

Chapter 1

NASCAR Racing: The Best Sport Around

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Most people don't know what it's like to dunk a basketball or hit a 100-mph fastball 500 feet for a home run, but almost everyone knows how to drive a car — and that familiarity is the appeal of NASCAR and stock-car racing. Whether they admit it or not, lots of people speed down the highway and daydream about winning the Daytona 500. That daydreamer could be a 17-year-old high school student who just got a driver's license, a 35-year-old orthodontist, or a 70-year-old retired teacher. Driving is nearly universal.

NASCAR's allure has grown in recent years because of its tremendous television exposure; the drivers' accessibility to their fans; and close, competitive racing. In 2003, nearly 7 million fans went to see the NASCAR Cup Series races, which is quadruple the attendance in 1980. And more than 280 million viewers tuned into NASCAR Cup Series events on television in 2003, making NASCAR one of the most popular sports to watch on TV, second only to the NFL.

Here are a few more stats that show how NASCAR has grown from an originally Southern-based sport to a truly national phenomenon:

- ✔ #1 sport in brand loyalty of fans
- ✔ #2 rated sport on television
- ✔ Over \$2 billion in licensed sales
- ✔ 75 million fans



The first NASCAR race

In February 1948, two months after NASCAR was founded, more than 14,000 people showed up at a race course just south of Daytona Beach. The 150-mile event was held on a unique track that was half on the beach and half on the highway behind the sand, making it interesting for drivers and spectators alike, particularly when the tide came in and the beach narrowed. Red Byron, a driver from Anniston, Alabama, whose left leg was injured when his bomber was shot down in World War II, won that first NASCAR-sanctioned race, enhancing his reputation as one of NASCAR's greatest early drivers. It also made him the answer to a common NASCAR trivia question: "Who won the first NASCAR race?"

Red Byron also won NASCAR's first Strictly Stock championship. This series — the forerunner of today's NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series,

debuted in 1949 and was limited to full-sized American production, or "stock" cars. The first Strictly Stock race was held in June 1949, and anyone with a car was eligible to race. And I mean anyone — people who had never raced before made the trip to the .75-mile dirt track in Charlotte, North Carolina, to see how they could do. All they needed was a car and a fair amount of guts.

The cars were plain vehicles like Buicks, Fords, and Lincolns, not like today's race cars, which are built from the ground up by multi-million-dollar teams and tuned specifically for racing. If drivers wanted to race back then, they could drive the family car right onto the track! Of course, if a driver crashed and destroyed his car, he could be stranded. Hitchhiking home was not out of the realm of possibility.

If you're one of the sport's new fans, this chapter gives you NASCAR in a nutshell, including enough details about its history, cars, drivers, teams, races, and statistics to make you sound like a veteran. If you're an old hand, you can brush up on what's new, as the sport is constantly evolving.

From Back Roads to the Big Time

A few decades ago, stock-car races weren't the professionally run events that they are now, even though many organizations — including the United Stock Car Racing Association, the Stock Car Auto Racing Society, and the National Championship Stock Car Circuit — sanctioned races. The schedule wasn't organized; instead, random races were held here and there, sprinkled throughout the southeastern United States wherever tracks were available (some were well-built, but most were pretty shoddy). Drivers didn't race in each event, so fans had no idea which of their favorites would show up until they got to the

track. Worse, some race promoters were less than honest, running off with the ticket receipts and race purses, never to be seen again.



Bill France, Sr., a tall, dynamic stock-car driver and race promoter, thought this was an unprofessional way to run a sport and was determined to set a standard for drivers and track owners. He decided to devote his energy to establishing one preeminent stock-car racing sanctioning body — NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) — that would oversee different series. A *racing series*, such as the NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series, is similar to a baseball league, featuring a group of drivers who compete in a set number of events and follow rules determined by the sanctioning body. At the end of the season, the sanctioning body in charge of making the rules, running the events, and making sure competitors follow the rules, crowns a series champion. That's exactly what France, also known as "Big Bill," created with his brainchild — NASCAR. In the beginning, France had several goals:

