

# God Speed – NASCAR

A Theological Analysis By:  
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When I pray with these guys, and I am privileged to pray with them before every race, I make sure they pray that God will be glorified and that's all I ask. If it's through a victory for these guys, fine, if it's coming through this race without being killed, fine, in whatever way God can be glorified in that race team's life.

-Chaplin Dale Beavers



## “Gentleman Start Your Engines!”

The National Association of Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) has opened its 2004 season with more fans than ever; this once ignored form of auto racing has now plunged into the sports market and is making tracks. The series started in America's 'Bible Belt' and continues its evolution running on fuel from its roots. Started in 1949 by Bill France Sr., the aim was to organize a number of loose stock car racing series in the U.S. southeast into unity with hopes for a fan base. The series is owned today by the late founder's family with Bill Jr. and Brian France at the helm. The south has had a history

with automobile performance that was birthed during the Prohibition period America experienced in the 1920's. Local covert distilleries, Moonshine Mills, needed to have the edge on authorities as they ran late night routes for distribution – thus the first performance stock cars were created. Local 'moonshines' felt the need to compete if not for anything else bragging privileges. As a primitive beginning the men would make laps around cow pastures until a hardened surface was achieved, the fun was about to begin.



After prohibition the racers continued their competitions in the legal light of the law and attracted spectators. A famed race on the beaches of Daytona Beach Florida soon became the Mecca of former whiskey warriors and the race, moved to a permanent asphalt venue in the late 1950's continues to hold the title 'The Great American Race' and acts as the Superbowl for today's drivers. The France's NASCAR operation is run through offices at the track. The series evolved to run mostly at permanent asphalt tracks as the dirt track waned out. This form of racing became a southern delicacy for fans who wanted to see automobiles that actually resembled and were in many ways the same as the cars they drove; at this time auto popular auto racing was done in open cockpit, open wheeled machines that were not practical for road use.

During the 1960's and 1970's the sport grew to a larger market and introduced new areas outside of their roots; Pocono Speedway in the hills of Pennsylvania was

developed to bring a northern market during this period, as were events at Loudon, New Hampshire, and a road course at Watkins Glen, New York. Into the 1980's NASCAR was regularly aired over radio stations and televised more often with coverage of the Daytona race its hallmark. At this time many were now familiar with legendary names: Dale Earnhardt, Ned Jarrett, and 'King' Richard Petty whose 1984 Daytona win brought acclimates from the most honored spectator that year, former President Ronald Reagan. By the end of this decade the ESPN sports network carried all events of the series with CBS holding a long time contract for Daytona.

## And the Winner is NASCAR



Over the last ten years NASCAR has developed its role in American sports as a true player; gone is the 'good-ole-boy' carapace that infected growth in this form of auto racing. How much of a player is NASCAR? Today it is at top spot in fan spectatorship with 6 million annually and in terms of retail and television viewers NASCAR is second, with 105 million viewers and 60 million radio listeners, only to the sacred cow of American sports the National Football League, a spot the France family openly vowed to unseat. The recipe the organization has unveiled consists of a closer points system of scoring and an ever broadening of track locations. Today you can see a sanctioned event in Las Vegas, Chicago, California, Texas, locations where every American can drive their own stock cars to see the action. Last week's race at

Atlanta Georgia saw the France organization bring in two top African-American rap artists to go after the struggling urban fan base. In this years election political commentators will constantly be talking about a new demographic – the ‘NASCAR Dad.’ The sport has arrived and has unbelievable exposure in the American eye ranging from apparel, commercials, to the dearest ‘Wheeties’ cereal veneer. With all this publicity there it seems odd to have a Christian image racing through the sport.

## Theology

In any major sporting event in the United States there is a ‘pre-game’ show that includes the introduction of the athletes as well as the singing, usually by a noted pop musician, of the



American National Anthem to kick off the show. In the Formula One World Championship, the world’s largest auto racing series, the multi-national drivers get their native Anthem played upon winning a race. This sometimes prompts comments that the all American field of drivers gets this ritual out of the way first. But more striking than the different Formula One race protocol, in fact different in any other major sport, is the use of an invocation before the cars are started. The National Football league banned this practice decades ago allowing for an all-inclusive audience. The NASCAR invocations,

given at all of the 39 races (there are no events December and January and a two week 'Easter Break' is observed for Holy Week), are almost exclusively done by a Baptist or Evangelical minister usually from a nearby church. The good will to the drivers in not only asks by God but, more specifically, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. This blatant execution of a purely Christian message may be a hang up of the series southern roots but it draws little opposition and is encouraged by race officials. One main reason why this is allowed is the fact that the France family privately owns the series; a conglomerate of team owners runs a sport like Major League Baseball so it is much harder to promote a tricky subject like religion. The Reverend Hal Marchman has done the prayer for many events and is the perennial giver of the Daytona 500; the Reverend allows for some inclusion, he states, by his famous ending of 'Shalom and Amen.' Still this is very different than other sport events and draws specifically on the Christian faith.

