

## Autographs Nothing New For Burton But Location Is Different

It's the time of year that Ward Burton is accustomed to getting his autograph hand limbered up, what with Speed Weeks firing up in just a matter of days.

And Monday morning he was cranking out autographs, but the setting was just a bit different from his familiar haunts.

Wearing a light-colored turtleneck and a tweed sport coat and seated alongside best-selling author Sharyn McCrumb, Burton faced a line of autograph seekers that snaked through Cantos Booksellers in Roanoke, Va.

For just over two hours the pair penned their names on McCrumb's new novel, "St. Dale," and generally had a good time.

But why was Burton at a bookstore a day shy of the first of February instead of preparing for the Daytona 500?

The answer is twofold: he doesn't have a NASCAR NEXTEL Cup ride for 2005 and he's a big fan of McCrumb's latest novel that traces the pilgrimage of a group of Dale Earnhardt fans as they visit tracks in the Southeast in memory of their fallen hero.

"Sharyn is really passionate and has done a great job with St. Dale that's going to let a lot of people in motorsports have their names remembered for generations to come," Burton said of McCrumb's 18th novel. Several of her first 17 have landed on the New York Times' bestseller list and built her a fan base as large and loyal as Burton's.

"She's very meticulous. She is very organized. She's had to do a lot of factual work to make sure she got it right in this book. She got in touch with a lot of people in the sport to make sure she got it right. And she got it right."

McCrumb became a Ward fan during the two years she researched St. Dale. She remembers the precise moment, as a matter of fact. It was the Sunday afternoon she became teary-eyed watching his car flip several times at Talladega. And even though she's recognized world-wide as an author, she was nervous as a teenage school girl the first time she met Burton. Since then the two have bonded, connecting on several levels, including a mutual passion for racing and the out-of-doors. In fact, McCrumb is donating \$1 for each copy of "St. Dale" that is sold to Burton's wildlife foundation.

"Sharyn and I started meeting a few months ago. She's really a sweet lady," said Burton. "We've got some pretty neat things down the road that we're going to announce we're going to do together."

Burton admits he's enjoyed the last few months without a racing job. "Life has slowed down a bit for me. I'm able to see the trees for the forest where before it was just a blur of forest. I'm able to be involved with some things I'm already passionate about and am able to spend some time with my children."

But he also admits he misses parts of the sport and that he has one over-riding reason to return to NASCAR NEXTEL Cup racing. Obviously, with the Daytona 500 on the near horizon, all the good rides are taken and he won't settle for anything less than a good, competitive ride. But he believes a phone call will come from one of those solid teams before the season is too far gone.

"I guess anytime you do something as long as I've been involved with auto racing, you'd like to be able to, when the time comes, to be able to go down a different road and end it in a way you'd like for it to. That didn't actually happen for me. But life will go on and we'll see what happens in the future."

Martinsville Speedway, website, Feb. 4, 2005