



Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

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Bill Rexford, NASCAR's Forgotten Champion



By almost any measure, **Bill Rexford** is the least known and most underappreciated of all NASCAR 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 75 Greatest Drivers during its 75th anniversary season of 2023. Mention him along pit

road or in garages on race weekends and notice the blank stares and shrugged shoulders.

There is no asterisk by Rexford's name in any record book. The entry simply list him as 1950 champion by 111 points over Fireball Roberts and 369 over Lee Petty.

Ironically, Rexford's résumé is similar to that of Red Byron, the 1949 NASCAR 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 NASCAR HOF in 2018. Rexford, also a WWII veteran, who spent two years in the Navy, died in 1994 and has never been seriously considered.

When Jeff Gordon won his first NASCAR Sprint Cup Championship in 1995, much attention was focused on his young age: 24 years, 100 days. However, the youngest champion in the history of the top division in NASCAR racing was Chautauqua County native Bill Rexford, who secured the title in 1950 at 23 years, 229 days of age.

William J. Rexford was born on March 14, 1927 in Conewango Valley, NY, the only child of Kermit and Edith (France) Rexford. Kermit owned a small Chevrolet sub-dealership in the village. Young Bill grew interested in cars as he helped around his dad's shop. At the age of sixteen, his passion for cars led him to attempt jalopy racing at the Penny Royal race track, a half-mile dirt oval in nearby Leon, NY.

Bill's fledgling racing career was put on hold when he joined the Navy. He served as a control tower operator in Rhode Island.

Following his discharge in '46, Bill resumed jalopy racing at the local bullrings. Although his cars were crude and the prize money minimal, Rexford loved the fun and excitement of the sport.

In late summer of 1949, while attending a party, Bill heard that Jamestown used car dealer, **Julian Buesink (right photo)**, had entered a car in the NASCAR sanctioned race at the one-mile circular dirt track at Langhorne, PA and was looking for a driver. Rexford approached Buesink with an offer to drive and a deal was struck.



On September 11, 1949, Rexford drove Buesink's 1949 Ford #59 from the 23rd starting position in a field of 45 entries to a 14th place finish. He completed 177 laps, 13 laps in arrears to the winner, Curtis Turner of Roanoke, VA. Although Turner and the car owner of his '49 Oldsmobile, Hubert Westmoreland were rewarded handsomely with \$2,250, the Rexford-Buesink team netted just \$50.

A week later, at the half-mile fairgrounds track in Hamburg, NY, Rexford again was at the wheel of Buesink's Ford for a NASCAR race witnessed by 11,733 spectators. Bill brought the #59 machine home in 5th place, earning \$175.

For his next scheduled NASCAR appearance at Heidelberg Speedway near Pittsburgh, Buesink doubled his efforts by entering both Rexford and a new teammate, **Lloyd Moore**, from Frewsburg, NY. Moore and Rexford were friendly rivals from the Penny Royal track. In fact, Bill had stopped by Moore's home to borrow a helmet for the event and had told Lloyd that Julian needed another driver.

The two-car effort paid dividends as Rexford finished third, seven laps down, and Moore sixth, fourteen laps behind in the October 2, 1949 race collecting \$400 and \$150, respectively. Race winner Lee Petty of Randleman, NC drove a lightweight '49 Plymouth to a \$1500 payday.

1949 was the first year of existence for the newly formed NASCAR organization. In total, the Bill France led group sanctioned eight events with Red Byron of Atlanta, GA, driving a '49 Olds 88 owned by Raymond Parks, being declared its first national champion. Despite racing in only three races, Rexford ended up in 12th place in the final points tally.

For 1950, Buesink continued his two-car team of Rexford and Moore on the expanding NASCAR circuit. Rexford competed in 17 of the 19 events, recording one win, 5 top-five finishes, 11 top-tens.



Bill's lone victory came in the "Poor Man's 500" at Canfield, OH (photo left). The race was so named because it was held the same day, May 30, 1950, as the other more notable Memorial Day race in Indianapolis. Rexford, driving a '50 Olds #60, took the lead from Curtis Turner on the 121st lap and led the remaining 80 circuits to score a two-lap victory over Glenn Dunnaway and teammate Lloyd Moore. Bill received \$1,000 in prize money and another \$400 in lap money, the first time bonuses for leading laps had ever been offered in a NASCAR race.

