


Prelude: On the Road to Charlotte

 On the 22nd of May 1999, I found myself sitting with my wife, Chris, in the Turn Two grandstands at the Lowe's Motor Speedway in Charlotte, North Carolina, not quite halfway up and just past the middle of the turn. You won't run into many college professors at the racetracks, but there we were, hunkered down for a night of action that would climax with The Winston, a seventy-lap, all-star event for competitors in NASCAR's premier series, the Winston Cup. The May races in Charlotte are run at night, and the air was uncommonly cool, almost sweater weather, but the action on the track was hot as only NASCAR action can be.

We were in Charlotte for "speed week," a ten-day extravaganza of stock-car racing that has the Winston Cup drivers in town for two consecutive weekends, first for The Winston, then for the Coca-Cola 600, NASCAR's longest race. Most Winston Cup teams are headquartered in or around Charlotte, so Lowe's is the home track for most drivers and speed week is NASCAR's equivalent of a home stand. Because the two races occur on back-to-back weekends, the second of which includes Memorial Day, thousands of fans come early and camp out for the duration. No matter where you park, getting to the track brings you through or past immense RV villages that stretch for miles up and down all the access roads. These vast encampments are unique in all of sports.

The Lowe's speedway is north of Charlotte, in the town of Concord, about halfway to Kannapolis (known to race fans as the late Dale Earnhardt's hometown). As you turn off the interstate, the track suddenly rises up out of the flat Carolina piedmont, an immense monument to automobile racing. (The track accommodates 155,000 fans in the grandstands and another 45,000 in the infield.) From the outside, it is improbably large, oddly attractive, very modern in appearance and amenities—the only track of eight I visited in 1999 with a concession stand that sold premium cigars. To be in Charlotte, the state's largest city, is to be at the epicenter of big-time championship stock-car racing, and if you go to the places in Charlotte where NASCAR fans hang out, the air crackles with excitement for days leading up to the race.

From the track's opening in 1960 until the spring of 1999, it had been called the *Charlotte Motor Speedway*, but owner Humpy Wheeler had decided to sell the track's naming rights to Lowe's, the home improvement giant. This \$35-million, ten-year deal was unpopular with fans everywhere and especially with fans from the Charlotte area. I overheard one fan wondering out loud, "Good Lord, how much money does that old man need?" *Sports Illustrated* ran a piece on the name change under the headline, "Goodbye, Sweet Charlotte," reporting that "the most commercially saturated sport in the U.S. has begun to sell off the last piece of its soul."¹ I'll bet old Humpy cried all the way to the bank.

At one and a half miles, Lowe's Motor Speedway is an average-sized NASCAR track, and we could see the entire track from our Turn Two vantage point (just as the ticket agent had promised). But the pits at Charlotte, as at most tracks, are along the main straightaway, and various infield structures (garages, pit stands, first aid stations, concessions, team transporters) kept the action on Pit Road hidden from our view. It was also nearly impossible to see the cars as they dropped off Turn Four and headed down the front stretch. But much of the night's wreckage, which was plentiful, took place right in front of us, and we had a great view of the racing action down the back straightaway. I was surprised at just how squirrely the cars were as they came out of Turn Two and blasted down the back stretch: they'd wiggle and waggle, then snap to straight-line attention as their drivers mashed on the gas. Considering the acceleration provided by these 750-horsepower V-8 engines, it's amazing that anybody gets through the corners in one piece. And yet, most do.

Lowe's Motor Speedway offered up four separate races the night of May 22 for our enjoyment. The first, a Legends Car race, featured small-scale reproductions of classic race cars powered by four-cylinder engines. At Charlotte, part of the main straightaway and Pit Road are used to create a quarter-mile Legends track. From our vantage point out in the Turn Two boondocks, we were unable to see any of this action, although we could easily hear the high-pitched whine of the cars.

