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Louise Smith

July 31, 1916-April 15, 2006

Nationality: American

Raced between 1946-1956

Origins: Louise Smith was born in Georgia and raised in Greenville, South Carolina, sharing a love of cars with her father and brothers. Her father William Duvall, a mechanic, embraced her initial interest and taught Smith how to drive when she was only four years old. During her first joy-ride, Smith was already behind the wheel of her father's Model T when she realized she still didn't know how to properly brake. The car finally came to a stop after crashing through the family chicken coop, and Louise survived the ordeal without a scratch. Throughout her teens, Smith worked in the local cotton mill as a weaver, attending school for only a few hours and then clocking in a 12-hour day at the mill. At the age of 19, she met Noah Smith, the owner of one of the largest automotive junkyards in the region, and they two were married in 1935. Noah's success allowed Smith to leave her job at the mill and surround herself with customized cars and others who shared her love of machines.

Early Influences: As a young woman, Smith was frequently seen speeding down Greenville's roads, outrunning area police, and riding alongside moonshine runners. When Bill France, Sr. visited the Greenville-Pickens Speedway as a promoter in the 1940s, he was interested in supporting a female driver in the hope of gathering publicity and increasing track attendance. Locals mentioned Smith's fast-driving reputation and France knew he had found a woman who could compete with the men then dominating the sport. Never attending a race as a spectator or competitor before, Smith had no idea what to expect when France convinced her to enter a race at her local speedway in 1946. The only advice promoters gave her for her first outing was to drive fast and stop only if she saw a red flag being waved. When Smith crossed the finished line in third place, she

noticed a waving checkered flag and her competitors returning to the pits, but continued to circle the track, unaware the race was over. It wasn't until one of her crew members remembered Smith was never informed a checkered flag was used to end the race that officials pulled out the red flag and Smith finally returned to the pits.

Racing Accomplishments:

- Won 38 races during her 11 year racing career while driving Midgets, Modifieds, Sportsman, and Late Model cars.
- One of first woman to compete in the Grand National series (now known as the NASCAR Nextel series).
- Promoted Bill France, Sr.'s newly formed NASCAR from Florida to Canada, competing against the likes of Buck Baker, Curtis Turner, Red Byron, Roy Hall, and the Flock Brothers.
- Survived horrific wreck at Occoneechee Speedway (NC) in 1947. Smith set a track record during her first qualifying lap, but later her car was sent airborne and hit four or five trees before coming to a stop. It took 36 minutes to free Smith from the twisted remains of her car and she required serious medical attention (48 stitches and four pins in her knee) before she could return to racing.

Interesting Fact: In 1947, Smith told her husband she was headed to Florida for a vacation while driving his new Ford Coupe. Instead, she drove to Daytona and entered a local race. She ended up in a seven car crash, completely wrecking the car. When Smith returned home via bus, her husband asked what happened to the car; she apologetically told him it broke down in Augusta, GA. Her husband then pulled out a copy of the local Greenville paper, which prominently displayed a picture of Louise and the headline "Louise Smith Wrecks at Daytona," blowing her cover.

Life off the Track: Smith retired from racing in 1956, but could not stay away from the track for long. In 1971 she returned to the sport, this time as a sponsor for up-and-coming drivers, including Bobby Wawak, Larry Pearson, and Ronnie Thomas during his 1978 Rookie of the Year season. She also served as grand patron for Darlington Speedway's Miss Southern 500 Pageant from 1977 to 1989. Smith volunteered for numerous local causes and raised chow dogs in her spare time. After being placed in hospice care and battling cancer, Louise Smith died in 2006 at the age of 89 in Greenville, SC.

Awards and Recognition:

- First woman inducted into International Motorsports Hall of Fame (1999).
- Recognized (with stock car racer Sara Christian) with the Mildred Marcum Pioneer Award from the Women in the Winner's Circle Foundation (2008)

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