

Lasting Legacies (Excellence - Chapter 7)

n/a

Ready:

"God, You have heard my vows; You have given a heritage to those who fear Your name. Add days to the king's life; may his years span many generations. May he sit enthroned before God forever; appoint faithful love and truth to guard him. Then I will continually sing of Your name, fulfilling my vows day by day." -Psalm 61:5-8

"The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it." -William James

Set

Depending on to whom you're talking at the time, conversations about the King will likely invoke numerous topics. When it comes to rock and roll, there's no doubt that immortalized crooner Elvis Presley fits the bill. Then you have the King of Pop, a nickname commonly given to iconic entertainer Michael Jackson.

History has also provided us with numerous real-life kings, including such notable biblical leaders as King David and King Solomon and such well-known English rulers as King James I (known for his commissioning of the King James Version of the Bible) and King Henry VIII (infamously known for his many wives).

But within the world of sports, only one image comes to mind when that nickname is uttered: NASCAR legend Richard Petty.

At six foot two and with the help of his trademark black cowboy hat and boots, Petty towers over most everyone in the garage and can seemingly be seen from half a mile away as he stops to sign autographs for anyone and everyone. His smile, shaded by that recognizable jet-black moustache, is welcoming and sincere. Even though his eyes are hidden by sunglasses, you still get the sense that they are locked in and fully engaged on each and every racing fan who simply wants to get close to greatness.

Robbie Loomis, vice president of Petty Enterprises, remembers the first time he met the King. At the time, he was working as an engineer with Petty's son, Kyle. (Loomis would eventually spend 11 years at Petty Enterprises before moving on to Hendrick Motor Sports as the crew chief for Jeff Gordon and then returning to the Pettys in 2006.)

"It was a little bit intimidating," Loomis recalls. "He looked like he was about 10 feet tall. But he's such a humble, unassuming and caring person. He really makes you feel comfortable in any setting."

Kyle Petty jokes that everyone in the shop — himself included — calls Richard the King as

well. It's become a matter of habit for most who simply respect the man for his years of excellence, although Richard Petty still seems a bit uncomfortable with the moniker.

"I don't pay any attention to it," Richard Petty says. "My name's Richard. I've done my thing. I tell them a lot of times, 'It's better to be known as that than some of the stuff people would really like to call you.' They're always calling somebody something."

Richard Petty might have had his fair share of enemies while he was dominating NASCAR throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s, but you wouldn't know that now. Any animosity his opponents once harbored has long since been replaced with praise for the King and his astounding accomplishments.

In a 35-year stock-car racing career that spanned five decades, Petty ran 1,184 races and claimed a record 200 wins, seven Daytona 500 victories and seven NASCAR Cup titles, a feat that only the late Dale Earnhardt Sr. managed to equal.

Richard Petty was preceded by his father, Lee Petty, who was one of the sport's original stars. In just 16 years, Lee Petty won 54 races and three NASCAR titles (an award that at that time was referred to as the Grand National Championship). Lee Petty also founded Petty Enterprises in 1949 — an organization that Richard and Kyle still run today.

NASCAR driver Jeff Green drove the #43 car for the Pettys from 2003 to 2005 and was honored to be part of the legendary team. "There's definitely a lot of heritage there," Green says. "Without Richard and Lee and the whole Petty organization, I don't think our sport would be the same. They laid the foundation. As our sport got bigger and better, it's changed a lot; but without those 200 victories and the 43 car and however many victories Lee had, I don't think it would be the same sport."

The legacy of excellence that was started by Lee Petty continued with Richard, whose philosophy on the subject is much like the way he raced and the way he continues to do business: straightforward and simple.

"When you get up in the morning, [you ask], Can I do a little better than I did yesterday?" he explains. "That's the challenge of not just staying the same. Can we make our business a little bit better? Can we help somebody today who we didn't help yesterday? It's just life."

Richard Petty has likewise passed on that desire to be the best to his son, Kyle, who has been racing in NASCAR's Cup series since 1979. More importantly, he has made a lasting impression on everyone involved in the sport.

"The names Petty and NASCAR go hand in hand," Nationwide Series driver Jason Keller says. "I don't think you can think of one without the other really. Richard Petty has done so much for the sport, and Kyle has followed in those footsteps. I've been fortunate enough to do some autograph sessions with Kyle, and it's just amazing how the fans relate to him and how personable he is with the fans. He's no different with the fans than he is with us drivers. I think that's what makes him so real — that he's so personable and you can really relate to him."

Tim Griffin, Motor Racing Outreach's lead Sprint Cup chaplain, has also been impressed by the Petty family and their contributions to stock-car racing. He often refers to them as "the class of NASCAR," not just because of their commitment to excellence on the track, but also because of how they serve the needs of so many away from the track.

