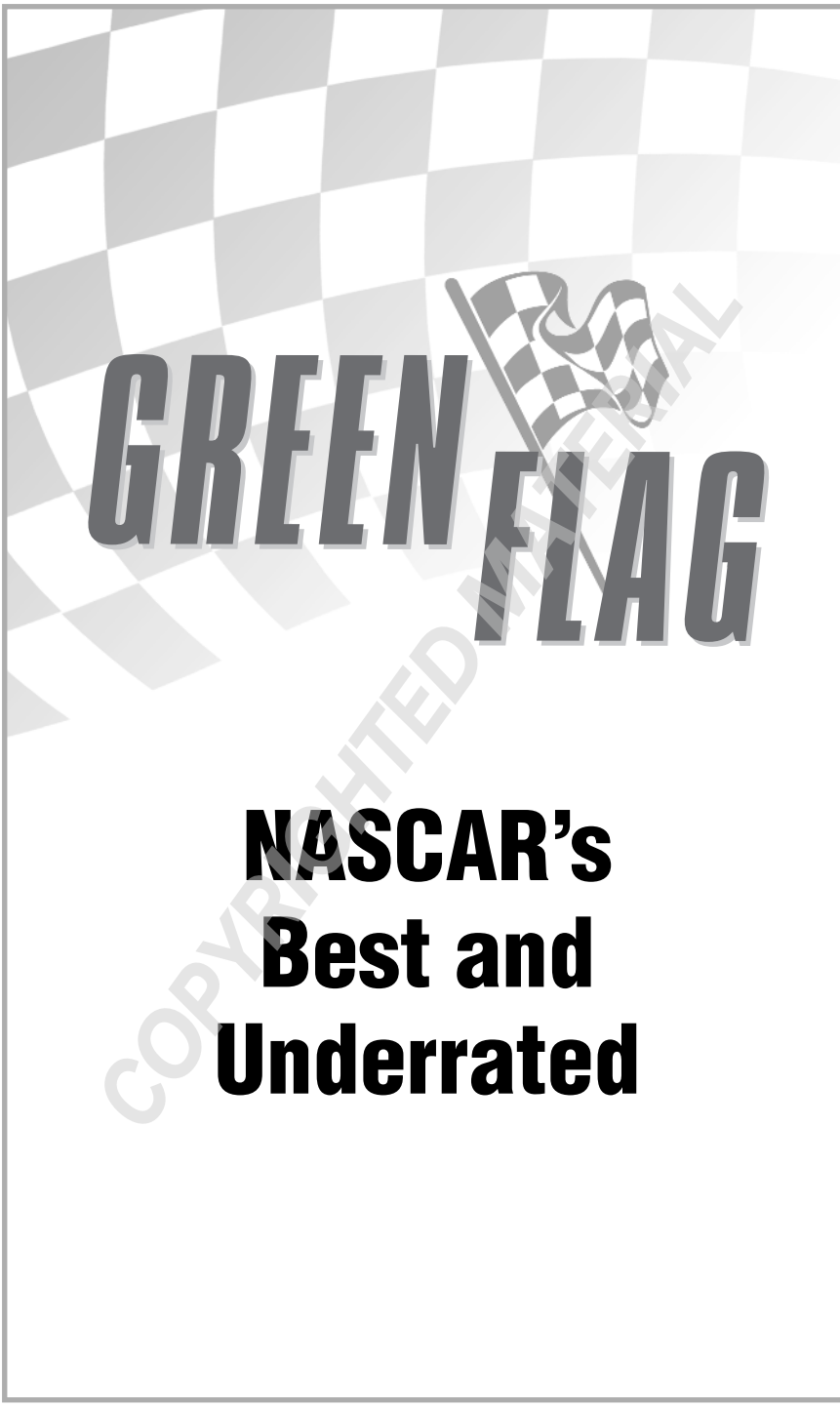


NASCAR's Best and Underrated

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Who Was the Greatest NASCAR Driver Ever?

This debate always gets passionate fans going, with typically mild-mannered individuals turning into raving, obsessed fanatics if someone dares to challenge the superiority of the guy they so proudly call "their" driver. Think of a 140-pound, Woody Allen–looking dweeb who lives and breathes Kasey Kahne suddenly getting a surge of testosterone, puffing out his chest while forgetting common sense, and stupidly trying to take on a hulking, 300-pound redneck who takes great offense if you say anything bad about Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Then watch the punched-out Woody Allen–esque fan suddenly wind up doing a frightening, almost cartoonlike barrel roll through the air like the great Rusty Wallace did more than a few times during his career at places like Talladega Superspeedway.

Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys, and make sure you teach 'em never to diss Dale Junior—but I digress.

In more than sixty years of racing, NASCAR has had more than its share of greats, the most notable being The King, Richard Petty, and the equally colorfully nicknamed Intimidator, the late Dale Earnhardt.

Both Petty and Earnhardt share a record that will most likely never be broken in Cup racing, each having won seven championships. Even Jeff Gordon, a guy who is just as talented as Petty and Earnhardt, will probably never make it to seven titles in the years of racing he has remaining. Say what you want about Gordon but if a gifted driver like him can't tie or break the joint Petty-Earnhardt mark, it's doubtful that anyone else will ever do so. Remember, Gordon has now gone eight seasons since his last championship in 2001.

Of the other drivers besides Gordon who are currently active, Jimmie Johnson—who is tied with Gordon, taking home trophies in the last four championships (2006 to 2009)—arguably has the best chance of

coming closest to, if not surpassing, the Petty-Earnhardt mark. Johnson is four years younger than Gordon; he turns thirty-five in September 2010 while Gordon will be thirty-nine that August. Since 2002, his first full year in Sprint Cup racing, Johnson has earned 47 wins to Gordon's 24 (through 2009), including 29 in his championship-winning reign (compared to Gordon's 9 wins in those same four seasons).

Some folks can make a case for drivers like David Pearson (105 wins), Bobby Allison and Darrell Waltrip (both with 84 wins), Cale Yarborough (83 wins), and even Gordon (82 wins heading into 2010) as being the best of the best.

(Sorry, and I know their fans will take offense, but guys like Sterling "Swervin'" Marlin and Derrike Cope simply just don't make the cut when picking NASCAR's numero uno.)

For my money, there are really only two drivers who can be considered for the title of NASCAR's best driver ever: Petty and Earnhardt. You can make all the counterarguments you want, but their respective numbers and careers don't lie.

Of Petty's 200 wins, 126 came on tracks that are no longer part of the modern-day NASCAR scene. Most prominent are his 15 wins each, the most at any track he ever raced on, at the now-shut North Wilkesboro Speedway in North Carolina and at the still-active Martinsville Speedway in Virginia. Petty's other great track closed at the end of 2002, but not before. The King earned 11 career wins at North Carolina Speedway, more commonly known as Rockingham or simply. "The Rock."

Petty also was the king of short and intermediate tracks that had much shorter tenures on the NASCAR schedule and are no longer part of the Cup slate: Nashville, Tennessee (9 wins); Maryville, Tennessee, and Greenville, South Carolina (6 wins each); Riverside, California, South Boston, Virginia, and Hickory, North Carolina (5 wins each); and Weaverville and Winston-Salem, North Carolina (4 wins each).

A large reason for Petty's incredible success was that he had the best organization on the Cup level pretty much from 1962 until 1979, when he earned the last of his seven championships. As the saying goes, The King got while the gettin' was good.

Petty retired at the age of fifty-five, having competed in 1,184 Cup and Grand National (the predecessor to Cup) competitions, ending with a winning percentage of 16.9 percent—the fourth highest in NASCAR history and by far the highest percentage of the sport's most successful drivers.

By the time Petty hung up his driver's suit for good at the end of the 1992 season, his retirement was long overdue. He spent the last eight seasons of his illustrious career failing to reach victory lane even once, averaged less than two top-five finishes per year and had just one top-ten season finish (eighth in 1987) in that final eight-year stretch of his thirty-five-year racing career.

Earnhardt, in contrast, competed in fewer than half the races Petty did—676, to be exact. He won 76, which made him fifth on NASCAR's all-time list. His overall winning percentage is 11.2 percent, which may seem paltry at first. But Earnhardt also competed more often—and overall was more successful—on bigger, longer, and faster tracks than Petty did during his career.

The King earned 10 career wins at Daytona International Speedway while Earnhardt had only 3 (including just one Daytona 500 to Petty's 6), but Earnhardt was more successful overall when it came to racing at places acknowledged by most experts as some of the toughest tracks in the sport: Talladega (10 wins to Petty's 2), Atlanta (9 to 6), Bristol (9 to 3) and Darlington (9 to 3).

Earnhardt was killed in February 2001 on the final lap of the season-opening Daytona 500, less than two and a half months before he would have turned fifty years old. Even though many (who were obviously not Earnhardt fans) considered him washed-up at that point, having won his last championship in 1994, let's not forget that Earnhardt still finished second to champ Bobby Labonte in 2000. This unquestionably proved that there was still a lot of high-powered fuel left in Earnhardt's tank—and he definitely still had what it took to be successful at the highest level of stock car racing.

Just prior to his fatal crash, Earnhardt told reporters he planned to race for at least another two or three years while also guiding and shepherding the career of an up-and-coming driver: his son, Dale

Earnhardt Jr. Although the elder Earnhardt would most likely never approach the success he enjoyed during the early part of his career, he might have added another 6 or more wins to his overall total, had it not been for his tragic wreck and resulting death. Given what he did in 2000 (2 wins, 13 top fives, and 24 top tens) he obviously had enough left in him to win an eighth championship, which could have put him above Petty once and for all in most championships.

There's no disputing how good Petty was in his day. But he was the big fish in the little pond, competing with teams that usually were not as well funded or did not have the same type of win-capable equipment that Petty and the fabled blue and white No. 43 STP Dodge-cum-Pontiac had.

Earnhardt, in contrast, didn't earn his fearsome nickname The Intimidator by happenstance or by having bad breath. Just his looming close in a rearview mirror was often enough to strike fear in a competitor, causing that opponent to get nervous and even rattled enough to allow Earnhardt to get by, either by choice or by Earnhardt's weapon of choice: the bumper on his menacingly all-black No. 3 Chevrolet. Earnhardt's bumper wasn't called "the chrome horn" for nothing; either you moved or he'd move you, plain and simple.

What's more, Earnhardt competed in an era when NASCAR had much greater parity and more popularity than in Petty's days. It was tougher for Earnhardt to win races and championships than it was for Petty, which made those wins and championships much more meaningful overall than Petty's.

The bottom line is that Earnhardt was the greatest driver NASCAR has ever seen. He may not have won as many races as Petty or Pearson, Allison, Yarborough, and Waltrip—and eventually he lost his fifth-place title on the all-time wins list to Gordon—but he raced in a much more competitive and pressure-filled era than Petty did.

Don't believe me? In the fourteen full seasons (1979 to 1992) in which they went head-to-head in Cup competition, Earnhardt won his first five Cup championships and 53 races. In that same period, Petty won just one championship and 20 races. 'Nuff said.



Who Does Richard Petty Think Is the Greatest Driver Ever?

It's not jealousy over all the money Petty's rival, Dale Earnhardt, earned during his career: $42 million to Petty's $8.5 million. It's not Earnhardt's lasting fame, nor is it a case of lingering bitterness that someone actually had the audacity to tie Petty's record for most championships.

Richard Petty insists none of these things play into his pick for the greatest driver ever. According to Petty's assessment, while there's no doubt the late Dale Earnhardt was a great driver, he definitely wasn't the greatest. So who does Petty pick for the best Cup driver of all time (himself not included, of course)? "David Pearson to me was a lot better race car driver than Earnhardt," Petty said. "That's my first pick."

Although a distant second to Petty on NASCAR's all-time wins list with 105 wins compared to Petty's 200 triumphs, Pearson was the man . . . or perhaps we should call him "The King's Man."

"Pearson could run any kind of racetrack and win any time—on a road course, short track, dirt track, superspeedway—effortlessly," Petty said. "He was just a pure, natural deal with no emotions or any of that stuff.

"Pearson was a whole lot like Earnhardt in that he'd figure out a way to beat you. He was a little smarter than Earnhardt. Earnhardt drove hard to make his deal work better, while Pearson drove hard and also thought hard. So if he couldn't outrun you physically, mentally he'd work on your mind. He was just really good."

Another thing that worked against Pearson is the fact that he was, for most of his career, essentially a part-time driver, often running just half of a yearly season schedule, or even fewer races than that. In fact, he competed "full-time" in just three seasons—and even those weren't full seasons, with Pearson missing either two or three races over the course of the year.

What's more, Pearson had an incredible 18.3 percent winning percentage, winning 105 of his 574 career starts. Equally amazing, he

totaled 301 top-five finishes (including his wins) in that 574-race skein, meaning he finished in the top five in over 52 percent of his starts.

Had Pearson not been a part-time driver, there's no question his career victory tally would have been greater—and Petty's total likely would not have been as high. Ditto for championships: if Pearson had run more often, he probably would have added to his three career Cup titles, most likely at Petty's expense.

Pearson, whose overall win total included outstanding individual seasons of 16, 15, 11 (for two seasons), and 10 wins over the course of his career, might have closed the gap on Petty in total wins if he had reached the Cup level a bit earlier. Petty made his debut at NASCAR's highest level at age twenty, while Pearson didn't appear on the scene until he was twenty-five.

By comparison, Earnhardt, who didn't go full-time at the Cup level until age twenty-eight, won just 76 races in his career, which ended tragically when he was killed on the final lap of the 2001 season-opening Daytona 500, a race that had vexed him for so many years before he finally won his first (and only) Daytona in 1998.

"You had [Cale] Yarborough that won 80-some races, [Bobby] Allison won 80-some races, [David] Pearson won a hundred-some races, that's your core right there, and I raced against them all," Petty said. "That was before Earnhardt came in and won his 70-some races."

Had Earnhardt started at age twenty as Petty did, who knows how many more wins he could have added to his career total. Still, that doesn't make Petty want to change his assessment of Earnhardt.

"He was of a different era," Petty said. "So you can't compare eras versus eras. I can't really compare Earnhardt with those guys [Pearson, Allison, Yarborough, and so on] because they didn't run together. They came at different times under different circumstances."

While Petty and Earnhardt did go head-to-head for fourteen full seasons, one must remember that Petty had already logged nineteen full seasons (plus two part-time campaigns at the beginning of his career) on the Cup circuit before Earnhardt got his first full-time ride in 1979. In a sense, when Earnhardt took that first ride, one man was beginning the downward road in his career, while the other was just beginning his ride upward.

The fact that Pearson took No. 1 on Petty's personal best list doesn't mean Earnhardt automatically took No. 2. "You have to figure that I ran against a bunch of good people, Yarborough, Allison, all those guys," Petty explained. "Those guys were unreal because the equipment they drove and the circumstances they were under were extremely difficult compared to the later crowds that came through.

"If you look at that crowd and put all the wins together, those guys were the ones that had all the wins and were running each other at the same time. They didn't come in there one and out."

Petty refuses to say where he'd ultimately put Earnhardt on his own list of best drivers. Part of the reason for that, in a sense, was Earnhardt was born too late to be considered among the best of the best.

Still, Petty would have loved to have gone mano a mano with The Intimidator when both were in their racing primes. "Earnhardt would have been pretty good," Petty said. "He was old-school enough to manhandle race cars and be able to drive in that era. A lot of guys could have never driven in that era because of the [lack of] power steering and the way the cars are downforced. We didn't have any of that kind of stuff.

"Earnhardt was just a natural driver. What he did, he didn't have to work at. He was just absorbed with just having fun, doing the deal. There's a lot of good drivers out there, but there's very few racers.

"Guys like Pearson, Allison, and Yarborough were racers. They weren't just only good drivers, they were racers because they won races and knew how to win races—and Earnhardt was one of those."

Petty-speak translated: Earnhardt was a good racer—just not quite as good as Pearson or Petty himself.



Who Are the Most Beloved NASCAR Drivers of All Time?

This question is as loaded as you're going to find. The answer to it can come from several directions, including fans, fellow drivers, and the media. One man's favorite driver is another's most hated. To make

such a selection even more difficult, there are sixty-plus years of drivers who have come and gone through the Grand National Cup Series.

So many drivers will be covered in this book that it would be somewhat redundant to go into great detail here, so I'll simply list my five most loved drivers, taking into account many different elements, such as judging criteria, fan base, rivalries between drivers, and how the media perceives certain drivers. By comparison, my list of most hated drivers is in the Red Flag section. Ironically, three drivers made *both* lists, which just goes to show how fickle popularity or hatred in NASCAR can be.

