



A Flyby

by Jay Pfeiffer

NASCAR fans could be forgiven for taking the weekly flyby for granted. After all, it happens at nearly every race. The spectacle of military aircraft zooming overhead is now just a familiar beat in the run-up to the big race.

But the flyby is a prized commodity in the sports world. Jay Howard, founder and president of JHE Production Group, the organization responsible for producing prerace ceremonies for 28-30 of 38 race weekends, says that every sporting event in America wants a flyby.

But given the shrinking military force and extended overseas deployments,

demand for aircraft far outstrips the supply.

"[The military] is really choosy," Howard says. "They only pick events that offer television exposure and lots of eyeballs. When the supply is low, you gotta go where the payoff is big."

That means that flybys are reserved solely for race days now.

"When I first started, we were doing flybys for qualifying, Nationwide, Truck and Cup," Ryan Baxter, vice president and general manager of JHE, says, "Now, they won't even look at a qualifying day — the only one that gets approved is the Gatorade Duels."

Despite the limited resources,

however, NASCAR still commands a disproportionately high number of flybys.

"An NFL team is going to get a flyby on Veterans Day or opening day. Very rarely both," Howard says.

So, why does the military favor NASCAR once a week?

"There has to be a patriotic reason for a flyby," he says. "NASCAR has built credibility in the fact that one way or another, they do honor the military. More so than any other sport. If you simply look at the activation the military does on-site — the way they invest in the sport — that makes a difference."



**Here's a timeline of how the 2012
Daytona 500 flyby came together:**

JULY 2011:

JHE submitted Form 2535, the official request for Military Aerial Support, to the Flight Standards District Office, the governing body for aviation activity for the Federal Aviation Administration. Then, once the FSDO (pronounced Fizz-Dough) office approved the application, JHE forwarded the request to the Pentagon for military clearance.

In this case, the Thunderbirds were going to be the featured aerial team. But it's not always that simple.

"Here's the catch: We get approval. But you don't get airplanes," Howard says. "You get permission to go look for airplanes.

"You get on the telephone and you start calling units anywhere until you find one. It's hard to find local bases these days. Homestead has a local military base, Phoenix, Darlington, Vegas — that list is short and getting shorter."

MONDAY, FEB. 20:

The Thunderbirds advance team, around eight people, arrived at Daytona Beach International Airport in a C-130 cargo plane. Also, one F-16 and the Thunderbirds crew chief arrived.

A scout surveyed the flight path and the facility, noting obstacles, landmarks. A communications team set up radios so the ground crew could communicate with the Thunderbirds on Sunday.

THURSDAY, FEB. 23:

The F-16s and the pilots flew from headquarters at Nellis Air Force Base, outside of Las Vegas to Daytona Beach, Fla.

In addition, a crew of around 45 maintenance workers, public affairs officers and support staff flew in on a C-17 cargo plane loaded with tools and equipment.

FRIDAY, FEB. 24:

The Thunderbirds did practice runs and held a media event.

SUNDAY, FEB. 26:

12:30 P.M.: Thunderbirds took off from Daytona International Airport and headed

east over the ocean. They entered a holding pattern near the New Smyrna Airport as they awaited word from their forward air controllers — Thunderbirds seven and eight — who were stationed on the roof of Daytona International Speedway.

1:09:30 P.M.: Thunderbirds began their inbound run. At 10 nautical miles from the track, they took their Spread Show formation and five nautical miles later, turned on the smoke to make it easier for fans to find them in the sky.

The pilots attempt to maintain a speed of 350 knots (approximately 402 mph) but can adjust as required.

1:10:00 P.M.: With the Presentation of Colors and Invocation, the preface ceremonies kicked off. The Thunderbirds were due over the track in 150 seconds. "We call it the most important 2:30 minutes of our day," Baxter says.

1:10:20 P.M.: Pastor Sonny Gallman of Central Baptist Church in Daytona Beach gave the invocation. This slot is one of the most unpredictable portions of the preface.

"That's a big wild card," Howard says. "One of the ways we can be wrong on the ground is out of our control. You can tell the preacher that he has 25 seconds but you can't stop him once he starts. There's no more helpless feeling than watching a preacher with his eyes closed."

But Gallman did his part and is off the stage in time.

1:11:00 P.M.: Pat Monahan, lead singer of the band Train, began the national anthem, which normally takes 1:30. But the length varies from singer to singer.

"About three lines into the anthem, you know the timing," Howard says. "There are 160 beats in the song. I made an interpolation graph from one minute to two minutes on five-second intervals so we have 13 different planning sheets that we round down — so if they're on a 1:20

anthem, you pull out that grid.

"The line that begins with 'And' is the halfway point. During that time of preface, a lot of people are running around, people yelling but that sheet allows us to keep our head in the game. It's like your wife pointing at the hymnal during church — we're on this verse."

During the anthem, Thunderbirds seven and eight were watching the same graph, talking directly to the leader of the squadron, giving him timing info and counting down to the end of the anthem.

1:12:35 P.M.: The flyby ToT or "Time over Target."

Aircraft are generally required to fly at least 1,000 feet higher than the tallest structure in the area. But the FAA granted the Thunderbirds a special waiver to come in at 500 feet over the top of the grandstand, and they hit the track approximately 760 feet off the ground.

"They were perfect," Baxter says. And given the rain, the timing was particularly fortuitous. Had it been scheduled a few minutes later, a low ceiling of clouds that moved in would have made the flyby much more difficult to stage.

What do the Thunderbirds get for their perfect ToT?

"We give them this coin," Howard says. "It says 'Sierra Hotel,' that's military jargon for '[expletive] hot.' 00:00 That was the target for the countdown.

"If they walk out with one of those, everyone had a good day. And we've given out a lot of those coins." **N**