- ✔ **Racetracks that were safe for the drivers, and track owners who repaired their facilities between races.** If a car crashed into or through a guard rail, it would have to be repaired by the track owner before the next race.
- ✔ **Rules that wouldn't change from week to week or race to race.** Before NASCAR was organized, different tracks had different rules, which drove drivers to distraction. Some even had quirky on-track rules, made up the morning of a race by a promoter seeking to make things more exciting. Because of these inconsistencies, drivers didn't know what to expect when they showed up at a racetrack. These days, rules still occasionally change but are often studied for a period of months before being implemented.
- ✔ **A set schedule allowing the same drivers to compete against one another each week.** This way, a single national champion recognized by all could be crowned at the end of the year.
- ✔ **A uniform point system to calculate which driver performed the best throughout the season.** Drivers would earn points according to how they finished in a race, with the winner receiving the most points and the last-place driver getting the least. With a points system like that, the series could crown a definitive champion instead of having many "national champions" crowned at different tracks or in different, smaller series. Having just one national champion made winning the title something special.
- ✔ **An insurance and benevolent fund:** This was meant to give the drivers something to fall back on in case they got hurt or couldn't compete due to injuries.

France's goals were realized and today NASCAR sanctions several racing series. The top one is the NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series, and I spend most of the book talking about this series. I give you a quick rundown on the NASCAR Busch Series, the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, and several NASCAR touring series in Chapter 3.

What Is Stock Car Racing?

When different people think of auto racing, the same image of a race car doesn't necessarily pop into their heads. That's because many different types of race cars and hundreds of racing series, or racing leagues, exist throughout the world.

NASCAR stock cars are unique in that they look very much like what a suburbanite drives. But looks can be deceiving. Almost nothing is "stock" when it comes to NASCAR vehicles, whether they run in NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series, NASCAR Busch Series, or NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series events. In addition to bodies (or chassis) reinforced with roll bars, multi-part driver restraint systems, and an escape hatch through the roof, NASCAR vehicles are among the fastest — and safest — on earth.

Three brands of cars compete in the NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series — the Chevrolet Monte Carlo, the Ford Taurus, and the Dodge Intrepid. The manufacturers of these brands of cars see the sport as a great marketing tool, hence the saying, "Win on Sunday, sell on Monday."



Here's a quick rundown on the other types of racing vehicles (Figure 1-1 shows you some of the differences):

- ✔ **Open-wheel:** The cars that run in the Indianapolis 500, perhaps the most famous race in the world, are open-wheel cars. They're agile, lightweight racing cars with an open cockpit. Open-wheel cars also have no fenders, so they can't bump and bang as stock cars do or they would crash. The three different leagues that use open-wheel cars are
 - **Formula One:** The world's best-known open-wheel series.
 - **Indy Racing League (IRL):** Which competes exclusively on oval tracks in the United States and features the Indy 500 on its yearly schedule. The IRL plans to add road courses in the near future.
 - **Champ Cars (formerly CART):** This series races in various countries but mostly the United States on road courses and ovals.
- ✔ **Dragsters:** Speedsters that race a short distance in a short period of time. They race in pairs on a straight, flat quarter-mile strip of asphalt

or concrete. The fastest ones can go from 0 to 100 mph in less than one second, topping out at speeds in excess of 320 mph. The premier dragsters are called *Top Fuel cars*, which are specialized cars that look more like rocket ships than anything else. They have long, tapered noses with two small front tires. The driver sits in an open cockpit about ten feet behind the wheels, with the engine behind him or her. Other dragsters are a little less exotic: *Funny cars* are highly modified, jazzed-up stock cars, while *Street Stock cars* look like passenger cars.

- ✔ **Sports cars:** Most are production (sports) cars with highly specialized engines, but the fastest are open-cockpit cars that sit close to the ground (like Ferraris). The cars are prototypes, which means they are built specifically for racing and aren't sold to the public.

