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## NASCAR drivers' TV ads are a gas

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By Nate Ryan, USA TODAY

In much of sports advertising, superpowers sell.

Kevin Garnett has been cast as Roman gladiator and intergalactic commando. Bo Jackson was the multisport phenom who could swing bat, club or racket with championship grace. Michael Jordan swished jumpers from atop skyscrapers.

In NASCAR commercials, though, the hook is more *Seinfeld* than *Superman*. A sport where success is intertwined with sponsors likes mixing its omnipresent shilling with regular-guy slapstick. [Dale Jarrett](#) tries to explain why he can't win the Daytona 500 in a brown delivery truck. [Tony Stewart](#) orders a piata of a rival for swatting at a niece's birthday party. [Jamie McMurray](#) slides into a hot tub wearing his fire suit.

"It's not like Nike or Gatorade, where it's about selling performance," said Bob Dorfman, a creative director at Pickett Advertising. "Most NASCAR sponsors have a very tenuous relationship to the sport. Ultimately, there's not a lot to talk about, so with nothing to say, you try to be funny about it. These drivers are more accessible to the public, ... and using that in funny situations, it does create appealing ads."

An influx of big-ticket companies into the Nextel Cup Series has resulted in a rise of big-budget ads featuring drivers in self-deprecating situations. NASCAR's star spokesmen frequently appear in 30- and 60-second *Saturday Night Live*-style sketches created by high-powered agencies in New York (BBDO, TBWA\ Chiat\Day) and Chicago (Leo Burnett).

They don't mind poking fun at themselves to heighten visibility. For a group accustomed to stepping out of cars and rattling off the laundry list of companies necessary to fund a championship team (estimated price tag: \$15 million to \$20 million annually), all pitch and no play can grow tedious.

"Everybody knows if we're going to do a commercial, they better make it funny or we don't want to do it," Stewart, 35, said.

During the June 25 telecast of the Nextel Cup race in Sonoma, Calif., roughly one of four commercials involved a driver doing something humorous.

In an era of TiVo and short attention spans, the ads are becoming part of the show and popular enough that fans enjoy keeping drivers on their toes by shouting out catchphrases from their commercials.

"I wouldn't say people are tuning in to see the spots. But I don't think they're getting off the couch, because it's become, 'What funny commercials will I see this time around?' " said Zak Brown, founder of suburban Indianapolis-based Just Marketing, an agency that specializes in representing motor sports sponsors.

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There's plenty to choose from whenever a caution flag sends the networks scurrying to a break:

- [Kasey Kahne](#)'s cherubic profile causes swooning female fans to drive their SUV into a pole.
- Stewart dabbles in ballroom dancing and home improvement with his crew.
- [Jeremy Mayfield](#) orchestrates the destruction of Stewart's race car with the help of an 18-wheeler.
- [Dale Earnhardt Jr.](#) shaves the No. 8 into [Ryan Newman](#)'s scalp.
- Ford drivers seek self-help for their overactive adrenal glands.
- Rookie [Denny Hamlin](#) engages his neighbor in a bout of bump drafting with a riding lawn mower.

"Unlike any other set of athletes, NASCAR drivers always have been approachable," said David Carter, principal of The Sports Business Group, a Los Angeles-based sports consulting firm. "This series of advertisements really reinforces that and makes them appear to be everyday guys who don't take themselves too seriously."

It's Madison Avenue meets the Marx Brothers — or in this case, the wacky Waltrip brothers, whose comic timing comes naturally.

"That's the way we are," said [Darrell Waltrip](#), 59, who has driven ambulances and taxi cabs through traffic at breakneck speed as the centerpiece of a Toyota campaign accentuating the three-time champion's brash and charismatic reputation.

"We're not Formula One drivers. We're not Indy car drivers. The thing NASCAR drivers do is laugh at themselves."

### **Sophistication of ads on rise**

NASCAR encourages comparisons of the Daytona 500 to the Super Bowl. The telecast of its marquee race this year resembled the NFL extravaganza as several companies rolled out slick commercials with a humorous bent.

Owner-driver [Kyle Petty](#) said it's tied to the 2001 network TV deal, which triggered a ratings spike, and the subsequent arrival of companies such as Nextel, Gillette, Toyota and FedEx that already spent millions on advertising.

"The sponsors are all national companies now," Petty, 46, said. "These aren't the regional and oil companies with automotive products that once marketed to the gear head. The sport has grown to having companies spending as much as \$40 million on a program, and that can't all be motor sports-specific marketing.

"Commercials that once never saw the light of day beyond ESPN have made that leap into mainstream TV. So now you're seeing a Coke commercial with NASCAR drivers during *American Idol*."