The Legends race was followed by ARCA's EasyCare 100. ARCA is the Automobile Racing Club of America, a sanctioning body that sponsors lower-echelon stock car races. Since ARCA cars are, basically, used Winston Cup cars, the qualifying speeds for the ARCA event (just under 180 mph) were only 8–10 mph slower than the qualifying speeds for the main event. Most ARCA races are run on short tracks, and most ARCA drivers have limited experience racing on high-banked superspeedways like Charlotte. The resulting combination of high speeds and relatively inexperienced drivers makes the average ARCA superspeedway race wild as all get out. That night's race was no exception: a succession of spin-outs and crashes littered the track with broken race cars, and four caution periods kept the field tightly bunched to the very end. (A caution period is called whenever there are unsafe conditions on the track—a wreck, debris, rain, and so on. During caution periods, all the cars slow down and get into line behind the pace car. No passing is allowed, so the effect is always to bunch up the field.) Rookie Mario Gosselin, a former champion in the USAH Hooters Pro Cup Series (another of the sport's minor leagues), successfully picked his way through the rubble and racked up his first ARCA win. Shawna Robinson, one of the sport's few female competitors, also had a strong run and finished fourth. (In June 2001 Robinson became the first woman since 1989 to start a Winston Cup event.)

Following the EasyCare 100 were the two Winston Cup races: a preliminary event called the Winston Open and the night's main event, The Winston itself. The Winston is NASCAR's all-star event, not a regular points race. Still, there are bragging rights and plenty of money on the line. (That night, for example, the total purse amounted to \$1,338,000, with the winner guaranteed at least \$200,000.) Twenty top drivers are invited into The Winston field, with slots automatically given to all drivers and car owners who have won a race in the current or preceding year; to all former Winston Cup champions who are still active; and to any active

driver who has won The Winston in the previous five years. If these criteria produce a field of fewer than twenty, race winners from previous seasons are also invited in, until a field of twenty is achieved. The remaining Winston Cup drivers—twenty or twenty-five of them—compete in the Open, the winner of which then becomes the twenty-first and final starting entry for The Winston.

The Open proved to be the most interesting race of the evening. Californian Mike Skinner, driving the Chevrolet sponsored by Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouses, sat on the pole and was the odds-on favorite to win the race and with it the twenty-first starting position in The Winston. Getting the Lowe's entry into the first-ever Winston to be run at the re-christened speedway would certainly have pleased Skinner's sponsor and might be seen, at least by some fans, as somehow vindicating the sale of the naming rights to Lowe's. Ironically, rookie Tony Stewart, driving the Home Depot Pontiac, started beside Skinner on the front row. Day in and day out, Lowe's and Home Depot compete head to head for the business of American do-it-yourselfers. That night, they'd go head to head at the Charlotte—sorry, Lowe's—Motor Speedway at speeds near 190 mph for the final starting spot in NASCAR's annual all-star contest. That front-row line-up was surely symbolic of *something*.

Stewart had begun his day in Indiana qualifying for the Indianapolis 500, then had jetted to Charlotte to compete in the Winston Open. When the green flag dropped, Skinner jumped into the lead, but Stewart overtook him on the second lap and never looked back, leading every subsequent lap and winning the race by a five-second margin. (As Winston Cup racing goes, a five-second winning margin is huge.) Skinner's car handled poorly, and he finished well back in the pack.

Considering that Stewart was a rookie and a Yankee to boot (he is one of several young Indiana drivers making waves in the Winston Cup), you'd not expect him to have much of a following at a venue like Charlotte, at least not that early in the season (or so early in his career). Yet the crowd around us cheered wildly lap after lap as Stewart barreled through the second turn at the front of the field. Chris, who retains her maiden name Stewart and who was therefore a natural Tony Stewart fan, asked what was going on, why all the boisterous enthusiasm for the young Hoosier? I didn't get it either, until about midrace, when a local fan sitting next to me leaned over to say with delight, "Ain't it good to see that

Home Depot car runnin' so strong at the LOOOOWE's Motor Speedway?!" (Humpy, are you listening? Racing traditions mean something to your average NASCAR fan.)

The Winston Cup season begins each year with the Daytona 500 in mid-February, and by that weekend of May 22, eleven of the season's thirty-four points races had been completed. Jeff Gordon, NASCAR's hottest star and the 1995, 1997, and 1998 Winston Cup champion, had already notched three victories, and while some early-season DNFS ("did not finish") had him languishing in fifth place in the points, he'd been running strong and was clearly the man to beat. Virginian Jeff Burton, with two wins, was the only other multirace winner of the year. Burton's teammate Mark Martin, points leader Dale Jarrett, and drivers Terry Labonte, Rusty Wallace, Dale Earnhardt, and John Andretti all had a win apiece. That amounted to eight different winners in the first eleven races—which meant that 1999 was already looking to be a very competitive season.

