



# Military and Motorsports: Martinsville and Charlotte

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- CATHERINE LASH / EXCERPT FROM THE EXAMINER



The NASCAR Sprint Cup Series Chase is in Virginia this week. The TUMS Fast Relief 500 is Sunday at the Martinsville Speedway.

Even though a driver's autograph is a premium for a race fan, this might up the ante when five Fort Bragg, North Carolina soldiers serve as dignitaries for Sunday's race.

Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Solomon from the XVIII Airborne Corps will wave the green flag as honorary starter. "Gentlemen, Start Your Engines" will be proclaimed by Sgt. Chad Willis from the 1st Sustainment Command, Sgt. Chase Noble and Spc. Matthew Lee McClintock, both from the 1-508th, 4th Brigade Combat Team and Pfc. Albert Boston from the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group.

TUMS is also providing 500 tickets to service members from Fort Bragg, Fort Lee and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base.

The military connection to today's #1 U.S. spectator sport dates back to World War II veterans, like motorsports car owner Walter M. "Bud" Moore and mechanic/car owner Ray Fox.



The Bank of America 500 at the Charlotte Motor Speedway

Photo credit: Catherine Lash at the Charlotte Motor Speedway.

The #1 fan base and hub centers around the Charlotte Motor Speedway, where the NASCAR and military connection couldn't be more alive.

## Infield Home

Since its inception, the Charlotte Motor Speedway has been a make-shift home for many a military veteran during race week festivities. After all, there are over 50,000 veterans in the Charlotte-Metro area today, and that number is climbing.

"The number of veterans is growing immensely," says Rick Cantwell, president of Odell International and founder of the nonprofit Military Family LifeStyle Charitable Foundation.

As Charlotte has honed itself as a financial center, veterans and defense contractors have moved in, says President of Odell International Rick Cantwell. He completed a 20-year career in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, serving as an engineer with the Special Operations Command out of Fort Bragg, NC.

Now, combine this with the latest research asserting that 37% of active service members and vets are NASCAR fans. With North Carolina's huge military footprint, this segment of the population is an important factor to the Charlotte racing scene.

### **Race Sponsors Show Military Support**

Bank of America's "Express Your Thanks" program centered around raising funds for the Wounded Warrior Project at its October 13th Charlotte 500 race and October 7th Chicago Marathon.

Thus far, BofA has raised over \$100,000 for the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP).

The campaign continues through Veterans Day in markets where the bank has sponsorships with the local NFL teams -- Charlotte, Boston, Dallas and Washington, D.C. In those cities, fans and customers can visit the banking centers to write notes of appreciation to the troops on mini-footballs. Every football signed is a \$1 for the WWP.

### **Inside The Fence At The Bank of America 500**

U.S. Air Force veteran Mike Kleban has enjoyed race activities at the Charlotte Motor Speedway since its construction. He'll tell you, the last three to four years have been the best of his life. That's when he started sponsoring race trips for veterans, wounded warriors, active duty and their family members.

Sgt. Casandra Gillinger with the 4th Brigade of Fort Stewart in Georgia and her husband, Joe, were among the 29+ military-affiliated NASCAR fans sponsored by Kleban.

You will never find another sport -- from the owners of cars to the drivers and fans -- that are more pro-military. Military veteran Joe Gillinger

Sgt. Gillinger is about to embark on her third deployment to the Middle East. The Charlotte race provided needed R & R time:

Being in the military, always being professional, coming here I can just be me, says Sgt. Casandra Gillinger of Fort Stewart.

Kleban has occupied the same spot on the infield for 30 years, now. Their suites consisted of trucks, tents and campers. The race night menu included chili. It was ribs the night before. Just as a rookie driver gets a yellow tape on the back bumper of his race car, the eight to ten new people at this infield home wore yellow tape.

Last race, Kleban says he didn't watch a single lap. For this Air Force vet, the race is a sidebar to his "thank you" missions.

Next race, the core group will be there -- on that same lot. A few will be missing, as they will be deployed. Sgt. Casandra Gillinger of Fort Stewart says she is a little nervous about it.

### **About Military Family Lifestyle Charitable Foundation**

Military Family Lifestyle Charitable Foundation (MFLCF) is dedicated to providing military service members and their families the dignity and support owed to them by a grateful nation. The military charity is often asked to step in and help with financial needs of families. Their "Honor The Warrior" Bike Ride and Hooters Golf Tournament raised funds to contribute to the construction of five homes for returning veterans in the Charlotte area. *Go to [www.mflcf.org](http://www.mflcf.org) or Military Family Lifestyle Charitable Foundation on Facebook to find out more about the MFLCF.*