Here are my picks:

1. **Richard Petty.** It's hard to find anyone who doesn't love The King; there may be some who hate him for dominating the racing scene, having won so many races (200) and championships (7). Even now, nearly twenty years after he retired as a driver, Petty still commands the greatest amount of respect from fans, current drivers, and just about everyone else in the NASCAR Nation. The soft-spoken seventy-three-year-old Southern gentleman is the greatest living ambassador for the sport, a role he will hopefully be able to continue in for many more years.
2. **Dale Earnhardt Sr.** As much as the fans of other drivers (most notably Jeff Gordon's fans) hated him, no other driver of his era, other than Petty, commanded the type of respect that Earnhardt received. He was The Intimidator both on and off the racetrack, making drivers fearful of what he'd do behind the wheel, as well as the driver who wielded the most influence with NASCAR chairman Bill France Jr. When Petty began to slow down, literally and figuratively, in the waning years of his racing career, it was on Earnhardt's back and persona that NASCAR built its future, using the mustachioed man in black as a symbol that attracted millions of new fans and helped to take stock-car racing from a primarily Southeast-based sport to one that stretched from Loudon (New Hampshire) to Los Angeles.
3. **Dale Earnhardt Jr.** Junior has proven the old saying that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. He's been NASCAR's most popular driver for the last seven years and will likely continue

in that role for several more years. Junior not only picked up countless fans who used to cheer for his late father after Dale Sr.'s tragic death at Daytona in 2001, he also gained his own fan base of millions worldwide. Is it any wonder that his Junior Nation is arguably one of the largest fan bases in all professional sports? Even though he hasn't had the kind of on-track success that his late father enjoyed, there's no question that Junior shares almost the same iconic position in the sport that Dale Sr. did.

4. **Jeff Gordon.** The all-American-boy antithesis of the late Dale Earnhardt Sr., Gordon was Mr. Clean in the white hat to Earnhardt's man-in-black persona. If you were not an Earnhardt fan, you typically cheered for his chief rival, which was Gordon. And even though he hasn't won a championship since 2001, Gordon is still arguably the second most popular driver in the sport, after Dale Jr.
5. **Darrell Waltrip.** Once one of the most hated drivers in the sport, Waltrip has become one of the most beloved characters due to his presence on Fox TV and SpeedTV telecasts. His "Boogity, boogity, boogity, let's go racin', boys" call when the green flag drops has become almost legendary, a true trademark for the former three-time-champion-turned-broadcaster. With an aw-shucks, down-home personality, Waltrip has endeared himself to countless viewers and fans with his homespun tales of NASCAR days gone by as well as his unique take on racing today. He is quite a departure from what he once was considered to be.



Who Was the Best Crew Chief Ever in NASCAR?

Chad Knaus, Ray Evernham, Robbie Loomis, Andy Petree, Kirk Shelmerdine, Gary Nelson, Tim Brewer, Jeff Hammond, Smokey Yunick, Greg Zipadelli, Harry Hyde, Bud Moore—some of these guys

were good, some were great, but who was the best crew chief to ever sit atop a Cup pit box?

a. Knaus
b. Shelmerdine
c. Evernham
d. None of the above

The answer, without equivocation, is *d*. The man who falls into that category is not on the list of choices because so many fans and media members seem to have forgotten about him and the accomplishments he achieved during his stellar career. No one, absolutely no one, even comes close to the kind of superiority he displayed in car preparation, pit strategy, and plain old-fashioned savviness that he deserves his own special place in NASCAR history.

Evernham? From the last race of 1992 through the 1999 season, he led Jeff Gordon to 47 career wins and three Cup championships in four years (1995, 1997–1998). He was even voted the greatest crew chief of all time in a 2006 vote of NASCAR media members.

Shelmerdine? He led the late Dale Earnhardt Sr. to four of his seven career championships—in a six-year period, no less (1986–1987 and 1990–1991), as well as 46 wins. But is he the best crew chief?

Knaus? Coming into 2010, he had led Jimmie Johnson to a record four consecutive Sprint Cup championships and nearly 50 race wins. Surely, Knaus is the greatest then, right?

None of them come close to the best. The best crew chief has credentials that no one can match. Don't believe me? How about these two very key statistics:

- Eight, yes, *eight*, NASCAR Grand National Winston Cup championships to his credit, including all seven of Richard Petty's championships (1964, 1967, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1975, and 1979) and the first of two Cup titles by Terry Labonte (1984). No other crew chief has ever won more than four championships.
- Leading Petty to 192 of his 200 career wins and Labonte to 4 other trips to victory lane. By comparison, Evernham led Gordon to just 47 wins, Shelmerdine directed Earnhardt to 46 wins, and

by the end of 2009, Knaus had shepherded Johnson to victory lane 47 times from atop the pit box (or from home when he was under suspension for various rule infractions).

Old-time stock-car racing fans still revere the name of Dale Inman. Even today, they speak with reverence at how Inman was without peer atop the pit box. Unfortunately, because most of his success was more than three decades ago, the fans who have come into the sport since then were deprived of the pleasure and joy of watching Inman at work. And because he has always been a relatively low-key, quiet sort who was not wont to toot his own horn, Inman has (through no fault of his own) rarely received the recognition he so richly deserved, particularly among modern-day fans and media.

King Richard was forty-two years old when he won his seventh title, but many thought that he still had enough left in his gas tank, so to speak, to win another one or two Cup championships. I firmly believe that had he not "retired" shortly after Petty's last Cup title in 1979—and then gotten so antsy almost immediately after deciding to take it easy that he subsequently joined Hendrick Motorsports—that Inman would indeed have led Petty to at least one or two more Cup championships. Don't believe me?

Once Inman left the Petty Enterprises fold—he did return as a consultant in 1986 (but never again as a crew chief), a role he still holds today—Richard Petty would go on to win just 8 more races in the next five seasons (1980–1984), but he had a big fat 0 in the wins column in the final eight seasons of his racing career (1985–1992). Coincidence? Without Inman calling the signals, I think not.



Who Is the Most Underrated Crew Chief in NASCAR Today?

Let's face it, being a crew chief at the level of the Sprint Cup Series is not exactly a ringing endorsement for job security. Go down the list of crew chiefs today, and you'll find few who have been

in their positions (or with the same driver) for more than three or four years.

Being a crew chief in NASCAR is much like being a manager in major league baseball. When things go right, you get all the praise. But when things go wrong and continue to spiral downward, you're typically the first to be fired.

Given the transitory nature of the job, choosing the most underrated crew chief is difficult. Some crew chiefs bounce from team to team throughout their careers, and few of them stand out because it seems as though they're just getting warmed up when suddenly they're on to another team.

When I first started writing this book, I settled on two choices for the most underrated crew chief. My second choice, Robbie Reiser of Roush Fenway Racing, was promoted to its general manager after 2007, overseeing all five Cup teams within the organization (until the number of teams was reduced to four by NASCAR mandate in 2010). Unfortunately, that promotion also ended a ten-year tenure for Reiser as Matt Kenseth's crew chief—a relationship that stretched back to the early to mid-1990s. First they raced against each other, then they paired up to race late models back in their native Wisconsin, with Kenseth behind the wheel and Reiser atop the pit box.

Reiser and Kenseth formed a potent team that was one of the most consistent operations in Cup racing, ultimately leading to their winning the final Winston Cup championship in 2003. As much as I admire and respect Reiser, and even if he were still atop Kenseth's pit box, he'd still be just the runner-up for my choice of most underrated crew chief.

The top honor goes to Greg Zipadelli of the No. 20 Home Depot Toyota team. For ten years, Zippy wasn't just driver Tony Stewart's crew chief, he was so much more: advisor, best friend, father figure, father confessor, counselor, guiding light, voice of reason, and containment specialist (of Stewart's often volatile temper), among other things.

Besides that, he's a master tactician and strategist on race day. Stewart's talent is unquestioned, but it's unlikely that he'd have won Cup championships in 2002 and 2005 if Zippy hadn't been making the calls.

"He's like the brother I never had," Stewart said of Zipadelli, after winning his second Cup title. "He understands me but also can put me in my place when I need it. I can't see myself with anyone else as my crew chief."

Unfortunately, the pairing ended after 2008, when Stewart became half owner and driver for the renamed Stewart Haas Racing team. While Zipadelli had the option to follow Stewart, he chose to remain at Joe Gibbs Racing out of loyalty to team owner Joe Gibbs and team president J. D. Gibbs.

At the same time, Zipadelli took on just as daunting a task as trying to keep Stewart in line: he became crew chief for a much-hyped rookie driver, Joey Logano. Even though Logano failed to make the Chase for the Sprint Cup in 2009, the pairing with Zippy promises to deliver great dividends in the coming years.

From an individualistic standpoint, Zipadelli's best trait is the one thing Stewart lacked early in his Cup career: patience. Stewart has gotten less volatile as he's aged, but Zipadelli has still always been there to calm him down, reason with him, and put the driver in his place when necessary. It's the same now with Logano, only Zipadelli is also more of a mentor than he ever had to be with the headstrong Stewart.

Not one for the limelight, Zipadelli gladly let Stewart take the spotlight during their time together. He prefers to be in the background—the brains behind the operation, so to speak.

With that eschewing of attention, Zipadelli and Reiser have never really gotten the recognition they so truly deserve from the fans or the media. When their drivers did something big, like win a race or a championship, they'd quickly credit Zippy and Robbie in victory lane or in postrace press conferences. That's their time to shine. But as soon as the crowds of fans or reporters thinned out, so did the attention and the credit.

That's where it ended. That's why I picked them as the first and second most underrated crew chiefs in modern-day NASCAR, even if Reiser has moved on to other responsibilities.

There's one group of people who will always recognize Zipadelli and Reiser and give them the credit they so richly deserve: their peers. Go through the Cup garage and poll the crew chiefs and the

team members on who are the best crew chiefs in the business, and Zippy's and Reiser's names will typically be the first mentioned—as well as the guy I nominate for the most overrated crew chief (in the Red Flag section).



What Was the Most Important Race in NASCAR History?

Picking the best or the worst race in NASCAR history is an exercise in futility, at best. While the question comes from a genuine desire for an objective response, the result is unfortunately far more subjective in nature. It's like trying to pick the winning number in Powerball: there are fifty-four numbers that have equal potential to be the winner. What distinguishes the outcome is the fact that only one number can ultimately be drawn. Trying to pick the best or the worst race is like saying that chardonnay is a better or worse wine than burgundy, chablis, or zinfandel. It's a matter of the beholder's taste.

For every event you pick as the all-time number one race in the sport's history, there are thousands, if not millions, of dissenting voices from fans, the media, drivers, crew chiefs, team owners, and the like. That's why I've intentionally stayed away from having a "best race ever" debate in this book (although I do have a "worst race ever" debate in the Red Flag section for what you will see are fairly obvious reasons). Had I included a best race, the debate that would result from it would rage endlessly, and I'd be no closer to a resolution than when I started.

However, there is one debate that can be brought forth and one that few would challenge: the most *important* race in NASCAR history. I've reached this conclusion not from how a particular race was won or lost, who did the winning or losing, or who won or lost a championship in it as a result.

I looked at each of the nearly twenty-three hundred races that have gone into the Cup history book, from the first sanctioned race by NASCAR on June 19, 1949, through Jimmie Johnson's clinching his

fourth consecutive championship in 2009. No one race stands out more in how it helped to shape the history, growth, and future of NASCAR than the twenty-first running of the Daytona 500 on February 18, 1979. It shows how significant just one event could be. Actually the second race of the season, preceded more than a month earlier by the official 1979 season opener on the road course at Riverside, California, the Daytona 500 was the biggest gamble NASCAR had ever undertaken: live, wire-to-wire coverage on national television of the Great American Race.

NASCAR had been featured on TV highlights and newsreel clips and had even been interspersed in pretaped segments in programs like ABC's *Wide World of Sports* over the years, but a race had never been aired live and complete from green flag to checkered flag. It all started with what many call NASCAR's "perfect storm." Had it not been for a meteorological calamity of sorts, who knows if NASCAR would have ever had another chance to strut its stuff in such a significant way.

On the night before the 1979 Daytona 500, a major icy snowstorm blanketed, and literally shut down, much of the northern half of the United States, reaching even as far south as the Carolinas. It forced millions to stay home, and many of them found little else to do but to watch TV. Because there were only three major TV networks at the time (certainly not the hundreds of cable TV stations in business today), the viewers' picks were limited. As more and more folks flipped through the trio of channels, they saw auto racing live from Daytona, a combination that immediately held the interest of millions of first-time stock car racing viewers.

CBS took a major gamble in televising the race, which almost turned to failure when rain inundated Daytona the night before and the early morning hours of race day. Still, NASCAR founder "Big Bill" France and his son, "Little Bill" Jr., were determined to get the race going, knowing perhaps more than anyone alive on the planet that day what a successful race, live on network television, would mean to the future of the sport.

When Daytona's clouds parted and the racetrack dried out, weather-marooned fans in much of the rest of the country saw one hell of a race that culminated with a last-lap crash in the third turn between the two leaders at the time (Donnie Allison and Cale Yarborough), followed

by the resulting surprise of NASCAR legend Richard Petty suddenly finding himself in the lead after he had already conceded first and second place to Allison and Yarborough moments earlier, as the final lap had begun. It would be the sixth and arguably the biggest of Petty's seven career Daytona 500 victories.

Then, shortly after Petty crossed the finish line, there was what has become known in NASCAR annals simply as "the Fight," when Yarborough and Allison (who received some last-second backup from his brother Bobby) scrapped in the infield after wrecking and knocking each other not only out of any chance of reaching victory lane but, more important, completely out of the race itself. They were scored fourth and fifth in the final race standings.

When the drama finally ended, a new tradition had been born that day. NASCAR was a huge hit in the TV ratings, and it was then that stock-car racing began to grow into the multibillion-dollar enterprise that it is today. The event laid the groundwork for the current megabillion-dollar, eight-year TV contract shared by ESPN, ABC, Fox, and Turner that expires in 2014.

"I think it made a lot of fans for the sport," Yarborough said in an interview several years later. "It was one of the biggest things that ever happened to the sport. It got people's attention."

That it did—and NASCAR has been getting people's attention ever since. The story of that race, if you're interested in learning more about it, is exquisitely chronicled in *The Great American Gamble: How the 1979 Daytona 500 Gave Birth to a NASCAR Nation* by veteran NASCAR writer Joe Menzer.



What Two NASCAR Records Will Never Be Broken?

Statistics and records are the lifeblood of any sport, from professional to the lowest amateur ranks. It's not always how you do, but what you do. You may have the greatest talent in the world, but your performance will always be measured in numbers.

The same holds true in motorsports. You can be from the United States, Japan, or Spain, yet no matter what language you speak, two measures are part of a universal language and are first and foremost in every racer's mind: speed and elapsed time. The faster and quicker you are, the better you are, plain and simple.

Although winning is the goal each time a driver straps himself into a stock car, there's another mark that every driver hopes to ultimately make: to break a record and make it his own.

Ah, records. The more you own, the more successful you're considered against your peers and the best of the best. As NASCAR progresses through its second fifty years, more records will obviously fall. It's just part of a sport's evolution. After all, as the old saying goes, records are meant to be broken.

But while almost everything else is fair game, two of NASCAR's records are pretty much out of reach, one more so than the other. It would take a driver of perhaps the most exceptional talent ever to even attempt to come close—and he'd still likely fall short, far short.

One reason is age. Drivers today are not driving as long or in as many races as their predecessors in the golden age of NASCAR racing, roughly from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. Richard Petty didn't retire until he was fifty-five, but Jeff Gordon will be lucky if he's still in Sprint Cup competition by the time he's fifty in 2021.

Another reason some records are seemingly unbreakable is a simple numbers game: in the "good old days," some drivers competed in forty, fifty, or more races a year. By comparison, today's NASCAR limits the Sprint Cup season to thirty-six races.

Look through NASCAR's record books, and you'll see that these two are all but untouchable.

1. **Most career wins.** Richard Petty's incredible mark of 200 career wins is so far out of reach that it's in a class of its own—perhaps the only record in all sports that will never be broken. Even Babe Ruth's major league baseball home run record of 714, once considered the most unbreakable of any record, has since been shattered by both Barry Bonds and Hank Aaron.

But Petty's mark will forever stand the test of time. It doesn't make a difference who a driver is or how good he is, there's little likelihood that he could win 100 races in his career, let alone 200 like Petty.

The only driver who has come even remotely close to Petty's record is the Silver Fox, David Pearson, who is second on NASCAR's all-time wins list, with a mere 105 victories. Of course, if Pearson would have been more than a part-time driver in his career, he might have closed the gap somewhat on Petty, but even 95 more wins is more than any other driver has ever accomplished. (Darrell Waltrip and Bobby Allison are behind Petty and Pearson with a distant 84 wins apiece.)

Think about it: it's a simple mathematical question. If a driver were to earn 10 wins in every thirty-six-race season, it would take him twenty seasons to tie Petty's mark. Even if Jimmie Johnson, who won 10 races in 2007 en route to his second consecutive Nextel Cup championship, continued at that pace for the rest of his career, he'd have to go nearly sixteen more seasons to break Petty's record—and that wouldn't happen until Johnson was fifty years old. Simply put: It ain't happening.

2. **Most career championships.** This one is, at best, a "maybe" record to be broken—and a long-shot maybe, at that.

   Richard Petty and the late Dale Earnhardt Sr. earned seven championships each in their careers, either in the Winston Cup or its predecessor, the Grand National Series. Only twenty-eight drivers have won Cup championships in NASCAR's sixty-year history. Some obviously won more than others, such as Petty and Earnhardt. Other greats, like Rusty Wallace, Bill Elliott, Dale Jarrett, and the late Alan Kulwicki, earned just one title each in their careers.

   There are currently only two drivers that have even an outside chance of challenging the mark Petty and Earnhardt share. First is four-time champ Jeff Gordon. Of course, if you're a Gordon fan, you'd beg to differ, arguing that if it wasn't for the newfangled Chase for the Cup format, Gordon would have ran away with his fifth and sixth championships in 2004 (the first season of the

Chase) and 2007. Unfortunately, what he might have won is not the same as what he did win.

