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**SPEEDING, SPENDING, AND SPONSORS: TOURISM AND THE
NASCAR WINSTON CUP EXPERIENCE**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series and an analysis of how stock car racing has become a focal point for tourism in the region around Charlotte, North Carolina. The article examines how businesses have capitalized on the loyalty and financial strength of Winston Cup race fans by making themselves spin-off attractions connected loosely to the sport of stock car racing.

Evidence to support claims made in this article comes from the author's fieldwork within the Charlotte-based Winston Cup community. This includes observations made by the author during the summer of 1997 while in North Carolina promoting his new book on NASCAR racing. The article strives to explain how professional sport can be treated as a form of cultural tourism, and how racing fans look beyond the speedway for ways to enjoy their leisure time and spend their disposable income.

INTRODUCTION

My new book, From Moonshine to Madison Avenue: A Cultural History of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series, had just been published, and I was invited to be a guest author at an event celebrating "The Champions of Speed" in Mooresville, North Carolina. Mooresville is a nice town situated off Interstate 77, a suburban community roughly twenty miles north of downtown Charlotte. Located near the shores of Lake Norman, Mooresville is known as "Race City, USA." This title stems from the fact that Mooresville is home to many of the race teams competing in NASCAR's Winston Cup, Busch Grand National, and Craftsman Truck divisions. Two industrial parks, one off the interstate and one near the Mooresville dragstrip, contain many of stock car racing's top teams, the buildings looking more like offices for software firms than garages, a stark difference from when I first toured some of these race shops ten years ago in 1987. Back then, they were little more than just metal pole barns with one or two large garage doors on one side away from the road. In those days, they were purely functional--places to work on a car or

load a tractor trailer for a trip to Alabama or Michigan.

One would think that having written a book on NASCAR, and having been a race fan all my life, nothing new would surprise me regarding the sport. My eyes really opened, however, during the two weeks I was in Mooresville at the level of interest in off-track recreation offered to tourists, fans who traveled hundreds of miles to get as close as they could to the sport itself.

What this all-encompassing fascination with NASCAR race teams has done is to create a unique form of tourism that is based mainly in the town of Mooresville, North Carolina (although there are other teams in nearby towns such as Harrisburg and Concord). Mooresville is at the center of the NASCAR map because it is home for so many teams, as well as for the men and women who build the cars and make them go fast. The positive side is read in dollars and cents--NASCAR fans come from all over the world with money to spend on everything from motel rooms and meals to T-shirts, hats, and used racing tires. The downside of this explosion in stock car racing's popularity is that it has forced an increase in the 32-race schedule to satisfy the growing demand of fans located all across America. These extra races--three slated for 1998 alone--will strain race teams that are already overworked. More races on the schedule will mean more preparation and travel, and less time to operate their shops as tourist attractions.

THEORY

Much of NASCAR's success stems from the fact that stock car racing embodies traits that

are considered essential to our mythological notion of what America represents. America is a nation of technological material culture--things like airplanes, televisions, computers, VCRs, and automobiles. Machines like the automobile are held in high esteem. Americans cannot live without their cars, and our culture leads us to believe that we have to own a vehicle. We live, and sometimes die, by the machines we create, produce, purchase, and operate. Individual ownership equates into individual freedom--the ability to travel throughout America wherever and whenever necessary. Other traits, such as the need to be competitive and the need to be successful, are fueled by the automobile. All of these complex issues come together as a central part of American culture.

Attending a Winston Cup event, or visiting a Winston Cup race shop, comes under the heading of what Gail Dexter Lord calls "cultural tourism" (4). Cultural tourism, according to Ms. Lord, "focuses on the meanings and patterned ways of being that are fundamental to identity and self-worth" (4). For Winston Cup fans, following the series is much more than simply cheering for your favorite driver. To be a Winston Cup race fan is to consider yourself a part of the entire NASCAR community, a person who is involved and connected not only for his love of the sport, but for how the sport reaffirms who he is and what he believes: rugged individualism, patriotism, and a direct connection to the cars being driven. Ford and Chevrolet owners identify with the Thunderbirds and Monte Carlos competing on the track. The NASCAR Winston Cup Series is more than just a division of professional sport; it is a vital subculture that includes both participants and fans alike. Wherever the race takes place, the nearby communities benefit.

