

If you want to get close to your favorite driver, nab limited-edition collectibles and or be a part of the NASCAR family...



By Randy Cummings

club members.

Dale Earnhardt's club benefits include a fanny pack and a die-cast car.

few years ago, Winston Cup driver Kenny Wallace came to the realization that one of the most rewarding gifts he could give members of his fan club would cost him just a few minutes of his time. The gesture had nothing to do with shaking hands, signing autographs or posing for pictures — commonplace events at NASCAR fan club gatherings that define the amazingly close and personal relationship that exists between today's drivers and

All Kenny had to do was pick up the phone.

Now, twice a month,

Wallace calls a member of his fan club on their birthday and helps them celebrate with a little driver-to-fan chit-chat. Whether the surprised birthday celebrants believe it's actually their horsepower hero on the other end is up to them.

"We've had people hang up," laughs Kenny's wife Kim, who operates her husband's 4,000-member club out of an office built last year behind the couple's home. "They'll think it's a joke."

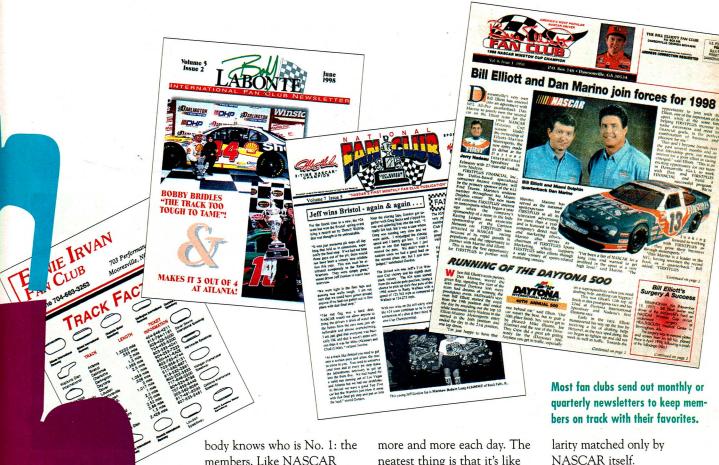
For the others who believe that it's really Kenny they're talking to, it's a dream come true. Imagine . . . an athlete actually calling one of his fans. Getting a personalized

autographed picture through the mail is one thing and standing next to a driver for a snapshot is certainly a thrill. But actually having a one-onone conversation with a favorite driver is like taking the checkered flag at Daytona — the ultimate.

Membership does have its privileges.

Wallace's surprise calls reflect the importance drivers place on maintaining the bond they have with their faithful followers.

Organized fan clubs have been around for years. The first, in fact, was formed for Lee Petty in 1955 by Morris Metcalfe, who later went on



to be a NASCAR official for four decades. Members had to drive a Chrysler before they could be admitted. A fan club for Richard Petty, Lee's son, got started not too many years later and is still going strong. Jerry and Linda Ritchie are now co-national directors of the Richard Petty Fan Club, a group they first became active with back in 1971.

In the long history of fan clubs, they have always been fan friendly. But racing's special kinship between driver and fan has never been stronger than it is today, with more drivers than ever boasting clubs that go to great lengths to make sure every-

body knows who is No. 1: the members. Like NASCAR itself, the drivers' clubs pride themselves on being fan-oriented, with newsletters, member-only events and products, and other benefits that nurture the family feeling nearly all clubs promote.

"We love going to the meetings and seeing all our old friends and seeing the fans getting the chance to meet Jeff," says Maureen Harris, who serves as co-director of the Jeff Gordon National Fan Club with her husband Russ. "It's growing

more and more each day. The neatest thing is that it's like NASCAR — it's one big family. We're having a blast."