Second, and tied with Gordon, is Gordon's Hendrick Motorsports teammate Jimmie Johnson, who has won the last four Cup championships (2006–2009). After Gordon and Johnson, Tony Stewart is the only active driver who has won multiple championships, in 2002 and 2005. With Stewart approaching forty years old, it's unlikely he will win more than *maybe* two more championships, thus equaling the current mark shared by Gordon and Johnson.

So even though almost every record has a chance of being broken someday by somebody, it's doubtful that we'll see an eight-time champion in our lifetimes—if ever. After all, it's likely easier to capture the first four championships than the second four titles. Gordon is living proof of that.



Who Does Richard Petty See as a Potential Challenge to His Career Wins and Championships Records?

Richard Petty is a realist, not a braggart. The man they call The King knows all too well that if any record in motorsports—make that *any* professional sport—will be safe in perpetuity, it's his record for career wins (200) in the Grand National/Winston Cup competition. No driver is even close to Petty's mark—and it's likely no driver ever will be.

Among active competitors, Jeff Gordon is the closest to achieving those heights—but I'm using "closest" in very loose terms. Gordon, a four-time Cup champion, still needs about 120 more wins just to tie Petty, a near-impossible task given the parity and extreme competition in NASCAR's Sprint Cup Series today.

"As far as the 200 wins, it's kind of improbable," Petty says not boastfully but matter-of-factly. One needn't look any further than mathematics and logistics to verify his assertion.

"They run 36 races a year, and . . . winning 10 races a year is going to take you a pretty good while," Petty said, trying to put an optimistic spin on the matter.

But then, much as he did in many of his 200 career wins, Petty effectively and bluntly closes the door on the competition. "They're not going to win 20 or 30 races a year, they're not even going to win 10 races a year for 20 years," said Petty, who once won 27 races in one season (1967) and 21 four years later.

Believe it or not, hunger may be another quality separating Petty from today's racers. Even if a budding superstar who could potentially win 10 races or more per year emerges fifty years from now, the money-is-everything attitude that has permeated the sport in recent years will likely prevent today's drivers from having the same kind of thirty-five-year racing tenure Petty had as an active driver at NASCAR's highest level.

And it wasn't just an appetite for success. Petty was legitimately hungry: the pride and joy of Randleman, North Carolina, was forced to race as much as he did—sometimes three or four times a week—to put food on the table and pay the bills.

Consider that Petty earned a grand total of just over $8.5 million in his three-and-a-half decade career, an average of about $244,000 per year. By comparison, today's drivers are spoiled. They earn a lot more money than Petty ever did. For example, Jimmie Johnson earned over $60 million for his four back-to-back championships from 2006 to 2009.

Petty insists that today's drivers don't have the same burning desire in their stomach. "The big deal is the guys are not going to stay in here very long," he says. "The good ones are going to come in, they're going to make so much money and they're just going to say, 'Forget it, we're out of here.'

"I don't see any of the drivers having the longevity of the crowd I came through with, the [Bobby] Allisons, [David] Pearsons and [Cale] Yarboroughs. I don't see any of that longevity coming in the future."

Petty does grant one concession: he wouldn't be surprised to see some driver, such as Gordon, tie and potentially even surpass the record seven Grand National/Winston Cup championships he shares

with the late Dale Earnhardt. "The seven championships is a possibility because Earnhardt got to that," Petty said.

But there are no ifs, ands, or buts that Petty's 200-win mark will live on in infinity.

Surprisingly, Petty doesn't have the slightest twinge of regret that no one will likely make a formal challenge to best his best. "I couldn't care less," he said. "I done my thing in my time and what anybody else does beyond that—there was no records when I was doing it, or there were records but nobody paid any attention to them—it's really immaterial.

"They didn't pay anything for the records, so the records don't really mean anything from that standpoint. They probably would pay for somebody to break 'em, but they didn't pay me for setting 'em."



Who Are Currently the Best Team Owners?

Picking the best team owners is perhaps one of the easiest tasks there is in NASCAR. Just look for the guys with the most money, sponsors, and championships.

But there's more to ranking who's the best and who isn't. There are intangibles like character, fieriness in competition, intelligence, the right people in key positions, and, in some cases, the best and most creative cheater.

There's an old adage in NASCAR: "If ya ain't cheatin', ya ain't tryin'." From the first organized races in the late 1940s on the sandy shores of Daytona Beach, Florida, the sport has had a long history of guys bending the rules, pushing the envelope, working in the gray area, or exploiting the rule book.

Some teams don't look at cheating as cheating. They look at it as a unique way to beat the competition, kind of a "Get them first before they get us" mentality. Yet at the same time, no other organized professional sport so often turns a blind eye to—if not unofficially endorses—teams that don't necessarily play fair and square. But if you

look at the makeup of some current and former NASCAR officials, you get a better understanding of why such blatant rule bending, if not outright rule breaking, is tolerated.

For example, Gary Nelson, NASCAR's former director of research and development, was one of the best at the game. A former two-time Daytona 500 winning crew chief, Nelson was always looking for an edge—any edge, be it right or wrong—over the next guy.

His most famous stunt was while serving as crew chief for Darrell Waltrip. Because Cup cars at the time were weighed before a race but never after, Nelson figured out that a car would run better if it became lighter. So he placed several pounds of buckshot in a secret compartment in Waltrip's car. During parade laps, Waltrip would release the buckshot, which flowed out in a trickle so as not to be readily detected. Voilà—the car became lighter and more maneuverable, and more often than not, Waltrip would jump straight to the front of the race, or near it, in short order.

Current NASCAR vice president Robin Pemberton is another good example of someone who was an "innovator," having been penalized several times during his previous career as a crew chief for drivers such as Mark Martin (whose illegal carburetor spacing plate ultimately cost him the championship in 1990) and Rusty Wallace. However, since assuming the role of head cop in NASCAR—enforcing rules, catching and punishing rule breakers, and trying to clean up the sport to a more tolerable level than its former Wild West, everything-goes days—Pemberton has nailed some of the sport's top teams whose hands got caught in the cookie jar.

Pemberton has penalized Chad Knaus, Jimmie Johnson's crew chief, several times. Likewise, Michael Waltrip Racing was heavily penalized for a still unknown (or perhaps NASCAR doesn't want to reveal it) substance that appeared to be like jet fuel, found in the motor of Waltrip's car during Speedweeks in Daytona Beach in 2007.

Others who have been punished by Judge Pemberton include Steve Letarte (Jeff Gordon's crew chief), Robbie Reiser (Matt Kenseth's former crew chief), Tony Eury Jr. (Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s former crew chief), Todd Berrier (Kevin Harvick's former crew chief), Bob Osborne (Carl Edwards's crew chief), and Kenny Francis (Kasey Kahne's crew chief).

It's difficult to pick the best team owners, because as much as I don't want to use being "creative"—aka cheating—as a basis, it is still an element for some of the success the owners have had over the years. So as much as I'm known for being a harsh critic of cheating and of those who practice that "art," I have to play it straight when giving my picks for the best team owners in the sport. In so doing, I have ranked them using a variety of grading tools, including championships won, total race wins, strategy, initiative, quality of personnel, available budget (and sponsorship), and yes, even creativity of cheating.

And while I'm sure some readers may bring up guys like Junior Johnson, who not only won 50 races as a driver but also had another 132 wins as a team owner, or Richard Petty, who had 200 wins as a team owner (or partly shared them in his earlier years with father Lee Petty), I'm focusing solely on current owners.

Here goes with Cup racing's A-list:

1. **Rick Hendrick, Hendrick Motorsports (HMS).** Nine Cup championships (four by Jeff Gordon, four by Jimmie Johnson, and one by Terry Labonte) and nearly 190 career Cup-level wins entering the 2010 season. Without question, HMS is the standard by which all other teams are measured in today's Cup-level racing. With a driver lineup including Gordon, Johnson, Dale Earnhardt Jr., and Mark Martin, HMS is a veritable Murderers' Row of NASCAR.
2. **Joe and J. D. Gibbs, Joe Gibbs Racing.** Three Cup championships (two by Tony Stewart, one by Bobby Labonte) and more than 75 career Cup-level wins. With a driver lineup including Kyle Busch, Denny Hamlin, and superstar-in-the making Joey Logano, Joe Gibbs Racing has probably the best chance of any team owners of toppling the Hendrick regime in the coming years.
3. **Jack Roush and John Henry, Roush Fenway Racing.** Two Cup championships (one each by Matt Kenseth and Kurt Busch) and more than 115 career Cup-level wins. Roush Racing (which was renamed Roush Fenway Racing in 2007) was once considered the sad sack of Cup racing for coming so close to winning a Cup

championship only to come up short again and again (four runners-up and six third-place finishes between 1988, when the team started, and 2002). But that ignominious streak finally came to an end when Kenseth won the final Winston Cup title in 2003 and Busch won the first Nextel Cup championship the following year. Its five-driver lineup (the lone remaining structure of its size) of Kenseth, Carl Edwards, Greg Biffle, Jamie McMurray, and promising youngster David Ragan was cut to four teams for 2010 to meet a NASCAR mandate, with McMurray ultimately being the odd man out.

4. **Richard Childress, Richard Childress Racing (RCR).** Six Cup championships (all by the late Dale Earnhardt Sr.) and nearly 90 career Cup-level wins coming into 2010. This was once the most feared organization in the sport, thanks to Earnhardt's reputation as The Intimidator and his incredible win record of 76 career victories on the Cup scene (67 while driving for Childress). But when Earnhardt was killed on the final lap of the 2001 Daytona 500, RCR went into a major and understandable depression, both on and off the racetrack. It wasn't until Childress returned to more hands-on control in 2006 that the organization's three Cup teams began to show marked improvement. With a lineup of Kevin Harvick, Jeff Burton, and youngster Clint Bowyer, RCR looked to be in good shape for many years to come, particularly when those three drivers finished fourth, fifth, and sixth in the 2008 Chase. Unfortunately, 2009 was a totally different story, which included the addition of Casey Mears in the long-sought fourth RCR team. Things went into a major tailspin when no RCR driver made the Chase and Harvick announced late in the season that he likely would be leaving the organization after his contract expires after 2010.
5. TIE: **Chip Ganassi and Teresa Earnhardt, Earnhardt Ganassi Racing (formerly Dale Earnhardt Inc.), and Roger Penske, Penske Racing.** Not exactly A-list material, per se, but both organizations are almost always threatening to pull off a strong run. Very similar in several ways, including never having won a Cup championship, both have Daytona 500 victories (EGR/DEI

with Michael Waltrip in 2001 and 2003, Dale Earnhardt Jr. in 2004, and Jamie McMurray in 2010; Penske with Ryan Newman in 2008). Penske has more career Cup-level wins, more than 60, than EGR/DEI, which has nearly 25. However, EGR/DEI, which began racing on the Cup level in 1996 (first as DEI, then merging with Chip Ganassi Racing before the 2009 season), did not earn its first Cup victory until 2000 with Steve Park; Penske, which originally formed its Cup team in 1972 (and then re-formed in 1980 after a two-year hiatus), earned 36 of its wins prior to 2000. Also, both organizations have never come close to their roots. EGR/DEI has never approached the success that late founder Dale Earnhardt Sr. had with Richard Childress Racing, and Roger Penske has continually been frustrated at not being able to achieve a success similar to what he has had in the open-wheel racing world (11 championships as well as 15 Indianapolis 500 victories).



Who Were the Five Most Important Individuals in NASCAR's Modern-Day Development?

When it comes to NASCAR's development into the multibillion-dollar monolithic enterprise that it has become, it might be easier to list those who made little or no contribution than those who helped build it. There are just so many names, faces, and talents that helped to shape the sport, from its roots on the beaches of Daytona in the late 1940s to the thirty-six-race, twenty-two-track national and even international enterprise it is today.

The sport was built on the backs of talented drivers and crew chiefs, who provided the excitement, while NASCAR officials and track owners provided the organized competition and the venues. And let's not forget one of the most important aspects of NASCAR's development into a multibillion-dollar enterprise: the infusion of hundreds of corporate sponsors and "partners" who provided necessary funding to keep both competitors and the sanctioning body fiscally alive and vibrant.

Trying to take the hundreds, if not thousands, of key individuals who helped to build NASCAR to what it is today and whittle them down to just five is an exercise in futility. No matter whom I pick, someone is going to find exception with at least one of my five picks, if not more.

I have chosen the five individuals who have played the biggest part in advancing the sport, making it more than just racing—making it a riveting, exciting spectacle and elevating its top players, particularly the drivers into modern-day heroes and even folk legends.

In order of importance and overall significance, here's my list of the top five individuals who made NASCAR what it is today:

1. **Bill France Jr.** "Big Bill" France Sr. may have conceived and founded NASCAR, but it was "Little Bill" France Jr. who took the sport and sanctioning body to unprecedented heights. In his thirty-one-year reign as NASCAR chairman, the man almost everyone called "Bill Jr." brought far-reaching changes to the sport, including the first live telecast of the Daytona 500 in 1979 (which served as a precursor to the multibillion-dollar TV package of today), the expansion of the schedule to thirty-six races, the construction of numerous new racetracks, and the purchase of existing facilities. Perhaps most important, he attracted tens of billions of dollars in corporate sponsorship support to both the sanctioning body and the teams, not only assuring their survival and prosperity but also consistently reinvesting capital for further growth and to attract millions of new fans. More than anyone else, Bill Jr. made NASCAR the place to be for drivers, team members, owners, and, most important, fans. He passed away in 2007, but his legacy will always be part of the sport, and his influence will continue to be felt for decades to come.
2. **Richard Petty.** The man known as The King was the ideal prototype for NASCAR's growth: a lean, soft-spoken, true Southern gentleman who let his performance on a racetrack do the majority of his talking for him. Petty became an icon in the sport because of what he represented in his role-model persona: he came from a strong family; lived his life by strong morals, ethics, and beliefs; raced cleanly (or at least more so

than most of his competitors); always made sure he gave plenty of time and of himself to his fans; and could drive the wheels off a race car better than anyone else, ultimately winding up with 200 career Cup-level wins, a record that will most likely never be broken. Petty blazed a trail for the likes of Dale Earnhardt, Darrell Waltrip, Cale Yarborough, David Pearson, Jeff Gordon, and so many others. And even though his team fell on hard times after he retired, his presence ranks almost as high as that of Bill France Jr., with a legacy that will also be felt for many years to come.

3. **Dale Earnhardt Sr.** The man in black, the cursed Snidely Whiplash of NASCAR, didn't earn his infamous nickname, The Intimidator, for being a nice guy. He earned it by being the most ferocious and feared competitor on any racetrack on which he wheeled a race car. Earnhardt was both loved and hated by millions of fans. Those who loved him were usually drawn by his win-at-all-costs driving style. Those who hated him usually did so because he kicked the asses of so many of their favorite drivers. But Earnhardt was an icon in other ways, too. Women loved him because he symbolized what they wanted most in a man, and men admired him because he was the prototypical man's man, the kind of guy most other men aspired to be. His popularity was so immense that when he died tragically in a last-lap crash in the 2001 Daytona 500, the subsequent mourning rivaled the grief after the death of Elvis Presley. While many wondered if NASCAR could survive such a major blow as Earnhardt's death, not only did he leave a legacy that helped the sport to continue to grow to unprecedented heights, his impact will continue to be felt as much as France's and Petty's for a long time. Perhaps the most telling aspect of Earnhardt's legacy is that now, nearly a decade after his death, he remains one of NASCAR's most popular figures. His fans just don't want to let go of his memory, which is one of the reasons for the thriving business of Earnhardt-related souvenirs and memorabilia that continues to be a multimillion-dollar cash cow for his widow, Teresa Earnhardt.

4. **T. Wayne Robertson.** As director of sports marketing for the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR), Robertson followed in the footsteps of his mentor, the late Ralph Seagraves, in using NASCAR as a vehicle for one of the greatest product and promotional enterprises that the business and the sports worlds have ever known. From the time that RJR entered the sport in 1972 and became the title rights sponsor for NASCAR's premier series (formerly known as the Grand National Series), Winston Cup racing became synonymous with NASCAR, and vice versa. It was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began, they were so closely linked.

   When federal government edicts in the late 1960s and the early 1970s limited tobacco advertising, Seagraves and Robertson came up with the ingenious idea to market the Winston brand of cigarettes not so much through advertising but just by name and brand recognition. Because the name "Winston" was so heavily plastered around race venues, race fans, particularly those who smoked, were understandably drawn to the brand; many believed that if the company was good enough to sponsor their favorite sport, then the company's product was good enough for them to smoke. The partnership lasted through 2003, when RJR was finally forced to withdraw its multimillion-dollar sponsorship due to heightened federal government pressure and restrictions. Nextel (now Sprint) replaced Winston as the title rights holder for the Cup Series in 2004, but to this day there are many diehard fans—and even competitors—who occasionally slip up and refer to the series as the Winston Cup Series.

   Robertson was selected as one of the most powerful men in all sports several times during his career, and for good reason: he created an empire that would most likely never have been toppled if not for the government lawsuits. Robertson was tragically killed, along with five friends, in a boating accident in January 1998, just eight months before his mentor Seagraves also passed away. Some say that RJR would still be sponsoring the series today—perhaps in another fashion or with a nontobacco product of the RJR family—if Robertson had not been killed. I am inclined to agree.

