a knack for spotting talent and recruiting people to join the team. He remembered that Holman "picked out people from all different parts of the

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<sup>61</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 158-162, 175.

<sup>62</sup>Howard DeHart, interview by Christina Wright, March 20, 2008, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

country, it weren't just the South, it's all over. He could pick out men that could do the job."<sup>63</sup>

Having so many talented people at its disposal also made Holman-Moody a leader in innovation. During NASCAR's formative years in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, figuring out how to control and minimize fires became a major concern, especially if a car's fuel tank ruptured during a crash. In the 1964 World 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway, Fireball Roberts and Ned Jarrett crashed early in the race, causing Roberts' car to erupt in flames. Jarrett heroically pulled Roberts out of his smoldering machine, but Roberts had suffered terrible burns and succumbed to his injuries a month later. In response to Roberts' accident, DeHart, Holman-Moody, and Goodyear had been working on a new design for a racing fuel cell, which NASCAR implemented later in the 1964 season. The design featured a rubber lining inside the metal fuel tank that kept the gasoline from spilling out in case the fuel tank was damaged. Later on, the team also developed a check-valve that sat on top of the gas tank. The valve allowed the tank to be refueled but would stopper the gas in the tank if the car turned upside down. DeHart explained that Holman-Moody patented the check-valve, so teams needed to get it from them.<sup>64</sup>

Not surprisingly, innovations for better speed and safety helped Holman-Moody earn a lot of success in NASCAR. Overall, the team made 525 starts in its existence and won ninety-six races. NASCAR stars including Turner, Roberts, Joe Weatherly, and

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<sup>63</sup> Charles "Slick" Owens, interview by Christina Wright, May 6, 2009, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>64</sup> Howard DeHart, interview by Christina Wright, March 20, 2008, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Bobby Allison all won races for the team. Open wheel racing standouts Mario Andretti and A.J. Foyt also competed in stock car races for the team. Yet Holman-Moody found its greatest success with David Pearson. Piloting the number seventeen Ford, Pearson won thirty races with Holman-Moody, including back-to-back championships in 1968 and 1969. Pearson would go on to even greater fame racing with the Wood Brothers, but his Grand National titles with Holman-Moody, the second and third of his career, cemented Pearson's place as one of NASCAR's greatest superstars.

Unfortunately for Holman-Moody, the team's run of dominance did not last forever. What ultimately sunk the organization was the same thing that ruined DePaolo Engineering – cutbacks to Ford's motorsports program. When Ford announced in November 1970 that it would not offer factory support to any race team during the 1971 season, Holman-Moody lost its distinction as a Ford parts supplier. The organization soldiered on into 1971 and performed very well, with Pearson and Allison combining to win eleven races. Following Allison's win at Charlotte in the National 500, *Stock Car Racing* reporter Paul Haluza paid a visit to the Holman-Moody shop to check up on the team. Haluza reported that he "was very much surprised to find a going and bustling operation upon my arrival." Speaking to both team owners, Moody expressed confidence in the team and stressed that the crew members had great communication with the drivers. Meanwhile, Holman acknowledged that Ford's departure from racing meant that the team would "have to go it alone," but that they "were well prepared" to do so.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Paul Haluza, "Publisher's Letter," *Stock Car Racing*, January 1972, 4.

Despite these public assurances that all was well, tensions within the Holman-Moody ranks began to bubble to the surface. The disagreements between Holman and Moody had never been too serious because both of them knew that Ford's factory support acted like a giant safety net for the whole company. However, once that net disappeared, the two owners' visions for running the team became more divergent than complimentary. Soon, neither owner was happy with their partnership, and their frustrations boiled over into the team's operations. One instance of conflict occurred when Holman was on the phone, only to be disturbed by the revving of an engine. Moody was in an adjoining garage at the time working on a race car, unaware that Holman was making a phone call. The disturbance upset Holman so much that he used a forklift to pick up the car and move it outside the building.<sup>66</sup>

The end of Ford's support cut Holman-Moody's staff down from several hundred to about one hundred people. Owens left the company and partnered with driver Darrell Waltrip, opening a racing parts store in Franklin, Tennessee. That venture proved to be short-lived, and by 1973, Owens had returned to Charlotte and opened his own store, Slick's Racing Parts. Yet the paths of Owens and his former employers crossed again after Holman died in 1975. By that point, Moody himself had left and the company was only building engines, rather than fielding cars for competition in NASCAR. Owens agreed to return to the company at the request of Holman's wife, but only in the interim, until she could find a replacement. Mrs. Holman agreed.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 283.

<sup>67</sup> Charles "Slick" Owens, interview by Christina Wright, May 6, 2009, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Following his own departure from Holman-Moody, Moody opened his own Charlotte garage in 1973. The new company, Ralph Moody Inc., sold itself as an operation run by a racer who had the specialized knowledge and expertise that his peers sought. His shop had an engine room, dynamometer, machine shop, and equipment to produce parts, all in the interest of providing “complete service to the racer, from small jobs to large.” Moody’s garage even had a “private room for work on new and/or secret race cars,” noting such a feature was important due to “the heavy influence of politics in racing.” In other words, Moody’s clients would not have to worry about their car design secrets being exposed under his watch. The shop also served as a Firestone service station and as a sales and service facility for motor homes. Experimenting on his own motor home, a twenty-eight-foot Winnebago with a one hundred miles per hour cruising speed, Moody “developed a complete handling package as well as engine modifications to improve the ride and power” of his customers’ motor homes.<sup>68</sup>

Moody’s and Owens’ shops became important parts of Charlotte’s racing landscape, especially because they offered services to racers and the general public. While they could have been regular mechanics in any city in the United States, Moody and Owens had the experience and expertise that racers wanted, and the racers were in or near Charlotte. Just as Bill France depended on Piedmont audiences to make NASCAR successful, Moody, Owens, and other mechanics needed to be around the other racers for their own operations to grow. Even though they were no longer affiliated with Holman-

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<sup>68</sup> Denis Hill, “Ralph’s Place,” *Stock Car Racing*, January 1973, 30.

Moody, they still contributed to the organization's legacy of building a racing industry in Charlotte.

The Holman-Moody team itself made its last entry in 1973, fielding a car for Bobby Unser in the season-opening event at Riverside International Raceway in California. Holman's son Lee eventually took over the company, buying out the other owners and retaining the Holman-Moody name.<sup>69</sup> The company continued to build engines for NASCAR teams, particularly the Wood Brothers, and manufacture racing parts. In fact, Holman-Moody still exists today as a builder of classic race cars, engines, and customizable performance packages for Ford cars. However, the company is now headquartered at a shop on Forsyth Park Drive in Charlotte. DeHart continued to work for the revitalized Holman-Moody for many years, and he lamented the demolition of the original complex adjacent to the airport in 2003.<sup>70</sup>

### *Respectable NASCAR in the Piedmont*

The continuation of Holman-Moody, as well as the advent of Ralph Moody Inc. and Slick's racing parts, solidified Charlotte's status as the hub of stock car racing by the late 1960s. In order for the sport to survive the roller coaster of factory support followed by pullouts, Piedmont audiences remained the core fanbase. Daniel Pierce points out that "at the peak of factory involvement in 1956, NASCAR held 40 percent of Grand National races outside the South." By 1958, after the factories had withdrawn, NASCAR had cut the non-southern races down to 25 percent of the Grand National schedule, adding more

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<sup>69</sup> Charles "Slick" Owens, interview by Christina Wright, May 6, 2009, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>70</sup> Howard DeHart, interview by Christina Wright, March 20, 2008, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

races to the Piedmont South and North Carolina in particular.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, the construction of the original superspeedways served the same audiences. Darlington Raceway, Daytona International Speedway, Atlanta International Raceway, Charlotte Motor Speedway, and eventually North Carolina Motor Speedway in Rockingham held the feature events of the Grand National schedule during the 1960s. A smattering of short tracks complemented the superspeedway races, mostly located in southern states. The locations of these tracks necessitated that drivers and their teams operate out of the South, and many drivers found Charlotte advantageous as a base of operations. By 1968, *Stock Car Racing* magazine had already dubbed Charlotte the “Capital of Motor Racing” due to the number of drivers who had ties to the Queen City.<sup>72</sup>

NASCAR’s drivers, particularly the independents, were aware that Charlotte and the South were becoming NASCAR’s technological centers, especially during the “Northern Tour.” During the summer months in the 1960s, it became common for NASCAR to sanction races at short tracks in the Mid-Atlantic and New England. These races allowed NASCAR to test the waters in new markets, but they also put a strain on the southern-based teams. Independent racer James Hylton described the “Northern Tour” as “sort of like fighting a war.” For Hylton, the ability to race was “rougher up here because we’re away from our garage and parts supply.” The distance made crashes and mechanical failures more severe. “If we break anything or tear up anything other than what we can haul,” Hylton explained, “we have a hard time getting it.”<sup>73</sup> Hylton’s

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<sup>71</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 190.

<sup>72</sup> “Capital of Motor Racing,” *Stock Car Racing*, October 1968, 6.

<sup>73</sup> “Go North Rebel Racers!” *Stock Car Racing*, Jan 1967, 16.

comments demonstrate the regionalism that NASCAR had taken on, but also reflect on the real industrial growth that was happening within professional stock car racing.

Among the independents, Charlotte's regional NASCAR community may have had the biggest impact on the career of Dick May. May cut his teeth racing stock cars on the short tracks near his native Watertown, New York, but received an opportunity to run NASCAR Grand National races in 1970. May and his wife moved to Charlotte later that year, bringing their own sense of regionalism with them. He recalled his friends in New York being excited for his move to the big leagues of stock car racing, seemingly a world apart from the brand of motorsports that they knew. Yet May discovered that "Watertown is like the Charlotte of the North." He found his southern counterparts "very easy to get along with" and felt like "one of the good ol guys" once people got to know him.<sup>74</sup> The recognition of Charlotte as the center of a regional racing industry no doubt aided May's transition from New York to the Carolinas.

In fact, being in Charlotte opened up new possibilities for May's career. He worked as a spokesperson for several companies, including Pontiac, STP, Goody's, and Winston. May enjoyed being a spokesperson when he got to hand out promotional material and free samples. He explained that "When you're giving stuff away you can be nothing but the good guy. Anybody who gives stuff away had to be a heck of a good guy."<sup>75</sup> Later on in his career, May earned a reputation for being easy on his equipment, which led to him becoming a popular substitute and relief driver. If May had never made

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<sup>74</sup> Dick May, interview by Christina Wright, January 15, 2008, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

the move to Charlotte, he probably would not have received those substitution or spokesperson opportunities. Physically moving from New York to the geographic center of the NASCAR world put May in a position to expand his profile as a race car driver.

