

Close Finishes: Fan Safety An Issue For All Sports, Not Just NASCAR

By now, just about everyone has seen the footage of the final lap of the NASCAR Nationwide Series race at Daytona where parts of Kyle Larson's car wound up in the grandstand injuring several fans.

Simply stated, the scene was terrifying, a nightmare for all involved.

As is the case with almost any graphic, attention grabbing public event these days, 'Social Media' blew up with all manner of comment. Among the usual postings of well wishes and prayers to those who had been injured, there were also wide swings of emotional comment vilifying NASCAR and Daytona International Speedway for putting fans in harm's way.

As someone who has worked as a professional motorsports reporter for 28 years, I can tell you NASCAR – and auto racing in general – has done much to insure the safety of the fans over the years. Incidents like those that occurred Saturday – where flying debris injures fans – are extremely rare at NASCAR sanctioned and local racetracks.

By comparison, more fans are routinely injured by wayward tee shots at golf tournaments. Ditto for fans who absorb the blow of a screaming line drive foul ball at all levels of baseball games. Meanwhile, how many times have you seen a basketball player obliterate the first three rows of fans when diving into the crowd to retrieve a loose ball?

Don't get me wrong – this is in no way a comparison between the impact of any of those incidents can inflict on a fan versus the injuries a flying tire or piece of sheet metal off a race car cause. Nor is this meant to minimize Saturday's events or somehow explain away the dynamics that contributed to this terrifying incident.

Anyone that knows me, or has followed my writing career, knows I am not a NASCAR apologist. Never have been, never will be.

But the reality is fans get injured at sporting events all the time. In an effort to get as close to the action as possible, fans spend additional money to sit in the prime seats right up on the action. They arrive hours ahead of time in an effort to crowd the ropes. They even sneak into areas that are restricted in an effort to get as close to

the action as possible or glimpse at their 'heroes.'

Certainly, everyone has an expectation of safety when attending a sporting event. Why wouldn't we? After all, we take that same leap of faith in just about every other daily activity we participate in - right down to the food we eat and the water we drink.

The fact that fans attending Saturday's race were injured or traumatized is extremely unfortunate and we wish all those affected by those events a speedy recovery and return to normalcy – whatever that is in today's world where safety is by most standards a complete illusion regardless of how many precautions you take to insure it.

That said, in an effort to be proactive and assist in the process of helping to eliminate some of the factors that may have contributed to Saturday's incident, I'd like to suggest the following –

First, all race track owners – not just those that host NASCAR events – need to reassess their grandstand seating. Given past accidents have proven you can't construct a catch fence high enough to restrict all flying debris, reconfiguring seating closest to the track is the best option.

This is especially true at older facilities like Daytona. Constructed in 1958 and opened in 1959, fans sitting in the bottom rows at Daytona are a mere 10-12 feet from the racetrack. Additionally, that area is used as a major fan walkway to access and vacate the grandstand, so there are always people immediately next to the catchfence.

These seats – perhaps a full 20 rows of them – need to be removed creating for lack of a better term a 'Safety Zone.' Given Daytona no longer sells out its events, fans currently purchasing these seats could easily be relocated to other open, non-sold seats.

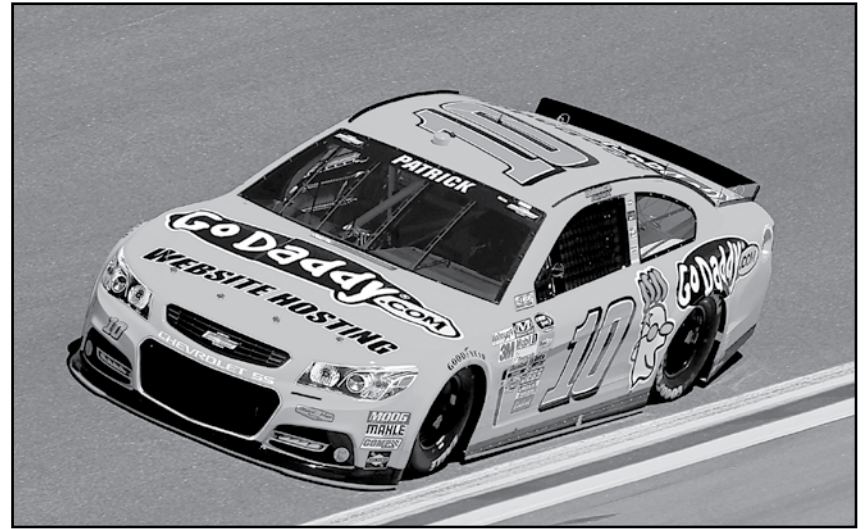
Second, ditch the restrictor plates on the racecars. In place for races at Daytona and Talladega since 1988, restrictor plates are designed to limit the amount of fuel to the engine. By slowing the cars down, the plates theoretically have made the races safer.

In reality, they have been a colossal failure.

In what can only be listed under the law of unintended consequences, the plates have forced the driv-

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Capt'n Herb Emory: Pit Row Report



Daytona, or should I say Danicatonna is over. Now it's on with the rest of the debut season of the new Gen 6 Sprint Cup car.

Don't expect to hear even a peep from drivers if there is anything wrong with this car. 2012 Champ Brad Keselowski apparently has already been called down because he did an interview for a story that didn't go exactly the way NASCAR wanted.

The new car looks good, but I don't know if I really noticed anything different about the way it raced at Daytona. There was still drafting and still one or two exciting crashes to make the highlight films in the television newscasts.

History was made at Daytona for sure. Danica Patrick became the first woman driver to win the pole position, to lead a lap and finish in the top-ten in the Daytona 500.

I think it was the first time ever as well that someone charged and associated with two murders was given "Honorary Starter" status at the important event. Maybe I should start working on parole for Charles Manson so he can do it next year.

The important part of Daytona for me was how our Georgia drivers performed. You don't hear about it too much these days, but Georgia drivers Red Byron and Gober Sosebee dominated the original Daytona Beach course during the first two

years of stock car racing in Daytona.

The only Sprint Cup entry from Georgia for the 2013 Daytona 500 was Unadilla's David Ragan. Ragan, who was married during the off-season, returns as driver of the No. 34 Ford for Front Row Racing this year. He was caught up in a crash and had to leave with 35th-place pay, which by the way was over \$308,000.

Peachtree City driver Reed Sorenson was the only Georgian in the Daytona Nationwide race. Sorenson finished 30th in the No. 40 Chevrolet.

Four Georgia drivers were running the Camping World Truck Series race at Daytona. Ryan Sieg, of Tucker, claimed tenth place in the event.

I was honored by having www.captainherb.net on the tailgate of Rockdale County's Chris Cockrum's truck as he finished 15th in the No. 07 he was driving.

John Wes Townley, of Watkinsville, collected 21st-place pay in the truck event, but he winner and pole sitter in the Daytona ARCA Series race the weekend before.

Griffin's Max Gresham was credited with a 24th-place finish in the truck event.

It's sad that we won't have the chance to see a truck race at Atlanta Motor Speedway during Labor Day race weekend. The series dropped AMS from the schedule for 2013.



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