

A Survey of the Region's Small-Town Racing Tracks

Racing built its foundation at places like these—which still offer fans a chance to see tomorrow's stars and cars

Charlotte

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The big tracks, like Charlotte Motor Speedway and Daytona International Speedway, get most of the attention. But the heart and soul of auto racing lie in local tracks, which run on weekends before a couple of thousand, or even just a few hundred, fans in the most intimate fossil-fueled venues.

Kyle Petty calls these events the Friday Night Lights of racing, on small tracks that establish the most personal connection among racing, racers, and fans. “You watch two guys run 30 laps door-to-door at Hickory. They beat, they bang. They do it every Saturday night because they're the two best drivers there. Chances are they get mad at each other. Chances are their crews scream at each other sometimes. But a lot of times, an hour or two after the race, you'll see them sitting on the hoods of their pickups drinking beer.

“And you know why you'll see them there? Because you're a fan. You come down out of the grandstand. You can walk across the racetrack. You can go touch the car, see the car, see the driver, touch the driver, talk to the driver, and you experience everything about what the sport is.”

Petty, who raced in NASCAR's Cup Series for three decades, is the grandson, son, and father of storied stock car racers, so he's spent plenty of time at all kinds of racetracks, whether in the car or the stands. He likens the experience of seeing up-and-coming drivers at small tracks to catching Bob Dylan in a dive bar before he became famous: “That's where you saw Dale Earnhardt Sr. for the very first time, but you didn't know it when you saw him. You just liked the way he drove; you just liked what he did. He was a nice guy. Good guy. You talked to him. And eventually, he became Dale Earnhardt.”

They're all over the country, in small towns where crews from ESPN and Fox Sports don't often show up. Here are five, within an hour's drive or so from Charlotte, that offer more intimate experiences than you'd get at a Cup race.