The professionalization of stock car racing also had a major impact on Ned Jarrett's career. Among NASCAR's star racers of the 1960s, Jarrett was the most sensitive to how NASCAR presented itself to the public. After winning his first Grand National championship in 1961, Jarrett took a Dale Carnegie course to improve his public speaking abilities. Jarrett recalled that most of his peers were less concerned with their public presentation, but as the reigning champion, he wanted to make sure he was a good representative of the sport. He went on to win another championship in 1965 racing for car owner Bondy Long. Long was one of a handful of car owners who received factory backing from Ford and technical support through Holman-Moody. With Jarrett's assistance, Long assembled his team like a miniature version of Holman-Moody, with specialists who worked on specific areas of the car.<sup>76</sup>

Toward the end of the 1966 season, Jarrett decided to retire from driving. However, he remained an active figure in the NASCAR industry, continuing to promote the advancement of the sport in the public eye. In 1969, Jarrett cofounded a Charlotte-based public relations company for race car drivers. This company was "set up specifically to manage the off-track business and activities of race drivers," especially those whose "names are now worth money in the way of appearances and

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<sup>76</sup> Ned Jarrett, first interview by Christina Wright, June 6, 2007, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

endorsements.”<sup>77</sup> Around the same time, Jarrett became the manager of Hickory Motor Speedway in Hickory, North Carolina. Much of his work involved being the public face of the track, which required him to act as an intermediary between the drivers, fans, and media. His duties also included running the PA system and being the track’s announcer. Jarrett’s experiences calling the racing action at Hickory gave him his first training for his later career as a broadcaster.<sup>78</sup>

Jarrett’s career changes are a reflection of how one racing professional was trying to find his place in a changing motorsports industry. By the mid-1970s, NASCAR’s industry had changed to the point that the sport was moving beyond its bootlegger roots and outlaw image. The sport’s fan base retained a predominately white, southern, and working-class character. Daniel Pierce points out that by NASCAR’s twenty-fifth anniversary in 1973, the sport “had more than 16,000 members, racing at eighty different tracks across the nation, in six divisions, competing for over \$6 million in prize money.”<sup>79</sup> Bill France’s attempt to organize American stock car racing experienced its share of growing pains, but his efforts laid the foundation for a professional motorsports industry to take shape. The knowledge, specialized skill, and cooperation that characterized NASCAR teams like Holman-Moody, as well as the operations of Charlotte Motor Speedway, made stock car racing an asset to the community, not a dangerous vice to be stomped out as the civic leaders of Atlanta had seen it in the 1940s.

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<sup>77</sup> Ned Jarrett, *Stock Car Racing*, June 1969, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ned Jarrett, second interview by Christina Wright, July 5, 2007, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>79</sup> Pierce, *Real NASCAR*, 291.

Change, however, continued at a rapid pace. Rather than relying on America's auto manufacturers to prop up the sport, NASCAR's professionals soon turned to corporate America for sponsorship of races and race teams. The age of sponsorship and big money would bring unprecedented growth to stock car racing. Sponsorship would also make Charlotte an even better place for the NASCAR industry to call home.

## CHAPTER 2: NASCAR BRINGS NEW IDEAS AND NEW MONEY TO CHARLOTTE, 1974-2000

Early in the 1970s, motorsports reporter Tom Higgins went on a fishing vacation to Lake Powell in Utah. Following a day on the water, Higgins and some friends went for a drink “in a saloon that that looked like a ‘waterin’ hole’ out of a John Wayne movie.” Higgins struck up a conversation with two “wranglers” who, upon hearing his “Dixie drawl,” asked where he was from. When Higgins replied that he was from Charlotte, one of the wranglers nodded and mentioned the World 600. Higgins relayed the story in the race program of the 1978 NAPA National 500 at Charlotte Motor Speedway. His point was that, even to people far removed from the Queen City, “Charlotte means stock car racing. The two are synonymous in the greatest sense of the word.”<sup>1</sup>

Charlotte had become a significant place in the NASCAR landscape due its central location in the Piedmont. Racing teams were able to operate out of Charlotte easily, which put them within reach of NASCAR’s major southern speedways. However, the 1970s brought a wave of new sponsorship and greater exposure to professional stock car racing, planting the seeds for a southern pastime to become a nationally popular sport. At the same time, the city of Charlotte experienced its own rise to greater national prominence. The expansion of major industries, including banking and aviation helped to make Charlotte a bigger player in the national economy and an exemplary city of the New South. The stock car racing industry fueled Charlotte’s rise as well, but the

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Higgins, “Date Line Charlotte: Hub of Racing,” *1978 NAPA National 500 Souvenir Program*, October 8, 1978, 36.

relationship between the city and the industry was more unique than others. Both NASCAR and Charlotte embraced industry and capitalism, as well as the New South identity, as a way to achieve national respectability. Since NASCAR and Charlotte shared these goals and benefitted from each other's success, stock car industry became the defining industry of the Queen City.

In seeking to explain how NASCAR became a nationally popular sport, scholars have considered the sport's southern character to be an important component. Scott Beekman explains that NASCAR was one of several pop cultural phenomena that facilitated a change in attitude toward the South by non-southerners in the 1970s. He argues that "The destruction of legal segregation, the emergence of a two-party system in the region, and vast economic gains brought on by industrialization" caused non-southerners to see the South in a more positive light. Beekman also states that "Southern successes brought about an in-migration that boosted income levels, suburbanization, and growing national political power." Americans were getting greater exposure to a new South, or at the very least a revised South, one with a regional culture that coincided more with the mainstream culture of the United States. Like country music, Burt Reynolds, and *The Dukes of Hazzard*, NASCAR "was part of an interconnected world of southern cultural forms."<sup>2</sup> Being associated with the south no longer pushed stock car racing to the margins of society. Instead, the New South was a pathway to respectability.

Thanks to its geography, Charlotte had an obvious opportunity to benefit from changing attitudes toward the South. The real question is what role the city itself could

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Beekman, *NASCAR Nation: A History of Stock Car Racing in the United States* (Praeger: Santa Barbara, 2010), 103-105.

play in fostering that change. Scholar Matthew D. Lassiter has examined boosterism in Charlotte with a particular focus on the Queen City's search for respect. He argues that Charlotte's goal was to overcome stereotypes about the "backwards" South by marketing the city as a bastion of capitalism. Charlotte's Chamber of Commerce presented the true identity of the city as its economic success, particularly measured against the declining Rustbelt cities of the Northeast.<sup>3</sup> Lassiter suggests that by the 1970s, the Chamber of Commerce had eased up on its endorsement of unbridled growth during the postwar years. Rather than offering support of growth for growth's sake (and risk becoming "another Atlanta"), Charlotte's civics leaders advocated for more controlled growth, with the city's key industries serving as the backbone. Yet even in an era of more equitable expansion, Lassiter demonstrates Charlotte's enthusiasm in the 1980s and 1990s for the proliferation of banking, international investment, and professional sports franchises.<sup>4</sup> These strategies show how NASCAR was using the same recipe for success as the Queen City.

Stock car racing also had a hand in developing the Charlotte metropolitan area. Lassiter explains how Charlotte's Chamber of Commerce attempted to market the region as "Metrolina" throughout the 1970s. The plan was "an effort to rebrand a twelve-county region surrounding Charlotte" as a regional city, with economic, cultural, and social influence that extended beyond the official city limits of any municipality. Lassiter deems the Metrolina campaign to be a failure because the name never found traction

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew D. Lassiter, "Searching for Respect: From 'New South' to 'World Class' at the Crossroads of the Carolinas," in *Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South City*, ed. William Graves and Heather A. Smith (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 24-26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-37.

among the people in the city or its suburbs. Worse yet, he notes that the campaign opened Charlotte up to mockery from other cities. For instance, Raleigh's local press characterized Metrolina as a complete fabrication, insisting that Charlotte had no real authority to claim cultural influence over a region. In Charlotte's quest to match the reputation and economic might of Atlanta, the Chamber of Commerce appeared to be relying on an overly-ambitious view of Charlotte's regional hegemony.<sup>5</sup>

Yet if the original idea of Metrolina lacked credibility in the late 1960s, NASCAR was helping to make the concept more of a reality even as the name faded away in the 1980s. Unlike Holman-Moody's race shop next to Charlotte-Douglas Airport, the new NASCAR teams that flooded into Charlotte from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s did not set up shops within the city limits. The new generation of team owners still required urban infrastructure to move people and goods effectively. However, many of them had the money and the means to build newer, larger race shops than their predecessors had used, leading teams to seek less crowded and often cheaper space more removed from Charlotte proper. Towns to the north of Charlotte, particularly Mooresville and the vicinity of Lake Norman, Concord, Huntersville, and Harrisburg became the places where teams established their headquarters, expanding Charlotte's racing industry out to the suburbs. NASCAR teams may not have covered the entire breadth of Metrolina, but their economic impact and cultural presence were a driving force behind the expansion of metro Charlotte.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

Although NASCAR could not claim high-profile international investments, the influx of new sponsorship into the sport carried over to the race teams, which began to take on characteristics of big corporations. More importantly, NASCAR also embraced the idea that free-market capitalism would become a major part of the sport's identity. Like Charlotte, professional stock car racing preserved vestiges of its southern character, but corporate sponsors increasingly found ways to commodify NASCAR by repackaging those vestiges in ways that appealed to Americans outside the South. In the final decades of the twentieth century, the identities of Charlotte and NASCAR were malleable, and would take on whatever characteristics corporate America desired.

Charlotte's favorable business climate made the city a more powerful place within the NASCAR industry. By the year 2000, it was almost a necessity that race teams be located near Charlotte, even as NASCAR's reach expanded across the United States. The culture of specialized technical skill that Holman Moody began carried over into a new generation of race teams. These teams included organizations like Hendrick Motorsports that pioneered a new approach to fielding a multi-car operation. The new wave of Charlotte teams also increasingly relied on sponsorship and drivers who could be both racers and salesman. Charlotte Motor Speedway also began a second phase of growth and expansion under the guidance of one of its original creators, who came back to Charlotte determined to finish what he had started in 1960.

