

A black and white photograph of a man standing on a gravel shoulder, looking over a chain-link fence at a vast field of RVs. The man is wearing a white t-shirt with a logo that says "United Way The Power of People", a white baseball cap, and shorts. The background shows a large, dense field of RVs stretching towards a hillside under a clear sky.

# We're not in Dixie anymore, Bubba

NASCAR dads have become the swing vote in this fall's US presidential election. But to understand the man, you must first try to understand what drives him

By David Hayes

ON MY WAY TO LAST SEASON'S FINAL NASCAR RACE AT LOWE'S Motor Speedway, coming over a rise on I-85 on the outskirts of Charlotte, North Carolina, I saw what appeared to be a huge, low-rent subdivision made up of very small, tacky homes stretching as far as the eye could see. It turned out to be one of several RV parking lots for the race that night. It was as though a temporary town had sprung up around Lowe's Speedway. There were 170,000 people attending the race that night—approximately the total attendance for an average pro football, hockey, baseball and basketball game combined—and you could fit a





US President George W. Bush meets with drivers, some NASCAR dads themselves, along Pit Road before the Daytona 500.

couple of SkyDomes into the track complex. Which suddenly made real what I'd heard about NASCAR racing—it's the number one spectator sport in the United States, and the number two television sport behind NFL football. Officials claim it has 72 million fans throughout the world, although most of them seem to be in the closet outside of the US.

NASCAR (short for National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing) is about regionalism, consumerism and the worship of technology. It is wrestling as designed by MIT. Spectators arrived carrying their own coolers to keep on ice the two dozen cans of beer you're permitted to bring into the racetrack. Many were wearing T-shirts—for some reason it's part of NASCAR culture to hack off the sleeves—depicting their favorite driver, or a favorite slogan. (I saw several that read: "Beeriodic Table of Elements" and one that read "Gun control means using both hands.")

This is the crowd that Democratic pollster Celinda Lake first identified as "NASCAR dads" two years ago. By this year's presidential race the NASCAR dads—blue-collar men who respond to values and trigger issues more than party loyalties—have become the swing voting bloc du jour. When he was riding high, Howard Dean declared that he wanted "to be the candidate for guys with Confederate flags in their pickup trucks." This strategy of appealing to the South led to a comical debate about "Bubba-ness," in which some candidates invoked politically correct responses and others jumped on the bandwagon, trying to "out-Bubba" Dean.

Deep in the land of Bubba, outside the track entrance, is what looks like a carnival midway. Almost every big-time driver has at least one trailer that converts into a store selling souvenirs, and outside the track about two dozen of them were doing brisk business. There were two trailers alone selling merchandise relating to the late Dale Earnhardt. By dying in a fiery crash in 2001, in a

car outfitted with substandard safety equipment that NASCAR officials ignored at risk of offending the sport's biggest attraction, Earnhardt has attained sainthood in NASCAR culture.

Inside, there's plenty more merchandise to buy, plus an assortment of food popular at NASCAR races—deep-fried Twinkies, chili dogs, pulled-pork sandwiches, fries in two-quart cardboard containers. When I first came into the stadium itself, heading for my seat in Row 7 of the Fourth Turn Terrace—"the crashes happen right on this turn," one young man, with an accent as thick as corn syrup, excitedly told me—I was struck by dozens of people gnawing on what has to be the oddest snack I've ever seen at any sporting event—turkey legs the size of my hand and wrist, juices dripping onto the concrete between their legs. (Among the merchandise, I found a four-inch-high Lowe's Motor Speedway "Racin' Bubbas" bobblehead doll in the form of a tubby, smiling race fan holding a turkey leg.)

NASCAR is less jarring on television, where at least you have the benefit of play-by-play announcers. Of course, many fans at the track wore headphones that were, in some cases, just ear protectors like those that construction workers wear. More often they were radios tuned into the race commentary and, in some cases, they were scanners allowing fans to listen to the largely unintelligible conversations between the crew chief in the pit and the driver of their favorite car.

