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AUGUST 1986

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This is the first of a multi-part series on safety, or the lack of it, in racing. Some names will be withheld to protect the guilty.

EVENT #1

Champion Spark Plug 150 for Charlotte/Daytona Dash cars, Pocono International Raceway, June 7, 1986.

FACT

8 out of a starting field of 30 drivers are not wearing fire-resistant gloves (26.7%).

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EVENT #2

Miller High Life 500 for Winston Cup cars, Pocono International Raceway, June 8, 1986.

FACT

8 out of a starting field of 40 drivers are not wearing gloves (20.0%).

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EVENT #3

30 lap feature for NASCAR Modifieds, Shangri-La Speedway, June 21, 1986.

FACT

4 out of the 22 entered drivers have no protection on their hands (18.2%).

* * * *

NASCAR, what are you thinking of? And just as important, what are the drivers themselves thinking of? Those figures should have all been zero percent.

Those drivers who insisted on gambling with their hands were not the back markers either. Going into the Firecracker 400, five of the aforementioned Winston Cup drivers were in the top 20 in the point standings. And two of the Modified drivers were feature winners in the Northeast last year.

SAFETY

NO LONGER A CONCERN?

PART 1 DRIVER APPAREL

So what possesses an obviously talented and supposedly intelligent driver to forsake basic protection? One of the biggest names in Winston Cup racing was asked why he did not make use of gloves. He looked rather sheepish, but answered that NASCAR did not require them. With the current technology and safety record to date, he said that NASCAR probably does not feel they are necessary because fire is no longer a significant problem.

Baloney! Unfortunately, the fuel cell, while providing excellent safety, seems to have lulled the participants into a mistaken air of complacency. How quickly they forget people such as Tony Siscone, Jim Dunn, and Natz Peters. Fuel cells do break.

One person who has not forgotten the horror of the Siscone accident at Martinsville is Modified driver Tony Hirschman. Hirschman had dropped out of the event and was standing in the pits when Siscone "blew up in front of me, and I could feel the heat."

Hirschman makes sure that he is always completely protected. His attire consists of a three-layer suit with underwear, gloves, balaclava, and Nomex racing shoes. He also doesn't feel that gloves should be an option.

"It should be made mandatory. Guys that drive without gloves, they're the ones fooling with their own lives, not me."

So why doesn't NASCAR come out with stronger language requiring gloves in all of their divisions? Phone conversations this writer had with a NASCAR administrator at both his Daytona Beach office and while on Motor Racing Network's "NASCAR Live" radio talk show produced some rather wimpy answers.

When questioned in the Spring of '85 on radio as to why NASCAR did not mandate fire resistant gloves, he replied that it was from a legal standpoint. Should a driver become injured in an accident, he could sue NASCAR for the reason that the supposed safety equipment contributed to his lack of control, or even caused the driver greater injury.

When asked if that reasoning wouldn't also apply to firesuits and crash helmets, he replied that it possibly could. There was a pause on both our parts, and host Eli Gold handled the embarrassing silence by cutting to the next caller.

This same bureaucrat was asked at the end of June '86

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the same question, but this time the reasoning was the lack of standards. Define fireproof or fire resistant, he asked. What standards will you be using? Who will set the standards?

I asked if ANYTHING wasn't better than bare hands. His reply - "Well, yes."

Shangri-La promoter Dale Campfield is quite outspoken on NASCAR's lack of action on the matter. "Not having fire resistant gloves is asinine. Since 1963, the SCCA has been a leader in having fire equipment to protect drivers. A first-degree burn changes into a third-degree burn because a guy doesn't have a decent pair of fire resistant gloves. We realize they can't be fire proof. But it should be mandatory, just the same as having a roll cage. No two ways about it."

The American Red Cross standard first aid workbook is quite descriptive about a third-degree burn: "The burn goes all the way through the skin. It may involve bone, muscle, and other tissue beneath the skin. The burn may be red and raw with ashy white or black charred areas. Third-degree burns destroy nerve endings and flesh. A major cause of shock in burn victims is a massive loss of body fluid through the burned area. Burns larger than about four centimeters (1½ inches) in diameter will need skin grafts."

Oswego Speedway is one of the leaders in mandatory driver safety. Their rules specifically state that a driver must wear fire retardant socks, underwear, shoes, balaclava, and of course, gloves.

Said promoter Dick O'Brien, "At Oswego, we've been in a lot of these situations before. We've been in fire, blown motor, and spraying hot oil situations, and it's (fire resistant clothing) obviously done its job. You go through that one or twice and you don't want to compromise."

"There are numerous drivers that came up there who didn't want to wear gloves, that they didn't feel comfortable or whatever, but they wore gloves at Oswego. In fact several were black flagged off the track in the warmups and were told to either put the gloves on, or get someone else with gloves on to run the car."

However, try as Oswego might, this is not always the case. This writer was shocked to find one Modified driver readily admitting to always removing his gloves at Oswego once a race gets under way.

"We're not afraid of losing cars from a safety aspect," continued O'Brien. "If a driver doesn't want to adhere to that, we obviously wouldn't want them to be at Oswego Speedway."

