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Nascar Demands Country Over Rock as Daytona Returns to Roots

By Gene Laverty



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Feb. 15 (Bloomberg) -- Nascar is counting on more fender-banging and the potential resurgence of its most-popular driver to woo back its fan base as this weekend's Daytona 500 starts the season.

The stock-car racing circuit, which says it's the second-most watched sport in the U.S. after professional football, is changing its tactics after television ratings slipped and plans to expand to New York and Seattle sputtered.

Drivers are being encouraged to express their emotions -- positive or otherwise -- without fear of being fined. They'll be in cars designed for the side-by-side racing that results in crowd-pleasing scrapes leaving tire marks on cars. Nascar even has country singer Trisha Yearwood performing the Star-Spangled Banner at the 50th running of the race after pop stars Mariah Carey and Fergie were among the performers the past five years.

"We need to get back to our roots," said H.A. "Humpy" Wheeler, president of Speedway Motorsports Inc., which promotes about a third of Nascar's Sprint Cup events. "They need to make it work and get us back to racing where we're putting black doughnuts on the side of the cars and not making felony offenses out of it."

Probation

Nascar Chief Executive Officer Brian France's more lenient policy toward drivers was tested during practice for the Feb. 17 race. Kurt Busch repeatedly slammed into the car of Tony Stewart on pit road after Stewart bumped him into a spin on the track. A similar incident last season resulted in a \$100,000 fine to Busch and the loss of 100 championship points.

This year's penalty: Both drivers were put on probation for six races.

Nascar is taking the right approach by focusing on its traditionally southern base as a slowing U.S. economy threatens corporate sponsorships, according to David Carter, founder of the Sports Business Group, a sports-marketing consulting company in Los Angeles. Since sponsorship revenue is unlikely to increase during a slowdown, it makes sense for Nascar to put a renewed emphasis on its fans, he said.

"In Nascar and throughout sports you've got to protect your core relationships," Carter said. "Now is not the time to expect a lot of growth."

The France family company, International Speedway Corp., shelved plans to add tracks in the Seattle and New York markets in the past two years citing local opposition.

Bulldozers

The Daytona 500 has been Nascar's marquee event since founder William France Sr., Brian France's grandfather, carved a 2.5-mile (4.02-kilometer) oval out of land in the east coast Florida town of Daytona Beach in 1959. France and his son William France Jr. ran bulldozers and paving equipment to

build the track.

The television fortunes of Nascar have been tied to the Daytona 500 since the first live national broadcast of the race in 1979. Viewers, including non-traditional stock-car fans in the Northeast confined to their homes because of a snowstorm, watched as brothers Donnie and Bobby Allison got into a fistfight with Cale Yarborough after a last-lap accident that gave the victory to Richard Petty.

That type of behavior has been discouraged more recently as Nascar has penalized drivers for infractions ranging from swearing on television to aggressive driving. Wheeler said that's also why the sport's growth has slowed.

Ratings

Television ratings were down for 29 of 37 races last season after falling in 26 of 36 races in 2006, according to Nielsen Media Research.

This year's race may also get a boost as Dale Earnhardt Jr., voted Nascar's most-popular driver, starts his first season with Hendrick Motorsports. News Corp.'s Fox network said interest in Earnhardt's debut with the seven-time championship winning team helped boost ratings 6 percent for last weekend's Budweiser Shootout Exhibition race.

Ratings rose during the final 10 minutes of the race, which was won by the 33-year-old driver who last season left the team started by his late father. France cited interest in Earnhardt's switch as a reason to expect more viewers this year.

Nascar's new car is also gaining fans. The taller, boxier vehicle has brought back the so-called slingshot pass, a popular last-lap maneuver until more aerodynamic cars in the 1980s made it rare. To execute it, a driver takes advantage of a break in the airflow created by the lead car, allowing him to gain speed and slingshot past.

People familiar to Nascar fans will also be carrying out traditional duties this weekend. Junior Johnson, the 1960 Daytona 500 winner who honed his skills running loads of moonshine in the hills of North Carolina, will drive the pace car. Johnson, 76, has lent his name to a legal whiskey called Junior Johnson's Midnight Moon, which is a sponsor of the car driven by Jeremy Mayfield.

``My history in the moonshine business is no secret," Johnson said. ``We can do things legally that we couldn't do in the old days. I own part of a company that makes moonshine, and our Midnight Moon is sponsoring a car in the 500. I never would have believed this was possible."

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