#### *The Battle for Charlotte Motor Speedway*

Bruton Smith never completely severed his ties with CMS. Despite getting ousted by the board of directors in 1961, he still retained 40,000 shares of stock in the company. But with nearly two million shares in existence, not to mention his reputation

damaged by the bankruptcy, Smith was in no position to be influential in the track's development. As a result, Smith had turned his interests toward managing automobile dealerships by 1966. He started in Charlotte with Bill Beck Ford, but left for Denver, Colorado less than a year later to manage a Ford dealership there. By December of 1968, Smith was looking to purchase a dealership of his own. He settled on Frontier Ford in Rockford, Illinois. Yet Smith was not content to stop at one dealership. In 1970, he purchased a Toyota dealership in Rockford, and in the next five years he acquired five more: two in Houston (one Ford and one Dodge), one in Dallas (Ford), one in Charlotte (Dodge), and one in Atlanta (Dodge).<sup>6</sup> Smith's investments made him a wealthy man, giving him the capital he had never been able to enjoy when building CMS.

As Smith was building up his network of car dealerships, he got a fateful call in 1972. A CMS board member reported that there was "disharmony among the directors" and that some were willing to sell their stock. Smith agreed to purchase it and found himself with 250,000 more shares. The 1974 stockholders' meeting brought an even bigger victory for Smith when he became the chairman of the board of CMS. Smith recalled that he was "instrumental" in helping Richard Howard maintain his roles as general manager and track president. Publicly, he expressed optimism that he and Howard could work together. Yet in assuming his new leadership role, Smith kept entertaining offers by other stockholders looking to sell. Smith reported that in one two-week period he was on the phone with brokers constantly and wound up spending \$750,000. Those purchases included buying 12,500 shares from Howard himself.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bob Myers, "Bruton Smith," *Stock Car Racing*, April 1976, 70.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

Despite the spending spree, Smith was adamant that he had no interest in owning Charlotte Motor Speedway. During the 1973 World 600, Smith stated publicly that he was “nothing more than a stockholder” and that Howard “does a helluva fine job” running the speedway. Smith also said that he had “no intention of engaging in a power struggle or making any attempt to jeopardize (Howard’s) position.” As for the stock purchases, Smith said that he did not really know why he was buying up so many shares. Either he was “buying with my heart” as one banker suggested to him, or that “the track holds a lot of sentimental value for me.”<sup>8</sup>

What did Smith really intend with his stock purchases? He obviously sought a greater role in managing CMS that he had before, and the purchases were within his means after the success of his car dealerships. However, the opportunity to restore his reputation likely motivated Smith to come back to CMS. Even after making millions in car sales, Smith seemed unable to forget about his past promotional work in racing, and his failure to secure a long-term loan that would have kept him in charge of CMS in the first place. In looking back on the building and bankruptcy of the speedway, Smith maintained that he was a “victim of circumstances, of innuendo, of idle gossip that cast doubts on my ability and my integrity.”<sup>9</sup> He might not have known exactly how far his stock ownership would take him, but it seems that Smith at least wanted another chance now that he was older, wiser, and richer. In essence, Smith was on a personal quest to prove his own respectability.

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<sup>8</sup> Gene Granger, “Richard Howard and Charlotte Part,” *Stock Car Racing*, February 1976, 29, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Myers, “Bruton Smith,” 74.

Regardless of how far ahead Smith had planned his next moves, his influence over CMS was growing, and Howard took notice. While Smith and Howard maintained a harmonious relationship in public settings, their leadership styles were creating a rift between them. The central point of contention was Howard's discomfort with Smith's spending habits, which were preventing the company from paying out dividends to the stockholders. Howard had always made certain that the track could pay dividends each year, but his inability to guarantee the payouts while working with Smith made him feel like he was losing control of the speedway.

The conflict came to a head during the stockholders' meeting on January 30, 1975, when Smith and Howard accused each other of undermining their authority. The two of them had apparently created a shortlist of people whom they would nominate to the 1975 board at the meeting. However, Smith charged that Howard broke the deal and was trying to add his supporters to the prospective board members. Howard countered that Smith had tried to do the same thing. In fact, Howard showed up at the meeting with a letter of resignation in his pocket in case Smith's supporters took over the board. Yet Howard never tendered his resignation. The contentious meeting ended with the board split 4-3 in Howard's favor, with both Howard and Smith keeping their respective roles.<sup>10</sup>

Now Smith and Howard's rivalry was out in the open, and their public statements became less charitable. Howard explained that he tried "to run the speedway conservatively, because I was once a poor boy with holes in my shoes. It got to the point where we were spending three dollars to make one." Howard added that he "ran out of

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<sup>10</sup> Granger, "Richard Howard and Charlotte Part," 28.

money for the first time in 10 years and had to borrow money to finish paying our (1974) taxes. I don't operate that way." He also expressed frustration about not really being in charge of CMS, saying that the speedway was "being run from Illinois."<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Smith suggested that Howard was distracted by his other business interests. Smith insisted that he was "not going to run the speedway" and wanted "a full-time general manager." He also hinted that he had bigger plans for the track and different priorities than what Howard would allow. Smith stated that "there are things to be done," but that "One of them isn't paying dividends to stockholders... That 2 ½ cents per dollar should be put back into the track for improvements." Smith went on to say that his biggest goal for the speedway was to "get some respectability about it, to see it's run properly and on a national scale." He added that "It is time Richard Howard stepped down and let a younger man with some fresh ideas take over."<sup>12</sup>

Later that year, Smith got his wish. On the weekend of Charlotte's National 500 in October, Howard announced his intent to resign before the stockholders' meeting in January 1976. Following the announcement, Howard revealed to the press that Smith had bought even more stock, bringing his total to 800,000 shares, a controlling interest. Howard reasoned that if he felt like his grasp on the speedway had been slipping away before, there was nothing he could do about it now. Yet before he fully handed over the reins to Smith, Howard insisted that "we are going to pay a 7 ½ per cent dividend a share before I get out," despite the fact that Smith was "highly opposed to it."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.

The power struggle over CMS represents a new direction for the speedway, as well as a new direction that NASCAR as a whole would take over the next twenty years. Smith's redefinition of big money and broad scope for a race track led to his clash with Howard. While Howard admitted that he did run the speedway conservatively, his initial goal had been to save the track from bankruptcy. His success in growing attendance, purses, and prestige at CMS made him one of the most, if not the most, respected promoters of his age. In his commentary on the leadership struggle in Charlotte, *Stock Car Racing* reporter Bob Myers described Howard as "a millionaire with a country image that has fir into racing so well that he's a hero." Smith had an entirely different image. Myers described him as a "multi-millionaire with city-slicker bearing" who wanted "Charlotte Motor Speedway run as a big corporation. He wants a showplace, to spend large sums of money for improvement and promotion. He is affluent and shows it. He is Madison Ave. in appearance and his associates are that type. He's a big businessman."<sup>14</sup>

It is doubtful if Smith would have objected to that description, and he likely would have wholeheartedly embraced it. Smith stated his desire "to make Charlotte, Concord, Kannapolis and Piedmont, North Carolina extremely proud of the speedway. I want to see it become more of an integral part of these communities." While that goal seems well in line with Howard's vision, Smith was really looking to take the track beyond Western North Carolina. Smith saw regional pride as the means to the end of national, even international prestige, whereas Howard thought of regional pride as an end in itself. Smith explained that his "objective at Charlotte Motor Speedway is a strong

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<sup>14</sup> Bob Myers, *Stock Car Racing*, February 1976, 12.

promotional campaign toward national recognition.” He even suggested that “The speedway has the potential to become the Indianapolis of major league stock car racing.”<sup>15</sup> Smith’s ambitious goals set the stage for a new era of growth at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

*Smith Thinks Big with Growing Speedway*

Smith’s leadership at CMS coincided with a new image of NASCAR that took shape in the late 1970s and 1980s. Scholar Mark Howell explains that NASCAR had traditionally been a “prole sport,” a type of athletic activity that emphasizes speed and power and is most popular with working-class people. However, the late 1970s and 1980s brought an influx of new corporate sponsors into NASCAR, as well as regular live television coverage for races. Sponsorship and television expanded the fundamental duties that drivers had to perform on the job. Because drivers had new responsibilities and a different image to uphold, NASCAR no longer fit the traditional parameters of a prole sport.<sup>16</sup>

Smith would soon find himself at the front and center of NASCAR’s changing image. From the moment he took over CMS, he was determined to create a visually and functionally impressive race track, one that would cater to the new white-collar audiences of NASCAR. Certainly, Smith’s primary goal as a track owner was to generate a profit by making his speedway appealing to upper middle-class fans and especially corporate America. In doing so, Smith changed the demographics of NASCAR fans and race track

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<sup>15</sup> Myers, “Bruton Smith,” 75.

<sup>16</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), 81-82.

visitors in Charlotte, moving the sport away from its rowdy, blue-collar, moonshine-fueled past. Once this image change had begun, Charlotte's civic leaders began to care less about stock car racing's bad reputation and more about the money it brought into the region. Howard's departure left Smith to reshape the track as he saw fit. In fact, his ownership of the speedway paved the foundation for what would officially become Speedway Motorsports Inc. in 1994. Whatever his original intentions, Smith was back in the speedway business.

As Howard had predicted, Smith went to work assembling a new team of lieutenants. One of them was H. A. "Humpy" Wheeler, a former Firestone representative whom Smith hired as his new general manager. When Wheeler joined forces with Smith, he had been entertaining several job offers, including one from Bill France to manage Talladega Superspeedway. In recalling his visit to the track, Wheeler remembered that Interstate 20 was not yet complete, and that there was a noticeable lack of hotel rooms in the area. He thought that the track "just had so much going against it."<sup>17</sup> Wheeler reasoned that he wanted to get back into racing but did not want to leave Charlotte. He considered working with Smith to be a calculated risk, but one that offered him the best opportunity.<sup>18</sup> Initially, the plan was for Wheeler to oversee Smith's expansion projects while Smith continued to operate his car dealerships in Rockford. Smith's bold expansion plans caused some friction between him and Wheeler. Wheeler recalled years later that Smith "was absolutely crazed by the idea of expanding the Speedway, making it

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<sup>17</sup> Humpy Wheeler and Peter Golenbock, *Growing up NASCAR: Racing's Most Outrageous Promoter Tells All* (Minneapolis: MBI Publishing Company, 2010), 165.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

bigger and better.” While Wheeler wanted the track to have quality, functional facilities, Smith’s game plan was “about adding glitter and glitz.”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the list of improvements that Smith announced for the track in 1977 included 10,000 more high-rise grandstand seats, a centralized control tower, a 14,000-square foot ticket office, and additional VIP suites. Smith defended the costly upgrades as simply keeping up with the times. Describing NASCAR as the “fastest growing sport in the country,” he explained that “Charlotte is in the center of this growth and that Charlotte Motor Speedway has the responsibility of projecting the sport’s rich tradition and heritage.” To Smith’s credit, his plans were met with approval by local leaders. *Stock Car Racing* reporter Bob Myers noted that Charlotte’s “Big Wheels, who treated the speedway like a case of leprosy for many years, are beginning to embrace the track and merchants in the Queen City have begun to realize the economic crowds of 80-100,000 have on Metrolina.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps those “Big Wheels” had been paying attention to Wheeler. In September 1976, he made a public appeal to the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, explaining “why Charlotte’s business community should look with favor on the speedway.” Wheeler pointed out that the track’s two major NASCAR races each brought eight million dollars into the local economy. Additionally, the speedway hosted a slate of twenty other events, including motorcycle races and sports car speed trials, which generated another 3.2 million dollars in local spending. Wheeler argued that the combined 19.2 million dollars annually that the speedway pumped into the economy was “the equivalent of a pretty

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 173, 176-177.

