

A Week in the Life of NASCAR: A View from Within

NASCAR Scene

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Thanks to a strong marketing campaign over the last few years, NASCAR—the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing—has become one of the hottest games in town.

For hardcore fans, the sport offers a constant buzz. For others, it's a guilty pleasure. And for those who wonder what all the fuss is about—what's the big deal, they wonder, about watching a bunch of decal-laden cars going around in circles for hour after hour?—this is just the book to make some converts.

As readers will see, there's much more to auto racing than putting the pedal to the metal. There's a great deal of science and strategy involved on the part of the driver and his (and increasingly, her) team. The author provides a wonderful portal through which to glimpse a world in which seconds can mean the difference between victory and defeat, and, in some cases, between life and death.

The book boasts “unrestricted access to the lives of teams, crews and drivers”—note the order—and shows all the components in assembling a crack racing ensemble, including designers, engineers, nutritionists, and those unsung heroes, the precision pit crew. This coffee table edition does a great job depicting the color and excitement of NASCAR in hundreds of photographs taken over a seven-day period at Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama and Darlington Raceway in South Carolina.

The individual shots of NASCAR stars and supporting cast are as interesting as the cars and the action shots. But most of the book is devoted to what goes on behind the scenes. Various personnel from different racing teams explain their functions via a question-and-answer format. Drivers, such as Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson, Terry Labonte, and Kyle Busch, may get the lion's share of the glory on TV and in the newspapers, but here the backstage folks get their due.

“Even though TV may not show them,” the authors write, “NASCAR teams employ hundreds of behind-the-scene people. These racers perform jobs big and small, each with eyes set on the victory lane.”

For example, Brian Whitesell describes his “team manager” job as making “sure all of the logistics throughout the week are taken care of.” Kevin Sigafoos, a “front tire carrier,” explains what it takes to do his job well: “Timing and coordination are huge ... we have to be fluid and each person has to focus on being in sync with the rest of the guys.”

Andy “Papa” Papathanassiou, a pit stop coordinator, sums it all up as he notes that “racing will find your weaknesses and exploit them very efficiently. We are not guaranteed four quarters of play, like in other sports. If we make one mistake—it could be on lap one or the first pit stop—our day is over.”

RON KAPLAN (August 18, 2009)

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