It is inconceivable how a person will spend time and money to shave a few hundredths of a second off his lap times, but will neglect the most important part of the race car - the driver. Unfortunately, most people are not far-sighted enough to see the potential expense, pain, and rehabilitation that goes with being in a fire. In their mind they justify the shortcuts by saying that it always happens to the other guy.

They forget that THEY are someone else's "other guy."

Sanctioning bodies have to realize that fire resistant clothing falls into the same category as roll cages and window nets. It is there to not only protect the driver, but to help reduce insurance costs and avoid the sensationalism that often occurs in newspaper coverage of the sport.

This spring four tracks intimidated NASCAR into dropping its 390 cfm carburetor rule to supposedly save the Modified class.

Maybe it's time they instead pressured NASCAR into doing something more meaningful — like possibly saving a driver's life.

Dave Wright's

AUTO RAC'R

SEPTEMBER
1986

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This is the second in a three part series on safety, or the lack of it, in racing. Some names will be withheld to protect the guilty.

Only a sissy has seen the inside of an ambulance or a hospital. Race car drivers are a much tougher breed than that.

For no matter how hard the crash into the concrete wall, no matter how many flips through the corner, a REAL MAN passes up any form of medical treatment and will come back for more.

No brain, no pain.

All too often at most race tracks a driver is allowed to walk away from a serious crash without receiving a medical examination. And there is nothing to stop someone who is not completely healed from climbing back into a race car the following night.

The longer this problem is ignored, the greater the potential for disaster. But how many tracks have rules or operating procedures in place to handle these situations?

Anyone who has been around the sport for any length of time has probably witnessed numerous examples of drivers either passing up medical treatment or being allowed to race under less than ideal circumstances. Two such instances stand out in my mind.

The first, during the latter portion of a 100-lap asphalt modified race, saw a car do a slow spin and stop cross-ways on the track. Another car unable to stop in time T-boned him at full speed in the driver's compartment. The driver was knocked unconscious and the car rolled onto the infield grass.

A few moments after the safety crews arrived on the scene, the driver came to. Surprisingly, the car was hardly damaged. Waving off the medical team, the driver fired up his car and rejoined the field.

SAFETY

NO LONGER A CONCERN?

PART 2

The Macho Image

In the second, two cars came together (one getting airborne) and slammed into the retaining wall. The drivers were knocked cold, and emergency crews spent several minutes around the wreckage. Upon regaining consciousness, both drivers refused further treatment. Yet two hours after the crash, it was apparent from the looks in their eyes and on their faces that neither driver knew who he was or where he was.

Why do participants in auto racing have such an aversion to medical personnel and facilities?

One problem could be that outsiders still do not view auto racing as a legitimate sport. Perhaps racers feel that they must keep up with the macho image exhibited in other sports. And what better exemplifies machismo than "playing hurt?"

In other sports, playing hurt can almost be considered a medal that one wears with pride. However, no other activity requires the constant attention and stamina demanded in motorsports. Racing allows no rest periods for offensive and defensive teams to alternate on the field, no time outs, and no one to cover for your less than 100% performance.

A driver is in charge of one to two tons of material traveling at extremely high speeds. Any decrease in his ability to handle the vehicle increases the chances of it becoming a lethal weapon.

So why do drivers continue to take these risks? As many are hoping to some day make it into the major leagues, they often pattern their lives on the actions of the Winston Cup stars.

Unfortunately, NASCAR's upper echelon are not setting a very good example of taking care of themselves. In fact, they rarely practice what they preach.

For example, in Richard Petty's press kit, one of his releases quotes him as saying:

"When you're in a 500 mile race on a hot day and strapped into a car for four hours or so without a break, you'd better be in good shape or you won't make it. When a driver messes up, he's on the way to a hospital. You're talking serious stuff when you get into something like driver error. When it comes time to go racing, you'd better be in tip-top shape. If you're not prepared, that race track is gonna reach out and gobble you up."

Yet in 1979 Petty had a grinding crash at Pocono and sustained a broken neck. But he kept it a secret and continued to race the full grueling schedule.

Not only was he not in "tip-top shape," he risked possible permanent injury had he been involved in another bad

crash before his neck had healed.

It is especially discouraging to see a sponsor encourage fool-hardy actions by a driver. In a press release dated May 23, 1986, the Miller Brewing Company took great pride that Bobby Allison had driven at Riverside in 1974 with a broken back.

That year two of the IROC events were held on the same weekend, and Allison was involved in a multi-car crash during the Saturday race. Allison was quoted in the release as saying:

"They put me in hospital garments before taking me in for X-rays. Then they stuck me back in a space in the emergency room and must have forgotten about me.

"It was about two hours later when some of my friends from Alabama came in to check on me. I had them get my clothes and we left. I hadn't been dismissed, but we left anyhow. I figured they wouldn't miss me.

"We went out to eat dinner and then I went back to the motel and was getting ready for bed when the phone rang. It was the doctor at the hospital. He asked where I was and what I thought I was doing. He said that he thought I really should come back to the hospital since the X-rays had shown that I broke my back in the crash.