<sup>20</sup> Bob Myers, *Stock Car Racing*, November 1977, 14, 80.

strong industry.”<sup>21</sup> Presenting with Wheeler was Gar Laux, the new owner of the Charlotte Checkers hockey team. Laux made a cultural appeal to the Chamber of Commerce about the value of professional sports. Perhaps it was not “mandatory” for Charlotte to have a speedway or a hockey team, but, as Laux reasoned, banks were not “mandatory” either. Laux posited that “a city like Charlotte” needed sports, because they “are pieces that go together to make it a complete city.”<sup>22</sup>

Finding allies within Charlotte, and even the state government, became increasingly important for Smith and Wheeler. One of those allies was *Charlotte Observer* publisher Rolfe Neill, who supported a bill that allowed the city to raise funds for promoting the World 600 and other events at the speedway. The bill did become law, but Smith and Neill’s victory was short-lived. CMS received only \$50,000 for one year until the fundraising campaign fell by the wayside. Smith ultimately found more help from the state government in the form of Governor James Hunt. He remembered that Hunt, like Neill, recognized the race track as a way to bring visitors to the city, and the governor was instrumental in getting US Route 29 widened by the speedway. In terms of promoting CMS and its races, Smith considered Governor Hunt to be “the best,” noting that “we got a lot of things done when he was in office.”<sup>23</sup>

Smith was also friendly with Luther Hodges Jr. Hodges’ father, Luther Sr., had served as the governor of North Carolina from 1954-1961. The younger Hodges attended the 1976 World 600 while he was Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. Although he

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<sup>21</sup> Roy Covington, “Stock Cars Rev Up Business,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 9, 1976.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Bruton Smith, Interview by Mark Ethridge, 2016.

wore a 600-dollar suit to the event and undoubtedly looked out of place among the crowd of racers, the experience made Hodges a believer in the economic impact of CMS. He explained to the Chamber that the track was “a whole new world out there,” but it was “a damn good world and a great one for Charlotte.”<sup>24</sup> When Hodges started his own campaign to be a US Senator in 1978, Smith was one of his biggest supporters. While Hodges’ bid for a congressional seat was ultimately unsuccessful, he had a longer career as the chairman of the Charlotte-based North Carolina National Bank, one of the forerunners of Bank of America. Having connections with Charlotte’s banking industry allowed Smith to be an observer of the city’s growth. Charlotte’s rise as an American financial center undoubtedly influenced Smith in his own business. Noticing that “the population of the state was growing,” Smith determined that he had to “gradually put in more seats with the growth of the state.”<sup>25</sup> Aside from a population increase alone, Smith must have realized that Charlotte could support a banking industry with a national reach. If it was true that Charlotte was establishing closer ties to other areas of the country, then it was only more appropriate for the Queen City to strengthen its claim as the stock car racing capital.

Smith recalled how “in the late, late 70s... people were looking more and more at the drivers like these great, great heroes, and they were seeking time with them.”<sup>26</sup> The idea of drivers becoming heroes in the late 1970s is best represented by the rise of Dale Earnhardt. Scott Beekman explains that Earnhardt became a fan favorite due to “a public

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<sup>24</sup> Covington, “Stock Cars Rev Up Business.”

<sup>25</sup> Bruton Smith, Interview by Mark Ethridge, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

persona that was a combination of genuine personality and carefully cultivated image.”

The image of Earnhardt as a “sullen loner” who would do anything to win, up to and including wrecking his opponents, “perfected the outlaw-hero character” that resonated so well with NASCAR fans. However, Earnhardt’s image depended on being cultivated by the sponsors and the media, which gave him “far more assistance... than (he) liked to admit.”<sup>27</sup> If Smith’s and Beekman’s observation is correct, then it reflects the changing nature of stock car racing. Drivers like Earnhardt relied on images of themselves as outlaw, daredevil racers, images that had their roots in old southern stereotypes.

However, sponsors and the media repackaged this imagery in ways that made NASCAR appealing to fans outside the South. Smith was so intent on making sure that he was the one who could capitalize on NASCAR’s growth potential that he started financing the construction of new garages in an effort to attract more teams to the city.

Of course, Smith’s major focus remained on turning CMS into a palatial facility that signified Charlotte’s relationship with racing. He soon transitioned from more seats and suites to creating amenities that no other race track could match, imbuing CMS with a touch of exclusivity. In 1984, Smith opened a condominium tower overlooking turn one of the speedway. The following year, Smith announced a new twenty-million-dollar construction project. In addition to adding more suites and seating, the track would add an office tower with a private dining area called the Speedway Club. Membership in the Speedway Club would cost a one-time fee of \$5,000, but Smith promised that the club would be “the most luxurious of its kind” and “totally unique to the world of

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<sup>27</sup> Beekman, *NASCAR Nation*, 108.

motorsports.”<sup>28</sup> However, Smith was clearly thinking beyond the world of motorsports. He considered part of his work to be “convert(ing) a lot of people to the sport (who) never knew nothing about it or went to a race.”<sup>29</sup> As he came up with ideas for improvements, Smith saw CMS less like a NASCAR track and more like a cross between a cultural center and sports stadium. His projects challenged the conventional notions about what kind of place a race track could be, what kinds of people would want to see and be seen at a stock car race, and how a race track could be interconnected with its local economy. Smith’s work with CMS expanded Charlotte’s reputation as an innovative place for NASCAR, and not just for the competitors.

If Humpy Wheeler was skeptical about Smith’s expansion plans, his skills still complemented Smith’s very well. Wheeler’s best contribution to CMS was his ability to generate crowds, an ability he displayed quickly. While trying to figure out a way to boost ticket sales for the 1976 World 600, Wheeler lamented that most of the motorsports world’s attention was on Indianapolis, where Janet Guthrie was attempting to become the first woman to race in the Indianapolis 500. When Guthrie was unable to make the field, Wheeler realized that the media’s focus would shift to Charlotte if he could get Guthrie to run the World 600 instead. So, after successfully convincing Guthrie to come to Charlotte, Wheeler assembled a team for her from scratch, with Ralph Moody as the crew chief. Guthrie’s car owner was officially Lynda Ferreri, a friend of Wheeler’s who worked as a marketing executive at First Union Bank in Charlotte, although that did not

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<sup>28</sup> Tom Higgins and M. S. Van Hecke, “Charlotte Speedway Planning Expansion Worth \$20 Million.” *Charlotte Observer*, December 11, 1985.

<sup>29</sup> Bruton Smith, Interview by Mark Ethridge, 2016.

stop most of the competitors from figuring out who was really financing the team.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Guthrie qualified for the race, and suddenly all eyes were on Charlotte.

Wheeler recalled that he kept the ticket office open all day on Friday after the Thursday qualifying session, and that the track set a record for one day ticket sales.<sup>31</sup> On Sunday, a crowd of 103,000 people turned up at the speedway, backing up traffic for nearly twenty miles.<sup>32</sup> David Pearson ultimately took home the trophy, while Guthrie raced to a fifteenth-place finish in the field of forty cars, but the biggest winners that day were Wheeler and Charlotte Motor Speedway.

The core of Wheeler's promotional strategy was to get people to the race who otherwise would not have been there. In 1977, he asked his staff who they thought the last person in the world to attend a race at CMS would be. The first two suggestions were the Pope and the Queen of England, neither of whom Wheeler thought he could reach. The third suggestion, Elizabeth Taylor, was a greater possibility. Wheeler reached out to Taylor's husband, Virginia Senator John Warner, and convinced the couple to come to the track, meet the drivers, and serve as grand marshals for the race. Once again, Wheeler entertained a sellout crowd on race day, and Taylor and her husband were an absolute sensation. *Charlotte Observer* reporter Elizabeth Rhodes described the energetic response for the actress, commenting how "Miss Taylor's every step was followed by the tramp of hundreds of fans' feet."<sup>33</sup> Even Taylor told Wheeler that she

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Benyo, "Lady in Waiting," *Stock Car Racing*, October 1976, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Wheeler and Golenbock, *Growing up NASCAR*, 170.

<sup>32</sup> Benyo, "Lady in Waiting," 44.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Rhodes, "Liz at the World 600: Wow!," *Charlotte Observer*, May 30, 1977.

had “never been in front of such a massive crowd of people.”<sup>34</sup> There is no doubt that Taylor’s visit was a big deal for CMS in of itself, but it also demonstrated the power of the track to bring national attention to Charlotte.

Taylor’s visit was so successful that Wheeler arranged for another unlikely celebrity, Zsa Zsa Gabor, to visit Charlotte and attend the World 600 in 1978. In preparing for Gabor’s arrival, Wheeler stated his and Smith’s intention to make Charlotte “the showplace of all racing, not just stock cars.” The obvious challenge in meeting that goal was figuring out how to draw attention away from the Indianapolis 500, which ran on the same day as the World 600 each year. Wheeler, however, pointed to his past experience working with Tony Hulman, who had owned Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He argued that “Indy has gone past its peak” and that the track “has lost momentum and we have gained.” Indianapolis “had no more room to grow,” but CMS had “scads of it.”<sup>35</sup> Wheeler’s positive comments about his own race track should not be surprising, but the way he viewed CMS’s growth potential is highly significant. Wheeler recognized that the track had the ability to cement Charlotte’s reputation across the United States as a motorsports city, just like Indianapolis.

