

WHEN THE ENGINES NO LONGER ROAR: A CASE STUDY OF NORTH
WILKESBORO, N. C. AND THE NORTH WILKESBORO SPEEDWAY

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WHEN THE ENGINES NO LONGER ROAR: A CASE STUDY OF NORTH
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SPEEDWAY

BY

ANDREW J. BAKER

has been approved for
the Department of Geography
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Timothy G. Anderson

Associate Professor of Geography

Leslie A. Flemming

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

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When The Engines No Longer Roar: A Case Study of North Wilkesboro, N.C. and the North Wilkesboro Speedway (83pp.)

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Over the last fifty years, the sport of NASCAR has become nationalized, leaving behind the small, Carolina towns where much of the lore and origins of stock car racing began. In 1996, the stock car engines no longer roared at North Wilkesboro Speedway (NWS) as racing ceased to exist after fifty years in the tiny, northwestern North Carolina town of North Wilkesboro. This thesis examines how the loss of NASCAR at North Wilkesboro Speedway has altered the local population's sense of place and self-identity or image. The research in this thesis is based on assessment of editorials, articles, and opinion discussions from two local newspapers, *The Record of Wilkes* and *The Journal-Patriot*, and a survey of Wilkes County residents. Further, by attending a NASCAR race weekend in Martinsville, Virginia, a town and speedway very similar to North Wilkesboro, this research gained critical insights and an understanding of what a race weekend would have been like in North Wilkesboro. The local population still feels that North Wilkesboro is a "NASCAR" town since the speedway and its local racing heroes were integral in creating the largest spectator sport in the world. However, overwhelmingly, the local population agrees that the town's image has changed since racing ended at the speedway.

Approved:

Timothy G. Anderson

Associate Professor of Geography

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During my two years of graduate study at Ohio University, I developed an interest in the geography of NASCAR and stock car racing. I have long been an avid fan of motorsports, attending every Indianapolis 500 since 1988. I am fortunate and very thankful for the opportunity to carry out this research which has helped me find my 'place' in the discipline.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“The roar of these engines is impossible to describe. They have a simultaneous rasp, thunder and rumble that goes right through a body and fills the whole bowl (track) with a noise of internal combustion. Then they start around on two build-up runs, just to build up speed, then they come around the fourth turn and onto the straightaway in front of the stands at – here 130 miles an hour... and the flag goes down and everybody in the infield and in the stands is up on their feet going mad, and suddenly here is a bowl that is... everything in the way of excitement and liberation the automobile has meant to Americans.”

- Tom Wolfe’s (1965) experience at North Wilkesboro Speedway described in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*

Over the last fifty years, the sport of NASCAR has become nationalized, leaving behind the small, Carolina towns where much of the lore and origins of stock car racing began. In 1996, the stock car engines no longer roared at North Wilkesboro Speedway (NWS) as racing ceased to exist after fifty years in the tiny, northwestern North Carolina town of North Wilkesboro (pop. 4,116). Located in the foothills of the Brushy Mountains, North Wilkesboro has long been associated with moonshine production and distribution, receiving the nickname “moonshine capital of America” in a 1950 *American Magazine* article. Many racing historians, enthusiasts, and fans have called this speedway and town the "Cooperstown of NASCAR," tracing the sport back to moonshine, bootlegging, and “good ol' boys” with souped-up cars trying to out-run the authorities. The culminating race of NASCAR’s inaugural season in 1949 was held at NWS.

Less than one year after the death of the speedway’s founder and owner Enoch Staley, two racetrack developers each purchased fifty percent of the racing venue. Bruton Smith, chairman of Speedway Motorsports Inc. and Texas Motor Speedway, and

Bob Bahre, owner of the New Hampshire International Speedway, purchased the speedway to obtain a race date for their tracks with the intention of never running NASCAR races at the North Wilkesboro Speedway. Due to differences between the track's co-owners, the town of North Wilkesboro has not hosted an auto-racing event since September 29, 1996.

This thesis examines how the loss of NASCAR at North Wilkesboro Speedway has altered the local population's sense of place and self-identity or image. First, the major forces or causes that built the image of North Wilkesboro as the home of stock car racing are delineated and examined. Next, the study tracks how this image has been altered, if at all, given that there are no more races or visiting fans. After all, the two weekends each year that NASCAR raced at NWS greatly impacted the local service industries and allowed North Wilkesboro to reach an international viewing audience.

1.1 Introduction to NASCAR

With the biggest pool of sponsorship money in sports at nearly \$1 billion, a 5.1 network television rating second only to the National Football League, and 7 million fans attending races in 2004, the National Association of Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) has become a highly visible, national sport in the United States. Seventeen of the top twenty most-attended sports or entertainment events in the world are NASCAR events (Teal, 2005). Many suggest that because NASCAR has become the largest spectator sport in the U.S., it has replaced baseball as "America's pastime." NASCAR's legendary tracks - North Wilkesboro Speedway and Bristol Motor Speedway -- are even compared to the

infamous baseball venues Ebbets Field (Hinton, 1996) and Wrigley Field (Menzer, 2001) respectively.

Based on figures from 2000, two NASCAR races, the Daytona 500 (\$240 million) and the Brickyard 400 (\$220 million), are the second and third largest income-generating professional sporting events for their host cities (“Coast to Coast,” 2001). Hotels, restaurants, and campgrounds are among the major benefactors of this income. Moreover, non-profit organizations, like the Boy Scouts, church organizations, and relief agencies use the events as major fundraising opportunities.

Revenue from the Atlanta Motor Speedway provides half of the total money generated from the metropolitan area's sports teams and facilities, according to a 2000 study by the Atlanta Sports Council. The speedway is expected to generate \$2.275 billion of the \$4.5 billion in anticipated revenue from sports between 2004 and 2008. The money generated by the city's major professional sports teams (the Braves, Hawks and Falcons) combined is expected to be less than half of what the speedway brings in, according to the study (Auerswald, 2005).

In June 2003, NASCAR announced a ten-year, \$700 million agreement with Nextel Communications, Inc., replacing R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. as the corporate sponsor of NASCAR's marquee series. What had been known as Winston Cup racing from 1971 to 2003 is now known as Nextel Cup, bringing NASCAR added exposure it could not previously garner because of restrictions on tobacco advertising. Since 1990, attendance at Nextel Cup races has doubled, exceeding seven million fans (Teal, 2005). NBC purchased broadcasting rights for twelve NASCAR races for about \$200 million.

Two other national broadcasting networks, Fox and TNT, purchased the remaining races, adding another \$200 million. Fox estimated 9.9 million fans have watched the first seven events of the 2005 NASCAR season (Mulhern, 2005).

The growth of NASCAR has coincided with the geographical and economic expansion of NASCAR from stock car racing's Carolina base. In 1960, six out of ten of the races in NASCAR's top division were at tracks in North or South Carolina. In 2005, the NASCAR Nextel Cup Series, the top division of stock car racing, will race thirty-six times at twenty-three tracks in nineteen states. Currently, only three of the thirty-six races will be held at two tracks in the Carolinas -- Lowe's Motor Speedway (Charlotte) and Darlington Raceway (Darlington, South Carolina).

1.2 The Geography of Sport

Cultural and sport geographers have analyzed sports within the context of how sport and its landscape artifacts might aid us in disclosing "the meanings that human beings attach to areas and places and to relate these meanings to other aspects and conditions of human experience" (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987, 96). Others argue that sports "offers great potential for the fuller understanding of society" (Rooney, 1974, 288). Studies in this sub-discipline have focused primarily on sports in the United States and Great Britain. Much of the sport geography literature tends to be empirical in nature, following a positivist approach in the Sauerian landscape tradition. The geography of sport has also been shown to be a useful pedagogical tool in geographic education.

The earliest research within the sports geography sub-discipline focused on the relevance and need for geographical interpretations and analysis of certain sports.

Terence M. Burley (1962) defined the five major fields of possible study within the geography of sport. These include the economic impacts and assessments of sports on a particular place, the social patterns, aspects, and effects on society, and the cultural origin and diffusion of certain sports. Further, the physical conditions under which sports are played, as well as sport's impact on urban land use, validate sports geography as worthy of geographic attention. The assumptions of these five major fields are based on sports' economic importance to a community or region, social implications on a society, and the ability to delimit cultural origin and hearth boundaries. Sports can be viewed as a function of nearly all types of human society in various regions.

The earliest prominent figure in the geography of American sport, John Rooney, outlined major subdivisions of the sub-discipline, including the identification of origins and diffusion of athletes and sports, the effect of sport on the landscape, and the social, economic, and symbolic impact of sport on society (Rooney, 1974). Rooney built on previous research suggesting the existence of strong relationships between sports and regions. "Sports regions" exist because different societies and places participate in different types of recreational events (Rooney, 1974). Other research has also focused on the spatial aspects and associations of sport.

In *Sports Geography*, John Bale (1989) offers an "initial attempt to draw together the principal foci from the existing literature on the geography of sports" (Bale, 1989, ix). Early in the text, Bale discusses the merits of the academic study of sport. By adding the spatial element of geography, sports geography is viewed as a viable sub-discipline. Bale discusses how sports geography literature has focused on looking at the many elements

comprising sports, particularly origins of athletes or diffusion of a sport, linkages between sports to the landscape and environment, and the economic implications of sports on society. Further, Bale discusses how sports can be a contributor to the image and pride of many places.

Bale then identifies the positive and negative impacts of sporting events and facilities on the landscape. Traditional geographic concepts are discussed, including central place theory, diffusion, the distance decay model, and areal classification. Bale also outlines research methods and suggestions for future research within sports geography.

Karl Raitz's *The Theater of Sport* (1995) is a collection of essays centering on the relationship between many different sports and the places where they are played. Each essay discusses the historical development of a particular sport, focusing on origin, diffusion, and region. Raitz feels "sports places are really complex landscape ensembles, and the sporting experience, therefore, is not simply the playing or viewing of an athletic event but an interaction with the sports landscape so that both the game and the place contribute to the experience" (Raitz, 1995, ix). Many of the essays suggest that sporting places are integral to the material culture of which they are a part and as reflections of the cultures and people that produce them.

The Atlas of American Sport visually illustrates the significance, presence, and interrelationships of a variety of sports (Rooney, 1992). Connections are made between sport and culture as culture hearth regions are delimited on the basis of a particular sport's spatial distribution. The origin of athletes and the popularity of specific sports in

specific places are the result of culturally manufactured preferences causing sports regions to be culture regions (Rooney, 1992).

1.3 Historical Geography of Stock Car Racing

Early auto racing in the United States focused on a driver's ability against the physical elements (Pillsbury, 1995). Endurance runs, hill climbs, and speed tests were typical of races between builders trying to prove their automobile was more reliable and faster. In the early 1900s, race tracks began to appear throughout the nation, supplying a place for head-to-head competition between car builders. Many of these "stock" cars were used as advertising for automobile businesses that sponsored or owned the cars.

The first geographer to extensively study the geography of stock car racing and NASCAR, the largest stock car organization today, was Richard Pillsbury. Pillsbury (1974) divided the historical and geographic development of stock car racing into three stages. Initially, stock car races were dispersed nationally up until the 1940s, with "small quarter-mile and half-mile dirt tracks scattered across the country" (Pillsbury, 1974, 39). In 1909 the most famous race track in the world, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (IMS), was built, hosting the Indianapolis 500 race annually. However, in 1919 "stock" cars were banned at IMS in favor of faster automobiles at this high-speed oval race track (Pillsbury, 1995). This form of racing then became popular in many large cities, including Chicago (Soldier Field), New York, and Los Angeles, as well as smaller towns in the Corn Belt, the Central Valley of California, and the southern Piedmont, particularly the Carolinas (Pillsbury, 1995).

The second stage occurred during the 1950s and 1960s, when stock car racing began to grow, especially in the South (Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3). As Pillsbury (1974, 39) explained, “In contrast to the South where stock cars were the only cars available, race

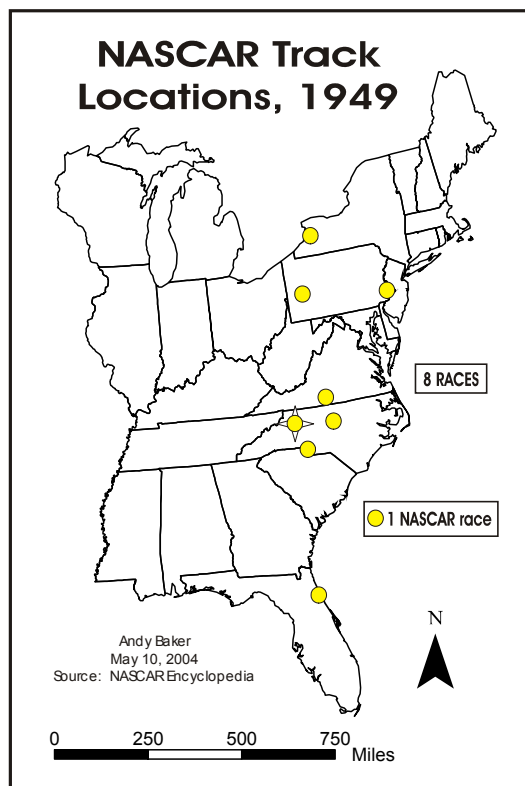


Figure 1.1: NASCAR’s inaugural season.

