

A Coach for NASCAR Royalty

Richard & Lynda Petty



by Sharleen Nelson

Every king needs his castle, and for the King of NASCAR, who has spent nearly 50 years of his life behind the wheel of a racecar, it was only natural that Richard Petty's castle at the racetrack would be a Marathon coach. In a 2001 interview for *Esquire* magazine, Richard said he believes the kind of vehicle a person chooses often reflects that person's personality. He said, "You see somebody driving a Volkswagen, their personality is for the Volkswagen. You see somebody driving a Cadillac, they've got a Cadillac personality. Everybody expresses their self in their automobile." Not surprisingly, in the 2006 Pixar animated film, "Cars," Richard provided the voice for his char-

acter, "The King," a Road Runner Superbird; his wife Lynda's character was "Mrs. The King," a station wagon.

Legions of fans may see them as royalty, but even the luxury Marathon coach that Richard and Lynda had a hand in custom designing is as warm, welcoming, and refreshingly authentic as the Pettys themselves. "We didn't want anything fancy and showy," said Lynda. "People come to our motorhome and they don't have to take their shoes off at the door. They can come in and sit down and enjoy it. They don't mind sitting on the sofa—it's not white and fancy looking. I think it reflects who we are, and we like that aspect of it."

The Pettys worked closely with Marathon Interior Designer Gail Curtis to achieve the look and feel they were after. "The coach is more homey than luxurious; it's comfortable," said Gail. "They are very down-to-earth people, so I wanted to do something that was easy to live in." Wood flooring, an upholstered sofa, leather chairs, and warm, earth tones create a relaxed and unassuming atmosphere, as well as a few personal, yet pragmatic touches such as a custom hat rack in the entry designed specifically for The King's trademark wide-brimmed hat. "I wear the cowboy hat all the time," Richard said. "It's the first thing I take off when I go in and the first thing I put on when I leave, and most of the time there's no place to lay it, and if you do lay it down, somebody's gonna sit on the thing or knock it off. So Marathon came up with a little hat rack by the door as you come in. It's those little extra touches that make it personal."

Still, as down-to-earth as their coach may be, it's a step above the vehicles they had when Richard began his professional racing career in 1958. At that time, wives, families, and fans alike parked in the infield. Lynda fed the family and the pit crew out of the trunk of their Chrysler sedan, and their children—three girls and a boy—played with the other drivers' kids. Several years later, they bought a station wagon. "When we got the station wagon I thought it was the most wonderful car I'd ever owned because I could get everybody in it, plus all my food and stuff," Lynda said. For Richard, what began with a bunch of guys racing each other on a dirt track has evolved into today's mammoth corporate-sponsored events. "We started way back with a plain old stock car," he said. "Everything was just more open; didn't have near the rules they have now; didn't have near the people. There used to be only 20 or 30 cars. If somebody needed something that somebody else had, they just borrowed it. You competed on a racetrack, but you survived off the racetrack."

The Pettys eventually graduated to a van in the '70s, and in the '90s they leased their first

