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Shifting gears

*Ex-racer, senator's son
films, markets history
of stock car racing*

BY BOB ROZYCKI

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Filmmaking, like auto racing, is not for the fainthearted. And John W. Warner IV of Southport should know — he has done both.

While he won't admit to racing around the streets of his native Washington, D.C. — he says he has a clean record — he was "notorious" while at the University of Virginia in his Shelby Cobra. His dad, U.S. Sen. John W. Warner, suggested that he get some race-car training. So, he did, starting with the Skip Barber Racing School at Lime Rock Park in northwestern Connecticut. He then moved onto International Motor Sports Association (IMSA) racing, Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) pro-racing and then Grand Am racing.

Several years back he was sitting at the starting line in the hot sun at Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth, boiling under three layers of protective gear and a helmet. He was thinking of producing a film about Wendell Scott, a driver who had to overcome many obstacles before becoming the first black man to win a NASCAR race.

A couple of days later, Warner tried to do research on Scott. "There was no book, no nothing," Warner said. A Hollywood movie called "Greased Lightning" was loosely based on Scott and starred Richard Pryor in the title role, Warner said. "The movie was a total farce. The real story is so much better."

He felt the documentary he had in mind



John W. Warner IV leans against a favorite car, his 1936 Packard convertible coupe.

Business Journal photo by BOB ROZYCKI

SHIFTING GEARS

Continued from page 1

would be a natural. Gaining the family's trust was the most difficult. "I befriended the family. It helped I was a Virginian" and a race-car driver, he said.

The film took about a year to complete and was aired on The History Channel in 2002 and last year on Turner South Network. Warner wanted to do more on racing's pioneers.

"Everyone (in the racing community) is tight." The Scott family made a few calls on Warner's behalf; he was in the fold.

Producer and stunt driver

A few years and \$3 million later, Warner has a creative work in the form of a series of documentaries on the early years of stock car racing. "American Stock: The Golden Era of NASCAR" spans 1936 to 1971 and is packaged in a four-DVD set that sells for \$79.95 at www.americanstock.us.

The four-and-a-half-hour series comprises: "The Early Years 1936-1949"; "The Jet Age, 1950-1959"; "Wild Wild 60's, From 1960-1971"; and "Profiles: Wendell Scott and Curtis Turner."

The producer, director, executive producer and stunt driver — Warner drove the backward escape for Scott's film as well as several other scenes — is now a marketer and spokesman for his independent film. He said filmmaking truly isn't for the fainthearted; he took out a second mortgage on his house.

And he didn't even pay his father for the 60-plus hours he spent in a studio booth narrating the series. The senator did say he enjoyed the work. He had been asked to be the voice of Gen. Robert E. Lee in the Civil War series produced by Ken Burns but declined due to his schedule.

As far as his son's NASCAR films, he said he loves them.

The younger Warner had his hand in every aspect of the documentaries, including the six to eight months it took to create the DVD package. "The design is old school — metal and paper." It's similar to a hubcap or an old film can with the American Stock logo embossed on the top.

For the early races he interspersed in the films, Warner had to sift through old footage that was owned primarily by two elderly men. There was no indexing, so it helped that Warner knew the difference between a 1964 and a 1965 Ford Galaxy.

Warner said he would have liked to get the NASCAR license for his films, but it costs \$1 million and they get 20 percent of the gross profits. "A small company cannot

What's your favorite race car?

"A Corvette GT1. It's a street Corvette modified for GT racing."

What's your favorite street car?

"That's difficult. My old Packard; it's a 1936. American made, it was the car of its day."

What do you drive today out on the road?

"A Range Rover."

Would you change anything in your documentary?

"You always think of changes when you look back. Not really. I did them the way I wanted them to be."

