

Wendell Scott 1921-1990

Wendell Oliver Scott, born August 29, 1921 in the “Crooktown” section of Danville, Virginia, was a remarkable man and accomplished many feats. Scott was the first African-American to compete in and own a NASCAR team.

Wendell Scott began his career, as did many drivers of the era, off the track. He gained seat time driving a taxi in Danville as fast as it could go, and hauled moonshine whiskey at night. Scott accumulated 13 speeding tickets in his taxi, which caused him to lose his chauffeur’s license. Hauling bootleg was exciting to him; he could buy liquor for 55 cents a pint and sell it for twice that amount, plus he had practice racing from the police and leaving them in a cloud of dust. He often bragged about how he could out run the police, for instance getting so far ahead and hiding in the shadows of the night until the police would come flying by. He was not always lucky though, and once was caught and placed on probation.

In 1949, a race promoter for the Danville Fairgrounds, in a quest to increase attendance for the track, was seeking an African-American to race. He went to the Danville police station to obtain a name, where the police promptly referred him to Wendell Scott. The promoter made Scott an offer, and he agreed with much enthusiasm. Scott used to watch the races with a friend and would often say, if given the chance, he would race.

Scott raced in the modified and sportsman division early in his career on dirt tracks in places such as Staunton, Lynchburg, Waynesboro, Roanoke, Zion’s Crossroads, Ruckersville, and Natural Bridge in Virginia, and Hagerstown in Maryland. Scott also raced on the sands of Daytona in the 1950’s. In this division, Scott won a total of 128 races. He was the Virginia State Champion in 1959, and the Southside Speedway Champion in that same year.

In 1961, Scott, along with his wife Mary, decided to make the move to the highest level of racing, NASCAR Grand National Division (now known as Winston Cup). He had to make the transition from dirt track to pavement, racing against such drivers as Ned Jarrett, Junior Johnson, Earl Brooks, Glen Wood, and Lee and Richard Petty. He also faced the challenge of going into many different tracks in the deep South at a time when segregation and racism were strong and brutal. Scott would confront many obstacles during his career in racing, often being hit on the track deliberately by other drivers, denied expense money, and turned away from tracks all because of the color of his skin. He loved racing, however, and took the bad with the good.

In 1963 NASCAR ran a split season and in December of that year, which started the 1964 season, Scott made automotive racing history. At Speedway Park in Jackson, Florida, in a 100-mile feature race, Wendell Scott finished the race first, in what should have been the greatest day of his life. However, it turned out to be one of the worst when Scott was denied the win to Buck Baker. Scott and his team protested the call and after three hours of consultation a NASCAR official declared Scott as the winner. They labeled the incident as a scoring error, marking him a lap down. Scott actually ran 202 laps in the 200-lap event. It was later said that NASCAR ruled the finish out of fear of what might happen if Scott were to pull into victory lane in front of a crowd of white

spectators. Scott said that he never would have kissed the beauty queen, but only shook her hand. Scott also noted that every time he passed Baker, he would wave at him. This incident troubled Scott for the rest of his life. He wanted to hear his name and car number being announced over the speaker in victory lane. He did receive the winner's purse but never got the trophy for his driving performance.

Scott continued to race until a near death car crash in 1973 at Talladega Speedway in Alabama forced him to retire. He didn't have factory backing, but he did have spirit and his family: wife Mary, sons - Wendell Jr., Franklin, and Michael, and daughters - Willie Ann, Deborah, Cheryl, and Sybil.

Some of the awards he received include the following:

- State of Florida Citation for Outstanding Achievements, 1965
- First Curtis Turner Memorial Award, 1971
- Special Olympics Service Award, 1974
- Schafer Brewing Company Achievement Award, 1975
- NASCAR Recognition of Achievement Award, 1975
- Bont Cultural Council Achievement Award, Greenville, SC, 1977
- Tobaccoland 100 Award for the finest NASCAR Driver via Major Henry Marsh, III, 1978
- Black Rose Community Service Award, 1980
- Muscular Dystrophy Association Award for Achievements, Roanoke, VA, 1981
- Danville, Virginia Citizenship Award, 1985
- Virginia Skyline Girl Scout Council, Inc., Award for Outstanding Contributions, 1985
- Proclamation of Atlanta, Georgia and Danville, Virginia, 1986
- Early Dirt Racers – Driver of the Year Award, 1990
- Resolution from Virginia General Assembly, “State Hero,” January 1991
- Winston Cup R.J. Reynolds Pioneer Award, 1986
- Driver of the Year Award, “Old Timers Racing Class,” 1990
- Induction into Black Athletes Hall of Fame, 1977
- Induction into Jacksonville, Florida Hall of Fame, 1994
- Induction into Danville Register and Bee Sports Hall of Fame, 1996
- Induction into National Sports Hall of Fame, Detroit, 1997
- Induction into International Motorsport Hall of Fame, 1999
- Induction into Virginia Sports Hall of Fame, 2000
- Induction into National Motorsports Press Association Hall of Fame, 2000

The road on which Wendell Scott built his home in Danville, Virginia has since been renamed Wendell Scott Drive. The homes in that area are now known as the “Wendell Scott Community.” During his career, Scott made 506 NASCAR Grand National starts, with 147 top ten finishes and 20 top five finishes. He served as his own mechanic and sponsor for most of his career.