5. **Rick Hendrick.** Since the time he started his first Cup team in 1984, Rick Hendrick has become one of the most prolific and successful team owners in Cup history. Heading into 2010 and throughout a span of more than twenty-five years, the drivers who have carried the Hendrick Motorsports banner have amassed nearly 190 wins (a collective average of nearly 7.2 wins per season) and nine Cup titles, including four each by Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson (the other was by Terry Labonte). Even though Hendrick has stoically supported his teams and employees when they were found to be in blatant violation of NASCAR rules (for instance, Chad Knaus's numerous suspensions for cheating), there's no discounting the fact that Hendrick has not just set the bar for other teams and owners, he's raised it into a whole other zip code. No other owner currently even comes close. And when it comes to former owners, the closest comparison would be Junior Johnson, whose drivers won 132 races (including 13 by Johnson) and six championships for him. While Johnson won 50 races as a driver, he never won a championship behind the wheel. Hendrick and his operation, which employs a staggering five-hundred-plus employees, has set, holds, and will likely continue to hold the top standard against which all owners and teams will be measured for many, many years.



What's Right with the Chase for the Sprint Cup?

Other than the so-called Car of Tomorrow, no other "innovation" during NASCAR chairman Brian France's tenure has created more controversy than the Chase for the Sprint Cup.

The Chase was originally designed to increase the emphasis on winning and to eliminate championship runs like the one in 2003 that saw eventual champ Matt Kenseth take the Winston Cup title despite earning just 1 win during the course of the entire thirty-six-race season.

France assumed his position as NASCAR's chairman in October 2003, replacing his retiring father, Bill France Jr. He wanted to create a system that drew lots of attention in NASCAR's direction, both with the fans and the media. It took nearly three months of discussion and going through countless "what if" scenarios, but France finally found a formula that he thought would work. He introduced it to the media in his first State of NASCAR preseason address in January 2004.

Although there was considerable consternation among the fans and the media during the first twenty-six races (dubbed the "regular season") about how the subsequent ten-race Chase would fare, it ended far better than anything France could have predicted or expected. For more on the events of that first year, read number 3 in the list on page 36.

As the Chase has evolved in its first six years, there has been a steady decline and erosion of the effectiveness and parity of the system. En route to four consecutive championships, Jimmie Johnson proved with his performance that drivers in essence had to have 10 nearly perfect races during the Chase to have any chance of winning the championship. One or more faltering steps early in the Chase, and a driver's chances to bounce back were all but eliminated.

A perfect example of this was in 2008, when Kyle Busch dominated the first twenty-six races, only to struggle in the first three Chase races (finishing 34th, 43rd, and 28th, respectively), which quickly made him a nonentity the rest of the way. He ultimately finished a disappointing 10th in the final standings.

I admit that I wasn't a big fan when France announced the Chase, but it quickly grew on me, especially with the way the first season played out. However, as each subsequent Chase has played out, I find myself, like so many others, questioning whether the Chase still remains a viable format. Has it already outlived its usefulness just six years into its run? So let's cut to the chase (no pun intended): Has the Chase for the Sprint Cup—known as the Chase for the Nextel Cup in its first four incarnations—proved to be good or bad for the sport and for NASCAR as the sport's overseer?

Here's how I see what's right with the Chase (I cover what's wrong with the Chase in the Red Flag section):

1. Faced with near-stifling competition from other sports, NASCAR needs a unique playoff system of its own to build excitement and to help it stand out from the more popular professional football season, the college football season, major league baseball's playoffs, and the World Series, along with the start of the basketball and hockey seasons. The Chase helps to create a buzz and a vibe for the sport at the time of year it needs it the most.
2. As the Chase has evolved, it has created two unique periods of excitement: first, during what has unofficially become known as the "Race to the Chase" (the seven races or so leading into the Chase, typically starting with the Brickyard 400 and continuing through the final Chase-qualifying race in Richmond, Virginia, in early September, where drivers on the bubble are faced with a make-or-break situation to qualify for the Chase), and then again during the actual ten-race Chase itself.
3. Although the last few Chases have not exactly created that level of excitement, many Chase supporters still hearken back to the way the first Chase to be contested played out in 2004. The championship was not decided until the final lap of the final race of the Chase, with Kurt Busch ultimately beating Jimmie Johnson by a razor-thin 8-point margin, the smallest championship-winning spread in the sport's history. Hollywood could not have written a better script if it had tried. Subsequent Chases have been judged against that inaugural edition, fair or not, and it still serves as the prime example of what all Chase battles should strive to be like.
4. The system is fair, for the most part—even if it means that some of the sport's best or most popular drivers sometimes miss out on the fun. For example, Jeff Gordon and Dale Earnhardt Jr. both missed the 2005 Chase due to poor performance during the first twenty-six races. And 2005 Chase champ Tony Stewart failed to qualify to defend his title in the 2006 Chase, ultimately settling for eleventh place, the highest a driver could finish if he didn't make the so-called playoffs. NASCAR subsequently expanded

the Chase field to twelve drivers in 2007 (with some critics saying that it was done to placate the stars who just barely missed making the top ten, like Earnhardt, Gordon, and Stewart), but the current twelve-driver field seems to have brought the sport a happy medium. However, there continues to be talk among the teams and the fans to potentially expand the Chase field once more, to fourteen or fifteen entrants. France has thus far resisted this move, and I commend him for doing so. Otherwise, you might as well open the Chase to everyone, thus negating the purpose for the format in the first place.

5. The Chase has helped to eliminate runaway championship drives. With the points reset that is done heading into the Chase, the drivers who have built huge leads during the twenty-six-race regular season—much like Jeff Gordon did in 2007—suddenly find themselves back at square one, ready to go back to battling for everything they can get. Some think this isn't fair, that a driver who has excelled in the first twenty-six races should not capriciously have the fruits of his hard work taken away when the Chase begins. But if there was no reset, how exciting would it be to see a driver build a lead of 500 or more points as the season wears on to a conclusion? The Chase was designed in part to keep things close—or at least closer than under the former system—and regardless of what Jimmie Johnson did between 2006 and 2009, it has still managed to stick pretty close to its original intent.



What Are the Best Racetracks in NASCAR?

For more than twenty years, people have constantly asked me what I think are the best and worst racetracks in NASCAR. Generally, those questions come from newer fans who want to maximize the enjoyment and experience of attending their first Cup race in person. Going to your first race in person is almost like losing one's virginity: you want your first time to be memorable and an experience you'll never forget.

Obviously, watching a race at a track and on TV are two entirely different experiences. You might have more comfort watching at home or at a bar, but there's nothing like the workout that your senses get live and in person:

The sights: the wonderful world of colors that permeates the entire experience, including more than forty multihued cars; the appealing or sometimes gaudy-colored uniforms of the team members who are working the pits or standing in unison for the national anthem; awe-inspiring airplane flyovers; watching the cars take the green flag; holding your breath when a car crashes only to exhale a sigh of relief when the driver emerges from the wreck unscathed; the fan in front of or alongside you, potentially a new friend, even if you cheer for rival drivers.

The sounds: race car engines roaring to life; the (sometimes off-key) national anthem; the cheers and jeers of as many as a hundred thousand fans or more; my favorite at-track sound, "Gentlemen, Start Your Engines!" Life doesn't get any better than that.

The smells: rubber burning off tires as the cars make yet another lap around the track; the exhaust fumes from the motors; the beer your neighbor just spilled all over you; acrid cigar or cigarette (both legal and illegal) smoke in the stands; the variety of food, ranging from the normal fare of hot dogs and hamburgers to more exotic offerings like sushi and Wolfgang Puck entrées.

You can see why having a great experience is so important when you attend your first Cup race in person. Anything less than a wonderful day will be cloaked somewhat in disappointment. But picking the best and worst racetracks on the NASCAR circuit isn't just for first-timers or newbies. Longtime fans who don't venture far from their closest or favorite track also want to know where they should or shouldn't go if an opportunity arises to expand their Cup horizons.

Picking the best of twenty-two tracks is a rather subjective exercise. The tracks I think are the best might not be on your list, and that's fine. That's the beauty of NASCAR: being able to agree and disagree. But with twenty-five years of writing about NASCAR and other forms

of motorsports, I've heard from and talked with enough fans, drivers, and team members to have a pretty good read on the pulse of the best tracks in the business.

So, without further ado, here are the five best tracks on the NASCAR circuit (conversely, the five worst tracks are in the Red Flag section):

1. **Bristol Motor Speedway** (.533-mile oval, 160,000 capacity). This legendary East Tennessee track is NASCAR's mecca, a place that offers an almost religious pilgrimage for fans who want to pay homage to some of the sport's greats who once raced or continue to race there. Nowhere else on earth can you squeeze so many race fans into such a small space. But that's the beauty of Bristol, with its close and often furious racing. It's one of the favorite tracks for many drivers, and it has some of the best sight lines for fans of any venue in all sports facilities. Just as spectacular is the noise factor: with the stands rising up to the clouds, the sounds that reverberate during a race make you feel like you're in the middle of a hive full of angry bees. Bristol is so popular that many fans actually put their season tickets in their wills to pass on to the next generation. There used to be a waiting list of more than fifty thousand for season tickets for both Cup races every year. The track has since refined its process to a yearly lottery in which the fans send in postcards for blind draws, and that lottery still draws more than ten thousand entrants who are seeking a chance to purchase four season ducats. Say what you want about fabled places like Daytona and Indianapolis, but when it comes to the hottest ticket in NASCAR, Bristol is it. If you had to pick which of the two yearly races to attend, the nod goes to the summer Saturday night race, which enhances the Bristol experience all the more with tens of thousands of cameras flashing away at any given time in almost strobe light–like fashion. If you attend only one race in your lifetime, Bristol is the place.
2. **Daytona International Speedway** (2.5-mile oval, 200,000-plus capacity). This track takes on an atmosphere unique in stock-car racing during February's two-week Speedweeks session, which leads up to the legendary and season-opening Daytona 500.

It's an experience comparable to spending the month of May at Indianapolis in preparation for the Indianapolis 500. This is where the all-time best enjoyed some of their greatest moments in stock-car history. It's no wonder that everyone in the sport refers to the Daytona 500 as NASCAR's Super Bowl; it's the biggest and greatest race. If you go there, another must-see is the Daytona 500 Experience, a museumlike exhibit in front of the speedway. Besides, you can't beat the frequent seventy- to eighty-degree weather in the middle of winter.

3. **Indianapolis Motor Speedway** (2.5-mile oval, 300,000-plus capacity). For the first eighty-three years since it opened in 1911, the most legendary racetrack in the world only featured Indy-style, open-wheel racing with its marquee event, the Indianapolis 500, otherwise known as the Greatest Spectacle in Racing. In 1994, the track opened its doors to NASCAR for the first time for the Brickyard 400. In a decade and a half since, that event has become the second largest and second richest event in stock-car racing, after the Daytona 500. Visiting this track is like going to Bristol, a pilgrimage of sorts in which the fans not only watch a great race but also immerse themselves in some of the greatest moments in motorsports at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame and Museum, located in the track's infield. If you're a diehard race fan, be prepared to spend several hours in the museum, which has one of the most reasonable admission prices in all of sports: three dollars for adults and one dollar for kids six to fifteen years old.
4. **Texas Motor Speedway** (1.5-mile oval, 160,000-plus capacity). Even though this is one of the seven "cookie cutter" tracks that dominate the Cup schedule, a race here is more than just another 1.5-mile event. It's a spectacle, with some of the biggest crowds, biggest driver paydays, and best racing action you'll find anywhere. It definitely lives up to its state's motto: it does things bigger and better in Texas. The fan who attends a race here winds up being as much of a winner as the guy who ultimately takes the checkered flag.
5. TIE: **Phoenix International Raceway** (1.0-mile oval, 85,000 capacity) and **Las Vegas Motor Speedway** (1.5-mile oval, 150,000

capacity). Where else could you watch a race while sitting on the side of a mountain (just watch out for the occasional wayward snake that might slither through the underbrush) with a spectacular view of the track below? The aesthetics of the Phoenix track are unlike any other track on the Cup circuit. Although attendance could stand to be increased, the 1-mile flat track is a cozy venue for watching NASCAR's biggest stars. And more often than not, the racing is among the tightest and closest side-by-side competition you'll find anywhere. But you also can't ignore its neighbor three hundred miles to the north in Las Vegas. With the reconfiguration of the track prior to 2007, and with higher banking and the fan-friendly Neon Garage in the middle of the infield, the Las Vegas track joins its sister track in Texas as one of the showplaces of the Cup circuit. And like Phoenix, Las Vegas has its own aesthetics to boast about: Nellis Air Force Base is right across the street, giving race fans some spectacular air shows for free.

HONORABLE MENTION: **Darlington Raceway,** the second oldest track on the circuit, built in 1950—the fabled Lady in Black (a reference to its original black asphalt) is a must-see for diehard Cup fans ▪ **New Hampshire Motor Speedway** may be in the middle of nowhere, but you'd be hard-pressed to find better side-by-side racing ▪ **Talladega Superspeedway** is so large (2.66-miles around) that you could fit a small country in its massive infield ▪ **Infineon Raceway** is arguably one of the most picturesque road courses in all of racing.



What Is the Best Track for Ingress and Egress?

Getting to and from every racetrack on the Sprint Cup circuit is like the old navy saying "It's not just a job, it's an adventure."

For many fans, it takes longer to get into—and even longer to get out of—a racetrack than to watch the entire race itself. More often than not, the way to get to a track quickly is not necessarily the easiest

or the most convenient route. Rather, it's the road less traveled, otherwise known as a shortcut.

Take my word for it: NASCAR officials are the kings at finding previously undiscovered ways to get to a track quickly. You may have to do a bit of dirt-road driving, but would you rather be stuck in traffic for a couple of hours or be in your seat less than forty-five minutes after leaving home or your hotel?

Here are the five best tracks for ingress and egress (I'd throw in my patented shortcuts for many of these tracks, but then, if I give my secrets away, I'll be back to fighting traffic in another venue):

1. **Kansas Speedway.** I can't lavish enough praise on the Kansas Highway Patrol and Kansas City police for making it so easy to get into and out of this place, which is nestled in the juncture of I-435 and I-70. It's rare that you are sitting in line for more than twenty to thirty minutes, if even that. And if you take some streets that parallel the track, you can just breeze right into the parking lot. This place gets an A-plus from me.
2. **Phoenix International Raceway.** As I mentioned earlier, this track is on the side of a mountain. The key is *not* to take I-10. Avoid it at all costs. And if you're coming from Phoenix, remember the following parallel roads (they'll get you to the track *much* faster): Broadway Road, Buckeye Road, Lower Buckeye Road, and Van Buren Street.
3. **Homestead-Miami Speedway.** Even though this track is about thirty miles from downtown Miami, a quick hop on the Florida Turnpike can get you here fairly quickly. The key, though, is to get off before everyone else does. Remember exit 9, and follow the signs for coming in the back way, along the outskirts of Homestead Air Force Base. You can thank me later.
4. **Michigan International Speedway.** This is the biggest surprise of all. Five years ago, I would have picked this as one of the five worst tracks for ingress and egress. But the job that track president Roger Curtis has done the last couple of years in conjunction with the Michigan State Police and local county and municipal police departments has been nothing short of spectacular. You used to sit in traffic two to three hours coming into

or leaving this track, but now you can typically be on your way within an hour or so after the race ends. You may have a few miles of bumper-to-bumper traffic, but it clears up quite quickly, compared to other locales. A bit of advice if you're heading to the track on race day: even though ingress has improved, you should still leave early. The worst time for traffic backups is between two and three hours before the green flag. One other tip: Invest in a good local map (or GPS) and plot out some of the back roads that are in the area. You may rarely even hit your brakes because the track comes into view so suddenly.

5. **New Hampshire Motor Speedway.** If you don't mind getting your car dirty, there are lots of back roads and dirt roads that can help you to avoid roughly 90 percent of race day traffic (that's right, I said 90 percent). Don't come in from the south on Route 106. Take I-93 to exit 20 (Tilton Road, also known as Route 140). Take Tilton east until you hit Route 106 southbound. You may be going a few extra miles out of your way, but trust me, you'll get to the track much faster than the cars that are creeping and crawling several miles from the south.

HONORABLE MENTION: **Chicagoland Speedway**—circle around and come in from the south, and you'll have very little stress on race day, but the postrace egress can be rough, especially if the police send you in the opposite direction from where you want to go and then you have to continue for a couple of miles before you can turn around ▪ **Atlanta Motor Speedway**, if you take the back roads instead of Route 19/41, which runs right by the track.

Of course, as attendance has continued to plummet, race day traffic has continued to improve, but that's a story for another day.



What Are the Best Cities in NASCAR?

I can't count the number of e-mails I have received over the years from fans asking the same question: if there are only a couple of cities that a diehard NASCAR fan should visit, which ones would they be?

We've already covered the best NASCAR tracks, but what about the best cities or metropolitan areas that surround some of those tracks? Which are the best at supporting the sport and the sanctioning body? Which offer the most entertainment or activities away from the racetrack?

The answers to these questions are pretty easy. There's no need to give a top-ten or even a top-five list. There are really only two cities that best encapsulate the NASCAR experience. You might be surprised at my choices, but after a decade on the NASCAR beat, twenty-five years in motorsports coverage, and thirty-five years overall in sportswriting, I cannot find any other locales that rival these two.

