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Special Report In Sidebar:

A Simple Solution to NASCAR's Disastrous 2004 Points Plan

by John Chuhran, Motorsports Editor and Associate Publisher



Preparing for the 500: Elliott Sadler pits during the second Daytona 125 qualifying race Photo: Ford Racing

“By locking out the other 35 or more drivers from the chance of even challenging for the crown in the last 10 races, NASCAR is gambling that the sport famous for the roar of engines (immortalized in the title of the Tom Cruise film “Days of Thunder”) will not endure the Days of Click.”

The objective was well intentioned, but the execution was flawed. That sentence summarizes the 2004 NASCAR Nextel Cup Series Chase for the Championship.

NASCAR apparently considered only three issues when it changed the points system for this year: 1.) How do we keep the championship undecided until the end of the last race, 2.) How do we encourage hard racing for the victory by everyone, even the points leader, and 3.) How do we create a “post-season” sense of excitement late in the year. While these ideas were important, they were not enough.

Because of the intense loyalty NASCAR fans have for their heroes – spending, on average, more than \$150 per year on their favorites – NASCAR also needed to consider a fourth issue: How do we keep as many drivers as possible in contention for the championship all the way to the end of the season.

In fact, NASCAR took the exact opposite position – the “Nextel Chase for the Championship” was designed to exclude all but the top 10 drivers from competing for championship. By locking out the other 35 or more drivers from the chance of even challenging for the crown in the last 10 races, NASCAR is gambling that the sport famous for the roar of engines (immortalized in the title of the Tom Cruise film “Days of Thunder”) will not endure the Days of Click. Fans of the drivers eliminated from competing for the championship over the final 10 races are likely to turn off their TV sets – “click” – in massive numbers. End result: lower TV ratings, causing more cars to lose sponsors, causing fewer companies to buy TV commercials on the telecasts, less money going to the teams and a drastically less lucrative TV contract for 2007 and beyond. It is a grim picture.



Passing Fancy: Kurt Busch (97) and Greg Biffle (16) cruise by Jimmy Spencer mid-race *Photo: Autostock*

But there is a simple solution to the problem that keeps the championship undecided to the end of the last race, encourage hard racing for each race win by all competitors and keeps the championship open to all drivers:

Simply count the best 26 or 30 finishes of each driver.

In a 36-race season, every driver has a bad result – usually more than one – in the course of the season. A blown engine here, a crash there and suddenly the boxscore has a driver listed in 37th or 40th or, gasp, 43rd (last). By counting only the best 26 results in a season, each driver would have the chance to toss out his 10 worst finishes.

Drivers who would be near the top of the points standings would have fewer poor finishes than drivers further down the list (duh – that’s precisely why some drivers would have more points than others). Over the final 10 races every driver would have a chance to improve. Everybody could race hard for the first two or three races and if the guys at the top of the points did well they could drop their worst results and replace them with better ones. But after the third race or so, the points leaders would have to register very high finishes in order to improve their points totals – they would have nothing to lose in trying for the win if their worst finish to date was only seventh or eighth.



Dropping of the green: Start of the 2004 Daytona 500 Photo: Autostock

On the other hand, if a driver is low in the point standings gets hot in the final 10 races, then the guys at the top of the standings would have to drive extra hard to stay in the points lead. Let’s say Driver X is sitting 11th in points after 26 races, but then his team starts to really work well and he wins four races in a row in September (Harry Gant turned the trick in 1991). Suppose his four worst results in the first 26 races were four 41st-place finishes. Under the “Best 26 Results” plan, Driver X can replace four results worth 40 points with four results worth 185 points – a gain of 145 points per race, or 580 points for all four events. The points leader, Driver Y, drives hard and finishes second in the same

four races. He gets to replace his four worst finishes, too. But since he was leading the points already, his four worst results were a quartet of 11th-place finishes. Driver Y gets to replace four results worth 130 points with four results worth 175 points (assuming he led at least one lap in each race) – a gain of 45 points per race, or 180 points for the four races.



Mark Martin (finished 43rd) and Crew Chief Tony Liberati discuss the finer, and funnier, points of racing *Photo: Ford Racing*

In this scenario, Driver X has gained 420 points on Driver Y in just four races – and Driver Y had to finish second in all of those events just to keep the difference that small. If he had wrecked or experienced a mechanical failures in the four events, Driver Y would have kept the points for his four 11th-place finishes, losing another 180 points.

Under the “Best 26 Results” plan, every driver will race hard in each of the last 10 races because they are free opportunities to move up in the standings; do well and replace a low score with a high one, do poorly and you can choose the better result between today’s race and your worst previous result. Drivers lower in the standings have the greatest chance to improve their total points, but drivers near the top of the standings will still have to drive hard. While they might only improve their point totals marginally with a good finish, drivers near the top of the standings will still drive hard to make sure others don’t gain more points by finishing in a high position.

“It is a fair argument, so perhaps it would be better to have a "Best 30 Results" points system and only let the final six races be used to attempt to improve a points score; this way, only 16.67 percent of a driver's results could be improved. Bear in mind that a massive position improvement could provide a driver with more than a 16.67 percent gain in points, so winning would certainly be handsomely rewarded”---J.T. Chuhran



Master of The Game: Jack Roush, NASCAR's 2003 champion car owner, lost at Daytona but won the second race of 2004 at Rockingham, N.C. Photo: Ford Racing

Of course, purists will regard having the opportunity to replace up to 10 race results with better outcomes as too much of an effort to get the drivers trailing in points closer to the front, and that the points leaders should be rewarded at least a bit for their success. It is a fair argument, so perhaps it would be better to have a "Best 30 Results" points system and only let the final six races be used to attempt to improve a points score; this way, only 16.67 percent of a driver's results could be improved. Bear in mind that a massive position improvement could provide a driver with more than a 16.67 percent gain in points, so winning would certainly be handsomely rewarded. But this is just a matter of fine tuning -- the general concept remains the same.

A simple plan.

And much more effective at keeping the championship open to all and undecided to the end of the finale while also encouraging hard fights for each race win. NASCAR, consider it my gift to you. I just hope you're wise enough to use it.

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