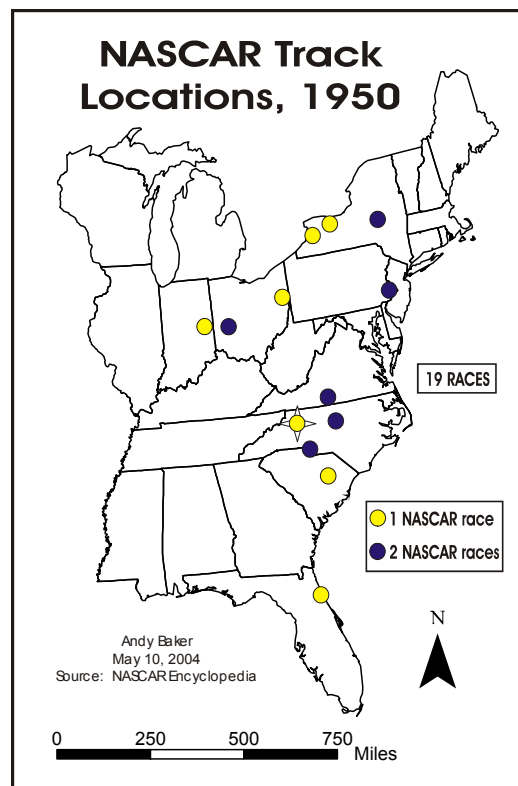


Figure 1.2: Eleven more races in 1950.

enthusiasts in other regions became interested during this critical period in a variety of cars, beginning first with foreign sports cars and later branching out to the European Grand Prix cars.” In the 1964 NASCAR season, seventy percent of the top twenty drivers were from the Carolinas (Pillsbury, 1995). Moreover, seventy-one percent of the races were at tracks in North and South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama (Alderman, 2003).

In the southern Piedmont, stock car racing has been traced to the production, transportation, and sale of moonshine (Howell, 1997). Moonshine served as currency, as a means for transporting and preserving perishable crops, and as a libation in the Carolinas, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. As bootlegging moonshine boomed, the drivers began to race among themselves to see who had the fastest, most reliable cars. Throughout the 20th century all kinds of racing forms existed in the southern Piedmont, ranging from drag racing to 24-hour endurance races. However, this geographic region has traditionally been most famously associated with stock car racing (Pillsbury, 1974, 1995; Rooney, 1992). Rooney (1992) found that early NASCAR races were held in the eastern United States, but more frequently in the South. He adds, “[C]ompetition and gradual retrenchment have increasingly focused the Winston Cup series (the top league of NASCAR) on the southern heartland” (Rooney, 1992, 45). Even today, NASCAR and stock car racing continues to identify itself with rural Southern traditions (Howell, 1997).

In Pillsbury’s “Stock Car Racing” essay in *The Theater of Sport*, he describes in detail “stock car racing and the Southern Ethos” (Pillsbury, 1995, 281). This view is based on interpretations and analyses of the region’s personality and historic isolation from the popular, mainstream culture in America (Pillsbury, 1995). With the exception of Atlanta, there were no major professional sports franchises in the South. Most sports fans followed local college football and basketball teams. However, less than fifteen percent of southerners have a college degree, resulting in little attraction to college sports by stock car racing fans that are “disenfranchised from this part of regional life at birth” (Pillsbury, 1995, 282). Seen in this light, southern stock car racing, and its drivers with

minimal schooling and backcountry origins, represents the achievement of the Southerner over the system.

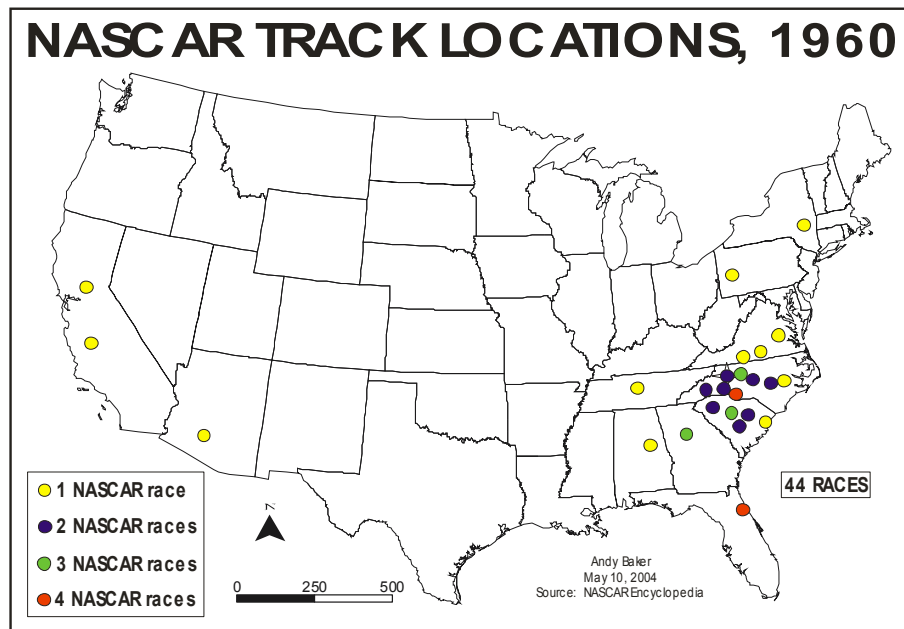


Figure 1.3: NASCAR track locations emphasizing Carolina and Southern base.

Pillsbury's (1974) third stage of stock car racing began during the late 1960's and early 1970's (Figures 1.4 and 1.5). During this time, southern race car drivers began to receive more competition from drivers hailing from other regions of the country. Pillsbury felt this was due to increased national television coverage and major corporate sponsorships. RJ Reynolds, a multi-national corporation located in North Carolina, sponsored the Winston Cup, the top division of NASCAR.

With the nationalization and corporatization of stock car racing in the South, NASCAR entered the "modern era" (Alderman, 2003). The major sponsor of NASCAR, R.J. Reynolds, wanted a more national series that promoted a shorter season, profiling

bigger events (Hagstrom, 1998). Further, the company encouraged movement to larger venues, which led to the abandonment of many small, southeastern race tracks (Fleischman and Pearce, 1998).

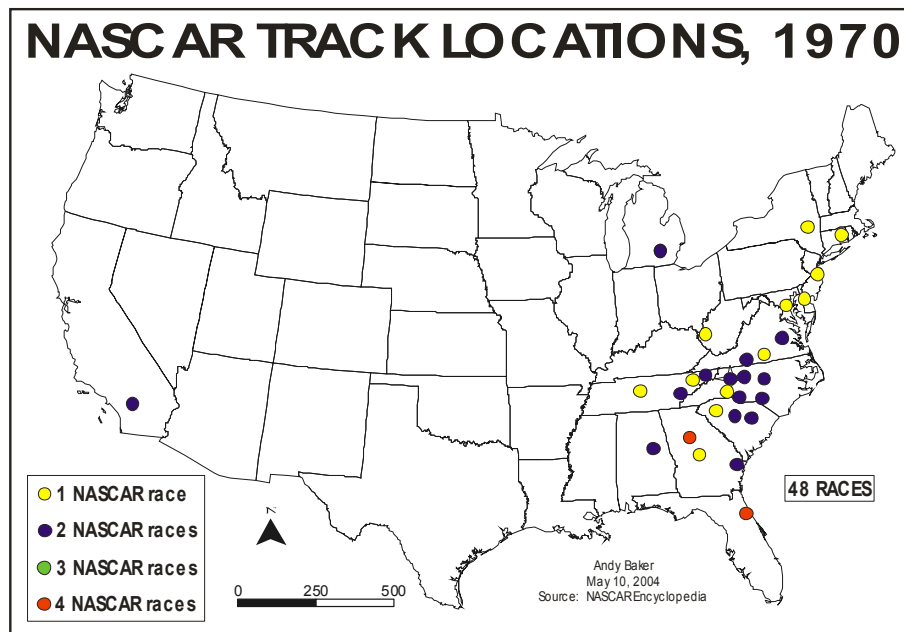


Figure 1.4: Track locations just before the “modern era” of NASCAR.

After the 1970s, growing numbers of drivers came from outside the Southern region (Pillsbury, 1974; Cain, 2002). The Winston Cup racing series began to race at new tracks in different regions. These new tracks were located in Phoenix, Southern California, and Texas. This “westward expansion” was coupled with increases in national corporate sponsorship (Figure 1.6, 1.7 and 1.8). Many large, nationwide companies began sponsoring NASCAR events and race cars. For example, corporations like Pepsi, DuPont, and Kodak began sponsoring cars that were formerly sponsored by

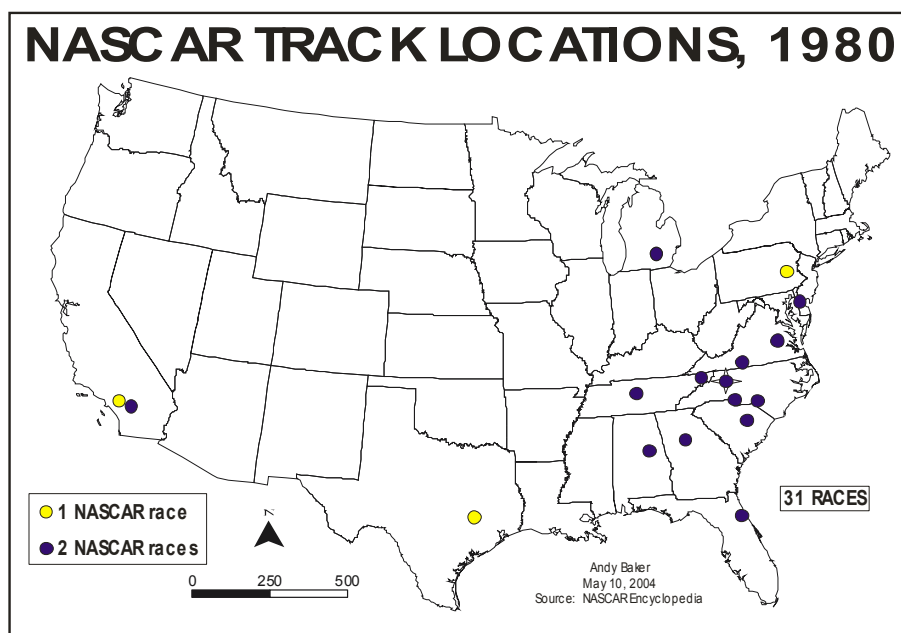


Figure 1.5: The 1980s saw an abandonment of the Carolina base of NASCAR.

southern car dealerships, liquor stores, and gasoline companies. However, corporate America has sought to maintain the connection between stock car racing and southern identity (Howell, 1997). This is exemplified, for example, by having Britney Spears, a native of Louisiana, and other country music singers sing the national Anthem at races; NASCAR and its promoters have attempted to foster the southern identity of this national sport. Tight control by the president of NASCAR, Bill France Jr., has focused on continuing to increase audience size and attract new markets (Howell, 1997).

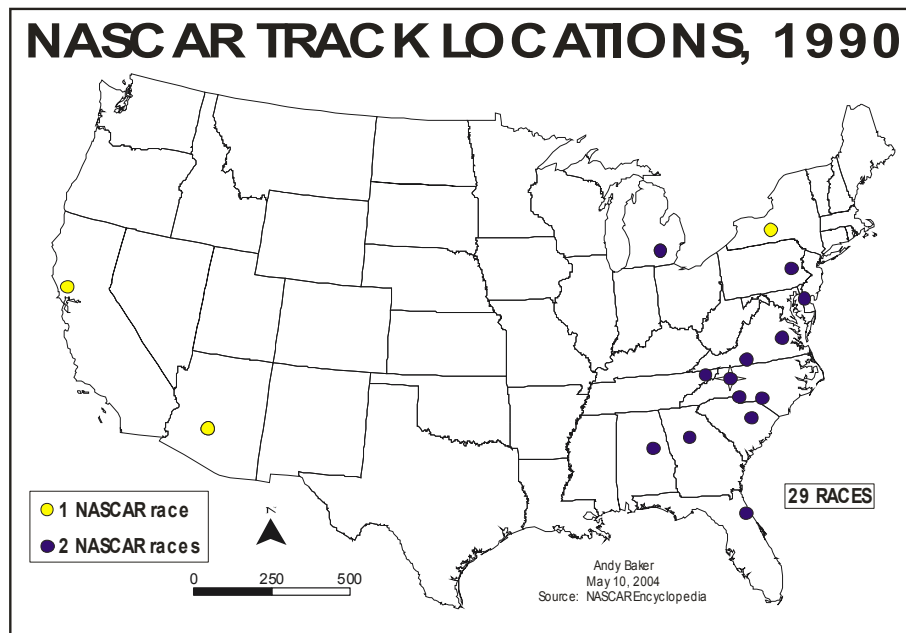


Figure 1.6: In 1990, NASCAR raced at only three tracks in North Carolina, down from eight in 1960.

