

'American Idol' Contestants Lean on NASCAR's Spiritual Adviser

When *American Idol* needed a spiritual adviser for its contestants this season, the show turned to an unexpected place: NASCAR.

Billy Mauldin, president and CEO of the Motor Racing Outreach ministry, was brought in to help Idol hopefuls manage the ups and downs of competition—much like he's been doing for NASCAR drivers since 1999.

Along with wife Julie, Mauldin has been on hand in Los Angeles to be a resource if contestants want someone to talk with them during a critical point in the competition. This week, a series of three live shows that begin tonight will whittle the field from 31 singers to the final 13.

"The expectations here are the same for what we do for NASCAR: To be there for the people, be present, help with the spiritual side of life and some of the struggles they may deal with as they're going through the competition," Mauldin told *USA Today Sports*.

The idea was the brainchild of David Hill, the former Fox Sports chairman who was tapped to oversee an Idol overhaul this year in the face of a ratings decline. Hill had been watching tapes of past seasons when it struck him how many contestants grew up in a faith-based environment and began singing in church.

"I thought to myself, 'Wow, it must be really tough to go to this intense competition—and this show does change lives—and if you're used to being in a church-based organization, that would be a huge adjustment,'" Hill said. "Especially for kids

who are 16, 17, 18 years old and away from home for the first time.”

Hill wanted to find someone who contestants could sit and talk to, but also someone who understood competition because “this is the biggest talent show in the world.”

Then it hit him: Through his experience working with NASCAR, he’d seen Mauldin in action.

“I couldn’t think of anyone better to advise these kids than Billy,” Hill said. “In my mind, NASCAR is the most intense athletic competition in the country because if you make a mistake, you’re risking serious injury and death.”

The stakes might not be as high in *Idol*, but it might feel that way at times for the contestants.

Mauldin and his family were driving home to Charlotte from the beach in June when Hill called and pitched the idea. He then brought the Mauldins to *Idol*’s boot camp in Palos Verdes, Calif., earlier this month. The hopefuls met former *Idol* stars Adam Lambert and Chris Daughtry, who talked to them about song choice and how to perform on stage, and also were introduced to the Mauldins.

“I told the contestants that Billy and Julie were people who understand competition and would be available to talk,” Hill said. “The response was incredible. A large percentage made appointments to sit down to talk to him—and not only the contestants, but even some of the producers. It is working beyond my wildest dreams.”

NASCAR driver Michael McDowell said Mauldin would be the “perfect person” to help *Idol* contestants deal with the roller coaster of emotions that come with any competition—whether it’s a talent show or NASCAR race.

“He treats everybody exactly the same,” McDowell said. “He’s

there to lean on and support you if you need it, but he's not a fan."

Mauldin, who will split time between *Idol*'s live shows and NASCAR's traveling circus (he'll be back in Florida for Sunday's Daytona 500), said the singers are much like the young drivers who reach NASCAR's top level for the first time.

Hill said he understands not all the contestants are of the Christian faith. Mauldin is not there to proselytize, he said, and someone will be made available to contestants of different religions if they so desire.

More than anything, Hill added, Mauldin is there for comfort.

"As a dad, if my daughter was 17 and she was living in Los Angeles for the next three months and performing in front of 15 million people who were watching every move she makes, I'd want to surround her with as much soul protection as I possibly could," he said. "You want them to be able to give the best of themselves."