First stop, **Charlotte, North Carolina**. (You thought I'd probably say Daytona Beach, Florida, didn't you?) There's no other city that compares in the U.S. motorsports community, not even the king of the open-wheel world, Indianapolis, Indiana. Often referred to as "Daytona North," Charlotte and its environs (Mooresville, Lake Norman, Concord, Kannapolis, and others) are home to the largest concentration of racing teams around. Virtually every Sprint Cup and most Nationwide and Camping World Truck series teams call this area home.

The center of everything is Charlotte Motor Speedway (known until the end of 2009 as Lowe's Motor Speedway), the so-called Beast of the Southeast, one of the best racetracks out there. Everything seems to branch off from the track like the tentacles of an octopus, including places where fans can get a true grasp on not only the history but also the present and the future of stock car racing.

There are more than a dozen museums dedicated to motorsports (primarily NASCAR), so a diehard race fan can immerse him- or herself for more than a week in NASCAR culture and still not see everything. There's the North Carolina Motorsports Museum in Mooresville, the Hendrick Motorsports Museum in Concord, the Richard Childress Museum in Welcome, the Dale Earnhardt Museum just outside Mooresville, and many others.

NASCAR opened its long-awaited and celebrated Hall of Fame and Museum in May 2010, which will take the sport to even greater levels of attention, notoriety, and popularity.

But museums aren't everything. Many teams offer tours of their shops to race fans. Among the top ones are Joe Gibbs Racing, Hendrick Motorsports, Penske Racing, Michael Waltrip Racing, and Dale Earnhardt Inc. Even if you're not a fan of a particular team, if it offers a tour, take it. It'll be an experience you'll never forget.

Next on the diehard's destination list is **Daytona Beach, Florida**. Before the hiatus to Charlotte by most teams in the 1980s and 1990s, Daytona Beach used to be *the* place to be for a lot of NASCAR teams. And even though Charlotte has overtaken it as the top destination for NASCAR fans, how can you ignore NASCAR's birthplace? Not only does it offer the legendary Daytona International Speedway, it also has the adjoining Daytona 500 Experience (formerly Daytona USA), an interactive museum that traces the history of the Great American Race. If you're in town on race weekends, you can also visit the fan zone, which allows fans to watch race teams as they do their work; this provides great opportunities for autograph hunting. But wait, there's more.

What helps Daytona stand out from other areas is that besides enjoying the race-related activities, you can escape a long, cold winter by traveling to the beaches that sit just a few miles east of the house that "Big Bill" France built. There's also the world's most popular family vacation destination, Walt Disney World, just outside Orlando, about an hour's drive away.

If you're a baseball fan, there's plenty of major league baseball spring training action within a few hours' drive in February and March, as well as a whole slew of minor league action during the summer.

Then there are a couple of honorable mentions. Talladega Superspeedway in **Talladega, Alabama**, is arguably the best place to party in the sport today—and certainly one of the wildest places on God's green earth on race weekends. Although Daytona used to be the king of drunkenness and debauchery, it's given way to Talladega, which is as close to a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah as you'll find anywhere. Often fueled by alcohol, the fans make the 'Dega infield and the surrounding campgrounds look more like Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Beads have become quite popular in and around Talladega, precious rewards for female fans to show off their sometimes far-too-ample charms.

Finally, if you've seen Charlotte and/or Daytona, sooner or later you have to trek several hundred miles north to **Indianapolis, Indiana**. It's a miniature version of Charlotte, and it's home to other forms of motorsports—not just open-wheel teams in the Indy Racing League but also an increasing number of National Hot Rod Association drag racing teams. Just like their stock car counterparts in Charlotte, several of these teams offer tours of their respective shops, and there are numerous opportunities for fans to purchase souvenirs of their favorite teams or drivers.



What Were NASCAR's Five Biggest Comebacks?

Nothing deserves more respect or appreciation, in my opinion, than overcoming incredible odds to end up with a major success or prize. When a NASCAR driver rallies from what would seem to be insurmountable odds to achieve success, he earns this kind of respect, which is rarely attained. Ever since NASCAR's "modern era" began in 1972, it has had some really incredible comebacks by drivers.

Here are the top five (actually six, because my fifth pick ended in a tie) comebacks, in countdown style, that I think have been the most significant and incredible rallies that the sport has ever seen:

5. TIE: **Richard Petty, 1979,** and **Terry Labonte, 1996.** They don't call Petty The King for nothing. In the same year that he earned perhaps the most memorable of his seven Daytona 500 victories, Petty ended the season in as much of a flourish as he began it with. Down 229 points with eleven races left, he put on perhaps his greatest championship-winning effort ever. It was quite fitting, indeed, for it would wind up being Petty's seventh and final Cup championship, as well, and would end up being the second closest finish in Winston Cup history (after Kulwicki's 1992 run and prior to Nextel/Sprint coming into the sport in 2004), defeating Darrell Waltrip by a mere 11 points.

Labonte overcame a 111-point deficit with four races left to overtake Jeff Gordon and go on to win his second career Cup championship, ultimately defeating Gordon by 37 points. Had it not been for Labonte's remarkable comeback, we'd be talking about Gordon's *five* career Cup championships today.

4. **Darrell Waltrip, 1985.** Even though he had a tendency of making things look easy, Waltrip's third and last championship was far from easy. He trailed Bill Elliott by 206 points with eight races left—a hard enough margin to overcome. But not only did he do just that, once Waltrip caught Elliott, he went on to win the whole dang title by 101 points, to boot.
3. **Jimmie Johnson, 2006.** October 8, 2006, is a day that—to borrow from the late president Franklin D. Roosevelt—will live in NASCAR infamy. The UAW-Ford 500 had just finished at Talladega Superspeedway, and young Johnson had finished a disappointing 24th, dropping him to 8th place and 156 points out of 1st with six races left to go (after disappointing finishes of 39th, 13th, and 14th in the first three races of the Chase). "I thought it was over for us at that point," Johnson recalled. "I figured we were done, we were out of it. I told Chad [Knaus, the crew chief] that we might as well start working on things for next year." But Knaus wasn't as willing to throw in the towel as his driver was. He assured Johnson that the team could still come back—and indeed, that's what they did. Two years after finishing second to Kurt Busch by a mere 8 points, Johnson would win the first of what would become four consecutive Cup championships. Was Johnson's "we were done" claim merely a bluff, so that other teams would discount his chances in the remaining half a dozen Chase races? If they did, then the bluff was obviously successful, because Johnson went on a hell of a tear from that point on, finishing first or second in five of the remaining six races and ultimately winning the championship by 56 points over runner-up Matt Kenseth. Johnson's feat just added to the legacy and the lore of a season that began with a win in the Daytona 500 (without Knaus, who was suspended prior to the race for improper adjustments to Johnson's race car) and another restrictor-plate win at Talladega in

April, and finally one of the biggest wins of Johnson's career came in August when he captured the Allstate 400 at the Brickyard at the fabled Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

2. **Darrell Waltrip, 1981.** Waltrip always had a flair for the dramatic as a driver, and that was never more apparent than in the way he won all three of his Cup titles between 1981 and 1985: he had to rally back in the standings each time to become champion. But it was his first title that stands out the most. Many decidedly Waltrip fans still consider his 1981 comeback as the greatest in the sport, rallying from a 341-point deficit in the final seventeen races to win his first Cup title. How he did it was sheer Waltrip magic: he earned fourteen top-five and three other top-ten finishes in those final seventeen races. Most notable was an astounding fourteen-race streak down the stretch in which Waltrip finished no lower than third place in each event, with 8 wins, 5 second-place finishes, and 1 third-place showing. He would ultimately defeat Bobby Allison, who at midseason looked like the man to beat, by 53 points.
1. **Alan Kulwicki, 1992.** What the Greenfield, Wisconsin, native achieved in 1992 was to many (including myself) the greatest comeback NASCAR has ever seen. Kulwicki rebounded from a 278-point deficit with just six races left to ultimately win that season's championship by a mere 10 points over the favored Bill Elliott. That an underdog like Kulwicki, who owned and raced for his own single-car team—and even did much of the grunt work like working on shock absorbers and springs—could bounce back from such a huge deficit and wind up winning at the end is a ready-made script for Hollywood. Ironically, back in 2003, NASCAR's media relations department came up with a list of the top-ten championship comebacks of all time and ranked Kulwicki only in third place. But if you look at his stats, compared to those of others who also were considered among the sport's greatest comeback honors, what Kulwicki did—and the short period in which he did it—would win, hands down. For the record, Kulwicki needed and got an average of 48 points

more per race in the final six events before the season was over. Also, he won the title, even though the final running order in the season finale at that point had Elliott winning the race and Kulwicki finishing second. The difference was in the number of laps that each driver led in that race: Elliott led 102, but Kulwicki led 103. In addition, this particular race will be remembered for two key points in NASCAR history: it was Richard Petty's last (finished 35th of forty-one drivers) and Jeff Gordon's first (finished 31st).



Who Are the Most Underrated Drivers in NASCAR Today?

It's easy to cite the biggest names in NASCAR. After all, they're the ones who have earned multiple championships or have the biggest followings. But what about the guys who do well yet rarely get the attention they deserve? Is it because they're not as flashy or successful as guys like Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jimmie Johnson, or Tony Stewart? Do they not covet or like the spotlight? Do they do their job in yeoman fashion, worried more about doing their best than counting wins or top-five finishes?

That's why I've always thought it best to gauge an underrated driver by his overall record compared to his notoriety and popularity. Let his performance speak for him, even if he doesn't necessarily get the attention he often so truly deserves.

For example, Jeff Gordon would never be considered underrated, given that he's won four championships and more than 80 races in his Cup career. At the same time, just because a guy has won a Cup championship shouldn't exclude him from being tagged as "underrated." You'll see a perfect example of this in a moment.

Much of the input I received for the selections to this question came from fans I heard from in recent years. So if you're going to

blame anyone, blame them—not me. Only kidding! It just so happens that I agree with these top three picks:

1. **Mark Martin.** He should wear a cape with a *U* on his chest, signifying the most underrated driver in modern-day NASCAR racing. Even though Martin is one of the most respected drivers in the garage, serving as an example to his peers of a good character, a clean life, and one of the most competitive racers, he'll forever be known for never having won a Cup championship. He gets respect, but there is little acknowledgement of his accomplishments. He's been a runner-up in the final season five times, but no other driver has gotten as little attention as Martin has, compared to drivers like the late Dale Earnhardt Sr., Jeff Gordon, and Tony Stewart. He deserves so much better.
2. **Matt Kenseth.** Kenseth is the "perfect example" of an underrated past champion that I mentioned earlier. Although his performance has slipped in the last two years—he missed the Chase for the Sprint Cup for the first time in his career in 2009, leaving Johnson as the only driver to have qualified for all of the first six Chases—Kenseth is still one of the most consistent drivers on the circuit when he's on top of his game. That consistency is so legendary that when Kenseth won the final Winston Cup championship in 2003, he did it primarily through consistency and not by wins. The fact that Kenseth had just 1 win that season en route to the title prompted NASCAR chairman Brian France to devise and implement the Chase for the Nextel (now Sprint) Cup the following year. France sought to give more weight to winning, because the way Kenseth won the title was, for all intents and purposes, boring. That's not a knock against him; he merely did the best collectively of all the drivers, even if he was more about top-five finishes than wins.
3. **Jeff Burton.** If Mark Martin is the elder statesman of NASCAR (not by age but by demeanor, attitude, leadership, character, and overall talent), then Burton could be mini-Mark. Like Martin, Burton is an eloquent and deep-thinking speaker (one of the

reasons he's always in demand by reporters), has been the main influence in resurrecting Richard Childress Racing, lives a clean life (has never been involved in any scandals), is a mentor to young drivers (like teammate Clint Bowyer), and has an almost prophetlike outlook on the sport and the world today. He's engaging to speak with on everything from getting through a turn to politics and solutions to the world's problems—which would explain why he's nicknamed The Senator in the garage area. Oh, yeah, and the South Boston, Virginia, native is one heck of a race-car driver. Unfortunately, as with his former teammate Martin, it just doesn't seem to be in the cards that Burton will ever win a Cup championship or get more of the attention he so deserves.

HONORABLE MENTION: **Ryan Newman**, **Greg Biffle**, and **Kevin Harvick** are all examples of the proverbial "he's much better than his overall record indicates" label.

As a postscript, some of you might wonder why I haven't included drivers like Clint Bowyer, Denny Hamlin, Carl Edwards, and Kyle Busch in this category. The reason is simple: these are budding superstars in the sport and still have long careers ahead of them. Check back with me in about ten years, and I bet none of them will be underrated by then.



When Jeff Gordon Retires, What Will Be His Legacy with NASCAR?

For nearly two decades, Jeff Gordon has been the most successful driver in Cup racing. Ever since he ran his first race in the 1992 season finale—in what many consider one of the most significant changing of the guards in the sport: Richard Petty's last career Cup start and Gordon's first—the driver of the No. 24 Chevrolet has gone on to become one of the greatest stars in the sport's history.

Among some of Gordon's most notable accomplishments: four Winston Cup championships (1995, 1997, 1998, and 2001); more than 80 wins in NASCAR's top division; at least 1 win at every current track on the circuit except for Homestead-Miami Speedway; more than 260 top-five and 350 top-ten finishes in fewer than 600 career starts; more than 20,000 leads in 165,000 laps; nearly 70 career poles; and more than 215,000 miles logged in a Cup race car.

Gordon came to NASCAR after an outstanding career in sprint cars, midgets, and other open-wheel racing, primarily under the auspices of the United States Auto Club. And while he quickly developed a large and loyal fan base, he was met with significant resistance from many longtime NASCAR diehards. For one thing, Gordon was a California native, although he spent much of his formative racing years in Indiana, the hotbed hub of sprint and midget racing. Gordon was therefore looked at by many Southern race fans as an outsider—a Yankee by some, a slick Californian by others.

Ironically, that perception only became compounded by the fact that Gordon became an almost immediate winner. Paired with crew chief Ray Evernham, he blazed through the Cup ranks, particularly from 1995 through 1999, when he notched three of his four Cup titles and won 47 races, including 13 in 1998 and 10 each in 1996 and 1997. Gordon's fourth title came in 2001, with Evernham prodigy Robbie Loomis at the helm as crew chief. (Evernham had moved on to form his own team and help Dodge return to the sport in 2001.)

With that kind of success, it is easy to see why Gordon might be the subject of hatred from non-Gordon fans. He was taking wins and championships away from other fans' drivers, most notably guys like the late Dale Earnhardt, Darrell Waltrip, Dale Jarrett, Terry and Bobby Labonte, Rusty Wallace, Ricky Rudd, and Mark Martin.

Martin is an especially poignant example, for he finished second to Earnhardt in 1994, fourth to Gordon in 1995, third to Gordon in 1997, and second to Gordon in 1998. Martin fans could make a strong case that if "Wonderboy" (as Gordon was derisively called by some non-fans) hadn't come along, Martin might very well have been able to earn at least one career Cup championship.

During his most successful seasons, Gordon was both cheered and booed. He became the subject of abject criticism and derisiveness. One well-known comedian, Tim Wilson, even recorded a song that became semilegendary among non-Gordon fans, called "Jeff Gordon's Gay!" That song and others of the same ilk were funny—even Gordon has good-naturedly laughed at them numerous times over the years—but only one thing is important: Gordon has been one of the biggest positives the sport has ever seen.

He exuded a clean-cut, all-American-boy image. When first wife, Brooke, filed for divorce, even non-Gordon fans came to Jeff's defense, essentially vilifying the former Miss Winston for doing her man—and their man, the way they saw it—wrong.

Gordon has been a perfect example of strong values, a tough but fair competitor, and a clean racer (most of the time). He has never had any off-track incidents that brought him or the sport any ill repute—something that can't be said of many other athletes in other professional sports. He's practically been the prototype of professionalism and classiness. Unfortunately, many other athletes have chosen to go in another direction.

As Gordon begins to close in on the end of his long and successful Cup career, something else needs to be pointed out about him. Had it not been for NASCAR's implementation of things like the Chase for the Sprint Cup or the Car of Tomorrow, Gordon would most likely have enjoyed even greater success, even during the waning years of his career.

For example, if the old format had stayed in place and the Chase had never come to be, Gordon would probably have won one to three more Cup championships from 2004 to 2009 (particularly in 2004, as well as 2006 and 2007). Unfortunately, Hendrick Motorsports teammate Jimmie Johnson wound up taking away three of Gordon's best chances from 2006 to 2009. And had it not been for the extreme difficulty of adapting to the Car of Tomorrow in 2008, Gordon might have added significantly to his total career wins.

In fact, I believe that Gordon would have had six championships and would have been closing in on 100 career Cup wins by now had it not been for the Chase, the Car of Tomorrow, and, of course, the success of his prodigy, Johnson.

Gordon came onto the NASCAR scene just as its biggest hero, Richard Petty, was calling it a career. Cut from a similar mold as gentleman Richard, Gordon brought class, fierce but clean competitiveness, and an example of how clean living and hard work can lead to success—just as Petty displayed during his nearly-four-decade racing career.

Gordon became Earnhardt's archnemesis and rival—much as Earnhardt had been to Petty during the final fourteen years of The King's Cup career—and when he eventually leaves NASCAR, it will be a much better organization for having had him in its ranks.