To explain further examples of Christ and NASCAR we might look at the makeup of fans, owners, and drivers. 56% of all NASCAR fans earn less than \$40,000 a year and 71% received one year of college or less. The southeast has the largest concentration of fans and races with 22 out of 39 events in this geographical region, this 'Bible-Belt' concentration explains to some degree the Christian enthusiasm that is prevalent in everyday life. Racing of any sorts is a costly investment with very little profit at lower levels thus it takes money to operate in the training 'feeder' series. What this spells out is the drivers experience with racing and the finances involved are usually handed down from generations of original stock car drivers. The drivers in the series are in many cases the cookie cutter guys from the south. The original driver Lee Petty spawned off four generations of racers, Ralph Earnhardt, also a founding father, is a three-generation

racing patriarch whose offspring have become the sports biggest name. Like the fans owners and drivers share the same demographic of the American southeast.

## Motor Racing Outreach

It is little surprise that a NASCAR Chaplain is needed to fill the spiritual lives of the drivers. Chaplain Dale Beavers explains in an interview with Roger Lipsyte that drivers who reach this 'brass ring' level often wonder 'is there anything else.' Reverend Beavers is head Chaplain of the Motor Racing Outreach program that travels with the circuit to provide spiritual services to drivers, crew, family, and television staff. Beavers and his wife lead five other ministers and five administrators to the grueling 39 weekends each year. The team provides counseling for all who travel with the circuit and the MRO conducts Bible study groups that are widely attended by drivers and crew. Sunday morning services are provided for all news teams and vendors and a separate service is given for drivers, family, and support crew; almost all drivers attend and each expects 250-300 persons at each event. Dale Beavers explains the role of the NASCAR as something of a manifest destiny: "God is using these people in high profile positions weather they are the drivers or the ones that make it happen. God is using them to say 'I'm still here, I'm not silent, and I still care for you.' Former champion Dale Jarrett, whose father Ned and son Jason are former and current NASCAR drivers, agrees: "We have fan clubs with thousands and thousands of people are involved in. If they see how Dale Jarrett and Jeff Gordon (fellow racer) lead their lives it might make a difference." Champion driver, turned commentator Daryl Waltrip, created the MRO: "A dangerous commercialized place is the perfect place for the Lord. If you don't



have the Lord, you'll go nuts." The MRO provided vendor stands with information for spectators buying driver merchandise and is believed to be the only religious group at any event.

Auto racing is indeed a dangerous place and each discipline has seen stars killed or injured on the track; at the height of his career F-1 driver Ayrton Senna was killed in his race car, Champ Car superstar Arie Luyendyk crashed in a race in Germany resulting in the amputation of both legs. Seven time NASCAR champion Dale Earnhardt Sr. was killed in February of 1999 on the final lap of the Daytona 500 while in third place one position behind his son Dale Jr. The sport is dangerous and 2000 saw the death of three racers. Religious beliefs are important for such a high-risk sport.

## How We View NASCAR



Christian exposure is a practice many drivers practice, many post race interviews reference Jesus and it is common for many drivers to place a Bible verse on their dash which can be seen by an in-car camera. Many crews

are seen praying together before their driver gets into the car including two Joe Gibbs Racing teams. Mr. Gibbs is an NFL Hall of Fame coach and believes that the operations on his two cars work better together thanks to the teams commitment with Christ. Two years ago driver Morgan Shepard put a Jesus decal on the hood of his car, there were a

few complaints about this and NASCAR asked Shepard to remove the decal. The driver complied but the backlash from thousands of fans put enormous pressure on officials – the decal has been on the car ever since.

Is this fair to the legions of NASCAR fans who do not want religion shoved down their thoughts? Are drivers being pedantic enthusiasts who openly tout the virtues of a system of salvation many do not agree with? The very popular Jeff Gordon does adds for The Church of Jesus Christ, very popular drivers Mark Martin, Jeff Green, and Joe Nemecheck are only a few of the many drivers who post Christian witness on internet bulletin boards, the drivers may be overstepping their influence in some eyes. The Nextel Corporation starts its first year sponsoring the series replacing long time backer Winston Cigarettes, the most popular driver Dale Earnhardt Jr. is sponsored by Budweiser Beer; alcohol, chewing tobacco, and cigarettes are the dominant sponsors for NASCAR teams and by promoting a more positive partnership with other companies may prove more effective and less hypocritical than trying to convert fans into Evangelical Christians.

There also is the problem of ecological damage the cars emit lap after lap. The stock car 'low-tech' engines produce only a few miles per gallon; this can be greatly increased by replacing the current carburetion system of fuel delivery with a direct fuel injection. The cars are constantly testing and practicing the entire race weekend using up hundreds of gallons of fuel and tires; by limiting the sets of tires per weekend the teams would be force into using tire management. This creates pollution in a world whose maker is proclaimed by those who damage it.



## Racing to the Future

There is no telling what the future of racing and religion will bring; I suspect the efforts to diversify the sport will break up the ‘tent revivals’ NASCAR currently enjoys.

There are no woman drivers, no foreign drivers, and no driver represents any minority group; the southern lifestyle that travels with NASCAR might have to be checked at the



door if plans to open up the field of drivers are in the future. This years ‘Great American Race’ top driver Bobby LaBonte’s hood decal was the seminal event in Christianity, the Crucifixion of Christ. He was promoting the new film ‘The Passion of the Christ’; “I know how much it impacted my life and the lives of my family”, said LaBonte. Faith in Christ is a personal decision we are taught in this nation of religious tolerance – we are also taught not to pressure an uninterested public.

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