

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Nick Staropoli (left), Patrick Staropoli (centre), and best friend Anthony Sandora (right) after winning the PEAK Challenge.
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Eastbound and Down: Patrick Staropoli

BY PETER CACKETT

One of my heroes growing up in the 70s was the iconic Formula 1 racing driver, James Hunt. At the time, if you had asked me and my primary school friends what we would most like to do for a living, near the top of the list would have been a racing car driver. Since that time, I have always wondered what it takes to be successful in this field.

Although social media networks can be tiresome at times, wading through the seemingly endless humblebrags, they can occasionally be beneficial. A good friend Stacey alerted me via LinkedIn that she had spotted a chap called Patrick Staropoli, who is not only a retina specialist in the US but also a professional racing car driver. He is also the only doctor in history to have won a National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) race. Given my interest in racing, I reached out and was delighted to catch up with him virtually in late April.

Patrick was born and raised in Fort Lauderdale, South Florida. He was brought into the world with motor racing in his blood as not only were both his dad and grandfather car mechanics, but at the weekends they would also race cars.

"So, I kind of grew up around the shop, learning how to work on cars," he explained. "My dad and grandfather were both great racing drivers, and I always hoped I would be as good as they were." His parents took him to his first race when he was six months old and throughout his childhood he spent almost every Saturday night at the racetrack. However, disaster struck when Patrick was 11 years old and his father had a bad accident during a race.

"The gas pedal on my dad's car got stuck wide open. The throttle return spring malfunctioned and he hit the wall head-on at full speed." The accident was nearly fatal, with his dad airlifted out of the racetrack. It was Patrick's first introduction to medicine and he spent a lot of time visiting him in hospital. Fortunately, following a three-month stay, his dad made a full recovery.

Following the accident his dad raced a couple more times but then decided he was done. Patrick, on the other hand, was still very interested in racing. "Most sane people would probably quit and never go racing after something as scary as that happening, but I loved the sport and knew that I wanted to do it." Two years later, he competed in his first local go-kart race in Naples, Florida.

After racing go-karts for a year he moved into the entry level stock car division, the Pure Stocks. "[This] is basically where old cars from

the 70s or 80s are turned into race cars with roll cages in them. It's entry-level racing where you cut your teeth and learn how to drive." From there he went to Pro Trucks and then moved up to Super Late Models, which is a regional division of NASCAR where he has subsequently spent most of his time racing.

It was midway through his time as a medical student that he had the golden opportunity to enter the inaugural PEAK Stock Car Dream Challenge. This was a reality TV driver search competition where the grand prize was one race in the national NASCAR K&N Series (now ARCA Series). In his homemade entry video on YouTube [1], he described what racing means to him: "It's an addiction [...] It means making any sacrifice necessary in order to get to the racetrack [...] It's when deciding whether to go away to college is the hardest decision you ever had to make, because it will put you half a country away from your car and the thing you love doing most [...] Above everything else it's knowing you will keep chasing the dream until the day you die because you've been preparing for it since the day you were born." He ultimately won the challenge and finished fifth in his first start, "which surprised a lot of people."

Given his success, PEAK sponsored him for some additional races in the 2014 K&N Series with Bill McAnally Racing. As a result, he took a year off medical school to work with the race team and got his first NASCAR win on the national tour. "That was huge, it was a dream come true."

Given my knowledge of NASCAR only extended to the 1990 Tom Cruise movie, *Days of Thunder*, I wanted to know the difference between it and Formula 1. Patrick explained that Formula 1 is the epitome of motor sport where the race cars are engineered for maximum speed, whereas in NASCAR there are lots of rules to keep costs under control. Also, in terms of driving, in NASCAR anything goes within a reasonable limit, and there is a tolerance for contact where bumping and rubbing other drivers is part of the culture. "They say 'rubbing is racing' and stock car racing is a contact sport. For example, you can't blatantly turn someone into the wall, but if you gently bump them so they lose a little bit of grip in the rear tires and they slide up a lane on the track and you get by them, then that's applauded, as you made a smooth 'bump and run' move."

I was interested to know whether Patrick ever feels anxious when he races, as in my preparation for the interview I read the famous NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt Jr's autobiography *Racing to the*

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Patrick's grandfather (Nick Staropoli) racing in upstate New York in the 1950s.