So, too, are the fans, as there are more card-carrying clubbers around the world than ever before. Whether it's the 1,200-member Rick Mast Fan Club, being steered by the solo efforts of Whitney Huffman, or Gordon's group, which employs a staff of eight to handle a membership that is expected to reach 20,000 by the end of the year, racing clubs are experiencing an explosion in popu-

The current pole sitter among the fan clubs is — Surprise! — Dale Earnhardt. His Sports Image, Inc. was bought by Action Performance in 1996, and last year the operation of his 25,000-member fan club was moved to Action's home base in Phoenix. Action Performance

president and



Signs of Membership

Fan clubs can be the best chance at getting a driver's autograph

Fan clubs may offer the easiest access to a driver and the most logical means of obtaining his autograph. But be warned, don't get greedy seeking out those signatures. And be prepared to show a little patience after sending in a request for an autograph.

Ali clubs are more than happy to accommodate the hundreds upon hundreds of autograph requests they receive each week. But the popularity of autographs as a collectible has forced some clubs to place restrictions on the number of requests a member can submit.

For members of the Jeff Gordon National Fan Club, members are limited to three autographed items every three months. Members are also warned to expect up to a six-month wait before finding those signed items in their mailbox.

Officials at the Darrell Waltrip Fan Club don't limit the number of times members can send an item in to get signed, but they do request that no more than two cards at a time be sent for signing.

Kim Wallace, who runs husband Kenny's fan club with the help of one other staffer, also monitors the autograph requests Kenny receives. "We honor everybody's first requests," Kim says, "and hope we can get them to become a member. All club members slide right through — members come first. But when people send in a whole bunch of stuff, you start to wonder. Those are set aside until we have time to get to them." — Randy Cummings



Action keeps Dale Jarrett members loaded with merchandise.

CEO Fred W. Wagenhals says the Intimidator's club now boasts 45,000 active members and has the pedal to the metal in hopes of reaching 100,000 by the end of 1999.

"By far, it's the biggest," Wagenhals says. "He's kind of like the Oakland Raiders, He's got a certain mystique that only comes along once in a lifetime. I think that people who don't even like him buy

his products.

"It always amazes me. Everything we come out with always sells through," he adds. "We've got all the top drivers

and they all do well. But Dale Earnhardt's like Michael Iordan — he's a cut above."

When Harris and Russ took over

Gordon's operation in 1992. the then 20-year-old racer's fan club was just 43 members strong and being run on a part-time basis by one of Gordon's T-shirt salesmen. Today, the club's home office in Williams, Ariz., cranks out a monthly, 16-page newsletter and organizes four to six meetings at which Jeff appears to meet his fans. Oh yeah, the club also has a corporate sponsor (Kellogg's cereals) that helps it deals with the nearly 400 letters and 100 e-mails that arrive every 24 hours.

For the Harrises, it's a labor

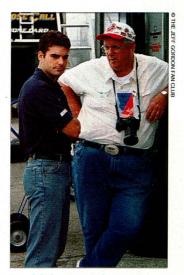
of love not unlike that which Kim Chandler experiences as one of the six volunteers all of whom reside in different states - who coordinate the Bobby Labonte International Fan Club. Sure, the self-supporting club has "only" about 3,000 members and the mail load (anywhere from 600-800 pieces per month) can't touch that of Gordon or Earnhardt. Still, Chandler and her coworkers are like any other fan club officials: they love their driver and love their work.

"With the fan club being so family-oriented, it really feels like a family," Chandler says of Labonte's club. "I really enjoy it. We don't get any glory out of doing this. We just do it because we enjoy it. And by the way we're growing, I think we're doing a pretty good job."

Beyond the common goal of promoting a particular driver, fan clubs share other

staples that not only enable its members the chance to know next to everything about their favorite driver but, in most cases, provide opportunities to meet the club's namesake and chances to purchase exclusive, club-only merchandise.

The Bill Elliott Fan Club,



Fan club directors such as Russ Harris confer often with their driver.