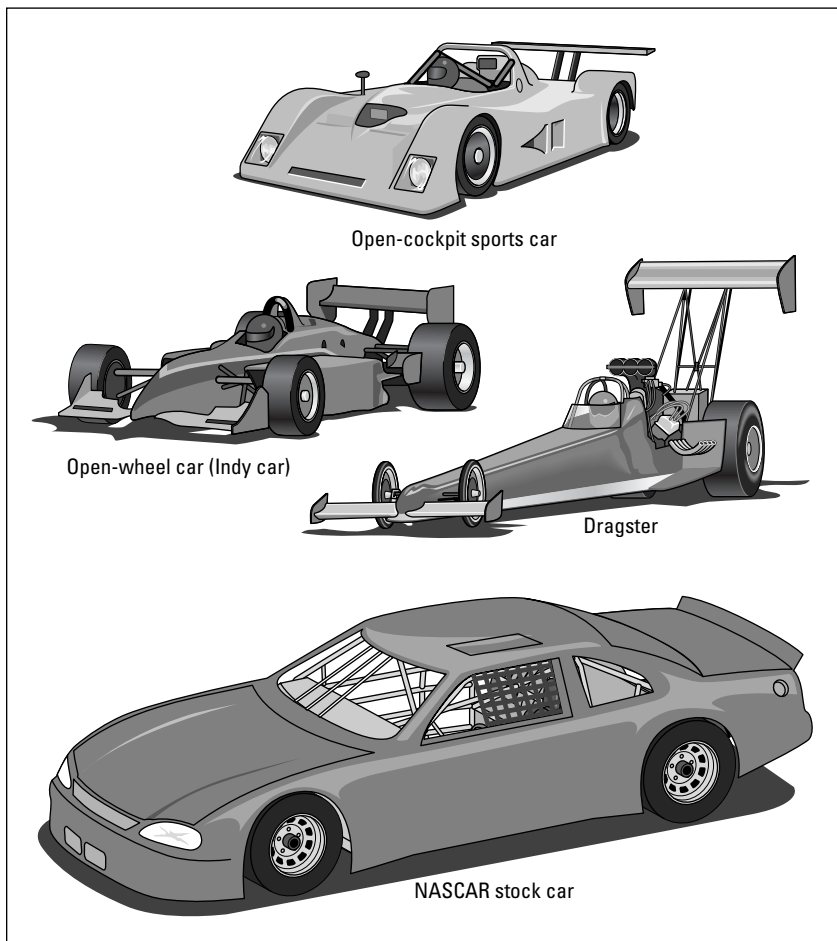


Figure 1-1: NASCAR stock cars look more like passenger cars than do open-wheel racers, most dragsters, or sports cars.

The Racing Team

One of the best aspects of NASCAR is that its drivers are regular people — that is, until they get to the race track. As is the case with all competitive athletes, NASCAR drivers have their own personalities, which are often magnified when they get behind the wheel. The legendary Richard Petty, whose 200-victory record will probably never be topped (he raced up to 60 times a season) is one of the nicest guys in the garage area, always stopping to sign autographs while flashing his signature smile. But Petty didn't win seven NASCAR Cup championships by being the series' sweetheart during a race; he bumped and banged with the best of them.

Drivers like Tony Stewart and Robby Gordon prefer their on-track performance to talking, while the colorful Rusty Wallace has never been asked a question that he answered in less than 300 words. These days, the prototypical driver more closely resembles multiple NASCAR Cup Series champion Jeff Gordon and up-and-coming star Jimmie Johnson, who keep their tempers to themselves and remain composed in virtually any situation.

During a time when many athletes are out of touch with the fans who pay their bills, NASCAR drivers are seen by many of their supporters as the guy next door. And they are definitely the most accessible of highly hyped superstars. Although some are naturally friendlier and others are more reserved, many retain an innate humbleness, which comes from remembering the early days of their careers when they built and worked on their own cars. They also recognize that without fans, NASCAR wouldn't exist. Although in this modern era drivers are pulled in many directions, from testing their vehicles to making appearances on behalf of their sponsors, they remain fairly accessible. NASCAR drivers still sign autographs and make appearances at malls in the cities in which they race. (For more information on drivers' schedules and their fan clubs, see Chapter 15.)

