



# Show us the money

Purses, car counts and crowd sizes are a 'chicken and egg' scenario

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**Grassroots racing has always been a 'follow the leader' sport, whether competing on track or replicating the set-up, engine or special parts used by the most recent race winner.**

The highest level of stock car racing is not any different and follows a similar cycle. Single-car teams have been displaced by large organizations and big-bar-soft-springs, coil bind and bump stops have all taken their turn as the 'hot' setup.

In recent months, the media has grown accustomed to Roush-Fenway, Gillett-Evernham and DEI-Ginn; these mergers with external business partners provide evidence of the financial struggles facing many of the sport's elite teams. As Felix Sabates so wisely stated several years ago, "To make a small fortune in racing, you have to start with a big one."

Across all divisions, rules have been amended in an effort to make racing more affordable and the cost-saving opportunities offered by the 'Car of Tomorrow, crate engines, spec tires and claim rules have been exhausted. For racing to continue to prosper, a different approach must be explored. In many cases, improving 'the purse' may represent the last lever to pull.

The NASCAR Canadian Tire series is clearly positioned at the top of Canada's stock car ladder. Featuring professional, multi-car teams with large budgets, strong personalities and a schedule that criss-crosses our nation, the series does a great job at mimicking its big brothers from the South.

But that is where all similarities end. The harsh reality is that even with NASCAR's considerable backing, the former CASCAR competitors are struggling, as evidenced by the low cars counts throughout most of the season. With an average payout of only \$2,200 per competitor, it's no wonder several teams skipped the recent Western swing.

For the NASCAR Canadian Tire series to remain as a viable entity, their payouts must reflect their position as Canada's premiere touring series.

Increased purses require the support of promotional partners who recognize the value of loyal race fans. It is through their dedication to the sport that sponsors can realize a return on their investment. But, without a full field of professionally prepared teams, the event offers little more

than an over-priced night of racing at the local speedway.

Fewer fans at the track hamper each team's ability to secure promotional partners and smaller budgets often result in less prepared cars or more teams opting not to participate.

Unfortunately, this leaves everyone arguing over whether the chicken or the egg should come first. Let's just hope that most teams started out with a large fortune!

Unfortunately, local grassroots competitors also struggle with the economic hardships faced by NASCAR's top teams. But for most teams who operate on limited funds as a hobby, we are not able to follow NASCAR's lead by attracting equity partners to our race teams.

When combined with a sluggish economy, increasing fuel prices and wet weather that has cancelled events and kept many race fans at home, the 2008 season has brought further challenges to speedway promoters and competitors.

Several area speedways have recog-



Racers need more money if they're to show up in big numbers.

PHOTO BY DAVEFRANKSPHOTOS.COM

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nized the need to increase the purse and as a racer, I applaud them for their efforts. Competitors must also recognize that it is unreasonable to expect each speedway to burden this responsibility alone, without being offered something in return. Speedways must remain profitable or risk waving the checkered flag for good.

In an effort to mitigate this risk, Flamboro Speedway introduced a scalable payout for the Late Model division, based on the number of competitors who start each feature. The intent was to encourage higher participation by hosting a longer race and bolster the weekly payout for a full field of cars. In

contrast, a smaller field will result in a shorter race and a smaller purse.

On paper, this appears to be a reasonable compromise. Unfortunately, it has not been successful for the competitors or the track. As a result of wet weather, on track incidents and poor scheduling, the number of competitors has rarely resulted in a longer race and full payout, leaving many teams frustrated with less track time and a small purse.

The root cause of Flamboro's struggles in 2008 is its decision to only count each competitor's top 18 finishes toward the championship. Although I support a flexible schedule, the number of events each team is allowed to 'drop' is too many. Instead, the track should work more closely with other speedways to offer competitors the night off when special events at other tracks are scheduled, while limiting the number of 'drop nights' to one or two.

Other speedways have also revised their payout to provide competitors a larger purse. Delaware has redeployed its points fund to the weekly purse, and Sunset Speedway recently announced a substantial increase to the feature winner of its Thunder Car division.

Although these are all steps in the right direction, each speedway's ability to significantly increase the payout must begin now while making plans for 2009. Each track must co-operate to avoid competing race dates and an extra effort by both race teams and the tracks must be made to attract new promotional partners and fans to the sport.

In turn, full stands will become a measurement toward each track's ability to increase its payout by securing the attention of potential sponsors. Be sure to do your part to support your local speedway and race teams by bringing a friend to the track. ♦