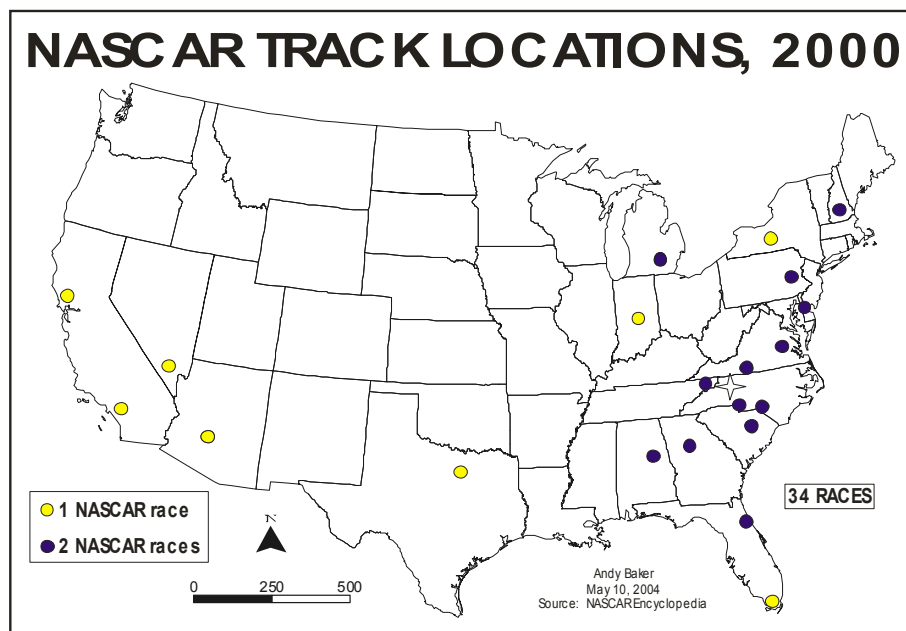


Figure 1.7: By 2000, NASCAR opened in many new markets at the national level including Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Indianapolis, New England, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Miami.

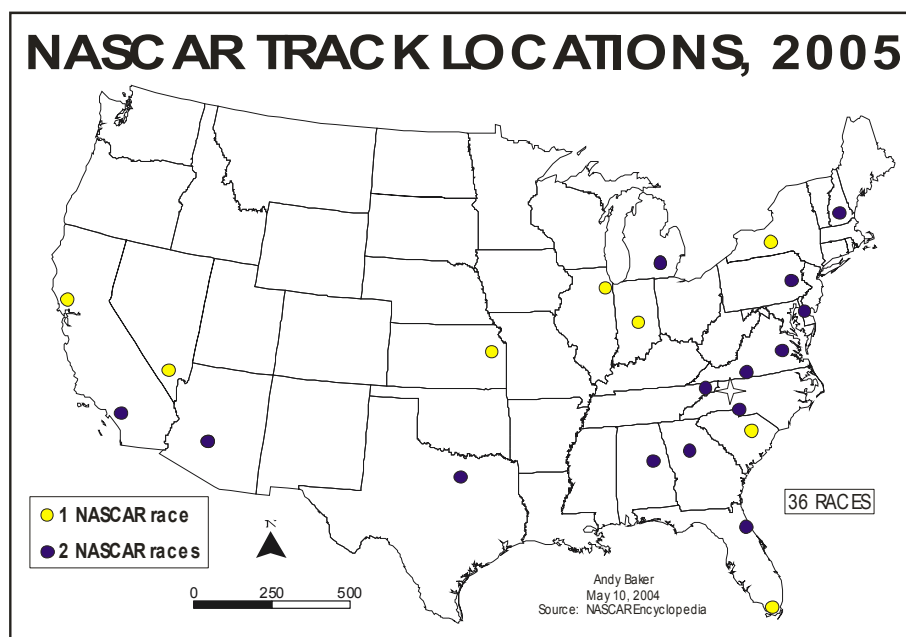


Figure 1.8: Only one race track in North Carolina will host a race in 2005. Two new urban areas, Chicago and Kansas City, now host NASCAR races.

1.4 Methods

Much of the research in this thesis is based on assessment of editorials, articles, and opinion discussions from two local newspapers, *The Record of Wilkes* and *The Journal-Patriot*, especially those pieces related to the speedway since the end of racing in 1996. These two periodicals were found in the microfilm section of the Wilkes Community College Library. Other regional and national newspaper articles chronicling the speedway's history were also consulted. Through visits to North Wilkesboro to conduct archival research, many pictures were taken of out-of-business service stations in the area surrounding the speedway. Photographs were also taken of the entire North Wilkesboro Speedway property. Further, a survey of Wilkes County residents was conducted to learn about how the residents view their home and the town of North Wilkesboro since NASCAR left. Several internet web message boards were also helpful

to this research, producing further discussions about the North Wilkesboro Speedway.

Further, by attending a NASCAR race weekend in Martinsville, Virginia, a town and speedway very similar to North Wilkesboro, this research gained critical insights and an understanding of what a race weekend would have been like in North Wilkesboro.

Chapter 2

The Birth of a Speedway, The Beginnings of a Sport: The History of North Wilkesboro Speedway (1947-1996)

2.1 “The Moonshine Capital of America”

In a 1950 *American Magazine* article titled “Millions in Moonshine,” the town of North Wilkesboro and Wilkes County was given the moniker “moonshine capital of America” (Packard, 1950) (Figure 2.1). The prohibited manufacture and sale of illicit whiskey was a multi-million dollar industry and a major component of the economy in this tiny, woodland town described as a “prosperous, bustling city” by its mayor (Packard, 1950). North Wilkesboro was a major distribution point in moving moonshine throughout the South due to its geographic location in the foothills of the Appalachians.

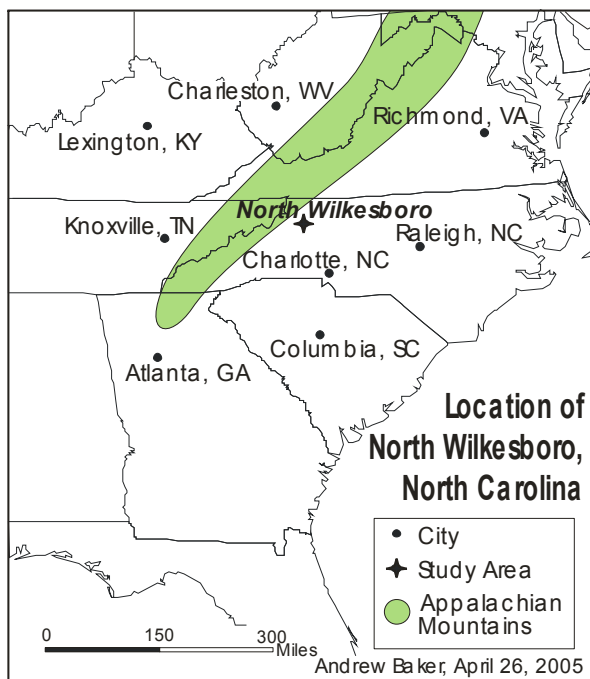


Figure 2.1: North Wilkesboro is located in the rolling Appalachian foothills of northwestern North Carolina.

Many of the early settlers tucked away in the valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina were of Scots-Irish descent, an ethnic group in which generations of families learned the skill of making homemade liquor. Further, many moonshiners sold their products to generate income in a poverty-stricken area where farming was difficult and few jobs existed. Local moonshiners located their stills in rough, remote wooded areas in the foothills of mountains since the stills were easier to hide from the Federal Revenue officers, known locally as “Revenuers,” in such a location. (Davis, 1990)

The undercover business of making moonshine was coupled with the secret transportation of the illegal liquor from the hidden stills in Wilkes County to markets across the Southeast. Running through North Wilkesboro, U.S. Highway 421 was a major moonshine transportation route, linking the backwoods and hills to larger cities like Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Charlotte (Davis, 1990). It has been estimated that there were at least 700 people in Wilkes County hauling whiskey, popularly called “tripping” (Wise, 2004).

A bootlegger’s car was equipped with “hopped-up,” modified engines that exceeded 115 mph, while the police cars that chased them topped out at 95 mph (Menzer, 2001). Often, bootleggers would insert special springs and shocks to help make sharp turns at fast speeds. When these cars were not being used to haul whiskey, drivers would race each other to see who the best driver was or who had the fastest machine, in hopes of winning a cash prize.

A chance to earn extra income and clout among fellow bootleggers spawned action-packed races and quickly led to rising attendance at these unofficial events. Rules,

however, were few and variable, and crooked promoters often left town with the purse before the race was over. This led to several attempts at creating governing bodies in the sport in order to clean up corruption (Menzer, 2001).

2.2 The Birth of a Speedway

Recent research by Suzanne Wise, director of the Stock Car Racing Collection at Appalachian State University's Belk Library, has examined the early history of the North Wilkesboro Speedway. She states, "[I]n 1945, Wilkes County resident Enoch Staley attended stock car races presented by William Henry Getty France, Sr., known as Big Bill, one of the top race promoters in the Southeast. Staley was excited by the sport and decided to build a track in his native Wilkes County, North Carolina. France promised to promote the races and help run them for part of the proceeds" (Wise, 2004, 1). Staley, with partners Lawson Curry and Jack and Charlie Combs, purchased farm land near North Wilkesboro and began excavating and constructing an oval racetrack ("Grand Finale," 1996). However, the group's initial investment of \$1500 ran out, causing the .625-mile track to be shorter and more undulating than planned (Wise, 2004). The track was not a perfect, symmetrical oval and took on a very distinctive shape as the frontstretch sloped downhill while the backstretch sloped uphill.

Upon completion of the speedway in 1946, one news reporter suggested, "North Wilkesboro Speedway is the racing mecca for northwestern North Carolina. The five-eighth-mile oval is nationally recognized as one of the fastest dirt tracks in automobile racing" (Anderson, 1990, 149). Robert Glenn "Junior" Johnson, a local racing legend, stated that the first race ran at the speedway was an unscheduled, unofficial race organized by local bootleggers (Anderson, 1990, 237).

The track's first 'official' event was a Modified race on May 18, 1947. The race included the running of heat races and a feature race primarily involving 1939 and 1940 modified Ford coupes. This inaugural event was deemed a major success as thousands filled the grandstands, infield, and even trees just outside the track. (Anderson, 1990, 236). Although the grandstands held over 3,000 spectators, it was estimated that over 10,000 race fans paid admission to watch this inaugural event (Helyar, 1996).

Many of the earliest drivers were among the best Carolina bootleggers (Cain, 1996). North Wilkesboro native and NASCAR driver Benny Parsons once said, "Trust me, there was nothing to do in the mountains of North Carolina back in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. You either worked at a hosiery mill, a furniture factory, or you made whiskey" (Wise, 2004, 2). Two-time NASCAR champion Ned Jarrett recalls, "Back then (the 1940s) most of the drivers were bootleggers from Alexander or Wilkes Counties, or just a bunch of fools who didn't have better sense" (Wise, 2004, 2).

The most successful early racer at NWS was life-long local resident Junior Johnson. Raised less than ten miles east of North Wilkesboro, Johnson grew up hauling his father's homemade whiskey throughout the Blue Ridge Mountains (Hinton, 1996). In Tom Wolfe's (1965) *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, Junior Johnson is proclaimed as the "last American hero" due to his aggressive, bad-boy driving style that shaped much of the image of early stock car roots. In a recent interview, Johnson boasts, "I wouldn't say I was better than everybody else. I just say I'd never seen anybody I didn't think I could outrun" ("Junior Johnson Interview," 2004).

The name Junior Johnson is synonymous with the early days of North Wilkesboro Speedway and stock car racing; he can remember when the infield was filled with rows of corn and the ticket booth was a chicken house. During the summer of 1947, Junior Johnson began his racing career at the speedway. He recollects, “I was 16, plowing a mule and planting corn for my father when my older brother L.P. drove up to the field and said they were going to have a race over at the new North Wilkesboro Speedway. He wanted me to drive his liquor car, a 1940 Ford. All the cars racing at North Wilkesboro then were liquor cars” (Hinton, 1996). About fifteen to twenty cars showed up for this early, unofficial event in which Johnson dodged holes and dirt clods in his moonshine car around the unfinished track. He would go on to test race cars during the prime of his racing career (1955-1966) at his home track two or three times a week, earning four of his fifty total career NASCAR victories there. Many spectators would drive long distances to watch Johnson race at his home track in North Wilkesboro.

2.3 The Creation of NASCAR

During the 1930s and 1940s, Bill France recognized that stock car racing lacked regulation and uniformly enforced rulebook, yet had much potential as a spectator sport. In 1947, France created the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, NASCAR, in hopes of bringing a uniform, sanctioning body to the sport. France, along with Enoch Staley and other early promoters, including Paul Sawyer (Richmond International Raceway), Alvin Hawkins (Darlington Speedway), Clay Earles (Martinsville Speedway), and Joe Littlejohn (Spartanburg, SC) met at the Hotel Wilkes in downtown North Wilkesboro after the fall 1947 race to draft plans for a meeting to establish a sanctioning

body (Wise, 2004). These early track builders and promoters of the sport were dedicated to turning the rural, Southern style of auto racing into a proper, viable sport. In late 1947, France officially founded NASCAR at a gathering at the Streamline Hotel in Daytona Beach. Staley was ill and unable to attend, but was firmly behind the new organization (Wise, 2004).

2.4 NASCAR at North Wilkesboro Speedway

North Wilkesboro was a popular dirt track in the 1940s and 1950s and carried a reputation as one of the fastest short-tracks in auto racing. In 1950, speeds reached 73 mph at NWS compared to the next fastest short-track, Charlotte Speedway (66 mph) (Golenbock, 2003). Staley, track president and CEO, ran the operation essentially as a hobby. All of the income generated was from ticket sales, and as long as profits covered maintenance costs, Staley was satisfied (Helyar, 1996). Wise (2004) states, “[F]or many years he didn’t even pay himself a salary. Enoch Staley personified the roots of NASCAR. The 6-foot-4, 230 pound mountaineer was universally described as unpretentious and forthright, a quiet man who loved racing and was content to work in the background.” In an interview with Enoch’s son Mike, he commented, “[H]is biggest achievement was giving the sport integrity and helping NASCAR get to where it’s at today. People like my dad and ‘Big Bill,’ when they told you something, that was the truth and you could take it to the bank. You didn’t need a contract, just a handshake with them” (Wise, 2004, 3).