NASCAR drivers are also known as family men, who bring their wives and children to many races — thanks to modern, comfortable motor homes replacing the need to stay in hotels. Many attend church services on the morning of a race and are very aware they are role models to kids and teens watching their every move. When people talk about the NASCAR family, they don't mean just the competitors. NASCAR fans tend to “adopt” a certain driver to root for, and he becomes a member of their extended family.

Although NASCAR's drivers are front and center when it comes to recognition and attention, they wouldn't be in the racing business were it not for the hundreds of people who run the sport, create the teams, work on the crews, sponsor cars and races, and bring the action to the nation via television, radio, and newspapers.



How I got started

Growing up in Batesville, Arkansas, I thought racing was the greatest thing in the world. My dad got me interested in it, and, considering racing is for people who love taking risks, it was no wonder he liked it so much. My dad was the wildest, fastest-running guy around, and he wanted me to be the same way.

My dad used to prop me up in his lap while he was in the driver's seat of the car and, without taking no for an answer, would make me take the steering wheel. Then he'd slam his foot on the accelerator and off we'd go. It scared me to death, but I was stuck steering that car sometimes at speeds over 80 mph on gravel roads

around our hometown. But the more we drove, the more I got used to it — and the more I fell in love with the sensation of going fast and taking the car to the edge.

I started racing cars when I was 15, even before I had a driver's license. That's when I discovered that everything about the sport of stock-car racing thrilled me. I became obsessed with the sounds and the speed — but mostly with the prospect of becoming a successful driver. For me, there was nothing better than driving a race car, especially because I was good at it. I won my first race in only my second start at a local track in Arkansas.

At the top of any individual race team is the owner, who pays the bills and calls the shots. Team owners also spend a vast amount of time searching for and pleasing sponsors, who spend millions of dollars for the right to put the name of their company across a car's hood. The team owner gets a great deal of help from his general manager and crew chief, who are in charge of everything from hiring employees to setting the testing schedule to being responsible for a car's performance on any given Sunday. Teams employ a large number of specialists who work at the race shop doing everything from painting the driver's cars to answering the telephone.

During the last ten years, it has become common practice for an owner to field more than one team, which is obviously more expensive but gives him or her more chances to share information between teams and have more opportunities to visit victory lane. (For more on team ownership, see Chapter 6.)

Winning a Race Takes Strategy

NASCAR racing is about much more than making rules and driving fast. In fact, becoming successful in NASCAR entails much more than the ability to wheel a race car at high speeds. By the time a race starts, a driver and his

crew have put in many hours of work building and tweaking the vehicles so that they handle well for that particular track, whether an oval track, a road course, or a superspeedway. Once at the track, drivers hit the pavement for practice laps, trying to coax the most speed they can out of their cars in order to both qualify and race well. A *qualifying lap* determines where a driver will start a race; the one who is fastest over one lap gets to start from the front *pole position* and the second-fastest driver starts next to him on the *outside pole*.

When the race starts, the objective is to move to the front (if you started in the back) and hold onto the lead if you started up front. The most successful drivers are well-schooled in the art of passing the competition, either by having that day's fastest car or by hooking up with their rivals in a draft, as two or three cars end-to-end can push one another past a car stuck out on its own. (For more information on drafting and race strategy, turn to Chapter 9.) A good pit crew that can change four tires and fill two cans of gas in less than 14 seconds is also crucial to having a winning car. The first car off pit road, especially near the end of the race, often is the one that makes the hard left into victory lane.



Winning has become increasingly difficult as the sport has become more popular and more drivers enter races. That makes winning more special than it used to be. Don't get me wrong, it was special when I won my first NASCAR Cup race in 1989, but today, there isn't as much disparity in equipment between first- and last-place teams. This is fine with me because it makes winning more satisfying.

