

norman poole

JIMMY CLARK

SCOT AT THE ROCK



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story by **MARK DILL**

Forty years before Formula One superstar Juan Pablo Montoya switched to NEXTEL Cup, World Grand Prix Champion Jim Clark tried his hand at NASCAR's premier series. The setting was deep in the heart of old NASCAR: Rockingham, North Carolina's one-mile oval, a world apart from the twisting courses of Europe. But the common thread was that both involved fast cars and competition, and that was good enough for an ultimate racer like Jimmy Clark.

In late summer 1967 Clark was at the peak of his powers. The 1965 Indianapolis 500 winner had just tied Juan Manuel Fangio's record of 24 World Championship F1 victories, and was the favorite to repeat for a third time as World Champion in 1968. While on vacation in Bermuda, he received a phone call from NASCAR's Bill France, Sr.

The NASCAR founder, looking for another angle to promote his series, knew attracting the world's premier road racer to the American 500 at Rockingham was a great story. Clark, always ready to test his skills, readily accepted a ride in a Ford Fairlane from the stable of John Holman and Ralph Moody, one of the top teams in the sport.

The Flying Scot, who once test drove a midget on a California oval, was known for his versatility. He started his career in 1956 driving British sedans commonly referred to as "saloon cars." He was game for anything, driving production or modified Sunbeams, Porsches and Jaguars in races throughout Europe. He drove an Aston Martin to third place at Le Mans in 1960 – the only non-Ferrari in the top seven.

Despite his credentials, the 1963 and 1965 World Champion had his expectations in check. Before practice he said, "I have no illusions about going out and beating the pants off this bunch. Maybe, if 20 or 30 of the front runners pile up, I could win this thing."

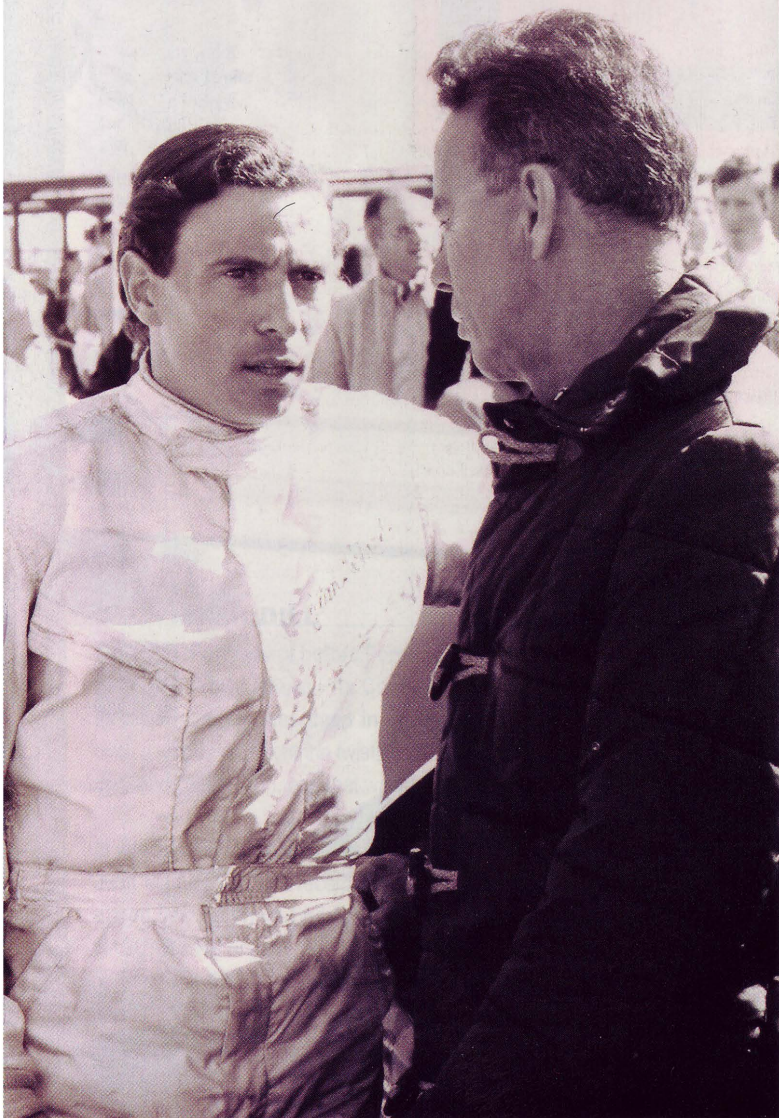


(right) Clark's 1965 Indy 500 victory proved the Scot's ability on ovals, *(main)* so, a journey down south to try his hand at NASCAR seemed only fitting.