Figure 2.2: Photograph taken from an early NASCAR “Strictly Stock” race at NWS.

Throughout its history North Wilkesboro Speedway epitomized this era as Wise (2004, 2) states: “It stayed simple, a time capsule which changed minimally as the sport grew.” Hank Schoolfield, the track publicist for many years, recalled his first visit in 1953 when he checked in at the “one-room cinder-block business office/ticket office, a converted chicken house with a bare earth floor and a sloped shed roof that threatened tall people” (Wise, 2004, 2). For many years the track was enclosed by wooden guard rails with rows of corn in the track’s infield.

Staley attempted to keep the facility modern and on pace with the growth of the sport. The West Grandstand was rebuilt, offering chair seats rather than a bare concrete slab, as were new, much larger restroom facilities. The South Grandstand was expanded, increasing total spectator capacity to 60,000 affording what some race fans suggest, “the best view of any NASCAR facility” (“Last Race Weekend?”, 1996). An electric scoring tower was built in the infield of the speedway, replacing the last manual scoreboard in Winston Cup. The track was one of the first to build air-conditioned, glass-enclosed

viewing areas (Wise, 2004). Further, a garage facility was built within the track, which at the time was unique among similar short-track venues. When the new Junior Johnson Grandstand was finished, it was christened with a bottle of moonshine (Helyar, 1996).



Figure 2.3: View from outside turn four at North Wilkesboro Speedway. Inside the track is an electric scoring tower and garage area. Outside the track is seating and luxury suites for 40,000 spectators (Photo by author, 2005).

Even with the modernization attempts, the track began to noticeably lag behind other speedways on the NASCAR circuit during the 1980s and 1990s. A nearby sportswriter recalled, “[O]ne year there were four telephones up there (in the press box), and three of them had rotary dials. This, mind you, was in the 1990s” (Dutton, 2002). The attendance and total purse for both races were the lowest in NASCAR, even though the races continued to sell-out and attract more fans each year.

2.5 Great Races at North Wilkesboro Speedway

The track's amenities might have lagged behind other, more modern facilities, but its devout fans were more interested in the racing action between legendary drivers.

North Wilkesboro held over 100 races in fifty years featuring some of the greatest names in NASCAR history, ranging from Junior Johnson and Curtis Turner in the early days, to Darrell Waltrip and Richard Petty in the '70s and '80s, and Jeff Gordon and Dale Earnhardt in the '90s.

The first race on October 16, 1949 was won by moonshine runner Bob Flock, winning by 100 yards over Lee Petty. During the final laps of the 1954 spring race, the leader, Dick Rathmann, blew a tire but still managed to finish the race victorious on three wheels. One year later, Rathmann lost by three feet in the closest NASCAR finish at the time. In 1958, fresh off of an eleven month prison sentence for moonshine hauling, Junior Johnson won his first race at his home track.

Two years later, the short-track became legendary for close, high-tension racing when Lee Petty spun Johnson out of the lead with fourteen laps to go, causing Petty to be the target of bottles, rocks, and other debris thrown into his direction by hostile Johnson fans. Lee Petty's son, Richard, was involved in a heated race against rival Bobby Allison in 1972 when the two drivers bashed into each other, forcing the other car into the wall. A drunken race fan attacked Petty after the race in Victory Lane. A similar rivalry between Ricky Rudd and Dale Earnhardt began after the two wrecked each other after several fender-banging duels during two 1988 and 1989 races that ended with altercations in the garage area.

2.6 The Uniqueness of North Wilkesboro Speedway

Race fans traveled long distances to watch races at one of the early, pioneering racing venues in NASCAR. Wolfe makes mention of this journey: “Ten o’clock Sunday morning in the hills of North Carolina, cars, miles of cars in every direction... all are going to the stock-car races” (Wolfe, 1965, 1). Another depiction of the scene stated that, “. . . multitudes of cars, pickups, and recreational vehicles [wound] their way past cow pastures, chicken farms and doublewide trailer homes” (Helyar, 1996). The speedway was renowned for its long traffic jams as cars came and left on two-lane, country roads, but to early fans of the sport the track was more notorious for being a great venue to watch races between legendary racers.

Racing at the North Wilkesboro Speedway, where drivers reach 140-150 mph, was a much different experience than a race at the “super speedways” of Daytona, Indianapolis, or Talladega, where speeds topped 200 mph. The slower paced racing on smaller tracks, like NWS, yields a “whole lot of beating and banging” between dueling race cars, as often the only way to pass a car was by forcibly moving it out of the way. The action in the grandstands was sometimes as eventful as the racing on the track. Richard Petty once commented, “There was a fight in the infield one time and it got so rough they had to throw a yellow flag [caution] so they could put one cat into a car, drive him around the track and get him out of there” (Siano, 1996). According to legend, fans would heave moonshine bottles at moving race cars they disliked (Helyar, 1996). The concrete bleachers were situated so close to the track surface that fans could see driver’s

faces through the windshields, while going home with shreds of tire rubber in their hair (McCollister, 1996).

However, watching races from the grandstands was a relatively safe, enjoyable experience as one race fan commented: “There was scarcely a bad seat in the grandstands, and fans enjoyed a great view of the entire track from any corner or straightaway. My first trip to the concession stands produced one of the culinary delights of my life when I ordered a simple hot dog, expecting it to be delivered naked and waiting for mustard. Instead, it was handed over complete with mustard, onions, chili and slaw” (Kay, 2003).

Staley always had the fans’ interests at heart, and his reluctance to raise ticket and concessions prices or charge spectators additional fees limited the capital available to make facility improvements. In 1996 a race fan could purchase a ticket for \$20, park and camp on site at no charge and buy a bag of potato chips and pork rinds for \$1.50 (McCollister, 1996). The cheapest “general admission” tickets to the 1995 Brickyard 400 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway cost \$45.

The town of North Wilkesboro was very welcoming as well. One fan remembered, “The little town up the road was wonderful as well. Every shop and street was always dressed up for the races. Checkered flags abounded and signs welcoming race fans were everywhere. Fans enjoyed the Southern hospitality, feeling very welcomed as the fan continues, “The people were friendly and the businesses were fair. There was no price gouging in North Wilkesboro. When I said that they rolled out the red carpet for the fans, I really meant it. Those good people knew that the race fans were the backbone

of their economy, and we were treated like royalty, in the tradition of true Southern hospitality” (Kay, 2003).

Fans and drivers alike loved the race week's down-home atmosphere. A local Wilkes County resident noted that “[O]n a race weekend, you would find sing-alongs in the restaurants and tailgate parties in the motel parking lots. More than likely, you'd meet some of the drivers there as well as other race fans” (Personal Communication, 2005). Another local race fan stated, “Evenings in North Wilkesboro were like one big party, and many of the drivers could be found at barbecues with the fans or sitting in the back of a pickup in the parking lot of a motel talking with anyone who walked up” (Personal Communication, 2005). Junior Johnson once described the North Wilkesboro race weekend experience as a “big fair” similar to “Disney World” (Marshall, 2001).

Chapter 3

The End of NASCAR at North Wilkesboro Speedway: 1996

3.1 Change of Ownership

Enoch Staley, the long-time owner of the speedway, died on May 22, 1995. Less than one month later, it was announced that Bruton Smith, the president of Speedway Motorsports, Inc., had purchased fifty percent of the 150 shares of the speedway from the Combs family. In a tradition steeped with Wilkes County style, Jack Combs pulled a quart of moonshine out of a cabinet to toast the deal (Wise, 2004). During a meeting between Mike Staley (Enoch' son) and Smith, it was decided that the two owners would have equal representation. Mike Staley was installed as president and chief operating officer of the speedway for a one-year term.

On January 1, 1996, it was announced that the fifty percent interest in North Wilkesboro Speedway owned by the heirs of Enoch Staley, including Mike Staley, had been sold to racetrack developer and promoter Bob Bahre, owner of the New Hampshire International Speedway (Williams, 1996a). Mike Staley felt that selling the track was “the only alternative” and a very painful but necessary decision in order to look after his own family's well being (Ju. Hubbard, 1996a). Speculation immediately began that the North Wilkesboro Speedway would lose its two Winston Cup race dates. The two new co-owners bought their shares of the track only in order to use the two race dates for Winston Cup races at their own racetracks. It was reported that Bahre purchased the Staley's shares of the track for \$7 million, while Smith paid the Combs family \$6 million (Williams, 1996a).

Bahre and Smith bought North Wilkesboro in hopes of adding race dates at their venues in 1997, the year in which Bill France established a limit of thirty-two total Winston Cup races that could take place in one year (Figure 3.1). Thirty-one races were already on the schedule, including a guaranteed race at the newly completed California Speedway. Thus, the only way to acquire a Winston Cup race was to buy a track that already had one or to move Cup races between tracks that promoters already owned.

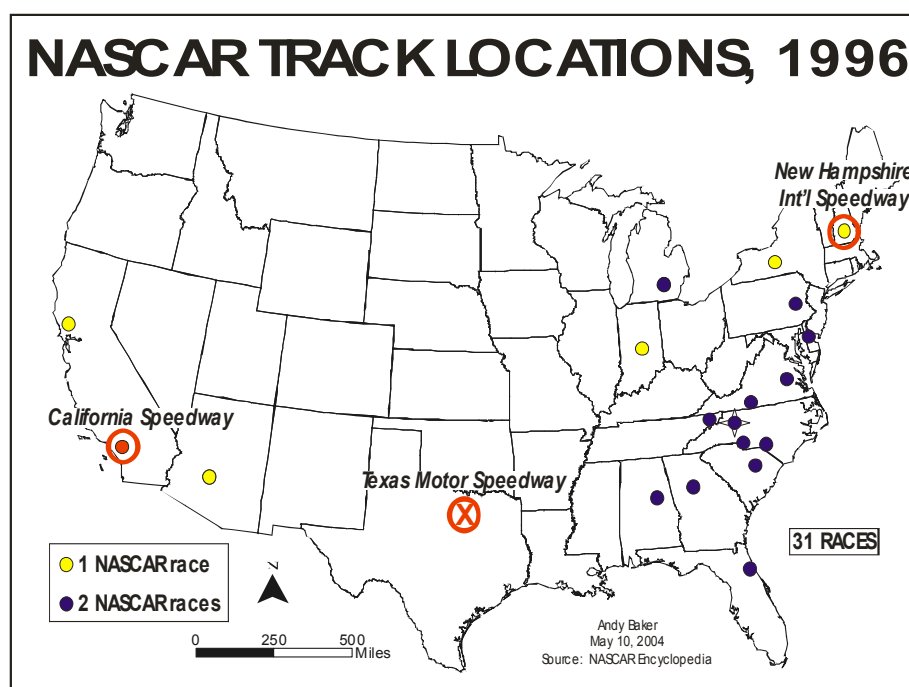


Figure 3.1: Those tracks that gained a 1997 NASCAR race are encircled in red. The California Speedway was already completed and guaranteed one race for 1997. Texas Motor Speedway and New Hampshire International Speedway gained a race date when their two respective owners each purchased North Wilkesboro Speedway.

3.2 NASCAR Outgrows Its Roots

The purchase of the North Wilkesboro Speedway by these two racetrack developers was the last in a long series of events that triggered the track's demise. The

popularity of the sport, construction of new speedways with more seating and bigger purses, as well as the geographical location of North Wilkesboro are the main factors that have led to the closing of the track. Former NASCAR champion Rusty Wallace stated, "... we need to be at the tracks that are best for teams and sponsors... everything from better pit road facilities to bigger purses to four-star hotels for the sponsors" (Tuschak, 1996). Three-time Winston Cup champion Darrell Waltrip adds, "[L]et's say North Wilkesboro is worth \$10 million... how could a \$10 million dollar racetrack hold up a \$150 million racetrack? These are \$150 million, \$200 million facilities waiting for us to come in and showcase their facility, and also to showcase our sport" (Barr, 1996). Waltrip, who grew up in a blue-collar family in Kentucky but then migrated to Nashville to pursue his racing career, feels the sport has outgrown its roots stating, "NASCAR is losing that connection. This started out as a grassroots sport with mostly grassroots drivers, but it's changed over the years. We've traded in some of the old rural tracks, like North Wilkesboro... I hate to see our sport lose its soul" (Hinton, 1996). Junior Johnson agrees, "The sport has lost what got it here. It got here on the strength of the people who had the willpower and honesty that America is made out of. Now, it's running solely on money" ("Junior Johnson Interview", 2004).

Due to North Wilkesboro Speedway being a very plain, older speedway, it was inevitable that the speedway had to build large suites and increase seating capacity to keep up with new facilities being built in large markets. However, Staley was resistant to change, focusing more on fan enjoyment rather than adding seats or increasing the size of the purse. Race teams, facing higher car costs and increasing driver salaries, wanted the

large purses that new tracks in bigger markets generate (Helyar, 1996). NASCAR president Bill France Jr. said: “With the increasing growth of NASCAR racing, this seems like the right time to take advantage of a new facility in Texas and a wonderful track in New England where we’ve already had success” (“N.C. track loses Winston Cup races,” 1996). NASCAR driver Rusty Wallace adds, “We need to bring the series to other parts of the country so we can provide a broader base to our fans and sponsors” (Pistone, 1996a).