ETHNOGRAPHY

The area surrounding Charlotte, North Carolina, is one such community. Charlotte Motor Speedway is just north of center city Charlotte, but the facility there hosts two Winston Cup races each season. The Charlotte region and its suburbs make up the physical "hub" of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series. Numerous businesses operate either within the sport of stock car racing or in support of the tourist traffic that stock car racing attracts to the area. Gift shops, museums, and racing-oriented restaurants abound in the greater Mooresville area. These businesses help to ease the pressure of NASCAR fans eager to tour team shops, while fulfilling the basic needs of visitors such as providing them with meals and souvenirs.

The key to NASCAR-based tourism is to satisfy the fans' desire for contact with the Winston Cup environment while keeping the fans from directly bothering the mechanics and fabricators who are busy preparing for the next race. Many racing shops have done away with their "open door" policies simply because they get too many visitors. In November of 1987, my wife and I visited Travis Carter's Skoal Bandit race shop near Taylorsville, North Carolina, where he and his team built cars for Harry Gant. We had met Gant earlier that day when we stopped for lunch at his restaurant, and he suggested that we visit the team's shop.

After a short drive, we found ourselves in front of a large building. A Skoal Bandit stock car was perched atop a tall metal pole near the road, marking the location of Carter's shop. We saw that one of the garage doors was open, so we approached the three men standing there talking in the cold November drizzle. A man in a Skoal

Bandit dress shirt greeted us with a smile. "Come on in," he said, "Have a look around and make yourselves at home. The car we're building for Daytona is on the stands down there if you want to check it out."

My wife and I were like kids in a candy store. One of the top teams in NASCAR Winston Cup Series racing was at our beck and call. I immediately headed for the Daytona car, which was skinned in bare sheet metal and up on jackstands in a corner of the shop, while Bonnie made a beeline, camera in hand, for two completed cars all decked out in the green and white paint scheme of Gant's famous #33.

After finishing his conversation with the two men in the doorway, the man in the Skoal shirt came over to visit with us. He introduced himself as the team's engine builder, and explained that the two men in the door were interested in buying one of the team's older cars to race in a lower division. As I looked around the team's car hauler, a tractor trailer brightly painted to match the Skoal race car, the engine builder showed my wife where he and his staff built the team's motors. Bonnie saw the dynamometer, or "dyno" room, which was used for testing finished engines, and the team's physical training area, complete with a universal gym.

As we moved about the shop, studying the tools and parts all neatly arranged for easy access, the engine builder apologized for not having his key to the team's storage area with him that afternoon. "We've got some nice Skoal Bandit watches," he explained, "and we've got some jeans back there that look like they're your size. They're like these." He turned and showed us the Skoal Bandit racing team logo embroidered onto the right rear pocket of his pants. "I'd see you got some stuff if I had my key on this ring."

Our visit to the Skoal Bandit garage in Taylorsville set the stage for how we looked at other race shops in the Charlotte area. Since that November afternoon in 1987, we have noticed how race teams have reduced what fans can and cannot see. One reason is that the sport has grown dramatically in popularity over the past ten years and would not be able to accommodate the crowds. Another reason is that Winston Cup teams are under more pressure now than they were a decade ago, so time and secrecy are of the essence. Corporate sponsors expect good results quickly and often, and this has put many race teams under the gun to produce. If a team fails to do well, however "doing well" is defined by the sponsor, they could find themselves without necessary financial backing.

As a result of this pressure to perform, most Winston Cup race teams limit the access allowed to visitors. Many teams have established tour schedules, especially during busy weeks like race week between the Winston Select and the Coca-Cola 600 in late May at Charlotte Motor Speedway. Teams during such hectic times will hold two tours each day. Some NASCAR teams have even installed special viewing windows or observation areas where tourists are able to look into the shop area without actually entering the work space itself. This allows fans to see their favorite stock cars and race teams upclose without hindering the shop personnel.

Other NASCAR Winston Cup teams, like Darrell Waltrip's Darwal Racing and Rick Hendrick's Hendrick Motorsports operations, have gone so far as to create special team museums for the many visitors who come to their shops. These museums contain historic race cars and team memorabilia, along with display cases full of

trophies, uniforms, photographs, and other "exhibits." This is a beneficial move for Winston Cup teams because it gives tourists more to see than they would during a standard shop visit, and it also allows the teams to customize what the fans get to see. A race engine that won a special event could be put on display minus the illegal carburetor that gave the motor extra horsepower. Secrets of success are kept quiet, while visitors get a close look at the winning engine that "meets" every NASCAR requirement.

