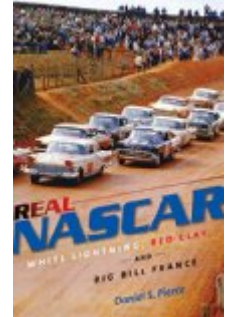


**Daniel S. Pierce.** *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 360 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3384-1.



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**Published on** H-NC (September, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Judkin J. Browning (Appalachian State University)

Histories of “contemporary” subjects are often difficult to write. Standing too close to the topic can be a problem because sometimes an insufficient amount of time has passed to warrant a clear analysis of the sport in question. All too often, such a history can be drowned out by the present-day news surrounding the topic; a historical analysis can fall victim to the loudest and most colorful of Web sites and newspaper stories charged with covering the latest-and-greatest events within the sport itself. Writing a history of NASCAR presents both of these problems. The notion of what constitutes a useful period of time between the historical past and the knowledge-hungry present is difficult to ascertain, while mesmerizing stories about the sport of stock car racing often rely on NASCAR’s folklore in order to construct an interesting perspective on what might be misconstrued as little more than a curious regional footnote.

Daniel S. Pierce has written a history of NASCAR that surpasses all previous attempts by authors—works written by both motorsports jour-

nalists and a wide variety of academics alike—in its ability to traverse stock car racing’s evolution from its origins within the culture of bootlegging corn liquor across the American Southeast to its current role as a globally popular sport driven by loyal fans and the necessary support of corporate sponsorship. As Pierce explains through his exquisitely detailed and most fascinating book, the history of NASCAR stock car racing is more about economic survival than jaw-dropping speed. From its earliest days, NASCAR’s founders were acutely aware of what seemed to be a three-tiered relationship among the racers, their fans, and business (as in the “big” variety that helped pay the bills, and the “show” variety that packed grandstands all across the country). Throughout its history, NASCAR has endeavored—often successfully, but sometimes not—to capitalize on our fascination with the automobile, our desire to see skillful athletes engaging in feats of death-defying competition, and the need for the sport to rise above its rough-and-tumble, almost mythic, ori-

gins to achieve a more “mainstream” acceptability.

Pierce, an associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, parlayed his own regional background into an opportunity to write this most astounding piece of scholarship. Not only did Pierce utilize all manner of research to build his interpretation of NASCAR, but he also delved into the sport from a more personal perspective. Although he never attended a NASCAR event until 1994, that initial “field” experience—along with a casual existence alongside NASCAR based on living in North Carolina and Tennessee—moved him enough to explore the role that moonshining played in the evolution of NASCAR as the sport grew from a regional “sideshow” into the nationally marketed entity that emerged during the early 1970s, after the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company signed on as a corporate benefactor to turn what had been known as the Grand National Division into the Winston Cup Series (what is today called the Sprint Cup Series, since the popularity of smoking cigarettes has been replaced by the more popular use of cell phones). Pierce turned his curiosity as a historian and a North Carolinian into what is most certainly the finest piece of motorsports scholarship ever written.

Pierce set out with a rather simple goal, to try and explain the popularity of NASCAR stock car racing. Many others have tried to do this—myself included—but the results have all too often fallen short.<sup>[1]</sup> This has been because so many books about the history and culture of NASCAR have focused too heavily on the folklore surrounding the sport’s true past. The stories about NASCAR’s earliest days are wildly interesting and great fun to both read and write, but, as Pierce posits at the beginning of his book, “One of the necessary aspects of building such a narrative on the history of stock car racing and NASCAR in the South is to include only those stories that can be verified. Much of what has passed for NASCAR history is

shrouded in myth, and even the better histories of the sport lack any sort of historical documentation. Many of the tales they relate have been repeated over and over, each author borrowing from the other and none actually verifying the stories’ authenticity. A major goal, then, of this work is to attempt to separate the myths of stock car racing’s early days from documented fact” (pp. 6-7). To this end, Pierce’s book is nothing short of incredible.

