SCOTT BEEKMAN

NASCAR NATION

A HISTORY OF STOCK CAR RACING IN THE UNITED STATES

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Scott Beekman

PRAEGER

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Dedicated to the memories of Bill and John Hoeckh,
both of whom loved NASCAR

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INTRODUCTION

History is a funny thing. If you got ten people and they all see the same thing, you'll get ten different stories from them.

—Richard Petty

The previous accounts detailing stock car racing's past validate "King" Richard Petty's assertion that history is a subjective art. Earlier volumes on stock car racing feature disparate claims over the sport's very origins. Efforts to understand the early years of the sport derail immediately thanks to various chroniclers both placing the birth of the sport in different locales across the United States and offering alternative versions of what actually constitutes a "stock car." Along with these geographical and technical disputes come arguments over who actually "invented" this form of motor sport. Unlike battles over creation myths in other sports, which typically pit one alleged founder against another, stock car racing's fight revolves around different socioeconomic groups. Indicative of the high level of confusion surrounding stock's origins, diametrically opposed views on creators have emerged, with claims that the elite invented the sport countered by assertions that credit should belong to lower-class criminals involved in illegal liquor operations. To further muddy the waters, NASCAR (the de facto governing body for all American stock car racing) vehemently defends its "official" version of the sport's history, which shifts over time depending on the organization's current economic and promotional imperatives.

From the maze of differing accounts, a consensus story of stock car racing's origins has gained strength in recent years. According to the popular myth of stock's birth, southern bootleggers invented stock car racing as a means of determining who owned the fastest customized vehicle. Unable to compete against each other on open roads thanks to law enforcement, these moonshine haulers began challenging each other on crudely laid

out dirt ovals across the rural South. News of these spirited races then spread to the wider populace, who began attending the events as spectators. Once these spectators started paying admission to watch the races, prize money could be offered to the competitors and thus a sport was born. The widespread acceptance of this account of stock car racing's development can be primarily attributed to NASCAR, who, in recent years, has repeatedly asserted the veracity of a bootlegger genesis. As the controlling body of stock car racing, NASCAR holds a status in the sport that lends great credence to their claims. Alas, the "official" version of stock car racing's development contains more myth than truth. Like Major League Baseball's false claim that Abner Doubleday invented baseball, NASCAR's story does not hold up to close scrutiny.

In this study I attempt to put forth a counter to this popular trope that bootleggers invented stock car racing by offering a more nuanced and verifiable perspective on the sport's history. It is my contention that the wide disparity in previous creation accounts stems from the inherent difficulty in ascribing inventor status to any one individual, group, or location. Put simply, both the elite and the working class share responsibility for the creation of stock car racing. Wealthy motor racing supporters helped build tracks, establish auto meets, and organize sanctioning bodies, but working class Americans (including bootleggers) filled grandstands and supplied drivers to compete in stock car races. While the gentry dominated early motor sports, the middle and working classes embraced auto racing and—especially in the case of stock—helped it flourish. By the mid-20th century, stock car racing had developed into a sport supported almost exclusively by the middle and working classes. Although they can be counted among the working class supporters of stock car racing, moonshine haulers served as an important part of the sport only for a brief period—roughly the late 1930s to early 1950s. Bootleggers clearly played a significant role in stock car racing's history, but the sport did not begin with them.

Technically, stock car racing began in 1895 (40 years before the period of bootlegger prominence) with a race in Chicago. Although credited as the first recorded motor race in American history, this 1895 event poses problems in its own right. Not only did earlier races involving stock vehicles occur in other countries, but unrecorded impromptu contests between early car owners surely predate the Chicago race. The northern location of this 1895 event also illustrates the pitfalls in viewing stock car racing as a purely southern endeavor. As I will detail, all parts of the United States can take credit for hosting early stock car races. Thanks to a host of cultural and economic factors, however, this form of motor sports became most popular in the American South. By the mid-20th century, despite races in other regions, the bulk of stock car fans, events, and governing bodies were found in the Southeast. The common assertion

that stock car racing is a southern sport, although correct, tells only part of the story. It is far more accurate to describe stock car racing as a sport with national roots that became a regional (southern) sport. Much of the focus of this work, therefore, revolves around the importance of stock car racing in the American South.

