

## Book Review of *The First Lady of Dirt: The Triumphs and Tragedy of Racing Pioneer Cheryl Glass*. By Bill Poehler. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024.

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*The First Lady of Dirt: The Triumphs and Tragedy of Racing Pioneer Cheryl Glass.* By Bill Poehler. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024.

August 30, 1980. Skagit Speedway. The final night of the season. The last race of the evening.

Despite a three-hour delay due to electrical outages, Cheryl Glass was ready. This was her last chance of the season to make her mark. Her car was never in better shape.

She was at her best that evening. She led the final 25 of 35 laps as she won her first sprint car main event.

She was the first woman to win such a race. She was the first Black woman to win a race in history.

Reflecting on her win later, she said, “I didn’t know that women, particularly a Black woman, wasn’t supposed to drive a sprint car, wasn’t supposed to be ‘Rookie of the year’ and wasn’t supposed to win main events and ‘walk’ the good ole boys.” (p. 58).

The other racers, all white men, complained. The result stood. As Jerry Day, who was on Cheryl’s team, chided the other racers, “You just got your asses whipped by an 18-year-old Black chick.” (p. 60).

Little did Cheryl know at the time that this was the greatest night of her professional career.

Only racing aficionados today remember the name Cheryl Glass. Her place in racing history, Black sports history, and women’s history, has largely been forgotten. In the past few decades, there have been scholarly articles and popular books on a host of Black women athletes who broke barriers in the twentieth century, including Wilma Rudolph (track and field), Ora Mae Washington (basketball and tennis), Louise Stokes (track and field), Toni Stone (baseball), and Bessie Coleman (aviation). The rise of NASCAR over the last twenty years into a billion-dollar sport has largely obscured Glass and her place as a pioneer in the sport’s history.

We can thank Bill Poehler, however, for resurrecting this long forgotten but important story of Glass and her contribution to racing car history. Poehler combines his two passions—racing and writing—to give us a wonderfully researched, well written, and highly enjoyable book on Glass, her short life, and important contribution to the sport.

Poehler’s first book, *The Brown Bullet: Rajo Jack’s Drive to Integrate Auto Racing*, also sought to bring a previously unknown story to a wider audience. His interest is Black race car drivers, and the challenges they faced and barriers they overcame to achieve their dreams and make racecar driving a more inclusive sport. In *The First Lady of Dirt*, Poehler situates Glass’s life, accomplishments, and struggles through the lens of a Black woman in the late 1970s and 1980s within the racing industry and larger American society, capturing her journey through her experiences as a Black woman.

Poehler’s deep dive into Glass’s life benefits from interviews with former drivers and individuals within the racing industry. His background in journalism proved helpful as he accessed newspaper articles, court records, police reports, and other public records. Finally, he received

support from Cheryl's mother, Shirley, whose only goal was that "I want my daughter to get her due." (201).

I am guessing that Shirley would not be disappointed.

Born as the only daughter of Marvin and Shirley Glass, Cheryl showed an early propensity to achieve at the highest level and her chosen sport was race car driving. Her parents spared no expense or support in getting her career off the ground. She raced locally in the Washington State area, ultimately capturing the final race at the 1980 Skagit Speedway. However, Cheryl's later life was not nearly as successful nor as happy as that moment.

Cheryl continued racing, although she never achieved the same success. She suffered several horrific injuries but kept following her dream, rather than listening to her body. She married, divorced, and opened her own wedding dress business. However, she suffered from symptoms of mental illness and had run-ins with neighbors which involved the police and courts.

Glass died in 1997 at the age of 35 from what Poehler believes might have been chronic traumatic encephalopathy, commonly referred to as CTE. Although CTE was unknown during her time, her many head injuries and associated symptoms largely point to CTE.

It is unknown what type of racer Glass could have been if born twenty years later, but regardless, her important achievements shine through this book and are part of the larger discussion of NASCAR history and pioneering Black women athletes in the twentieth century.

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