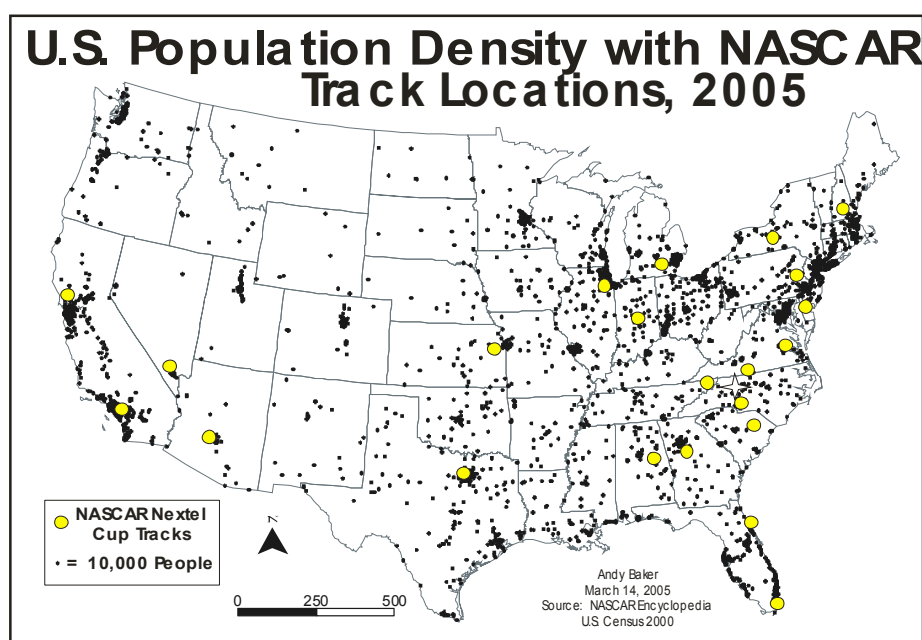


Figure 3.2: Notice how NASCAR is moving to venues with higher-density populations. Future possible track locations include the Pacific Northwest, New York City, and Houston.

Not only is North Wilkesboro in a sparsely populated area, but it is also within 100 miles of two short-track venues in Martinsville, Virginia and Bristol, Tennessee. Martinsville Speedway and Bristol Motor Speedway kept up with the growth of NASCAR with seating for over 100,000 and bigger purses than North Wilkesboro

Speedway, which could seat only 60,000 race fans (Pistone, 1996b). Prior to the last race at North Wilkesboro Speedway, Darrell Waltrip said, “Our sponsors want us to reach more markets and not be so saturated in the Southeast. And the tracks with larger seating capacities are in these new markets, so it’s a matter of progress that we move on” (Pistone, 1996b).

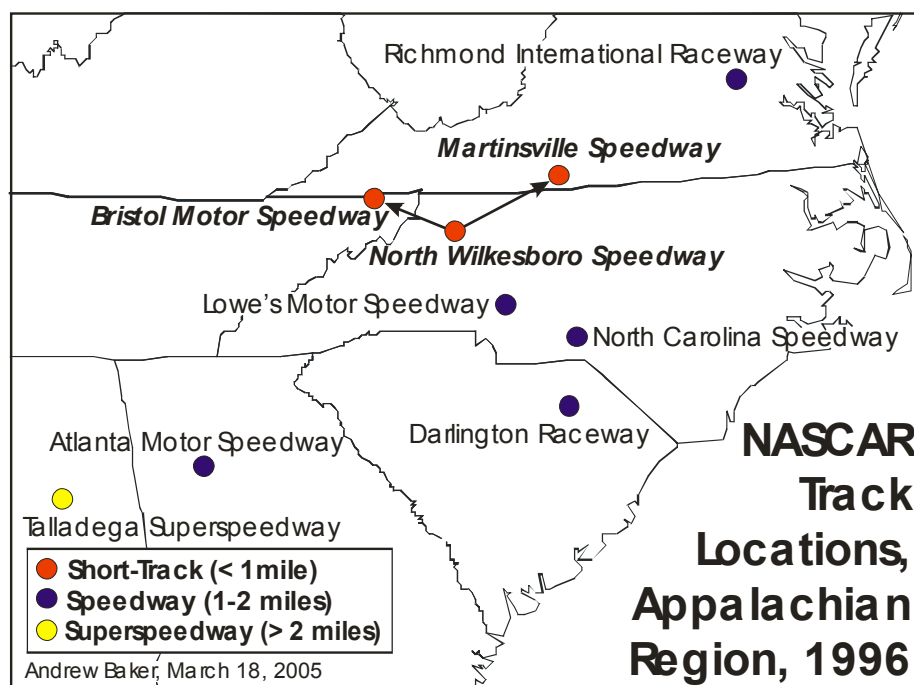


Figure 3.3: North Wilkesboro Speedway was already located close to two short-track venues in a sparsely populated area. Beginning in the 1990s, NASCAR moved away from short tracks and the Appalachian region.

3.3 The Final Season: 1996

The First Union 400, held on April 14, 1996 and the Tyson Holly Farms 400, held on September 29, 1996, both attracted over 60,000 race fans, each more than any race prior. Up until the April race, most residents and race fans figured this would be the last

race held at the speedway, since the September race would be far enough in advance for Bob Bahre to organize a race at his New Hampshire International Speedway (Williams, 1996b). However, the September race went on as planned in front of a record crowd that watched Jeff Gordon take the final checkered flag.



Figure 3.4: The logo from the September 29, 1996 Tyson Holly Farms 400, the last race at NWS.

One local race fan was noticeably absent; Junior Johnson refused to attend the last race weekend, as he stated: “I’m not going. It would be more of a sad deal for me – to go out and just stand around and look at something disappear, something I can remember almost since I’ve been around” (Zeller, 1996b). Those fans that were in attendance watched a race under clear skies, where one could easily see the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. After the race, most of the fans remained in their seats long after the checkered flag was thrown, clinging to the memories of the speedway (Zeller, 1996b). Bruton Smith, viewed by most as the reason for NASCAR’s departure from the track, needed extra security for his own protection from hostile race fans during the final race.

Some fans brought bolt cutters attempting to cut out sections of the bleachers and fence to keep as memorabilia (Ju. Hubbard, 1996b).

Table 3.1: Top ten most-attended races at North Wilkesboro Speedway.
During the mid-1990s, the speedway enjoyed record-breaking crowds each race

	Date	Race	Attendance
1	September 29, 1996	Tyson Holly Farms 400	60,000
2	April 14, 1996	First Union 400	60,000
3	October 1, 1995	Tyson Holly Farms 400	60,000
4	April 9, 1995	First Union 400	56,000
5	October 2, 1994	Tyson Holly Farms 400	54,000
6	April 17, 1994	First Union 400	50,500
7	October 3, 1993	Tyson Holly Farms 400	45,500
8	April 18, 1993	First Union 400	45,000
9	April 12, 1992	First Union 400	44,000
10	September 29, 1991	Tyson Holly Farms 400	43,500

Bruton Smith, viewed by most as the reason for NASCAR's departure from the track, needed extra security for his own protection from hostile race fans during the final race. Some fans brought bolt cutters attempting to cut out sections of the bleachers and fence to keep as memorabilia (Ju. Hubbard, 1996b).

3.4 The Return of Racing?

Since the last race in September 1996, the track has sat idle and empty due to differences between Bob Bahre and Bruton Smith, the track's equally represented co-owners. Bahre and Smith bought the track with no intentions of ever running a race there as Bahre states, "I don't want it. I have no interest in running it. I just bought it for the Winston Cup date" (Zeller, 1996a). In fact, Bahre was willing to sell his half-share back to the Staley family or other investors at a fraction of the cost he paid for it. Bahre wants racing, whether it be the "minor-leagues" of NASCAR (Busch Grand National,

Craftsman Truck Series, Hooters Pro Cup) or open-wheel racing. Bahre feels he is limited in making decisions regarding the track's future without Smith's approval.

Bruton Smith, upset that he did not become 100 percent owner, has shown little interest in bringing back racing to the speedway he co-owns. Smith approached the Staley family both prior and after the death of Enoch Staley in 1995, however the family declined to sell to him because the offer was unsatisfactory and Enoch Staley distrusted Smith, instructing his family to never sell any part of their interest in the Speedway to him (Wise, 2004). Smith said in a 2003 *The Record* article that "[T]he people there had the chance to sell 100 percent to me. If that had occurred, it [the track] would have been operating today" (Lankford, 2003b). Smith adds, "I'm not going to put my dollars and people at risk as only a 50 percent owner."

When Smith made the initial 50 percent purchase in 1995 he told a local newspaper, "I'm looking to do anything that we can to help the speedway," hoping to improve the track's facilities for future races. He added, "I can't imagine that there will be a time with no races there. There's a lot of history there... the people should absolutely have no fear at all of that [track closing] happening" ("Sore Winner?", 1996). These comments were drastically contradicted after the Staley's sold their 50 percent remaining share to Bob Bahre when Smith stated, "The plan right now after the race in September is to shut down. Everybody goes home. That's it." ("Sore Winner?", 1996). Smith and Bahre no longer remain on speaking terms to this day. Bahre was once quoted as saying, "I think someday, someone will have a race there... but it's probably going to be after Bruton and I are in heaven or hell" (Marshall, 2001, c4).

In early 2003, it was reported that local legend Junior Johnson and a group of investors were considering a purchase of the speedway (Lankford, 2003a). Johnson feels that the track would be best suited for races at all levels of the “minor-leagues” of NASCAR or possibly used as a testing track for the top division of NASCAR, the Nextel Cup. In the article, Johnson adds, “I’ll do what I can to help get the thing back in operation. Whatever happens, it needs to be running. It don’t (*sic*) need to just be sitting there. It does no one any good that way.” However, by 2004, Johnson deemed any track purchase to be very unlikely and an expensive, risky venture (Lankford, 2004b). The dispute between the two owners, coupled with the numerous necessary repairs such as painting and water and sewer problems, were cited as economical obstacles to a track purchase.

Johnson sees several possible uses for the speedway, as he lists in an interview what he would do if he owned NWS: “I would run a test track at first. That’s what I would set it up for, because all the [Nextel] Cup teams now in the winter, and through the summer, build new cars and they want to take them somewhere and shake them down and run them. They only got a few tests, and when they use those tests up, it’s over with.” He adds, “So, you could run probably every day of the year at North Wilkesboro it wasn’t raining or snowing. I think it would be a great place for a driver’s school. It’d also be a great place for Modifieds, ASA. I think you could keep it busy. Car shows. All kinds of stuff” (*Stock Car Racing*, 2004).

3.5 Community Petition

In October of 2003, Robert Glen, a local realtor who moved to Wilkes County from Virginia in 2002, started a petition to get racing back at North Wilkesboro Speedway (Lankford, 2003c). Glen feels that the speedway's absence has hurt the local economy stating, "The biggest thing is that people are losing their jobs and they're losing their homes. You mention the speedway and you see a glimmer of hope in their eyes. That racetrack is a crown jewel of Wilkes County. It's history. I see this as a catalyst for bringing in new businesses and jobs to Wilkes" (Lankford, 2003c). The petition asked that county commissioners condemn the track and through power of eminent domain sell the speedway to an investor that will use the facility for auto races. It was reported that there were 3,313 signatures on the petition that stated:

We the undersigned strongly believe that the closing of the North Wilkesboro Speedway in September 1996 has caused severe economic hardship for the citizens of Wilkes County. Jobs have been lost, businesses closed and tourism has diminished. We strongly support action by the Wilkes County commissioners to condemn the North Wilkesboro Speedway and bring back racing back to Wilkes County. By signing below, we agree and support the county commissioners' effort to restore racing to Wilkes County by power of eminent domain.

The petition was presented to the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners during an October 21, 2003 meeting. However, the county officials decided condemnation was not the best option. Local officials recognize the only solution is discussions with Bahre and Smith.

3.6 The Speedway Today

During the fall of 2004, engines were finally heard echoing from the local speedway. Unfortunately, for the town's race fans the roaring engines were only part of Roush Racing's "Race for the Ride" testing session in which twenty-six drivers compete



Figure 3.5: A truck takes a Fall 2004 lap around NWS during the "Race for the Ride" testing session (Photo by Mitchell, 2004).

for a chance to earn a ride in the 2005 Craftsman Truck Series. The Roush Racing team felt that North Wilkesboro would be a great place for testing young talent because it is a "driver's track," further adding that none of the drivers would have an advantage because none of them have ever raced there (Mitchell, 2004, 1).

With the exception of these few test dates, the track has remained silent. Billboards around the track are fading and peeling away, much like the paint on the track's walls and on the sign that greets visitors at the entrance. Grass can be seen growing up through cracks in the racing surface. Bushes can be seen growing through

the Junior Johnson Grandstand bleachers. A windstorm in 1997 tore the roof off of the concession stands and restrooms outside the fourth turn. At the north end of the grounds along Speedway Road lays a go-kart track that was once a favorite of young race fans. The tiny go-kart track has suffered the same demise since racing stopped at the speedway, with rusty gates, grass growing through cracks in the track, and paint peeling from walls.



Figure 3.6: Grass is starting to grow through the fences and over the track's walls.

Nevertheless, stock car race fans visit the track to take pictures and view the legendary track. I visited the speedway to get a glimpse of the track surface and was greeted by the lone employee remaining, caretaker Paul Call, who lives within feet of the turn four bleachers. Call mentioned that visitors often come to look at the track for five to ten minutes, often asking Call questions about the track's history. Unfortunately, Call

refuses to talk about the track's history, only stating, "[NASCAR Nextel] Cup will never be here again, not for a good while. Never make enough money to have a race."