Another benefit of opening team museums for the fans is that it enables individual race teams to have their own gift shop. Why have tourists spend their hard-earned money at a typical souvenir store when they could buy items right from their favorite driver's garage? This is an idea that has solid business philosophy behind it. Race teams generate more profits from sales in their own gift shops because they can effectively eliminate the outside retailer. Why should Hendrick Motorsports make less of a percentage off a T-shirt sold at Bob's Victory Lane Souvenir Shop in the local shopping mall when the team can sell the same exact merchandise itself?

Teams with their own gift shops can also capitalize on impulse sales. The little boy who spends twenty minutes studying Darrell Waltrip's first championship-winning stock car at Darwal Racing's museum can ask his father to buy him a 1:24 scale diecast model of that same car before the family even leaves the building. If the boy had to wait until his father found the same model car in an outside souvenir store, his excitement--and the potential for a guaranteed sale--might have time to wear off.

Giving tourists what they want when they want it is vital to maintaining a strong relationship between NASCAR and its fans, and the racing community near Charlotte has made sure visitors are shown a good time. For most tourists, this means getting up close and personal to the NASCAR culture. Winston Cup stock car racing is a lifestyle sport, meaning that the sport requires more than a passing professional interest.

People inside NASCAR racing live near their work. A fabricator (someone who shapes sheet metal and puts it onto the race car's framework) who works for a race team in Mooresville will most likely live in Mooresville, or at least in one of the towns nearby, like Cornelius or Davidson. A professional football player, on the other hand, might play for a team in New York, but live on a ranch in Montana. Living near the workplace is best for Winston Cup racing given the length of the season. The Winston Cup season stretches from mid-February until late November, but preparing race cars and testing them at various speedways makes the unofficial "season" a year-round job. During the summer months, when Winston Cup races are often held for ten consecutive weeks or more, time off for team members is virtually unknown.

The summer months are, however, the peak season for tourism relating to NASCAR. Late May is the busiest time of year for most Winston Cup teams because of the two-week emphasis on Charlotte Motor Speedway and Memorial Day weekend. Race week in the Charlotte area begins with the running of the Winston Select. The Winston Select is a special "all-star" event featuring any driver who has won a race the previous year, along with any driver who has previously been the Winston Cup champion. This non-points paying race is held on a Saturday night,

along with a qualifying race for any driver who has yet to score a recent win in what is called the Winston Open. The winner of the Winston Open moves into the field for the Winston Select in order to round out the starting field. These races are short and fast; the Winston Select ends with a ten-lap "shootout" with the winner taking home the biggest money of the night.

During the week following the Winston Select, the whole Charlotte region comes alive with race fans and stock car-oriented entertainment. Show cars are on display at various supermarkets or stores that cater to Winston Cup sponsors. Drivers appear at numerous events to meet the public and sign autographs, and many businesses around the area hold special race week festivities. A popular one is "John Boy and Billy's 'Breakfast of Champions,'" where two Charlotte-based radio hosts conduct a live program from the Sandwich Construction Company, a well-known NASCAR-based theme restaurant just a few miles from Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Another special race week event in Charlotte is Speed Street, which draws tens of thousands of visitors every day into the downtown area. Fans can see stock cars up close, hear live music, play games, meet their favorite drivers, and enjoy a full variety of local food in celebration of the race to be run on Memorial Day Sunday. I attended Speed Street this past May and was part of the largest one-day crowd ever assembled there. The Doobie Brothers played a free concert while kids played games set up by the Coca-Cola Company, whose name was on that weekend's big race.

The focal point of race week in Charlotte is the Coca-Cola 600, which is the longest event on the 32-race NASCAR Winston Cup

schedule. Practice and qualifying for the 600 begins during the week, with time trials being held at night under the lights that illuminate the 1.5-mile Charlotte Motor Speedway. Fans will come to town for all of the racing activity leading up to Memorial Day weekend, including paying upwards of ten dollars per person to watch practice and qualifying. For many who cannot get tickets to the main event, this substitutes as the next best thing.

