

CWD_August 2013_NASCAR driver charities

Crazy Woman Driver column

August 2013

Headline: NASCAR drivers do good off track

Tease/Deck: Professional racers know they live charmed lives. That's why most of them give back to others through their charitable foundations.

Suggested Art: Greg Biffle and his dogs

Main column = 791 words (sans tagline)

Lugnuts = 407 words

By Kay Bell

With its stretch of late summer heat and haze, August is known as the dog days. But for NASCAR driver Greg Biffle, it's dog or cat or some other pet day 365 times a year.

The Greg Biffle Foundation, founded in 2005 by the driver of the #16 Ford and his wife Nicole, works year-round to improve the well-being of animals. As the "parents" of three dogs, the Biffles lend a hand to shelters nationwide as advocates of spaying and neutering programs and work to convince more people to adopt homeless pets. To that end, the Biffles' nonprofit has awarded grants to more than 500 humane societies and animal shelters from coast to coast.

It's not unusual for athletes to start charitable foundations in support of causes they find near and dear. And the Biffles are part of the many in the NASCAR community who are doing good through formal foundations.

The sports' governing body has its own NASCAR Foundation, which supports a wide range of charities and volunteer efforts, with special emphasis on initiatives for children. Kyle Petty, son of NASCAR's King Richard, and his wife Patti started Victory Junction in 2004 in honor of their son Adam, who was killed in a racing accident. Now affiliated with Paul Newman's group of charities, Victory Junction camp is a place for kids aged 6 to 16 who are dealing with chronic medical conditions or serious illnesses.

But in this age of personalities, it is the philanthropic efforts of Biffle and his NASCAR brethren that get the most attention. Here are some more drivers and the causes they support.

Kyle Busch may be one of NASCAR's bad boys on the track, but Rowdy has a soft spot for kids. The Kyle Busch Foundation's primary focus is supporting programs that help less fortunate children throughout the country. This includes donations to housing and nutrition programs, as well as providing gift cards from national retailers which groups can use to purchase clothing, school supplies and outdoor sporting equipment.

Dale Earnhardt, Jr. is NASCAR's most popular driver in part because he comes across as a kid at heart. On the philanthropic front, the Dale JR Foundation works with child-centered groups such as Make-A-Wish, Blessings in a Backpack and Ronald McDonald House of Charlotte. Junior also is an avid music fan with eclectic tastes; he's appeared in music videos for recording stars ranging from Jay-Z to Sheryl Crow to Trace Adkins to Nickelback.

So it's no surprise that Earnhardt's nonprofit also supports the VH1 Save the Music Foundation.

Jeff Gordon is now one of the sport's elder statesmen, but he stays young by spending time with the kids that are helped via the Jeff Gordon Children's Foundation. The four-time Sprint Cup series champion's charity focuses on patient assistance programs for pediatric cancer patients, awarding grants to groups that help patients and family members cope with diagnosis, treatment and the emotional and financial challenges they face. In 2005, Gordon took things a step further, partnering with Carolinas Medical Center-NorthEast to build the Jeff Gordon Children's Hospital in Concord, N.C., which opened its doors in December 2006.

Tony Stewart is as no-nonsense when it comes to charity work as he is behind the wheel. "There are so many organizations providing outstanding service and programs and my impulse is to help them all," Smoke writes on the mission statement web page of the Tony Stewart Foundation. "However, it has been necessary to focus our funding to those programs that most closely match my passions -- children, animals and fellow drivers in need of assistance." To entice his faithful fans to also donate, Stewart's foundation offers the membership group Lap Leaders, raffles, ride along contests and quarterly eBay auctions.

Juan Pablo Montoya has taken racing charity international. The Colombian NASCAR driver and his wife Connie Freydell-Montoya established Formula Smiles Foundation -- Fundación Formula Sonrisas in Spanish -- in their native country in 2004. With the tagline "using sports to build a better future," Montoya's charity seeks to increase opportunities for young people ages 6 to 17 who live in vulnerable areas of Columbia by educating them via sports participation.

The Jamie McMurray Foundation supports research, education and assistance for individuals and families afflicted with autism. The Denny Hamlin Foundation focuses on raising awareness of and funds for those afflicted with Cystic Fibrosis. And the Ryan Newman Foundation supports wide-ranging goals, including animal welfare, conservation projects and educational scholarships,

These are just a few of the philanthropic efforts associated with NASCAR. With all the drivers, crew chiefs and owners in the sport, you'll likely find a cause that you too want to support. Just spend some time searching online or social media sites and be sure to have your checkbook handy!

Kay Bell is an Austin, Texas-based writer. When she's not yelling at her television during NASCAR races, she writes about financial topics and blogs about taxes at Don't Mess With Taxes (www.dontmesswithtaxes.typepad.com).

LOOSE LUGNUTS

Castronevis, Franchitti dish F1: I sure hope Helio Castronevis doesn't need a Formula 1 ride any time soon. In a recent interview with Forbes online magazine, the IndyCar champion totally dissed the other open-wheel series and most of its drivers. The voluble Brazilian declared that politics is F1's biggest problem, comparing it to personality driven Hollywood. He also characterized most F1 drivers as prima donnas, saying he only respects a handful of current and past drivers. Helio's Indy colleague Dario Franchitti was part of the same interview, but the Scot was more circumspect. Aside from noting that Mark Webber is "my boy," Dario only offered that F1 needs U.S. fans more than Americans need it. So Dario

might still eventually land a F1 spot one day, but Helio ... It looks like he better stick with IndyCar.

Tony K's Texas ties: Tony Kanaan has more than just the annual IndyCar race at Texas Motor Speedway to bring him to the Lone Star State. The 2013 Indianapolis 500 champ owns two bulls that could one day buck professional bull riders. The bulls, which Kanaan named Downforce and, in honor of his home country, Brazilian Bully, are among 48 being trained at the Stephenville, Texas, Aces of Spades Ranch. Kanaan bought the cattle after learning about the program from former IndyCar CEO Randy Bernard, who headed the Professional Bull Riders association before his three-year stint with the racing league. Kanaan is the second international racer with a Texas connection. Following the first U.S. Grand Prix in Austin in November 2012, Formula 1 champion Michael Schumacher bought a 500-acre ranch in Central Texas.

Speedy snail mail: If you remember when racers drove real stock cars, then you'll love the latest addition to the "America on the Move" postage stamp series. The five new first-class stamps are reproductions of classic American automobiles based on paintings that the U.S. Postal Service commissioned from California car artist Tom Fritz. The featured muscle cars of the 1960s and '70s include a 1966 Pontiac GTO, Carroll Shelby's 1967 Ford Mustang GT500, the 1970 Chevelle SS and the 1970 Plymouth Hemi 'Cuda. But my favorite is the 1969 Dodge Charger Daytona with its two-foot tall rear spoiler. Race fans of a certain age (or those who watch classic race TV reruns) remember the distinctive vehicle as the winner of the inaugural Talladega race in 1969, which was boycotted by most drivers because of tire grip issues.