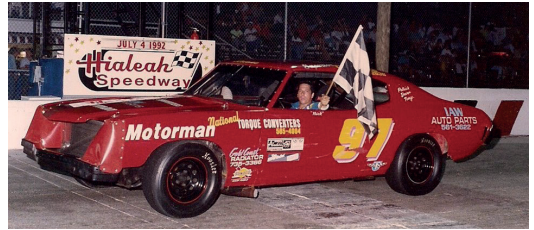
Victory Lane picture of Patrick Staropoli, father and grandfather at Hialeah Speedway in the Limited Late Model division. February 2001.



Patrick Staropoli in first fire suit, aged five years old.



First ever win in a go-kart in Naples, Florida.



Nick Staropoli (father) with a feature win at Hialeah Speedway in the street stock class. July 1992.

Finish, where he describes multiple accidents and concussions which significantly impacted on his career. Patrick explains that if you are in a car and are worried at all about an accident or an injury then you shouldn't be in it, as you won't be 100 percent and it can be riskier for you. He also has a lot of faith in the safety of the cars, which has improved significantly over the years.

His worst accident happened when he was 18 years old. "Our steering wheels clip on and off and are not permanently fixed. We were at a race and I was rushing to get back out for the end of practice. Someone popped the steering wheel on for me and I didn't check it. I went out and made about seven laps before the wheel came off right into my lap. I looked up and went head on into the wall. Fortunately, I had no injuries."

I asked Patrick what he enjoys most about racing and he explained, "when you first get into racing it's the thrill, where you're going so fast and feeling the G-forces. You're completely zoned in on the task that you're doing. Pretty much anything else that you might be worried about in life, be it school, work, family or whatever, you really don't have time to think about that when you're on the racetrack. Initially that's what I liked about it, the 100-percent focus that it takes to go out there and perform the task."

He continued, "when you become more experienced, the racing becomes more second nature and then you realise there is a lot more involved in being successful in the sport: the strategy in the race, how you manage your tyres, the feedback that you give your crew so that they can make the proper adjustments on your car. A lot of people think that it's a physical sport, that you just get in the car, crank on the wheel and you drive it. That's a large part of it, but there is a mental component as well to outsmart your competition. You have to outthink them before the race starts, so I'm really drawn to that challenge. I like beating people because I figured out how to make my car faster than theirs."

To be a good racing car driver, Patrick explained that you need to be cool under pressure and be able to process information quickly so that you don't make the wrong decision and end up crashing. You also have to be always thinking about the car. "There are opportunities in longer races to come in and make pitstops and adjustments. You can start a race with a car that can barely run 10th or 15th, but by the end if you make the right adjustments you could have a winning race car. Being able to strategise in your head while racing at 150–200mph is a quality of the best racing car drivers. We can change the shock absorbers, the springs, the anti-roll bars, the

geometry of how the tyres are connected to the car, which changes the load on the four tyres. The whole game in racing is trying to get all four tyres to work equally and in balance and that is going to be the fastest race car. That's the constant game you are playing whenever you go to the racetrack."

Although Patrick's passion in life is motor racing, something he knew he would always want to do, he ultimately chose a career in medicine. He told me that the reason for not pursuing racing as a career is because, like most professional sports, it gets very narrow the closer you get to the top of the mountain and is a difficult sport to make a living in.

Patrick's decision to study medicine was partly influenced by his dad's accident and the thought that he may want to be a doctor was in the back of his mind whilst he was growing up. However, at college in Harvard, Massachusetts, where Patrick was majoring in neurobiology, many of his classes overlapped with those of his roommates who were studying pre-med, and he began see himself doing medicine. He also realised that if he had pursued engineering which is what he had originally set out on, he would probably end up working on a professional race team but wouldn't necessarily be the driver, and didn't think he would be happy in that situation. So, Patrick went to medical school at the University of Miami and subsequently completed ophthalmology residency and a vitreoretinal fellowship at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute.

I was keen to know Patrick's motivation for pursuing ophthalmology. He was drawn to ophthalmology even before starting medical school, both from his work with the charity Unite for Sight, doing free vision screenings for under-served populations. He also studied in detail the wiring of the visual pathways whilst majoring in neurobiology. The icing on the cake was an inspiring 10-day ophthalmology rotation at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute whilst studying medicine next door at the University of Miami. "So, I had a ton of ophthalmology exposure early on and that's what got me interested."

