

# Nascar's Winners...

## A Depressed Kansas City Gains an Economic Engine

BY JAY KRALL

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**K**ansas City, Kan., used to be the kind of place visitors were warned away from—a jumble of smokestacks, abandoned buildings and crime-ridden streets.

But in a remarkable turnabout, this city across the river from Kansas City, Mo., is becoming the area's largest tourist magnet. So many visitors are flocking to KCK—as it's known—that its population and job base are growing for the first time in decades.

The spark for this miracle was a new Nascar track in town. The track stages races only five times a year, bringing in an annual total of about 650,000 visitors. But it has turned out to be an economic engine year-round. After it was built, outdoor-sports retailer **Cabela's** opened a store nearby that has quickly become the largest tourist attraction in Kansas, with five million visitors a year. And this month, **Nebraska Furniture Mart**—the nation's largest furniture store under one roof—opened next door to the track, and almost certainly will make the speedway area the most popular tourist spot in greater Kansas City.

That reaction helps explain why Nascar officials are moving away from small towns, in favor of cities where the economic impact of their events is explosive. No small town could afford to foot even half of the \$250 million cost to build the race track, as government officials agreed to do here. In exchange for paying that amount, KCK has been rewarded not only with Cabela's and Nebraska Furniture but also a new hotel and minor-league ball-

park. Indeed, since the 80,000-seat track opened, KCK has led the region in attracting new employers.

Credit for winning the race track belongs mostly to Mayor Carol Marinovich, who was elected in 1995. When **International Speedway**, which operates half the speedways that host Nascar events, announced plans to build a track somewhere in greater Kansas City, Mayor Marinovich decided to make a pitch for her city. Upon visiting KCK, Speedway officials saw something most people outside KCK had never bothered to notice. Unlike the decayed inner core of KCK, the proposed site featured acres of green space, along with neighborhoods as clean and attractive as any in the area's finest suburbs. The spot was close to Interstate 435, which loops the metropolitan area. Both Kansas City, Mo., and suburban Johnson County, Kan., were too built up to offer land this close to the freeway. KCK won the bidding against Kansas City, Mo.

At first, people elsewhere the region dismissed the victory, ridiculing KCK and Nascar as working-class entities that deserved each other. But the arrivals of Cabela's and Nebraska Furniture have silenced most critics.

Now KCK's reputation locally is changing. After 35 years of building homes in Johnson County and Kansas City, Mo., Tom Woods recently switched his focus to KCK, where he's selling \$225,000 homes in a county with a median house price of \$75,000. He says the race track along with the big retailers piqued his interest. "We thought, 'If those people are going in, maybe we better pay attention,'" he says.

# ...And Losers

## A Small North Carolina Town Is Left in the Dust

BY VERNON CLEMENT JONES

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**R**ockingham, N.C., has seen its share of economic troubles, but prosperity always arrived twice a year, when Nascar's Winston Cup races filled every motel room in sight and put the local track on TV screens across the country.

Now, Nascar's ambition to turn itself into America's next national pastime threatens to leave Rockingham (pop. 9,431) and other Southeastern towns in the dust. Starting next year, the North Carolina Speedway here loses one race, and its second race could be in danger. Another track 60 miles away in Darlington, S.C., also lost its big Labor Day weekend race to a newer

venue in Southern California.

Brian France, vice chairman of Nascar, says the shake-up is needed to help the sport meet huge demand in places outside the Southeast. But locals say Rockingham relies on the two races to cushion the blow of a 12.7% local unemployment rate—about twice the U.S. rate.

Monty Crump, Rockingham's city manager, says Nascar's decision to take away a race is "kind of like your husband or wife leaving you after you've paid their way through medical school. There ain't nothing you can do about it, but you're going to be mad as hell."

For decades, the 1.017-mile track—called "The Rock" by racing fans—drew some of the biggest crowds on the circuit. Fans

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love its banked turns and uninterrupted views of the action. Loyalties notwithstanding, Rockingham has been lapped by Nascar's explosive growth and the opening of huge tracks elsewhere. The 60,000-seat facility hasn't had a sellout since 1997 and seats barely half as many fans as the average Winston Cup race.

Rockingham officials estimate an economic hit of about \$4 million from losing one Winston Cup race, erasing more than 10% of the local tourism industry, as the number of empty restaurant tables and hotel rooms climbs and racing-season jobs vanish. Darlington isn't expected to suffer as much, though attendance at its new November race might slip if fans think the weather is too cold.

Mr. France won't rule out more changes to the lineup after 2004. That causes some fans to worry that tracks in Bristol, Tenn., and Martinsville, Va., with two races each, might lose out to new markets. "Big business is very complex, but essentially the little guy will get left behind," says Steven Foster, mayor of North Wilkesboro, N.C., which lost Nascar races to tracks owned

by **Speedway Motorsports** in Texas and New Hampshire.

Lauri Wilks, a Speedway Motorsports spokeswoman, insists the shifts are helping to build fan excitement throughout the country without abandoning stock-car racing's heritage. Even after next year's changes, 21 of the 39 big-league races will be held in seven Southeastern states from Virginia to Alabama. Mr. France says the region simply is saturated with races that all chase the same fans.

Rockingham is determined to hold on to the one race it has left. Local and state officials met over the summer with International Speedway to propose that the track's February race be moved to a better spot on the schedule. Rockingham also suggested trying to raise \$3 million for new lights that could help it attract night races.

Kyle Petty, a driver who won three times at Rockingham, is philosophical about the decline of small-town tracks. "You feel bad for the people left behind," he says, "but at the same time you have to grow."