

My NASCAR Experience

By Howard Kaplan, Director of Marketing Services



To say that I know anything about NASCAR is to say that I speak four languages fluently, including Russian. Being born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania I'm not even sure if I speak English properly let alone any other language. Similarly foreign to me is the mass attraction to NASCAR. I'm lucky enough to work for a company that is also experiencing NASCAR for the first time, as a sponsor to a great team and driver (Joe Gibbs Racing and Marc Davis respectively). A good friend of mine, who is also an avid race fan, suggested I go to a race and "live the experience"! Under the umbrella of an educational marketing experience, and feeling as though his invitation was more like a challenge, I manned up and took him up on the trip!

This is the story of my first NASCAR racing event. As you will see, I had to battle my own ignorance and stereotypical behavior along the way in order to have any hope of enjoying the experience. I wanted to share my experience with folks who, like me, have never experienced the excitement of a live NASCAR race!

Small Town Saturday Night

We went to the Iowa Speedway in Newton, IA. Not the most cosmopolitan city in the country, but for years it was the home of Maytag! So the town has some history and small town personality as well. I mean that in a good way. It was obvious that the whole town was excited about their race track and the weekend's race schedule. Yet, already my NASCAR stereo types are coming to life. Small town, 'good old boy' race fans, etc. So I'm thinking...Why am I here? It's Saturday night and I should be home spending time with my family. This is boring and I still can't see what people like about this racing stuff. I take my bad attitude inside the speedway to a private suite that one of our vendors has at the track. Yep, a suite at the track baby! Food, drinks, personal service...sweet! Granted, it's not really the true 'down in the trenches' NASCAR experience, but I certainly wasn't going to pass up the *Suite Life*.

Saturday night races are not the big ticket races that gain all the media hype and I really did not know any of the drivers, but the fans were there cheering nonetheless. Sitting in the suite, I could barely hear the roar of the engines and the hollers from the crowd. If this was supposed to be a "sport" it certainly was one that you needed to experience outside of the box. So, I hung out in the stands to try to "live the experience" amongst the fans. It was most certainly loud (the cars and the fans) and the people were excited to be watching cars go around, and around, and around, and...You get the picture. For a moment it reminded me of the excitement I had as a kid playing with my race track. I guess at that point I was getting a touch of the fever. I certainly was not hooked. Yeah, it was loud and it might be fun, but I was still skeptical and wanted to see what the Sunday race would bring.

Sunday – Camping Series East Race Day: Pre-Race

I met up with Jim Obos, our RSM as well as Deb our vendor hostess (owners of the primo suite). Deb had secured a golf cart for the day. We darted off and got our credentials. Yes, we had full access. Not only did we have the nice suite, we had pit passes and track access all day long! These are some of the perks of our sponsorship. Again, not every true NASCAR race fan has the ability or is lucky enough to have the "full access" experience. I have to admit, I was feeling pretty special.

We made our way over to the Joe Gibbs / Marc Davis garage. Already, there is activity everywhere. There were 50 cars with their own race teams and crews! Great big, huge Trucks! Tons of Tools! Media everywhere! Autograph sessions! This was a really big deal event. The excitement was starting to build all around me. Yeah, even I was taken back by all the excitement and fanfare. Then there were the families of the drivers and race teams - all of them there in support of their loved ones. It was humbling.

Through the crowd we see Marc Davis, and I immediately begin to feel a personal attachment. To me, Marc is just a kid (I have two sons around his age) and the danger of a race car drivers life becomes more real to me now. He's only seventeen years old and driving a car at speeds of 150 MPH! But this kid has got his stuff together. What a nice, well-mannered, friendly young man. He has more going for him than lots of 30 year olds. And I know why. We met his dad, Harry. It didn't take long to figure out how Marc got to where he is. What a great family.



Then we met the crew. Watching the crew work is like watching a finely tuned operation. These guys, and girls, know their stuff! Everyone has a role. They were busy getting ready for the race. They had lots to do and think about. NASCAR Officials were checking cars to make sure every race car rated within the NASCAR Rules. Tires were being checked. Shocks were being adjusted. Reporters were interviewing drivers and crew members. Naturally, being a newbie, I had lots of questions as I observed all the activity all around us, busy as they were the crew still took the time to talk with us and explain things. As the excitement built so did my enthusiasm. I was becoming a fan.

During the day, Marc and his dad accommodated us, when they could have been standoffish. Both could tell I was new to this and they made me and our entire group feel welcomed. Marc came up to the suite after his driver autograph session before the race. I don't know how such a young man could be so calm, cool and collected with the pressure of a big race just a few minutes away. Not to mention, one of the entrants in the race was Kasey Kahne, who was riding high from a big million dollar racing win the night before! There were big names and famous people everywhere. Big name team owners, winner's circle drivers, and veteran past champions all converged on the race track that Rusty Wallace (a name even I know) designed in a little town in Iowa.

