

(True) Life in the Fast Lane

✖ There are sports. And then there's NASCAR.

I really didn't understand that concept until I went to my first NASCAR event back in 2005. I watched stock car racing from time to time and got more interested when I found out my wife (heavily influenced by her dad) was a big fan.

But it took hanging out in the garage area throughout the practice rounds and during qualifying for me to really get it. Hearing 43 finely-tuned speed machines roaring in perfect harmony was a kind of music I'd never heard before.

And I liked it.

Millions of Americans apparently agree. NASCAR is, by many accounts, as popular as the NFL and its fans maintain fierce loyalties to favorite drivers such as Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jimmie Johnson, Jeff Gordon, Kasey Kahne and Carl Edwards.

I have a few favorites myself. Towards the top of that list is veteran wheelman Mark Martin who mans the #5 car for Hendrick Motor Sports. For over 20 years now, Martin has earned the respect of everyone in NASCAR. He has 48 victories in the Nationwide (formerly Busch) Series and claimed his 36th career Sprint (formerly Winston and Nextel) Cup Series victory in Phoenix this past weekend.

The win broke a four-year Victory Lane drought and the rest of the field was about as happy for Martin as they could be without actually winning the race themselves. That's because Martin's name commands respect and high praise.

"We don't have enough time to talk about everything I learned from Mark," former teammate Matt Kenseth, driver of the #17 car, told me last October at Texas Motor Speedway. "I don't think there's much bad about Mark."

Back in 2007, David Ragan, another solid Christian NASCAR driver, took Martin's place in the #6 car. His experience with Martin goes back to 2002 which enabled him to echo Kenseth's sentiment.

"Character and good work ethic are very important in this garage," he said. "That's why he's been here as long as anyone has and that's why he can write his story for whatever he wants to do for the rest of his life. Good things happen to good people and Mark is certainly a good guy."

Sure, it might not be a surprise to hear such affirming talk from within the NASCAR community which has long been perceived as a boys club of sorts. But there's definitely something different about Martin.

He has a quiet faith in Christ that has helped him build a reputation as one of the most even-tempered drivers on the circuit. The ability to hold back angry words and resist retaliation is something Kenseth has watched from his driver's seat and likewise tries to implement.

"Mark is one of the guys that I respect because he's not one of the guys who stands up in front of everybody and shouts it," Kenseth says. "He lives it. It's easy to say it. It's hard to live it. He's a great example to follow. I've seen a lot of people that say one thing and then live another way. But you can just watch the way he lives and watch the way he acts and watch how much he's respected and you know it right there. That's what I like about him the most."

Martin is a big supporter of Motor Racing Outreach-an organization that specializes in ministry to NASCAR drivers, crew members and support staff. I had the privilege of sitting in on a Sunday chapel service in Texas just a few days after interviewing Martin and couldn't help but notice him sitting on the next to the last row in a corner seat.

He barely moved the whole time but his eyes were intently

trained on my good friend Tim Griffin who is the Sprint Cup Series' lead chaplain. Griffin has come to appreciate Martin's faithful attentiveness.

"In chapel, when he sits in his chair, he's not the biggest guy in the bunch," Griffin explained a few days later. "He's a small built kind of guy and he's in incredible shape for his age. But no matter where he's sitting, he'll find his angle to look around the head of the person in front of him and man, he has that steely stare that lets me know, 'I'm listening to every word you're saying and I'm checking you out.' I value that because he's not a guy who is going to take everything you say hook, line and sinker. He is going to listen to every word. You can tell he's processing it through the mind of a disciplined professional. I like that."

I jokingly asked the low-key driver if he'd ever find himself trading places with Griffin.

"I would rather not," he laughs. "I just don't feel like I have enough authority to do so. I don't think that I'm the smartest guy around, so I'm better off to keep my mouth shut as much as I can rather than opening my mouth and proving to people that I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm more of a leader by example than I am a preacher. Preaching is a calling and mine is to lead by example."

And for guys like Kenseth, Ragan and everyone else on the circuit, Martin continues to drop nuggets of wisdom through his actions and sometimes, even, through his carefully scripted words.

"Your character is slowly built and quickly eroded," he said. "You're definitely influenced by whatever you're immersed in and whatever you're around and what you're a part of. I'm far from perfect but I have managed to earn a good deal of respect by trying to implement the kinds of things I've learned about. I try. I'm not always successful. But I try to treat the

people the way I want to be treated.”

Chad Bonham is a freelance author, journalist and television and documentary producer from Broken Arrow, Okla. He has authored several books including a four-book FCA series (Regal Books) and is the coordinating producer on a forthcoming documentary called Choosing Life.