Figure 3.7: Outside the fourth turn is an old concession stand and restroom damaged in a 1997 windstorm (Photo by author, 2005).

3.7 Economic Impact

One estimate suggests Wilkes County has suffered \$34 million each year in lost revenues (Smith, 2001). Many local businesses have closed down, while others continue to suffer from the economic loss. Eric Williams, owner of Williams Hotel in North Wilkesboro responded in a January 4, 1996 *Journal-Patriot* article by saying, "...it's a sad day for Wilkes County." Other business owners noted the severe economic impact of losing the two races. Don Jarvis, a local restaurant and hotel owner, speculated that it would cost his businesses "at least \$15,000 per year." Bob Ashley, president and owner of many convenience stores, noted "we get a lot of traffic here fifty-two weeks a year

from people driving over just to see the track.” Bill Harrold, manager of Lowe’s Food, which is the closest supermarket to the speedway, estimated a ten percent increase in profits. He noted that fans begin arriving on the Tuesday before the Sunday race, with the “big push” coming in on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Wilkes Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice President Sandie Gambill felt that losing the track would create a domino effect on many businesses. She adds that the number of inquiries to the chamber about Wilke’s services and attractions double during a race weekend. (Ju. Hubbard, 1996a)

During the following February of 1996, the Wilkes Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors sent a letter to the new speedway owners and NASCAR president Bill France, Jr. The letter noted that the speedway “has been a tradition in Wilkes County and Northwestern North Carolina” and that “it is an important part of the county’s history and economy.” The letter also stated “the removal of Winston Cup racing from this the birthplace of racing legends and the cradle of NASCAR represents a major loss for our community.” The board also suggested that North Wilkesboro would be a prime location for a NASCAR museum depicting “the original Thunder Road.” (Williams, 1996c)

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

“The sport of racing was born on the back roads of the county which we call home. Race fan or not, every Wilkes County resident must admit that the chase for the checkered flag has, in large part, established our community in the eyes of the rest of our United States. We have a place on the map because of the name auto racing built for us.”

- Don and Mary Lee Holliman, North Wilkesboro, NC (“The Mailbox,” 1996)

4.1 Newspaper Articles, Editorials, and Opinion Pieces

Many in the North Wilkesboro community echo the statement above from the Hollimans. They see the track as the birthplace of the sport, very integral in creating the enormity NASCAR is today, yet are helpless in controlling the loss of racing at the local track. There is a strong sense of pride in being a charter track of NASCAR and home of legendary drivers like Junior Johnson and Benny Parsons. During the final season of racing, residents like the Hollimans voiced their opinions with emotions ranging from disgust and anger to sadness and grief, many feeling as if something very valuable was stolen.

Immediately upon news of the sale of Enoch Staley’s 50% interest in the North Wilkesboro Speedway surfaced on January 1, 1996 local residents strongly voiced their opinions. While many residents focused on the economic ramifications of losing the speedway, others felt the loss of nationwide publicity would be great as well. In one editorial, a resident says, “...sadness is felt by all Wilkes County residents who shared pride in our county’s ties to the major leagues of sports” (“The Mailbox,” 1996). The pre-race promotion and build-up gave the North Wilkesboro area national recognition during the weeks prior to racing (Jo. Hubbard, 1996a). Lin Brooks, president of the

Wilkes Chamber of Commerce, said in reference to NASCAR's exit from the area, "This allowed North Wilkesboro to have a national identity. This allowed the name of North Wilkesboro to be circulated around the country" (Zeller, 1996b). Linda Cheek, executive director of the Wilkes Chamber of Commerce echoed Brooks stating, "A lot of people call up and ask us if we have a NASCAR museum. We don't even have that, yet. We've lost a part of our history. This is NASCAR country. This has taken something away from our heritage" (Lankford, 1999).

The removal of stock car racing from the speedway has caused many to be outraged with NASCAR and the track's owners. The sports editor of the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* lamented in an opinion piece, "(This) is one of the dumbest ideas I have ever heard. Rather than taking the dates from North Wilkesboro Speedway, the track should be made a shrine to short track racing, and the Winston Cup dates should be retained as a celebration of NASCAR history" (Jo. Hubbard, 1996b). Some even suggest that NASCAR will suffer considerably, as well, since most NASCAR teams are located in the area now must travel farther distances, incur higher costs, and spend more days away from their families. More optimistic residents mention the annual MerleFest and Brushy Mountain Apple Festival as ways to keep Wilkes County in the national spotlight. One resident suggested that Wilkes County commissioners should erect signs on each major road proclaiming, "This is race country" (Jo. Hubbard, 1996c).

The North Wilkesboro Speedway is built less than 100 yards from U. S. Highway 421 and very noticeable when driving in either direction. Residents are constantly reminded of the vacant speedway's memories. The grief of the speedway's loss has

caused Dean Combs, son of former track owner Jack Combs, to lose interest in NASCAR as he says, “I’d rather be out mowing the grass or digging taters or something than watch it. It’s changed that much” (Pallone, 2004).

U.S. Highway 421 is the major transportation route through North Wilkesboro linking nearby Interstate 77 and the city of Winston-Salem to the Appalachian Mountains. Many feel that the speedway gave travelers a good stopping place and a landmark to take pictures. As one resident states, “losing the speedway turns Wilkes County into just another place to get gas on the way to the mountains”(Personal Communication, 2005).

4.2 Questionnaire/Survey of Wilkes County Residents

A survey was sent via e-mail on March 28, 2005 to 150 residents of Wilkes County. The e-mail list was generated from the 2004-2005 Wilkes County Chamber of Commerce Membership Directory. Additional e-mail addresses were included if respondents listed an address of an adult Wilkes County resident that would be interested in participating in the survey. The survey was closed for analysis after ten days, resulting in fifty-six survey respondents.

Survey respondents ranged between the ages of eighteen and sixty-seven years old. Of the fifty-six respondents, twenty-nine were male (52%) and twenty-seven were female (48%). The total average age of the respondents was 39.65 years. When segmenting the respondents into six categories based on age, the 40-49 age bracket had the most respondents with seventeen, followed by 20-29 age bracket with twelve, and 30-

39 age bracket had eleven. Only two respondents were under the age of twenty, both of whom were eighteen years old.

The first question asked to those surveyed was designed to determine if the respondent was a fan of NASCAR. Respondents had to choose only one of four answers, which read as follows:

1. I am a huge fan of NASCAR.
2. I watch some races.
3. No. Not since racing stopped at North Wilkesboro Speedway
4. No. I do not like NASCAR.

The third answer choice was added to see if the reason a resident was not a fan of NASCAR was due to its departure from the speedway and town.

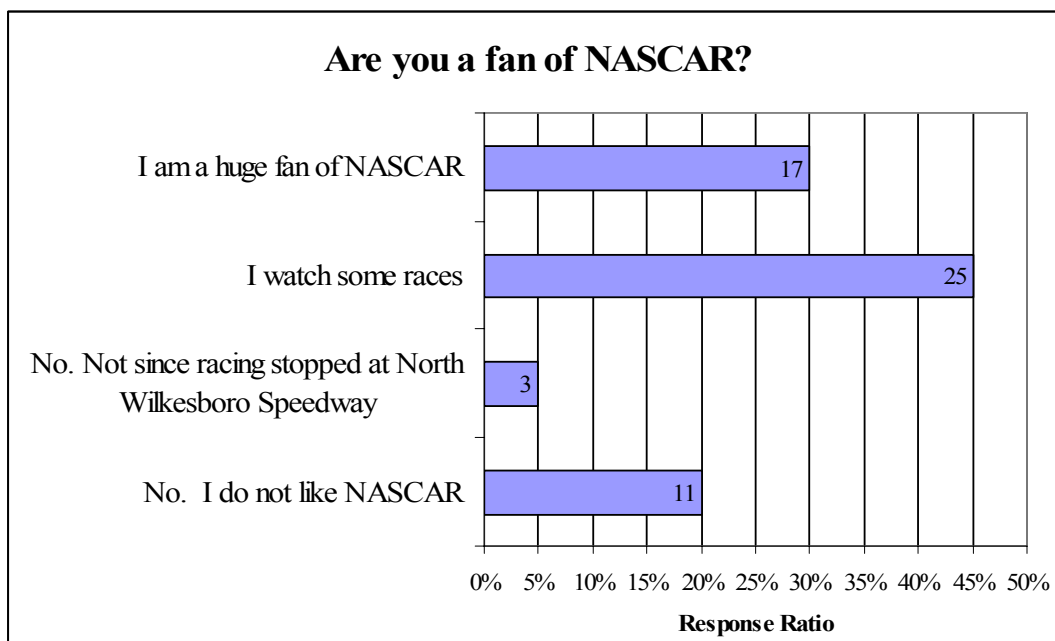


Figure 4.1: Seventy-five percent of those surveyed are fans of NASCAR.

Three-fourths of the respondents chose either answer one or two suggesting that most of the respondents are currently fans of NASCAR. Forty percent of the respondents said they watch races on television, while thirty percent identify themselves as huge fans of the sport. Only five percent of the respondents said they were formerly fans of NASCAR prior to the end of racing at NWS.

Based on the history and heritage of stock car racing in Wilkes County, it was assumed that most residents would be identified as NASCAR fans. In order to ascertain the degree of NASCAR fandom of only those identified as fans, respondents were asked to describe themselves as a fan of the sport in the second question. The respondents could choose one or more of the following responses:

1. I attend multiple races each year.
2. I attend one race each year.
3. I watch races on television.
4. I listen to races on the radio.

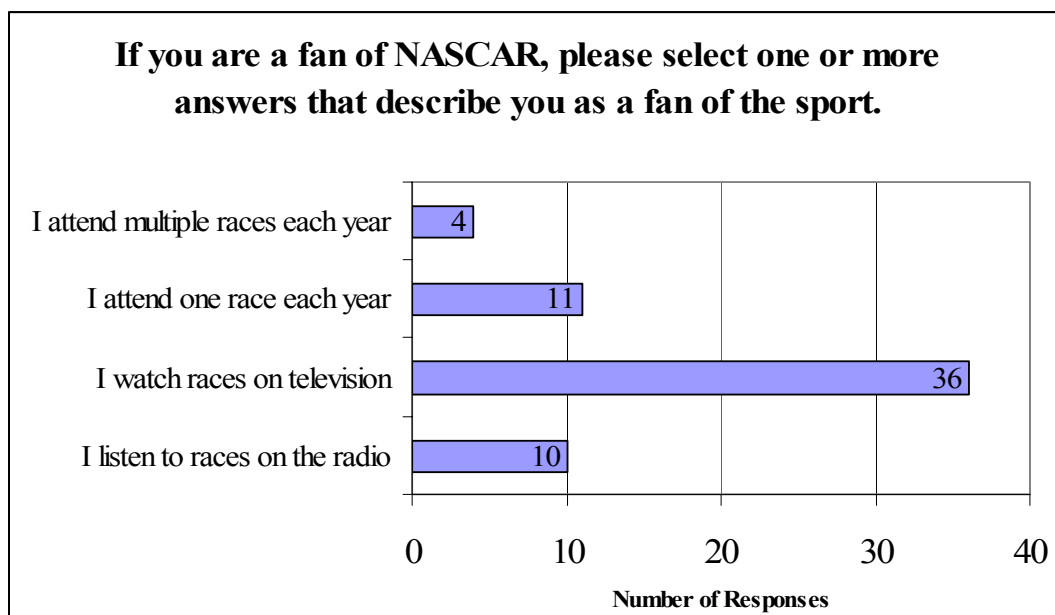


Figure 4.2: Most fans of NASCAR in North Wilkesboro prefer to watch races on television.

Of the responses given, the most (36) were for the third answer choice, which relates to watching races on television. Fifteen of the fans try to attend at least one NASCAR racing event annually, while ten responses were given to answer four.

The next question, “Have you ever attended a race at North Wilkesboro Speedway?” was asked to all respondents. Two-thirds of those surveyed attended an automobile race at the local speedway, including one fan that only attended the last race and another who estimated over 100 races witnessed at the track. The average amount of races witnessed by the respondents was 14.5 races.

In the fourth question, the survey respondents were asked if they consider the town of North Wilkesboro a NASCAR town. Over eighty-five percent of the respondents viewed North Wilkesboro as a NASCAR town, whereas only eight of the fifty-six respondents felt the contrary. All respondents were then asked to explain their answer in greater detail. Many of the respondents that consider North Wilkesboro a NASCAR town feel the heritage of stock car racing and the town’s role in the early years of NASCAR is the basis for their view, as one response stated, “North Wilkesboro still considers itself one of the birthplaces of NASCAR. It feels rejected by the sport it helped birth, but still hold out hope that something might change” (Appendix A, Response 6). Others feel that because the most famous early stock-car driver, Junior Johnson, and former NASCAR driver and current television announcer, Benny Parsons, grew up in Wilkes County, the town is closely tied to NASCAR.