I asked Patrick if there are any translatable skills from racing driving to being an ophthalmologist. He explained that his approach to racing is similar to what he does in medicine: "You come up with a problem when the car is going round the track. You identify a differential of what could be causing it and some adjustments for trying to fix it. You try to pick the adjustment that is going to help with your specific problem on the track, without having any negative side-effects in other areas. So, if you're struggling with the

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(Above) First win in a stock car (Pure Stock division) at Hialeah Speedway in Hialeah, Florida (Patrick's home track). November 2004.



(Left) Win in the Super Late Model division at Auburn Dale Speedway, Auburn Dale Florida. March 2012.

exit on a corner, you don't want to hurt the entry or the centre part. It's the same in medicine, you make a differential and you pick the treatment that helps someone the most with the least amount of side-effects." He believes that being a racing car driver has made him a better clinician and vice versa.

I asked Patrick the significance of the number 97 adorning his racing car. He informed me that this number was in fact the one that both his dad and grandad had also raced under. Before his grandad passed away, Patrick wanted to find about the meaning of the number 97 as he had lived his whole life by it, so he asked him, "Pop-pop, why did you pick 97? What's the significance behind it?" His grandfather replied, "Well I showed up to my first race, and they told me I needed to pick a number. They showed me the sheet and all the low ones were taken, so I just picked a high one."

Patrick has raced on many NASCAR tracks, including one time at the famous Daytona, "which was amazing and one of the most well-known racetracks in the world." However, his favourite track is where he won a NASCAR race, Irwindale in California. "I'm probably biased but it's a cool racetrack because I grew up watching races there and I always wanted to race there myself. When I finally had the chance to compete there, we ended up winning!"

Patrick is now in his first year out of training and seven months into his new job at the Retinal Consultants of Texas. He continues to race in the NASCAR Super Late Models regional division on a regular basis but now his schedule is more in control, he is hoping to race NASCAR again at a national level. In addition, since he started working in Texas, he has started a campaign called Driving to Fight Blindness, with the goal of raising awareness for vitreoretinal disease and funding for research initiatives to help prevent and treat blinding diseases.

The idea was pitched to him by Professor Dave Brown when he was recruited last year. He described what happened: "The first time I met Dave he jokingly said, "I don't know your name so I'm just going to call you Ricky Bobby. I want you to come to Texas and you're going to fix retinas and drive a Retina Consultants of Texas race car." Patrick is now delighted to see it come to fruition and sees it as a cool platform for local outreach projects while fundraising at the same time. He has combined racing and medicine in the past, driving a pink racing car for the Drive Pink campaign, raising money for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

I asked Patrick, if he could go back to his 17-year-old self and offer some advice, what would he say. He replied, "Continue to be



Pre-race photo from the NASCAR ARCA Series at Daytona International Speedway. February 2015.

passionate about the things that you dream about. Racing was a challenge. Before I got to enter the Dream Challenge competition, I thought I would just be racing on regional level, which was fine. But I always had aspirations of something more. Life is challenging and you get lots of obstacles, but don't give up and keep going in the direction that your heart wants you to go. You will get lucky sometimes and fortunately I got very lucky. Even where I am at right now, getting to do the two things that I love doing, I could never have imagined that."

I asked him which song would headline the Spotify playlist of his life. I suggested a few, including *Life in the Fast Lane* by The Eagles, *Fast Car* by Tracey Chapman, or *Start Me Up* by The Rolling Stones. However, for Patrick it had to be *East Bound and Down* by Jerry Reed, a popular song on the NASCAR circuit and made famous in the 1976 movie, *Smokey and the Bandit*, starring Burt Reynolds.

For the meaning of life, as a kid, Patrick's answer would have been one word: racing. Now however he believes that it is about taking advantage of the relatively short blip of time we spend on this earth to share memorable experiences with the people we love and care about.

As we brought our discussion to a close, I recalled another Jerry Reed song, *Texas Bound and Flyin'*, as it very accurately describes Patrick's career trajectory. As I sat down afterwards on the sofa to listen to the song, I smiled at the lyrics: "Well, if I can keep it on the ground, when I put that hammer down, then I'll be Texas bound and a flyin'." And I reflected on how he has achieved what many of us aspire to, which is the opportunity to pursue and combine our passions in life.

References

1. https://youtu.be/T9WLR_pKu_0?si=Bdfx4f0p9evkARJb

INTERVIEWER



Peter Cackett,

Medical Retina Consultant, Princess Alexandra Eye Pavilion, Edinburgh, UK.

pdcackett@hotmail.com