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MARKETING

Bodice rippers meet burners of rubber

Harlequin publishes NASCAR romances

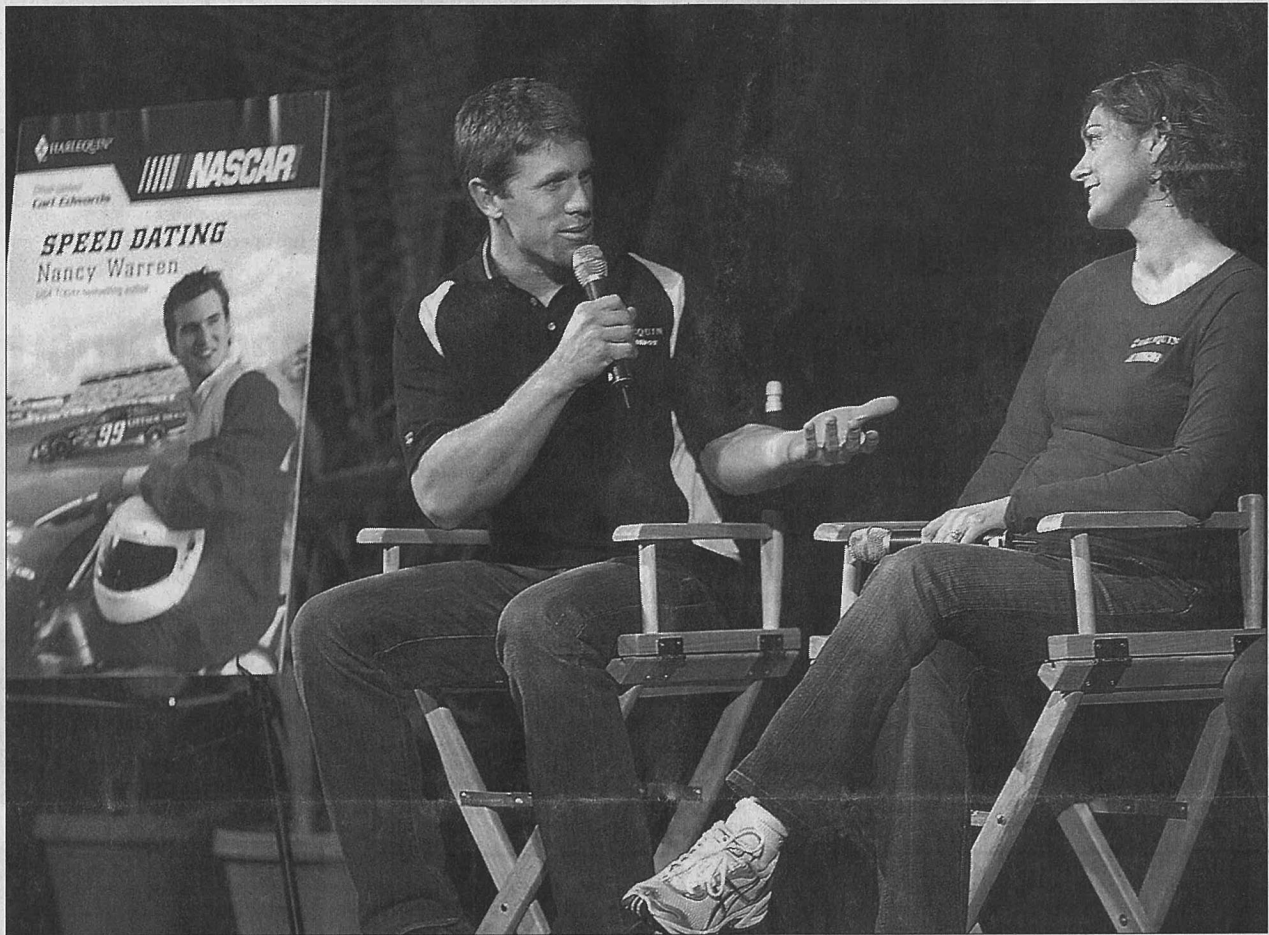
BY CHARLES McGRATH
DAYTONA BEACH, FLA.

After a year of courtship, Harlequin Enterprises Ltd., the leading publisher of romance novels, has entered into not a marriage, exactly, but what a Harlequin heroine might call a meaningful relationship with NASCAR, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing.

With NASCAR's approval, Harlequin published three NASCAR-themed books last year, including one in which the heroine, an ex-kindergarten teacher, falls in love with a NASCAR driver after first being run over by him and then piloting his enormous motor coach from race to race. The company, a division of Torstar Corp., is embarking on a 16-book series, all of which will have NASCAR settings; the first and last will feature cameo appearances by Carl Edwards, a real-life NASCAR driver who has consulted with the author, Nancy Warren, to help create a suitable fictional representation of himself.

Booksellers and other publishers are following the NASCAR-Harlequin hookup with interest, because romances are an important genre, accounting for about 55 per cent of all popular, mass-market fiction sold every year. Here at the Daytona International Speedway, two days before the Daytona 500, Mr. Edwards appeared at a speed-dating event organized by the publisher.

Some 50 men and women, roughly divided between Harlequin fans and diehards who belong to the NASCAR Members Club, sat



CHRIS LIVINGSTON/NEW YORK TIMES SERVICE

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across a big U-shape table and, waved on by a checkered flag, moved over every few minutes to talk to someone else. They ranged from twentysomethings to people who had possibly begun dating back in the dirt-track era.

But at least a couple of phone numbers were exchanged at Daytona and, after completing the circuit, a few participants repaired to a nearby lounge to chat some more. Some of them even took away a little booklet called "Ladies, Start Your Engines," with excerpts from the first three novels in the series.

Romance novels are changing these days. Old standbys, like romances set in the Regency period, continue to do well, as do stories set in Ireland and Scotland, but the fastest-growing category these days are paranormal romances, books about vampires and werewolves in which the path to true love often

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entails looking past a guy’s fangs to discover his inner self.

NASCAR drivers — heroic, adventurous but, to judge from the books anyway, in need of a down-to-earth woman they can count on — are more in the traditional mould. So for booksellers, much of the appeal of the new Harlequin series stems less from its novelty than from the power of the NASCAR brand, which commands tremendous loyalty among racing fans.

The new books will be sold in all the places Harlequins are already sold and will also be available at races and on NASCAR.com, which has already had considerable success selling licensed works of non-fiction and even a tailgater’s cookbook by Mario Batali.

“We’re excited about this program,” said Ann Binkley, a spokeswoman for the Borders chain of bookstores. “Books about NASCAR

do very well, and of course romances are extremely important for us, so it will be interesting to see if the crossover happens.”

Michelle Renaud, a public relations manager for Harlequin, said of the racing-and-romance match: “We know it’s working, for sure.”

Mark Dyer, vice-president of licensing for NASCAR, said: “Look at our stats. Forty per cent of our fans are women, and among younger fans it’s trending toward 50-50.” He added that according to NASCAR surveys, 72 per cent of female fans enjoy reading and are more likely than non-fans to purchase books.

“We like going places we’ve never been before,” Mr. Dyer said of NASCAR’s marketing, “and we think this could spring off into other media platforms. I’m not sure there isn’t a TV series in this.”

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