

Auto Racing: Enough already

by Jane Miller

Cease and desist with this incessant talk about points three weeks into the NASCAR season.

Stop the hand-wringing about Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s poor start, the gushing over David Ragan being in the top 10 (after two races - he has since dropped to a more realistic 19th), the glee over Mark Martin leading the points and will-he-or-won't-he race at Bristol.

Now, repeat after me. It's early.

Yes, the first part of the Nextel Cup season is only 26 races long. Drivers need to be in good position with the Chase format fairly quickly or they face the danger of not being one of the (now) 12 drivers who face off for the championship.

But these early weeks - the first five at least - are a sorting-out period. There is going to be wild fluctuation in the standings. Take Ragan, for example. The rookie driver, who replaced Martin in the No. 6 Ford, finished a surprising fifth at Daytona and 16th at California to earn that fifth-place points spot after the first two races.

Sunday at Las Vegas he was 37th, which dropped him to 19th in the standings.

On the other side of the coin is Tony Stewart, who finished 43rd at Daytona. He was 40th in the points, though, because of penalties assessed to other drivers at that race.

An eighth-place finish at California moved him to 21st and his seventh place at Las Vegas on Sunday jumped him to 13th.

The top 10 now - Martin, Jeff Gordon, Jeff Burton, Jimmie Johnson, Matt Kenseth, Kevin Harvick, Kyle Busch, Denny Hamlin, J.J. Yeley and Elliott Sadler - is a bit more realistic, though Yeley and Sadler may still be a bit high. Expect the other major players to find their usual level shortly.

For example, Earnhardt Jr. is up to 28th now, jumping from 40th after the California race with a 11th-place in Las Vegas.

"No one panicked after those first two races," he said. "The media made a much bigger deal out of it than it really was."

There is a group of drivers, however, who need to be mighty concerned about points - the ones out of the top 35 in owner points.

At this time of the season, the top 35 in last year's points are still guaranteed starting spots. After the Bristol race March 25, this year's standings are used.

Kasey Kahne is 36th now but he won't remain there. But drivers like Dave Blaney (40th after Las Vegas), Brian Vickers (41st), Ken Schrader (43rd), Ward Burton (49th) and Michael Waltrip (50th) have a lot of work ahead in the next two races to try to climb out of the hole.

But the top 12? Let them race a few more weeks before panic sets in.

FEELING LUCKY

Dale Earnhardt Jr. said anyone who left the Las Vegas race without a wrecked race car should feel lucky.

"I saw some miraculous saves out there - I mean world-class, top-10 unbelievable saves - right in front of me," he said.

F1 LAUNCH

A season of change awaits Formula One fans starting with this weekend's Australian Grand Prix.

Michael Schumacher is gone, replaced at Ferrari by Kimi Raikkonen. Two-time World Champion Fernando Alonso has moved from Renault to McLaren-Mercedes, paired with highly-touted rookie Lewis Hamilton. Another high-profile rookie, Heikki Kovalainen, takes Alonso's place at Renault.

Bridgestone is the sole tire supplier.

It's always fun to try to imagine what wacky and wonderful things are in store in the F1 world, but usually the reality is even crazier than anything anyone could make up.

BACK IN ACTION

The last time the NHRA raced, three weeks ago at Phoenix, Roy Johnson nearly died.

Johnson, father of and co-crew chief for Pro Stock driver Allen Johnson, had a heart attack and had to be shocked back to life.

For this weekend's Gatornationals at Gainesville, Fla., he's back to work.

"I'm doing just great. I can't even tell I've had a heart attack," said Johnson in a press release issued by the team.

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