



Opening too soon?

Can creativity overcome the risks of racing in the Spring?

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Each year, speedway promoters struggle to find ways to attract fans to the track during the opening weeks of the season.

Cold temperatures and the high probability for rainouts have kept many would-be race fans at home, watching the Stanley cup playoffs or NASCAR races on TV.

Having a great start to the year is essential to a successful campaign and each track takes a different approach to starting off on the right foot. Innovative tracks have enjoyed considerable success, while many other speedways seem to stumble out of the gate.

Race teams spend all winter preparing for the new season and begin their count-downs to the first race, in early spring.

Anticipation builds as raceday approaches, but often leads to disappointment when the opportunity to compete is taken away by Mother Nature. Or the thousands of fans promised to a new sponsor fail to materialize. The question must be asked: is the start of the Southern Ontario racing season a few weeks too soon?

Several speedways disagree, and choose to open their facilities as soon as the snow is cleared. As a race fan and competitor, the start of the season can't come soon enough.

But as a professional, I can't help but question their business plans. Some of these speedways appear to be less concerned with entertaining the fans than maximizing revenue from the back gate.

If a positive cash flow can be achieved by following this model, it is no wonder that their pace truck has a blue flashing light. Even if only one event is completed early in the season, the absence of promotion means that each competitor is merely helping to pad their local track's bank account.

Other tracks have conceded defeat to Mother Nature, opting to delay the start until warmer weather arrives. Local, grass-roots racing is a family-centric sport, and must appeal to everyone, not just the die-hard fans.

Cold, damp evenings make for a long night at the track that even the close competition, drama and excitement displayed on the speedway will be challenged to overcome. Perhaps the health of our sport may actually improve if the rainy season is

cut out of the schedule.

Despite all of our planning, hard work and best intentions, race teams always run out of time prior to the start of the season. Delaying opening night by a few weeks would allow more teams to be ready for the first points night. A positive by-product, for the tracks, is that they would benefit from improved racing throughout the season.

A later start to the race season would provide the opportunity for additional test days. And the improved competition would offer better entertainment to race fans.

When race day finally arrives, tracks have a responsibility to the race teams that that they are fully prepared for opening night. There's only one opportunity for a first impression, and spring cleaning and general maintenance must be complete.

Faced with competing against the hockey playoffs and cold, damp weather, are short track promoters doing themselves a disservice by opening so early in the Spring?

A great night of racing can be ruined by any negative experience. Being adequately staffed with friendly, knowledgeable assistance is also a must.

Successful organizations focus their effort on exceeding customer expectations, hoping to be rewarded with the loyalty of their clientele for many years to come.

Race fans must believe that the track will provide value for their entertainment dollar. Developing this trust will reap greater rewards if it is established early in the season.

Despite the inclement Spring weather, some tracks have been very successful in attracting fans to the speedway for opening night. Building awareness for the start of the season should be considered top priority, and partnering with the local media is a sound strategy.

Simply stating that the speedway is open for business is not enough. Each track must provide a compelling reason for fans to frequent their facility.

Peterborough Speedway should be commended for hosting a fan appreciation night to kick-start its season. By offering free admission, the track was able to reintroduce itself to fans and overcome the uncertain weather by eliminating this risk to its consumers.

Reasonable concession prices were popular with those in attendance, which likely exceeded admission sales had the speedway decided to rest on its past laurels. Through a positive first experience, new fans and regulars will think fondly of their first experience of 2008 and will undoubtedly return to the track throughout the year.

In the Niagara region, Merrittville Speedway advertised heavily on the local television station. Traditionally, tracks have focused their attention on radio promotions, but the high number of stations result in a fragmented market.

Although the price for TV advertising is much greater, it may have provided a better return to the speedway by reaching a larger and broader audience. Merrittville's incentive to race fans was to feature a premiere touring division on its opening night.

This series arrived at the track with its own dedicated following and was enhanced by new fans who responded to Merrittville's advertising.

The track's regular divisions supported the headline class, and the talent and professionalism demonstrated by its competitors was sure to leave a lasting impression on the thousands in attendance.

By delighting its race fans on opening night, Merrittville is sure to see them return to the speedway many times during the summer.

As demonstrated by the tracks listed above, local speedways can find success during uncertain Spring weather.

By understanding the importance of a strong start to the season and planning events to attract fans to the track, both Peterborough and Merrittville Speedways have fulfilled their obligations to local competitors. I encourage everyone to value these tracks for their efforts by paying them a visit in 2008. ♦