All the fanfare was great and I was now buddies with Marc Davis! I can't believe how excited and proud I felt to have the seventeen year old wear a uniform with one of our brands on it and driving a car with one of our logos on it. I now had a relationship going. I was feeling a part of the NASCAR family. Marc took a little time to sign some stuff and answer some of our questions, and then we took him back to the garage and his team for the race. All of that being said, and putting aside all that Marc and Harry did to make the day great, nothing compared to the "race"!



And They're Off

Marc started in position 23 in a field of 43 cars partaking in a 200 lap race. We spent the start of the race in the Pits. To say it was loud would be a grotesque understatement. The engines were thunderous – it was a ground-shaking, engine revving, tire peeling, rubber burning fuel-injected infusion that caught the attention

of all of my senses. Marc quickly gained speed and began his assault on the race. He was running up around 12th when we decided to go upstairs and watch from the suite. The pits are great but you really can't see the whole track. Like a little kid with my first race track – I had to see the entire track and watch the cars go around and around. After several crashes and stoppages, Marc continued working his way up in position. Things were really heating up. Several battles for position were going on at the same time. My eyes were all over that track – looking for every nook even remotely big enough for Marc to get his car through. The next thing I knew Marc was in first place and battling a driver named Brian Ickler, who was riding a car his own family financed! What devotion!

I'm glued to my seat. Everyone in the suite was cheering for Marc. After all, we're all his buddies now. Marc led for what seemed like forever. I was watching his number 18 Toyota Camry fight to hold onto first place

and I became anxious to have the laps tick more quickly off the scoreboard. The group said they were going down to the pit because they wanted to be there when Marc won, but I couldn't move. I didn't want to miss a lap. The next thing I knew, Marc was passed by Ickler. Now Kasey Kahne, the million dollar man from a race the night before, was fighting to catch up to Marc Davis, a second season seventeen year old! How great is that? Now, the million dollar man was Marc's new enemy. Kahne was all over him vying for second. I was already proud of Marc no matter the outcome of the race was. The laps kept ticking away and Marc kept on fighting. Two or three times I thought that Marc would have been passed. Everyone was on edge, cheering and screaming and glued to that track! When it was over, Marc Davis had secured a Second Place finish. I could not believe the thrill of it all and how swept up in the race I had become. It was as if I had won. I jumped up and made my way back down to the pits as fast as I could.

Rushing down to the pits, I thought about what a day I had and how lucky I was to be afforded the opportunity to be a part of the race. In that moment, I realized that what makes NASCAR the phenomenon that it is - is that everybody is a part of the race. Fan cheers almost muffle the noise of the speeding the cars. Fan energy, like the gasoline that fuels the engines of the race cars, fuels the drivers - pushing them to enhance their racing skills more with each race, and the Pit Crews to transform these carved out vehicles into well-oiled, primed speed machines. Each driver, regardless of how famous they become, start off in the sport as regular people that the NASCAR fan can identify with and can live vicariously through. Through their acquired skills, we too fly around the track at outrageous speeds and we share in all of their thrills along the way. The race fan experience is enhanced by the omniscience of being able to see the whole track. You see what the drivers can not and that offers its own level of excitement...Will your favorite driver get caught in the accident around the bend? Can your driver see the gap along the rail and squeak through to win the race?

I think the change of heart for me came in meeting Marc, his dad Harry, and the Crew. The difference between a day at the races with no NASCAR representative relationship and a day with a NASCAR representative relationship was stark. I didn't need a private suite or pit passes, or even rally rags...the experience came just the same - without boxes, bows, and bags! All I needed to get hooked was a personal association. That can be said of many sports. It's like a little kid with a favorite baseball player. Maybe that kid saw that ball player in a store or got close at the stadium and they caught each others eye and there was an acknowledgement. That Sunday in Iowa, I was that kid and Marc was that race car driver. I can understand now how someone can wear a #3 drivers' shirt or can ride around with a #8 sticker on their car window. I can't say that I will be as fanatical as that in my devotion - I haven't rushed out to the auto detail shop to get a #18 stencil for my car window yet. And, I can't say that I will be able to go to another race anytime real soon. What I can say is that I've experienced the thrill that every NASCAR fan talks about. I've "lived the experience" and in doing so have gained a new appreciation of the sport and the fan base that supports it. I also agree with my friend, "EVERYONE should experience a NASCAR race at least once"!

For more information about Marc Davis and Little Wonder & Mantis Racing, visit our new racing pages on our websites at www.littlewonder.com and the new www.mantisdealer.com.