Rules keep the fans happy

Like other professional sports, NASCAR has a rule book. Unlike other professional sports, however, that rule book changes during the season — and can even change from week to week. For example, if a driver's team gets an edge over everybody else with the car's aerodynamics or in a particular part of the engine, NASCAR may change the rule regarding that area and the team's advantage disappears. While some rules changes sometime appear to help or hinder a certain manufacturer, there are those that affect drivers equally, such as the introduction in 2004 of the Chase for the NASCAR NEXTEL Cup, which opened the title race to the

top-10 drivers in the standings (or those within 400 points of the leader) with 10 races remaining. While some rule changes are difficult to swallow at times, I appreciate how exciting the changes make the races for the fans. Without great racing, there would be no fans. And without fans, I wouldn't be living my dream and racing for a living. It's a necessary trade-off between the rules and success. And, unlike the rules changes before NASCAR was formed, at least we know our changes in advance. We also know there's a reason new rules — to keep the competition as thrilling and as even as possible.

Heading Out to the Track

Watching a NASCAR race is a total-body experience: the earth-shattering sound of a 790-horsepower engine roaring when a driver flips the ignition switch, the sight of 43 colorful cars flying around a track fender-to-fender as the grandstands shake, and the gritty smell of burned rubber mixed with gasoline. If watching races on television from your living room isn't enough of a rush for you, it's time to head out to the track. Here are several great races you may want to check out yourself (see Chapter 14 for more info on going to races):

- ✔ **The Daytona 500:** NASCAR's annual Super Bowl, which is held in February and signals the start of the season. Teams spend several weeks at Daytona International Speedway getting ready for the year's most hotly-contested event. Even past series champions say they don't consider their resumes complete unless they have won the Daytona 500.
- ✔ **The Brickyard 400:** Long the hallowed ground of the Indy 500 (open-wheel) race, NASCAR has had no trouble packing the Indianapolis Motor Speedway stands with more than 300,000 spectators each August. Jeff Gordon is the event's master, having won four Brickyard 400s since NASCAR's inaugural race there in 1994.



Mark Martin fans

It's hard to believe how many NASCAR fans buy racing paraphernalia to support their favorite drivers. Then again, as a driver, it's even harder to believe how many fans root for me. I drove for a long time before that sunk in, but I'll never forget the moment it did. In 1990, seven long years after my first NASCAR Cup race, I was driving at North Wilkesboro Speedway in North Carolina, battling Dale Earnhardt for the lead. At that point, Earnhardt had won three of his seven NASCAR Cup championships, and my goal was to keep him from winning his fourth title that year and to beat him in that race. It wasn't easy getting by Earnhardt, but when I finally passed him, the crowd went wild.

Usually a driver doesn't see the fans because he's concentrating so much on the race. On that

day, though, I could see the crowd out of the corner of my eye as soon as I began the pass. They were standing up, hooting and hollering as I pulled next to Earnhardt. They only got louder as we raced side-by-side down the frontstretch, which is the straight section of racetrack between the first and last turns. (See Chapter 8 for more details on the layout of racetracks.) It created an even bigger stir when I passed Earnhardt for good and won the race. At that moment, standing in Victory Lane and seeing all those fans, I realized that the crowd was rooting for me and that I had a pretty big following. Even though Earnhardt won the championship that year and I was the runner-up, I still felt pretty good about that moment at North Wilkesboro. It was unforgettable.

- ✔ **Talladega Superspeedway events:** Both races at NASCAR's longest track (2.66 miles) are hot tickets. Even with the introduction of carburetor restrictor plates, which have kept average speeds under 180 mph, fans can't get enough of the high-speed action. (For more on restrictor plates, see Chapter 13.) Many races end with last-lap surprises at this Alabama track.
- ✔ **Bristol Motor Speedway events:** This short half-mile track brings out the beast in every driver, with close-quarters racing sending many drivers to the garage area long before a winner is declared. The bumping and banging is the bane of many teams, who spend weeks afterwards smoothing out the dings and dents in the car's superstructure.

Reaching the Big Time

Millions of fans dedicate a portion of their weekend to attending or watching NASCAR events, a far cry from the hundred or so who turned up in the sport's early days to witness the competition on small dirt or asphalt tracks. In addition to unparalleled action, NASCAR has grown in leaps and bounds thanks to two entities: Sponsors and media coverage. Without either, NASCAR most likely would still be a regional sport with limited opportunities to get a first-hand look at the action.