A decade ago Edward Ayers, among others, warned that a focus on "southern culture" created a fiction that arbitrarily and obfuscatingly created a rigid distinction between the states of the former Confederacy and the rest of the United States. Although his point is well taken, it is also important to note David Potter's defense of attention to regional differences (at the expense of examining the similarities) in order to gain a fuller understanding of the nation's southeastern quadrant. If we accept the proposition that the South is somehow, someway, distinct from the rest of the nation, it becomes incumbent upon us to seek out those cultural artifacts that illustrate the area's unique attributes. It is my contention that stock car racing represents a sport that became an important part of the southern cultural landscape in the mid-20th century, and that even in its current nationalized condition, it retains vestiges of this southern heritage. Further, NASCAR and the sport's corporate sponsors actively seek to reinforce this lineage as part of a campaign to position stock car racing as a traditional, patriotic, family-friendly, and politically conservative sports form. As I will discuss later, modern stock car racing's blending of national and regional locales positions the sport as "transcultural," thanks to its ties to a sense of regionalism not found in any other major professional sport.[1]

Studies of the "South" often use that term as a replacement for "white," thereby unwittingly eliminating half the southern population from the discussion. In the case of this examination of stock car racing, however, I use "South" and southerners with the explicit understanding that these references apply purely to white residents of the country's southeastern corner. Stock car racing in the states of the former Confederacy developed as a cultural endeavor for whites and, to a significant extent, remains a preserve for them. Unlike all other major sports in the United States, minority athletes play little role in stock car racing. The absence of color in stock car racing initially developed out of the white dominance of all forms of early 20th century motor sports, but became even more pronounced as stock racing established itself as a cultural form embraced by mid-20th century middle and working class southern whites. When coupled with the racially conservative leadership of NASCAR, efforts by southern stock car fans to position races as havens from the pressures of the civil rights movement succeeded in creating a segregated sport.

Along with being openly right-wing, the NASCAR leadership is unique among major American sports organizations in that it is a family-owned

business. The France family, in the person of "Big" Bill France, helped create NASCAR and then moved during the 1950s to wrest control of the sanctioning body from all other stakeholders. Subsequently, two additional generations of the family have shaped the direction of NASCAR. As majority stockholders in what is now the undisputed ruler of stock car racing in the United States, the France family effectively owns the sport. With this unfettered control of NASCAR, the Frances have possessed the freedom to imbricate stock car racing with their personal views. NASCAR's reputation as a socially and politically conservative organization can be traced to the family's efforts to shape the sanctioning body in their image. This ability to direct NASCAR gave the France family a position of enormous influence throughout the last 60 years of stock car history. As such, "Big" Bill and his descendants are key to my narrative throughout this work.

The France family built NASCAR with the assistance of corporate America and the automobile industry. Without Detroit products, there simply would have been no cars on the track. American auto makers began their direct relationship with NASCAR in the early 1950s and, despite occasional periods of retreat, continue to work with stock car racing today. And without deep-pocketed sponsors, drivers could not have afforded to compete in the expensive world of motor racing. Although corporate sponsorship plays a growing role in all American sports, the level of involvement in stock car racing supersedes that found in any other athletic endeavor. The modern stock car has effectively been converted into a rolling billboard plastered with the names of sponsors. Given the importance of American corporations and auto makers in the evolution and success of stock car racing, their roles are frequently foregrounded in this volume.

Although the Frances and NASCAR loom large in the story of stock car racing, it is important to note the contributions of other leaders and organizations. Much like the bootlegger myth, a version of stock car racing's history that excludes all other sanctioning bodies has recently gained momentum thanks to the pronouncements of NASCAR. Also, like Vince McMahon in professional wrestling, NASCAR's last man standing status in stock car racing naturally invites accounts of its inevitable supremacy. While I spotlight NASCAR in this account, discussions of other organizations (and the travails of NASCAR) are also included in an effort to avoid a whiggish history of NASCAR's rise. NASCAR's role in the development of American stock car racing, however, towers over all other sanctioning bodies to a degree that warrants placing that organization at the center of the story. To most motor sports fans in this country, NASCAR *is* stock car racing. This merging of the sport and its sanctioning body can be seen in the name millions of stock car racing fans have adopted for themselves—NASCAR nation.

About the Author

SCOTT BEEKMAN is an assistant professor of history at the University of Rio Grande. He is the author of *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult* and *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*.