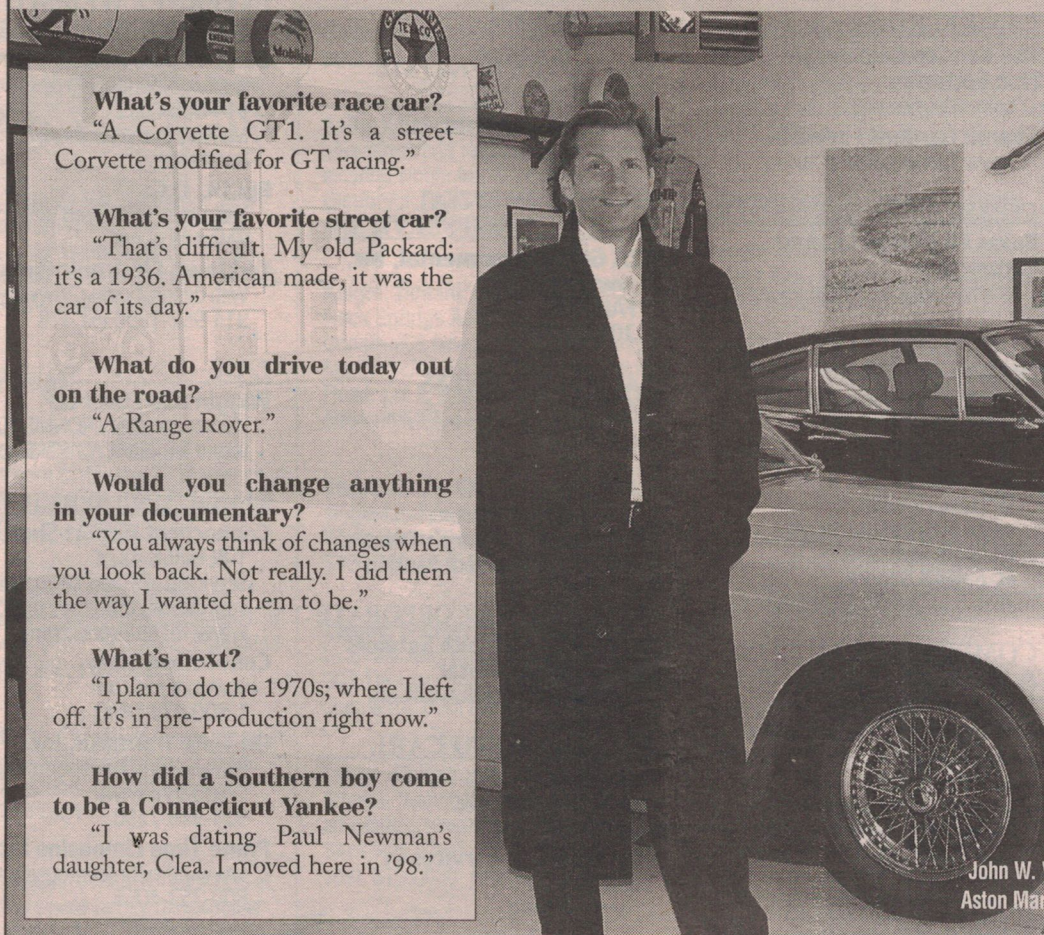
What's next?

"I plan to do the 1970s; where I left off. It's in pre-production right now."

How did a Southern boy come to be a Connecticut Yankee?

"I was dating Paul Newman's daughter, Clea. I moved here in '98."

From zero to 60 with John Warner IV



John W. Warner IV
Aston Martin

as a young boy sitting on a tractor on the farm. He asked for a dirt bike at 10. "My mom taught me to drive when I was 12." He was not unlike thousands of other farm boys before him who learned to drive on private land before venturing onto the streets and highways.

"I was a gear head at birth. People who are into cars are born into it."

Warner recalled hearing his dad tell tales of moonshiners who lived not far from the farm. "All the tall tales are true," he said.

In the Wendell Scott story, Warner said he found a policeman in Danville, Va., who used to try and catch Scott as he drove moonshine. One time, police set up a roadblock on a twisting section of road leaving Scott no place to turn around and flee. However, they didn't count on Scott racing away backward. When police caught up to him, he was in his garage with the engine of the car he fled in on a hoist and no moonshine in sight.

BAs, GTs and FX

When he wasn't toying with the Shelby Cobra, Warner was working on his



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U.S. Sen. John W. Warner and his second wife, Elizabeth Taylor, are all geared-up for racing, though neither ever did actually race.

Photo courtesy of John W. Warner IV

degree in advertising and design. He worked as a digital compositor and merged live footage with graphics and animation. He later worked at Blue Sky Studios in White Plains doing special effects primarily for commercials. While there, he also created visual effects for "A Simple Wish," a movie that featured Martin Short.

While working as a freelancer, he kept

his hand in racing. After Blue Sky, he raced full time across the country and Canada on the Grand Am circuit.

"Racing is my passion; I raced pro for seven years of 16 total. It's an interesting perspective for a filmmaker to actually have lived the subject," he said.

"Racing is racing; all racers share the same fears and exhilaration." ♦

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Born to drive

Warner grew up a "gear head" on his parents' horse farm in Front Royal, Va., on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains. There's a photo somewhere, he says, of him

as a young boy sitting on a tractor on the farm. He asked for a dirt bike at 10. "My mom taught me to drive when I was 12." He was not unlike thousands of other farm boys before him who learned to drive on private land before venturing onto the streets and highways.

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When he wasn't toying with the Shelby Cobra, Warner was working toward a degree in Russian history from the University of Virginia. The degree came in handy when he accompanied his dad and Sen. Bob Dole on a 1990 trip to Russia.

Warner went to Parsons School of Design in New York City and earned a