The Winston features a unique format, three races in one. Cars start in order of qualifying position and run an initial thirty laps. The leader at the end of the first thirty laps wins \$50,000. Then, the front-runners (on that night, the top six cars) are "inverted"—the first-place car goes to sixth, the second-place car to fifth, and so on—and the field races another thirty laps. Again, the driver leading at the end of the second thirty laps wins \$50,000, the front-runners are inverted, and then there is a ten-lap dash to the finish and the winner's purse of \$200,000. Jeff Gordon picked up \$100,000 for leading the race at the end of both thirty-lap segments. 1996 Winston Cup champion Terry Labonte won the ten-lap finishing dash and pocketed a cool two hundred grand. Stewart drove through the field to finish second; Gordon, the most successful of the young Hoosiers and the dominant force in Winston Cup racing in the 1990s, ended up third.

The race was a NASCAR wreck-fest. Perhaps due to the racing residue deposited in the preliminary events, the track was slick all night. In a regular Winston Cup race, adjustments are made during pit stops to improve handling or to compensate for track conditions, but a thirty-lap dash allows for none of that. So the drivers were stuck with their original set-ups and nobody had guessed right. Boom! A big wreck on Lap 11 took seven cars—a third of the field—out of the race, leaving only fourteen cars to complete the remaining fifty-nine laps. Fourteen race cars look

mighty forlorn out running by themselves in single file around a mile-and-a-half oval. So The Winston was less exciting than the usual Winston Cup race. But the ten-lap finishing dash was all I expected it to be: a dozen fast stock cars running nose-to-tail, fender-to-fender, with the outcome in doubt to the last lap.

Not all the night's interesting action took place on the track. A serious fist fight broke out about ten rows down and a bit to the left of where we were sitting (the only fan altercation of any significance I witnessed all season). It started as a harmless little punching contest between two seriously drunk and heavily tattooed long-haired country boys (to borrow a famous phrase from the Charlie Daniels Band), but friends on both sides quickly joined the fray and, in a matter of seconds, six or eight rednecks were whomping on each other with fists, empty beer coolers, and whatever else was ready to hand. A bloody cut over the eye of one combatant was the only damage I saw, and the incident was over by the time security guards arrived. Still, the two lads who had started it all were escorted unceremoniously to the gate. I never did figure out just what the fight was about, but the peripheral involvement of two foxy little GRITS (that's Southspeak for "Girls Raised in the South," a character type as much as a regional origin) made me think it was a disputation about women, not race cars.

About a half hour later, we saw an obese and evidently besotted fan roll down a grassy slope between our grandstand and the next, stopping only when he piled into the trackside wall. He sat on his duff for a while, looking bewildered, then staggered to his feet and waved, much to the delight of the assembled NASCAR masses. A track ambulance came to investigate and, with some assistance, our roly-poly race fan finally made it back to his seat.

There were many drunken fans at the Charlotte speedway, more than we saw at most other races—although there weren't too many sober people sitting around us at the July event at Daytona, either. Both of these are night races, and while nighttime Winston Cup racing is a spectacular visual experience, it gives fans way too much time to get liquored up before the racing begins. On the other hand, the Richmond event that I attended in the fall was also a night race, and with one exception (a fan about two rows down from us whose only friends in life were apparently Jack Daniels and Jim Beam), the fans seated near us in Richmond were all



A view of the infield campers from our seats at The Winston in Charlotte, the first event on the 1999 *Fixin' to Git* Road Tour. It is a few hours before race time at this point, thus the many empty seats. There is a grassy incline (just visible at the far right of the photo) between the Executive Suites and the East Grandstand where we were seated. We watched a drunk fan roll down this hill and up against the trackside restraining wall.

sober as judges. (Okay, some were a bit tipsy, but we're talking Winston Cup racing here, where the standard for drunkenness is high — way higher than the six-pack or two that I go through during a hot summer race.)