In addition to bringing greater attention for the track through the attendance of celebrities, Wheeler and Smith had success at finding ways to broaden CMS’ appeal to mass audiences. For instance, Wheeler conducted a survey at the track in 1976 and found that women made up only fifteen percent of the race day crowd. While exploring ways to

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<sup>34</sup> Wheeler and Golenbock, *Growing up NASCAR*, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Tom Higgins, “Special Day for CMS’ Wheeler: When Engines Crank Up, He’ll be Chocked-Up,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 28, 1978.

increase female attendance, Wheeler read about how filling stations built new restrooms and cleaner facilities during the 1940s, making them more appealing to women. Wheeler decided to try the idea for himself and convinced Smith to make new restrooms a priority in the track's next round of improvements. In addition, Wheeler made some adjustments to CMS' front gate personnel. Instead of the prison guards and "gruff people who would bark at the customers," Wheeler hired teachers, coaches, and salespeople to work the front gates. The experiment in guest service paid off well. By the early 1980s, Wheeler observed that more women were attending races at CMS and that security had improved as well.<sup>36</sup>

Wheeler also placed an increased emphasis on public relations. In 1983, he put together a package ticket deal for the owner of a plumbing supply company. The company's owner had moved to Charlotte from New York City, and, finding that many of his clients were motorsports fans, wanted to treat them to a race.<sup>37</sup> These kinds of corporate connections were crucial to the growth of the speedway. While the improvements around the track made CMS a better place for women and families, corporate outings distinguished the track as a place of business, and it fact more like a business itself. If Smith and Wheeler were running Charlotte Motor Speedway more like a corporation, their initial success was in increasing the track's appeal and strengthening its ties to the local economy. Stronger ties with new fans and business people brought more money to the track for Smith's expansions. It also brought him respectability.

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<sup>36</sup> Wheeler and Golenbock, *Growing Up NASCAR*, 184.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-184.

By the early 1980s, Smith and Wheeler's efforts had indeed ushered in an image change for Charlotte Motor Speedway. Prior to the 1982 World 600, Wheeler noted that CMS' fans, expected to be 130,000 strong, were "more affluent and mature" than their predecessors. Additionally, Wheeler attested that there had been a "500% improvement" of the Charlotte business community's support of the race.<sup>38</sup> Such a figure would have been hard to prove, but the city's reaction to the race weekend had become more festive than it used to be. *Charlotte Observer* reporter Sam Fulwood III noted that the Chamber of Commerce had transformed a ten day long downtown celebration before the previous year's race into a "20 Days in May" festival, including barbecues, an art show, dancing, golf, and boxing. "No longer do the city's merchants," Fulwood wrote, "worry about hell-raising race fans chasing away regular customers. Today, they see the World 600 as a golden marketing opportunity."<sup>39</sup> Small businesspeople like Dean Kokenes, who owned a restaurant near the speedway, remembered his past fears of "rowdy race fans" but recognized that "NASCAR racing has broadened its appeal." Kokenes explained that "Before you didn't want them because they might run off the regular business, but not now."<sup>40</sup> Clearly, Charlotte was warming up to NASCAR and its fans, especially their money.

#### *Charlotte Becomes the Home of the All-Star Race*

Positive relationships with corporate sponsors assured that CMS would remain an important NASCAR venue. The most important relationship was with tobacco company

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<sup>38</sup> Sam Fulwood III, "Businesses Now Race to Win World 600 Fans for Customers," *Charlotte Observer*, May 27, 1982.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

R. J. Reynolds, whose Winston brand cigarettes served as the title sponsor for NASCAR's top division, the Winston Cup Series. At the conclusion of the 1984 season, R. J. Reynolds president Jerry Long announced that the following year would feature an all-star race for drivers who had won in 1984. The all-star race, which became known as The Winston, would be held at a different venue each year, and Charlotte would get the inaugural edition.<sup>41</sup> The decision to start The Winston in Charlotte likely resulted from R. J. Reynolds' desire to hold the race at a track near a major city, particularly one close to its home base in Winston-Salem.

For 1986, the race moved to Atlanta on Mothers' Day. After the race was poorly attended Wheeler lobbied Winston's sports marketing executives to bring the race back to Charlotte permanently. He also proposed a new twist – the race would be divided into segments, with a ten-lap shootout to decide the winner. The idea was to make the final portion of the race very short in order to ratchet up the tension for drivers and fans.<sup>42</sup> To the delight of Wheeler and R. J. Reynolds executives, the new format was an instant success. The race ended with a thrilling battle between Bill Elliott and Dale Earnhardt. As the laps wound down, Elliott hit Earnhardt from behind exiting the fourth turn, causing Earnhardt to go sliding into the infield. However, Earnhardt amazingly regained control of his car, stayed ahead of Elliott, and went on to win the race. Fans would later refer to the maneuver as the "Pass in the Grass," even though Earnhardt never actually lost the lead. Yet as much as the Pass in the Grass added to Earnhardt's legend, it helped

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<sup>41</sup> Wheeler and Golenbock, *Growing Up NASCAR*, 229-230.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-234.

to turn The Winston into a fan favorite event, adding to the uniqueness of Charlotte within the NASCAR world.

The ten-lap shootout format proved to be the first of two big ideas that cemented the all-star event as a staple of racing in Charlotte. In 1991, when Winston executives were toying with the idea of moving the race again, Wheeler made a seemingly ridiculous proposal. For 1992, CMS would run the Winston on a Saturday night on a lit-up race track. Night racing was not a new concept for NASCAR, but it was limited strictly to short tracks that did not require a lot of lighting fixtures. Nobody had ever attempted to run a night race at a superspeedway like Charlotte. Wheeler himself had no idea how he could accomplish the feat when he made the initial suggestion, but he did recognize the huge marketing potential for the track and Winston. With Smith's blessing, Wheeler first attempted to set up his own lighting system and test it himself by driving around the speedway. While the system functioned properly, Wheeler found that the lights along the inner wall of the track were too intense, blinding him every time he looked to the left.<sup>43</sup>

Seeking a better solution, Wheeler turned to an Iowa-based company called Musco Lighting. The challenge became figuring out how to light the track surface from a low angle without blinding the drivers. Meanwhile, Wheeler had to contend with NASCAR's skepticism about the lighting project. Bill France Jr. required that whatever system Wheeler came up with had to pass a test conducted by NASCAR, and that there had to be an emergency backup system if the main transformer malfunctioned. After a few months, Wheeler paid a visit to Musco's headquarters to see what the company had

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

designed. Musco's system used standard light poles around the outside of the racing surface with mirrors directed back toward the track on the inside. The result was that the racing surface lit up without putting lights anywhere that could blind the drivers. Wheeler eagerly began promoting the race, although NASCAR's final test was still pending.

In April 1992, one month before The Winston, NASCAR gathered all the teams at CMS to test the Musco lights. The system worked at the track, but Wheeler still had trouble getting drivers to volunteer to drive around the track for the test of the emergency backup system. Fortunately, the emergency lights worked as well, and NASCAR approved the plan to run The Winston at night.<sup>44</sup> The only incident of the evening was when Smith pulled a lever on a ceremonial switchbox, separate from the real lighting system. The ceremonial box was supposed to light up itself, but the switch triggered a fireball that shot out of the box and briefly set Smith's hair aflame. Fortunately, the success of the actual light test overshadowed Smith's mishap. *Charlotte Observer* reporter Tom Sorensen noted that the lighting was "not diffuse; it is steady, and seemingly glare-free," and that once the initial shock wore off, it was "business as usual for the drivers." Sorensen predicted, though, that the Winston would be anything but usual for the fans. "How many big-time sporting events do you see during the day?" Sorensen asked his readers. If the Winston was successful, it could open the door for more NASCAR races to be night time events, and "Night is prime-time."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 239-241.

<sup>45</sup> Tom Sorensen, "Speedway Test is Ablaze in Glory," *Charlotte Observer*, April 16, 1992.

The race itself turned out to be the totally unique and memorable experience for which Wheeler had hoped. A total of 133,500 people showed up, which set a record for highest-attended night sports event in the United States.<sup>46</sup> Once again, the ending ten lap run produced a spectacular battle. Earnhardt led the field with one lap to go, but Kyle Petty and Davey Allison were closely tailing him. As they raced into the third turn, Petty tapped Earnhardt from behind, sending Earnhardt's number 3 car sliding sideways through the turn. Petty appeared to have the race won, but Allison pulled alongside Petty as the two of them raced down the front stretch. Both cars bounced into each other, turning Allison sideways in front of Petty. Allison won the race sliding across the finish line, but as he did his car snapped back around and slammed the outside wall. The crash left Allison with a concussion and the race with the strange scenario of a wrecked race car getting towed to victory lane while the winner was in the track's medical center.<sup>47</sup>

The novelty of racing under the lights made The Winston one of NASCAR's biggest events for the competitors and fans. In addition, Charlotte became home to two of NASCAR's greatest tests of man and machine. Not only did CMS host the Coca-Cola 600, NASCAR's endurance event, but it could now lay claim to the all-star race, the shortest event of the Winston Cup circuit, where drivers finished the fight for big money and bragging rights with a ten-lap dash. Musco's lighting system became an industry standard for night racing in NASCAR, and many other tracks use the system today. Even so, Charlotte Motor Speedway was the first track to use the system, and the combination

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<sup>46</sup> Tom Higgins, "Victory Leaves Allison A Wreck – All-Star Race Win Marred By Finish-Line Collision," *Charlotte Observer*, May 17, 1992.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

of the Winston, the Coca-Cola 600, and the 500-mile race in October gave the track three major Winston Cup events each year. As NASCAR continued its national expansion, new fans were introduced to CMS as a showplace track that hosted major events, events that competitors considered to be different than any ordinary race. Boosted by sponsorship from Winston and Coca-Cola, CMS's status as a leading NASCAR venue made Charlotte a valuable place to a new generation of fans.

#### *The New Industrialist Team Owners*

As Charlotte Motor Speedway's notoriety grew, so did the success of the NASCAR teams that had established themselves in Charlotte or relocated to it. While Holman-Moody ceased to exist as a race team, its former employees brought the organization's culture of innovation and specialized skills to other teams, who found that Charlotte was the ideal home for a NASCAR team, even as the sport continued to expand across the United States. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many of the Charlotte teams quickly adapted to the model of a race team that functioned as a corporation and was supported by a major sponsor. This transition came naturally to the new generation of team owners. In previous decades, most team owners had been individuals who were professionally involved in motorsports, often as master mechanics or ex-drivers. Organizations like Petty Enterprises, Wood Brothers Racing, and Junior Johnson and Associates had been the dominant forces of the 1970s and represent this type of racer-created team. By the 1980s, they faced competition from teams owned by individuals who did not have connections to racing as competitors. This new breed of team owners often included racing enthusiasts who saw NASCAR teams as a good investment

opportunity. Approaching stock car racing from a business perspective led many of the new team owners to take advantage of Charlotte's resources and technological expertise.