Installing lights at Charlotte Motor Speedway was a boon to the area's economy because it freed visitors during the afternoon so they could see race shops and frequent local businesses. When the racing action had to be held during the daytime hours, people were required to stay at the speedway if they wanted to watch the events. Once night fell, the tourists would be limited to evening hour businesses like shopping malls, restaurants, or bars. With the speedway getting lights in 1992, racing could start in the late afternoon or early evening, allowing tourists to spend their free afternoons visiting race shops, museums, and amusement parks or giving them the chance to enjoy boating and swimming at nearby Lake Norman. Racing at night also made it easier for drivers to make personal appearances since they would not be "working" until early evening. The drivers and crews could spend time with their fans before heading to the speedway, much to the delight of the tens of thousands who traveled to Charlotte in hopes of seeing their heroes away from the track.

As a guest author at the Mooresville "Champions of Speed" celebration during race week, I was able to experience the advantages of night racing on tourism firsthand. The "Champions of Speed" events were scheduled for weekdays between nine in the morning and six in the evening.

Everything was focused around the North Carolina Auto Racing Hall of Fame, a museum and gift shop located inside the Lakeside Industrial Park in Mooresville. The museum displayed various kinds of race cars from throughout the history of motorsports while hosting a number of special events in conjunction with a local newspaper called Race City News, which concentrates on the racing business in Mooresville. These events included personal appearances by legendary drivers and familiar television commentators, as well as several additional displays including Winston Cup show cars and dragsters.

The amount of tourist traffic in Mooresville was hard to believe. Crowds began swarming the Hall of Fame on the Friday before the Winston Select--a full weekend before the "Champions of Speed" festivities kicked off. People from all over America made their way through Lakeside Industrial Park hoping to catch a glimpse of a driver or a crew chief, or hoping to buy a special souvenir. I had met Jerry Cashman, executive director of the hall of fame, while finishing the research for my book, and I was impressed with the effort he and other Mooresville professionals were making to draw visitors into the area. The Lakeside Industrial Park, and all the connecting roads leading to it, reflected the benefits of teamwork and effective promotion.

As I approached Mooresville on I-77, the first thing I saw was a large brown sign just one-half mile or so from town. It was a sign erected by the state highway department announcing that the North Carolina Auto Racing Hall of Fame was just off the next exit. The sign was a recent addition, having not been there the last time I was on the interstate. Later that day, Cashman told me

that the sign had tripled his tourist traffic in the six months since it had been installed.

As I exited I-77, I was confronted with stopped traffic on the ramp. The stoplight at the end of the ramp swung over a tangle of cars, pickup trucks, and motor homes. All vehicles were headed in the direction of Lakeside Industrial Park, whose access road was just a few hundred yards from the off-ramp intersection. I made the right hand turn that put me near the park entrance, and saw a number of cars jockeying for position along the roadside. A man had set up a small blue tent in the parking lot of a Texaco gas station across from the industrial park, where he was selling sunglasses "as seen on TV" for \$5.00 a pair. Given the strong sun of North Carolina, and the fact that many of these travelers would be spending the next week outdoors, the man under the blue tent was doing a brisk business.

As I turned left into Lakeside Industrial Park, I saw a line of cars crawling bumper-to-bumper past the sign that informed visitors where each business was located. Occasionally, a car or minivan would swing left onto the narrow access road that led to Sabco Racing and the Checkered Flag Restaurant, which sits on a small hill overlooking Sabco's shops and has one wall shaped like a large checkered flag unfurled in the wind. Even though the restaurant was closed--it being nine in the morning and not open for breakfast--visitors still stopped to see the building since it is a popular lunch hangout for the drivers and crews of the ten or so racing shops located within the park.

The cars that did not turn into Sabco Racing continued on through the industrial park. Most of the vehicles were headed toward the hall of fame, which sits on a side street across from Penske South Racing, the Roush

Racing shop of Jeff Burton, and the shops of Robert Pressley's Federal Mogul Ford Thunderbirds. Considering that the "Champions of Speed" events did not start until the next Monday, the number of visitors streaming into the hall of fame was impressive.

I entered the hall of fame and said a quick hello to Jerry Cashman, who was preparing a bank deposit of the morning's intake. Since my official duties as a guest would not start until Monday morning, I volunteered my services as a docent, going about the cars on display and answering any questions the visitors had. As I talked with people, I quickly realized how many of them came just to watch the Winston Select, which was to be run the following night. Some people explained that they had taken a week's vacation to visit Charlotte and attend both races, while others were using the all-star race as the focus of a three-day weekend.