Signing up the major sponsors

In 1970, Robert Glenn Johnson, Jr., a legendary driver and car owner who made his name as a bootlegger before racing in NASCAR, took a trip to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and changed the sport of stock-car racing forever. Johnson, who goes by Junior instead of his given name, went to the town to talk to R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR) executives and convince them to sponsor his race team. The meeting resulted in much more than anyone imagined. Instead of sponsoring Johnson's race team, RJR ended up sponsoring the entire series.

But things are always changing and in 2003, NASCAR and Nextel announced a 10-year series sponsorship beginning in 2004. The wireless communications leader wanted to build on

the opportunities associated with the 55-year-old sanctioning body, as well as the numerous ways Nextel's technology enhances the sport for fans, competitors, officials, media, sponsors, and tracks.

Nextel's investment in the NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series goes beyond the race track, activating fan interactive opportunities as well as community and charity initiatives. The marketing pact between NASCAR and Nextel has proved to be a gold mine of opportunity. A FORTUNE 500 company, Nextel is a leading provider to fully-integrated wireless communications services and has built the largest guaranteed all-digital wireless network in the country.

MARK SAYS



Where are the women?

As you may guess, stock-car racing started out as a male-dominated sport, but change has come. Several women drivers and women team members have made it into NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series, NASCAR Busch Series, and NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series. Janet Guthrie raced in NASCAR Cup series in the mid-1970s and competed in the 1977 Daytona 500, making her the only woman to compete in NASCAR's top series. She finished 12th. Patty Moise raced several seasons in the NASCAR Busch Series, and Shawna Robinson became the only woman to win a pole position for a NASCAR Busch Series race, but took a hiatus when she had difficulty securing a sponsor and then decided to have children. More recently, Tina Gordon has raced regularly in the NASCAR Busch Series, and Kelly Sutton is a regular NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series competitor.

Although not many women race, the ones who do aren't harassed or berated. Robinson has said that people treat her just as they do the men drivers — and she prefers it that way because she would rather distinguish herself as a good driver than as a good *female* driver.

Today there are many women in the garage area, working as journalists and public relations representatives. While the number of women working in the garage grew slowly over the years, the number of female fans has exploded. Today, nearly 40 percent of fans who attend races are women, which is a tremendous gain from 1975 when just 15 percent of attendees were women. This is all part of the overall growth of NASCAR.

The sponsors

It costs tens of millions of dollars to operate a NASCAR team, so team owners must get companies to sponsor their racing organizations to ease most of the financial burden. These companies use NASCAR as a vehicle (no pun intended) for their marketing campaigns, with their logos plastered on the cars and the drivers' uniforms. But it's a two-way street because NASCAR and its drivers also benefit. When NASCAR fans see an advertisement for Budweiser they think of Dale Earnhardt Jr., who is sponsored by that company. The same holds true for DuPont, which has reaped immeasurable benefits from its association with Jeff Gordon. Sponsors are integral in boosting NASCAR's popularity and in turn gaining financial rewards. If it weren't for sponsors, teams wouldn't have the financial wherewithal to travel across the country so fans can see them compete in person.

Catching races on the tube

When ESPN began broadcasting in 1979, it needed to fill 24 hours a day with sports. Broadcasting racing was an ideal way for them to fill hours. It was a perfect fit — a sports station looking for sports to televise and a sport that

was looking to be televised much more extensively than it was. TV rights to races were less expensive then, costing the networks about \$50,000 per event. After the two came together, some viewers stumbled upon racing, including NASCAR, because it was on so often. Existing fans couldn't get enough to begin with, and the more races that ESPN broadcast, the more they watched.

The modern era of NASCAR television broadcasting is considered to have begun in 1979, although it was a coincidence that was the same year as the birth of ESPN. In 1979, CBS aired its first live, flag-to-flag telecast of the Daytona 500, catapulting the sport into a new age. In 2004, FOX and cable partner FX broadcast events during the season's first half, while NBC and cable affiliate TNT combined to provide coverage of the second half. Now, nearly every major network and many cable stations can say they have broadcast a NASCAR race or have had some NASCAR coverage. That includes not only the major networks and ESPN but also specialty stations such as SPEED Channel.