The night's biggest disappointment was my new race scanner, a short-wave radio that is used to listen in on conversations between drivers, spotters, and crews. (Outfitted with a proper set of headphones, my rig had been a \$300 birthday present from Chris.) Each team broadcasts on its own frequencies, with most teams using two or three, so there are several dozen frequencies you have to program into your scanner before the race begins — a tedious process. Still, I thought listening in on the drivers and pit crews would add to the enjoyment. But you never know just which driver you should listen to, and to my surprise, driver-to-pit communications are infrequent and usually terse, if you manage to pick one up. Driving a race car at 190 mph requires intense concentration, and drivers do not chatter away on their radios while the race is under way. I'd listen in to a particular driver for a couple of silent laps, then hear him say some-

thing like, “We’re loose in two.” That’s it. “We’re loose in two.” Another silent lap would go by, and then the crew chief would respond, “We’ll fix it with air pressure at the stop.” And that would be it.

Granted, the format of The Winston leaves little time for drivers and crew chiefs to “dial in” the car; basically, the race team either gets the setup right on the first try or lives with its mistakes for the rest of the night. And there was a bit more car-to-pit communication at some of the other races I attended later in the season. Still, as I flitted haplessly from frequency to frequency and driver to driver, trying in vain to find an interesting conversation — I was looking for something like, “Did you see what that bastard Andretti did to me on the last lap?” or “Jesus Christ, they’re NUTS out here tonight!” — I realized that fiddling with my high-tech gizmo had caused me to lose track of the action on the speedway. What I learned at Charlotte and elsewhere is that the best use of the scanner is to listen in on the Motor Racing Network radio broadcast — far more informative than listening to the drivers themselves. But you can do this with a \$20 radio. Oh well.

Serious Winston Cup fans know that everything about a race weekend can be a struggle: obtaining tickets, securing accommodations, getting to and from the track, parking once you get there. But that particular trip was a logistical triumph for me and Chris. I had purchased two over-the-counter tickets to the race by telephone for \$65 apiece about a month before, a pleasant surprise, since I had been warned that Winston Cup events are always sold out months in advance. And, while a hundred and thirty bucks might seem a lot to spend on four hours of entertainment, these were in fact the cheap seats. The best seats at a stock-car race are those at the top of the grandstand (the higher up, the better the view) and near the start-finish line. With our tickets, we were nowhere close to the top and were a long way from the start-finish line to boot. On the other hand, if you compare the price of Winston Cup tickets to the cost of going to rock concerts, the races don’t seem quite so pricey.

By the time I had my tickets, all the hotel and motel rooms within a ten-mile radius of the track were booked. Near the Charlotte airport, about twenty-five miles from the track, I found a hotel that still had rooms, but they were going for \$275 a night, with a three-night minimum. I’m no piker when it comes to race weekends, but I wasn’t anxious

to pay Manhattan rates for Charlotte hotel rooms, so I called my buddy Dwayne Smith at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte and he hooked us up with a guest room in a UNC-C dorm for \$23 a night, not five miles from the track. The dorm was empty, the room Spartan but clean, comfortable, and convenient. The school could do a brisk trade renting these rooms to NASCAR fans on race weekends.

We'd spent the day before the race scouting out traffic patterns and parking possibilities—logistical details that fans ignore at their peril. Regardless of the posted starting times, fans begin showing up at the tracks five or six hours before the races begin, but everyone wants to leave as soon as the race is over, so Winston Cup races invariably end with massive traffic jams as hundreds of thousands of fans all try to leave at the same time. With the average Winston Cup gate now approaching 180,000, getting fans away from the tracks and onto the nearby interstates is the logistical equivalent of evacuating, in a couple of hours, a city the size of Dayton, Ohio.

Race-day traffic control limits your freedom in leaving the track. Basically, you go where you are made to go, then loop back around miles later if that's what it takes to get headed in the right direction. So the trick is to park such that the direction you'll be made to go is the direction you'll *want* to be going, not always an easy feat. Usually, this requires avoiding the trackside lots altogether in favor of "quick getaway" spots in the surrounding neighborhoods. We found a \$10 parking spot that seemed to fit the bill, and, sure enough, we scampered back to the dorm room after Saturday's race in under half an hour. We talked the next day to fans who'd parked trackside, and they'd spent the better part of two hours escaping the postrace traffic knot.

