

Stewart simply stated what many fans believe

by Bill Center

Perception is everything.

Which is why Tony Stewart's recent comments that NASCAR is beginning to look like professional wrestling struck a responsive chord with stock car racing fans.

Maybe the two-time Nextel Cup champion could have picked a slightly better analogy. Possibly, he's totally wrong. And choosing to make the charges on his own radio show (Sirius Satellite) after skipping a mandatory postrace interview session was completely out of line.

But Stewart only stated what a lot of fans believe - that NASCAR rigs late-race cautions to fit in a final round of television commercials and set up a photo-op finish.

When that is the perception, there is a problem, which NASCAR needs to address.

In case NASCAR hasn't noticed, television ratings were down 10 percent last season and empty seats could be found at most tracks. If the boom isn't over, it has at least slowed.

Why?

Well, some fans - and I hear from them almost weekly - have grown tired of the way races end and disgusted with the amount of commercial interruptions on the telecasts.

"Is stock car racing about racing or is it about selling products and having the networks promote other shows?" reader Mike Hanford wrote two weeks ago, before Stewart's comments.

Another reader questioned the green-white-checked program NASCAR adopted three seasons ago to reduce the number of races finishing as parades under the yellow flag.

"I thought it was a good idea at the time," said Ted Stansbury. "But now it seems like every race ends in that

shootout. Sometimes it'd be nice to see a driver finish a dominating run."

Exactly the point made by Stewart. To a degree, I agree with Stewart.

Now, if there's an accident on the track, you have to go to caution. No argument. But I've been to races where I've searched hard to no avail for that elusive "debris" on the track.

It does make one wonder. And when fans and the media - and at least one well-known driver - are wondering in unison, there's a problem.

Among Stewart's rants on his radio show:

"(NASCAR) is like playing God. They can almost dictate the race instead of the drivers doing it. It's happened too many times this year."

"I guess NASCAR thinks, 'Hey, wrestling worked, and it was for the most part staged, so I guess it's going to work out in racing, too.'"

"I don't know that they've run a fair race all year."

"I can't understand how long the fans are going to let NASCAR treat them like they're stupid before they are going to turn on NASCAR."

NASCAR, of course, reacted by hauling Stewart into the woodshed as soon as he arrived at Talladega. I mean, the meeting started at 6 a.m., even before Stewart's team could - or was allowed to - set up shop.

A contrite Stewart emerged.

"Yeah, I probably did hurt the integrity of the sport," he said, adding: "It's a little tender for me to sit down right now."

Not if he was sitting on his wallet. NASCAR fined Stewart \$10,000 and placed the outspoken 35-year-old on probation for the rest of the season. But the penalties were not, officially, for what Stewart said, but rather for skipping the postrace news conference at Phoenix.

NASCAR should have rewarded Stewart.

He might be wrong. There might be a legitimate reason behind all those late-race cautions. There might actually be debris on the track.

NASCAR Vice President Jim Hunter offered a quick rebuke of Stewart's comments and claims.

"NASCAR has been running races since 1948 and we place the safety of the drivers at the top of the list," said Hunter, one of NASCAR's most respected officials.

But a growing number of fans believe some events have been contrived and that finishes have been orchestrated.

That's not good. And that perception is a much bigger danger to NASCAR than Stewart's comments.

Fact: More races now finish under the green-white-checkered shootout format than finished under the caution.

The fans are wondering why.

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