Those who no longer consider North Wilkesboro a NASCAR town also cited the track’s early role in the development of NASCAR, as one response stated, “It was a great

NASCAR town... It's where it all originated... but people have lost their interest since the track closed. It's sad, but it brought a lot of business to the North Wilkesboro area”(Appendix A, Response 24). Others felt the absence of races and race fans as the

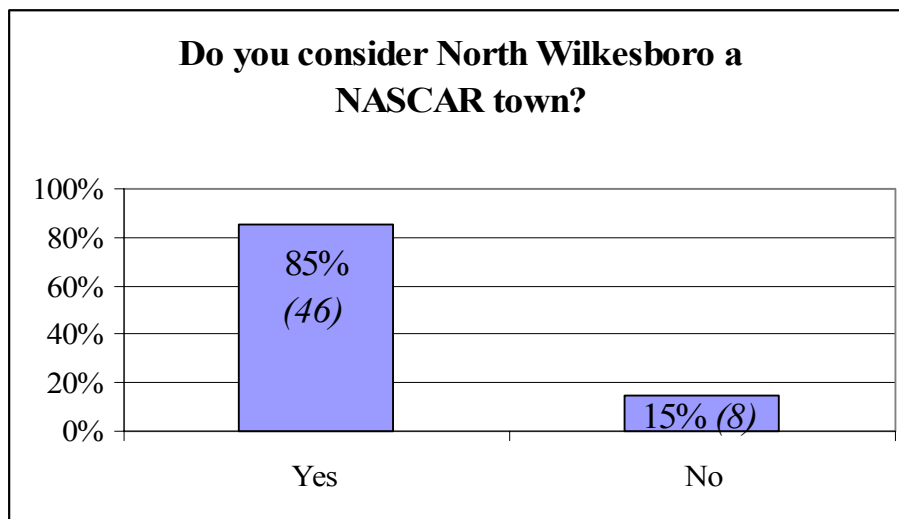


Figure 4.3: Those surveyed consider North Wilkesboro a NASCAR town.

reason they no longer consider North Wilkesboro a NASCAR town, as one resident stated, “It’s a shame but years ago when the track was open the racing experience was great and the town turned into a racing town. Now they are racing at superspeedways and the sport has lost the small-town appeal. Here you would run into the drivers and crews all weekend, now they have become untouchable stars” (Appendix A, Response 11). The statement is echoed in another response, “When the track was in operation, every race you would have people all over come here to watch. Everywhere you go there is a sign or something about racing” (Appendix A, Response 45).

The next question asked those surveyed if the image of North Wilkesboro has changed since racing stopped. Over eighty-five percent of the respondents either agreed or slightly agreed that the image of the town and area has changed. Only eight respondents felt that the town's image has remained unchanged. Two of the fifty-six Wilkes County residents surveyed feel the image of North Wilkesboro had not changed since the end of racing at the North Wilkesboro Speedway.

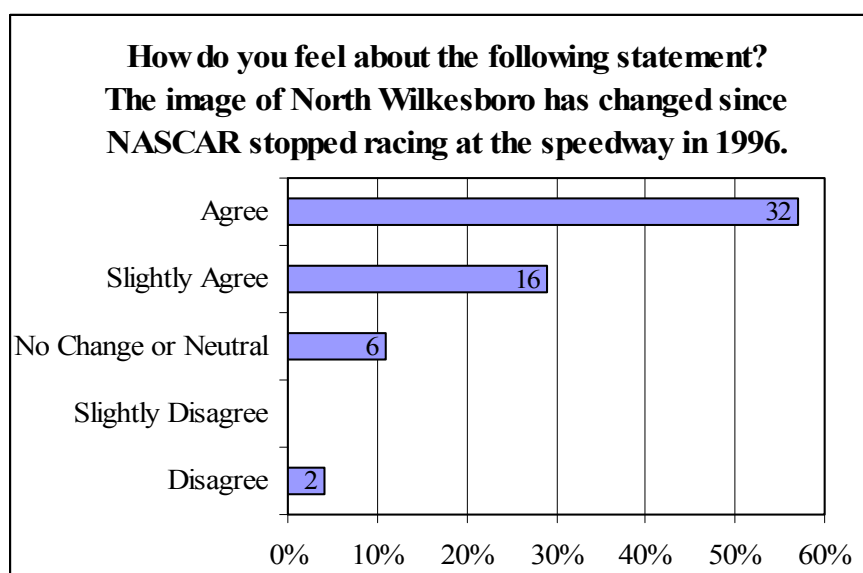


Figure 4.4: Overwhelmingly, those surveyed feel the image of North Wilkesboro has changed since 1996.

The very last question was an open-ended question in which respondents were asked to briefly describe North Wilkesboro and conceptualize the town's image. Opinions were quite varied as one description states, "It is a progressive, rural community in the foothills of North Carolina," (Appendix B, Response 1) while another reads, "Small-town that has become smaller as time goes by. Many businesses have left or folded and tourism is mostly a thing of the past" (Appendix B, Response 40).

However, the majority of responses view North Wilkesboro in a very positive light, focusing on the quiet, small-town atmosphere and charm of the area. One respondent described North Wilkesboro as “rural, beautiful setting, great climate, low cost of living, affordable land and lots of it” (Appendix B, Response 44).

Those who portray North Wilkesboro and Wilkes County negatively feel the town lacks jobs, a night life, and much of what it had when stock-car racing thrived in the area. A response shared by others states, “This area as well as a few others helped NASCAR to develop to the national sport that it has become, and NASCAR, in search of the dollar, has abandoned its roots. North Wilkesboro had an image of a town that was the home of NASCAR races, race drivers, and Lowe’s Companies, etc. Now it has really no particular image with the exception of an area in decline” (Appendix B, Response 45). Another negative portrayal reads, “This town has an image as a “pass through” town on your way to other places that have more interesting things to do... The town has nothing to brag on, nothing to draw people, nothing to do” (Appendix B, Response 24).

4.3 Participant Observation: Using the Internet

While conducting the research for this thesis, a website titled, www.gowilkes.com was found. The website contains a community message board for the residents of Wilkes County and North Wilkesboro, as well as a classified ads, personals, and a business guide section. It is assumed that all posters are residents of the Wilkes County area, however, because biographical information is unavailable, all those that post cannot be completely assumed to be from the area.

The first post found that was pertinent to this thesis research was entitled, “NASCAR” in which a resident asks, “Does anyone think we will ever see NASCAR racing or something similar in Wilkes again?” (Personal Communication, 2005). In the twelve posts that followed, nearly all of them feel racing would never come back because NASCAR was too big for North Wilkesboro and that the disagreement between the track’s co-owners would never allow for racing. One post stated, “...[T]hat’s the reason this county’s losing all it’s (sic) jobs, this county was doing good as long as we had NASCAR, once we lost that we lost Ithaca, Golden Needles, Tom Thumb, and about all Lowe’s. Now that out (sic) to tell you something!” (Personal Communication, 2005).

In an attempt to learn more about the residents of Wilkes County and their self-image, a post called “Describe Wilkes” was started stating, “I’m curious to hear what you guys think... how would ya’ll describe Wilkes County to a foreigner?” There were eighty-four responses to the original post, most of which contained discussions between those that post. While many of the posts were complaints about the local, “good ol- boy” government officials, many posts were very interesting and useful for this thesis research. Many discuss the appeal of life in a small town as one post states, “I have so much wildlife in my yard it’s always fascinating... I’ve never worried about my car being left unlocked or felt safer than I do here” (Personal Communication, 2005). In the second response to the original post, it stated, “I would describe it (Wilkes County) as NASCAR capital of the world” (Personal Communication, 2005), a thought echoed by others. Another post mentioned NASCAR stating, “Wilkes natives still take strong pride in the

roots that the good ol' country folks planted, such as Lowe's and NASCAR" (Personal Communication, 2005).

Further, the website, www.savethespeedway.net is devoted to bringing back racing to North Wilkesboro Speedway and another internet research tool useful for this thesis. The website contains pictures, links to articles, and a petition to track owners Bruton Smith and Bob Bahre. Also, the website contains a message forum, where race fans from all over the world leave their opinions about the North Wilkesboro Speedway. The consensus gathered from the messages is that the historical significance of the track is a major reason to keep the track open. Further, many suggest that if the speedway installed lights, fans would flock to watch races, especially races in the minor-leagues of NASCAR (Busch Grand National and Craftsman Truck Series).

4.4 Visiting North Wilkesboro and Attending a NASCAR Race Weekend, April 2005

Driving along Speedway Road, which connects the North Wilkesboro Speedway to the town of North Wilkesboro to the west, one will notice many service stations that are no longer in use. Many of these seem to be modern looking, suggesting their demise could be due to the end of racing at the local speedway. In fact, there were no operating service stations spotted along Speedway Road.

Closer to the speedway lies a go-kart track that has also closed down since 1996. The go-kart track, located less than 200 yards from the North Wilkesboro Speedway, was a huge success during the family-oriented, race-weekend festivities. Very similar to its bigger counterpart less than 200 yards to the south, the go-kart track has cracks in the surface, tall grass growing over the walls, and fencing that has been rusted.



Figure 4.5: A modern service station along Speedway Road that is no longer operating.



Figure 4.6: Another abandoned service station along Speedway Road.



Figure 4.7: This closed-down service station is located at the intersection of U.S. Highway 421 and Speedway Road.



Figure 4.8: A service station that has been turned into a house complete with a mailbox next to an old gas pump.



Figure 4.9: The go-kart track's demise mirrors its larger, nearby counterpart, the North Wilkesboro Speedway (Photo by author, 2005).

I attended the Advance Auto Parts 500, a Nextel Cup NASCAR event held at the Martinsville Speedway, in Martinsville, Virginia, from April 8-10, 2005. The reasons I attended the race were two-fold: First, I wanted to attend a NASCAR race, to see first-hand the sport upon which my research is based. Second, I feel Martinsville, Virginia (population 15,000) is very similar to North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, allowing myself to understand what a race weekend would have been like at the North Wilkesboro Speedway.

The two rural, Appalachian foothill towns are both suffering economically from a lack of jobs due primarily to the textile industries outsourcing somewhere else. During the final year of racing at North Wilkesboro in 1996, the only two tracks to remain on NASCAR's schedule since the inaugural season of 1949 were Martinsville Speedway and North Wilkesboro Speedway. Therefore, both towns are rich in short track, stock-car racing heritage, relying heavily on the tourism from races.

I arrived in Martinsville, Virginia during the mid-morning of Friday, April 8. Immediately, I became aware of the role racing plays in the town as the town's welcome sign included a checkered-flag in the background. Signs everywhere advertised places to park and camping areas, with people selling tickets on the side of the road. Gas station and super-market marquees read "Welcome Race Fans."

Eventually, a campsite was found on a hill over-looking the speedway and a railroad track that ran in between. The campsite was located on a lot with a large, two-story house with a covered front porch. All around the campsite were other privately-owned homes that allow campers to park on their property. By noon, engines were heard

echoing throughout the area, as NASCAR practice and qualifying began. Already, tens of thousands of people were watching practice at the track, settling in for the weekend. Many others were arriving, as the nearby campsites filled up quickly. After qualifying and practice concluded, race fans headed back to their campsites for a night of festivities, complete with fireworks, impromptu bluegrass jam sessions, and hog roasts. As the partying carried on, so did the traffic coming into the town and speedway area.



Figure 4.10: A large campground full of race fans in Martinsville, VA. (Photo by author, 2005)

On Saturday, Nextel Cup held their last practice in the morning. Following this last practice was the Kroger 250, a NASCAR Craftsman's Tools Truck race. Crowd attendance was estimated at nearly 50,000 race fans. After the race was completed, a bluegrass concert began on the covered front-porch of the house at the campsite. At the organized concert, I met many of my fellow campers, many of whom were dancing in the

front lawn to the music. Campers traveled from all over including: Maryland, North Carolina, Indiana, Pennsylvania, New York, and West Virginia. Nearly every single camper comes to both the April and October Martinsville Speedway events, camping in the same exact spot every year. By Sunday, nearly 100,000 race fans flocked to Martinsville, Virginia to watch a NASCAR Nextel Cup event.

4.5 Replacing NASCAR?

With rapidly growing attendances each year, MerleFest, an Americana music festival, and the Brushy Mountain Apple Festival have replaced much of the lost income from racing. Music is the largest source of entertainment during these two, weekend-long events. In many ways, banjos have replaced the roar of the engines as bluegrass and Americana music, distinctively Appalachian, have replaced stock car racing, the roots of which lie in Appalachia. The first MerleFest took place in 1988, paying tribute to the memory of Eddy Merle Watson, a noted finger-picking guitarist who died in a tractor accident, in front of 4,000 fans (“The Mission of Merlefest: Our History,” 2005). Many famous artists, including Vince Gill, Hootie and the Blowfish, and Emmylou Harris have played the festival. At the 2004 event, Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones made a surprise appearance after coming across the festival website when surfing the internet. MerleFest director Jim Barrow said, “He started looking at the artists and knew some of them. He said it just looked like a place he’d like to come” (Lankford, 2004a).

The 2004 MerleFest economic impact exceeded \$13.7 million from 81,592 fans (Lankford, 2004a). Further, non-profit organizations earned \$348,541 in profits from participating in the festival. The 2005 festival drew a record 82,666 fans of bluegrass and

folk music (MerleFest Press Release, 2005). Many fans are campers who travel from nearly every state, even some from Europe, often meeting up together this one weekend each year (Lankford, 2004a). Similar to the MerleFest, the 2004 Brushy Mountain Apple Festival enjoyed record crowds, surpassing 100,000. Crafts, food, and bluegrass and gospel music are the featured attractions for this weekend-long event. The 2003 event raised \$54,000 to various Wilkes County groups and individuals raised via vendor rentals and concessions sold (Lankford, 2004d).

Wilkes County was proclaimed as the “home place of Americana music” by 2005 MerleFest organizers in order to take the festival to greater popularity (Lankford, 2005). The organizers hope to bring visitors to Wilkes County throughout the year, building off of MerleFest and Americana music. MerleFest organizer Art Menius stated, “We also bring attention to Wilkes County. We bring people from all over the world to MerleFest. We try to bring together all the great kinds of roots music” (Lankford, 2005).

