

My NASCAR Experience

Four laps around the track provide a whole new appreciation for the sport

Having been born north of the Mason-Dixon Line, I never had any particular affinity for or connection to NASCAR racing. If I thought of auto racing at all, it was Formula One, Indy Car and NASCAR, in that order—except for perhaps Memorial Day weekend, when Indy Car racing would take the top spot. Thus, finding myself recently at a NASCAR track, and in an actual NASCAR Sprint Cup race car, was about as unlikely as Michael Vick walking into the Westminster Dog Show.

If I had any fondness whatsoever for NASCAR, it was as a result of being amused by the differences in the parlance of the various versions of auto racing. Whereas a crash in Formula One would be described as “an incident,” the NASCAR description would be something along the lines of, “Well, a couple of the boys got together in Turn 3.”

Nevertheless, in one of the more robust corporate outings I’ve been invited to in a while, I had the opportunity to participate in the Team Texas NASCAR experience at Texas Motor Speedway—meaning that I was able to take four laps in the passenger seat of the Team Texas Jack Daniels 07 car. Not only was it an exhilarating experience, but I have newfound appreciation for what the good ol’ boys in stock cars do on Sundays.

The first thing that you notice is how soberly the driver and the team approach and prepare even for practice laps. The cars themselves are groomed as if they are race horses, with every detail being reviewed by the team before and after each practice run.

If you think you are out for a joy ride, the attitude of those in whom you put your trust makes you realize that there is still something inherently dangerous about driving a car at 170 mph. The team members and driver clearly have great faith in each other.

By Bob Latham

Thus, when you hear a driver on any given Sunday talk about how “we” finished, that is not lip service. There is very much a team behind the wheel of that car.

The feeling that this is not something to take lightly is reinforced by the flame-retardant race suit as well

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as the thick helmet that you are required to don, not to mention the monstrous release of liability that you must sign before crawling through the window into the passenger seat of the car. Once there, the team fastens your racing seat belts so tightly that movement is not an option.

Then there is the sound. While you can appreciate the sound of the engine from the stands, hearing it so close to your seat makes you feel like you are inside the sound itself.

There are five cars on the track, and I am in the lead car. After being catapulted out onto the track, you wonder what that first turn will feel like. Since the hallmark of NASCAR is that you are in a stock car, the view from the passenger’s seat is not uncommon. What is uncommon is to be heading toward a wall at 170 mph and not slowing down.

As the centrifugal force starts exerting itself, you wonder why the back end of your car is not flying into the wall. Then, astoundingly, you look to your right and there is another car about 2 feet away. Your concern about the wall is replaced by admiration for the driver’s ability to hold such a true line, despite the speed and forces at work, that there

seems to be no danger that the “boys will get together in Turn 3.”

You come to realize that Texas Motor Speedway has only one true straightaway. While it appears on the grandstand side of the track to be a relatively straight passage, in reality you are making one long, gradual turn that can be felt keenly by driver and passenger alike. Again, you appreciate what it takes to make it just one lap around the track safely with four other cars in close formation. That appreciation does not wane, nor does the bewilderment wear off, over the next three laps.

Stepping out of the car is a bittersweet moment. While the phone call to your lawyer to tell him that he can now put your will back in the safe is a pleasant one, the truth is that you want to get right back in the car and do the whole thing all over again.

Not being able to do so, you extrapolate from your experience. Four laps alone seem to be a draining experience requiring considerable skill and effort by the driver. Imagine doing that 30 mph faster for several hours, not with five cars driving cooperatively but with 30 cars all racing against each other. And imagine that you have to keep that flame retardant suit on for a few more hours on a hot afternoon in a car that is not exactly equipped with air conditioning (or a good sound system for that matter).

Versions of the NASCAR experience, including the Richard Petty Driving Experience, which the racing legend started in 1994, are available at more than 20 racetracks across the country. Believe me, it’s an effective antidote to any auto-racing snobbery. ■

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