

Baker Rode Name, Great Career To NASCAR Hall Of Fame

By John Close, www.closefinishes.com
You'd expect a guy named Elzie Wylie to have a nickname.

You wouldn't expect him to be the toughest guy on the lot.

But that's exactly what you got, however, when you encountered Elzie Wylie 'Buck' Baker.

Baker, who passed away at the age of 83 in 2002, will join Rusty Wallace, Cotton Owens, Herb Thomas and Leonard Wood as the latest inductees to the NASCAR Hall of Fame this weekend. It's an honor befitting all named here, but especially for Baker, one of the true legends and pioneers of stock car racing.

By the time NASCAR was formed in 1947, Baker was already an established racer in the south. Starting his driving career in 1939, Baker's familiar No. 87 racers were always among the cars to beat as evidenced by his string of 27-straight modified stock car wins at the old Charlotte (NC Fairgrounds track).

In 1949, NASCAR came calling and Baker – a Charlotte city bus driver by trade - answered the bell wheeling a 1948 Kaiser to an 11th-place finish in NASCAR's inaugural 'Strictly Stock' race at Charlotte.

Baker's initial NASCAR successes were modest – but not significant - until 1952 when he steered a Hudson Hornet to his first series win at Columbia (SC) Speedway. The following year, Baker broke through scoring five poles and four wins – including his first Southern 500 at Darlington - driving an Oldsmobile for Charlotte area businessman Bob Griffin.

Four wins and a third in NASCAR final division point standings followed in 1954. Along with three more victories and a second in the final division standings in 1955, Baker had established himself as one of NASCAR's biggest stars.

But that was nothing yet.

After starting the 1956 season driving a Ford for team owner James Satcher in the first three events, Baker jumped ship to the new and powerful Carl Kiekhaefer-owned Chrysler 300 stock cars.

The results were instantaneous as Baker won his first race with the new team at Phoenix. Wins at Langhorne (PA), Richmond (VA), Greeneville (SC), Hillsboro (NC), Martinsville (VA), New Oxford (VA), Syracuse (NY), Montgomery (AL), Columbia (SC), Shelby (NC), Wilson (NC) and Charlotte followed and at the end

of the year, Baker was crowned the 1956 NASCAR Grand National (now Sprint Cup) champion.

Baker's final 1956 line – 14 wins in 48 races and a whopping 31 top-five and 39 top-10 finishes.

Despite his success, Baker bolted the Kiekhaefer team in 1957 to drive Chevys for Hugh Babb. The association lasted just 15 races with Baker winning four races and never finishing out of the top 10.

Baker then went back to driving his own cars starting Newport, TN in the 16th race of the 1957 NASCAR campaign. After finishing no worse than third in his first three events, Baker won at Jacksonville (FL) Speedway. Baker then closed the final 21 races of the season with 19 top-nine finishes including five wins – the last one coming in the final race of the season on the half-mile dirt track at Greensboro, NC.

In doing so, Baker not only became NASCAR's first back-to-back Grand National champion, but he did so driving for four different team owners.

Baker continued to drive his own iron in 1958 winning three times and finishing second in the points. Baker then closed out the decade with one win and 19 top-10's in the 1959 season leaving him with 40 victories in the decade and the mantle of one of NASCAR's greatest early drivers.

Baker would continue to compete in NASCAR for another 16 years hanging up his helmet after 635-career Strictly Stock/Grand National/Winston Cup starts. The last of his 46 career victories came at Darlington in 1964 – his third Southern 500 win - in a Ray Fox-owned Dodge.

In a 25-year career, Baker earned just a tick over \$362,000.

In 1998, Baker was named one of NASCAR's greatest 50 drivers. Today – and more importantly – Baker has earned NASCAR Hall of Fame status.

Baker will be enshrined in the Hall with fellow 'old school' NASCAR racers Owens and Thomas this coming weekend in Charlotte. We salute the Hall voters for including these three – along with Wallace and Wood – in this year's class.

It's an honor well deserved for all, but especially for Baker – a no-nonsense, gritty racer that wheeled his way from the seat of a city bus to NASCAR immortality.

Cap't Herb Emory's Pit Row Report: With New NASCAR Season, Changes



The engines crank up and the tune ups begin for Speedweeks in Daytona next month and part of the prep will take place in Charlotte and Las Vegas this year.

There are three NASCAR test sessions this month. The first in Daytona and then a two-day session drivers can participate in closer to most of their homes in Charlotte. The third round of testing will be in Las Vegas at the end of the month.

Get ready for other changes as the new season approaches. The first one that will hit you maybe the next name of the Busch Clash, Bud Shootout, you know that Saturday night race that used to be just for pole winners from the year before that kicks off the NASCAR racing in Daytona. It's not called any of those names anymore. This year's name for the event is the Sprint Unlimited.

There's lot of driver and number and sponsor changes and there will be confusion for the first few weeks for me as I attempt to keep track of those changes.

The young Legend Series drivers around the country are glad to hear some of the news out of the NASCAR offices. The minimum age of drivers for the Camping World Series is being lowered from 18 to 16. The teens will be restricted from driving on speedways over one-mile.

Georgia Driver David Ragan is back

with the No. 34 Sprint Cup team this year. Ragan's been busy over the NASCAR off season helping his dad, Ken, with their Ford dealership and getting hitched!

The Unadilla native married his longtime sweetheart Jacquelyn, had time to honeymoon, to sign up McCall Farm's Peanut Patch as a sponsor and to fill out entry forms for the races at the end of this month at Watermelon Capitol Speedway.

Peachtree City's Reed Sorenson had off season news that he is engaged. He plans to marry a North Carolina teacher.

The Jack Jackson/Peach Bowl Speedway reunion is set for Sunday, Jan. 27. It's the 24th year that the folks that remember the track gather to trade stories, photos and fun. The reunion will be held at the Austell American Legion, 3914 Ewing Road in Austell. We'll be collecting food again for A Gift of Love Services at the reunion. Susan Milam Morgan is organizing the event. You can call Susan at 770-942-6380 for more information.

NASCAR Datebook

Feb. 16 Shootout at Daytona (Sprint Unlimited)

Feb. 17 Daytona 500 Time Trials

Feb. 21 Budweiser Duel

Feb. 22 Daytona Camping World Truck Race

Feb. 23 Daytona Nationwide Race

Feb. 24 Daytona 500



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