Atlanta Motor Speedway is one of the oldest and most popular stops on NASCAR's Winston Cup circuit. The two Winston Cup events hosted by the speedway each year attract crowds of nearly 250,000 fans from all fifty states and several foreign countries—consistently the first and second highest attendance levels for single-day sporting events in Georgia.

A group of Atlanta real-estate developers led by Garland Bagley, seeking to take advantage of a super-speedway boom started by the successful launching of Florida’s Daytona International Speedway in 1959, built the one-and-a-half-mile speedway twenty-five miles south of Atlanta in Hampton (Henry County). Plagued with financial difficulties and construction delays from the start, Atlanta International Raceway (as it was initially called) hosted its first race on July 31, 1960. A crowd of 25,000 braved the mud and unfinished facilities to see Glenn "Fireball" Roberts win the inaugural event. Since then the speedway has hosted at least two Winston Cup races annually, numerous races in NASCAR’s Busch Series, races sanctioned by the Automobile Racing Club of America, and fourteen races for Formula One cars sanctioned by the U.S. Auto Club, Championship Auto Racing Teams, and the Indy Racing League.

The Atlanta Speedway struggled for much of its early existence, changing ownership and management numerous times and even being subjected to reorganization under Chapter 10 bankruptcy provisions in the 1970s. In 1990, however, speedway magnate Bruton Smith purchased the facility, renamed it Atlanta Motor Speedway, and proceeded to turn it into a state-of-the-art auto racing venue. Smith’s Speedway
Motorsports, Incorporated, has spent millions of dollars to refurbish and expand the track to bring the total number of permanent seats to 124,000, while adding 141 luxury suites and the nine-story Tara Place, which houses offices, banquet facilities, and 46 condominiums. The track itself was reconfigured in 1997, when the start-finish line was moved to what was the backstretch and two doglegs were added to the new front stretch to improve the fans' view of the racing.

Atlanta’s importance as a venue on the Winston Cup circuit increased in 1987, when the speedway began a fourteen-year run as the site of the final race of the season. This made the fall Atlanta race particularly appealing in years when the Winston Cup championship came down to the final race. Perhaps the most storied race in Atlanta Motor Speedway history came in such a year, 1992. On November 15 the Hooters 500 attracted a huge crowd to witness NASCAR legend Richard Petty’s final race and a battle among five drivers with a mathematical chance to win the championship. The favorite to win the championship, Davey Allison, crashed on the 253rd lap, leaving Georgia’s favorite son, Bill Elliott, and Alan Kulwicki to battle for the title. Although Elliott won the race, Kulwicki finished second and led one more lap than Elliott, which gave him five bonus points for leading the most laps and the Winston Cup championship by ten points. After the race Richard Petty commented on the reaction of the fans: “Nobody left. There was so much going on. You had a race winner, a new champion, and me running my last race. I wish we had this much enthusiasm for all the races.” Later the race gained additional significance as the first Winston Cup race for Jeff Gordon, who would dominate Winston Cup racing for the rest of the 1990s.

Although inexperienced or journeyman racers have occasionally won Winston Cup races at Atlanta, most often the winner of an Atlanta race is a skilled driver. Indeed, the winners of multiple races at Atlanta reads like a “who’s who” of Winston Cup racing. Multiple winners include Jeff Gordon, Fred Lorenzen, David Pearson, and Darrell Waltrip (each with three wins); Bobby Allison and Bill Elliott (each with five wins); Bobby Labonte and Richard Petty (each with six wins); Cale Yarborough (seven wins); and the late Dale Earnhardt, who holds the record with nine wins.

Since the 1997 renovation of the track, Atlanta Motor Speedway has become the fastest and one of the most competitive tracks on the Winston Cup circuit. Qualifying speeds at the track have exceeded 190 miles per hour in recent years, and the races themselves invariably feature more than thirty lead changes, almost double the average for a Winston Cup race.

Atlanta Motor Speedway also regularly hosts car shows, corporate functions, outdoor concerts, and even dog shows.

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