"I told the doctor that I wasn't coming back, but I promised him I'd try to drive a bit more carefully in the future.

"I got up the next morning and I hurt, but I was determined to race anyhow. I never got off the pavement because the bumps really made the pain so much worse. I went on, broken back and all, and won the race. But it took a long time to get over the pain."

What is also frightening is how some members of the media actually glorify and encourage such behavior. On June 15th, CBS-TV presented live coverage of the Miller American 400 at Michigan. Much of their attention focused on the injuries Harry Gant had received the previous week at Pocono.

He was suffering from a bruised heart and lungs, and in a pre-race interview after just buckling up admitted that sitting there motionless was the only time he didn't hurt. Much of the coverage that afternoon focused on the "amazing" performance of the injured driver.

As all three of these examples had "happy endings," the average short tracker is led to believe that driving while hurt is OK. As long as he can somehow get himself into the seat, everything will work out just fine.

Yet what Petty, Allison, and Gant did was risky, fool-hardy, and damn stupid. What would have happened had they been involved in, or caused, another serious accident due to their injuries? Could NASCAR, or the sport as a whole, recover from the uproar that would result?

It's time race tracks started taking an active stance when it comes to injuries. Drivers involved in serious incidents should be required to have a MANDATORY examination at a qualified medical facility. And that does not mean the back of the track ambulance.

A completed examination by a track approved physician, along with information provided by the driver's doctor, should be required before a driver is allowed back on to the track. Any reports of incidents at other tracks should be similarly investigated.

Race car drivers are not men of steel. The human body can only take so much abuse during the deceleration that comes with a crash. Seeking medical treatment and sitting out races until properly healed does not make you a wimp. It is a sign of an intelligent person.

As the saying goes, a man has to know his limitations.

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WHAT'S IT LIKE TO RUN WITH HIM

SAFETY

NO LONGER A CONCERN?

PART 3: TRACK OPERATIONS

Just about every race track has in place some set of rules dictating safety guidelines for the competitors and their equipment. But who polices the tracks themselves to make sure that they are operating in a safe manner?

This question was partially answered during the recent insurance crisis. Suddenly the insurance underwriters were having more of a say as to how the tracks should be run. Not only did the promoters find their premiums reaching astronomical levels, but many were presented with a list of changes that had to be made to their facilities. No compliance - no coverage. No racing.

The changes were required because unsafe conditions were often found to exist at some tracks. While as a whole the facilities in the Northeast were far superior to what existed in other parts of the country, there were still situations that should never have occurred.

The promoters at these tracks should have examined their facilities and spotted these problems on their own, without needing to be told by an outside source.

One of the greatest concerns of the insurance companies so far are tracks that have their pit areas located in the infield. If a race car went out of control at these tracks, very often the only thing that would stop it would be another parked race team.

The insurance companies required complete protection of the infield areas through the installation of guard rails along the straightaways and into the corners. Crowd control fences were also recommended. They also addressed such items as cable reinforcing in fences, and discouraged promotional events such as powder puffs and media races.

However, what the insurance companies have been concentrating on so far are physical items. How a track is operated can also be considered dangerous, and has yet to be addressed.

One of the areas that could use improvement is in the dispatching of safety vehicles. I have often found that the most dangerous part of racing is being in the way of a vehicle speeding towards the scene of an accident or taking a shortcut through the infield.

While not in the majority, there are some wrecker operators who seem to be frustrated race car drivers. Believe me, nothing is more memorable than being caught in the path of two wreckers trying to be the first one to reach an accident. Especially when I am standing in what I thought was a safe part of the infield.

Too many times I have seen wrecker crews sitting idle after a multi-car incident, while at other times everything rolls for a simple single-car spin. The problem usually is that the workers couldn't see the entire track, or didn't know what the others were doing.

The only proper way for safety and clean-up crews to operate is under the direction of someone in the control tower. That person should be the one determining, by radio, what vehicles are needed and the route they should take to reach the problem.

These are not the only practices which make me cringe. Over the years I have seen, and continue to see:

- 1.) Photographers and video cameramen allowed, and

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MICHAEL J. MARRER *continued*

even encouraged, to shoot from areas outside the track that have no protective barriers.

2.) Race crews watching the race while standing on pit road. At one track in particular you can't see or hear a car coming. Out of the corner of his eye, what a person is likely to see is a wave of people jumping back several feet, like a row of dominoes knocked over. Just as that person does move back, a car goes whizzing past just inches from his toes.

3.) People with no knowledge of the sport driving pace cars during caution periods of the race.

4.) Unsecured and unanchored material being used as temporary guard rails.

5.) Ditches running alongside the track that can send an errant car flipping violently.

6.) Improper landscaping in runoff areas, causing additional damage to race vehicles.

7.) Animals (the four-legged variety) allowed in the pits.

Yes, race tracks today are in much better shape from a safety standpoint than they were years ago. But they could be improved even more.

It would behoove every track promoter for one night to just take a tour of his facility during the course of the show. The important thing is for him to keep his eyes, his ears, and his mind open.

Better he should find and fix a problem himself, before someone else finds it for him.

The future, the reputation, and the independence of the sport demands it.