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## **SPORTS OF THE TIMES; A River Helps Harvick Flow**

By **GEORGE VECSEY**

There really is a river. It flows through the hills of Davidson County in North Carolina. When Kevin Harvick talks about his maturity -- his relative maturity -- that maybe led to the epic victory at Daytona on Sunday, he dates it back to the river.

Once a bit of an annoyance to other drivers, Harvick makes the experience at the river sound life-changing, almost biblical, but in reality it was a walk and a talk with his boss, Richard Childress.

The river is the Yadkin. People don't hear much about the Yadkin outside North Carolina, but Harvick assures the world that it flows pleasantly behind the Childress estate near Clemmons, N.C.

After beating the popular Mark Martin by two-hundredths of a second on Sunday, when officials did not stop the race despite crashes behind the leaders, Harvick was making a publicity foray yesterday into that bastion of auto racing, Manhattan. He was talking about how his boss had stuck by him when he was acting out.

Harvick, now 31, had moved up suddenly when his stablemate, Dale Earnhardt, was killed on the last lap of the Daytona 500 in 2001. Childress turned over the steering wheel, if not Earnhardt's legendary and mothballed No. 3, to Harvick.

"Imagine what it would be like for a basketball player to replace No. 23, Michael Jordan," Childress explained last night, keeping the comparison within the North Carolina family.

"There was a lot of pressure on him right away," added Childress, 61, a high-school dropout with more success and savvy than some M.B.A.s one could mention. A former driver, Childress made his best maneuver in getting off the track and becoming an owner, eventually teaming up with Earnhardt. Among his acquired tastes are big-game hunting in Africa, raising Angus cattle alongside the Yadkin, and supervising his vineyard in Lexington, N.C., a region not traditionally known for fine wine.

"I never had a sip of wine in my life until 2001," Harvick said yesterday. "I was in Richard's airplane leaving Las Vegas and he showed me a bottle from 1948 that he said was worth \$15,000. We won the next week, and he opened it up."

Harvick told this story with the reverential tone and lowered eyes of a man who had known his second glass of wine might never compare to his first.

What kind of wine was it?

"Red," Harvick said.

Actually, Childress clarified last night, it was a 1945 Rothschild Bordeaux that did cost around \$15,000. He liked 1945, he said, because he was born that year.

After that \$15,000 sip, Harvick went out and dropped penny nails in his own path. In 2001, he shouldered a teammate aside to win at Bristol. Not long after that, he invaded Chad Little's garage at Darlington, where he was manhandled.

In 2002, he was fined \$15,000 and put on probation after an argument with Greg Biffle in March, and then in April he bumped Coy Gibbs in a truck race in Martinsville and was fined \$50,000 and suspended for a week, the first driver ever to be parked for rough driving.

At that point, Childress called Harvick in for a chat in his garden, with barbecue pit and all, alongside the Yadkin. Harvick worried he might be dropped from the team, but Childress just wanted to know what was on his mind.

"Kevin is the most intense competitor I've ever met, just as much as Dale," Childress said. "He confided in me, told me things about himself, and I told him some things about myself."

"Richard has been a driver," Harvick said yesterday. "He understands emotion. He is very patient." Harvick has also said, "He pulled me up and he kept me from drowning" and, mixing metaphors, he has talked about "a fork in the road."

For all that, in 2003, Harvick followed Rickey Rudd into the pit area and pounded on Rudd's car and was fined \$35,000. In 2004, he was fined \$25,000 after a dispute with Matt Kenseth at Pocono. In 2005, he and Joe Nemechek got into it in Concord, N.C., and had to be separated. "That wasn't my fault out there," Nemechek was quoted as saying, "He was just being an idiot, just being Kevin." Last year there was a feud with Kurt Busch, whom Harvick called "a whiner."

That's a lot of confrontations, but Harvick said, "As you get older, you should be more mature." In fact, last Friday, Harvick told Childress, "Right now we're a 10th- or 15th-place team." The boss replied, "Well, I think you can win," which he did.

Yesterday, Harvick said he won because of favorable aerodynamics, saying: "You get your car aligned right, you get a side draft. He did that to me, and I did that to him, and I got home first."

Childress predicted: "He's probably going to get in more trouble. He'll tell people what's on his mind."

In victory, Harvick has represented his sport like a champion, just as Childress told him to do, down by the river.

*E-mail: geovec@nytimes.com*