

Close Calls: 'FIRECRACKER' TRADITION RETURNS

The roar of engines – and NASCAR's past – will echo around Daytona International Speedway when the Subway Firecracker 250 takes the green flag this Friday, July 5.

The race will mark the first time the iconic 'Firecracker' moniker has appeared in a NASCAR Daytona event title since the 1988 Pepsi Firecracker 400 Winston Cup battle.

From its introduction in 1959 through its final bow 25 years ago, the Firecracker signature became synonymous with the Independence Day Grand National/Cup race at Daytona. The Firecracker 250 – and later 400 – mile event was to the Fourth of July like the Southern 500 was to Labor Day Weekend.

The genesis of the event is as old as Daytona itself dating back to 1959. Looking to book additional dates to his new super speedway, Bill France, Sr. added a summer race at DIS to the NASCAR calendar. The 'Firecracker 250' would join the Daytona 500 as crown jewel races at the lightning-fast 2.5-mile Daytona oval.

Billed as a 'Sweepstakes Event' for entries from both the NASCAR Grand National (now Sprint Cup) and Convertible Divisions, the race featured a total purse of \$25,525.

Like the inaugural Daytona 500 earlier in the year, the July 4, 1959 Firecracker 250 was contested caution free. Glenn 'Fireball' Roberts and his hard top Pontiac won the pole with a speed of 144.997 miles per hour and then backed it up leading all but 16 of the 100 laps to get the win. Joe Weatherly – in the only Convertible in the top-five – was second followed by Johnny Allen, Jack Smith and Eduardo Dibos.

Roberts earned \$7,050 for the victory.

The race – which drew an on-site crowd announced as 12,017 – became an instant classic with the first widespread drafting in any NASCAR race.

Roberts would go on to win three of the first four Firecracker 250's with David Pearson's victory in the 1961 event the only speed bump. A.J. Foyt, Jr. captured the 1964 and 1965 races.

Later years saw NASCAR greats Cale

Yarborough, Bobbie and Donnie Allison, Bobby Isaac, LeRoy Yarbrough, Richard Petty, Buddy Baker and Neil Bonnett all win the 'Firecracker.'

Tim Richmond won the last sole Firecracker 250 in 1986 before the soft drink invasion hit NASCAR and the race was named the Pepsi Firecracker 400 in 1987. One year later on Saturday, July 2, 1988, the Firecracker name made it's last appearance in the title of the summer race at Daytona when Bill Elliott bested Sterling Marlin, Bobby Hillin, Jr., Darrell Waltrip, and Kyle Petty in the Pepsi Firecracker 400.

Elliott won \$63,500 in an event that featured three caution periods – one for a Daytona 'Big One' – on the first lap.

The race has continued the past 25 years as either the Pepsi 400 (through 2008) or Coke Zero (2009-Present). Saturday's event will also mark the first-ever appearance of the classic Firecracker signature to a title of a NASCAR Nationwide Series race at Daytona.

To 'old school' NASCAR fans, having the Firecracker reference in the title of a race at Daytona represents tradition, a time when racing was a lot less complicated – when some old fashioned ingenuity both on and off the track could make a big difference in a race.

Times change, memories linger. That said, whoever is responsible for returning the Firecracker race title back into the Daytona and NASCAR lexicon, thanks much.

Now, if they would just move the Southern 500 back to Labor Day at Darlington...

About John Close

John Close covered his first NASCAR race as a professional media member in 1986 at Bristol Motor Speedway. Since then, Close – a former Associated Press newspaper sports editor – has written countless articles for numerous motorsports magazines, trade publications and Internet sites.

His third book – On The Spot – a volume about the history of NASCAR race spotting, will be published later this year.

You can direct comments/inquiries to Close at www.closefinishes@carolina.rr.com.

The Daytona race marked the official middle of the NASCAR racing season. Eighteen of the 36 official point-awarding races for 2013 are now complete and we are down to just eight races until the ten-race Chase phase of the season begins. The Chase format to select the big trophy and money winner of the year replaced the point system NASCAR used to use to crown the annual champion of the sport based on the performance of the team all year long.

It was that old point system that Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt earned their seven championships under. There were several adjustments made to the point system over the history of the sport, but the big chance came in 2004 when the organization decided they wanted racing to be more like football or basketball with a playoff system. So the Chase was invented and even that formula of calculating the top team has been monkeyed with by NASCAR folks in their ever-ending quest to get fans back to the level of interest they had in 1998, when an empty seat could never be found at Bristol.

What NASCAR's leader Brian France has failed to understand is the point system was never the problem. The problem was and still is the constant flip-flopping of rules and regulations and how and when they are enforced. France has already changed the Chase rules three times in the past seven years.

The change from rewarding a team for their performance in each and every race for the entire year has now been reduced to those last ten events and not every kind of track is represented in what now determines which driver is called champion.

I sure some remember the days of November when the NASCAR Championship was decided after 500 miles around Atlanta Motor Speedway. The AMS grandstands were full to watch the championship crown change hands lap-by-lap several times in the 1992 Hooters 500. That championship battle between Alan Kulwicki and Bill Elliot had only a ten-point spread. The AMS grandstands

Herb Emory's Pit Row Report



were still packed two years later when Dale Earnhardt won the 1994 Winston Cup Championship by a whopping 444 points over Mark Martin.

I really do believe NASCAR should return to rewarding a driver and team for their overall race-after-race performance for the year and maybe come up with some other title or prize for the team that does the best in the final ten events.

My colleague, Doug "Fireball" Turnbull, reminds me from time-to-time that I'm "old and in the way," in my thinking about the new-modern ways of NASCAR. As you can probably figure out by not I'm not one of the Chase format's biggest fans.

I don't object to some sort of special end-of-the-season hoopla to boost television viewers and ticket buyers, but throwing a driver and team's accomplishments during the first 26 races out the window to reset the score of the dozen Chase contenders for the last races of the year just doesn't seem right.

If there's gonna be a Chase, it at least should be conducted on every kind of speedway, instead of the hodge-podge bunch of tracks on the schedule now. I'll vote for Charlotte, Talladega and Martinsville to remain in the ten playoff races. New Hampshire, Chicago, Texas, Dover and Homestead get a big "no" vote from me. None of those speedways have the

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