We had headed to Charlotte at the front end of speed week, hoping to take in both events and fill up the intervening week by visiting friends, giving a couple of talks, and traveling around North Carolina. But tickets to the Coke 600, as it's popularly known, never materialized. A week before the race, scalpers were asking \$150 for \$95 tickets. (In May I was unwilling to pay the scalper's price; by August I had learned to accept the street market in tickets as a necessary element in the serious fan's repertoire.) So, after Saturday's running of The Winston, we spent some time with friends, I gave a talk about homelessness (my area of research)

to a group of forty or fifty academics and social-service workers, and we headed home midweek.

I'd been an earnest Winston Cup fan since the early '90s, but aside from an annual trip to Daytona for the July Pepsi 400 with my brother-in-law Ed, I kept up with the sport through television, books about stock-car racing, and semiregular forays into the sport's fanzines (*Inside NASCAR*, *Stock Car Racing*, *NASCAR Winston Cup Illustrated*—just the thing to get a race fan through extended airport layovers). Charlotte was my first look at what Winston Cup racing had to offer besides Daytona. It would not be my last: the trip to Charlotte was the inaugural event in a half-year odyssey that would take me to eight of the Winston Cup's legendary venues and result in the book you now hold in your hands.

Since I had first started following the Winston Cup action, championship stock-car racing had become America's fastest-growing sport. How, I wondered, did that happen? NASCAR, its stars, and its fans seemed (and still seem) to be everywhere. Charlotte was the opening gambit in my effort to figure out why. In February 1999, three months before the Charlotte trip, I was standing on the corner of Napoleon and St. Charles Avenues in uptown New Orleans watching Bacchus, one of the oldest and most spectacular of the city's many splendid Mardi Gras parades. On the inside of that corner sits Copeland's Restaurant, and looming above the restaurant, taller and more imposing than any of the surrounding buildings, was a giant billboard featuring an immense visage of Jeff Gordon with a white stripe over his lip and the query, "Got Milk?" If you've watched much TV, you'll know that Gordon also promotes the Living Word, Pepsi-Cola, microwaveable nachos, Chevrolet Monte Carlos, and a score of other products. What is it about this guy—what is it about his sport?—that has entities from General Motors to the American Dairy Association paying him a king's ransom to hawk their wares?

Gordon is not the only NASCAR star whose face beams down from the billboards or flickers across the TV screen. You've probably seen Dale Jarrett on the tube, paired with football announcer John Madden, pitching Outback Steakhouses (John goes for the "big juicy steaks," Dale wants that "shrimp on the barbie"); Mark Martin shilling for Winn-Dixie supermarkets or Discount Auto Parts; Bill Elliott urging his fans to chow down at McDonald's and spend their nights on the road in Super Eight Motels;

Tony Stewart and Bobby Labonte peddling Chef Boy-Ar-Dee canned spaghetti products. These guys are *race-car drivers*, not rock-and-roll celebrities, models, television personalities, or movie stars. What has turned them into cultural icons whose endorsements command millions?

Have you ever been motoring down the highway when you noticed a car going past with a numeral displayed in the rear window, or maybe on the bumper? Just a numeral, no text or explanation: a 2 perhaps, or a 5, maybe an 88, usually in some iridescent Day-Glo color. Or a pickup truck with a cartoon graphic showing Calvin (of “Calvin and Hobbes”) with his pants down, a naughty arc of pee splashing off a number 24? Did you ever wonder what that was all about? Well, it’s a NASCAR thing: the people who display those puzzling numerals are stock-car racing fans, and they do it to identify themselves and their preferences to other fans. It’s a species marker, a secret code, a clan totem, mysterious to outsiders but instantly recognizable to those in the know: 2 identifies a Rusty Wallace acolyte, 5 a follower of Terry Labonte, 88 an enthusiast for Dale Jarrett. And the Calvin decal? It translates, “Piss on Jeff Gordon” (24 being the number of Gordon’s car).