One of the first business-driven operations to test the NASCAR waters was the Di-Gard Racing team. The name came from its founders, brothers-in-law Mike DiProspero and Bill Gardner, who established the team in Daytona Beach in 1973. While they initially planned to manage the team together, DiProspero was involved in a serious car accident and needed time to recuperate, leaving Gardner to get the team up and running. Fortunately, Gardner was not lacking in resources. Having made a fortune in the steel and real estate industries, "Gardner was willing to pour the needed money into the operation to come up with the wins and the reputation that the team desperately needed." Gardner determined that spending big money was the key to success, especially in terms of "making the team a marketing tool that a potential sponsor would find attractive." Seeing no fundamental difference between the NASCAR industry and any of his other business endeavors, "Gardner was prepared to give what it took to make Di-Gard an operation that was paying its own way in his enterprise empire."<sup>48</sup>

In its first three seasons, the team had moments of success but was constantly plagued by equipment failures. Halfway through the 1975 season, Gardner replaced driver Donnie Allison with Darrell Waltrip, who managed to earn the team's first win by season's end. For 1976, the team landed sponsorship from Gatorade, and Waltrip delivered them a victory in Martinsville, Virginia. But the team's mechanical issues persisted, which created a high turnover of employees within the team and dissension

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<sup>48</sup> Bob Myers, "The Pride and the Glory," *Stock Car Racing*, December 1976, 45.

among its leaders.<sup>49</sup> After the season concluded, Gardner made a crucial decision. The team was going to pack up everything and move to Charlotte. Once in the Queen City, everything clicked, and Waltrip and Di-Gard enjoyed a breakout season in 1977, winning six races together.

Waltrip, who had won another six races by the end of the 1978 season, was convinced that the move to Charlotte made the difference in the team's performance. He noted that the team had lost "invaluable time transporting the car to races" when it was based out of Daytona. Waltrip also explained that the amount of race teams based in Charlotte made it easier to acquire parts.<sup>50</sup> Waltrip's thoughts reveal how Di-Gard was benefitting from the legacy left by Holman-Moody. Relocating to Charlotte smoothed out the team's operations. The pool of talent around the Queen City obviously helped Gardner find the mechanics he needed to build reliable cars. Charlotte's position in the center of the Piedmont still mattered as well, and it compared favorably to Daytona in terms of less distance to most of NASCAR's tracks. Di-Gard's solid financial backing allowed the team to survive the roller coaster of its first few seasons, but as Gardner found, establishing better connections with the NASCAR industry was important for taking the team to the next level. For Waltrip, his success spoke for itself, and while he lived in Tennessee to stay closer to his family, he deemed Charlotte to be "the only place" to be a home base for a race team.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>50</sup> Higgins, "Date Line Charlotte," 38.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38.

The only downside to being in Charlotte for Di-Gard was that it put Waltrip in much closer proximity to the team's competition, which almost proved to be a disaster for Gardner. Prior to the 1979 season, Waltrip received an offer to drive for W-I-N Inc., another Charlotte-based team owned by Harry Ranier. Waltrip was inclined to take the offer, but he was still under contract with Di-Gard for four more years. Gardner declared that he would enforce the terms of Waltrip's contract, and that Waltrip would only leave if his new team bought out the contract. The showdown between Waltrip and Di-Gard set off a bidding war for Waltrip's services. While it was not unusual for drivers to have contracts with teams or sponsors by the late 1970s, it was rare to see teams fighting over a driver, or for teams to have a financial interest in keeping their driver. Gardner publicly stated that the team had "an investment in Darrell" and speculated that Ranier wanted Waltrip for his driving skill and sponsor appeal.<sup>52</sup>

The concept of a driver as a sponsor pitchman would take off in the 1980s as part of the formula for creating a winning NASCAR team. Di-Gard's rise represents all the trends of NASCAR's new generation of teams. While some were more successful than others over the long term, the new organizations of the 1980s consisted of owners willing to spend big money, a fleet of mechanics led by one or two individuals who had lots of experience and more traditional stock car roots, and a sponsor-friendly driver. Most importantly, the team had to be based in Charlotte to get access to the best drivers and crew members. As a result, the businessmen team owners followed Di-Gard's example

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<sup>52</sup> Bob Myers, *Stock Car Racing*, November 1978, 10.

and took their money to the Queen City, bringing the attention of corporate America with them.

The rise of W-I-N Inc. and Ranier includes all of these trends. Ranier was a Kentucky native who made millions in the coal mining and construction industries. He was also a racing enthusiast who fielded cars in NASCAR infrequently during the 70s before taking his team full-time in 1978. To ensure that the team would be competitive, Ranier hired two veteran crew members to lead his operation, both of whom were former Holman-Moody employees. Herb Nab, who had won the Winston Cup in 1976 with Cale Yarborough, served as the crew chief, with Waddell Wilson building the team's engines.<sup>53</sup> Ranier also struck up a sponsorship deal with Spectra Oil in which the team would get a percentage of the profits for every quart of oil sold.<sup>54</sup>

Finding the right driver proved to be more difficult. Unable to acquire Waltrip, Ranier hired Buddy Baker and won five times over the next two seasons, including the 1980 Daytona 500. However, Ranier found that he needed a driver who could bring in more sponsorship money and hired Bobby Allison for 1981.<sup>55</sup> The pairing produced five wins but lasted only one year after Allison left for Di-Gard. Ranier ran part-time for the next several seasons, but it was Bobby Allison's son, Davey, who set the team up for future success. After a strong 1988 campaign, Ranier sold the team to one of his employees, former Holman-Moody engine builder Robert Yates. The team, renamed to

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<sup>53</sup> In addition to creating a NASCAR team, Ranier also purchased a house in Charlotte for his friends, the televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Allen Cowan, "Bakkers' New Friends Buying New Home," *Charlotte Observer*, November 15, 1978.

<sup>54</sup> Bob Myers, *Stock Car Racing*, September 1979, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Tom Higgins, "4 Drivers Caught in Shake-up," *Charlotte Observer*, September 10, 1980.

Robert Yates Racing, became one of the top organizations in the 1990s. Along with Allison's big win in The Winston in 1992, Yates' drivers won fifty-seven races, including three Daytona 500s, and the 1999 Winston Cup with driver Dale Jarrett.

The 1980s also witnessed the rise of a team whose owners came from an entirely different industry – Hollywood movies. In 1980, stuntman Hal Needham set out to create a NASCAR team called Mach 1 Racing, with Burt Reynolds and Paul Newman among its investors. Needham and his associates wanted to have the team ready for the 1981 Daytona 500, giving veteran crew chief Travis Carter a seemingly impossible task. One of Carter's first jobs was to find an available race shop. Junior Johnson had extra space available at his complex in Wilkes County, North Carolina, but Carter turned him down after deciding "that would be too far from Charlotte, from where he expected to draw crewmen."<sup>56</sup> Thanks to the help of his team manager, Carter found what he was looking for in a warehouse north of Charlotte near Lake Norman. Creating a race shop closer to Charlotte proved to be a good decision for Carter. Being near the Queen City allowed him to spread the word about the new team and quickly hire crew members. Carter also got help from other suppliers and car builders who were willing to help the team on a volunteer basis.<sup>57</sup> Setting up the team with the experts of the NASCAR industry at its doorstep allowed Mach 1 Racing, against all odds, to be ready for Daytona.

The team initially planned to race with fellow stuntman Stan Barrett and sponsorship from Skoal dipping tobacco.<sup>58</sup> The sponsorship became one of the most

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<sup>56</sup> Tom Higgins, "Carter, Team Already Setting Speed Records," *Charlotte Observer*, January 18, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Tom Higgins, "Barrett's Career Shifted Gears Before Initiation at Daytona," *Charlotte Observer*, January 22, 1981.

iconic in NASCAR, using the face of the “Skoal Bandit” on the car as a play off the *Smokey and the Bandit* film, which starred Reynolds and was directed by Needham. Barrett only wound up driving ten races for the team, but his replacement, Harry Gant, turned Mach 1 racing into a contender. The team won nine races with Gant at the wheel of the No. 33, and the driver maintained a good relationship with the sponsor. When Needham decided to sell the team to Carter after the 1988 season, Gant decided to leave, and Skoal went with him.<sup>59</sup> While Gant took to the track the next year with an entirely different team, owned by Leo Jackson, he was still piloting the No. 33 Skoal Bandit. Gant won another nine races before retiring after the 1994 season. But even after he left the driver’s seat, Skoal continued to sponsor the No. 33 car through several driver changes and after Jackson sold the team to Andy Petree, a former crew chief for Dale Earnhardt, in 1997. The sponsorship ultimately ended in 1999, outlasting the career of Gant and the team ownerships of Needham and Jackson. The Skoal Bandit sponsorship was one of several in the 1980s and 1990s that became famous in the NASCAR world, and it probably would never have existed if not for Needham’s investment and Carter’s insistence on being in Charlotte.

Not every businessman who tried his hand at NASCAR made such a lasting impression. While some new team owners tried to follow the process for setting up a winning organization, deep pockets and experienced crewmen were not always enough. Such was the case for Jim Stacy, a coal mining magnate who made two bold attempts to establish a NASCAR team, both of which ended badly. In 1977, Stacy purchased the

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<sup>59</sup> Tom Higgins, “Needham to Sale Gant Race Team,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 15, 1988.

remnants of Nord Krasukopf's team, which had been one of the top organizations earlier in the decade. Almost from the start, Stacy's team appeared to be on shaky financial grounds. By the following year, Stacy had parted ways with team manager Harry Hyde and had settled seven lawsuits between the two of them out of court. Stacy, however, was involved in "varying business interests nationwide," the extent of which were not well-known toward most in the NASCAR community. Stacy became even more mysterious one day when police discovered that someone had rigged up a bomb underneath his street car, which had been parked at a motel in Concord.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps fearing for his safety, Stacy's team made only a handful of starts in 1979 before the owner disappeared from the NASCAR scene.

