

ONLINE:
Cross country season ends at NCAA Southeast Regionals

ONLINE:
Volleyball ends season with Senior Day win

SPORTS

ALEX SIMON | Sports Director
L.D. Russell, senior lecturer of religious studies, cheers on the Elon University women's basketball team Nov. 14.

NASCAR, RELIGION, TV STAR

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It's not very common for an Elon University professor to be interviewed for a TV series.

But L.D. Russell, senior lecturer of religious studies, thinks he knows how the producers of the new TV documentary series, "Religion of Sports," found him.

"My guess is they Googled 'NASCAR religion,'" Russell said. "And, since I am the one who wrote the book on it, my name is one of the first that pops up."

Russell was interviewed for the episode "God in the Machine," the first of six episodes in the series that airs at 8 p.m. Tuesdays on the Audience Network, a channel in the DirecTV and AT&T U-verse packages.

Russell's interest in NASCAR roots back to his youth, when his grandfather took him to his first race at a "tiny little track in Harris, North Carolina."

"I just remember how loud the race was, how fast it was and how crazy it all seemed," Russell said. "I remember my grandfather being so enraptured by what was happening — he was not an emotional man at all, but he was very much focused on what was happening. And the more beer he drank, the more expressive he became. It was a good time."

Russell had a similar moment with his faith, saying he had a "huge religious experience" when he was 16. But after Russell went to college and the seminary, he moved away

from both racing and religion, becoming a self-proclaimed hippie.

It wasn't until Russell was in his mid-30s that he got back into both religion and NASCAR, getting a master's degree in religion at Wake Forest University and becoming a teacher at Elon in 1993.

After 10 years, Russell got a call from Henry Carrigan, a friend Russell met at seminary school but, like Russell, also didn't go into the ministry. Carrigan was working as an editor at Continuum Press, a publishing company.

"He calls me and says, 'Larry, we want you to write a book for us,'" Russell said. "He's a dear friend of mine, but he's a kisser and always has been. I say, 'Yeah, right, Henry. About what?'"

"And he says, 'About God and NASCAR.' And I thought about it for a moment, and I said, 'Okay, I can write that book.' And I did. It took years, but I wrote the book."

Russell's book, "Godspeed: Racing Is My Religion" was published in 2007, a work that blended two of his life's passions and ended

up being different than expected.

"The book did not turn out to be what I thought it was going to be," Russell said. "I knew how to get started, but it turned out to be a story of a journey, where I'm looking for, 'Why am I even interested in NASCAR, particularly given my religious leaning?' The further along that journey I went, the more I learned — not just about NASCAR and religion, but about myself."

Russell said the book-writing process was "revelatory" for him. And, when "Religion of Sports" executive producer Gotham Chopra — son of Deepak Chopra, a prominent figure in the medical field — read Russell's book, he emailed Russell and said he was "inspired by it."

"The description sounded so much like the approach I was taking in 'Godspeed' and how religion manifests itself in culture," Russell said. "Religion isn't always religious, in a traditional religious sense. Can sports be a kind of religion for people, or does it at least have the characteristics — or some of, if not many — of the characteristics of religion?"

Russell met with Chopra and the production crew at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, with the interview focusing on what makes a racing automobile a religious symbol or icon.

And no matter what the producers choose to use for the television show, Russell says just being asked to be a part of the show is a "red-letter day in a career."

"It immediately brought forth in me... a gratitude — a deep gratitude to everyone who has helped me along the way," Russell said. "That is the kind of email, the kinds of phone call that we want to get, that some people dream of getting, that all of those years where I could not get to a position where I could do what I needed to do, where I could not really live my passion."

"I was afraid that that day would never come, and that is a terrible feeling, to feel like your life is never going to be fulfilled in a sense, and it took a while for this to sink in but it was a moment of confirmation — that I am doing what I should be doing, and I am doing it well."

THE PHOENIX FOCUS

WOMEN'S XC

RESULTS



NCAA Southeast Regional Championships
Nov. 11
11th



MEN'S BASKETBALL

RESULTS & SCHEDULE



Nov. 11
101-68



Nov. 14
95-100



Away

Nov. 17
7 p.m.



MEN'S XC

RESULTS



NCAA Southeast Regional Championships
Nov. 11
27th



FOOTBALL

RESULTS



Nov. 12
14-44



Away

Nov. 19
1:30 p.m.



WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

RESULTS & SCHEDULE



Nov. 11
56-71



Nov. 14
66-54



Away

Nov. 18
4:30 p.m.



Away

Nov. 19
TBD



Home

Nov. 22
7 p.m.

