

Student art project sets a campus exposure record....

From Crayons to NASCAR: A Rare Artist's Journey



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by Glenn Tornell

DAN NISBET'S SENIOR GRAPHIC ART PROJECT AT MSUM SET A RECORD FOR NATIONAL EXPOSURE THAT'S NOT ABOUT TO BE LAPPED SOON.

More than five million people, in the grandstands and on prime-time cable television, watched his art work zoom around Lowe's Motor Speedway near Charlotte, N.C., last fall with NASCAR superstar Kyle Busch behind the wheel as the No. 18 Joe Gibbs Racing driver won the 300-mile Dollar General Nationwide Series race.

For Nisbet, who designed the car's visual scheme, it was a moment he won't forget.

"I was a nervous wreck watching it on television in my Fargo apartment," said Nisbet, who earned a degree in graph-

ic communications from MSUM last year. "And when Kyle Busch actually won the race, I was stunned."

NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) is virtually the Musee du Louvre of race car designers. With 75 million fans in the United States (40 percent of them women), it has become the second-most popular pro sport in the country, with TV ratings trailing only the National Football League. And it has more Fortune 500 sponsors than any other sport.

The design on the winning Busch car at Lowe's Motor Speedway last year was literally what Nisbet packaged for his senior art project. It was later picked up by NOS Energy Drink, a product of The Coca-Cola Company, a major sponsor of 23-year-old NASCAR superstar driver Busch.

"I contacted the NOS people for permission to use their logo for my senior project," Nisbet said. "They not only okayed it, they sent me three cases of NOS, a bunch of T-shirts and other stuff, which I gave away during my project presentation."

NOS recently expanded their sponsorship with Joe Gibbs Racing #18 team and as a result, Nisbet's senior project car will be making 14 appearances this year.

Today when Nisbet isn't working his day job as a graphic designer for Studio 7 Productions in Fargo, he spends his evenings designing race car schemes for CM2 Concepts in Indianapolis, Ind., a graphic company specializing in motor-sports marketing.

"It's a very niche market," accord-



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ing to Bart Kelley, owner of CM2. "We're one of only about four companies in the country focusing almost exclusively on motorsport designs."

Nisbet has been working part-time for CM2 since his freshman year at MSUM. Since then, he estimates, more than 45 of his designs have ended up on NASCAR vehicles.

"He's been magic for me," Kelley said. "When I hired Dan, my business was growing like crazy and I needed a 3-D designer. I didn't really want a young guy, but when I saw his stuff on the Web, I knew Dan was something special. It would take anyone else maybe 10 or more years of experience to reach the level he's at now in a very, very specialized market. He's also brought my company up to a new level."

What's even more impressive, Kelley said, is how mature, confident and trustworthy Nisbet is. "That's extremely important in our business. When a client comes to us with a logo and design,

which could mean a \$10 to \$15 million contract for a team or driver. Confidentiality is absolutely critical. And I trust Dan like a brother."

For Nisbet, it all started with a box of crayons and a father who wanted to bond with his sons.

"I was maybe six years old when my dad started my brother and I racing go carts," he said. "We grew up on a farm in East Grand Forks, Minn., and quickly became motor heads. Throughout high school, we spent nearly every Friday night working the pits at the Grand Forks Speedway (now River City Speedway). We were all about cars." (And they still are. His brother Dave is now on the pit crew for World of Outlaws' driver Daryn Pittman.)

More artist than mechanic, Nisbet extended his racing fixation to the drawing board, keeping several sketch books at his side at all times. And his art teacher at East Grand Forks High School, Myke Knutson, now retired,

catered to his interest.

"Myke set up a special desk for me at school where I'd draw my car designs," Nisbet said. "I was so involved in it, I'd come to school a half hour ahead of everyone and stay late just to keep working on my projects."

