

Close Calls: NASCAR needs serious jolt of positive public perception

There's nothing like a Pub Crawl to find out what people think of NASCAR.

Last weekend, I took the opportunity to reconnect with classmates from Libertyville (IL) High School. It was the first time since 1969 that I had returned to the Chicago suburb to mix with the people I grew up and went to school with.

Needless to say, there was a lot of catching up to do after 40-plus years and the event I attended – a Pub Crawl through the center of the city – was the perfect way to do it.

Along the way, I got to share many wonderful moments with friends recapping what had happened to each over the past four decades. Of course, we discussed careers and to say it was interesting to hear the responses to my career in NASCAR is an understatement.

It was also an eye opener.

Of course, everyone found my 25-plus years in NASCAR interesting. After all, a career that takes you all over the country to participate in professional sports events certainly sounds exciting – even romantic.

Frankly, it was.

Everybody got that.

What they didn't get was NASCAR.

As usual, some professed they knew little or nothing about NASCAR. In 1960s lingo, it just 'wasn't their bag.' Others claimed they had a passing interest in NASCAR. Some were actually avid fans and followed the sport on a regular basis.

What was sobering to hear was - regardless of their degree of interest in NASCAR - there was an almost universal perception that something was wrong with the sport.

Here are just a few of the comments I heard.

"Man, that sport is messed up now, isn't it?"

"NASCAR sure has credibility issues, don't they?"

"It seems like they have some sort of a controversy every week."

"I don't watch it anymore." "I used too, but it's just not as exciting as it used to be."

"I liked the old cars better. The new cars are cool, but nobody can pass anymore."

"If I want to watch something fixed, I'll watch wrestling."

"It seems like the same guys – the drivers on the big teams with all the money - win all the time."

Ouch.

There we're more comments, but I think you get the point.

Leave it to my friends to pour water on NASCAR career campfire.

Still, I understood. NASCAR isn't for everybody, just as the biggest game in the land – the National Football League – isn't for everybody.

I get that.

Yet, it was hard to hear how many thought the sport was boring and contrived. Just a couple of weeks after the big Sprint Cup race manipulation fiasco at Richmond International Raceway, NASCAR's shortcomings were fresh in the minds of many – even those who don't regularly follow the sport.

Scandal will do that.

Call it bad timing if you will. Maybe if I had made this trip down memory lane in Libertyville prior to the Richmond race, the opinions would have been somewhat different.

Probably not.

Forget the empty seats and the falling television ratings. While those are certain indicators that NASCAR is down a couple cylinders from its halcyon days of the last decade, they don't give you the reasons for the sport's crash in popularity.

If you want a barometer of why things are happening, there's no better way to find out what people think about something than by hitting the streets. There, you'll get an unvarnished vision of what people really have on their minds.

In this case, those opinions were offered over a couple of brews on a friendly Pub Crawl. From the comments given – by both non-fans and the sport's most avid supporters - NASCAR seems to have lost a good bit of horsepower in the world of public opinion.

There's an old saying that 'talk is cheap.' Maybe so.

After all, who gives a damn about what a bunch of 60-somethings thinks about NASCAR?

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Cap't Herb Emory Pit Row Report: Ethics and Interest

It was no surprise to me that Michael Waltrip was caught cheating again in the final race of what NASCAR now calls the regular season. What surprised me was that he was punished, although in my opinion not nearly enough.

I remember the first time the Waltrip Toyota's competed in NASCAR when Waltrip was busted for using some sort of illegal fuel additive that produced extra speed.

Jaws Jr. would have probably gotten by with the clandestine maneuvers to get his cars into the Chase playoffs if it hadn't been for those few words spoken by Dale Earnhardt Jr. about Clint Bowyer's on purpose spin to force the late race caution to set up their cheater's chess moves.

NASCAR should have ousted both Waltrip cars from the Chase, but I think money and politics kept them from really doing what they should have done. You see Mikey is on a lot of television shows and he never fails to tow the NASCAR line.

At least NAPA finally saw the light and used their know-how to pull the plug on the money they were sending the Waltrip Toyota gang. The auto parts company is ending sponsorship of the No. 55 and hopefully we won't have to endure any more of those stupid Mikey commercials anymore, at least not for NAPA.

The Fox Sports people should have done the ethical thing too and removed Michael Waltrip as a representative of other drivers on the NASCAR television shows. You sure don't see the networks using Pete Rose or Barry Bonds as baseball commentators.

The antics pulled by the Waltrip organization at Richmond have tainted the entire image of NASCAR. An image that had already been dimmed in Charlotte when NASCAR broke the decades old tradition of not allowing work on race cars during red flags.

And to tell you the truth, I just finished watching the Kansas race and the Chase still seems rather boring. The Kansas race was the first of the four Chase events that didn't seem a big bore.

I hoping for better races at Charlotte and Talladega, but I expect after Martinsville

it will be back to the same old rerun of Hendrick and Gibbs and their rich man's V-8-powered polo game for the the top prize.

Good Run: Helmets off to Tucker's Ryan Sieg for his 21st-place finish in the Nationwide race at Kansas. Watch for Sieg in the Camping World Truck race at Talladega and in the No. 39 Nationwide ride.

TALLADEGA: The Chase for the Sprint Cup returns to the Alabama high banks of Talladega Superspeedway in October. Long considered the "wild card" of the Chase due to its unpredictable outcome, this year's race will provide even more thrills with its later date in the Chase schedule. The Fred's 250 Camping World Truck race will run Saturday, Oct. 19 and the Sprint Cup Chase race will run Sunday, Oct. 20.

If you make the trip go early and check out the International Motorsport Hall of Fame at the speedway entrance. It's packed with more racing hardware and history than any place around.

Captain's Calendar:

OCTOBER 27th—Douglas County Humane Society Cruise-In fundraiser with Sam Memmolo. On Chapel Hill Road, south of Central Church Road, in front of Burke's Grill. Noon until 5PM. More information at www.DouglasCountyHumaneSociety.org.

DECEMBER 7th—Marines Toys for Tots Newstalk WSB Festival-Famous Fred's Bar-B-Que House-Thornton Road, Lithia Springs..Noon till 4PM. Race cars, vehicles from "The Walking Dead" television show and more. Bring toys for the kids and bring kids for the fun! More info on www.captainherb.net.

DECEMBER 13: GEORGIA HALL OF FAMERS: The 2013 Georgia Racing Hall of Fame Induction banquet will be held on Dec. 13, 2013 at the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame, located inside the Dawsonville Municipal Complex in Dawsonville. A limited number of seats for the banquet will be available. For more information, call the Hall of Fame at (706) 216-RACE (7223) or go online to www.georgiaracing-hof.com.



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