Pierce relies on the usual sources available to a historian of contemporary topics, including newspaper articles, magazine features, existing literature, and Web sites. Given his geographical location, however, and the fact that so many figures central to the evolution of NASCAR are still with us, Pierce utilizes extensive interviews he conducted with some of the sport’s greatest and most influential personalities; in order to gather necessary “personal” observations regarding NASCAR’s most formative years, Pierce includes oral histories he recorded from NASCAR Hall of Famers like Junior Johnson, Richard Petty, Ned Jarrett, and David Pearson. He also conducted interviews with figures who took part in NASCAR’s development from a more behind-the-scenes perspective—racing insiders like H. A. “Humpy” Wheeler (the voice of “Tex” in the movie *Cars* [2006]) and famed journalist Chris Economaki (a former television race commentator and the long-time editor of the *National Speed Sport News*). Such personal observations add great depth to the overall context of Pierce’s subject matter, and their reflections offer a depiction of NASCAR that goes beyond the rehashed folktales often found in earlier NASCAR histories. These are the people at the center of many NASCAR stories, and what better way to achieve accuracy than to speak directly to the source? Time and age do tend to cloud memories and allow them to be reinterpreted, but the critical topics addressed by Pierce with his interview subjects—pivotal events like the Professional Drivers Association’s (a union for NASCAR drivers) boycott of the inaugural race at Alabama

International Motor Speedway near the town of Talladega in August of 1969—are so essential to the sport of stock car racing that the details remain fresh and clear. Add to that the extensive media trail generated by this controversial period in NASCAR's history, and Pierce is able to convey the heartfelt attitudes, impressions, and opinions of those who were there, with the documented "facts" as published by regional newspapers and racing periodicals. This is just one example, culled from many, of how Pierce's new book takes popular racing folklore and turns it into a more concrete racing reality.

The central idea running throughout *Real NASCAR* is the question of just how much bootleggers were directly involved with the birth and development of the sport. Hauling moonshine against the constant threat of arrest by federal agents, and the ever-present possibility of a high-speed accident while carrying over 130 gallons of highly volatile corn liquor, made racing stock cars a favorable means by which to earn a living. This was even more the case after "Big Bill" France and an assembly of his peers (including car owners, drivers, mechanics, journalists, and race promoters) founded the National Association for Stock Car Automobile Racing in December of 1947. Pierce addresses the bootlegger question once and for all by turning to his vast collection of reliable sources. While the moonshiner element in NASCAR has become the stuff of folk legend in stories, songs, movies, and various books, it is the work of Daniel Pierce that follows the trail completely from the pre-NASCAR days of "trippers" racing each other for bragging rights in rural towns all across the American South, up through an organized era dominated by factory-backed race teams willing to test Detroit's finest on rugged tracks up and down the Atlantic seaboard, to the corporate formalities of national sponsorship, which rendered such an "outlaw" element unsuitable for mass-market consumption. With this, moonshine's impact on the sport of NASCAR racing faded into sociocultural mythology. This is

where that iconic legacy stagnated until awakened through Pierce's efforts and insight.

The conclusion of Pierce's work offers a vision of current-day NASCAR—a sport that is dominated by marketing representatives, sports agents, media personalities, driver/celebrities, and massive amounts of corporate money. While NASCAR has changed dramatically, especially following the death of seven-time Sprint Cup champion Dale Earnhardt during the final lap of the Daytona 500 back in 2001, the author suggests that parts of NASCAR circa 2008 still seem rooted in the sport's more colorful past. Pierce writes about seeing alternating regions around Bristol Motor Speedway where the corporate influence of today was matched by areas around the track "that reflect the sport's white-liquor and red-clay roots" (p. 297). He writes of fans "who looked like they might have sacrificed meal money—or pawned something—to purchase a ticket," and of going to an area "populated by fans in relatively modest campers and pop-up trailers" where there was "the consumption of large amounts of alcohol, including moonshine" (p. 297). This observation from the field is intended to serve as a bridge connecting the NASCAR of yesterday's liquor haulers to the sport as seen today. Emphasis on social class is critical here, especially when building a case for the harsh realities of NASCAR's "hard-scrabble" past, but—unfortunately—banking on such stereotypical imagery renders the overall conclusion of *Real NASCAR* as more of the same which has been covered in earlier books on this subject.

To his credit, Pierce ends *Real NASCAR* with a piece of worthy advice for any NASCAR official or administrator who takes the time to read this book (and it should be required reading for everyone in the sanctioning body), and that is that they should "look to the sport's past not as a source of embarrassment to be ignored or whitewashed but as a source of pride to be appreciated, welcomed, and even honored" (p. 299). Pierce declares at the

very end of his book, “I would humbly suggest that it is time for NASCAR to stop ‘modernizing tradition’ and start embracing its tradition” (p. 299). A close reading of *Real NASCAR* is a good place to make that start.

Note

[1]. Mark D. Howell, *From Moonshine to Madison Avenue: A Cultural History of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

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**Citation:** Mark D. Howell. Review of Pierce, Daniel S. *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France*. H-NC, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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