



Rules to live by

Guidelines for those seeking the return of travelling series'

➤ In a previous column, I declared that the demise of the ALSTAR Late Model series actually had a positive impact on the weekly programs at area speedways. Large car counts and strong competition at the tracks throughout last year appears to support my claim.

However, the overwhelming success in '07 of Ontario's traveling series, in combination with large car counts for the special events indicates that there may be a greater appetite for a traveling series than I initially gave credit for. But, what lessons can be applied from past failures to ensure that a successful traveling series and strong weekly program can co-exist?

The likelihood for success or failure of any venture is directly linked to its guiding principles and the degree to which its strategy is consistently executed. To be successful, the needs of the race teams, sponsors, tracks and fans must all be considered, which have led to some guiding principles listed below.

➤ Don't battle weekly tracks

With a finite number of race teams, how can a new series survive without drawing upon the weekly racers to fill its roster? The formula for success has already been established, with the special events that conclude each race season. On these occasions, competitors from each track are brought together to defend the honour of their local speedway by competing for the right to be crowned the best.

In fact, many regional racing series across North America have enjoyed considerable success by following this same strategy. Local heroes competing against the best traveling teams is guaranteed to provide an exciting evening of racing for the fans. Existing special events are already the most prestigious dates on the motorsport calendar, offering the greatest participation and highest payouts. Combining the existing special events into a single, marketable entity will further elevate the status of these events, attracting new competitors, fans and sponsors.

➤ Economical for teams

All winning sport franchises have one common trait; a ladder to success that includes developmental division to support the top rung. As the premier division, late models have always been the corner-

stone of past series, which would not have been as successful without their strong fan support. But, as in racing, focusing solely on the lead of your immediate predecessor may result in tracks that lead directly into a concrete wall.

In grassroots racing, the Thunder Cars are best positioned to fill this need and often provide the best racing at an economical cost to race teams. Although a new series that features two divisions greatly adds to its complexity, its sustainability as a marketable attraction far exceeds any short term growing pains.

Many race teams aspire to attain a higher level of competition, but moving up a division may not be within financial reach for all teams. Unfortunately, some of these teams may eventually lose interest or become priced out of the sport. Providing new challenges to veteran competitors will encourage these teams to remain in the sport longer. It also provides an opportunity for young drivers to gain valuable experience adapting to variety of tracks and competitors before graduating to the late model division.

"Perhaps it is time for the ALSTAR brand to re-appear"

The special events in '07 were able to successfully draw a full field of race teams. But, continued success is dependant on a large number of competitors and further revisions to the current strategy would help to encourage even participation.

Race teams who support a single speedway often cite the high cost to travel as the primary reasons for not competing at other tracks. Increasing the tow money that is guaranteed to each competitor will help to offset the travel expense, especially for teams that are at risk of not qualifying for the main event.

➤ High exposure

The proposed special event schedule will ensure a quality product on the race track. But close competition on the speedway does not guarantee success. By providing free admission for two members of each team, the focus of each promoter must switch from the competitors to putting fans in the stands.

The competitors have equal responsibility to promote the unique identity of the series and some of the cost savings should be reinvested into the professional appearance of their team. The accessibility of its drivers led to the explosive growth of NASCAR and is a sound strategy to follow. Requiring each team to produce hero cards to distribute during autograph sessions will ensure that race fans leave the track with a reminder of an exciting evening at the speedway. By providing value for their entertainment dollar, these fans will be encouraged to return to the speedway for a regular night of racing.

A high number of competitors who must qualify for the feature, close racing action, interactive activities and full stands will transform a race into an event. It is this exciting atmosphere that attracts the media's attention and helps to bring new fans and sponsors to the sport.

➤ Co-operation

The plans for a new series cannot be made in isolation and accommodations to the weekly program must be made in order for it to flourish. The success of the special events in '08 will require a high number of competitors to travel to each speedway, independent of any efforts to recognize a series champion. To attract the highest number of competitors for each race, track promoters must collaborate when creating their respective schedules. Race teams must have the freedom to participate in the special events without sacrificing their position in the weekly standings. This can only be accomplished if they are not scheduled to compete at their home track on the same weekend.

The '08 special event schedule must also reflect the needs of grassroots competitors, with events spread throughout the season to allow each team to prepare for the next race. Track promoters must also continue to work toward a common set of rules to limit the amount of change required to compete at each speedway.

By following these guiding principals, there is an opportunity for a new traveling series to thrive and its success will undoubtedly make a contribution to the overall health of the local racing community. Perhaps it is time for the ALSTAR brand to re-appear or the struggling Weekend Warrior Series to re-emerge as influential members of the racing community. ♦