Many came to Mooresville from incredible distances. One couple had flown to North Carolina from South Dakota just to watch the Winston Select. Another couple had flown south from Lansing, Michigan to see the Select. They were flying home Sunday morning to work for a couple of days before driving back to Charlotte for the Coca-Cola 600. On Memorial Day Monday, they would be headed north to Michigan in order to be back at work the next day.

Such is the dedicated nature of NASCAR Winston Cup fans. Because of the loyalty of these people--and their willingness to spend money--many businesses have embraced the NASCAR aesthetic and turned themselves into spin-off attractions. One does not have to look far throughout the Charlotte region to find dozens of NASCAR-oriented enterprises. In my book, I wrote about a

place called Montana's Steak House in Hickory, which is located nearly sixty miles northwest of Charlotte. Montana's looks like an ordinary restaurant from the outside, situated along a busy commercial strip not too far from Interstate 40. Hickory is a nice community, best known in racing circles for two things: as being the hometown of the Jarrett family (Ned, Glenn, and Dale--all of whom drove stock cars) and Hickory Speedway, which hosts weekly lower-level NASCAR events and occasional upper-level divisions like the Busch Grand National cars.

Given Hickory's reputation as a racing town, Montana's Steak House reflects the community's connection to motorsports. A patron will be seated in a dining room plastered with photographs, posters, and bent sheet metal from various race cars. Each booth is dedicated to a different driver, the wall space decorated with all sorts of driver-specific memorabilia. Along the ceiling of the dining room is a scale model of a speedway straightaway, complete with safety walls and lines painted on the "asphalt." Lined up in double-file formation along the "track" are scale models of actual NASCAR Winston Cup cars. Promotional items from beer distributors and other companies with ties to stock car racing are tacked up in what little wall space is available. The place looks like a great big den in a race fan's house.

But that's the idea. Montana's Steak House is packed on Saturday nights with race fans who are headed for the track. I first went to Montana's for that very reason; some friends of mine invited me to the races, and supper at Montana's was part of their pre-race ritual. The name "Montana" led me to believe that dinner would be served with a Western flair--the dining room highlighted by maps of the Oregon Trail and framed Remington prints.

How surprised I was to see stock cars instead of stockyards. The name implies Old West, but the decor emphasizes local history and tourist traffic.

Such examples are endless. Big Daddy's Oyster House in Cornelius, near Mooresville and Lake Norman, is decorated in a New England-like seafaring motif, yet there are Winston Cup stock cars and a Legends car poised along the roof of the building facing the road where passersby can see them easily. The same is true at the Sandwich Construction Company near Charlotte Motor Speedway. Several full-sized race cars on the roof greet visitors as they pull into the parking lot. Lancaster's Barbecue in Mooresville has a Winston Cup car parked in front of the entrance, and the walls inside are covered with NASCAR memorabilia.

The use of NASCAR artifacts helps restaurants like these identify themselves as being race fan-friendly. If race fans feel accepted and made at home, they will return during their next trip and spread support for the business by word of mouth. The Stock Car Cafe, a restaurant in Cornelius that opened in 1996, is part of a soon-to-be-national chain owned and operated by the Sandwich Construction Company. The Sandwich--as locals call it--gained a large clientele through its association with the NASCAR racing community. More Stock Car Cafes are planned for other Winston Cup cities, such as Bristol, Tennessee.

NASCAR itself has already jumped on the national chain bandwagon. The sanctioning body is opening two business endeavors that will compete against other operations for tourist traffic. A chain of NASCAR Cafes is being built throughout the South in areas of heavy race fan travel, including both Bristol and Nashville in Tennessee, and Myrtle

Beach, South Carolina. NASCAR is also going to operate a chain of souvenir stores called NASCAR Thunder. Some of these outlets are already open in such racing-based regions as Atlanta, Georgia, and Myrtle Beach. NASCAR Thunder has moved into some Northern areas for stock car racing like Ohio; one of the stores is open near Cincinnati, and another is slated for Chicago, Illinois.

All of these restaurants, shops, and stores are examples of how the NASCAR Winston Cup Series reflects cultural tourism. A visitor to the area around Charlotte, North Carolina will quickly recognize the role that big time stock car racing plays in the region's economy. The businesses that support racing, the jobs created by racing, and the spin-off attractions connected to racing are all part of what makes Charlotte one of America's fastest growing cities. Despite the influx of high-tech industry and research, it is the sport of Winston Cup stock car racing that helps bring hundreds of thousands of tourists into the area each and every year.

