



One Helluva Ride: How NASCAR Swept the Nation

Liz Clarke

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From its raw beginnings on Southern dirt tracks, NASCAR smacked of a slightly depraved spectacle, as if nothing but trouble could come from the unbridled locomotion of a V8 engine. By the time NASCAR roared into the twenty-first century, it had grown into a billion-dollar sports and marketing colossus, its races attended by hundreds of thousands of fans on any given weekend from mid-February through mid-November, watched on television by the second-largest viewing audience in sports, and bankrolled by the marketing largesse of the Fortune 500's elite.

One Helluva Ride, a full-throttle account of the rise and reign of NASCAR nation, is award-winning motorsports reporter Liz Clarke's chronicle of how stock car racing exploded from regional obsession to national phenomenon. In covering the sport for more than fifteen years, Clarke has developed a strong rapport with NASCAR's drivers, team owners, and hard-core fans. Through her reporting and analysis, we get to know the public and private sides of NASCAR's most iconic figures, including seven-time champion Richard Petty, who set the standard for treating fans with respect, and the late Dale Earnhardt, whose brazen, bullying tactics wreaked havoc on the track, but whose heart was as big as Daytona's infield.

The sports world stopped in its tracks the day Earnhardt was killed on the last lap of the 2001 Daytona 500. Some feared that NASCAR's soul would die with him. But it has raced on, steered by visionary promoters, the all-controlling France family (who founded the sport), and, above all, the next generation of drivers to stir fans' passions: Dale Earnhardt, Jr., son of the NASCAR legend and now, like his father before him, the circuit's most popular driver; Jeff Gordon, the beloved but oft-maligned outsider, bred from the cradle to be NASCAR's winningest modern champion; and Kasey Kahne, a reluctant heartthrob whose confidence derives entirely from an accelerator pedal. Clarke also brings us inside NASCAR's most triumphant and tragic dynasties: the Pettys, the Earnhardts, and the Allison—and reveals how faith, family, and a deep-seated love of their sport helps them cope with grief and loss.

Clarke shows NASCAR to be at a crossroads. In pursuit of a broader audience, NASCAR has severed its sponsorship ties to Big Tobacco, abandoned racetracks in small markets in favor of speedways near glitzy major cities, and welcomed Japan's Toyota into a sport traditionally restricted to American-made sedans. As NASCAR races toward mass appeal, some suggest it is leaving its roots behind. To others, it is boldly extending its reach from the Southern workingman to every man, woman, and child in the world.

Whether you're one of the die-hard NASCAR faithful or just a casual follower, nobody brings you closer to the sport and business of big-time stock car racing than Liz Clarke. This book, like the phenomenon it profiles, really is **One Helluva Ride**.

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