LABONTE

Beckett Racing & Motorsports Marketplace ranks the top fan clubs from a hobby perspective

1. Bill Elliott Fan Club -The participation from fans and sponsors makes this club tops. Everybody knows that McDonald's is the corporate king of the goody bag. Legions of fans are actively

involved, helping decide just what benefits members should receive. Another big plus is that the fan club has been strong for a long time, making the Bill Elliott Fan Club warehouse one of the most established racing collectibles shops in the United States, Bill's fans can even pick up items bearing the logos and color schemes of previous sponsors. The fans have helped make Elliott the Most Popular Driver on the Winston Cup circuit a record 12 times.

2. Jeff Gordon National Fan Club — Again, the organization's cornerstones are its strong base of fan participation and sponsorship support. The club has a great Internet site and strong newsletter, but the biggest privilege from this membership is access to Gordon. Sure, that exposure is extremely limited, but Jeff's more in demand than half the field combined. The fan club is your best bet to get Jeff's signature next to being a cousin to one of the Rainbow Warriors.

3. Club E - The Dale Earnhardt Fan Club - For collectors who want volume and hot-off-the-production-line pieces, this is the club to join. This is also a club on the rise as it recovers from the uncertainty of several leadership changes in the 1990s. Action Peformance Companies is now in charge, so look for this club to just keep getting better and growing bigger. The biggest drawback to Club E is that Dale's autograph doesn't go through his fan club, but through the corporate offices at Dale Earnhardt, Inc.

4. The Richard Petty Fan Club - Richard Petty will always be "The King" of stock car racing, and his fan club will always be part of the royalty. Petty's fan organization blazed the trail. The King has always been popular, and at one point he had a fan club chapter in all 50 states. Petty started racing 20 years before cable television, and like Elliott's club, the warehouse is a good source of older pieces.

5. Bobby Laborte International Fan Club — Strong membership involvement makes this club work. Club leadership is hobby smart, frequently going to the top names in collectibles and asking for help producing special pieces. The newsletter has even run checklists of Bobby's trading cards in the past. Labonte's popularity, his relationships with some of NASCAR's strongest licensees and the groundwork of his biggest fans make this club a great one for collectors.

6. The Dale Jarrett Fan Club — Action Performance also runs this club, along with the fan organization of popular drag racing champion John Force. This Dale isn't quite as popular as Earnhardt, but Action has put the same commitment into his club. Jarrett has just come into his own as a driver over the past several years, and his fan club is making the same transition.

7. The Darrell Walfrip Fan Club - The three-time Winston Cup champion is collectible savvy, and so is his fan club. Darrell's 25th anniversary tour helped get Waltrip and gang in the collectibles groove, and strong ties with Action help. Waltrip's sponsorship and ride changes of 1998, plus his imminent retirement, make this a good club to be a part of.

8. (tie) Terry Labonte, Mark Martin and Rusty Wallace Fan Clubs - These clubs are similar in development and in their involvement with collectibles. They started small with the help of family and friends, but have grown increasingly larger. The drivers are popular, the merchandise available is steady and strong, and the chance to get an autograph solid.

9. The Elton Sawyer and Patty Moise Fan Club - Who can argue with two memberships for the price of one? The fan club membership is small, so while you can't expect a great deal of membersonly merchandise, you can expect to get a shot at just about all of the souvenirs produced of the two drivers. Members have a good chance at some personal interaction with the only married competitors at NASCAR's highest levels.

10 (fie) Kenny Wallace and Geoff Bodine Fan Clubs - These two drivers give members the personal touch. Kenny calls two of his members each month to offer them a happy birthday, while Geoff not only sends out birthday cards to all his members, but also Christmas cards.

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for example. devotes most of a back page in its

newsletter to items such as club hats, model airplanes, golf cart banks, pins, metal cards, die-casts, dolls and even football jerseys.

Gordon's newsletter also includes a merchandise page for ordering such club-only items as hats, bumper stickers, jackets, buttons, pins and flags.

Gordon's club hosts up to six national meetings each year, at which Jeff speaks, signs autographs and poses for pictures. The events have become so popular that the club limits attendance to the first 250 registrants.

Most, of course, are quick sellouts.