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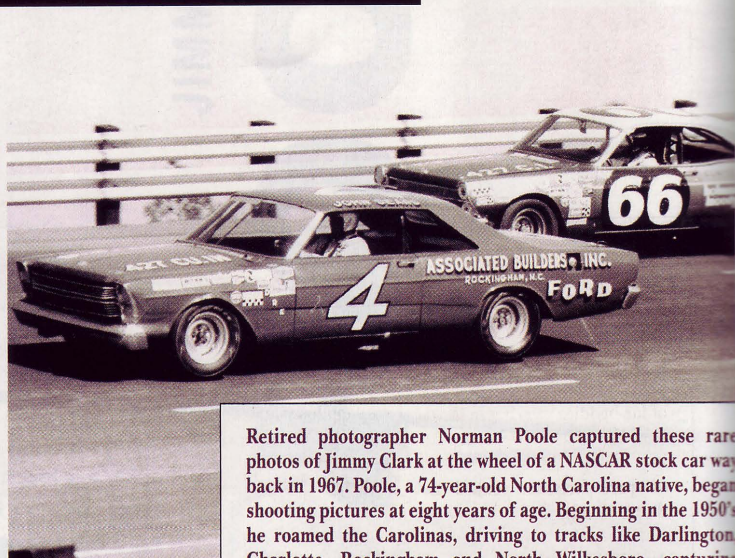


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(left) Clark speaks with Ralph Moody prior to the start of the American 500 at "The Rock." (below) Two Fords battle wheel-to-wheel with Clark on the high-side of NASCAR regular John Sears.



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Retired photographer Norman Poole captured these rare photos of Jimmy Clark at the wheel of a NASCAR stock car way back in 1967. Poole, a 74-year-old North Carolina native, began shooting pictures at eight years of age. Beginning in the 1950's he roamed the Carolinas, driving to tracks like Darlington, Charlotte, Rockingham and North Wilkesboro, capturing images and freelancing for newspapers and magazines. These photos originally appeared in National Speed Sport News. Much of Poole's work is available at the Holman and Moody library. He resides today in Gastonia, North Carolina.

He called his adventure "just curiosity" and explained, "I'm doing it for the fun of it. I just want to have a look at how this type of racing goes."

There's little doubt that what he said is what he meant. He didn't intend to run the entire race. Formula One colleague Jochen Rindt joined him on the trip, and the plan was for the two to co-drive the car.

The race attracted an impressive mix of talent beyond NASCAR regulars such as Richard Petty and Cale Yarborough. Indy 500 winner A.J. Foyt and future Indy winner Gordon Johncock were also entered, as well as Italian road racer Lodovico Scarfiotti. But the motor racing press swarmed Clark; the novelty of this foreign superstar in such unfamiliar territory was the best storyline going.

Practice and qualifying began on Wednesday, October 25 and only the fastest eight drivers were allowed to earn a position in the field. David Pearson won the pole at 117.120 mph, a new record. Clark focused on getting his bearings, which probably proved even more difficult than he imagined. After struggling with the handling of his Ford on the second day of qualifying, Clark prepared to make the field on the third day.

Entering the first turn of the first lap of his four-lap time trial, the right front wheel came off the car and hurtled over the wall at the top of the banked oval. Clark's Ford slammed the wall, twisting the right front spindle, right side springs and shocks and smashing the body. The cars of the day were decidedly more "stock," retaining their chrome bumpers, headlight sockets and distinctive body design – there were no templates to conform to.

An all-nighter in the Holman-Moody garage produced a rejuvenated Fairlane that Clark put into the field on the final day of qualifying at 114.349 mph. The effort was the fastest of the day, netting him the 25th starting spot in a field of 44.

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The race was the following day, October 29, and Clark gave a good accounting of his abilities, steadily progressing through the field to 12th place before his 427 cubic-inch engine blew at 144 miles. Two other Holman-Moody cars in the hands of Bobby Allison and David Pearson prospered, finishing one-two. The race was Allison's first speedway victory. His car was the one Mario Andretti used earlier in the year to capture the Daytona 500.

Clark's 30th place finish was enough to satisfy his curiosity. He told reporters that surrounded him, "It's quite different from Grand Prix racing. The competition is closer and you have to make your judgments quicker, particularly going into the oval track corners."

Sadly, Jimmy Clark never raced NASCAR again. He lost his life in a German Formula 2 race the following April. After Clark's run, there was no influx of F1 drivers into NASCAR, making the 2007 arrival of Montoya all the more special. ■