“They’re ambassadors of NASCAR,” Griffin says. “That’s probably the best term for them. They’re the class, the standard, both on and off the track. Their desire to elevate the sport with class and dignity is really unparalleled. They’ve been at it for so long, and they’ve gained such a high level of professionalism and created so much respect from the community itself. You can’t help but respect that.”

Kyle Petty has benefited from seeing his father in action as far back as he can remember. He raced for Petty Enterprises from 1979 to 1984 and — following stints with the Wood Brothers and Felix Sabates’s Sabco Racing — has been back with the organization since 1997.

Whether it was hanging out in the garage area as an eight-year-old kid or riding in cars owned by his father, Kyle Petty has learned a great deal about excellence, including a personal definition that has taken years of first-hand experience and second-hand observation to craft.

“For me, excellence means always striving to do one’s best,” he says. “It’s pushing past your comfort zone sometimes — not necessarily meeting others’ expectations, but meeting God’s expectations.”

Kyle Petty has wisely taken the advice found in Job 8:8-9, which says, *“For ask the previous generation, and pay attention to what their fathers discovered, since we were [born only] yesterday and know nothing. Our days on earth are but a shadow.”*

To that end, Petty says he has gleaned many amazing nuggets of wisdom from watching his father in action.

“I’ve learned to always take the high road,” Kyle says. “I’ve learned to know that God will always serve your needs, even when you aren’t sure what your needs may be. He is there. He is with you and helping to guide you to make the right decisions in all aspects of your life. There have certainly been times when we have questioned things that have happened in our lives, but we know that God’s strength and power are at work.”

In essence, it is the Pettys’ faith that is at the crux of their pursuit of excellence. Richard Petty cites his wife, Lynda, as the key to his family’s commitment to God, while Kyle Petty mentions his Grandmothers Petty and Owens for laying the foundation of faith.

“I don’t think you can take your faith in God and put it in a pigeonhole,” Kyle says. “It’s there all the time, every day, everywhere you’re at. It’s not something that you put in your pocket, and you bring it out to show people and then put it back up. It’s not like a new watch. You need to have it all the time. It shows in not only what you do and how you do it, but how you lead your entire life and not just the time you get to stand in front of a TV camera for 32 seconds on a Sunday afternoon. That’s the time that people see you, and that’s the time you use for witnessing. That’s a good thing to be able to use.

“But at the same time, it’s just as important for that guy that you stop to talk to on the side of the road or someone you’re having dinner with and talking one on one,” he adds. “You may reach just as many people.”

As a testament to his strong faith, Kyle Petty has been a longtime supporter of Motor Racing Outreach, and Tim Griffin always enjoys his weekend visits with Petty — whether it be at Sunday morning chapel service, prerace prayer time or just a random encounter.

“Before the race, we have the privilege of going to each team as they’re on the starting grid before they climb into their car and go out to race,” Griffin says. “We pray with each driver. At Michigan one year, I remember Kyle said to me, ‘You know, the reason I come to chapel is that I just want to hear the Word. That’s what I’m here for. That’s what most interests me.’”

In 2000, the Petty family’s faith was tested profoundly. On April 5, Lee Petty passed away at the age of 86 after complications from surgery for a stomach aneurysm. While losing a father, grandfather and great-grandfather was difficult, nothing could prepare the Pettys for the tragedy of May 12. On that day, Kyle Petty’s oldest son, Adam, was taking practice laps for the Busch (now Nationwide) Series race at the New Hampshire International Speedway when the throttle in his car stuck and caused him to hit the wall head-on. He was killed instantly.

Adam Petty’s death sent shockwaves throughout NASCAR, not just because he was a fellow driver, but also because he had become a part of the family. His grandfather Richard Petty says that all of the veteran drivers had known him since he was a child and had adopted him as one of their own.

“When something like that happens, it doesn’t only happen to your family, it happens to this entire community,” Kyle Petty explains. “This is a community. That’s what you’ve got to keep in mind as well. When you talk about this sport, you’ve got to remember that we’re going to go over there, we’re all going to work on our cars, we’re all going to go out there on the racetrack and try to beat each other’s head in. But after all that’s over, we’ll come right back over here and, look, we’re neighbors with each other.”

Prior to his death, Adam Petty had shown great interest in camps that cater to kids with special physical needs and had expressed a desire to help build one near the family headquarters in Level Cross, North Carolina. So when he was tragically lost at the age of 19, Kyle and his wife, Pattie, decided to fulfill their son’s dream.

