

EDITOR'S PICK

## TIM ECHOLS: NASCAR does it again

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Tim Echols

If you watched the exciting Daytona 500 as I did, you saw more car wrecks than you see on I-285 during Friday rush-hour traffic. Fifteen out of 40 drivers didn't finish the race. That topped five in 2016, six in 2015 and seven in 2014. And the new rule changes adding two segment winners really broke up the race in a fun and new way. I hope you will join me this weekend in Hampton to see a continuation of this high-speed excitement.

When you go to the event, the air is electrified by those familiar words: "Drivers, start your engines!" It is a tradition in Georgia. It is a tradition in the South. It is important for you to know that it is more than just noise they are making. Let me show you why.

First, every time big-time racing comes to town, we not only hear the roar of the engines and the crowd but the cash registers ringing transactions from many new customers. From NASCAR events, the races held at Road Atlanta to the Saturday night short-tracks across the state, motorsports is a significant economic driver both on and off the track.

Everybody wins in this race. By many coming to these events and enjoying the community and the sports, they also are helping build the local economy. Fans from all over the region will spend hundreds if not thousands of dollars to be a part of the NASCAR weekend festivities. Atlanta Motor Speedway activities alone expect to generate in excess of \$150 million this year.

According to Henry County officials, it is the county's single most important commercial event. That is big money for the Southern Crescent and all of Georgia. Yet, while this is a sports race and an economic driver in its own right, it also is a beautiful tradition that allows fans to interact with professional athletes like no other sport. If you have a pit pass, you can touch the cars, talk to the crews and get driver autographs. It is the ultimate in fan experience — especially for the young.

Second, I really see attending a NASCAR event as a rite of passage for many Southerners. So, if you were not born in the South, having moved here from another part of the country, you owe it to yourself to attend a race to experience what it is all about. Many of the drivers, like Chase Elliott, are millennials, some not even 21 years old. I recommend that everyone go to at least one NASCAR race and check it off their bucket list.





Third, the racetrack has something for everyone. Blue- and white-collar fans will pack into this gigantic facility. Companies like Home Depot, Lowes and Coca Cola all have suites atop the track. One good ol' boy named Chris has an old prison bus he parks in the infield with a railing welded on top for his own bird's-eye view of the action. Food and drink will be in abundance, and if nothing else, I promise you will be entertained. You can rent a headset that blocks part of the noise and gives you an audio play-by-play feed so you can keep up with racing action on the track.

Finally, our city's professional sports organizations need your support. The Braves, Hawks and Falcons all have seats to fill. Georgia previously held two NASCAR weekends, but unfortunately one was lost to Kentucky due to lack of attendance in Georgia, taking money right out of Georgia's coffers.

Come and make this event this year a new tradition for you and your family. Bring your best friends. Georgia is a great state with wonderful traditions, and a NASCAR race weekend is something everyone should have on their bucket list. I'll see you at the racetrack after church on Sunday.

*Tim Echols serves on the Georgia Public Service Commission. He grew up in Clayton County — not far from the Speedway.*

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