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1

BIRTH OF A SPORT

In December 1947, Bill France Sr. and a group of fellow stock car racing promoters and enthusiasts gathered in the Ebony Lounge atop Daytona Beach's Streamline Hotel for three days of discussions. They drank, fraternized, and vied for the attentions of the local swimsuit models France had hired to entertain them. Amidst the revelry they also transacted important business. France arranged the meeting in the hope that this group could coalesce into a unified organization to control stock car racing in the United States. After some debate they settled on the rather repetitious name National Association for Stock Car Automobile Racing (NASCAR), which was suggested by World War II hero and ace racing mechanic Red Vogt. Initially, NASCAR represented just another entry into the welter of alphabet soup organizations struggling to rule stock car racing—France himself previously organized the National Championship Stock Car Circuit (NCSCC) in 1946—but this new group would eventually succeed in dominating American stock car racing. France's dictatorial leadership, a host of popular folk-hero drivers, millions of sponsorship dollars, and stock car racing's ability to connect with the psyche of American racing fans eventually made the initially humble NASCAR into one of the country's most popular sports organizations.

Stock car racing dates back to the dawn of motor racing. Expensive, high-tech racing involving purpose-built vehicles, however, quickly established itself as the most popular and highly regarded form of motor sports—a circumstance that continued for almost the entire 20th century. Often viewed as the primitive stepchild of open-wheel auto racing, stock cars spent much of the century ignored by the national media, periodically disdained by the very manufacturers whose products were being raced, and ghettoized in the Southeast. Pre-NASCAR sanctioning bodies promoted occasional open-wheel races in the South, but these groups focused more attention on other parts of the country. Although pockets of stock car

racing enthusiasts operated throughout the United States, the Southeast emerged as the area of the most sustained stock activity. Although factors in the South weighed heavily in the popularity of stock car racing in the region, inattention to the area by national racing organizations helped this form of racing take root by offering little competition from open-wheelers. Although NASCAR made sporadic mid-century efforts to extend the organization's territory, stock car racing remained wedded to its southern base, with a few annual forays into the Far West and New England. Only in the last two decades of the 20th century was stock car racing able to exert itself in a truly national fashion. NASCAR now rules American auto racing thanks to a host of national, social, economic, and cultural changes; it survived long enough to flourish thanks to particular conditions in the American South.[1]

Southern sports of the 19th century featured time-tested diversions such as horse racing and cock fighting, coupled with emerging forms promoted by the burgeoning national sporting press. In many instances—baseball, for example—the sports landscape of the southeastern quadrant mirrored that of the rest of the United States. Thanks to the cross-country reach of pioneering sporting journals such as *Sign of the Times* and the *National Police Gazette*, sports-minded southerners stayed abreast of professional athletics occurring throughout the United States. Southerners could therefore watch the evolution of professional baseball and the legal struggles faced by boxing, and follow the blossoming of new popular sports such as wrestling, rowing, and pedestrianism. In many cases, however, watching was all they could do. The low population density, relative paucity of newspapers, poverty, and lack of significant urban centers meant that the South did not emerge as a center of major sporting activities similar to the Northeast and Midwest. The South did occasionally play host to significant prizefights, but these bouts typically occurred thanks to promoters from other areas finding the region easier to maneuver than more tightly regulated eastern states. Viewed as the periphery both politically and economically, the states of the former Confederacy suffered a similar fate culturally.

Although baseball and other sports penetrated the southern markets, the Southeast's lack of involvement at the highest levels of these sports helped keep traditional and uniquely southern sporting endeavors alive at a time when regionalism in sports was being slowly eliminated by the spread of a national sporting culture. For example, Major League Baseball positioned itself as the nation's leading sport during the late 19th century, but until the 1960s its "southern" teams were located in Baltimore and St. Louis. States in the temperate South supported a great deal of barnstorming and spring training games, proving the presence of hungry sports

fans in the area, but major professional sports organizations hesitated in locating franchises there. Minor league and semipro baseball reached fans in the South, but the second-class nature of baseball in the area allowed for the continued demand for other sports. Much of the early growth of auto racing hinged on the survival of horse racing, a sport that remained popular in the South thanks to southern sportsmen's ability to compete at its highest levels. Although the types of sports embraced by southerners changed over time, the uniqueness of southern sports culture continued into the 20th century.