When he does ultimately retire from NASCAR—which given Gordon's new-found second wind to keep racing for several more years could be anywhere between 2015 and 2021—Gordon will likely be a unanimous first-ballot inductee for the NASCAR Hall of Fame in much the same fashion as Petty and Earnhardt, the two biggest names in NASCAR history that preceded him. That's true greatness right there—and Gordon certainly deserves to be in that category, if not a category of his own.



Which Drivers Made the Biggest Leap to Stardom by Jumping to Another Team That Led Them to Greatness?

If at first you don't succeed, change teams. That has been the formula for many Cup champions since 1972. It is becoming increasingly rare for a driver to remain with the same team and the owner who first brought him either to the Cup level or into the sport as a whole, and several drivers have left one team to achieve the kind of success they always hoped for with another.

In many cases (such as the late Dale Earnhardt's), the jump to another team did pay off beyond a driver's wildest dreams. But there were also some bittersweet end results (such as Rusty Wallace's).

The top two reasons why a driver jumps from one team to another are the opportunity to earn significantly more money and the opportunity to potentially earn more wins and championships. Other reasons include wanting to leave a team that doesn't have enough resources to be competitive (and most likely never will), following a sponsor the driver is readily identified with to a new team (such as when Dale Jarrett followed United Parcel Service from Robert Yates Racing to Michael Waltrip Racing in 2007), or simply wanting a different type of pace with another team (such as when Bobby Labonte left Joe Gibbs Racing after the 2005 season to join Petty Enterprises and, more important, to be able to spend more time with his family).

Even valid active contracts don't stop drivers from jumping to another team. After 2005, just a year removed from winning his first Cup championship with Roush Racing (now Roush Fenway Racing), Kurt Busch was given a less than amicable release from his existing contract to sign with Penske Racing, replacing Wallace, who retired after his "Rusty's Last Call" (a takeoff on Wallace's primary sponsor, Miller Beer) farewell tour at the end of that campaign.

Ditto for Jamie McMurray, who essentially replaced Busch at Roush Racing for 2006. McMurray also had an existing contract with Chip Ganassi Racing with Felix Sabates, but after lengthy haranguing he eventually won his release as well, thus paving the way for him to sign and race for multicar team owner Jack Roush.

Unfortunately, McMurray's tenure with Roush lasted just four seasons, for after 2009, Roush was forced to release McMurray and disband the No. 26 Ford team to comply with a NASCAR mandate that limited team owners to operating no more than four Sprint Cup teams at any one time. Roush had five teams and had to divest himself of one by the end of 2009. Unfortunately, McMurray and his team were the odd men out.

Although I wanted to choose five drivers here, I wound up choosing seven. I was probably more torn about this choice than any other I've made in this book, but I decided that the other two drivers deserved at least an honorable mention.

So let's look at the top five drivers (with two others close behind) who went from "standing at the altar" with one team to achieving a success afterward that they could only dream about:

HONORABLE MENTION: Awesome **Bill Elliott from Dawsonville, Georgia,** wasn't very awesome at the beginning of his Cup career, when he was driving for Elliott Racing, which was owned by his father, George. In sixty-five starts for the family business, Bill managed just a pair of top-five finishes. It wasn't until he moved to Melling Racing (owned by Harry Melling) in 1982 that Elliott began to carve his path to racing history. During his ten-year tenure with Melling, Elliott earned 34 of his 44 career Cup wins, as well as his lone Cup championship in 1988. When Elliott moved to Junior Johnson's team in 1992, he earned 6 wins in three years, but he never came close to approaching what he achieved during his glory days with Melling. ▪ After two years with Cliff Stewart, **Rusty Wallace** decided to move to Raymond Beadle's team in 1986. Beadle had achieved success in drag racing with his infamous Blue Max Funny Car and had decided to try his hand at NASCAR Cup team ownership. It took the duo just three years to earn the Cup championship in 1988 (they also would earn 18 wins together). Here's where the melancholy enters: Wallace parted ways with Beadle and joined Roger Penske's organization in 1991. He'd go on to win 37 races there, becoming one of NASCAR's most beloved and popular drivers in the process, but unfortunately he was never able to earn another Cup championship. It's the same with Wallace's successor at Penske, Kurt Busch. He won the Cup title in 2004 and 14 races overall for Roush Racing, moved to Penske in 2006 to replace the retiring Wallace, but has yet to repeat his championship achievement with Roush Racing.

5. **Dale Jarrett.** Early in his career, Jarrett drove for Eric Friedlander's team, split duties in the same season driving for teams owned by Cale Yarborough and Hoss Ellington, and eventually drove for the Wood Brothers (winning his first Cup race in 1991). He then moved up the ladder a bit higher by joining

Joe Gibbs Racing in 1992, where he stayed for three seasons and won 2 races. Finally, in 1995, Jarrett found a home at Yates Racing, and the rest is history. In the next twelve years in the Yates camp, Jarrett would win 29 of his 32 career wins, including the 1999 Cup championship.

4. **Cale Yarborough.** Yarborough was an interesting case. He drove for a number of different team owners during the first fourteen years of his career, but only on a part-time basis. He finally moved up to full-time in 1973 for team owner Richard Howard, where he stayed for a year and a half before moving to Junior Johnson's camp. It was there that Yarborough would have the greatest success of his career, not only earning 45 of his 83 career Cup wins but also becoming the first driver in NASCAR history to win three consecutive Cup championships (1976–1978). Once he left Johnson's team after 1980, Yarborough essentially came full circle. He would race for another nine seasons, but only on a part-time basis, much like the way he started in the sport.
3. **Darrell Waltrip.** The kid from Owensboro, Kentucky, came into the sport doing things his own way, racing primarily for his self-supported team early in his career. Waltrip enjoyed limited success driving for himself until he moved to the DiGard team near the end of 1975. He stayed there through 1980, earning 26 wins, a total he nearly equaled in his first two seasons (12 wins apiece in 1981 and 1982) with Junior Johnson. It was under Johnson's tutelage that Waltrip became one of the greatest drivers in the sport, not only earning more than half (43) of his 84 career wins in Cup racing but also capturing all three of his career championships (1981, 1982, and 1985).
2. **Jeff Gordon.** Everyone knows that Gordon won all four of his Cup championships and more than 80 career wins driving for Hendrick Motorsports. But here's one of the best bar bets in the sport: who did Gordon actually race for when he first came into NASCAR? No, it was *not* Rick Hendrick. Gordon actually came into the sport with Bill Davis Racing. Yep, it's true; you can look it up. In fact, Gordon wound up finishing fourth in the then Busch Series standings in 1992, winning 3 races as well, before he made his Cup debut

for Hendrick in the season finale at Atlanta that same year. The rest, as they say, is history.

1. **Dale Earnhardt.** It's hard to believe that one of the greatest drivers in NASCAR history couldn't get anyone to believe in his talent and ability early in his career. Earnhardt finally got his big break when a new hotshot team owner from California, Rod Osterlund, took Humpy Wheeler's advice and hired Earnhardt for his first full-time ride in Cup racing in 1979. Everyone knows that Earnhardt won seven career Cup championships, tying him with Richard Petty. And most average NASCAR fans may believe that all seven of those titles were earned while racing for Richard Childress Racing. Wrong. Guess again. Earnhardt actually only won six titles with Childress. The first of his seven Cup championships came in 1980 while racing for Osterlund. Almost as quickly as he came into the sport, Osterlund was gone by halfway through 1981, selling his operation when funds became scarce. Earnhardt finished the season racing first for Jim Stacy and then Childress, but he moved to Bud Moore's team in 1982. He stayed there for two years before moving permanently to Childress's operation in 1984 and earning 67 of his 76 career Cup wins.



What Are the Five Biggest Off-Track Developments to Change NASCAR in the Last Twenty-five Years?

I talk a lot about the so-called Car of Tomorrow in this book. It and NASCAR's commendable push to optimize safety for drivers have been two of the most significant developments to change the sport in the last two and a half decades.

But there have also been several off-track developments in the last twenty-five years that have helped to take stock car racing from just a simple sport, based primarily in the Southeast, to a major league, national enterprise. I'm talking about things that have helped drivers

more from a business, time-management, and comfort standpoint than the newest engine-chassis setup or lightning-fast tires.

There have certainly been other changes that have helped drivers to worry more about racing and less about nonracing details, but here are what I think are the five most significant changes that the nonracing aspect of the sport has seen:

5. **The Internet.** Many race fans arguably now receive the majority of news about races or their favorite driver from Web sites such as ESPN.com, NASCAR.com, Yahoo.com, and Jayski.com. The online explosion has revolutionized the way we get our information and how quickly we get that information (we know about breaking news almost as soon as it has happened). It has opened a whole new universe in which race fans can share their thoughts and cheer their favorite drivers through social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook.

   There's also a side of things that is not as well publicized, but I predict it will become much more important in the next few years: driver-owned Web sites. Instead of having a fan-run site, as many celebrities do, a driver typically contracts an outside firm to host and develop his site. In turn, the driver often shares information about himself or a particular race as well as his thoughts on subjects that he might not share with the mainstream media (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines).

   We've seen it far more frequently in football, baseball, and basketball: an athlete will give his side of a story only to his personal site, keeping mainstream media in the dark and out of the loop.

   This trend is not lost on NASCAR drivers, and I predict that in the next few years you're going to see even more drivers utilize their own sites to get their message across. They'll still have to fulfill certain mainstream media obligations, but the less a driver can say to those outlets, the more he can say on his own site.

   One other area that is virtually brand-new is NASCAR's experiment with so-called citizen journalists (fans who maintain general-interest racing sites and receive full access as "real"

reporters). Because so many mainstream media outlets have drastically cut, if not totally eliminated, their motorsports coverage—primarily NASCAR coverage, and particularly in newspapers—the sanctioning body hopes that the citizen journalists will fill a coverage void. Time will tell.

4. **Private airplanes.** When you travel cross-country several times a year for races or sponsor-related appearances, or you need to get somewhere more expeditiously than by commercial airline, your travel choices become somewhat limited. That's why most Sprint Cup drivers have gone the route of either owning or leasing private airplanes. They're not held to airline schedules, they can typically fly into smaller and less populated (that is, less busy) airports, and they don't have to hassle with long security checkpoint lines.

   "Having your own private airplane saves you an incredible amount of time and hassle," Sprint Cup driver Carl Edwards said. "When you want to go, you just take off and go. No matter where we're racing in the U.S., we can typically be back home within four, five hours. You can race during the day and be back in your own bed later that night. It's just so, so convenient."

   Some drivers have even gone as far as to take flying lessons and earn pilot licenses from the Federal Aviation Administration so they can fly themselves to and from races. Some drivers who are also pilots are Mark Martin, Matt Kenseth, Jeff Burton, Greg Biffle, Jamie McMurray, and Camping World Truck Series driver Mike Skinner.

   Edwards also became a pilot, partly out of design and partly out of necessity. As a teen, Edwards had visions of becoming a fighter pilot in the military. If it hadn't been for his prowess behind the wheel of a race car, he just might have fulfilled that dream. Besides, when you compete in close to seventy Sprint Cup and Nationwide series events per year, not to mention doing numerous sponsorship appearances and TV commercial shoots, hopping into your own airplane becomes as routine as climbing into a race car.

3. **Driver-endorsed or driver-licensed memorabilia.** What drivers earn from race winnings can be chump change compared to the

multimillions of dollars they earn from other sources throughout their careers.

The trend toward big memorabilia cash began in the 1990s, when diecast cars—fully detailed and exact duplicates of the cars that drivers drove in actual races—came into prominence, thanks to companies like Action Performance, Team Caliber, and Racing Champions.

The industry became so lucrative that in 2005, NASCAR's International Speedway Corporation and its rival, Speedway Motorsports, merged with Action Performance and Team Caliber to create a new company called Motorsports Authentics.

While diecasts remain popular, other driver-branded and licensed merchandise has also taken off, particularly T-shirts, jackets, caps, seat cushions, pennants and flags, bumper stickers for fans' personal cars, and even driver-sanctioned credit cards.

When Dale Earnhardt Jr. decided to leave Dale Earnhardt Inc. for Hendrick Motorsports after the 2007 season, having the best equipment and organization was only part of the reason. Both Junior and team owner Rick Hendrick realized the huge financial windfall that Earnhardt's move would bring to both the driver and his new home, particularly since new primary sponsors (including the National Guard and Amp Energy Drink) were replacing Earnhardt's former sponsor, Budweiser, which had been the biggest memorabilia vendor in the business (thanks to Earnhardt). Who can forget the sea of red shirts, baseball caps, and jackets that followed Earnhardt from one venue to another? This trend has now been replaced by the green, white, and blue colors of Amp and/or the National Guard.

2. **Driver-team public relations person.** As NASCAR became more popular, the drivers needed someone to oversee their media efforts, coordinate fan club and newsletter notes about them, schedule appearances, and, in general, point them in the right direction, making sure they're where they're supposed to be to do what they're supposed to do.

   A PR person's biggest role remains dealing with the media, and it has taken an ironic twist in the last decade. As drivers and the

sport have increased in popularity, media availability has actually decreased; many PR directors are severely limiting media access to "their" drivers, as they like to call them. Particularly with some of the biggest teams in the sport, PR directors often even go so far as to offer driver availability only to those reporters who have favored status with the team or the driver or who usually write only positive stories or broadcast positive reports about the driver.

On the one hand, PR directors are a blessing for the drivers and the teams. On the other hand, they are also somewhat of a curse. That's why there's so much turnover in the industry; some individuals are almost like journeymen, jumping from one driver or team to another every year or two.

Of course, the drivers sometimes play a hand in that. I know of one very popular Sprint Cup driver (I won't mention his name because I don't want to embarrass him) who fired his PR person because he forgot to bring the driver's sunglasses to a fan event at which the driver was appearing.

1. **Business managers or agents.** NASCAR has not seen the often overbearing presence of agents that is seen in other pro sports—particularly football, baseball, and basketball. However, they're out there, and they're getting significantly more important with each passing year and every contract, endorsement, and investment deal that they complete for the drivers they represent, further maximizing each driver's name, reputation, and "brand."

   The biggest agent and firm in NASCAR is Cary Agajanian and his Motorsports Management International (MMI). Agajanian, one of several sons of legendary West Coast motorsports promoter J. C. Agajanian, has been involved in racing his entire life, including race promotion, track management, and team ownership. But Agajanian has made one of his biggest marks on the sport by representing drivers, helping them to earn substantial amounts of money and then save and protect their earnings. His client roster includes Tony Stewart, Kyle Busch, Kasey Kahne, David Reutimann, Jamie McMurray, Bill Elliott, and Denny Hamlin.

   In a sense, Agajanian is part father, part advocate, part watchdog, and part handyman in the way he oversees his drivers'

careers. Not only does he do the standard thing that sports agents typically do—negotiate contracts with team owners—he also takes care of things like investments, taxes, sponsorships and personal endorsements, insurance policies, and anything else that needs to be watched over.

In a business that can be cutthroat, Agajanian has one of the kindest hearts in it. He's spent countless hours helping up-and-coming drivers, even giving advice or direction for free. In fact, not many people know it, but Agajanian played one of the biggest roles in Jeff Gordon's development—and pretty much gratis because Gordon and his stepfather, John Bickford, had no money to pay for Agajanian's services at the time.

But don't call Agajanian or his employees "agents." "We're very, very careful not to call ourselves agents, because we're not," Agajanian said in an interview with *NASCAR Scene* magazine in June 2005. "We really are managers. There's a difference, too. We do some similar things to what an agent does, but our company is called a management company, and there's a purpose for that. We're not out trying to find jobs for people. That's not what we do. We want to make sure that the life of the professional race driver is managed properly, his business and all aspects of his business life. That's why we call ourselves managers."

Another significant representative of drivers is Birmingham (suburban Detroit), Michigan, attorney Alan R. Miller, who has represented a number of drivers in NASCAR, as well as the Indy Racing League, including Kyle Busch (before he jumped to MMI) and Indy 500 multiwinner Helio Castroneves.



What Are the Best NASCAR Movies of All Time?

For the most part, the phrase "best NASCAR movies" is a perfect example of an oxymoron. For as much as Hollywood has tried to bring the serious drama of stock car racing to the big screen, it more often

than not has turned portrayals of the sport into cartoonish and comedic spoofs. That's not to say that those laughable louts are all bad, but it doesn't exactly put the sport in the best light when it's being made fun of so often—whether or not it's good-natured mockery.

When *Sports Illustrated* came up with its list of the top fifty sports films of all time in 2003, only one race-car driving movie made the list, and it wasn't even a NASCAR movie: the 1966 racing classic *Grand Prix*, which starred James Garner as a Formula One driver. Oh, the indignity—not one NASCAR flick on the list. But then, given how Hollywood really doesn't take NASCAR all that seriously, such a choice is not surprising.

I'd love to see a NASCAR-themed movie that would be a combination of three of the greatest sports movies of all-time: *Bull Durham*, *Slapshot*, and *Rocky*. It's unlikely we'll ever see anything like that, unfortunately.

