



## **Filmmaker John Warner's Historical *The Golden Years of NASCAR* The Complete Backstory**

Four years and \$3 million in the making, John W. Warner IV's documentary movie collection of the wild and gritty early years of stock car racing in America, "*American Stock: The Golden Years of NASCAR*," evolved from Warner's interest in telling the story of Wendell Scott, the first African-American to campaign fulltime in NASCAR's premier racing series.

More than a decade ago,, Warner, a University of Virginia graduate and former (16 years) club and professional sports car racing driver, sat sweltering in 110-degree heat waiting for the green flag to fall for his race at Texas Motor Speedway. He idly thought of the movie he had watched the night before, "Greased Lightning," a film loosely based on Scott's life. Warner wondered what Scott's life had really been like in stock car racing's rough and tumble days of the past.

The Texas race completed, Warner went searching on the Internet for background materials regarding Scott – and was disappointed to find little information. "No book, no real biographical information, not much of anything," was what Warner said he found. It made him want to learn more and he decided to make a film that would tell the true story of Scott and his trials and tribulations competing as a privateer against the moneyed teams in NASCAR's Grand National series. It took Warner some time to get the Scott family to open up, but when they did, he was invited into the treasure trove of the NASCAR community.

"It was hard, at first," Warner explained, "because in some cases the family had been taken advantage by others in the past. I think it helped that I was a racer, I spoke the language, I was a Virginian, and my dad (Sen. John W. Warner, R-VA) was well known and liked within the racing community."

It took nearly a year for Warner to complete the Scott movie and he called on many former NASCAR stars, officials, drivers, team owners and mechanics to help tell the Scott story through interviews and narrative. Once complete, and

with the documentary's narration recorded by Sen. Warner, the movie was shown on the History Channel in 2002 and then on the Turner South Network as part of its Black History Month celebration.

“What I found was that Wendell Scott was a brilliant mechanic, a very tenacious and persevering person and a man whose driving talents were totally overshadowed by his lack of funding to be competitive on a race-to-race basis,” Warner recalled. “Despite all this, and the prejudices of a black man racing in a white sport in the South during the time period he raced, Wendell repeatedly said his participation was ‘about racing, not about race.’ His effort earned the respect of drivers, fans and track officials and after his career was over, those talents and skills have been recognized with his induction into 15 different Halls of Fame. His story was true Americana, and it was our pleasure to truthfully bring it to the screen and the attention of the public.”

### **Telling “The Rest of the Story”**

While working on the Scott movie, Warner became immersed in the early history of stock car racing and decided to tell the “rest of the story, to try to let the current generation of fans and others know where the sport's roots truly were.”

“It was a much different sport then,” Warner explains. “Today's version is very commercial, politically correct and controlled. It's immensely popular now – and in the Southeast in particular, it was just as hugely popular in its earliest years.

“It was full of very colorful characters, veterans who came back from World War II and used many of the skills and talents developed during their service to help build a fledgling sport. They were vigorous ‘men's men’ who were ordinary folk – but who also did extraordinary things. They were mavericks -- daredevils in some cases -- and some were moonshine runners who turned to racing on clay oval tracks plowed out of farmer's fields. They used cutting edge war technology to find ways to make cars go faster and turned raw ambition and fearless driving into a sport that captured the imagination of a generation starved for thrills.”

Warner's three-part series about the history of the sport includes interviews with more than 50 NASCAR veterans and family members, and many of the images within the movies came from the private family collections of some of sport's pioneers. Many of the images have never been seen publicly before.

“Many of the early stars of the sport were private people,” Warner said, “and it took a while for some of them to open up to us on camera and help us with our journey through history. Sometimes one would call another and tell them that we were ‘okay’ and that they should participate. They understood that we were trying to tell a truthful story about the origin and history of their sport and do it in an unbiased, documentary style, and at the same time, pay tribute to the pioneers who helped create the sport.

“It took a lot of time and effort – and money – because there were many times our film crew had to wait days in hotel rooms to accomplish an hour’s worth of interviews. But that was part of the price we understood we needed to pay to make the films the way they needed to be made.”

### **Overcoming the obstacles**

Tracing the history of the sport and in some cases recreating it were not the easiest chores.

“The media coverage of the sport in the ‘Thirties, ‘Forties, ‘Fifties and ‘Sixties was much more limited than it is now, when millions of fans go daily to websites, watch live on Sundays or read daily news stories in their hometown newspapers,” Warner said.

“Races weren’t televised, there was a limited amount of footage available to use and many of the sport’s heroes and organizers had passed on. We were determined to be correct in everything we did, so it took us much longer than you might think it would to make the movies. Everything we did was done the right way. We found and used either original or restored cars in the scenes we created. We used real stills, real quarts and gallons of moonshine, real settings, replica cars and airplanes when needed. We wanted it to be right, and as far as I can determine, now that the films are completed, everything we did was done with no mistakes. It was costly, but I was determined to do it the right way.”

The “American Stock: The Golden Era of NASCAR” series includes “The Early Years 1936-1949”, “The Jet Age 1950-1959”, and “Wild, Wild ‘60s, from 1960-1971”. Packaged in a replica metal film can, the series also includes the Wendell Scott movie and another about Curtis Turner, a pioneer driver and one of the most colorful personalities and maverick superstars of stock car racing’s early years. The four DVD series is available on [YouTube](#).

Once the filming was completed, Warner asked his father to narrate the movies. Sen. Warner, who had been approached by Ken Burns to voice Gen. Robert E. Lee in his Civil War documentary series but was unable to participate due to schedule conflicts, joined his son in their collaborative effort. It took more than 100 hours in the studio to do all five films, but for the father and son, it was a collaborative labor of love and effort. The Senator’s pay for his work? “Not even a ham sandwich,” the filmmaker recalled with a smile, “not even a handful of M&Ms!”

### **More than just producing**

During the making of the films, the younger Warner found himself doing much more than just producing the movies. He was the director, collaborated on the script and interviews, spent thousands of hours searching through old footage

and scanning photos in the homes of many of NASCAR's early legends. Calling on the skills developed during his 16-year sports car racing career, Warner even did stunt driving in scenes that recreated portions of the early years of the sport.

"It was one of those things where, in order to get things done correctly and true to history, you just had to be hands-on," Warner explained. "The entire effort became a burning passion for all of us who were involved. The more we searched, the further we went, the more we became totally determined to do the films right, to make the story true, to tell the colorful history of the sport.

"Our desire and our commitment was evident to everyone we worked with. The drivers, officials and family members associated with the history of the sport could see our dedication. It made them want to help us, to be part of the effort. It was something that evolved and their assistance made us even more determined to tell the real story. All of us wanted to help current enthusiasts understand the incredible – and sometimes forgotten – sacrifices and contributions these pioneers made to the sport of stock car racing."

Warner savors the friendships he made during the making of the films.

"What was amazing to find out as we went through the process was that all of the old stories and rumors we had heard – drivers putting rental cars into swimming pools, methods of 'cheating' in the old days, moonshine runners turned drivers, airplanes landing on main streets for the pilot to find a bottle of liquor on a Sunday and on and on – all were true.

"The way people opened up their homes, their private collections, their memories and their families were simply amazing to all of us. We made many friendships that I treasure to this day. It's true the films were a labor of love for me, but I think the finished product pays tribute to those pioneers in a meaningful way. I believe all of those who helped us can share in the enjoyment that the past will never be forgotten or pushed aside by the sport as it is today.

"That was our goal – to tell and preserve the history of American stock car racing – and I believe we have done that in the "Golden Years of NASCAR" collection," Warner concluded.

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