Prosperity in many parts of the country helped support growing associations between sports fandom, leisure, and masculinity, which allowed increasing numbers of professional sports to develop national reaches, but rural and southern fans bereft of local professional teams of the highest order turned college football and stock car racing into regionally significant sports. Even after the National Football League boosted the reputation of professional football in most parts of the country, college football retained its preeminence in the South. Neither of the two major professional football leagues bothered locating teams in any southern states save Texas until the late 1960s, which gave college football room to flourish. A regional affinity for college football helped the amateur form of the sport retain its significance in the South even after professional football franchises arrived. The largest American sanctioning body for auto racing similarly ignored the South, helping the growth of stock car racing. As with college football, stock car racing's place in the southern sports culture remained intact even when later confronted with challenges from other forms of motor sports.

The cultures surrounding both southern football and stock car racing are often linked to regional notions of honor. Southern honor (and its concomitant effects on masculinity) played a critical role in the development of a distinct regional sporting culture, a culture that, in turn, would color the behavior of stock car drivers of the 20th century. The violation of southern honor (among all white socioeconomic classes) required immediate and direct responses. Honor effectively coded acceptable actions outside of written laws. Although courts served as a mechanism for redressing material losses, the erosion of reputation and respect caused by an attack on one's honor could be addressed only through personal initiative. The fragility of honor created the need for constant, vigilant protection. Honor blended with class often constituted more of the public's perceptions of an individual than any material possessions. Bertram Wyatt-Brown noted that the importance of defending honor contributed greatly to the levels of violence in southeastern states, as a full display of southern masculinity mandated spirited defenses of one's honor. Even

among southern adolescents, violent behavior could be condoned (if not promoted) by parents if these confrontational actions represented responses to threats to a boy's honor. Notions of honor existed in northern states during the 19th century, but for still disputed reasons, more muted responses to personal slights prevailed.[2]

For 20th-century southern stock car drivers, the related issues of honor and masculinity often dictated actions on the track. To be bumped out of the way by a competitor demanded some sort of response. NASCAR's officials might penalize a confrontational driver (thereby serving the role of a court), but a driver with a sense of honor felt compelled to personally respond. Retaliating either in kind on the track or through a verbal or physical altercation in the pits after the race represented an essential defense of one's honor. By not doing so, a driver ran the risk of being viewed as soft, which opened one up to both frequent, similar bumping and questions about the driver's manhood. As Bobby Allison, leader of NASCAR's Alabama Gang, explained after an on-the-track altercation with Curtis Turner, "I decided that if I was ever gonna race and be respected, then I was gonna have to give him what he had already given to me." Abiding by traditional notions of southern honor established drivers such as Allison as popular and highly regarded racers among southeastern stock car fans.[3]

Notions of honor, coupled with race and masculinity, undergirded one of the uniquely southern sporting endeavors of the 19th century—ring-and-lance tournaments. Based on fanciful notions of medieval chivalry, the tournaments provided the southern gentry opportunities to reinforce gender roles, honorable behavior, and the superior horsemanship of the well-heeled. Members of the gentry (men as armored knights with lances on horseback, women as fair maidens) reenacted medieval tilting contests to determine a champion knight, who then selected one of the female spectators as his queen. As part of what Wilbur J. Cash called the South's "cardboard medievalism," the tournaments attempted to create a linkage between medieval knights, southern cavaliers, and 19th-century gentry in an effort to reinforce social hierarchy.[4]

Vestiges of these events can be discerned in the more democratic world of modern stock car racing. The crowning of a "queen" as the trophy for the victor in both the tournaments and motor racing may be the most immediately visible linkage, but other connections exist as well. An 1898 account of one tournament describes the beginning of the event in the following manner: "there is a blast from the trumpet, the flag in the hands of another herald drops to the ground, and the rider is flying down the course at break-neck speed." Such a description bears a striking resemblance to the beginning of a NASCAR event with the roar of the engines followed

by the drop of a flag and the subsequent blast of speed. Surrounded by (as opposed to clothed in) steel, guiding a vehicle whose strength is measured in horsepower, and competing for a trophy and kiss from a race queen, stock car drivers afford ample opportunities for knight-related metaphors. Examples of the conflation of stock car racing and ring-and-lance tournament traditions can be seen in reporter Chris Economaki's 1970 description of drivers as knights jousting on the road and in racing historian Sylvia Wilkinson's comparison of the steel-bodied, overweight American cars run in NASCAR to suits of armor.[5]