Bill's other top finishes in 1950 were a 5th at Rochester, NY, a 4th at Hillsboro, NC, a third at Winchester, IN, and a 4th in the first-ever Southern 500 in Darlington, SC.

Rexford's average finishing position of eleventh with just three DNFs (did not finish) were good enough to make him the 1950 NASCAR Champion, edging out Fireball Roberts of Daytona Beach, FL, and Lee Petty for the honor. Teammate Moore completed the season in fourth place marking a very successful year for car-owner Buesink.

Bill Rexford, NASCAR champion 1950As champion, Rexford received \$2000, a Bulova wristwatch, and a 1951 Nash Rambler convertible. As agreed upon in their deal, and as they had been doing all year, Bill split the money with Buesink. However, a dispute arose between the two men regarding the car. Julian believed Bill should compensate him for half its value, whereas Rexford felt that he had earned the exclusive right to the car. Rexford ultimately traded the Nash for a hardtop model that he raced on quarter-mile tracks. The disagreement that developed over the car eventually led to the demise of the Rexford-Buesink team.

The following year, Buesink promoted Moore to lead driver status giving him 22 NASCAR starts. Julian also employed seven other drivers to drive 24 other entries. Meanwhile, Rexford got just five rides in Buesink cars that season. He managed to pick up six other rides from other owners. Although, Bill put Buesink's Oldsmobile on the pole for the second annual "Poor Man's 500" at Canfield, he lost control of the car on the 115th lap and catapulted over the guardrail, landed in a ditch and received chest injuries. Bill struggled for the remainder of the year, recording just one top-ten finish, a 6th at Rochester.

The Buesink-Rexford relationship continued to sour in 1952 as Bill got just two NASCAR starts in Julian's #60 Ford resulting in an 8th and a 16th place finish. Meanwhile Moore and Jim Paschal combined for 14 races in Buesink machines.

Similarly in 1953, Rexford got two NASCAR starts for Buesink, however with much better results, a 5th at Rochester and a 10th at Langhorne.

1953 also marked the debut of a new sanctioning body, MARC (Midwest Association for Race Cars) that was organized by a former NASCAR official, John Marcum, and headquartered in Toledo, OH. MARC offered new racing opportunities for Bill. He drove a car co-owned by Bob Duell of Frewsburg, NY in the new circuit's races. Although complete historical records for the full 1953 MARC season are lacking, Rexford drove to 5th place finishes at Akron, OH and Canfield. He completed the season in sixth place in the final points tally behind champion Jim Romine from Youngstown, OH.

His MARC participation did not go unnoticed by NASCAR czar Bill France who viewed MARC as a threat to his racing empire. France suspended Rexford from NASCAR competition and fined him \$1000, a penalty Rexford refused to pay.

For 1954, Bill moved to Dayton, OH and secured rides from several car owners on the MARC circuit. His best finish was a 4th place result at Dayton, OH. He found himself in 10th position in the season-long points chase behind champion, Bucky Sager of Toledo, OH.

Rexford continued to pick up rides in MARC races in 1955, with at least eight top-ten results. He won at Dayton on April 24th and at Toledo, OH on July 10th driving a '55 Buick. At season's end he was scored in 7th place on the final points chart behind champion Iggy Katona from Milan, MI.

In 1956, Bill ran a few more MARC races including a 4th at Ft. Wayne, IN, a 5th at Dayton, and a 6th at Salem, IN. This was his last year behind the wheel of a race car.



Bill then moved to Parker, AZ where he began a small business: B.R. Trucking. Twenty-four years later, he moved to Hemet, CA and where he lived until his death on April 18, 1994 at the age of 67.

He is the father of five children: William, Brian and Brenda from his first marriage to Thelma, and Peggy Lee and Dennis from his marriage to Peggy.

Bill was inducted into the Friends of Auto Racing (FOAR) Hall of Fame in 1995 and the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 1997.

But what about the NASCAR Hall of Fame?

I'll leave the final word on that subject to Richard Petty, the seven-time NASCAR champion, the winner of 200 races, and a person universally known as the King of NASCAR. "No matter what anybody won... 16 races or one or none, anybody who wins our championship belongs in our Hall of Fame."