The result was Victory Junction Gang Camp, which focuses on children with chronic and life-threatening diseases. Richard Petty donated 70 acres of land, and this was followed by donations from many others, including fellow drivers Dale Jarrett, Bobby Labonte, Tony Stewart, Kevin Harvick, Michael Waltrip, Kurt Busch, Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson, just to name a few.

Built to look like key elements of a racetrack, the medically safe camp is a place where kids can enjoy simple pleasures such as swimming, bowling and fishing — things that their conditions would otherwise prevent them from doing. Kyle Petty and his family are constantly raising money to ensure that all campers can attend the camp at no cost.

Victory Junction Gang Camp has become one of the Pettys’ great passions. Some have even commented that helping hundreds of kids every year has overtaken the family’s desire to win races, although few (if any) would suggest that the competitive fire at Petty Enterprises has been extinguished. But there is a greater realization from Richard and Kyle that their legacy of excellence is wrapped up in much more than fortune and fame. Instead, they can turn to the Bible for examples of what such a legacy should look like. Proverbs 13:22, for instance, tells us that *“a good man leaves an inheritance to his grandchildren, but the sinner’s wealth is stored up for the righteous.”*

“To be excellent at what you do is a result of faith,” Kyle Petty explains. “Ultimately, we are

God's children and are here to serve as disciples of Christ. Always striving for excellence sometimes means foregoing the immediate benefits in exchange for long term."

That sobering thought also brings to mind one of David's prayers found in Psalm 61:5-8:

God, You have heard my vows; You have given a heritage to those who fear Your name. Add days to the king's life; may his years span many generations. May he sit enthroned before God forever; appoint faithful love and truth to guard him. Then I will continually sing of Your name, fulfilling my vows day by day.

While Richard Petty is already experiencing some of this passage's promise, he rarely stops to think about the legacy of excellence through a lifetime of serving and integrity that he is actively creating for his family and the NASCAR community.

"I haven't really ever gone there," Richard says. "We're doing our thing in our time under our circumstances. Hopefully, you leave a good taste in everybody's mouth, and they remember the good. If something happened to us right now and we're not here anymore, we would hope that you would forget about the racing part and go to the camp, the things that we have left that will enrich other people's lives later down the road where racing won't. Racing will be history and that's what we happened to do, but [the camp] is what we left for the rest of the world."

Kyle Petty wholeheartedly agrees with his father's wise words and has similar thoughts on the subject of legacy. "You're only here 60, 70, 80, 100 years — whatever it is," he says. "In the big picture, you're not here that long. I don't think you need to worry about your legacy. But how do you know that your legacy's not that some kid who has spina bifida or has hemophilia or has AIDS comes to camp and at some point in time 20 or 30 years from now, he has a son or a daughter and tells them about a camp he went to when he was young and then this child grows up and discovers a cure for cancer?"

Tim Griffin has seen the Pettys forge ahead in their quest for excellence and can't help but be inspired by their impeccable vision and unshakable resolve.

"You can't worry about your legacy," he concurs. "It can't be part of your goal. It's a by-product of doing the right thing today. The Pettys have grown to understand that it's an improper focus to have your mind fixed on what people are going to think about you. You've just got to do the right thing that's in front of you today."

As a follower of Christ, Kyle Petty is driven to excellence and understands its ultimate purpose in the grand scheme of life.

"That's simple," he says. "I want to please God. I want Him to know that I believe in Him as my Savior, and because of that, I will do all things to please Him. He has played a large part in my family's life. We are here because of Him. Sure, we question why some things have happened and always will. But it is because of faith that we can pick up and move forward, using those experiences to make us stronger followers of Christ and to strive for excellence in all that we do."

Go

1. If there were a poll taken among your family, friends and acquaintances, what do you think most people would say is the most unique thing about you? For what qualities would you like

to be remembered?

2. Kyle Petty says that excellence is “meeting God’s expectations.” What do you think are some of God’s expectations for your life? What part does excellence play in your legacy?

3. Read Job 8:8-9. How often do you ask for advice from others? As you strive for excellence, what can you gain by following the admonition found in Job 8:8-9? How has paying attention to “the previous generation” taught you a valuable lesson about athletics or life in general?

4. Read Proverbs 13:22. What are some examples of “an inheritance” that someone could leave to his or her children and grandchildren? What kind of inheritance or treasure (whether physical or spiritual) do you hope to leave those who follow in your footsteps?

5. Read Psalm 61:5-8. What does David suggest are some key elements to a godly legacy? What are some of the blessings that accompany that kind of lifestyle? How does having the wrong focus (worrying about what others think of you) hinder your legacy?

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Proverbs 13



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