



Late models or demo cars?

Rough-housing is the exception rather than the rule at local tracks

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The end of the race season in Ontario is marked by several prestigious races that are contested over a longer distances and reward competitors with larger purses. In 2007, the finish of many of these special events had few cars remaining and closely resembled a demolition derby rather than a pro stock car race.

If these events truly do attract the region's top competitors, why can't they showcase their talents by providing greater entertainment for race fans? Although many in attendance appreciate a good wreck, it is the promise of strong competition that originally attracted us to this great sport.

Many teams defend their tactics by pointing out that many of Ontario's facilities lack a second groove that provides close side-by-side racing. Although there may be some truth to this claim, there is still a person in control behind the wheel who makes a conscious decision whether to slow down, or keep their right foot firmly planted to the floor.

The high number of rainouts and the sluggish economy have both presented many challenges to speedway promoters during 2008 and further setbacks are unwelcome. The high number of accidents has a direct impact to the number of competitors supporting each track's weekly program, as many teams are forced to the sidelines while they make repairs.

With a sound assumption that a second groove will not miraculously appear during the off-season, competitors and promoters must seek opportunities to address this growing concern.

A recent article in Circle Track magazine featured a 'pay-per-lap' Late Model race that paid all competitors a set amount for each lap completed and a bonus for laps led. Could this be the missing component required to address the concerns of promoters, competitors and fans, taking grassroots racing to the next level?

In previous columns, I have advocated the need for a larger purse that is distributed more evenly throughout the field to help cover the increased cost to compete. It should come as no surprise that this plea comes from a racer, and places a greater burden of responsibility on promoters. Applying the concepts explored in the 'pay-per-lap' article may provide a way to

satisfy my wishes while simultaneously protecting each track's bank account.

The top-heavy purses of many special events offer little distinction between the middle and rear of the field. This provides limited incentive for those who are not challenging for the win to complete the full race distance, especially with the high likelihood of wrecking and the soaring cost for race fuel.

Outside of the racing community, nobody questions a client for not paying the full amount to a contractor for a job that is only half done. Despite this universally accepted principle, race teams have not been governed by this approach and I question why we should be any different.

By applying this same principle to the racing community through linking each race team's payout to the number of laps completed, competitors will be forced to reconsider attempting high-risk maneuvers that could end their races early.

A decrease in on-track incidents will result in greater competition, increasing the excitement for the fans. But, can this strategy be translated to each speedway's weekly program to improve the health of local, grassroots racing? In my opinion, the answer is a resounding "YES!"

Why can't they showcase their talents by providing greater entertainment ... ?

A pay-per lap strategy for the weekly program is equally effective in redistributing the purse more evenly, but must guarantee a minimum payout to all competitors, matching the tow money currently offered to non-qualifiers. The remainder of the purse must be tied directly to each competitor's on-track performance.

Many tracks feature a handicap system that forces the championship contenders to begin each race at the rear of the field. A lap leader bonus will provide additional funds to those teams that start near the front. It is these marginal teams that require the extra funding the most, which will help to close the performance gap to those favoured to win.



If racers were paid for finishing races, would the carnage – especially at the late-season specials – be reduced?

PHOTO BY JOE HAMILTON

But, the teams that start each race from the rear must also be given consideration, as it is from these competitors that the purse will be redistributed. There is a reason why they are considered the top competitors and the lap leader bonus is still available to them if they are able to cleanly race their way to the front.

An equal bonus must also be available for each position gained throughout the race. This will ensure that drivers are not financially penalized for starting from the rear and provide equal incentive to all race teams to put on a good show.

However, on-track altercations that result in a black flag should also disqualify teams from this bonus. Fan attendance will be bolstered because the reduction in accidents will result in more action, drama and excitement, providing greater value to race fans for their entertainment dollar.

For this plan to be successful, area speedways must invest in new technology to introduce a transponder scoring system to keep better track of the action. Despite their best efforts, manual scoring has resulted in many disagreements over the final results.

An automated system will eliminate this conflict and when combined with a simple spreadsheet, accurately calculating the evening's payout will not be a chore.

Through an improved distribution of the purse and a new-found respect among competitors, the improvement in competition will result in renewed interest from fans, race teams and track owners.

The synergies that result from adopting this strategy could offset many of the challenges experienced in 2008, promising a bright future for local, grassroots racing. ♦