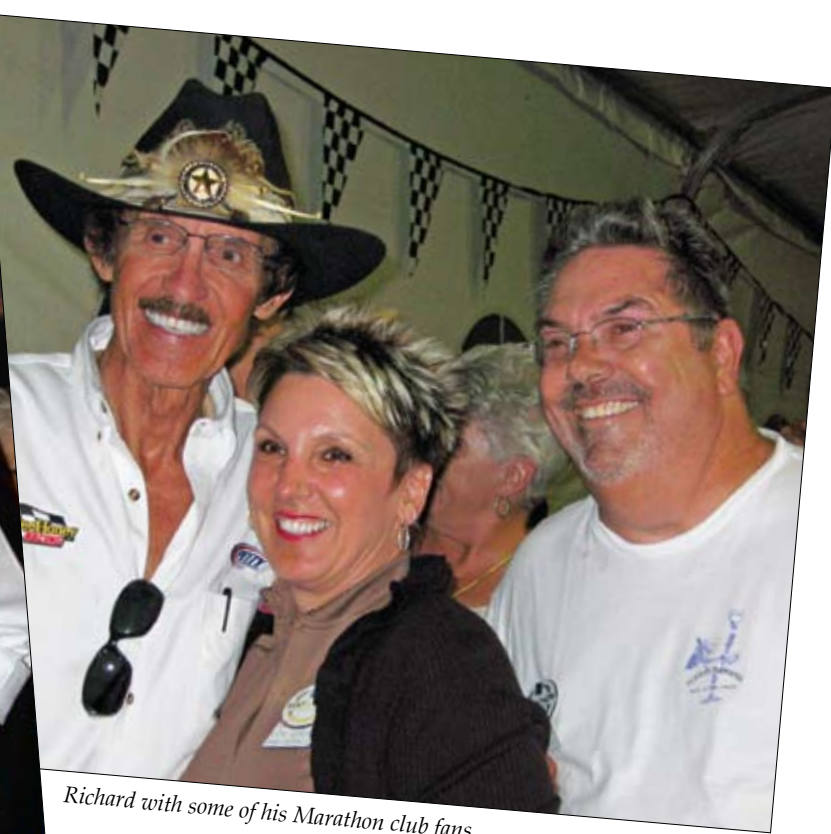
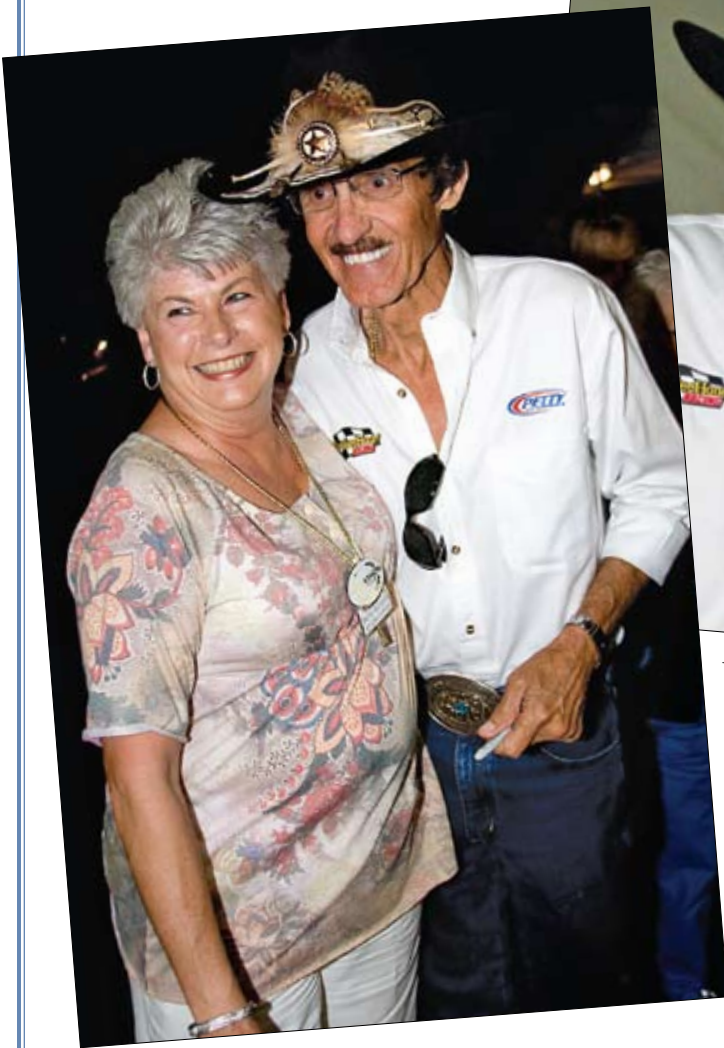


Photo courtesy of Tom Copeland.

