Did NASCAR take a wrong turn?

by Bill Center

Where have you gone, NASCAR?

Where have you gone, Richard Petty and the high-winged Plymouth Superbirds ... David Pearson and the Wood Brothers' Mercury Cyclone ... Junior Johnson's famed one-of-a-kind banana car?

Anyone else remember when Petty and Bobby Allison would have at it on and off the track?

Apparently a lot of NASCAR fans do. And they don't like the politically correct/corporate direction their sport is following.

Furthermore, NASCAR has noticed.

In his recent "state of NASCAR" address, Brian France, CEO and chairman, admitted that NASCAR has probably made too many changes in recent years, removing much of the zest that made stock car racing the outsider boom sport of the 1990s.

How does he know this?

Not only is attendance down at most tracks, but television ratings have slumped each of the past two seasons. Even the sale of souvenir merchandise has taken a hit.

Why?

Much of what attracted many new fans to the once shoot-from-the-hip renegade sport has been removed by a generation of marketing-minded executives who pandered to corporate America.

Are there any interesting story lines in NASCAR's renamed Sprint Cup heading into Sunday's traditional Daytona 500 season opener? Absolutely.

Leading the list is Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s switch from the DEI team founded by his late father to the Rick Hendrick megateam led by reigning champion Jimmie Johnson and four-time champion Jeff Gordon.

Equally as significant, however, are:

- The influx of open-wheel drivers (Dario Franchitti, Sam Hornish Jr. and Jacques Villeneuve join Juan Pablo Montoya).

- The switch of Joe Gibbs' team (and driver Tony Stewart) from Chevrolet to Toyota.

- Johnson's bid to tie Cale Yarborough as the only drivers to win three straight season championships.

- The full-time use of the Car of Tomorrow.

Ah, the COT. While it is the safest car NASCAR has produced and should eventually even the playing field between the have and have-not teams, the COT is in the cross-hairs of the movement that believes NASCAR has gone soft.

The COT is a standardized design that NASCAR is forcing on all teams. Yes, teams will still be listed by the four competing manufacturers - Chevy, Ford, Dodge and Toyota (which represents another speed bump to core fans) - but the COT Ford is a Chevy is a Dodge is a Toyota.

All the COT chassis come from a single template, leaving little in the traditional Ford vs. Chevy debate other than the engine block.

But the COT is just one example of how NASCAR has boxed itself into a corner that removes initiative and personality, part of its foundation and tradition.

NASCAR has come down hard on any crew chief tinkering with the COT concept. It also has taken to disciplining drivers for a wide variety of indiscretions, from saying bad words to sparring with rivals.

Which is why France, during his "state of NASCAR" speech, spoke about emphasizing NASCAR's "history and tradition" - which, actually, is rooted in the clandestine moonshine industry.

France said NASCAR must now "minimize change and embrace the past" and admitted NASCAR may have made too many changes toward the politically correct side of the equation in recent years.

"All those things, to our core fan, that's a lot to digest in a very short period of time," said France. "We know that. Change is good to a certain point. And we've made all the change that we think our sport can stand."

One more change might be necessary, however. NASCAR should take the reins off the drivers and allow them to speak their minds again. There are few personalities left in NASCAR, aside from Earnhardt Jr. and Stewart.

"If they allow us, we'd cuss like sailors and the FCC would shut us down," Johnson said recently.

"I don't understand the penalty side of it. I understand some of the decisions. But some of the changes have been massive responses to small things."

TEAM-BY-TEAM LINEUPS

CHEVROLET

Hendrick Motorsports (Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson, Dale Earnhardt Jr., Casey Mears drivers): Already the most dominant team in the sport, Hendrick became a superpower with the addition of fan favorite Earnhardt. But outside the restrictor-plate tracks (Daytona and Talladega), will Earnhardt measure up to four-time series champion Gordon and Johnson, who is trying to win three straight season championships? Gordon, Johnson and Earnhardt will advance to the Chase for the Championship playoffs.

Richard Childress Racing (Kevin Harvick, Clint Bowyer, Jeff Burton): Harvick is the defending Daytona 500 champion, but it was Bowyer who finished third to Hendrick's Johnson and Gordon in the final 2007 standings. Harvick and Bowyer will reach the playoffs.

DEI (Martin Truex Jr., Mark Martin, Paul Menard, Regan Smith): Teresa Earnhardt is committed to making this team work despite the loss of her stepson. Martin is a big boost to Truex. Smith will compete for Rookie of the Year honors, but only Truex will advance to the Chase.

Haas CNC Racing (Jeremy Mayfield, Scott Riggs): Both drivers have had their moments.

Hall of Fame Racing (J.J. Yeley): Top draw is co-owners Roger Staubach and Troy Aikman.

FORD

Roush Fenway Racing (Matt Kenseth, Carl Edwards, Greg Biffle, Jamie McMurray, David Ragan): Ford has taken a hit the past couple of years and opens the season as the only factory not introducing a new engine. 2003 champ Kenseth was fourth in the standings last year as the top non-Chevy. Busch Series champ Edwards was ninth. Kenseth and Edwards will make the Chase with Biffle a long shot.

Yates Racing (Travis Kvapil, David Gilliland): Famed engine builder Robert Yates sold the team to son Doug.

Wood Brothers (Bill Elliott, Jon Wood): Famed team is hanging on.

TOYOTA

Joe Gibbs Racing (Tony Stewart, Denny Hamlin, Kyle Busch): Embarrassed by its first season in NASCAR's premier series, Toyota spent a lot of money to get the Gibbs team to shift from Chevrolets. The team has been extremely fast in practice. Two-time series champ Stewart, Busch (fifth last year) and Hamlin should all make the playoffs. Stewart didn't like the idea of driving for a foreign brand.

Michael Waltrip Racing (Waltrip, David Reutimann): Last year was horrible, starting with the cheating scandal at Daytona. The team struggled to make fields. But owner-driver Waltrip was the second-fastest qualifier at Daytona, where he always is fast.

Bill Davis Racing (Dave Blaney, Jacques Villeneuve): Villeneuve will give the team a publicity boost.

Red Bull (Brian Vickers, A.J. Allmendinger): The same lineup struggled in its debut season of 2007.

DODGE

Penske South (Kurt Busch, Ryan Newman, Sam Hornish Jr.): Busch finished seventh in the 2007 standings. Newman should be better. Off early results, Hornish is better suited to open-wheel racing, where he was a champion.

Chip Ganassi Racing (Juan Pablo Montoya, Dario Franchitti, Reed Sorenson): Clearly, Ganassi is going for the international market with open-wheel expatriates Montoya and Franchitti. Reigning IRL and Indy 500 champ Franchitti could follow Montoya as Rookie of the Year. Montoya might make the Chase.

Evernham Gillett Racing (Kasey Kahne, Elliott Sadler, Patrick Carpentier, Robby Gordon): Once the hand-picked guru to lead Dodge back into NASCAR, Ray Evernham has sold off part of his struggling team. Kahne is a solid driver. Gordon is getting technical assistance.

Petty Enterprises (Kyle Petty, Bobby Labonte): This team still has solid name recognition.

For the complete 2008 Sprint Cup schedule, go to uniontrib.com/more/motorsports.

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