What put him over the top was a personal interview with Chip Foose, the legendary grand master designer and fabricator of race cars, and the youngest person ever inducted into the Hot Rod Hall of Fame. Foose came to Grand Forks to design a special car for Rydell GM Auto Center and Nisbet's uncle, a machinist and mechanic at Rydell's "Toy Shop," which specializes in modifying and restoring classic cars, arranged for his nephew to sit down with Foose.

His art teacher, also becoming a NASCAR fan, went with him. "It was like a field trip for us," Knutson said. "Foose took off his overalls and sat down with us and talked about his career. It was an eye opener. And it just solidified Dan's already strong interest in race car design. Dan is a very unique guy who's extremely focused."

When Nisbet enrolled at MSUM, he started as an art major. But it didn't take him long to gravitate to the graphic communications program and his future academic advisor Mike Ruth, who also happened to share Nisbet's fascination with NASCAR. And by the end of his freshman year, he was working with CM2 in Indianapolis.

"The exposure NASCAR and auto racing in general receives is amazing," Ruth said. "Put this in perspective. The Indianapolis 500 (not a NASCAR event) is the largest single sporting event in the world. More than 500,000 people are in ticketed seats or standing in the field at the Brickyard. That's almost as many people who live in the entire state of North Dakota (about 641,000). Add to that a television audience in the millions and you've got quite the exposure."

NASCAR isn't shy about its dependence on sponsors, and maintains strict standards for the appearance of its race cars.

Besides those restrictions, and with all the logos on the cars, you wouldn't think

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

NASCAR FROM PAGE 15

there'd be much left to design.

"Actually, there's lots of freedom and creativity involved," Nisbet said. "It's a challenge, kind of like combining art and brand marketing. The single most important part of the job is making the sponsor's logo stand out to television viewers and to people in the stands."

It's a trick, because the 750-horsepower cars zip by TV cameras and the fans in seconds at speeds up to 200 mph.

The process begins when Nisbet's boss, Kelley, who's the project manager and the initial designer, sends him a photograph or a vector image of a client's car online.

Nisbet starts his end of the design work by placing all the car's basic elements into a NASCAR-approved template, basically a race car body folded out like a broken down box—side panels, hood, trunk, top, grill all separated into pieces.

First he determines where to put the logos of the major and associate sponsors (there's usually one primary sponsor



Nisbet does his NASCAR design work on computers at his Fargo apartment.

and up to 20 secondary sponsors sharing space on a single car). Then he creates a color and paint scheme, working with any illustrations that might be included (ranging from flames and shark-tooth designs to a photograph of a celebrity or a sponsor's product). The magic comes next: integrating all the design elements to spotlight the sponsors.

Collaborating with Kelley by phone and e-mail during the process, it takes Nisbet about two to four hours for each project.

The final design, if the sponsor approves, is then printed on sheets of vinyl that are wrapped around the car like a snake-skin. The traditional method of painting, drying, clear-coating and then applying the logos di-

rectly on the car has been eclipsed by vinyl wraps, which are replaced after each race due to the damage they endure. The process saves bundles in time and money.

And if the car is badly damaged or crashes, the vinyl wraps, at least, survive digitally as a testament to the art.

"Like all advertising, the visual look of these cars drives the marketing aspect of the sport," Nisbet said. "And the design often extends to the fire suits of the drivers and pit crews, to souvenirs and other merchandise." (NASCAR merchandise sales have nearly doubled in the past decade, now estimated at over \$2 billion annually.)

While race car drivers and their teams are image conscious and pay attention to detail, Nisbet said, the final decision rests in the hands of the sponsors. "Last year I probably designed 250 cars," he said. "Maybe 14 or 15 actually appeared on NASCAR vehicles. It's a tough business."

At the end of each NASCAR season, fans vote on the top 10 best and worst car designs on the circuit. "Unfortunately, I haven't made the best list," Nisbet said. "Fortunately, I haven't made the worst list either." ♦



Kyle Busch celebrates in victory lane after winning the NASCAR Nationwide Series Dollar General 300 auto race at Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord, N.C. Oct. 11, 2008. His car's visual scheme was created by MSUM grad Dan Nisbet as part of his senior art project.