motorcoach. Little did they know then that they were part of a burgeoning RV trend, in which thousands of fans now routinely pack the infield and camping areas that surround the speedways, and which also extends to NASCAR drivers and owners. And with nearly every driver at the track owning a motorcoach, the community dynamic has also changed dramatically. "When we parked in the infield in the car we shared our food. Our kids played together while the guys were out there racing, and we were a little

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bit more close-knit," said Lynda. "Now today, the drivers and their wives come and get in the motorhome. They don't get out and socialize with each other as much, so it kind of isolates you." Lynda concedes that she wouldn't wish what she went through on anyone. "We didn't know anything different. It would be hard now to park in the infield and work out of the trunk of a car because we've been spoiled with our motorcoaches," she said. "It changed our whole way of going to the race and what we do at the race. The convenience of just having your own private place to sit; your own private restroom



Richard with some of his Marathon club fans.

and things like that, I mean, I don't know if you can even put a price on that."

Although the sport has become more streamlined and business oriented than it used to be, Richard recognizes that the seed they planted 60 years ago in NASCAR has blossomed into what it is today, and it's not such a bad thing. "We remember the good times, we remember the fun times; we don't remember how hard it was," he said. "Ten years from now we'll look back and say, 'look at the good old days.'"

Richard is immensely grateful to have been part of something that has rewarded him so momentarily. During his 50-year career he has chalked up a phenomenal 200 victories, including 7 NASCAR Points Championships and 7 Daytona 500 wins, not to mention scores of accolades, including inaugural inductee into the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame, the Inter-

national Motorsports Hall of Fame, and Motorsports Hall of Fame of America. He was named one of NASCAR's 50 Greatest Drivers and, after retiring, he received the country's highest citizen's award, the Medal of Freedom.

The honors notwithstanding, it's the fans that have made Richard "The King," and it is to them that he attributes his long and successful career. Wearing his trademark cowboy hat and dark shades, Richard has always been accessible to his fans, taking time to greet and sign autographs, though he's had to scale back somewhat as the crowds have grown increasingly larger.

"We still figure though that without the fans there wouldn't be a Richard Petty and there wouldn't be any racing. They pay the bills," he said. "The reason I've got a motorcoach and could afford to get one is because the fans in the grandstand work with the racetrack; they buy tickets. They buy the products we're selling, and then the money trickles down to Petty Enterprises and Richard Petty so we can go racing and also enjoy ourselves in a motorcoach."

To be sure, the Pettys do enjoy their new Marathon coach. In fact, Richard said they spend more time in it than they do at their home in Level Cross, North Carolina. Richard spends about 3 days a week in the coach conducting



business, and then he and Lynda stay in it during races over the course of about 30 weekends. "It's a real convenience," Richard said. "You don't have to worry about traffic going in to the racetrack or fighting the traffic coming out. You just stay there. When the traffic thins out and you need to go to town or make an appearance somewhere, you can do that kind of deal."

They're also thrilled with the added space that a quad slide-out coach provides, particularly with 11 grandchildren running in and out—one of the Pettys requests was that the coach be made "grandkid proof." In addition to an abundance of space, their coach has many other custom features, including a rear bath, a ceiling fan and sculptured carpet in the bedroom, an area rug in the salon, a wine bottle and glass rack, and a hookup to the NASCAR scoring system, the board in the pit area that the crew chiefs work off of that shows how many laps have been run, how fast drivers are running, and what position they're in.

"Sometimes when I go inside to the race, Lynda stays on the bus where she can see everything that goes on," said Richard. "We've got the computers and all that stuff. We can do e-mail; we can do everything we can do at home."

Richard and Lynda are no strangers to RVs—they've owned four, but this time when they decided to purchase a new coach, they toured some of the other coaches at the track before making a final decision. "We got to looking around at what everybody had," Richard said. "We liked the arrangement and we felt that Marathon had the most things that we liked, and the way the people were so nice talking about servicing them and looking after them, and so that is why we decided to go with Marathon. I guess we wanted the best."