Early in the spring 2000 Winston Cup race at the Texas Motor Speedway, the TV coverage cut away to a live interview with General Colin Powell (now the U.S. Secretary of State), who was attending his first motorsports event and enjoying it, too, he claimed. Powell was at the race to promote America’s Promise, his nonprofit foundation dedicated to building character among the nation’s youth, and to appeal to NASCAR fans to get involved with kids as mentors, Big Brothers, teachers, and friends. Who’d ever think that NASCAR fans would be attractive as role models for children? Or that a racetrack would be a good place to troll for America’s Promise volunteers? A church—sure. A college campus—no doubt about it. But the Texas Motor Speedway on a NASCAR weekend?

An acquaintance of mine who knew of my interest in stock-car racing sent me an article about one of my favorite drivers, Ricky Rudd. It recounted Rudd’s problems with his former sponsor (Tide laundry detergent), his hook-up with Robert Yates Racing, his arduous physical fitness regimen, his courageous 1998 victory at Martinsville. It was a nice piece, laudatory, informative, the sort of driver story I’ve come to expect in *Stock Car Racing* magazine. But this item didn’t turn up in *Stock Car*



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Racing or even in the *Charlotte Observer* (the newspaper of record for motorsports). It ran in the *New York Times*. Since when did readers of the *New York Times* develop an interest in NASCAR?

NASCAR has even insinuated itself into the national political discourse. There was a controversy that seethed for years in South Carolina (and in a number of other Southern states) over the Confederate battle flag that once flew above the state capital. Cartoonist Mike Luckovich suggested we resolve this by swapping out the discredited Stars and Bars for “a flag that isn’t racist . . . but preserves white Southern heritage” — a NASCAR checkered flag. Luckovich draws for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and you’d expect Georgians to get the joke. But the cartoon also ran in *Newsweek* without comment or explanation, and I’m sure *Newsweek*’s mostly Yankee readers got it, too.

I’d set out for Charlotte that late weekend in May 1999 to see if I couldn’t get some answers to these questions or at least develop some sort of adequate take on the NASCAR phenomenon. NASCAR was born in Charlotte a half century ago. The organization’s first stock-car race was run on a three-quarter-mile dirt track in Charlotte on 19 June 1949, and

championship stock-car racing has been a continuous presence in the city ever since. Nearly all the current Winston Cup teams and NASCAR itself are headquartered in Charlotte, and during the fifty-plus years of competition, more drivers, race winners, and annual champions have hailed from North Carolina than any other state. If you want to figure out NASCAR, where better to begin than Charlotte—the womb, the Earth Mother, of the sport?

I had been granted a sabbatical that freed me of classroom responsibilities from May through December. Chris had arranged with her employer to take off as much time as she wanted. Our nest had been empty since 1993, and with a handful of graduate students willing to tend to our pets, there was nothing to prevent us from traveling around the country to check out as many races and venues as our marriage could withstand. And if I could say I was writing a book based on these experiences, I could even deduct a share of the expense on my income tax return. From these opportunities, the 1999 *Fixin' to Git* Road Tour had been conceived.

Dozens of books have been written about stock-car racing, and I've read many of them over the years. I can't say I ever read a racing book I didn't enjoy, but none seemed to capture the essence of the sport as I had come to know it or to do justice to the phenomenon that NASCAR has become. Most NASCAR books are insiders' accounts that take the reader "behind the scenes" of championship stock-car racing, and while it is fascinating back there, it is not part of the experience of the typical fan. Unlike other NASCAR authors, I was not interested in interviewing drivers, owners, and crew chiefs, or in crafting an exposé, or in following the fortunes of this team or that through the season—these had been done before. No, I wanted to experience and write about the Winston Cup spectacle itself—the fans, the pageantry, the history, the subculture—and, where possible without being pedantic, to connect my observations to larger themes in American history and culture. I was less interested in hanging out in the Winston Cup garages than in the bars, restaurants, parking lots, juke joints, motels, and campgrounds where race fans congregate; less interested in insiders' opinions about the sport than in the views, enthusiasms, and prejudices of the people sitting around me in the grandstands. Most of all, I wanted to experience then convey the rich, erotic sensory overload—the sights, the sounds, the smells, the *feel*—of

weekends at Winston Cup racetracks. I wanted to know NASCAR in the biblical sense.