Around the same time that Stacy's first team folded, another Charlotte-based organization was taking off. The team was owned by San Jose, California native Rod Osterlund, who had made millions in real estate land developments on the West Coast. For 1979, his third season in the sport, Osterlund hired a rookie driver named Dale Earnhardt. Earnhardt won his first ever Winston Cup Series race later that year, benefitting from the guidance of veteran wrench-turner Jake Elder. The team got off to a hot start in 1980, but after Elder suddenly quit, Osterlund hired twenty-year-old Doug Richert to replace him as crew chief. The unproven combination of Earnhardt and Richert seemed to spell disaster, but the team went on to win five races that year, including three after Elder's departure, and the Winston Cup championship. Going into the 1981 season with sponsorship from Wrangler Jeans, Osterlund had the best young

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<sup>60</sup> Tom Higgins, "Bomb Attempt Stuns Racing," *Charlotte Observer*, November 12, 1978.

team in NASCAR. But in late June, Osterlund made a bombshell announcement – he was leaving NASCAR and had sold the team to Jim Stacy.<sup>61</sup>

Stacy's takeover led to the breakup of the defending championship team. Earnhardt and Richert left the organization after only five weeks, taking the Wrangler sponsorship with them. Stacy, however, remained confident about his second try at NASCAR. Hiring Joe Ruttman to finish out the season, Stacy opted to sponsor the car himself. In fact, Stacy started paying to sponsor other Winston Cup drivers as well, with the goal of putting "J.D. Stacy Enterprises, Inc." on as many cars in the field as possible. By the end of the season, rumors began to swirl that Stacy might try to sponsor as many as ten different cars in 1982. Stacy brushed off the rumors that he was angling to take over NASCAR, stating that his only goals were "to have some fun" and "to get some publicity for my companies." He explained that the point of him sponsoring so many cars was to bring people to the race track, including "Banking connections, suppliers," and other "people we do business with." Stacy reasoned that "if I make one deal a year, I'll be many times better off than if I didn't sponsor them."<sup>62</sup>

Stacy did not try to take over NASCAR, but he put his name on a lot of its cars. While his team fielded at least one car in every race, it was common to see Stacy's name on several other rides on competing teams. In the 1982 Daytona 500, Stacy sponsored seven different drivers. In placing his name on as many cars as possible, Stacy continued to make long-term financial investments which he increasingly struggled to back up as the year progressed. Stacy found that sponsoring teams gave him less control of those

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<sup>61</sup> Tom Higgins, "Osterlund Team Sold to Stacy," *Charlotte Observer*, June 27, 1981.

<sup>62</sup> Les Bowen, "Stacy and Racing: A Volatile Mixture?" *Charlotte Observer*, October 11, 1981.

organizations than he originally thought, causing him to butt heads with other team owners.<sup>63</sup>

By the end of the season, it grew more apparent that Stacy's sponsorship plan was stretching his finances a little thin. In the National 500 at Charlotte, Harry Ranier declined to put Stacy's name on his car, despite their sponsorship agreement. Ranier commented that his name was on the car instead, because "We're simply putting the name of the man on the car who pays the bills."<sup>64</sup> Stacy's team returned to the track in 1983, but not a single car would carry his name as a sponsor all year. The team did not win any more races, and by the end of the season, Stacy had apparently run out of money. He shuttered his team and disappeared from NASCAR, never to return for a third try.

Stacy's rise and fall is one of the most unusual stories among his contemporary team owners, but he is still a part of the investors and businessmen who changed the NASCAR landscape in the 1980s. This new crop of team owners understood that Charlotte had become the center of the NASCAR industry and took advantage of the concentration of talented mechanics around the Queen City. While a lot of their new teams did not last long, they were the catalyst for a cultural change in NASCAR. The businessmen team owners pushed stock car racing's older teams to aggressively seek out sponsorship. Much like Holman-Moody in the 1960s, the new team owners also conceived of their operations as more than just race teams. The success of their operations depended on the team's ability to make money, as well the team being

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<sup>63</sup> Beekman, *NASCAR Nation*, 121.

<sup>64</sup> Tom Higgins, "Tradition is Broken at Speedway," *Charlotte Observer*, October 6, 1982.

interconnected with other industries. The businessmen team owners ultimately helped to fulfill Charlotte's goal of being recognized nationally as a place to make money.

### *Rick Hendrick's New Team*

Following the formula for creating a new NASCAR team in the 1980s allowed many of the businessmen-turned team owners to earn some success in stock car racing, but only in the short term. However, one of the businessmen who entered the sport in the 1980s laid the foundation for a team that would become one of the most dominant in NASCAR history. The organization was originally called All Star Racing, and the team almost did not survive its first full season. Thanks to a timely win and sponsorship help, the team continued on, and even supported a movie about NASCAR, *Days of Thunder*, starring Tom Cruise. Perhaps most importantly, this team owner pioneered the modern multi-car team approach that became the golden standard for NASCAR in the 1990s and 2000s. The team owner is Rick Hendrick, and the organization that bears his name, Hendrick Motorsports, has been based in Concord, North Carolina for over thirty years.

Much like Bruton Smith, Hendrick's first business success was in managing car dealerships. His first was located in Bennettsville, South Carolina, but his purchase of a dealership called City Chevrolet brought him to Charlotte, allowing Hendrick to see the center of the NASCAR universe for himself. No stranger to motorsports, Hendrick had dabbled in speedboat racing, and his father had been a drag racer. Deciding to give NASCAR a try, Hendrick hired Harry Hyde to help him manage the team. Hendrick also

bought the land where Hyde's small race shop was located, only about a mile away from Charlotte Motor Speedway.<sup>65</sup>

Hendrick quickly found success with driver Geoff Bodine, winning three times in 1984, the team's first season together. More wins followed when Hendrick added a second team for Tim Richmond in 1986. By the end of June, Hendrick announced that he would field a third car, piloted by the now veteran Darrell Waltrip, in 1987. The rapid expansion of Hendrick Motorsports caused other NASCAR competitors to take notice, wondering just how high Hendrick could climb. Despite him being new to the game, some people in the NASCAR industry were already describing Hendrick as "an ideal team owner, one who is just as interested in counting RPMs and their fluctuation as he is dollars and cents." As far as outside observers could judge, the combination of Hendrick's business acumen and competitive spirit seemed to be fueling his expansion plans and on-track success. Richmond even compared Hendrick to businessman and open-wheel racing giant Roger Penske, saying that Hendrick "is on his way to becoming the Roger Penske of the South."<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, Hendrick continued to expand his car dealerships. By 1987, he owned twenty-two dealerships in eight states, which employed 1,200 people and aimed to sell 40,000 new and used vehicles that year. This gave Hendrick a net worth of over one hundred million dollars and made him one of the richest people in Charlotte.<sup>67</sup> Hendrick

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<sup>65</sup> Wheeler and Golenbock, *Growing Up NASCAR*, 201-204.

<sup>66</sup> Tom Higgins, "The Penske of the South? Charlotte's Hendrick Becoming a Bold Force in NASCAR," *Charlotte Observer*, June 28, 1986.

<sup>67</sup> David Mildenberg, "Hendrick Stays on the Fast Track Auto Dealer Finds Success in Racing too," *Charlotte Observer*, February 9, 1987.

attributed the growth of his company to a series of good opportunities that he could not pass up, some of which were brought about by NASCAR. He pointed to one month during which his race cars were on the covers of five automotive magazines, which gave him great brand recognition. Additionally, Hendrick came up with a standardized system for managing his automotive dealerships. The goal was to have all of his franchises and employees be familiar with this system, allowing for better communications within the company.<sup>68</sup>

What really made Hendrick successful was bringing this philosophy to NASCAR, particularly with a multi-car team. When past team owners had tried to field multiple cars out of one shop, there usually was not any form of teamwork or cooperation between the teams. At the race track, they would be two competing cars that happened to be owned by the same person. However, Hendrick's NASCAR team operated as a single unit, with the three cars and their crews sharing setup information with each other. By 1997, after his company had grown to include nearly ninety dealerships, Hendrick explained that he "related racing to the automobile business," and that "being able to share information, we were more successful."<sup>69</sup> This strategy helped to make Hendrick Motorsports the Holman-Moody of its day. While Hendrick was part of the businessmen team owners who changed the culture of NASCAR, he was the one most responsible for changing the competition aspect of professional stock car racing. Following Hendrick's example, multi-car teams that acted as one combined organization would become the standard of NASCAR in the 1990s and early 2000s.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Rick Hendrick, *Stock Car Racing*, January 1997, 20, 22.

One of Hendrick's other good opportunities was using the creation of *Days of Thunder* to his advantage. Hendrick Motorsports acted as consultants on the film, supplying cars and stunt drivers for the movie, much of which was filmed at Charlotte Motor Speedway. The filmmakers also benefitted from Hendrick's connections within the NASCAR world, as the team owner "introduced people who needed a rush course in racing to the people who rush around race courses." Hendrick himself also personally developed the movie with Cruise, striking up a friendship with the actor and the producers while filming the movie at CMS.<sup>70</sup> As one of the premier team owners in NASCAR, Hendrick found himself in contact with people from all over the United States, introducing his associates to the world of professional stock car racing, and the Queen City.

*Mooresville, NC: Race City USA*

While Hendrick's work with *Days of Thunder* brought attention to the Charlotte area in the early 1990s, no other city took ownership of NASCAR quite like Mooresville, one of Charlotte's northern suburbs. Mooresville was the home of a number of race shops when Bill Simpson, a leader in developing fire-retardant racing suits, moved his company there from Indianapolis, Indiana and Torrance, California in 1988.<sup>71</sup> Simpson's enterprise helped to expand Mooresville's profile of racing-related businesses. In 1994, the town's business leaders spearheaded a campaign to rebrand Mooresville as "Race City USA." The Chamber of Commerce was cognizant of NASCAR's growing influence

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<sup>70</sup> Lawrence Toppman, "A Driving Influence – Charlotte's Rick Hendrick Makes Sure 'Days of Thunder' Stays on Right Track," *Charlotte Observer*, December 21, 1989.

<sup>71</sup> John York, "New in Town: Simpson's Fire-Retardant Clothing Plant Moving to Mooresville," *Charlotte Observer*, October 26, 1988.

across the country, and, with the presence of eighteen race teams located in the town's business park, the Chamber wanted to capitalize on the aspect of Mooresville that had the ability to make the town nationally famous. The campaign included the sale of merchandise with the new "Race City USA" logo, hanging banners in the downtown area, and opening a North Carolina Auto Racing Hall of Fame in the motorsports business park. And when Dale Earnhardt approached the Iredell County planning board about building a new race shop in Mooresville, city officials were quick to support him.<sup>72</sup>

By 2000, the number of race shops in town had ballooned to fifty, and motorsports had emerged as the dominant industry in Mooresville. While the area's textile mills had been in decline, NASCAR's professionals increasingly came to town, seeking homes on the shores of nearby Lake Norman. Mooresville's proximity to Interstate 77 also made it a convenient place for NASCAR teams to set up shops. Once the race teams came, other businesses followed. Engine builders, chassis designers, and racing parts suppliers all came to Mooresville, not to mention tourists. The most popular site had to be Earnhardt's race shop, a 9,000 square foot garage that served as the headquarters for Dale Earnhardt, Inc. While Earnhardt continued to drive for longtime team owner Richard Childress, the establishment of DEI allowed The Intimidator to become a team owner himself. The opening of the DEI shop cemented Mooresville's association with Earnhardt, and visitors came from such far-flung places as Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Jennifer Tescher, Mooresville Touts NASCAR Link, *Charlotte Observer*, June 8, 1994.