The NASCAR Winston Cup Series helps tourism in several distinct ways. Stock car racing is a sport based on consumption, and consuming goods is something that racing fans do very well. A Winston Cup car can consume hundreds of gallons of Unocal gasoline and dozens of Goodyear tires during a race. In the same amount of time, a Winston Cup fan can consume hot dogs, cold beer, popcorn, and manage to take home souvenirs worth hundreds of dollars. When Peter Golenbock did research for his book American Zoom: Stock Car Racing From the Dirt Tracks to Daytona (Macmillan, 1993), he found that the average Winston Cup fan at the Daytona 500 spends \$200 on souvenirs alone--over and above the price of his ticket, which often ranges

somewhere between \$50 and \$125 per seat (1, p. 8).

Much of the United States' population considers itself a Winston Cup racing fan. Over 10 million people attended Winston Cup stock car races in 1995, and over 120 million watched them on television (2, p. 4). Golenbock cited a 1990 Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company survey that found "a full 26 percent of Americans are race fans, including 14 million women" (1, p. 3). This number, by today's standards, is considered low, especially when given the strong female following behind a young driver like Jeff Gordon. Gordon, who turned 26 last August, entered the Winston Cup Series in 1993, where his movie star good looks and his Midwestern "boy next door" demeanor immediately won him huge numbers of female fans from across a wide generational spectrum. At the race track, teenaged girls will scream for his autograph, while their mothers snap his photograph and their grandmothers comment on what a nice young man he is. Through it all, Gordon continues to do what he does best: win races on a consistent basis and keep himself a constant threat to win the Winston Cup championship.

Gordon's success has been a double-edged sword of sorts. While legions of women buy his souvenirs and cheer him to victory, men will comment on the advantages Gordon's high-financed team has over the rest of the field. Men are more likely than women to accuse Gordon and his Dupont-sponsored "Rainbow Warriors" of cheating. Every driver introduction ceremony before every Winston Cup race has the young Gordon, who won the 1995 Winston Cup championship and who finished second for the title in 1996, being booed loudly from the assembled crowd in the grandstands. The

"boo birds," who are often men (and Dale Earnhardt fans), generate little more than a grin from Jeff Gordon. In the world of NASCAR, getting booed is a good sign; if the fans are booing, you must be winning races.

This kind of behavior--race fans chastising a successful driver--is what makes the NASCAR Winston Cup Series such a profit-generating enterprise. Winston Cup racing fans are loyal to their favorite drivers, much more than the traditional "stick-and-ball" sports fans. If a driver changes teams, sponsors, or make of car, his fans will continue to support him. Some drivers, like Bill Elliott or Michael Waltrip, will enjoy almost fanatical popularity with fans, despite the fact they have gone two or more seasons without a win. This is the aspect of stock car racing that teams, sponsors, and speedway communities love: Winston Cup fans will support and attend Winston Cup races, regardless of their favorite driver's performance prior to the event.

The popularity of Winston Cup racing has led to the construction of new speedways near Fort Worth, Texas, and Los Angeles, California. On August 12, 1997, another new speedway--this one located near Las Vegas--announced that it would host a Winston Cup race on March 1, 1998. Other speedways, like Bristol, Dover Downs, Atlanta, Pocono, and Charlotte have built additional seating to alleviate demands for tickets, with most of the new seats being sold before they were built. Prior to Pocono's second race in July of 1997, bulletins were broadcast over regional media outlets warning fans to stay away from the speedway unless they already had a ticket in hand. As NASCAR approaches the twenty-first century, something will have to be done

to meet the public's demand for more racing events.

Ironically, automobile racing--unlike hockey, baseball or football--is not a sport that is always casually recognized by the average American. Stock car racing is marginalized even more because it never drew significant national attention until the last ten years or so. For most Americans, the sport of automobile racing prompts thoughts of the Indianapolis 500, the spectacle of speed held on Memorial Day Sunday each May. Such recognition has evolved through history since 1911, when Ray Harroun won the inaugural battle at the Brickyard. Time has been kind to the Indy 500 because age has turned this event into a piece of national folklore. The names, dates, speeds, and machines have all been incorporated into our understanding of what automobile racing is. Ironically, however, large numbers of race fans associate Memorial Day Sunday with NASCAR's Coca-Cola 600, the main reason being the 1995 split between CART (Championship Auto Racing Teams) and the IRL (Indy Racing League), which left many racing fans divided.

