



# Slippery Slope

Short tracks have to put the fans back in their business plans

**T**he Corporate landscape in Canada is filled with promises that the customer should always come first. Although this appears to be a universally sound business practice, some institutions have been more successful than others in making this vision a profitable reality.

Unfortunately, most area speedways are not going to win any service awards from race fans for the promoters' attempts to make them a top priority. Successful promoters say that fans are the most important part of their weekly program, but do their actions really support these claims?

Throughout Ontario, many speedways have taken the fan out of the equation by operating mostly on back-gate receipts. Operating costs are collected from teams for their admission to the track and redistributed in the form of the weekly purse. At a distance, this model may appear sustainable, as the dedicated teams who love to race provide a stable stream of income when they return to the track each week.

However, the number of teams competing has not changed significantly in recent years and depending on this small group poses a considerable risk. Relying on a steady income stream from the back gate without a significant effort to measure the overall health of the speedway, through the voice of the race fan, encourages complacency.

Owners and promoters are at risk of waking up to the realization that minor problems have developed into a financial crisis. Too many speedways have been closed through the years because the owners did not react to the changing environment quickly enough.

As the cost to field a competitive racecar continues to rise, each team's need to secure funding also increases. Tracks that rely primarily on back gate receipts collected from a fixed group of individuals may be limited in their ability to react to the rising costs. Without increased purses, race teams are required to seek financial support from new sponsors. Unfortunately, teams that are unable to secure additional funding may be forced to hang up their helmets for good.

With fewer teams competing on the track, entertainment value and interest to the race fans will diminish. Sparse stands make it more difficult for the remaining race teams to demonstrate value to their sponsors, who depend on the visibility,

enthusiasm and loyalty of the race fans. A very slippery slope, indeed!

On a positive note, the pitfalls illustrated above are avoidable and several area speedways are successful in providing great value to their customers. For the remaining tracks, the time is now to deliver on their promise to make the race fans their top priority. The race fans hold the key to continued and sustainable growth at our local speedways, and our collective efforts must start and end with them.

But, how do you encourage more fans to visit their local speedway, spend more money while they are in attendance and leave the track feeling appreciated and satisfied that they received value for the entertainment dollar?

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Tracks are facing increased competition for race fans' attention and the promoters must realize that a potential customer's decision about where they spend their income is not solely decided by the action that they witness on the speedway; they need to make each race fan feel like they are attending an event. Grassroots motorsports provides family-friendly entertainment, which must be reflected in every aspect of the facility, the service that it provides and its promotional platform.

Although many race tracks enjoy the loyalty of a small group of dedicated fans, the promoters must market the track to the casual fan, offering amenities and convenience that they expect from other entertainment options, including the comfort of their own homes.

Inefficient process and technology limitations that prevent fans from quickly entering the track or at the concession and souvenir stands must be eliminated and long lineups for an insufficient number of run-down washrooms is not acceptable. The evening's program should both start and end on time with limited interruptions, while not exceeding the attention span of a casual or young race fan.

Each track needs to provide general-interest entertainment for the entire family, which extends beyond the racing action. Many area speedways should be commended for their efforts to appeal to the young fans. Junior fan clubs, regular kids rides, draws and door prizes should all be continued. A track mascot to entertain the youngsters may also be a welcome addition.

The event must be interactive, keeping the fans entertained and informed on the latest developments, both on and off the track. Great announcers will create excitement throughout the evening by celebrating the heroes and villains that compete at the speedway each week. Pit and trackside reports can also help to keep fan interest during breaks in the racing action. As fans get to know their local drivers, they will develop favourites and cheer for them week in and week out.

The Internet may be the first exposure of a potential fan to the speedway and each track must provide a professional, informative and media rich website that is kept up to date. Equal effort to create a souvenir program provides the speedway with the opportunity to send a reminder home with their customers each week.

Race fans must feel like they are receiving great value for their entertainment dollar. Admission should be regularly benchmarked against other entertainment options and prices should be set at the beginning of the year and held consistent throughout the season. A flexible rain-out policy should provide the race fan with the option of redeeming at their convenience, instead of limiting them to the next scheduled race date.

Partnering with local businesses or events within the community to give away tickets will help to reintroduce people to the speedways and at a minimum, will help to boost concession sales.

Efforts to make the race fans come first, in combination with a consistently enforced rulebook, designed with racer affordability in mind, is a winning formula. Large fields that provide exciting entertainment at a well-maintained, efficiently run and effectively promoted speedway will help to rebuild the fan base at local tracks.

Above everything else, each race fan should feel like their participation in the event has been appreciated by the competitors, track owners and promoters who all welcome them back to the speedway each week. ♦