North Carolina is the traditional center of southern stock car racing. Two recent publications showcase a pair of its historic racetracks.

Charlotte Motor Speedway (CMS) is one of the top racetracks in the country. It hosts two major NASCAR race weekends each year as well as several smaller series races, and it is a major economic force in the state. As well established as the track is today, its beginnings were, literally, very rocky. Author Deb Williams, a veteran motorsports journalist who is the former editor of NASCAR Scene and a recipient of the Henry T. McLemore Award for continued outstanding motorsports journalism, has penned an inside look at the men who built and raced at CMS.

In the 1950s two men envisioned the sport of stock car racing growing beyond the local dirt tracks around the state. Stock car driver Curtis Turner and race promoter Bruton Smith each decided to build a speedway in the Charlotte area, but both ran into financial difficulties. They joined forces in 1959 to construct the Charlotte Motor Speedway. Even after combining their resources, funding was an issue, and the financial strain was exacerbated when the boulders on the site turned out to be the tip of a half-million yards of solid granite. The paving was not completed until the morning of qualifying runs for the inaugural race on June 19, 1960, and large chunks of track were gouged up all during practice and the event itself. Cars used screens over their grills and windshields to deflect the hunks of pavement. The eventual winner of stock car racing’s first 600-mile race—also the first race to offer a $100,000 purse—was Joe Lee Johnson, said by one spectator to be the slowest car in the field.

The track faced massive debt, and both Turner and Smith were jettisoned by the board of directors in June 1961. Stockholder Richard Howard stepped in to rescue the facility and slowly brought it to solvency. In the meantime, Smith began quietly buying up the seemingly worthless stock and in the 1970s returned as the majority stockholder. He quickly gained control of the board and brought in H. A. “Humpy” Wheeler to promote the track. Over the next thirty years the two men, both products of a rural North Carolina upbringing, became legendary for being well ahead of the curve in business acumen and event promotion. Under Wheeler, called the P. T. Barnum of motorsports, the track became known for elaborate pre-race entertainment. CMS was the first to build trackside condominiums and a fine dining restaurant open year round; the first to install a mammoth HD television screen; and the first to establish a weekly racing series for children. Smith and Wheeler had a parting of the ways in 2008, and Smith brought in his son Marcus to take over Wheeler’s duties.

Deb Williams has covered the primary events in the track’s history in a very readable narrative, including topics ranging from drivers whose first win came at CMS, to a survey of the movies filmed at the Speedway. Of particular interest is the account of Curtis Turner’s alliance with the Teamsters Union, in which he agreed to help unionize the drivers in return for a loan to alleviate
the Speedway’s financial crisis. The action provoked NASCAR president Bill France Sr.’s legendary response that before he would accept a union, he would “plow up Daytona International Speedway and plant corn in the infield” and that he would use a gun to enforce his banishment from all NASCAR races any driver who was a teamster member.

The volume contains many photographs from the CMS archives, including a center section of color illustrations. While the color reproductions are good, some of the black-and-white photos lack sharpness. Also included in the book are an appendix of race results of all NASCAR Cup races and All-Star races at the track, a brief bibliography and list of Internet sites, and a subject index.

Bowman Gray Stadium is a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project composed of a racetrack with a football field in the infield. Auto races were first held there in 1939, and the quarter-mile track is NASCAR’s oldest weekly race track. Bowman Gray has been the site of heated competition among the stars of racing in midgets, modifieds, stocks, and more. Its Saturday night races draw as many as 15,000 fans each week. Bowman Gray attracted national attention in 2010 when the History Channel broadcasted the Madhouse series, featuring local racing stars Tim Brown, Junior Miller, and the Myers family.

Bowman Gray Stadium follows the usual Arcadia Publishing format. It is filled with historic black-and-white photographs, each with a brief caption. The quality of the photos, mostly from the Bowman Gray Racing Archives, is excellent. This is not a true history of the track, but it is certainly satisfying eye candy. Author Richard Miller is the chief scorer at Bowman Gray Stadium.

Charlotte Motor Speedway History: From Granite to Gold and Bowman Gray Stadium are written for general readers. They help to fill the need for published material on the history of auto racing in North Carolina. Charlotte Motor Speedway History is notable for its thorough research and historical information, while Bowman Gray Stadium presents an enjoyable collection of nostalgic photographs. Both books will appeal to older children, teens, and adults who are racing fans, and could be especially useful to entice reluctant readers. They are recommended for school, public, and academic libraries.

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