

**2011 IMHOF Inductee
Rex White**

By Cary Estes

Rex White was working at a gas station in Maryland when he received a sign indicating what he could do with his life. In fact, he stared at that sign for several weeks.

The sign had been placed in the window of the gas station one day by a local promoter. It said simply, "Stock car racing every Friday night."

"I must have looked at that thing for half the summer," White recalled recently. "I finally saved up enough money to go to one. When I saw my first race car going around the track, just warming up, I said, 'That's what I want to do.' So I set out to do it, and I think I did pretty good."

Good enough that he won the 1960 NASCAR Cup Series championship and was named one of the 50 greatest drivers of the sport's first 50 years. Good enough that he won a total of 26 Cup races from 1959-62, more than any other driver during that four-season span. That's more than Junior Johnson, Ned Jarrett, Fireball Roberts, Joe Weatherly or anybody named Petty.

White accomplished all this despite being only 5-foot-4 and having a withered left leg that became damaged after he contracted polio as a small child. In his autobiography, "Gold Thunder," White said, "Most of the lessons I learned (from having polio) have stayed with me all my life. The biggest one was how to conquer fear."

White was born on Aug. 17 in Taylorsville, N.C. He grew up in the heart of bootlegging country, which



he said meant he "was around a lot of people who had some fast cars." But White never thought much about being a racer until he actually saw the sport for the first time in Maryland during the summer of 1952.

Using the "no-fear" attitude he developed as a child, White returned to the track the following week, slipped through a hole in the fence around the pit area and began casually asking the drivers if there was anything he could do to help.

Before long, Modified veteran Frankie Schneider started using White after races to help pack up equipment and prepare the car to be towed. When Schneider's full-time assistant left, he offered the job to White.

"He said, 'I won't be able to pay you anything, but you can travel to the races with me and I'll buy you

something to eat,'" White recalled. "That sounded like a good deal to me."

White toured with Schneider through Florida during the winter racing season and became increasingly knowledgeable about the sport. Soon he was ready to hit the track on his own. So he scraped together \$600, bought an old 1937 Ford and began his new career as a race car driver.

Like many young drivers in the 1950s, White bounced around on the numerous short tracks that dotted the southeast. He performed well enough that in 1956 he managed to get a ride driving top-tier Grand National cars (now Sprint Cup) for Chevrolet. He had 14 top-10 finishes overall, and was second in the final standings of the NASCAR short-track division.

But White's true breakthrough came in 1958 when he moved to Spartanburg, S.C., to team with his friend and chief mechanic Louis Clements. Together they began producing cars capable of competing with the big boys in the sport.

White's first Grand National victory came on June 29, 1958 in Weaverville, N.C. A year later he won five times and finished 10th in the series point standings. In 1960 he picked up six victories and captured the NASCAR championship, then followed that up in '61 with seven wins and a second-place finish in the standings to Ned Jarrett.

White was able to run this well even though he was operating on a relatively limited budget. Lack of funds prevented White and Clements from overpowering the

competition with pure speed, so they became experts at finding the ideal way to set up their cars for each individual track.

A prime example of this occurred in the 1962 Dixie 500 at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Using both ingenuity and simplicity, White won the race after discovering a way to get around one of the track's quirkiest elements.

"That track had a bump going into turn one. If you drove across the bump it upset your car and slowed you down through the corner, but if you went around it you lost more time," White explained. "So I built a shock for the left front designed so I could drive over that bump."

"The problem was, we didn't have parts for the shock. So we sawed the shock apart, and then I made a shim and a valve out of a Coke can. That's what we used to valve the shock the way we wanted it in order to go over that bump. We worked really hard on that car."

That turned out to be White's final NASCAR victory. Despite his success, he still wasn't making much money. White won \$13,000 for his 1960 championship, and expenses ate into part of that. So he opened up an auto dealership near Atlanta and wound up earning more there than he was from racing.

"I got out of the loop, and the next thing you know four or five years had gone by and I was out of racing for good," White said. "Looking back, I wish I had stayed in a little longer. We had a lot of fun back then, even if we didn't get paid much for having it."