"We work out the schedule

with Jeff and usually publish the dates [in the club newsletter] by the end of the year," Harris says. "And they sell out fast. They usually sell out by the end of February."

When Chandler helped organized the first annual fan outing in 1994 for the Bobby Labonte club, 84 die-hard fans showed up to meet their hero. This season's event in October was preceded by a second "mini" meeting that had to be added to the schedule to accommodate the growing interest in Labonte. The June event attracted nearly 400 fans.

"We're trying to keep it very fan-oriented," Chandler says. "That's the way Bobby wants it, and we're trying hard to keep it that way."

Club newsletters are also a standard with club membership. While they may vary in size and frequency of publication — for example, Kenny Wallace's 8-12 pager comes out four times per year while

Gordon's monthly usually is 16 pages — they serve a similar purpose. They're the perfect tool for giving club members exclusive news and notes about the drivers that "outsiders" can't usually get.

The newsletter for Kenny's club is edited by his wife, who along with daughters Brooke (11), Brandy (9) and Brittany (7), write regular columns for the club's publication. In addition to the standard schedules, race results, team updates and club activities that are part of all newsletters, Wallace readers might learn about the family's next vacation plans or what it's like being the child of a famous driver.

"We tell the fans everything," Kim Wallace says. "There are no secrets in this family."

All fan clubs offer members exclusive, one-of-a-kind memorabilia to some extent. It all begins with the "fan packs" that members receive upon joining a club or renewing a membership. Membership cards, certificates, autographed photos, newsletter subscription, race schedules and discounts for merchandise are all standard goodies that come with plunking down anywhere from \$10 to \$20 for either an individual or family membership.

But each club usually throws in additional items that are special to that particular driver that might range from an exclusive Burton club T-shirt, Labonte hat pins or a Wallace rain poncho, to the club hats and personalized signed photos offered to members of Mast's club.

The Earnhardt club has a



Mauren Harris' duties as co-director of Jeff Gordon's fan club includes dealing with autograph requests.

NASCAR Fan Clubs

Ron Barfield Fan Club P.O. Box 1508 Dawsonville, GA 30534

Johnny Benson Fan Club 3102 Bird St. NE Grand Rapids, MI 49505

Joe Bessey Fan Club 2004 Renaissance Blvd. King of Prussia, PA 19406

7365 Elwood Dr. Charlotte, NC 28227

Frosted Mini-Wheats. **Brett Bodine** 304 Performance Rd. Mooresville, N.C. 28115

