

Michael Poynter

43 Cars, 1 Long Day

Twice per year, for a period as short as a few hours and up to about a week or so, the small town of Ridgeway, VA gains about 40,000 visitors. Motels sell rooms that haven't been touched in months. Campers and pedestrians line the streets and fields for miles. It seems as if it is predetermined that the clouds will shed tears at some point during the week, as race weekend here at Martinsville Speedway has become notorious for some form of bad weather. Every year, I look forward to hanging out with my father-in-law, two of his brothers and my best friend, Greg. The Sprint Cup race and all the pre-race activities is something I look forward to every year; a day chocked full of fun, fellowship, food and fast cars.

As the tall police officer waves us through the muddy entrance at Gate 17, there's a noticeable energy change in the packed SUV. "Dale Jr. is the man!" bellows a portly, camouflage-clad gentleman as he sways back and forth like a flag in the wind. We're motioned to our parking spot, which the cars fit into like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. The ice clinks against the array of bottles and cans as it is poured into the large, overfilled cooler. The tantalizing aroma of grilled meats and vegetables meanders its way through the air, causing mouths abound to water, in the makeshift party area. Chargrilled burgers, plump sausages and crispy brown chicken legs take up residence on the grills beside the Christmas-colored peppers and onions. Competition meets camaraderie among new and old friends alike as footballs and plush corn hole bags fly around like the hands on the clock.

Tailgating complete, we plod across the fields like a herd of overweight sheep, stopping periodically to get another ice-cold beverage, visit the rancid facilities or to whine like school children about the weight of the overfilled cooler. Upon entering the track it sounds like 100 pagers from the 1990's going off at the same time as the employees wearing bright yellow jackets scan tickets and check

bags and coolers that push the boundaries of what is allowed inside the paperclip-shaped track. We find our seats and bow our heads as a grey-haired balding gentleman in a button-up shirt as crisp and white as a sheet of paper delivers the invocation. Both the crowd, which is a sea of colors, and the drivers and pit crews stand as the National Anthem blasts through the speakers. Jets cut through the clouds with a thunderous roar as we try to be manly and pretend the small drops of water under our eyes are not tears. "Gentlemen, start your engines!" blares through the PA systems, and our excitement begins to peak.

43 cars, adorned with more colors and decals than we can count, follow the red and white pace car around the track for a couple laps. The crowd stands in unison as the green flag waves, signaling the start of the race. Engines roar like angry lions as the cars make their way around the half-mile track. As the brakes heat up, cooler heads prevail; after all, it's only the first lap. We imagine we're in Las Vegas for the moment as we pull out a couple worn, torn one-dollar bills and make prop bets. Adorned with earplugs we try to make sense of muffled conversation before settling into our cushion-less seats. Oh yes, we forgot to bring our overpriced, novelty seat cushions.

By the middle of the race, the multi-colored cars have started to sound like a million bees buzzing in unison. At their fastest speeds, they resemble the blur of a Polaroid photo where the subjects moved too soon. The crowd is a mixture of bobble head dolls and a human version of Whac-A-Mole. Black rubber blankets the track and the curbs have lost as much of their color as the drivers have lost their patience. Pit crews scramble like small colonies of ants, making small and large adjustments alike. As the laps remaining decrease, the drivers' willingness to take chances increases. A man wearing oversized red headphones waves the white flag in the air, signaling the final lap. We're all playing human Whac-a-mole now as tires screech, brakes glow a bright reddish-orange and a paint-smeared FedEx Toyota crosses the finish line first. There is a mixture of cheers and boos as fans scurry out of the

stands in a hurry, leaving mountains of trash to adorn the worn-out grey bleachers. With the overwhelming sounds of cheers and boos surrounding Victory Lane passed, the journey back home begins.

Almost all of our visitors to our tiny town exit in a much bigger hurry than they arrived. Work or family waits on Monday morning. We've cheered on our favorite drivers and booed everyone else's. We've stuffed ourselves with more food than we'd normally eat in a week, drank too much and worn ourselves out over the last several hours. We'll do it again in about 6 months when they bring a new set of damage-free cars back for another go-round. I can hardly wait.