The remarkable horsemanship displayed in the ring-and-lance tournaments reflected the enormous cultural significance of horses in the South. Owning a saddle horse demonstrated one's status; meeting someone on a horse while walking made visibly clear that the pedestrian was beneath the rider. The southern gentry also strove to establish hierarchy within their own ranks through owning the fastest of horses, which gave rise to the most popular sport in the South—horse racing. Two different types of races emerged in the South, and both of them involved honor and status. Regularly scheduled racing events on well-known tracks offered opportunities for formal challenges among members of the gentry. Informal challenges between gentlemen who had congregated to drink and socialize were settled on the nearest piece of available flat land. Both types of races provided opportunities for gentlemen to engage in gambling, an abiding pursuit of many members of the southern gentry. Although the high-stakes gambling and expense of the best-bred horses eliminated the middle and lower classes from participation for financial reasons, the gentry outright banned those below them from competing as a matter of honor and hierarchy. By allowing nonelite whites to attend only as spectators, horse racing helped reinforce hierarchical standards. This intersection of horse ownership and its attendant status was replicated with automobile ownership in the first half of the 20th century. As NASCAR champion Ned Jarrett noted, "in the South an automobile is a matter of pride." Such attitudes also help explain why one form of motor sports—the demolition derby—did not succeed in the South. To destroy an automobile in such a willful fashion simply could not be justified.[6]

The connections between horse racing and southern motor sports cannot be overstated. In the South the love of speed, gambling, and bragging rights contributed directly to the development of stock car racing. As with horse racing, formal motor racing events were coupled with impromptu challenges settled on dusty back roads. In addition, road racing's popularity in early motor racing quickly became superseded by track racing, which offered both more safety (although unbanked turns created their own dangers) and better vantage points for paying spectators. The

ubiquitous dirt oval tracks constructed for horse racing provided a convenient environment for motor racing as well, with much of stock car racing's early history occurring on horse tracks. Enterprising track owners sometimes even added a short motor race into the middle of a regular horse meet to generate excitement. The spread of motor racing in general would have suffered mightily without the presence of these dirt ovals. NASCAR no longer races on dirt tracks, but the legacy of this lineage is that races are conducted in a counterclockwise fashion, a practice initially adopted to placate the sensibilities of horse racing fans accustomed to watching races proceed in this fashion.[7]

The emergence of motor racing in the late 19th century occurred during a period of transition in America's sporting culture. In many parts of the country, a number of the sports associate with the post-Civil War birth of professional athletics (such as wrestling, rowing, and pedestrianism) skittered toward irrelevance as baseball, football, and boxing came to dominate the sporting landscape. In the South a similar transformation created an environment conducive to the rise of new pastimes. For example, this period witnessed widespread efforts to clean up traditional southern sports viewed as "rough amusements." New restrictions on hunting and drinking emerged in many places, and during the last quarter of the 19th century, every southern state passed laws against the long-lived sport of cockfighting. With older amusement forms circumscribed, southerners found themselves forced to embrace new entertainment forms, including motor racing. One by-product of this shifting cultural landscape was the wild popularity of county fairs in the early 20th century. As part of their growth, many southern fairgrounds expanded to include new, elaborate horse racing tracks. Motor racing, then, did not merely rise as a result of the South's changing sporting culture; it also benefited from the new infrastructure constructed for other purposes. In the wake of significant cultural alterations, especially after horse racing faced its own series of difficulties, motor racing grew in stature.

The roots of the stock car racing that came to prominence in the transformed southern sports culture can be traced to the November 1895 event sponsored by the *Chicago Times-Herald*. This first significant automobile race in the United States, a road course event from Chicago to Evanston and back, was won by auto manufacturer Frank Duryea. The next year a race occurred at the Rhode Island State Fair, thereby initiating the era of oval track racing that would eventually give rise to open-wheel and stock car racing. These earliest races frequently served as promotional devices for the hundreds of manufacturers that dotted the American landscape. Desperate to distinguish themselves from their competitors, manufacturers participated in races that served primarily as tests of durability and