The Pettys flew out to Marathon's Oregon headquarters and spent a day with the engineers and designers fashioning their custom coach. "We really enjoyed working with Marathon," said Lynda. "Gail was so good. I picked out things and I said, 'I like this color, I like that color,' and then she helped me put it all together."



While Lynda was in interior design pouring over fabric swatches, Richard was meeting with the exterior paint designer. "My wife did the inside and she let me paint the bird on the outside," Richard said laughing.

Richard presented his eagle design idea to Marathon Designer Linda Aldridge, who worked with him to conceptualize it and to produce a computer rendering. "I'd come back and she'd have something and I'd say, 'yeah, that's a good start, but let's do this.' And we did that all day long," he said. "I kept moving this part around, and that color around, and the whole deal, but I think at the end of the day we were both really satisfied." For Linda, the opportunity to work with the Pettys was one of the most memorable and enjoyable events of her career. "I was so excited when their coach came out of paint because we were able to give them an exterior that they had designed."

Lynda was impressed by Marathon's ability to achieve their goals in just one day, versus having to make multiple trips back at different stages of production as they had experienced with other coach manufacturers. "We came out one time and we were there all day," she said. "After we were finished, I said, 'When will we come back and see it?' They said, 'You won't. When you see it, it will be being delivered to you.'"

The Pettys saw their custom coach for the first time when it was delivered to them at Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama.

"It was beyond my expectations," Richard said. "The paint job is just unreal; the way they blended all the colors. It looks like a show car. We got a lot of positive reactions at the race-track. They (the Marathon paint team) should be proud of it because I know we're proud of it."

Lynda was also pleased. "It turned out absolutely beautiful. It is just phenomenal, and we love it," she said.

Although Richard is retired from racing, the Pettys aren't showing any sign of slowing down. They keep busy running Petty Enterprises, which fields cars for their son Kyle and Bobby Labonte, overseeing the Richard Petty Museum, which has on display Richard's racing memorabilia as well as Lynda's extensive doll collection, making personal appearances, and giving generously of their time to Victory Junction Gang Camp.

And although the coach is currently used mostly for business and as a home away from home when they're at the track, Richard and Lynda don't seem to mind, because whether it's a secluded castle on a hilltop, a farm in Level Cross, North Carolina, or a coach fit for a king (or queen), any spot can be a home...as long as there's a place where a fella can hang his hat. •



Opened in 2004 by NASCAR champion Kyle Petty and his wife Pattie, in honor of their late son Adam, Victory Junction Gang Camp, located in Randleman, North Carolina, provides life-changing camping experiences to children ages 6 to 16 with chronic medical conditions or serious illnesses such as spina bifida, cancer, heart disease, and autism. Decorated with a racing theme, the year-round venue provides a fun, exciting, and empowering camp experience in a safe and medically sound environment. The camp is located on 84 acres generously donated by NASCAR legend Richard Petty and his wife Lynda.

Before Adam Petty died in 2000, he had traveled to a similar camp for special needs children in Florida. "He thought it was great that all those kids were playing around in there that didn't have a regular camp to go to, and they were able to take care of them there," Richard said. "Adam

came back and he was thinking about it, talking about it, and then we lost him." Wanting to do something for Adam, the family went to the NASCAR community. "We went to NASCAR, to the NASCAR drivers, to the tracks, to the sponsors, and then we went to the fans," said Richard. "Everybody said, 'what can we do?'"

Within a couple of years the camp was up and running, and according to Richard, the racing community has been behind it 100% ever since. All of the drivers have made appearances and donated to the camp, as have sponsors and fans. The North Carolina camp has been such a success that another camp, located in Kansas, is expected to break ground in the summer of 2009.

"It has been phenomenal that we've had so much interest, just because of our racing connections," Richard said. "The deal is, no matter where these kids come from, it costs them nothing. We transport them here, we take care of them; it costs the parents nothing. It's 100% charity. So no matter how rich the kids are, who they are, or what their circumstances, we get them here and give them a good time for a week."

For more information about this wonderful camp, visit www.victoryjunction.org. •