



Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

15 West Third Street - Jamestown, NY 14701

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The following article about CSHOF inductee Bill Rexford, written by Al Pearce, appeared in the September 13, 2018 edition of Autoweek Magazine. CSHOF President Randy Anderson and CSHOF inductee Jack Lawrence are both quoted within.

BILL REXFORD IS NASCAR'S FORGOTTEN AND UNDERAPPRECIATED CUP SERIES CHAMPION

NASCAR's second Cup champion receiving no love from Hall of Fame voters



By almost any measure, the late Bill Rexford (*left*) is the least known and most underappreciated of NASCAR's 32 Cup Series champions. He's the only eligible champion never nominated for the Hall of Fame and the only one ignored when the sanctioning body recognized its 50 Greatest Drivers during its 50th anniversary season of 1998.

Mention him along pit road or in garages on race weekends and notice the blank stares and shrugged shoulders. Richard Petty recalls him only because Rexford beat two Hall of Fame drivers—including his father, Lee—for the 1950 championship. It was

Rexford's sole claim to fame, one that barely resonates outside his hometown in far western New York state.

Dennis Rexford, 60, thinks the way his father became the champion might have contributed to his anonymity.

“I don’t know that it bothers me because there’s an asterisk by his name,” he said from his home in California. “Didn’t Lee Petty lose some points (809 of them, for running “outlaw races” not sanctioned by NASCAR) that year? That’s part of why my father left NASCAR and went racing in the Midwest. He didn’t think those people were happy that he’d won their championship. He was never on anyone’s radar after that, so it is what it is.”

There is, in fact, no asterisk by Rexford’s name in any record book. The entries simply list him as 1950 champion by 111 points over Fireball Roberts and 369 over Lee Petty. “And there shouldn’t be an asterisk,” said two-time Cup champion Ned Jarrett, one of the sport’s most respected voices. “If Lee lost points, there must have been a good reason. Nobody’s ever asked me but, yes, I think all our champions belong in the Hall of Fame.”



Bill Rexford standing next to his 1950 Oldsmobile that was owned by CSHOF inductee Julian Buesink of Findley Lake.

Some old-timers in Chautauqua County and Conewango Valley still remember Rexford and respect what he did. But few outsiders—especially those in the Southeast—seem to appreciate what he did in NASCAR’s second season. Little wonder, perhaps, since only 14 of his 36 career starts were south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

“It was like, ‘Wow, this is really good,’ but then everybody just moved on,” said Fred Milliman, a New Yorker who watched Rexford graduate from dirt-track

jalopies to Cup. “He didn’t get a lot of praise or anything. If you knew him you congratulated him, and that was about it. He was just a wild young man who loved going fast. Even on the road, he’d go as fast as he could. They could have made one of those ‘wild child’ movies about him.”

Rexford raced locally before joining Bill France’s new series in 1949. The next year, at 23, he won the championship by running 17 of 19 races, winning one and adding 10 more top-10 finishes for owner Julian Buesink. He left NASCAR in 1953 and raced briefly for ARCA before retiring in the mid-’50s. He spent the rest of his life in Arizona and California, out of the racing spotlight. Other than Martin Truex Jr. (New Jersey) and Alan Kulwicki (Wisconsin), he’s the only other Cup champion from the North and remains the youngest of NASCAR’s 32 champions.



NASCAR President Bill France watches as Fireball Roberts congratulates Bill Rexford (middle) on his 1950 championship.

Ironically, his résumé is similar to that of Red Byron, the 1949 champion. Byron made 15 career starts; Rexford made 36. Byron won two poles and two races;

Rexford won one pole and one race. Byron finished top five eight times and top 10 nine times; Rexford had eight top-five finishes and was top 10 in 17 races. Byron, a World War II veteran, died in 1960 and went into the HOF this year; Rexford, also a WWII veteran, who spent two years in the Navy, died in 1994 and has never been seriously considered.

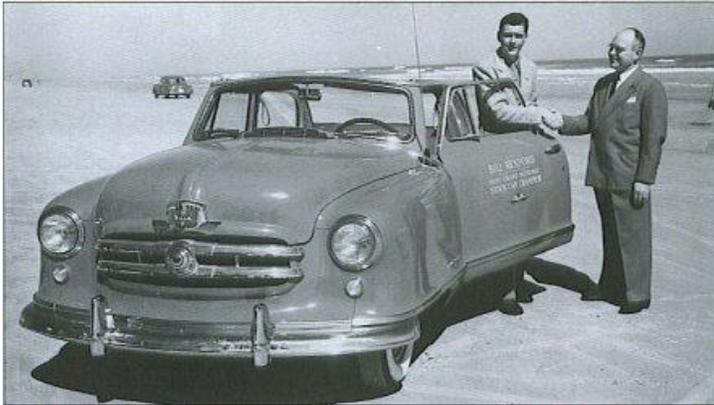
Jack Lawrence, who built cars for Rexford, said one drawback was that the Cup Series seldom came to New York in that era. Even when it did, there wasn’t much advertising, promotion or media coverage. Fans simply weren’t aware of what the owner and driver were trying to do. When Rexford moved out West he became “out of sight, out of mind.”

“Bill’s time racing was brief, but once a champion, always a champion,” Lawrence said. “And this is how some people feel: Bill was a Yankee, and not many Yankees were racing then. He wasn’t a rebel or a ‘good ol’ boy’ like (Alabama native) Red Byron. Some people think that might have something to do with it.”

Hall of Fame director Winston Kelly emphasized that geography has never been a factor in the selection process. “Look at our inductees from outside the Southeast,” he said. “And there’s nothing to that asterisk talk, either. There’s no asterisk by Richard Petty’s name because he won championships when David Pearson didn’t run the full schedule. Our process considers a candidate’s body of work. It would be inaccurate to say that Bill’s name has never come up in our meetings.”

As for seven-time champion Richard Petty, he feels Rexford should be in the Hall. “No matter what anybody won ... 16 races or one or none,” the 200-time winner said, “anybody who wins our championship belongs. Yeah, Bill France took points from Daddy. But that was the way it was back then: Winning the championship wasn’t that big a deal.”

Probably true ... but having Rexford in the Hall of Fame would be a huge deal for those who hold him dear.



Bill Rexford receives the keys to a 1951 Nash Rambler for winning the NASCAR championship.

“Some people are upset that he’s not in, but there’s no groundswell or uprising about it,” said Randy Anderson, president of the Chautauqua County Hall of Fame, where Rexford

is honored. “He had a short career, so we understand what he’s up against. We know he’s the forgotten champion, but we’re still proud of him. We’d rejoice and be thrilled beyond belief if he made it.”

Dennis Rexford paused a moment upon hearing that Petty and Jarrett agree that all Cup Series champions should be recognized, regardless of the circumstance.

“Dad was a huge Richard Petty fan,” he said, “and I was too. So who am I to argue with him?”

Bill Rexford @ <http://chautauquasportshalloffame.org/billrexford.php>

Jack Lawrence @ <http://chautauquasportshalloffame.org/jacklawrence.php>

Julian Buesink @ <http://chautauquasportshalloffame.org/julianbuesink.php>