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First Person: When “The Sopranos” Hit NASCAR

By Matthew Glass



“Why would [HBO](#) want to use [NASCAR](#) to promote ‘[The Sopranos](#)’?” asked the reporter on the other end of the line.

We were speaking about HBO’s sponsorship of a car in this week’s NASCAR race in Las Vegas, a deal that my company, [Grand Central Marketing](#), brokered and is managing on behalf of HBO. And on the surface, her question made sense.

It would seem that NASCAR and “The Sopranos” have very little in common. NASCAR has its roots in the Deep South; “The Sopranos” is set in the working-class suburbs of New Jersey. NASCAR is all about pork rinds and beer; pasta and chianti is the meal of choice for “The Sopranos.” In NASCAR, the emphasis is on what’s under the hood; with “The Sopranos,” it’s what in the trunk that matters.

But looking more closely, you can see there are also many similarities. Both require a crew. Both are ruled by a Tony (in NASCAR it’s reigning [Nextel Cup](#) champ [Tony Stewart](#)). Both are American cultural phenomena. And most important, both have millions of loyal fans and television viewers.

This last reason is what led us to sponsor [Richard Childress Racing](#)’s No. 07 Chevrolet in the UAW-Daimler Chrysler 400 at the [Las Vegas Motor Speedway](#). As an added benefit, the race takes place on March 12, the same day as “The Sopranos” season premiere.

Since it is often difficult for HBO to buy airtime for its programs on the broadcast networks, we thought that placing the “Sopranos” logo on the hood of a stock car was a creative, albeit unlikely, avenue to get network airtime. Like the best product placement, the “Sopranos” car will be integrated into the four-hour broadcast’s “story line.” And should the 07 car be in contention near the end of the race, the investment will pay off exponentially.

The disparate worlds of NASCAR and mob drama collided one afternoon in late February when we brought [Clint Bowyer](#), the 26-year-old Nextel Cup rookie, to New York to unveil his new car on the set of “The Sopranos” in Queens. He was joined for the occasion by five members of his new extended “family”—[Vincent Curatola](#) (Johnny Sack), [Joe Gannascoli](#) (Vito Spatafore), [Steve Schirripa](#) (Bobby Bacala), [John Ventimiglia](#) (Artie Bucco), and [Frank Vincent](#) (Phil Leotardo).

Perhaps because of the inherent risks involved with their respective professions, there was mutual respect between Clint and the “Sopranos” actors, and a bond quickly developed. While Clint showed John Ventimiglia how to operate the car, Steve Schirripa helped the Kansas native with his pronunciation of “fugetaboutit” and “bada bing.” After Clint autographed helmets for the cast, they reciprocated by pretending to throw him in the trunk and explaining that that’s where he will end up if he doesn’t win.

The sponsorship has opened doors for promotional partnerships with some of Richard Childress Racing’s other partners. To maximize HBO’s NASCAR tie-in, we’ve developed copromotions with HBO and associate-sponsor [DirecTV](#) and with [Jack Daniel’s](#), the No. 07 car’s usual sponsor, at a party at the Palms with “Stuff” magazine. We’re also working with ESPN Radio in Las Vegas to promote the car by giving out “Sopranos” premiums in the days leading up to the race. At the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, fans will be able to play a customized “Sopranos” Whack-a-Mole game (with a baseball bat replacing the usual mallet) and pose with the 07 “Sopranos” show car. While the green flag hasn’t dropped on the race yet, the sponsorship has already been a marketing and public relations win for HBO. We’ve made headlines in both entertainment and auto-racing media, with video of the car unveiling appearing everywhere from [CNN](#) to [Speed Channel](#) to a podcast on [VOD Cars](#) and an AP wire photo running in newspapers around the country (“NASCAR, TV Show a Perfect Match” was the headline in one Florida newspaper).

In the end, we offered HBO a sponsorship they just couldn’t refuse.


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