As the ads' frequency has increased, so has the level of sophistication.

"Ten years ago, someone from an agency in New York would have come to Charlotte and said, 'Where's the guy in the overalls? Where's Cooter?' " said Larry DeGaris, president of the Colorado Springs-based Sponsorship Research & Strategy company that tracks sports marketing.

DeGaris said the 2001 debut of UPS' lighthearted series "was the first NFL-type commercial campaign more consistent with big-time sports."

In their sixth season, the commercials remain a hit. In a recent USA TODAY Ad Track poll, 26% said they liked them "a lot" vs. the Ad Track average of 21%.

"The commercial's funny, Jarrett's not," DeGaris said. "They didn't try to change him."

Agencies strive for authenticity in portraying drivers' personalities. Mike Goff, vice president of national advertising at Sprint Nextel, said the

idea of having Stewart and Mayfield in ads arose after learning they had played practical jokes on each other.

The stars also are granted creative leeway on scripts, tweaking phrases to enhance realism.

Darrell and [Michael Waltrip](#), 43, have made up lines on the fly in shooting commercials for Aaron's. [Carl Edwards](#) and [Mark Martin](#) helped rewrite the Nextel commercial in which Martin pretends to execute Edwards' trademark back flip.

"In five to 10 minutes, they came up with that commercial," Edwards, 26, said. "It's more fun to do commercials like that. It seems the best ones don't have a script."

### **Up close with an adoring public**

As much as the ads are about selling product, drivers also are selling themselves. Besides easy laughs, it also means easy money, a byproduct of the product endorsements and brisk souvenir purchases that accompany rising popularity.

"The drivers absolutely love the creative spots because it helps bring out their personality, which then attracts a larger audience that translates into merchandise sales," Just Marketing's Brown said.

"When drivers sign with teams, who the sponsor is and what they're going to do in commercials is a big consideration. They want to get in the best car, but if all things are equal the sponsor and brand ultimately will drive their decision."

Jarrett received feedback from UPS' campaign within the first week of its launch. In one of the first spots, a young boy vowed to hold his breath until Jarrett agreed to "race the truck."

"I had little old ladies, 75 and 80 years old, who would get my autograph and wouldn't go away," Jarrett, 49, said. "I look up from signing, and there they are, puffed up and holding their breath, wanting me to squeeze their cheeks. That one went over pretty well."

Mayfield once heard non-stop cries of "Hey Jeremy" — the signature line of a Dodge ad in which he picked up a date wearing "93 octane" perfume.

"Come on back" — the phrase he repeatedly says into a chirping Nextel phone as his team's hauler crunches Stewart's Chevrolet — is what fans have been shouting this year.

Mayfield, 37, credits the ads for helping build a solid following even though he has won only five races and never finished higher than seventh in points in 13-plus seasons.

"It's helped me and my image," Mayfield said. "When we're not running good, it's always good to be in the spotlight somehow."

Martin, 47, has been besieged by requests "to do the flips." Hamlin, 25, is asked if the mammoth powerboat he soaks a rowboat of fishermen with in a FedEx spot is his. ("I wish it was, but it's not in my budget yet.")

### **Selective with humor**

NASCAR fans have a well-documented connection to drivers and sponsors. In a poll of 1,000 fans last year by James Madison University's Center for Sports Sponsorship, 85% believed Cup drivers were good role models; 36% could name the sponsors of every car in the top 30.

"The NASCAR fan is very loyal to sponsors and their products, and sometimes the hard sell isn't necessary because of the sophistication level of the audience," said Les Unger, national motor sports manager for Toyota. "You're trying to break through the clutter, and one way is to perhaps not take your message so seriously all the time."

But Allen Adamson, managing director of worldwide Landor Associates, a brand consulting firm, said too much comedy can backfire.

"If everyone is using humor, you better have the funniest commercial out there," he said. "The sport is getting more popular and attracting more advertisers, which is increasing the challenge of standing out. Humor isn't going to work for everybody. It's going to reach a saturation point."

In image-conscious NASCAR, which has been vigilant about defending itself against hillbilly stereotypes, there are limits to the jokes. Roush Racing President Geoff Smith said his team has nixed a few of its sponsors' ads because they were "in extremely poor taste and used our team to ridicule the sport in some way."

NASCAR spokesman Andrew Giangola said the series has final approval of commercials involving official sponsors to ensure they "are in good taste for a family-oriented sport" but hasn't nixed any.

"We totally support the use of humor. They show our drivers in a different light and help to draw new fans," Giangola said.

"America sees them as likable, fun, funny people."


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