As I've mentioned, no city in America is more closely associated with NASCAR than Charlotte (Daytona Beach being the only possible exception). In Charlotte and the surrounding towns, there are constant reminders that you're in NASCAR country. WELCOME RACE FANS! banners start flying about thirty miles out, and once you near the track, most of the billboards, signs, and banners have something to say about racing. Home to the Sandwich Construction Company, perhaps the best-known stock-car theme restaurant in America (you may have seen photos—it has race cars on the roof), Charlotte boasts any number of other sports bars, restaurants, and souvenir shops catering to NASCAR fans. Travelers through the Charlotte airport can stop for a beer and a burger at the NASCAR Cafe, the first, I believe, of what is now a large national restaurant chain. (It is right down the concourse from the airport cigar store.)

With a city population of 400,000 and a total metropolitan area population of 1.5 million, Charlotte self-consciously bills itself as a major urban center of the New South.² None of the young urban professionals I met while I was there (academics from the university and human services workers who attended my talk on the homeless) were race fans, although most of them were aware that it was a race weekend in Charlotte. (It is easy to tell: all the restaurants are packed.) Most of these young, bright, attractive, upwardly mobile New Southerners seemed vaguely embarrassed by their city's NASCAR connections, dumbfounded that I was in town mainly to go to the race, and taken aback to learn I was writing a book about the Winston Cup. They were more interested in comparing notes about Charlotte's new sushi bars than in stock-car racing.

With the exception of a few areas of historical renovation, there is little about the city that looks or feels Southern or that would distinguish it from recently built sections of Omaha, say, or Rochester. The city has none of the antebellum grace of a Charlestown or a Savannah, none of the seamy decadence of a New Orleans, none of the down-home country feel that makes Nashville or Memphis unmistakably *Southern* cities. A first-time visitor would scarcely know that the city was incorporated in 1768. In fact, most of Charlotte looks like it was built sometime in the past ten or fifteen years. Large knots of suburban development have sprung up everywhere on the urban fringe, and with extensive development has

come the predictable slurry of malls, chain restaurants, coffee shops, factory outlet stores, and the related tacky-tacky of suburban America. You can still get grits with your morning eggs in Charlotte, but if you're not careful, you might end up with something like herb-infused grits cakes with shaved Parmesan when all you were hoping for was a pair of eggs over easy with whole hog sausage, a fresh biscuit, and *grits*. For the most part, Charlotte's "Southernness" is a caricature, a pleasant but not very interesting parody of the real thing. And that, I gather, is precisely the point of the New South.

But then you get out to the speedway, and all at once the entire legend of NASCAR courses through your veins, the whole half-century of wild-eyed Southern boys soaked in their own testosterone; hot rods with noisy, souped-up V-8s; moonshiners and whiskey-runners who (as the story goes) invented the sport in the Carolina hollows right after World War 2. You look out at the thousands of fans milling around their infield campsites, and you know, as certainly as you know your own name, that none of them started their day with a bowl of yogurt or granola. You wander through the RV villages and the campfire aromas slam into your olfactories like a race car into the wall. Wham! — charcoal, bacon, roasting animal flesh. Bam! — cheap perfume, ripe T-shirts, tobacco, beer. Downtown, it's sushi bars; out here, it's Budweiser for breakfast.

You can't be in Charlotte as I was, spending half my time with university professors and the other half with NASCAR fans, and not sense the chasm in American culture that separates city from country, professionals and clerks from factory workers and mill hands, the politically correct from the rednecks and good ol' boys, the New South from the Old. No wonder Charlotte race fans reacted so negatively to the renaming of their speedway. The track — one of the few meaningful links that remain between the modern city and its own legacy — is about the only thing left in Charlotte that would make one think of it as a Southern city. My trip to The Winston revealed that America's cultural tensions are found no less in NASCAR than anywhere else; how these tensions play out is only one of a number of story lines that emerged in Charlotte and that now thread their way throughout this book. The Charlotte expedition didn't give me any answers, but it brought some important questions into sharper focus, and at that very early stage in the project, sharper questions were plenty good enough.