My picks for the best NASCAR movies are a cross-section of decent drama and seemingly unnecessary, over-the-top comedic caricatures of the sport and its people. In making my picks, I've tried not to take things too seriously while maintaining a semblance of respect and dignity for the portrayals that came the closest to showing moviegoers the real inside story of NASCAR life:

1. ***The Last American Hero* (1973).** Not to be confused with the TV show of the early 1980s, *The Greatest American Hero*, this flick is blessed with a great story line (based on the life of the legendary Junior Johnson), great inspiration (based on a 1964 *Esquire* magazine story by Tom Wolfe), and great acting by the likes of Jeff Bridges, the late Ned Beatty, and even Gary Busey (five years before his breakout portrayal of Buddy Holly and before all his personal problems occurred). This is about as close as you're going to get to a real-life story about NASCAR's early days, tales about moonshine running, and how stock car racing evolved. Even though it's been nearly forty years since this movie hit the big screen, a DVD or a videocassette of this is a must-have for the true NASCAR fan.
2. ***Greased Lightning* (1977).** The true story of the late Wendell Scott, the first black driver to be a regular in NASCAR's Grand

National (predecessor to the Winston Cup, Nextel Cup, and now Sprint Cup) Series. Richard Pryor plays it straight in this drama and gives one of the best performances of his acting career. Scott's career was one of fighting prejudice, injustice, and adversity, and Pryor pulls off his portrayal of Scott with uncanny believability and aplomb.

3. ***Days of Thunder* (1990).** I can't win with this pick. NASCAR purists hate this movie, but those who like it think it should be ranked first instead of third. Actually, I was going to rank it fourth, but there's no way it could rank below *Talladega Nights*. Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman star, along with great supporting performances from Randy Quaid as Tim Daland (a character that is loosely based on Rick Hendrick) and Robert Duvall, who especially stands out as Harry Hogge, Cole Trickle's (Cruise's) crew chief. Although some of the scenes are overplayed, especially Trickle's ongoing conflict with chief rivals Rowdy Burns (Michael Rooker) and Russ Wheeler (Cary Elwes), the good and the bad times on and off the track are very close to what we see in real-life NASCAR, with everything from pathos to comedy. My first two picks are equally close to being real-life portrayals, but this one is a bit more relevant to modern-day NASCAR, even if it is—hard to believe—twenty years old now.
4. ***Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2007).** I have to admit that I loved this movie when it first came out; I even picked it ahead of *Days of Thunder* as a favorite at one point. But time has mellowed my feeling somewhat. It's hysterically funny, but when it comes to reality, it's *way* off base. Ironically, it's that off-base story line that actually made this movie such a fan favorite, with Rick Bobby (Will Ferrell) matching wits and accelerator pedals with archrival Jean Girard (Sacha Baron Cohen), a gay ex–Formula One driver who has come to the United States to be the best in stock car racing, Bobby's providence. If you are feeling down or want a good example of outlandish NASCAR-related story lines, this is the movie for you. But please, don't make the mistake that many did when this movie was first released and think that this really is true-life NASCAR. Even though the sanctioning body

gave its full cooperation and support to making this film, the story line couldn't be further from the truth.

5. ***NASCAR 3D: The IMAX Experience* (2004).** I really debated whether to include this film, because it's a documentary rather than a drama. But given that it really shows NASCAR in its truest form, there really is no excuse not to include it as one of the best portrayals of the sport and its participants. Although you can pick this up on DVD at most video stores, the *only* way to experience the full fury and action is at a real IMAX theater (this movie is one of the highest-grossing IMAX productions ever made). The sounds, the visuals, and the story line are the closest you'll come to NASCAR, short of climbing behind the wheel of a Cup car yourself.

HONORABLE MENTION: ***Cars* (2006):** It really pains me to include *Cars* in this category, but facts are facts: this animated story, based on NASCAR but without any direct references to the sanctioning body (for example, cars race for the Piston Cup championship rather than the Nextel/Sprint Cup title in real life), has become one of the most popular racing movies of all-time, especially for kids. Think of a touching racing version of *Toy Story* and *A Bug's Life*, and you'll get the idea of *Cars*, complete with race action and even an underlying love story. Frankly, it's only in this type of format that you would probably ever have both Paul Newman (voice of the retired Doc Hudson) and Larry the Cable Guy (voice of Mater, the tow truck). As much as I hate to admit it, this is also a must-have for NASCAR fans ▪ ***3: The Dale Earnhardt Story* (2004):** A made-for-TV movie produced by ESPN, *3* is an outstanding depiction of the life of the late Dale Earnhardt. Underrated actor Barry Pepper gives one of his best career performances (his portrayal of baseball legend Roger Maris in "*61**" was slightly better) as The Intimidator, particularly in the later, most successful stages of Earnhardt's career. If you want to know the real story of Earnhardt's development from childhood to becoming one of NASCAR's greatest drivers, pick this one up.

Postscript: As we went to press with this book, rumors were swirling of sequels in the works for *Talladega Nights*, *Cars*, and even *Days of Thunder* (let me guess, Cruise tries to win one last

championship before he hangs up his firesuit for good). That's just what we need: even worse follow-ups to the originals.



What Were the Best Tracks That Are No Longer Used by NASCAR?

A week rarely goes by when I don't receive at least one e-mail from old-time NASCAR fans who are lamenting that some of their favorite tracks have gone by the wayside due to "progress"—in other words, because they aren't making enough money. Most of the e-mails say the same thing:

"I loved The Rock. NASCAR should never have closed it."

"It's a shame what's happened to North Wilkesboro. They should never have closed it."

"I sure miss Ontario and Riverside out in California. They really had some good races there."

NASCAR's Sprint Cup currently races on twenty-two different racetracks, from Loudon, New Hampshire, to Fontana, California. There are thirty-nine races each season: thirty-six regular season events, the Budweiser Shootout and the split-field Gatorade Twin 150 (which are part of Speedweeks, leading up to the season-opening Daytona 500), and the Sprint All-Star Race in May.

But NASCAR's most popular series has also played at 146 other venues over the years; some that are still in existence, but many others have been torn down, taking lore, legend, and history with them—again, all in the name of "progress."

Of those 146 tracks, 6 stand out as the ones that fans lament and miss the most:

1. **North Carolina Speedway, Rockingham, North Carolina.** Without question, North Carolina Speedway is the track that fans miss most today. The Rock, as it was fondly called for the forty years it hosted Cup events (1965–2004), is also the track

most recently jettisoned from the Cup schedule. Unfortunately, although many fans say they loved The Rock and considered it their favorite racetrack, these fond feelings did not necessarily translate into ticket sales. When you have a capacity of 60,000 and you consistently fail to sell out the place—and attract fewer than 50,000 for the final Cup race there on February 22, 2004—it is easy to see why a supposed fan favorite just could not be sustained. One bright note, though: former racer Andy Hillenberg bought The Rock in 2007 and has attracted both the Automobile Racing Club of America and the United Speed Alliance Racing Hooters ProCup for events at The Rock, and he hopes to further expand its slate with other racing series. I don't know about you, but I'd love to see a Camping World Trucks or Nationwide series race back at Rockingham. We can only hope.

2. **North Wilkesboro Speedway, North Wilkesboro, North Carolina.** When New Hampshire International Speedway owner Bob Bahre and Speedway Motorsports chairman Bruton Smith needed additional race dates for their respective facilities, they combined efforts to purchase North Wilkesboro Speedway. They closed the 40,000-seat venue in 1996. One of NASCAR's original tracks, it opened in 1947. Efforts to reopen the track since it was shut have failed. The track was sold to a developer in 2007 for the dirt-cheap price of $12 million, but nothing has changed since then. At best, the site is most likely on life support. At worst, don't be surprised to see a shopping mall or an office park eventually built upon its hallowed land.
3. **Hickory Motor Speedway, Newton, North Carolina.** Just forty-three miles from North Wilkesboro sits Hickory Motor Speedway, which hosted Cup events from 1953 until 1971 and then opened its doors to the Busch Series from 1982 to 1998. But unlike its neighboring track, it has remained in operation as a venue for sportsman racers on the weekends since NASCAR pulled out. Opened in 1951, the 13,200-seat facility—which ultimately was its downfall because it could not expand any further and NASCAR was moving into much larger venues—continues to be popular among fans of exciting grassroots short-track

racing. As a result the track continues to call itself the "Birthplace of the NASCAR Stars."

4. **Ontario Motor Speedway, Ontario, California.** This is one of the greatest yet short-lived tracks in racing history. Designed to be similar to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (it even had a circle of bricks from Indy in its victory lane), it ultimately wound up being slightly faster, and it had the best of both worlds with a 2.5-mile oval and an infield road course. Unfortunately, NASCAR ran just nine races there before the track went bankrupt, allegedly due to mismanagement, and was eventually torn down (just eleven years after it opened), giving way to commercial development and housing. Ironically, California Speedway, a 2-mile high-speed facility, opened in 1997, just two miles away from the former Ontario site, and hosted its first NASCAR event in 2001. (It now hosts two races each season in the renamed Auto Club Speedway of Southern California.)
5. **Riverside International Raceway, Riverside, California.** One of NASCAR's most unique tracks, this 2.6-mile road course hosted stock-car racing from 1958 to 1988, before the value of its land became worth more than the racing action there (a direction in which Pocono Raceway may soon go, as well). If you ever find yourself at Moreno Valley Mall at Towngate and listen really close, you might still hear the sounds of the cars of the late Dale Earnhardt or Richard Petty in the distance. "The House That Dan Gurney Built" (a reference to one of the most versatile, prolific racers ever in motorsports history) deserved a much better fate than it received. Only memories remain, but ah, what memories they were.

HONORABLE MENTION: **Bowman-Gray Speedway, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.** Although this track hasn't seen major-league NASCAR action since 1971 (having started in 1958), Bowman-Gray holds a special place in NASCAR lore for its unique makeup. How many other racetracks do you know that have a football field in the infield (home to the Winston-Salem State University football team)? What's more, it continues unabated as NASCAR's longest-running weekly racetrack, hosting

a variety of sportsman events from spring to fall. To think that this 17,000-seat facility was once one of the biggest and most successful tracks on the Grand National circuit shows just how far NASCAR has come since then and how much it has grown. Still, Bowman-Gray will always hold a place in the hearts of die-hard race fans. If you've been there, you know what I'm talking about. If not, and you consider yourself a true race fan, do what you can to someday make a trek here.



Who Are the Five Most Underrated Front-Office People in NASCAR?

In NASCAR, team owners typically get all the glory (or criticism), pay the bills, and hire and fire the drivers and the crew chiefs. What else would you expect from the guy whose name is on the front door, like a Rick Hendrick, a Richard Childress, a Jack Roush, or a Joe Gibbs?

But one man is not an island unto himself, and owners are known for hiring some of the smartest minds to help them run things. More often than not, you hear very little from them publicly or in the media, but they are undoubtedly among the most powerful individuals in the sport.

I've looked at all Sprint Cup organizations, as well as within NASCAR, the sanctioning body for those individuals who have meant so much to their respective teams and organizations. Here are my picks for the five most underrated front-office guys in NASCAR (in no particular order):

- **Geoff Smith, President, Roush Fenway Racing.** Smith has one of the toughest jobs in the sport: Jack Roush's right-hand man. While Roush is out and about running a multimillion-dollar performance company in Michigan, flying his fleet of airplanes and playing owner of four Sprint Cup teams on

weekends, it's Smith who is the glue that holds everything together. Think of it in these terms: if Roush Fenway Racing were a suburb, Roush would be the part-time village president or mayor while Smith would be the full-time village or town manager or administrator. When things have to get done, Smith is typically the guy who lays the groundwork. He has Jack sign off on it, and then he seals the deal.

- **Marshall Carlson, Executive Vice President and General Manager, Hendrick Motorsports.** Carlton is one of the friendliest guys in the sport, but don't let his smiling face fool you. He's also one of the most intelligent negotiators and administrators around. Of course, it doesn't hurt that he's Rick Hendrick's son-in-law and the likely heir if and when Hendrick retires. Hendrick was grooming his son, Ricky, to eventually replace him, but that possibility ended tragically in 2004 when Ricky was among the ten victims who perished in the crash of a Hendrick team airplane into a mountainside near Martinsville, Virginia. Carlson runs the day-to-day operations at Hendrick Motorsports and played a major role in bringing Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Mark Martin into the Hendrick fold.
- **Kerry Tharp, Senior Director of Communications, NASCAR Front Office.** A veteran of sports public relations, including more than twenty years as sports information and assistant athletic director at the University of South Carolina, Tharp has done a tremendous job since joining NASCAR in 2006. Based out of the sport's Research and Development Center in North Carolina, Tharp is all business, but with a personable side, much like his boss, longtime NASCAR official Jim Hunter. If and when Hunter, who is approaching seventy years old, decides to retire, Tharp is a perfect replacement.
- **Jay Frye, Vice President and General Manager, Red Bull Racing.** A long-time administrator in the sport who continually flies under the radar of recognition, Frye has worked for several organizations in an executive role, including MB2 Motorsports, the short-lived Ginn Racing, and currently Red Bull Racing. Frye is one of the most organized individuals in the business, has great

chutzpah, and is the type that would give you the shirt off his back—provided it had a Red Bull logo. If and when NASCAR officials like Mike Helton, John Darby, and Robin Pemberton retire, Frye is a strong candidate to move up the ladder into a high-ranking administrative role within the sanctioning body.

- **Ty Norris, Vice President and General Manager, Michael Waltrip Racing.** Norris is the quintessential underrated executive. Though not known much in fan circles, he's one of the most respected executives in the business. Norris was invaluable in the formation and development of Dale Earnhardt Inc., taking the company of the late Dale Earnhardt and his widow, Teresa, from a small-time operation to one of the most efficiently run major teams in the business. Norris was also a key factor in the planning and construction of DEI's "Garage Mahal," the modern, multimillion-dollar headquarters of the organization, which is now called Earnhardt Ganassi Racing. Norris has done wonders at the helm of Michael Waltrip Racing, not only in building the team with its namesake owner but also as one of the best in the business at attracting and retaining sponsors. He also helped his current boss develop Waltrip World, an interactive combination museum and shop tour in suburban Charlotte. Like Frye, Norris would be a strong candidate to one day move up to NASCAR's corporate headquarters.

HONORABLE MENTION: **Eddie Jarvis, Tony Stewart's business manager, Stewart Haas Racing.** While guys like Frye and Norris fly under the radar, Eddie Jarvis is downright stealthlike invisible. And that's the way he likes it. A former motor coach driver, Jarvis endeared himself so much to Stewart that he eventually became his business manager. In addition, Jarvis is one of the most respected and trusted individuals in the garage, a person whom numerous drivers on competing teams actively reach out to, confide in, or seek advice from, knowing he won't betray them. In a sport in which it's often hard to find anyone you can trust fully, Jarvis has proven over the years to be one of the exceptions.



Whose Rookie Season Gave Us the Best Hint of What Was to Come?

NASCAR used to have one of the most convoluted systems for choosing each season's Rookie of the Year. From 1958 until 1973, a bunch of NASCAR officials would get together and simply pick the person they thought was the top newcomer in the sport. There was no true points system, per se, which contributed to some controversial decisions and choices.

Unfortunately, they goofed a time or two, particularly in 1973, when Lennie Pond was chosen over a promising young racer from Kentucky by the name of Darrell Waltrip. As a result of that last straw of a faux pas, the entire Rookie of the Year system was overhauled for the 1974 season, a points system was implemented, and, with a few tweaks over the years, has remained fairly constant since.

I like the system for the most part, but I do have a problem with how NASCAR allows a young driver to have up to seven starts per season and still retain his rookie status. Although it's not common, some drivers over the years have run up to seven races in *more than one* season and have still been considered "rookies."

Then there are the veteran race car drivers, particularly those who came to NASCAR from other series, like the Indy Racing League, who were considered "rookies" when they reached the Sprint Cup level. That's a misnomer if I ever heard one. But so be it; those are the stipulations NASCAR has in place, and we have to live with them.

Since 1974, a number of young drivers have come into the sport and either went on to become stars or faded away almost as quickly as they came. But whose rookie season gave us the best hint of what was (or was not) to come? I am including the Rookie of the Year only from 1974 to 2007, because it takes at least two years for a rookie to really get on the path to success in NASCAR.

In order, from fifth to first, here's my list of the top five rookies (and the year they won their respective titles) in the modern era who would go on to greatness:

5. TIE: **Alan Kulwicki (1986), Davey Allison (1987), and Kyle Busch (2005)**. Kulwicki and Allison never reached their full potential as drivers because they died (about three months apart) in 1993 in tragic flying incidents. Kulwicki perished with three others when their small plane crashed on its final approach to the airport in Johnson City, Tennessee. Allison was killed in a parking lot of Talladega Superspeedway while practicing landings in a brand-new helicopter he had just purchased. (Legendary driver Red Farmer was also in the chopper and was severely injured but survived.) Kyle Busch, the younger Busch brother, is one of the most prolific, exciting, and controversial figures in the sport, and he just turned twenty-five! If what he's accomplished thus far is any indication of what's to come, Busch could become one of the greatest drivers the sport has ever known; he's already got a great start in that direction.
4. **Rusty Wallace (1984).** Wallace came out of the St. Louis area, having first raced for a team owned by his father, as well as being the first of three brothers (with Kenny and Mike) who would eventually go racing in Sprint Cup competition. After earning Rookie of the Year honors, it would take Wallace five more seasons before he would win his first and only Cup championship. Although he failed to win any more titles, he did go on to win 55 career Cup races, which is a lot by anyone's measuring stick.
3. **Tony Stewart (1999).** Stewart came to NASCAR after a brief but superlative career in Indy cars, preceded by a lengthy stint of numerous wins and several championships in sprint-car and midget-car racing. It took Stewart just four years to win a Cup title, a feat he repeated three years later. He is closing in on 40 career wins on the Cup circuit.
2. **Jeff Gordon (1993).** Like Stewart, Gordon built his racing foundation in sprint and midget cars. He quickly became one of the Sprint Cup's most prolific winners and champions, earning his

first title in his third season of full-time competition (1995), followed by three other titles, in 1997, 1998, and 2001. He also has won more than 80 Cup races and may hit 90 before he retires.

