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FAST BALLS & FAST CARS

Robert Lipsyte changes gears with a book on racing

New York, N.Y. – Novelist Robert Lipsyte has also been a sports writer since 1957. From the days as a New York Times cub reporter covering the New York Mets, he intimately understood every major sport on the planet...except one.

That changed in 2001 with a few hot laps in the right seat of NASCAR veteran Mark Martin's race car. When he climbed out, seasoned motorsports writers noticed what they call "The Permagrin," a smile all first time race car passengers can't seem to wipe off. That was the beginning of a year-long adventure covering NASCAR, the nation's second most popular spectator sport.

Tragically, 2001 was also the year the sport was jolted by the Richter scale shock over the loss of its "Superman," Dale Earnhardt. The national reaction to the Intimidator's death surprised Lipsyte, a die hard stick and ball guy.

In the months that followed, he discovered the NASCAR community was not a bunch of hayseed yokels. Instead, he found a group of intelligent, dedicated professional athletes. He was surprised to find the people in the sport to be so candid and accessible. It was one of the best years in his career, Lipsyte says, "I'd never been with athletes who were so willing to explain what they did, from the drivers and owners to the mechanics who seemed ready to teach me how to make my own restrictor plates. It was NASCAR 101 from the best teachers."

Lipsyte's interest and understanding got kicked up a notch with a 16-lap run in the driver's seat of the Number 43 Richard Petty Dodge before the 2001 Coca Cola 600. On May 25, 2001, Lowe's Motor Speedway became the birthplace of "Yellow Flag, Lipsyte's latest novel. When the window net was lowered and the adrenaline rush hit him like a Muhammed Ali uppercut, Lipsyte recalls: "I felt incomplete. I knew what had to come next. I needed to write about it."

Since then, Lipsyte the novelist has done what he does best: get inside the minds of the characters in his books. He realized that racing was much more than hammering the gas, turning left and spitting death in the eye. It is a microcosm of life, with all its challenges, dangers and choices.

Former NASCAR Champion and broadcaster Darrell Waltrip set the stage for Yellow Flag with this insight into racing: "Do everything slowly, but think ahead, anticipate your moves, anticipate where you want to be. You must always know where you are. Always. You must always know exactly where you are."

Lipsyte thought it was great advice for living life *and* writing a book. It is.

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