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NASCAR goes Beyond the Wheel

Fans of NASCAR (National Association of Stock Car Racing) are tuning into the Speed Channel every week for its popular show *Beyond the Wheel*. The program gives viewers unprecedented access to the popular Nextel Cup race series.

"*Beyond the Wheel* is a cinematic, dramatic recap of that week's race," says Al Francesco, head of the NASCAR Images camera department. "It's high-end, documentary-style storytelling. We're trying to make 30-minute movies out of these races."

NASCAR Images is following in the tradition and aiming for the same high standards established by NFL Films. Francesco spent 10 years at NFL Films

before being recruited by executive producer and NFL Films alumnus Jim Jordan to build the NASCAR Images camera department.

"These cars are going 200 mph, so you have to shoot slow motion," says Francesco. "What are you going to shoot slow motion on? You have to do it on film. Our goal from the start here has been to bring up the visual image and impact of NASCAR, and it was a no-brainer that we needed to shoot more 16mm film."

Francesco and his team typically rely on three film stocks for race days.

"For our wide-angle beauty shots of all the drivers we like to shoot on Eastman EXR 50D 7245 film," says Francesco. "We love the 7245 for our hero shots and pre-race footage. Once we get into the race, we shoot Kodak VISION2 250D 7205 film, and then depending on how late in the

day it ends we'll switch to Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 stock."

"I actually try to shoot as much of the 7218 as I can on a long lens to give us the stop. You can save a stop shooting 7218 uncorrected, and it looks beautiful once it is color corrected. It blends in perfectly with the other footage. If I could only have one film stock, I'd take 7218 everywhere I go."

One of the challenges Francesco and his crew face is being at a different location each weekend. They are always looking for new angles. The size of the racetrack can also leave them with a lot more or less ground to cover.

They typically cover the area with Aaton A-Minima and ARRIFlex SR-3 and SR cameras, using a combination of 150-600mm zoom, 600mm prime, 10:1 short mid-zoom, 5.5 and 4mm wide-angle primes, and a 7-63mm short zoom.

"Our best footage is shot by Kevin Mooney," says Francesco. "He has been shooting video of the sport for 20 years. The footage he recorded on video was good, but with a film camera in his hand, people are blown away. He knows the perfect angles, and now he has the right tools in his hands to produce unbelievable images."

Francesco notes that some of their segments have given fans new insights into the sport.

"A good pit stop happens between 13 and 15 seconds," explains Francesco. "When its shot on video, you can't even see what is happening, but shooting 60, 120, and on occasion 500 fps we're capturing the lug nuts unscrewing. We're adding drama to that moment because if you blink it passes you by. You see the choreography of these guys sliding around the car, and see a lug nut slip off, fly in slow-motion, bounce off the guy's face, and then he's running to get the other one. Nobody had ever seen that before."

After each race, the film is put on a plane to be processed and color-corrected at NFL Films on Monday. It's shipped back to NASCAR Images on Tuesday.

"The people at NFL Films are used to the quick turnaround, and we have a trained eye in our colorist Chris Pepperman," he says. "NASCAR is all about color, and Chris takes a little extra time with those pre-race, hero shots to add a little vignette or bring something out in the film."

Francesco says NASCAR is thrilled with the vivid, detailed images, and surprised at how much drama has been added to the races. "The drama was always there, it just wasn't being captured before." ■



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Left: Kevin Mooney on location at a NASCAR race shooting a scene for *Beyond the Wheel*.