1. **Dale Earnhardt (1979).** No modern-day rookie can match what the late Intimidator did in his career. It took Earnhardt just two seasons, including his rookie campaign, before he won his first championship (1980). He went on to win six others, tying Richard Petty for most Cup titles earned (seven). Earnhardt also won 76 career Cup races. Had he not tragically perished in the 2001 Daytona 500 at the far too young age of forty-nine, Earnhardt might have gone on to win at least one more championship and several more races. After all, he finished second in 2000 to champion Bobby Labonte and won 5 races in the two previous seasons before his untimely death.



What Are the Best Tracks for Tailgating and Partying?

For many fans, attending a Sprint Cup race in person is number one in their hearts and minds, followed closely by tailgating and partying. It's no secret that NASCAR fans love to party. And as wild as today's crowds may seem, they're actually tame compared to the race crowds from the late 1960s until around the mid-1990s. For many during that era, going to a NASCAR race was a celebration of speed and drunken debauchery. Women showing their breasts, couples having public sex, and the almost obligatory drunken brawls were practically stalwarts of the NASCAR crowd during that period.

As NASCAR made a conscious move to become more family-friendly, some of that craziness has been greatly reduced—but not completely reduced. Go to places like Daytona, Talladega, and Michigan, and you can still see a lot of skin and more.

The men at 'Tona and 'Dega like to shower the women who obligingly bare their breasts with Mardi Gras–like beads, a prized

commodity and great symbol of bragging rights. If you see a woman walking around a track with a whole slew of multicolored beads, there are only two ways she got them: she bought them, or she flashed to a number of appreciative men.

Talladega is known not only for that proclivity but also for some of the most memorable fights among the fans, in the stands, the parking lots, or the campgrounds. It's no wonder there is such a huge police presence at each of Talladega's two annual races, including police officers who look into virtually every car leaving the track to see if they can spot open containers or drunk drivers.

If you haven't been to any or many NASCAR races and want to see humanity at its most basic animalistic core, here's a primer of the best tracks at which to tailgate and party—and oh yeah, to eventually see a race:

5. **Michigan International Speedway.** Some folks like to call Michigan International Speedway the Talladega of the north because of the pervasive party atmosphere. The Midwest ethic includes lots of tailgating, camping, and drinking. If you didn't know any better, you'd say the crowd was tailgating before a football game, because the vibe is almost the same. Situated in south-central Michigan, in the picturesque Irish Hills area, this track is almost a perfect venue for partying and racing. Numerous lakes—and lake house rentals—wind up being either the start or the end of each day's partying going to or returning from the track. Of special note: If you leave the racetrack and go west on Route 12, be prepared to enter a flashing zone, where race fans line both sides of the two-lane road, waving signs or chanting the phrase "Show us your boobs." I've seen sixty-year-old grandmothers take off their tops, much to the delight of the audience.
4. **Texas Motor Speedway.** This is one of the few tracks on the circuit that lets folks who are camping or in RVs arrive a week before the race. What does that tell you? Plenty of party time! Texas Motor Speedway also arguably has the best tailgate cooking around. I've spent many hours walking around through parking

lots where I've watched folks cooking everything from full pigs to monstrous Texas steaks to alligator meat. Oh yeah, and don't forget the Texas chili. But be forewarned: Bring a gallon of ice cold water with you, just in case, because Texans love to spice up their chili with things like jalapeños and wasabi. Talk about hot—you can easily wind up with a five-alarm fire in your mouth and gut if you're not careful. (I've actually seen people be taken to the hospital as a result.) If you smell something good, ask for a sample—and ask if it's hot. Folks are very friendly and always love to make new friends.

3. **Bristol Motor Speedway.** Virtually a carbon copy of Texas, only in a much smaller geographic footprint. Parking lots and campgrounds are situated very close to the racetrack. Over the years, Bristol has become much more of a family-friendly track, so if you're looking for excessive skin display, fall-down drunkenness, and downright debauchery, you've come to the wrong place. A few instances pop up here and there, but for the most part, the partying and tailgating here is rather sedate.
2. **Daytona International Speedway.** This place used to be the king of partyin', drinkin', flashin', and tailgatin'. But as the track has gone through a number of capital improvement programs, including new race garages, the creation of a very popular fan zone, and the like, mischief in the infield has been ratcheted way down. Still, it has its moments. Be especially careful if you're walking around the RV lots and campgrounds: I was brushed by a car a few years back while walking alongside the main access road through the middle of the infield. Had I been two inches more to my left, I might not be writing this now. It was an elderly gentleman—I'm not sure if he was under the influence or just couldn't see (but how can anyone miss a 275-pound behemoth like me, anyway?). I'll never forget how his car brushed my buttocks and my left arm. Meanwhile, the driver kept on going as if nothing had happened.
1. **Talladega Superspeedway.** Even though the track has cleaned up its act, most notably in the infield, it is still a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. The best party action is in the surrounding

campgrounds. Partying typically starts on Thursday and continues 24/7 until Monday, the day after the race. One thing to be prepared for, especially if you're bringing your family, is that lots of skin gets displayed in the campgrounds. The parking lots are a bit tamer, and the infield is a crapshoot. Parts of it are G-rated while others are close to X-rated. As an aside, in terms of places and foods, Talladega was the first place I sampled alligator. And yes, it tasted like chicken.



What Were the Greatest Daytona 500 Races?

In another chapter of this book, I'll discuss NASCAR's one-hit wonders. Because the nature of a one-hit wonder is doing something so big at a major event that it stands out above everything else, naturally a win in the Daytona 500 would take precedence.

But what about the greatest Daytona 500 races of all—not the one-time wonders, but the races that shaped or defined the sport's biggest contest? Even though it kicks off the season rather than ending it, the Daytona 500 has assumed the persona of NASCAR's version of the Super Bowl: the sport's biggest race with the biggest payday and the most prestige.

Granted, I should cover all sixty-plus editions of the Daytona 500. But because the majority of this book is based upon NASCAR's modern era (1972 to the present), I'm focusing on the five races that made the most impact on the sport's development and are responsible for its ascension to the second most popular spectator sport in the United States.

Here's my list of the five most important modern-era Daytona 500s:

5. **2004.** Three years after his father perished on the final lap of the 2001 Daytona 500, Dale Earnhardt Jr. broke through to win his first—and only, as of this writing—Daytona 500. It took

his father twenty years to win his only 500 title, but Junior did so in just his fifth start. Not only did it show that Junior could do it, it further helped to cement his reputation as NASCAR's most popular driver, a title that would continue to grow with each passing year. According to some accounts, the cheers for Junior were the loudest ever heard for any driver in Daytona's history.

4. **1988.** Bobby Allison showed that even at the age of fifty, father still knows best, for he held off a hard late-race surge by his son Davey to win by two car lengths. It would be one of the few times that father and son would finish right behind each other.
3. **1976.** In one of the greatest battles of their long rivalry, Richard Petty and David Pearson were bound and determined to beat the other to the finish line. Somehow, you just knew something would happen before the checkered flag, and it did: both drivers made contact coming out of turn four, spinning into the front-stretch grass. It was a battle of restarts at that point. Pearson was able to fire his engine and, even with a crippled race car, drove past Petty, who could not get refired in time. Pearson returned to the track and crossed the finish line at a speed estimated to be just 20 miles per hour. It would be Pearson's first and only career triumph in the Great American Race.
2. **1998.** After nineteen previous misses, including losing just two turns from the finish line in 1990 due to a blown tire, Dale Earnhardt finally conquered Daytona, winning in his twentieth start. Earnhardt would amass more than 30 career wins in several different racing series at the legendary 2.5-mile superspeedway, but only once would he be able to claim the title of Daytona 500 champion. It was a triumph not just for Earnhardt but for NASCAR as well, for it was one of the few times that something like this has ever happened: crews from all forty-three teams came out onto the pit road to congratulate Earnhardt on unquestionably the biggest and most satisfying win of his Cup career. It's such a tragedy that he was taken from us three years later.

1. **1979.** I've already mentioned this as the most important race in NASCAR history and thus in Daytona 500 lore as well. Leaders Donnie Allison and Cale Yarborough got together on the backstretch, sliding into the infield near turn four (and eventually getting into a fistfight after exiting their cars). A shocked Richard Petty slid on past to claim the win, taking the victory by one car length over Darrell Waltrip, with A. J. Foyt finishing third. Not only was it a wild finish, it was the first flag-to-flag live national TV broadcast of a NASCAR race to a mostly captive audience housebound by a blizzard.



What Are NASCAR's Best Rules?

Why does it always seem that there are more bad things than good things in this world? Elsewhere in this book (the Red Flag section), I mention the worst rules in NASCAR. There are so many bad rules, in my opinion, that I had to resort to creating a top-ten list just to squeeze them all in.

That's not the case with NASCAR's best rules (fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your viewpoint). There are just five rules that are the best overall elements of the sport, making it stand out and be better for everyone. Here are my choices for the five best rules in NASCAR today:

5. **Pit road speed limits.** Even though there are still mishaps on pit road, the situation today is *much* better than in the past. Who can forget when Ricky Rudd accidentally ran into Mike Rich, the right-rear-tire changer for Bill Elliott, at Atlanta in 1990? Rich, tragically, was killed in the mishap, due partly to the fact that there was no pit road speed limit in effect at the time. Later, two of Rudd's crew members were struck by Ward Burton's car after a pit road collision with Casey Atwood sent Burton's car into Rudd's pit at Homestead, Florida, in the

2001 season finale. That incident eventually led NASCAR to mandate all over-the-wall crew members to wear heavy-duty helmets in addition to already mandated firesuits. Drivers and fans sometimes complain that pit road speeds are too slow, but I'd rather have slow speeds than funerals and paralyzed crew members.

4. **Freezing the field when a caution flag flies.** It used to be that a "gentlemen's agreement" existed between drivers that when a yellow caution was thrown, they wouldn't try to advance their positions. Unfortunately, NASCAR is steeped in a tradition of bootleggers and cheaters, which means that the gentlemen's agreement often went out the window. But when Casey Mears almost broadsided Dale Jarrett's crippled car in 2003 at New Hampshire in an attempt to gain as many positions as possible before taking the yellow caution flag at the start-finish line, NASCAR had seen enough. It implemented a new rule that immediately froze the entire race field at the time the caution flag was thrown. That way, no one could unfairly or sneakily advance his position any longer—and potentially risk the safety of the other drivers on the track. Electronic devices implanted in the race cars and at several points around the racetrack helped to keep everything on the up-and-up. Since its implementation, the system has worked so well that many have wondered why it took NASCAR so long to bring it to fruition. NASCAR is known for its speed on the racetrack but not in the boardroom.
3. **Double-file restart.** Even though this rule was only recently implemented (in 2009), it has earned its weight in gold very quickly. It's hard to find anyone who doesn't like it, other than maybe the field fillers, who rarely get a chance to race up front except in restarts off cautions that preceded the implementation of the double-file restart. Now the leader has the choice of taking either the inside or the outside lane on a restart, the driver running second at the time is then given the other line, and all cars on the lead lap fall in behind in their respective positions at the time of the restart (in other words, the first driver is next

to the second, the third is next to the fourth, the fifth is next to the sixth, and so on). This is yet another example of folks wondering aloud to NASCAR, "What the heck took you so long?"

2. **Green-white checker finish.** I have mixed emotions about this rule. On the one hand, it helps to ensure that a race finishes under green-flag conditions (though it doesn't always work that way). On the other hand, it's an artificially created way to bunch up the field for a two-lap shoot-out to the checkered flag. It certainly injects drama and excitement into the race's finish, but should a race outcome really be decided in just a two-lap battle? I'd be much more in agreement with a five-lap shoot-out, but a two-lap green-white checker is better than nothing, I guess. And if it breeds drama and excitement, even though it was created artificially, that's still a good thing for the sport and the fans.
1. **Mandatory use of head-and-neck-restraint devices.** After Dale Earnhardt was killed at Daytona International Speedway in February 2001, NASCAR moved quickly to require that all drivers wear head-and-neck-restraint devices. It became mandatory in October 2001, roughly eight months after Earnhardt's death, which might have been prevented if he had been wearing one. Earnhardt died from basilar skull fracture; his neck essentially snapped from the trauma and the impact of the crash. An emphasis was also placed on the installation of steel and foam energy reduction barriers at racetracks to cut down on the impact of crashes into retaining walls, but that was a process that took several years to complete at all NASCAR tracks. The head-and-neck devices were much easier and quicker to implement. Although most drivers quickly adhered to the new rule—in fact, some actually started wearing the devices even before NASCAR made them mandatory—there were some holdouts, most notably Tony Stewart. The Indiana native claimed that he suffered from extreme claustrophobia and that the restraint device would impede his ability to drive a race car. Stewart refused to wear the device, but NASCAR had the last word on it, telling Stewart to either wear it or not race. Needless to say, he's worn one in every race since.



Who Is the Best NASCAR Driver to Never Win a Points-Paying Cup Race?

Thanks to Jeff Turner of McLeansboro, Illinois, for this particular question. It's a great one, Jeff, although I admit I was kind of stumped by it at first. How can you gauge a driver who is the "best" to never win a points race? If he's a good driver, wouldn't you expect him to have lots of wins? But after giving it more thought, I realized that it is actually a good and legitimate question.

Before answering the question, let me preface it with a caveat: Just because a driver has never won a Cup race doesn't make him a bad driver—or a good driver, for that matter. But given how many drivers have come and gone in the Cup Series in the last six decades and have never won a race, you have to draw some type of qualifier to distinguish which drivers are eligible for this category.

To me, that qualifier is success—that is, wins and championships—in other series, most notably the Nationwide/Busch Series and the Camping World/Craftsman Truck Series. A driver may have been a dud, victorywise, in the Cup Series, but he could be a true stud in the other two racing leagues.

Here are some of the main requirements that I used to determine my pick for number one:

- He had to have at least 150 career starts in the Cup Series. So if you're thinking about guys like Mike Bliss, David Green, or Jason Leffler, who are stalwarts in either the Nationwide or the Trucks series, they're eliminated because none have even reached 100 career Cup starts.
- He had to have had marked success in either the Nationwide/Busch Series or the Camping World/Craftsman Truck Series, with a minimum of 100 career starts in one of those series, as well.
- He's been called upon numerous times in his career as a fill-in driver on the Cup side to replace another driver for reasons of

illness or injury, he served as an interim replacement after a driver was released, or he was hired to simply "shake down" a car to see if a poor performance was due to the car itself or the regular driver.

I'm going to list my top five picks from fifth to first, starting with three honorable mentions. Because some, if not all, raced in 2009 during the preparation of this book, I've rounded off some of their career numbers, such as starts and total races, to reflect this.

HONORABLE MENTION: **Kevin Lepage:** 201 career Cup starts; more than 250 Nationwide Series starts (including 2 wins) ▪ **Dave Blaney:** more than 320 career Cup starts; more than 115 career Nationwide starts (including 1 win) ▪ **Mike Wallace:** 188 career Cup starts; more than 330 career Nationwide starts (including four wins); more than 110 career Trucks starts (including 4 wins).

5. **Jeff Green:** 265 career Cup starts; more than 260 career Nationwide starts (including 16 wins); winner of the Busch (now Nationwide) Series championship in 2000 and runner-up in 1999 and 2001.
4. **Kenny Wallace:** more than 340 career Cup starts; more than 450 career Nationwide starts (including 9 wins); runner-up in the Busch Series in 1991.
3. **Todd Bodine:** more than 230 career Cup starts; more than 320 career Nationwide starts (including 15 wins); runner-up in 1997 and third in 1990 and 1992 in the Busch Series; more than 135 career Camping World starts (with more than 15 wins); won the Trucks championship in 2006.
2. **Ted Musgrave:** 305 career Cup starts (but none since 2003); 191 career Camping World Truck Series starts (including 17 wins); winner of the 2005 Camping World Truck Series championship, runner-up in 2001, and third place in 2002, 2003, and 2004. Even though Musgrave was forced to the sidelines in 2009 due to a lack of sponsorship, he still maintained his active status as a driver per NASCAR licensing. That's why I've included him

here, particularly since it's difficult to ignore the kind of numbers and accomplishments Musgrave has posted in his career.

1. **Mike Skinner:** more than 260 career Cup starts, including being the late Dale Earnhardt's teammate at Richard Childress Racing from 1996 to 2001; more than 200 career Truck Series starts with nearly 30 wins; winner of the Truck championship in 1995 and close runner-up in 2007. It seems that whenever a Cup owner needs a short-term replacement driver or someone to shake down a car, Skinner is typically at the top of the list. In recent years, he's driven for Red Bull Racing, Michael Waltrip Racing, Bill Davis Racing, and Tommy Baldwin Racing, among others. Given his achievements over the years, even if they don't include a Cup win, it's not surprising that Skinner is such a man in demand on the Cup side.