

Close Calls by John Close: NASCAR Truck Series goes "Springer" in Canada

The Jerry Springer Show featuring guests Max Papis, Kelly Heaphy and Mike Skeen will air in various markets this week. Check your local television guide for a time and station near you. Just kidding.

Papis, Heaphy and Skeen already staged their made-for-TV moment this past weekend at the conclusion of the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series race at Canadian Tire Motorsports Park in Bowmanville, Ontario. At this point, a Springer guest appearance would only be a staged rehash of the real thing. Dang.

In case you missed it, Papis and Skeen crashed while racing for third place on the last lap of the Chevy Silverado 250 Truck Series race Sunday. That set off a wild scene in the garage area afterward with the 'disagreement' culminating in Heaphy - Skeen's girlfriend - slapping Papis across the face.

Papis later claimed the open-handed blow dislocated his jaw.

Jerry! Jerry! Jerry!

The post-race controversy and battle royal has since gone viral not only knocking NASCAR's Sprint Cup division's 'Championship Chase' into also-ran media status, but it also displaced many top moments from a sporting weekend filled with college football, major league baseball pennant races, and the U.S. Open Tennis Tournament off the list of top stories.

Not even Springer can beat this kind of reality TV.

With NASCAR sanctions and possible legal action on the horizon, it's hard to say where this will end up. That said, here's a few observations that I took away from this episode of NASCAR TMZ -

Frankly, most drivers don't trust Papis or try to race him - they try to avoid him. In garage speak, Papis is a 'rolling pylon' - someone who is completely unpredictable lap after lap. The goal is to try to stay away from him. As a former NASCAR spotter, I can tell you passing Papis was always a tense adventure.

The fact that Papis hasn't been slapped around by another NASCAR competitor before this past weekend is a bit of a surprise - or at least a testament to how genteel NASCAR has become.

For instance, earlier this year, Papis slapped fellow competitor Billy Johnson after the NASCAR Nationwide race at Road America. Not much was made of the incident because Johnson still had his helmet on.

Whether Papis deserved the opened-handed greeting Sunday remains to be seen as there's really no clear video of the on-track incident between he and Skeen.

What is clear is that Heaphy had no business being the one doing it. On-track

incidents are between the drivers and nobody else. Period. They are the ones holding the steering wheels. If they want to 'slug it out' or 'hug it out,' that's up to them - nobody else.

That said, Heaphy should have stayed out of it. So should have one of Skeen's crewmembers that tried to get to Papis while he was still in his racer on pit road after the event.

Finally, Papis has hinted he may take legal action against Heaphy. He's playing the dislocated jaw angle to the hilt in the media. If he really is injured, he's probably got a beef. After all, if you hit someone and cause injury at a job in the 'real world,' you're probably going to face litigation.

Almost lost in the Papis tapas in Sunday's Truck Series race was the rock 'em, sock 'em race for the win between Ty Dillon and Chase Elliott.

The pair crashed right in front of Papis and Skeen in the same corner on the final lap. Dillon, the leader heading into the bend, got the worst of it pounding the retaining barrier while a battered Elliott limped on to win his first-ever NASCAR Truck Series race.

Afterward, Dillon - like the Skeen crewmember - got up in Elliott's grille while Elliott was still strapped in his Truck. Bad form, dude.

Later in a post-race interview, Dillon sniffed to the assembled media that he had been wronged, that he'd lost a top finish, and valued championship points thanks to Elliott.

He also vowed retaliation at a future race.

Video replay of the incident, however, paints a slightly different picture than the one Dillon presents as Elliott had caught Dillon's gas-starved truck and was clearly inside - up to Dillon's door - as they entered the turn.

If I'm spotting Dillon, I'm screaming 'Inside, Inside, Inside!'

Dillon had to know Elliott was there, yet he still pinched Elliott down to the curb running him out of racing room in the process. The ensuing contact had Dillon eating the retaining wall and Elliott getting his first taste of Victory Lane in the Truck Series.

If Dillon had used his head, he would have given Elliott room and raced him clean to the checkered flag. Even if Dillon had lost, second is still always better than being in the fence with crappy finish and a torn up race vehicle to boot. The runner-up result would have also provided Dillon the cherished championship points he so desires.

Instead, Dillon tried to block Elliott and it cost him.

Pit Row Report by Capt'n Herb Emory: Sorry Hampton... Shame on NASCAR

Empty grandstands covered with banners, campgrounds that once were full closed, shopping center parking lots that used to be filled with racing vendors empty..

I'm beginning to understand why NASCAR races just can't attract the large crowds we used to see at most all of the tracks.

Part of the problem might be attributed to the way NASCAR supports-or doesn't support in this case- the communities it comes in and takes over for race weekend.

It was about two years ago when I first heard from a lady in Hampton about her idea of attempting to get her community more involved in the race activities on Labor Day weekend. She had heard about the parade of race car haulers that happens in Bristol every year. She wanted to treat race fans and residents of the town that has been the home of Atlanta Motor Speedway since 1960 to a little pre-race weekend excitement.

She knew getting the drivers to come out to events like this would be almost impossible, but she figured since those big trucks that carry the cars back and forth from the racetrack to the shop would be looking for something to do.

Most of the race team haulers sit parked on the road outside Atlanta Motor Speedway on Thursday. They are not allowed inside the garage area until Friday morning of race weekend.

She signed up others in the town and gained the support of the Mayor, City Council and other community leaders. The volunteers worked organizing the parade and a special ceremony to honor race car drivers.

The community was excited as 1960 NASCAR Champion Rex White would be the first driver honored in the city's "Speed Lane" racing tribute area.

Folks were there to congratulate Rex and get his photo, book and autograph, as he prepared to lead the NASCAR trucks in a parade thru the small town.

As time for the parade drew closer I started to hear the volunteers voice concern about how many haulers might participate.

The town had limousines lined up ready to drive the NASCAR team truck drivers the two-miles from the track to a free dinner and then back to the track so they could load up

and parade through town.

Problem was, there were no truck drivers to participate in the special occasion. Organizers had only had a reply from two teams committing to helping the town's first big NASCAR experience and the drivers of those two trucks couldn't be found. The limos sat empty and a bunch of mighty fine fried chicken, greens and other home-cooked treats were left for me and Rex and some of our friends to enjoy.

So we drove NASCAR Champ Rex White down Main Street in the Mayberry Patrol Car and the race fans and kids that gathered cheered and smiled, but you also sensed a little disappointment.

Not a single NASCAR truck was willing to make the two-mile drive for the parade and there wasn't a single representative of NASCAR management in the parade or at the ceremony honoring Rex White.

Hats off to Ed Clark, President of Atlanta Motor Speedway. Ed was there for the award presentation and he also made sure the speedway pace car was in the parade.

The rest of the NASCAR world seemed to ignore the little town's effort to reach out and lend their support to a sport where there's apparently been such a drop in ticket sales that NASCAR stopped releasing attendance numbers.

It made me wonder if Ford, Sprint, Target and some of the other sponsors knew that a chance to get their products additional exposure and support a community project at the same time was wasted because someone at the NASCAR home office didn't deem this small town's request important enough to support.

That poor response from NASCAR to Hampton was the low point of race weekend in Georgia. The high point for me happened while patrolling outside the track in the Mayberry Patrol Cat. Someone in a minivan was blinking their lights and honking at me, chasing me down from behind. When I stopped it was my old bud NASCAR great Bobby Allison just running me down to say hello and see how we were. Rex and Bobby still know how to act. Wish some of their manners would rub off on the top brass at NASCAR.



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