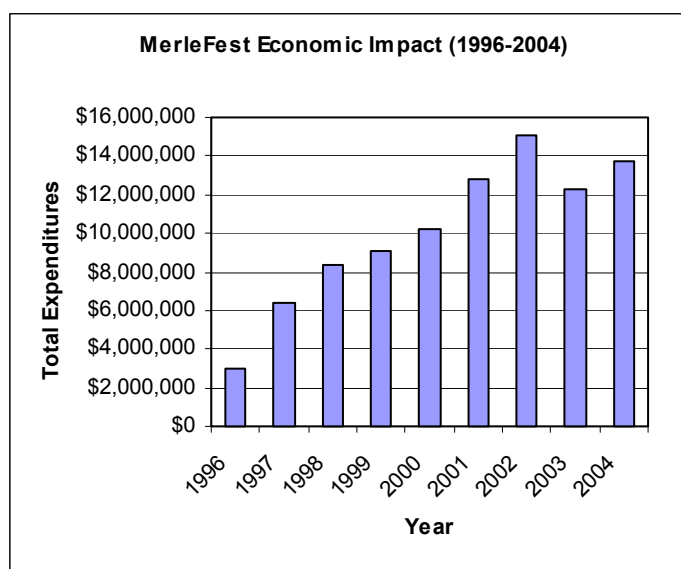


Figure 4.11: Nearly every year, the MerleFest economic impact is greater than the year prior.

On April 12, 2001, a 10-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 421 was declared the “Junior Johnson Highway” (Higgins, 2004). The North Carolina Board of Transportation named the highway due to “(Johnson’s) contributions to the sport of automobile racing and to his community and state” (Higgins, 2004). During the fall of 2004, a play was written by Wilkes Playmakers Executive Director Karen Reynolds focusing on the early years of Junior Johnson’s life. The play details life growing up in rural Wilkes County, specifically looking at the role of moonshine hauling in order to “show that part of our history and our economy” (Lankford, 2004c). The play covers Johnson’s life up until he became a legendary NASCAR driver.

The old Wilkes County Courthouse, built in 1902, has been restored as the Wilkes County Heritage Museum and Visitors Center. The new museum contains artifacts from the early stock car races held at the speedway. The stock car exhibit depicts the origins of NASCAR, even mentioning the roots of moonshine (“History Has Its Place,” 2004).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“It’s just progress. I look at the record books and see some places they used to race in the old days, and I can’t believe they used to race at those tracks. Years from now another generation of drivers will say, ‘I can’t believe they used to race at North Wilkesboro.’”

- Terry Labonte after winning the last spring race in April 1996 (Hinton, 1996)

From the time it was built in 1947, North Wilkesboro Speedway has been the spiritual and economic backbone of Wilkes County, giving it an international identity. The races gave Wilkes County a strong sense of local identity and status in the long-time, stock-car racing South. The new fans that NASCAR is attracting in new markets possess little knowledge of the great races ran at North Wilkesboro Speedway, Junior Johnson, or Enoch Staley’s “fans first” business strategy. The town’s name is no longer circulated across newspapers, magazines, and television screens during the two race weekends. To these new fans, North Wilkesboro Speedway is no different than other closed down racing venues where NASCAR used to race.

The local population still feels that North Wilkesboro is a “NASCAR” town since the speedway and its local racing heroes were integral in creating the largest spectator sport in the world. However, overwhelmingly, the local population agrees that the town’s image has changed since racing ended at the speedway. Many see NASCAR leaving the town as the beginning of a downward economic trend and increased unemployment.

One way to conceptualize North Wilkesboro since racing ceased is to think of what the town would have been like if racing still existed. The town would have reaped the benefits of hosting the biggest spectator sport in the world. The speedway would

have built larger, state-of-the art facilities and installed lights for prime-time, night races. With the increased media attention that has paralleled NASCAR's growth, North Wilkesboro and its ties to the origins of the sport would have been often talked about, and probably glorified in movies and magazine articles. The new fans of the sport would want to visit the "birthplace" of the sport.

As NASCAR continues to grow, rumors have circulated that the sport will soon be leaving more tracks in the Southeast. Darlington Raceway will soon lose its last race, while Martinsville Speedway will only host a race in the fall. Future studies might look at the Southeast once the sport further leaves its origins.

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Appendix A

Survey Responses Part One

Do you consider North Wilkesboro a NASCAR town? Why or Why Not?

1. The track here was one of the first on the circuit and the fan base is very large here.
2. It used to be... the loss of the speedway killed that.
3. One of the first tracks in the country – sure it is!
4. One of the first
5. Most everyone here is pro-NASCAR
6. N. Wilkesboro still considers itself one of the birth places of NASCAR. It feels rejected by the sport it helped birth, but still hold out hope that something might change. The socio-economics of the community still fit into those typical of NASCAR fans and you can still hear a lot of NASCAR talk in the coffee shops.
7. Because of History & Heritage of NASCAR
8. It was one of the earliest race tracks and the home of Flossie & Junior Johnson.
9. Lots of NASCAR fans here.
10. Junior Johnson is a local celebrity, and N. Wilkesboro is viewed by the locals as the true birthplace of NASCAR racing as we know it today. The loss of the Speedway races here had far more than an economic impact. It was the end of an era. That Bruton Smith has kept the track hostage to development for other purposes (truck races, for example) is viewed by many as downright dirty, hostile men. He is persona non grata in our community.

11. It's a shame but years ago when the track was open the racing experience was great and the town turned into a racing town. Now they are racing at super speedways and the sport has lost the small town appeal. Here you would run into the drivers and crews all weekend, now they have become untouchable superstars.
12. It's in the blood/core of the folks born and raised here.
13. The NASCAR race brought a lot of revenue to the town and the area. All of the beds in the area were filled, the restaurants were full, and commerce in general was good.
14. On a race weekend, you would find sing-alongs in the restaurants and tailgate parties in the motel parking lots. More than likely, you'd meet some of the drivers there as well as other race fans
15. Many people here are NASCAR fans. This is NASCAR country.
16. With such a background in stock car racing and as some think the birth place of racing, with its tie in moonshining, it seems only natural to consider it such a town.
17. Since Junior Johnson is from here I know that North Wilkesboro is a NASCAR town. Benny Parsons is also from the area!!
18. Has a potential for a positive draw form the community and everyone would support it both economically and in attitude.
19. North Wilkesboro, Junior Johnson, and the North Wilkesboro Speedway are the roots of NASCAR. Shamefully, it was all taken away from us when they closed the NWSW Track.

20. Wilkes County is considered by many as the birthplace of NASCAR because of the moonshiners and their fast cars.
21. Towns like North Wilkesboro is where it all started. Most drivers started from small towns.
22. A lot of NASCAR roots began and flourished here.
23. This is where it all got started and we love it.
24. It was a great NASCAR town... It's where it all originated... but people have lost their interest since the track has closed. It's sad... but it brought a lot of business to the North Wilkesboro area.
25. NASCAR was a big sport and it brought a lot of business to the North Wilkesboro area.
26. Our county is rich in racing history producing a lot of legends. Many believe that NASCAR was born from our legendary moonshiners.
27. NASCAR was born in this town. Everyone loves it.
28. I believe North Wilkesboro is a founding city of NASCAR, and a great deal of interest in the city and income was invested when NASCAR was here.
29. Yes, everyone loves NASCAR and very big on it.
30. Any town can be a NASCAR town, and personally I think we have some very big race fans in Wilkes County.
31. Wilkesboro is full of lots of NASCAR fans.
32. I was told this is where it all started. I think that this town is full of NASCAR fans!

33. That privilege was snatched from us.
34. If you check the history of NASCAR you would see it and Lowe's Hardware was started here.
35. It is a very nice place.
36. Because it is a good town.
37. Everyone in Wilkes loves NASCAR, and would love to have them back.
38. Many fans here that can no longer afford to go to races as they once could.
39. NASCAR began here. Even though I am not a fan, I would like to see the Speedway used for its intended purpose.
40. I did before Enoch died.
41. There was a huge following of NASCAR to the North Wilkesboro race. Once of the first tracks of NASCAR.
42. Many local residents closely follow or work for NASCAR teams.
43. NW is the birthplace of NASCAR in my opinion. Even without a race now, everyone still has an interest and would like to see racing come back.
44. Everyone enjoys racing in Wilkes, so many people were upset when they found out it was leaving the county.
45. When the track was in operation, every race you would have people from all over come here to watch. Everywhere you go there is a sign or something about racing.

Appendix B

Survey Responses Part Two

As brief as possible, describe North Wilkesboro. What is the town's image?

1. It is a progressive rural community in the foothills of North Carolina. This area has taken many hits in it's economy in the last ten years. The first was the losing of the two races here.
2. The entire town has gone downhill since the race left.
3. Small old-time country town.
4. Negative – non proactive in keeping competitive and up to date in promoting the area. Way too much political infighting and lack of real leadership in the community.
5. Home of Lowe's Hardware/Holly Farms chicken and brand jewelry.
6. Historic are with mostly local business. The area is growing and becoming a more popular area for residential growth.
7. N. Wilkesboro is a proud community that has received many economic hit – NASCAR leaving being just one wound. In the past it has been known for its entrepreneurial spirit. Whether or not it can regain that spirit and recognize that it's asset is that spirit (not what the spirit created – NASCAR, Holly Farms, Lowe's) remains to be seen. The community is still in grief.
8. Negatively portrayed by local papers because of ongoing political activities, and small town atmosphere.
9. Quiet, residential town.

10. Rural county with two small towns, very diverse population from county to towns.
11. Conservative Christian; entrepreneurial; visionary; sublime blend of Southern, rural culture, with progressive, global thinking.
12. North Wilkesboro is a great town. We need NASCAR back in our area.
13. Now NASCAR has no presence here and has forgotten the small town that had so much to do with its roots.
14. Town in evolution. Not sure where we're going from here. With Lowe's "moving out" and NASCAR out, the perception is not good outside the county.
15. It is a great town. Tourism is one of the major things here. Closing the track was a big blow to this town.
16. Very Conservative and non-changing. Very greedy. They charge to have the Brushy Mountain Apple Festival in their town, where as do not charge any other organization. You would think they would be happy about such an event. The Town of Wilkesboro would certainly most like having this festival in their town without charging. They want to do things their way versus what is best for the town.
17. Since I am fairly new to the area, it is hard to conceptualize it's image. I only come to North Wilkesboro 2 or 3 times a week (I have a small business here that I'm trying to get going). I feel the focus and image now is on small town America with an historic main street flair, sort of the Mayberry RFD icon. It seems to have the great place to live feel.

18. With the adjoining town of Wilkesboro just across the Yadkin River, N.

Wilkesboro is a nice small rural town in the foothills of North Carolina with the real southern flavor.

19. Rural, pleasant, great people, great potential.

20. Small but warm and welcoming to all who visit or pass through.

21. N. Wilkesboro benefited from NASCAR. It brought in several dollars to the area.

Track and towns like North Wilkesboro also brought several dollars to NASCAR.

22. Home of Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse (which now sponsors a

NASCAR track). Centrally located between mountains (Blue Ridge moonshine runnin') and Winston-Salem (tobacco country). Both are a part of Wilkes heritage.

23. We love NASCAR racing.

24. This town has an image as a "pass through" town on your way to other places that have more interesting things to do. Ex. Boone, NC and Winston-Salem, NC. The town has nothing to brag on, nothing to draw people, nothing to do!

25. Friendly, it's a nice place.

26. Going backwards! Lost many of our money producers such as the speedway.

The mall, factories, and several corporate offices followed.

27. We are a poor community with no money coming in. There is no money being brought in. Many people are going through poverty.

28. A great town, well kept and maintained. We have a lot to offer while keeping a small-town image.

29. A bit county made of good people.
30. No jobs, no good places to go for fun, nowhere to shop besides Wal-Mart, this town needs some change.
31. A small-town atmosphere that is on its way to becoming a tourist town in certain ways it reminds me of Mayberry on the Andy Griffith Show.
32. North Wilkesboro is a nice town filled with lots of great people with southern hospitality.
33. Boring, there is never nothing to do.
34. From ancient to modern we've changed with the times.
35. It is not good since the track closed.
36. The town is still the same, but the major roads have been four-laned to help race traffic.
37. A very nice, quiet place.
38. North Wilkesboro is a beautiful, quiet place.
39. Drugs
40. Small-town that has become smaller as time goes by. Many businesses have left or folded and tourism is mostly a thing of the past.
41. North Wilkesboro's image is not rally separate from that of the county. Other than Merlefest & the Apple Festival, there is not much going on here.
42. Economically depressed.
43. Very family-oriented.

44. Rural, beautiful setting, great climate, low cost of living. Affordable land and lots of it.
45. This area as well as a few others helped NASCAR to develop to the national sport that it has become, and NASCAR, in search of the dollar, has abandoned its roots. N. Wilkesboro had an image of a town that was the home of NASCAR races, race drivers, and Lowe's Companies, etc. Now it has really no particular image with the exception of an area in decline although there is several positives of the area and the environment.
46. I don't separate NW from the county as a whole. I believe our county is made up of honest, hard-working people who produced such companies as Lowe's Homecenter, Lowe's Foods, Holly Farms Chicken, Northwestern Bank, East Coast Millwork, Gardner Mirror and many more. I believe we are a community that has deep religious beliefs and strong traditional values.
47. Nice little town that likes to have a good time. Very friendly and invites newcomers in.
48. We are a town which prides itself in the Brushy Mountain Apple Festival that we have and for our landmarks.