> **Geoff Bodine Fan Club** P.O. Box 1790 Monroe, NC 28111-1790

Todd Bodine Fan Club P.O. Box 2427 Cornelius, NC 28031

Jeff Burton Fan Club P.O. Box 1160 Halifax, VA 24558

Ward Burton Fan Club 3475 Myer Lee Dr. NE Winston-Salem, NC 27101

Rick Carelli Fan Club c/o Chesrown Auto Grou 2009 Market St. Denver, CO 80205

Derrike Cope Fan Club P.O. Box 1542 Cornelius, N.C. 28031

Delma Cowart Fan Club 6134 Scott Lake Rd. Lakeland, FL 33813

Ricky Craven Fan Club P.O. Box 472 Concord, NC 28026

Mike Dillon Fan Club P.O. Box 30414 Winston-Salem, NC 27130

Club E - Dale Earnhardt Fan Club 1-888-332-5823

Dale Earnhardt Jr. Fan Club P.O. Box 1298 Mooresville, N.C. 28115

Dawsonville, GA 30534

Tim Fedewa Fan Club P.O. Box 428 Terrell, N.C., 28682

Jeff Fuller Fan Club 103 Commercial Park Dr. Concord, NC 28025

rdon National Fan Club P.O. Box 515
Williams, AZ 86046-0515
520-635-5333

David Green Fan Club P.O. Box 4821 Archdale, NC 27263-4821

Mark Green Fan Club 262 W. Parrish Ave. #121 Owensboro, Ky 42301

Steve Grissom Fan Club P.O. Box 989 Statesville, NC 28687-0989

Bobby Hamilton Fan Club

Bobby Hillin Fan Club 110 Knob Hill Rd. Mooresville, NC 28115

Lance Hooper Fan Club P.O. Box 903323 Palmdale, CA 93590-3323

Ron Hornaday Fan Club P.O. Box 870 Kannapolis, NC 28082-0870

P.O. Box 4425, Bethlehem, PA 18018

Tommy Houston Fan Club P.O. Box 5250 Conover, NC 28613

Ernie Irvan Fan Club 1027 Central Dr. Concord, NC 28027

Dale Jarrett Fan Club 1-888-324-3527

Buckshot Jones Fan Club

Jason Keller Fan Club P.O. Box 14748 Greenville, SC 29610

Matt Kenseth Fan Club 10 Water Street-Rockdale Cambridge, WI 53523

Tammy Jo Kirk 743 Peek Rd. Dalton, Ga. 30721

Bobby Labonte International Fan Club P.O. Box 358 Trinity, NC 27370

Terry Labonte Fan Club P.O. Box 843 Trinity, NC 27370

Randy LaJoie Fan Club P.O. Box 3478 Westport, CT 06880

Nashville, TN 37214

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Glenn Allen Fan Club 7280 Jerry Dr. Westchester, OH 45069

Bobby Allison 6616 Walmsley Blvd. Richmond, Va. 23224

2416 Music Valley Dr,

little steeper membership cost (\$29.95), but members are treated to club-only gifts and memorabilia on a regular basis. They receive a welcome-to-the-club pack when they pay membership dues, but three other times throughout the year they are given special member-only gifts such as exclusive die-cast cars — Action's cornerstone product.

"Action knows how to run a fan club," Wagenhals says. "We give them a lot. We give them a great package for openers. Besides that, we give them something unique and different things on a quarterly basis. Fans always want something that they can't get anywhere else and that's what we do. If we don't do that, what's the reason for joining a fan club!"

Earnhardt's club isn't the only successful fan club operation Action can boast. A year after its startup, Action's Dale Jarrett Fan Club has amassed nearly 20,000 members. Action also has handled the Racing Collectibles Club of America (a mail-order club)

Family Directory

The qualities needed to organize a fan club are usually relative

The word "family" pops up often when talking about driver fan clubs, but it's usually for reasons beyond specific goals as an organization or the cozy feeling members get when they gather together to cheer for their favorite.

Many fan clubs were started and maintained by family members, or perhaps a close friend of the driver's family. With the tremendous growth of fan clubs in the 1990s, many have grown out of the mom-and-pop status and are not operated like a corporation or volunteer organization.

For example, Ward Burton's wife Tabitha got her husband's club off the ground four years ago before handing the reigns over to Mona Singleton, who along with two other staffers runs the club as part of the services offered by SCM Marketing, Ltd.

But some are still run by family members.

Judy Wallace, the mother of Winston Cup drivers Rusty and Kenny, organized fan clubs for both sons back in the late 1980s and continues to head Rusty's club. Kim

Wallace, Kenny's wife, decided her

mother-in-law needed some help in '91 and took over the operation of her husband's fan club after enrollment reached 50 fans. Today, the club numbers nearly 3.900 members.

"We had always talked about doing one during [the early part of his] career," recalls Kim, who has been married to Kenny for 14 years. "Then when he started on the Busch Nationals circuit, his mother started doing a little with Kenny. She was already doing a club for Rusty, so she did Kenny for about three years.

"I thought I had a place for it and thought it'd be fun," Kim adds.

"With Rusty's mom having her club, I thought by taking over Kenny's club she could devote more time to Rusty. And I'm glad I took it over. It's grown a bunch and it's been like a big party."

— Randy Cummings

since purchasing it in 1993, and the company just inked an agreement with NASCAR to run an official fan club for the stock car association.