<sup>73</sup> Jim Wrinn, "Mooresville is Reborn with Pedal to the Metal," *Charlotte Observer*, May 26, 2000.

Mooreville's rebranding as "Race City USA" coincides with the emergence of NASCAR onto the national stage. The sport had benefitted from sponsorships and regularly-televised races, which helped to expose stock car racing to record audiences. Thanks to the increasing professionalization of the industry, NASCAR was developing the national fan following that the sport's founding generation had longed to reach. At the same time, the growth of Charlotte Motor Speedway and the proliferation of new teams around the Queen City raised Charlotte's profile as a nationally-important city. While Charlotte had earned the title of America's stock car racing capital by the early 1970s, it took another two decades of growth to fuse Charlotte's commercial interests with those of the NASCAR industry. As the city of Charlotte approached the twenty-first century, NASCAR had transformed from an industry in Charlotte to one of its most defining features.

## CONCLUSION: THE PERIL AND PROMISE OF NASCAR IN CHARLOTTE

Charlotte Motor Speedway got a new neighbor late in 1994. The Concord Regional Airport opened on the other side of Interstate 85, only a short drive down Speedway Boulevard away from the race track. Almost immediately, the new airport took “an identifying interest in motorsports.” By 1997, team owner Joe Gibbs was housing his plane at the airport, along with several drivers. Butch Mock, another team owner, went a few steps further with plans to build his own hangar and an office building at the airport. Mock recognized how many competitors had been able to make use of Concord Regional, referring to it as “the NASCAR airport.”<sup>1</sup> That association only grew stronger into the new millennium. In 2003, 198 planes were based at the airport, and around fifty or sixty of them were connected to motorsports. Team owner Jack Roush had even built a new race shop next door. Concord mayor John Cox credited the airport with raising “the kind of national interest in this area of the country for the development of motorsports.”<sup>2</sup>

With the popularity of stock car racing booming, NASCAR’s professionals and the Charlotte area embraced each other like never before. Mooresville’s contributions include the NASCAR Technical Institute, a specialized training school for engineers and mechanics, as well as the AeroDyn Wind Tunnel, which can mimic the conditions of a stock car racing at 130 miles per hour. In addition to its airport, Concord boasts the “Windshear” Tunnel, built by machinist-turned team owner Gene Haas in 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> Gail Smith, “Concord Airport is Already Spreading its Wings,” *Charlotte Observer*, March 20, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Ronnie Glassberg, “Racing Bolsters Concord Airport – Success Exceeds Expectations as Teams Dash Around Nation,” *Charlotte Observer*, November 30, 2003.

“Windshear” uses a single 5,100 horsepower fan to produce the effect of a stock car cutting through the air at 180 miles per hour. Concord is also home to NASCAR’s Research and Development Center, which serves as the home offices of the directors for NASCAR’s three national touring divisions.<sup>3</sup> This collection of training schools, technological centers, and NASCAR offices is not like the Concord Regional Airport, which was built for the city but became a convenient place for NASCAR’s competitors to use in their profession. Instead, Mooresville and Concord were embracing racing-related infrastructure by the early 2000s. Much like Mooresville’s “Race City USA” branding, the Charlotte area’s expansion of facilities to support NASCAR teams represents the city’s willingness to embrace stock car racing and claim the sport as its own.

However, Ronald Mitchelson and Derek Alderman note that the Charlotte-NASCAR relationship has not been without conflict, even in recent years, due to the growing ambitions of Bruton Smith. By 2007, Smith owned seven race tracks that held high-level NASCAR races. That year, Smith sought to build a drag strip across the street from his original race track in Concord, which was sponsored by home-improvement company Lowe’s at the time. Upon hearing Smith’s latest plans, Concord’s city council changed the zoning laws on Smith’s property during an early October meeting to forbid the construction of a drag strip. The council’s fear was that the noise would disturb people who lived nearby and lower the property values. As a result of the council’s decision, Smith made a serious threat. Either Concord would allow the drag strip to be

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald L. Mitchelson and Derek H. Alderman, “Red Dust and Dynamometers: Charlotte as Memory and Knowledge Community in NASCAR,” in *Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South City*, eds. William Graves and Heather A. Smith (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 67-69.

built, or Smith would shut down Lowe's Motor Speedway (LMS) and build a new track somewhere else.<sup>4</sup>

Within a matter of weeks, the city council had backed down. Smith got permission to build his drag strip and even got Speedway Boulevard renamed to "Bruton Smith Boulevard." Yet Smith was apparently still peeved enough to move forward on his threat to build a new race track somewhere else in the Charlotte area to replace LMS. The threat would loom over the people of Concord for another month. While many were not impressed with Smith's tactics, it was no secret that his potential departure would have serious economic implications. If Smith left, the \$400 million per year that the speedway brought in would go with him. Additionally, Concord had also experienced the loss of jobs with the closing of a local textile company in 2003, and the closing of a Philip Morris plant. What would the town do without its connections to the racing industry?<sup>5</sup>

The fears of Smith's departure ended with a news conference the Monday after Thanksgiving. Smith reiterated that he had sent people to survey other sites around suburban Charlotte for a new race track and had been serious about moving, but that, given the city's concessions, "We're here forever."<sup>6</sup> However serious Smith's threat had been, Concord's city officials proved unwilling to take a chance. Mitchelson and Alderman argue that Concord recognized its own economic vulnerability, and that

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<sup>4</sup> Sharif Durhams and David Poole, "Smith: My Way or No Speedway – Drag-Strip Dispute Escalates in Concord," *Charlotte Observer*, October 3, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Price, "Hot Dogs and a Side of 'Will He or Won't He?' – Bruton Smith's Threat to Move Track Has Many in Concord Wondering About City's Future," *Charlotte Observer*, November 4, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Jefferson George and Adam Bell, "'We're Here Forever' – Yes, Track Will Stay in Concord, A Smiling Smith Says," *Charlotte Observer*, November 27, 2007.

staying on Smith's good side outweighed the concerns of neighboring property owners.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the drag strip controversy demonstrates how racing became not just an identifying industry in Concord, but eventually the only industry. NASCAR's national rise pushed the sport from the periphery of Charlotte's economy much closer to its center, strengthening the city's ties to big-time stock car racing. Along the way, NASCAR-related installations outside the city fueled the development of Charlotte's suburbs. But in the process, NASCAR's relationship with towns like Concord and Mooresville became more unequal, so much so that the towns found their economies fueled with motorsports money.

Around the same time of Smith's threat, Charlotte scored a major cultural victory in the world of motorsports by winning the site for the future NASCAR Hall of Fame. Charlotte was one of four finalist cities, along with Daytona Beach, Atlanta, and Kansas City, where NASCAR hoped to build its own ceremonial museum and showplace. The proposal immediately caught the attention of Charlotte mayor Pat McCrory, who expressed his support for keeping his city's association with NASCAR strong. Cathy Bessant, Charlotte's Chamber of Commerce chairperson and chief marketing executive for Bank of America, also stressed the importance of Charlotte securing the Hall of Fame. Bessant declared that the Charlotte region should "accept nothing less than a world-class, winning proposal," because NASCAR had become a central part of the region's culture. Bessant further stated that "The whole notion of culture being highbrow and NASCAR (as) not is wrong," and that "the NASCAR community" is part "of all of the forms of

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<sup>7</sup> Mitchelson and Alderman, "Red Dust and Dynamometers," 75-76.

culture in the marketplace.”<sup>8</sup> A Chamber of Commerce official and bank executive making a statement about NASCAR’s valuable place in Charlotte’s culture reflects how much stock car racing’s image had changed in just a few decades. It was one thing to tolerate NASCAR, but the push to build a shrine to stock car racers directly in the city represents Charlotte’s enthusiastic embrace of the sport.

In successfully winning the bid for the Hall of Fame, Charlotte made a massive cultural and financial pitch to NASCAR. The public campaign utilized a simple slogan: “Racing was built here. Racing belongs here.” The city also promised to raise over \$100 million through a hotel tax increase to finance the Hall of Fame. When NASCAR Chairman Brian France announced in March of 2006 that Charlotte’s bid was successful, he admitted that the hotel tax money was “a big foot forward” for the Queen City, but that overall, “Charlotte, North Carolina is where the hall of fame needs to be.” NASCAR’s vice-president for licensing, Mark Dyer added that “the heritage of the sport meant a lot” in NASCAR’s decision. For Charlotte’s leaders, the Hall of Fame officially made their city the center of the NASCAR universe. As McCrory explained, Charlotte’s association with NASCAR was now akin to Pasadena’s association with the Rose Bowl, Nashville’s association with country music, and Augusta’s association with the Masters golf tournament.<sup>9</sup>

For McCrory and the leaders of Charlotte, NASCAR was the answer to the question about what made the Queen City unique. NASCAR’s explosive growth from

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rubin, “NASCAR Hall of Fame Race On – Charlotte Among 4 Invited,” *Charlotte Observer*, January 5, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Dodd, “Charlotte: ‘Where the Hall Needs to be’ – In the end, Officials Said the City’s Deep Routes in NASCAR Were What Brought Home the Hall of Fame,” *Charlotte Observer*, March 7, 2006.

the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s was the final step in the process of the city taking ownership of American stock car racing. However, the forces that produced Charlotte's impressive credentials for the Hall of Fame were at work long before the city was so quick to embrace NASCAR and its money. Piedmont working-class culture gave rise to NASCAR's initial popularity. While Charlotte benefitted from being near the center of NASCAR's traditional home region, the industry never would have coalesced in Charlotte if its professionals had not proven that stock car racing could be a financially successful enterprise. Bruton Smith's speedway dreams were always about garnering national attention. Likewise, race teams like Hendrick Motorsports relied on talent and connections from across the country, just like Holman-Moody did before it. Yet the success of Holman, Moody, Hendrick, Smith, Richard Howard, depended on the industrial cluster which they built together, allowing for innovation to flourish in the Charlotte region. NASCAR's influence may have flowed out of the Piedmont to the rest of America, but America's racers, engineers, mechanics, industrialists, and corporate supporters who built a career in professional stock car racing still take their skills, and their money, to Charlotte.

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