

Smoke still hasn't cleared over Daytona 500

by Jane Miller

It started in controversy, with the suspensions and fines.

It ended in controversy, with a huge accident and hotly debatable finish. No one could say this year's Daytona 500 was dull.

Hard as it is to imagine, what happened at the end of the race has managed even to overshadow the days before, when five crew chiefs were suspended, multiple fines and points deductions were levied and even Jeff Gordon's team was called into question.

The question which remains is, should a caution have been thrown before the lead cars of Kevin Harvick and Mark Martin took the checkered flag?

Those who say no say this: The wreck was behind the leaders, so the race should have been allowed to play out to a natural conclusion. The yellow flag would not have stopped the cars already crashing from continuing to do so and fans hate races which end under caution.

Those in favor say NASCAR throws cautions for every little bitty piece of debris which happens to float onto the racetrack, and they don't put one out for a multi-car crash with a car upside down and on fire? Be consistent, for heaven's sake. Cars behind the wreck also were racing for position, and that put all of them in danger.

And how could they deny Mark Martin, one of the most respected drivers in the history of the sport, his chance to win the biggest race of all?

As Harvick said during a conference call on Tuesday, "I'm glad I don't have to make those calls."

There's no doubt decisions like these have to be made in split seconds. But even watching the race live, one had time to sit and wonder, "Aren't they going to throw the caution?" while at the same time thinking, "I hope they let them race to the line."

There's no going back now, though. Kevin Harvick, with his new colors and new sponsor, is the Daytona 500

champion, coming from sixth to the front on the final lap.

"To be able to look at that trophy and see your name up there next to a lot of the guys that have won before, it's definitely the biggest thing you can do in the United States in racing," he said.

COMING BACK

Martin hasn't given up the fight to win at Daytona this year. Following Sunday's race, he added the July 7 Pepsi 400 at Daytona to his part-time schedule for 2007.

"I've kind of had that one penciled into the back of my head for some time," said Martin. "We were pretty sure that we might add it for a while, but after the car that the guys gave me on Sunday and with as much fun that we had in the 500, I just don't see any reason not to go back Daytona and see if we can't finish the job in July."

SPEEDING TICKET

Up until the final melee, one of the highlights of the Daytona 500 was Toyota driver Dave Blaney's speedy trip down pit lane to avoid a crash on lap 185.

NASCAR officials weren't pleased about the speed with which Blaney traveled through the pits and first assessed a five-lap penalty, then decided to park the Caterpillar-sponsored car for the rest of the race.

He finished in 34th place.

GOING TO CALIFORNIA

The Nextel Cup Series now moves across the country to California Speedway, a mile-and-a-half track, for a race which marks the beginning of the regular season.

Daytona 500 polesitter David Gilliland is a California native and is looking forward to this weekend's event.

"This is my favorite type of racing - running on intermediate tracks," he said. "California is a track I've got some laps on and I feel very confident after the Vegas test where our intermediate program is."

The Busch and Craftsman Truck Series also race at California this weekend.

INDUCTEES

NASCAR champion Bill Elliott, Indy Car mechanic and team manager Jim McGee, 1960 Indianapolis 500 winner Jim Rathmann and Goodyear and Indy Racing League executive Leo Mehl will among the inductees to the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in August.

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