

Bill France Jr. was - and is - NASCAR

by Bill Center

Bill France Jr. knew about power, for he was a powerful man.

"Clout is not necessarily how hard you swing the bat," the czar of stock car racing said some 5 1/2 years ago during a meeting in his office at Daytona International Speedway.

"It's how hard the pitcher thinks you can swing it."

At the time, the most powerful man in American racing was discussing baseball and the fear certain hitters put in pitchers. But he could have been talking about his position as the leader of NASCAR. Probably, he was.

France had clout, in a number of directions.

In a 31-year reign as chairman of NASCAR, Bill France Jr. took what had been a regional organization started by his father in 1947 and expanded into one of the world's greatest sport empires.

During his tenure, NASCAR went national without losing the southern charm that made it attractive. Once regionally-recognized drivers became national celebrities and a sport that had no network exposure in 1972 now has a television package that is second only to that of the NFL.

In just over three decades under France, everything about NASCAR grew and changed, except for one small item.

NASCAR was born a France family operation. It remains so today.

The key to NASCAR's growth and success was France, whose start in NASCAR was far from the corporate boardrooms where he would eventually be welcomed.

Shortly after his father founded NASCAR, Bill Jr. was at work selling programs. When Daytona

International Speedway was being built in the late 1950s, Bill Jr. was driving a bulldozer that helped form the famed high-banked turns.

"I'm not a genius," he said sitting there in his office in 2002. "But I'm a hard worker."

But he was a genius.

Shortly after becoming the leader of NASCAR, Bill France Jr. was the leader of a fuel-consuming sport at a time when gas stations across the land were running dry. Then the economy went into the tank.

Not only did France steer his sport through those crises, he quickly developed a program to expand stock car racing's horizons far beyond the south.

He was a leader with unlimited power who wielded it for the universal good. The good of NASCAR was always paramount in his mind. No team, no driver - not Richard Petty, not Dale Earnhardt - was bigger than NASCAR.

Nor was France. Nor did he want to be.

"Bill is tireless in his devotion to this sport," right-hand man Jim Hunter said just before that 2002 meeting.

France negotiated billion-dollar television deals and launched new superspeedways with his signature on a contract. But he also fretted over the fine print in rules changes that could affect driver safety or the bottom line of smaller teams.

NASCAR exploded on all fronts under France.

Attendance not only doubled, much of the expansion was in the female market. Television ratings soared. And because NASCAR fans are among the most loyal in sports, corporate America poured sponsorship dollars into NASCAR.

By the time he stepped down as chairman in 2003 because of failing health, France was running an empire. Presidents would call to see if they could drop by for a NASCAR race.

But France remained true to the kid selling programs and the young man on the bulldozer in the hot Florida sun.

The extremely rare benevolent dictator.

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