Combining his love of history and NASCAR, Associate Professor Dan Pierce has authored a new book, Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France (University of North Carolina Press, February 2010). Library Journal enthusiastically recommends it as “an important work that would serve an academic audience as well as general readers.”

BY MELISSA STANZ
An easy read that speeds along like a pace car, the book details the history of NASCAR and its primary players from the 1940s through the 1970s. It also establishes solid ties between the sport that currently claims more than 75 million fans and the illegal liquor industry of the 1940s—a controversial topic mostly ignored by NASCAR officials.

“I thought all the talk about illegal liquor and bootlegging in the early days was overblown until I dug into it,” said Pierce. “But my research confirms that almost all the top drivers in the early years did moonshine runs, and that the illegal liquor industry permeated the organization, including drivers, mechanics and owners.”

Real NASCAR tells research-based stories—the same kinds of stories Pierce loves to use in the classroom. He believes stories are the best way to bring history to life.

Alumnus Will Tate ’05 agrees. “Dr. Pierce’s challenge to pursue knowledge, facts and storytelling was a spark in my mind. He always asked that students tell a story when answering a question. And although I know that history is a lot of facts, dates, people and places, Dr. Pierce wanted us to put it in a story, in context, where it related to something else.”

Pierce credits his dad with helping him develop his storytelling skills. As a Baptist preacher, his father told stories from the pulpit every Sunday. “I never realized how much I was absorbing—the structure and the stories—but I did. I’m a big believer in using stories.”

While he was learning the power of stories, Pierce also fell in love with history. When he was 12, he traveled with another student and a teacher to Europe for the summer. It was a life-defining experience. “My teacher, Jean Bennett, loved history and she was an incredible teacher, taking us to many countries and bringing history alive. I thought I would study European history even into graduate school.”

The desire to study European history was overshadowed when Pierce began working on his master’s degree at the University of Alabama. “I studied with two professors who were on the cutting edge of Southern history,” he said. “One professor, Forrest McDonald, really simplified things for me. Then I took a Southern culture class that was all about working class Southerners—people like my grandfathers. That’s when I really understood that everyone has a story, and they are all valuable.”

Understanding the value of working-class peoples’ stories is something Pierce emphasizes in his classes. He enjoys teaching about the lives of people who have been marginalized because it helps them have a voice. “Anyone is a proper subject for an historian,” he said.

Learning that is a revelation for students, but they embrace it quickly. The History Department requires all history majors to write a senior thesis, and many choose to write about relatives, everyday people or little-known subjects. Pierce notes that when the papers are turned in, students have not only completed original research but have also become experts in their subject matter.
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—WILL TATE ’05

Recently, two students chose NASCAR subjects for their senior papers and Real NASCAR benefited from their research. “Dr. Pierce recognized my passion for this subject and forced me to continue the journey on seeking out the true story. I’m honored that he considered my work valued enough to assist him in his journey,” said Tate.

Bryan Greene ’08, another NASCAR fan, also chose to do his senior thesis on the sport. “During our second meeting to discuss my paper, I rambled on and on about facts and dates and Dr. Pierce just smiled and nodded,” Greene recalled. “When I finished touting my racing expertise, Dr. Pierce removed his glasses and warned me about the mistake of becoming an antiquarian instead of a historian. I needed to focus on explaining my findings rather than regurgitating them. I was shocked at first that he would be so blunt with me, but soon realized how much that one statement would improve my research. I rewrote the paper that night.”

Since Pierce is the author of two books, several magazine and encyclopedia articles, and a weekly blog, you might think writing was a natural gift for him. Not so. “Until I was studying for my master’s degree, I never made better than a C in writing. It did not come naturally for me. I had to work at it and break it down,” Pierce said.

He emphasizes this to his students regularly. “I tell them any idiot can do this if you work at it, but you have to have a thick skin and take constructive criticism.”

Greene, who is now a coach and teacher in Rockingham, N.C., has a special appreciation for Pierce’s teaching style. He said, “Dr. Pierce is very forthcoming with his own education and how he improved as a student and a writer through his undergrad, grad school and doctoral experiences. He expects his students to improve as well. If you accept this unspoken challenge then you will not only be successful in his class but also throughout your collegiate career. So far, it has worked for me in my professional career as well. I find myself using this same philosophy of high expectations in my classes and for my teams.”

Despite his successes, Pierce continues to seek constructive criticism. Paul Bergeron, a favorite University of Tennessee graduate school professor, is commonly called upon to review his writing. And Pierce is grateful for the feedback.

“You need people in your life that care enough about you to tell you the truth. And anyone that makes me look smarter than I am—that’s a good thing,” Pierce laughed.

With some help from Bergeron, Pierce published his first book, The Great Smokies: From Natural Habitat to National Racing legend Junior Johnson is shown following the Grand National race at the Asheville-Weaverville Speedway in August 1961. Johnson won despite the hole in his windshield caused by flying debris as the track began to break apart. When NASCAR shortened the race because of track conditions, fans rioted and kept the drivers from leaving for four hours.
Park (University of Tennessee Press, November 2000). It was the inaugural selection for Tennessee Reads, a book club featuring titles from the University of Tennessee Press.

Now, Real NASCAR, his second book, is flying off the shelves nearly as fast as race cars themselves. Since its release, Pierce was asked to pen an op-ed for the New York Times, has appeared on morning radio shows across the country and has garnered rave reviews. He now writes a monthly history column for NASCAR Illustrated and blogs at realnascar.com. He’s also working on a guidebook of NASCAR historical sites.

While it’s safe to say that none of the fame has gone to his head, Pierce isn’t resting on his laurels either. He continues to teach popular courses on Southern history. He is mentoring students on their undergraduate research projects. And he’s begun imagining his next book, a text on moonshining in the 20th century.

“I want to know how it worked, what it financed and ferret out the illegal activities versus the legitimate enterprises,” he explained.

It sounds like the perfect project for an atypical history professor with a knack for bringing the stories of common people to life in really big ways.

From Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay and Big Bill France by Dan Pierce (UNC Press, April 2010)

“Because of its roots as a Piedmont-region, working-class, moonshine-tainted, good ole boy sport, NASCAR has often struggled for respectability both in the world of motorsports and in American sports in general. Indeed, only in relatively recent years has NASCAR been covered by the major national press outlets. Much of the history of Piedmont stock car racing and NASCAR itself, like the history of the modern South, has been about joining the mainstream, transcending roots, and gaining both respectability and national recognition.”

For more about Pierce’s book, visit uncpress.unc.edu/books/T-5676.html