Stock car racing, on the other hand, is only now gaining such recognition as an American tradition. The Daytona 500, first run in 1959, is just now earning a reputation as "The Great American Race." This has come primarily through television coverage. In 1979, CBS began broadcasting the race live in its entirety to a national audience. That was the year when Cale Yarborough and Donnie Allison wrapped fenders on the last lap while fighting for the win, a move that caused both drivers to slide off the track into the infield grass. While Richard Petty crossed the finish line for his seventh Daytona 500 victory, Yarborough and Allison broke into fisticuffs alongside their

crippled race cars. Donnie Allison's brother, Bobby, also got involved, trying to fend off the two as they swung in anger and frustration at each other after 199 laps of hard driving. While the three drivers fought it out under gray Florida skies, America was watching at home, fascinated by the scenario unfolding over national television. NASCAR Winston Cup racing, through ruffled sheet metal and bruised egos, had found itself an audience.

Daytona Beach, once a traditional vacation spot for college coeds, is now synonymous with the "Super Bowl" of stock car racing. Race fans flocked to Daytona in such large numbers that NASCAR felt compelled to open an interactive museum called Daytona USA, where families can learn about stock car racing in a hands-on environment. The most recent Daytona 500-winning car is on display, along with exhibits showcasing the history of racing at Daytona Beach since the early 1900s. Daytona USA helps foster the close relationship between professional sport and corporate America with its colorful displays and high-tech attractions. Patrons leave the interactive museum with a better understanding of NASCAR, which in turn helps to increase the sport's national audience.

This audience proves to be highly loyal, supporting not only the drivers and their names, but the corporate sponsors whose names are painted on the cars. Sponsorship of racing cars has been part of the sport since 1910, when Barney Oldfield, America's "Speed King," barnstormed throughout the country in cars brightly emblazoned with the distinctive company logo of Firestone Tires. Oldfield thrilled crowded grandstands at fairgrounds across the United States, his racer carrying the slogan "Firestone Tires are my only life insurance." From these modest

days of barnstorming came the juggernaut of Madison Avenue, as Winston Cup stock cars today take to the speedway decked out in computer-generated decals representing Fortune 500 companies.

Corporate America understands the close relationship between Winston Cup fans and their favorite teams. Corporate sponsors also understand that their name will be, at least for the duration of their contract, associated with a specific driver and race team. The sponsor/team/fan relationship is critical, not only for the team's success on the track, but for the sponsor's success in the marketplace. Through it all, it is the Winston Cup race fan who keeps the wheels turning. If a fan loses interest in a certain team or driver, that team's sponsor loses money because the fan will no longer feel compelled to buy the sponsor's goods. Unlike a sport such as baseball, where the teams are in control and salaries are negotiated during the pre-season, the Winston Cup Series recognizes that it is the fans who motivate the drivers and crews to victory lane--where the big prize money is.

The interaction between race fans, sponsors, and race teams comes from NASCAR's desire to create a relationship among all the parties involved. On the morning of a race, it is common to see company guests receiving a guided tour of the garage area and pit road. While at the Pennsylvania 500 this last July, I saw a group of almost fifty people get escorted into the Skoal Racing Team's car hauler while the crew was preparing their equipment for that day's race. A young woman led the group, and nothing seemed to be off limits for the tourists. People in the group posed for photographs alongside nitrogen tanks, impact wrenches, and spare motors. The crewmen simply shrugged and went about their work, as

though the tour group was nothing out of the ordinary.

If truth be known, the pit crew on the Skoal team had seen such behavior before. In fact, it was only ten years ago that an excited young race fan and his wife scrambled about the team's shop in Taylorsville, North Carolina, taking countless photographs and snooping around the "dyno" room. By the time they were finished, the young couple felt connected to the Skoal Racing Team as if they had always been behind the scenes. Their cheers for Harry Gant, from that cold

November afternoon on, were always a little louder, always a bit more spirited.

CONCLUSION

Such is the relationship that is forged when a racing fan visits a place like Mooresville, North Carolina. From the race shops to the gift shops, the emphasis of the region is to provide tourists with a bond that will solidify their loyalty and dedication to the NASCAR Winston Cup Series for years to come.

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