

WHAT GOLF CAN LEARN FROM NASCAR

BY DAVID OWEN

HITTING HIGH DRAWS is hard, but driving race cars is harder. Here's what happened to J.J. Yeley, a NASCAR driver, during a practice session at a sprint-car race in 2000, when he was 23: As he was trying to pass another car, his left front tire clipped the other car's right rear wheel. "That sent my car up into the air," Yeley told me during a round of golf at the Brickyard Crossing Golf Course, part of which is enclosed by the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. "My car started doing a series of somersaults and barrel rolls, and, unfortunately, at that racetrack there was a junkyard on the other side of the wall."

Yeley's first couple of impacts were like scenes from a "Road Runner" cartoon: He landed on top of a huge pile of old tires, which flipped him over a second fence and into a second junkyard, and then he crashed into the side of a trailer before flipping onto a heap of old car parts and rusting scrap metal. Race drivers are taught to shut their eyes tight as soon as they go airborne, because the force of an impact can cause traumatic globe luxation; that is, it can cause their eyeballs to pop out of their sockets. Yeley did so many revolutions in the air that his eyes swelled shut from the centrifugal rush of blood, and the muscles in his neck became so stretched that he couldn't hold his head up, and his right arm got knocked loose from the steering wheel, which he was trying to hold onto, and he broke his forearm. "My uniform was soaked with hot fluids, and I could smell stuff burning," he continued, "but I couldn't see anything, so I didn't know what was on fire. I popped my belt as soon as I stopped flipping and stood up in the car, and some of my friends pulled me out, and then the ambulance got there." Two weeks later, with his right arm in a cast, he was racing again. "You've got to get back on the horse," he says.

"You realize that most of the influential people play golf," says Yeley.



Yeley has windblown-looking short brown hair and a strong jaw, and he's a shade less than average height—an advantage in racing, where you want maximum clearance between the top of your helmet and the bottom of your roll bar—and he doesn't tuck in his shirt. He and I were teammates in a one-day golf tournament leading up to a race on the NASCAR circuit. The other members of our team were Bill Weber, who does the play-by-play on NBC and TNT's NASCAR broadcasts, and Terry Rhadigan, the head of communications at Chevrolet. The tournament was a scramble, and every participant, before teeing off, was allowed to purchase two mulligans, for \$10

in the Brickyard 400 and the Indianapolis 500; he ran Indy in 1998, when he was 21, and finished ninth.)

I asked him what sort of preparation he usually does before a big race, and he shrugged and said, "Nothin.'" This wasn't completely true; he watches practice sessions, to see where other drivers are taking the turns, and he sometimes reviews tapes of previous years' races. He also drinks lots of water. "You're in a race car for four to four-and-a-half hours, and the cockpit temperature is 120 or 130 degrees, so it's easy to lose four or five pounds just from sweating," he says. "If you don't start your hydration early in the week, you'll never get all

its official schedule and adding a four-tournament, end-of-season competition for the top-144 players (*see previous story*), to be called the FedEx Cup, it was clearly following the example of NASCAR, which has a highly successful late-season kicker, called the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup. The tour hopes that the FedEx Cup, like the Chase, will hold the interest of fans and top competitors as the season winds down.

I asked my teammate Bill Weber—who has been covering NASCAR races for 17 years and Champions Tour events as well—if he could explain the secret of NASCAR's popularity. "The first thing," he said, "is that all the stars play on the same field on the same day. There's no cut on Friday. If you buy a ticket right now for the Bristol race next August, it's pretty much guaranteed that the 43 biggest names in the sport will be in that race."

NASCAR drivers are also more accessible to fans than most top golfers are. Even the superstars sign lots of autographs, and they visit the huge RV encampments that form in racetrack infields during the days leading up to a race weekend, and they drop by their "souvenir rigs"—the trailers from which they sell merchandise with their name on it.

"The NASCAR souvenir business is unbelievable," Weber said. "At a typical race, there will be 40 souvenir trailers outside the track, and top drivers like Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Jeff Gordon and Matt Kenseth and Jimmie Johnson will have multiple trailers each. Every fan has a guy they root for, and they buy his stuff: jackets, T-shirts, hats, mugs, license plates, whatever."

John Daly—the PGA Tour member who probably comes the closest to a NASCAR sensibility—does have a souvenir rig, and Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus and Greg Norman sell golf stuff that has their logos on it, but that's about it. Could this be what golf has been missing?

"When fans go to a NASCAR race, it's their vacation," Weber said. "It's not just a hotel room, not just a ticket—it's what hat am I going to buy, what jacket, what shirt. And if your guy wins, you go back and buy more. Golfers should be able to do the same thing. If you go to a golf tournament, you can buy a hat that has the name of the tournament or the golf course on it, but you can't buy a hat that says 'Fred Funk.' That surprises me." 🍷

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each. On the 11th hole, after Yeley, Weber, Rhadigan and I had all missed a 10-foot downhill birdie putt, we used six of our mulligans in trying it again, and still got just a par.

Even so, we finished in sixth place and each won a dozen golf balls with the Chevrolet logo on them. We also had a good time. Yeley—whose initials stand for Jimmy Jack—had a miniature air horn in his pocket, and whenever he saw a NASCAR driver or racing official he knew, he would blast the horn in their backswing. He also had a self-propelled golf ball of some kind, which, he said, would have taken off like a rocket when he hit it except that he had used all of its gunpowder-based fuel.

This past year was Yeley's official Nextel Cup rookie season. He began racing professionally at 14, with the help of a phony birth certificate forged by his parents. (His father, Jack, was a seven-time statewide midget-car champion in Arizona.)

When Yeley graduated from midgets to sprints, at the age of 17, he also took up golf. "As you work on gaining sponsorship," he told me, "you realize that most of the influential people play golf, and that more deals are closed on the golf course than in a boardroom or an office, so I figured I'd better learn how to play." He has what he calls an "old-man swing," but he hits the ball pretty far, and he's a good putter. In fact, in our scramble he sank three birdie putts in a row on the holes inside the racetrack, where he seemed to pick up favorable vibrations from the ground. (He is one of only a handful of drivers to have competed

those fluids absorbed into your body in time to sweat them out.")

In 2006, Yeley competed in the complete Nextel Cup and Busch Series schedules. That works out to 71 races in 40 weeks, plus practice sessions and numerous corporate and promotional appearances. This schedule—and the fact that he and his wife, Kristen, have a 1-year-old daughter, named Faith Anne—doesn't leave much room for golf. "I do love to go play whenever I get the opportunity, though," he told me. "And when I retire, as long as I don't hurt myself too bad driving race cars, I'm going to play golf about every day."

Golf and car racing don't have a lot in common, beyond the fact that women are amazed that men will watch either of them on TV. (When I was in high school, in the early 1970s, the father of one of my friends owned an audio recording of the Indianapolis 500—and listened to it!) Still, the two sports are somewhat complementary, because golf in recent years has been trying to attract fans who earn less money, while car racing has been trying to attract fans who earn more. So far, these efforts have been more productive for racing than for golf. NASCAR is the fastest growing spectator sport in the United States, and it's also the second-most popular televised sport, after the NFL. Golf, meanwhile, has remained pretty much the same, plus Tiger Woods.

Recently, golf has tried to emulate racing's success. When the PGA Tour announced, in 2006, that it was shortening