

Teams are pushing the envelope, maybe a bit too far

by Jane Miller

Again this year, during the buildup to the sport's most important race, NASCAR's biggest story is the suspension and penalties for at least four of its teams.

Robbie Reiser, crew chief for Matt Kenseth, and all three crew chiefs from Evernham Motorsports received suspensions Tuesday for unapproved aerodynamic modifications.

Reiser and Ken Francis, who is crew chief for Kasey Kahne, earned four-race suspensions and \$50,000 fines. Their drivers and car owners also were slapped with deductions of 50 championship points.

Their violations were found after Sunday's qualifying and both drivers' times were disallowed.

Crew chiefs Rodney Childers (Scott Riggs) and Josh Browne (Elliott Sadler) were handed two-race suspensions, fines of \$25,000 and losses of 25 driver and owner points.

Their violations were found before qualifying.

Chad Knaus, crew chief for last year's Daytona 500 winner Jimmie Johnson, received penalties similar to those of Reiser and Francis for infractions before last year's race, but his team did not lose points.

NASCAR president Mike Helton said Tuesday that the severity of the penalties was consistent with the warning laid out at the Chicagoland race last July, in which he told teams that the sanctioning body was basically going to put a stop to the nonsense and the hammer was going to fall quickly and hard.

NASCAR chairman and CEO Brian France reiterated that Tuesday. "As these penalties or as these infractions become more frequent, you will see us undeniably step up the punishment," he said during a state of the sport address. "We'll find the right common ground to make sure while there will be some inadvertently flop over or make a mistake, but the intentional pressing, trying to get ahead of the rules, will not work. We'll make sure of that one way or the other."

And the four suspensions are not the end of it. Still to be dealt with, as of Wednesday morning, was Michael Waltrip, whose intake manifold was confiscated and his car later impounded after a substance was found in

the manifold during pre-qualifying inspection.

With practice scheduled for later in the day, Waltrip was looking at using a backup car from another one of his teams in order to make it out onto the track.

FRONT-ROW SWEEP

Certainly some of the bad taste of the infractions has been counteracted by the feel-good story of Daytona front-row starters David Gilliland and Ricky Rudd, both of Robert Yates Racing.

That team, formerly one of the most successful in the business, suffered through a season so horrible last year that Yates almost considered quitting. Not only were his cars uncompetitive but he lost both drivers and a major sponsor.

But his hiring of Gilliland, a diamond in the rough, and the return of veteran Ricky Rudd have brought new energy to the team. "I'm just tickled to death for all the guys who weathered the storm last year," said Rudd.

Gilliland proved the cars not only were fast by themselves but raced well, too, when he finished second in the Budweiser Shootout on Saturday night.

"I've been pinching myself for the last eight months and I'm not going to quit anytime soon," said Gilliland after locking up the pole.

HE'S BACK

Michael Andretti confirmed Tuesday that he will enter the Indianapolis 500 again this year.

The second-generation driver, who retired after the 2003 Indianapolis 500, made his first start in three years at last year's Indianapolis 500.

That allowed him to be part of one of the most thrilling finishes in history, when Sam Hornish Jr. passed

Andretti's son, Marco, just short of the finish line.

Michael Andretti finished third.

"Last year when I returned, at first it was all about getting to race with Marco," Andretti said. "Then we both had a shot at winning it and I knew it would be very tough for me to walk away knowing that I'm still very capable of winning that race." Andretti fields a four-car team in the Indy Racing League for Marco Andretti, Danica Patrick, Tony Kanaan and Dario Franchitti.

FIRST RACE

The NHRA opened its season in grand fashion last weekend with rookie of the year J.R. Todd (Top Fuel), 2005 champ Gary Scelzi (Funny Car) and three-time Greg Anderson (Pro Stock) winning in their respective divisions.

Ashley Force, despite being bumped by her father early in the final session, qualified for the finals but lost to brother-in-law and teammate Robert Hight in the first round.

Kenny Bernstein failed to make the finals in his return to Funny Car competition.

The fish are biting.

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