In what's called the Inner Circle—the approximately six acres within the 1.5-mile oval track—there is the garage and pit area plus the officials' tower. Then there are two huge areas reserved for campers and motor homes. People arrive as early as a week before the race to settle in and party until race night. During the race itself, while 40 high-performance cars roar around the track at upward of 200 miles per hour, making a non-stop concussive assault of sound, fans sit on top of their RVs in the in-



Fans mourn the death of Dale Earnhardt, a saint in NASCAR circles, at Daytona International Speedway in Florida, near the spot where he died.

ner circle. Many have strung patio lanterns or Christmas lights, and most sit with their backs to the track, wearing headphones and watching on TVs the race that is happening directly behind them. (Outside, in the sprawling parking areas, some people become so absorbed in the tailgate parties that they never make it into the track.)

The origin of NASCAR culture is stock car racing, which developed as a sport in the mountains and foothills of the Southern Appalachians after the Second World War as cars became widely available in the rural South. For many young people, it represented progress in the modern world, as well as a way of escaping the family farm or a dead-end job at the local mill. When Tom Wolfe profiled Junior Johnson for a 1965 *Esquire* article called “The Last American Hero,” Johnson was already a legend. Like many of the early stock car pioneers, he’d honed his racing skills running moonshine. (Closest to Johnson in celebrity was the family dynasty of Tim, Bob and Fonty Flock, who worked for their uncle, Peachtree Williams, one of the biggest bootleggers in Georgia.) In the beginning, stock cars were Fords, Chevrolets and Dodges right off the showroom floor, souped up by kids who knew that if you could do 115 miles per hour in second gear, you could outrun the county cops. Today’s NASCAR cars may look like ground-hugging, highly modified Thunderbirds, Monte Carlos and Grand Prix, but in fact they’re one-off technological marvels, mutant cars without any factory parts on them.

At the track, I saw quite a few men who might be NASCAR dads, but this supposedly powerful voting bloc is somewhat artificial. Statistics show that women make up about 40 percent of the sport’s fan base, and I saw a lot of women of all ages—NASCAR moms?—that night. On any given weekend, the largest TV markets for NASCAR races are New York and Los Angeles,

not the South. Furthermore, a CBS poll of NASCAR dads found that only 41 percent of them were fans of NASCAR. (It may not matter. Recently, pollsters and pundits have identified a new swing-voting group: single women, dubbed *Sex and the City* voters.)

Besides, the whole NASCAR dad phenomenon is more interesting for what it says about the culture of the South. In the past dozen years, the governing bodies of NASCAR racing have relentlessly tried to take the sport mainstream, skillfully marketing its rebel image and developing stars by encouraging drivers with outrageous, larger-than-life personalities to be themselves. At Lowe’s Speedway that night, hot-headed Tony Stewart won the race. He’s the Liam Gallagher of NASCAR, having shoved one photographer and punched another one, and can usually be counted on for a few derogatory remarks about fellow competitors. Stewart ended his victory lap by driving his orange Number 20 Home Depot Chev into the winner’s circle and revving it backward and forward for several minutes, tearing up the manicured grass and sending divots flying 25 feet into the air. With the crowd on its feet, cheering wildly (and, not infrequently, drunkenly), he then drove onto the track and did a kind of four-wheeled interpretive dance, the Chev boogalooing from side to side, the tires burning so much rubber that eventually, like an illusionist’s trick, it disappeared inside a thick column of acrid, black smoke that billowed into the night air.

Which seemed to say everything about the sport—and the culture. At a time when the new South has become suburban and middle class, filled with tidy industries and mobile workers with accents developed far from the Mason-Dixon Line, NASCAR racing celebrates excess and a kind of give-’em-hell, good ol’ boy swagger that the South never fully outgrew, and is proud of it. ■