And since Action owns marketing licenses with more than 300 active drivers, owners and sponsors, it's expected that Action will be operating as many as 10 new driver fan clubs by

next year.

"We'll be coming out with new programs next year," Wagenhals says. "I can't tip my hat, but we're talking about some really unique things that NASCAR fans can do, like tuning into the drivers' meeting on Whether its hearing the drivers on Sunday or listening to Kenny Wallace offer his personal birthday greetings, fan clubs really do live up to their names.

Be a member. Carry a card. And don't leave for the track without it.

Randy Cummings is a freelance writer in Denton, Texas.

NASCAR Fan Clubs

Kevin Lepage Fan Club 159 Bevan Dr. Mooresville, NC 28115

Chad Little Fan Club P.O. Box 562323 Charlotte, NC 28256

Curtis Markham Fan Club 433 Bostwick Lane Gaithersburg, MD 20878

Sterling Marlin Fan Club 1116 W. 7th St. Suite 62 Columbia, TN 38401

Mark Martin Fan Club P.O. Box 68 Ash Flat, AR 72513

Rick Mast Fan Club Rt. 6 Box 224-A Lexington, VA 24450

Jeremy Mayfield Fan Club P.O. Box 2365 Cornelius, NC 28031

Ted Musgrave Fan Club P.O. Box 1089 Liberty, NC 27298

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Jerry Nadeau P.O. Box 1358 Harrisburg, N.C. 28075

Joe Nemechek Fan Club P.O Box 1131 Mooresville, NC 28115

Steve Park P.O. Box 6005 Mooresville, N.C. 28115

Kyle Petty Fan Club 135 Longfield Dr. Mooresville, NC 28115

Richard Petty Fan Club 1028 East 22nd St. Kannapolis, NC 28083

Stevie Reeves Fan Club 200 Rolling Hill Rd., Suite 113 Mooresville, NC 28115

Ricky Rudd Fan Club P.O. Box 7586 Richmond, VA 23231 Hermie Sadler Fan Club P.O. Box 871 Emporia, VA 28847

Jay Sauter Fan Club P.O. Box 278 516-D River Hwy. Mooresville, NC 28115

Patty Moise/Elton Sawyer Fan Club P.O. Box 77919 Greensboro, NC 27417

Ken Schrader Fan Club P.O. Box 1227 Kannapolis, NC 28082

Dennis Setzer 159 Bevan Rd. Mooresville, NC 28115

Morgan Shepherd Fan Club P.O. Box 623 Conover, NC 28613

Lake Speed Fan Club P.O. Box 499 Danville, WV 25053 Ω

Jimmy Spencer Fan Club P.O. Box 1626 Mooresville, NC 28115

Jack Sprague Fan Club 280 Hwy 29 S. Suite 120, Box 173 Concord, NC 28027

Billy Standridge Fan Club 1521 Sulphur Springs Rd. Shelby, NC 28152

Tim Steele Fan Club 11433 24th Ave. Marne, MI 49435-9716

Mike Stefanik Fan Club 106 Pierremount Ave. New Britain, CT 06053 - WEN

Sunday."

Tony Stewart Fan Club P.O. Box 446 Rushville, IN 46173

Hut Strickland Fan Club P.O. Box 1028 Calera, AL 35040

Randy Tolsma Fan Club 610 Performance Rd. Mooresville, NC 28115

Dick Trickle Fan Club 5415 Vesuvius-Furnace Rd. Iron Station, NC 28080

Bill Venturini Fan Club 7621 Texas Trail Boca Raton, FL 33487 Kenny Wallace Fan Club P.O. Box 3050 Concord, NC 28025

Mike Wallace Fan Club 224 Rolling Hill Rd. Suite 9A Mooresville, NC 28115

Rusty Wallace Fan Club 224 Rolling Hill Rd. Suite 5A Mooresville, NC 28115

Darrell Waltrip Fan Club P.O. Box 381 Harrisburg, NC 28075

Michael Waltrip Fan Club P.O. Box 339 Sherrills Ford, NC 28673