



FROM THE SIDELINES

Standardized rules would benefit grassroots asphalt racers

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With the season now in the record books and race teams and track promoters taking a well deserved break, the opportunity to reflect back on the season is welcomed by all. But in 2008, the biggest stories had nothing to do with the on-track action or drama from the pits.

The 2008 season did not lack newsworthy events. Each speedway featured intense battles and many Canadians gained recognition on the local and international stage. But with so many races cancelled due to rain, the headlines were dominated by Mother Nature.

This made it difficult for race teams to gain momentum. And when combined with the high price of fuel, many would-be race fans opted to stay at home. With fewer tales to recollect about "the one that got away," the grassroots racing community must find new ways to generate interest during the off-season.

Although my own race team spent more time on the sidelines than on the track during 2008, it provided me with the opportunity to return to my roots, visiting both asphalt and dirt speedways as a fan. From this new perspective, the struggles of some race teams and speedways became very apparent.

In previous columns, I have offered suggestions to keep race fans engaged during uncertain economic conditions. As fuel prices reach skyward and stock markets continue to plunge, equal attention must be paid to competitors, whose pockets are hurting just as much.

Faced with smaller budgets, many teams have been forced to cut back on their race schedule or have decided to compete in a more economical division. With so many choices available to them, they should not have difficulty finding a new place to race. Although the notion of everyone having a place to race may appear to be a positive situation, too many choices result in cannibalization across each division. The unfortunate result is a program featuring small fields and nights that drag on far too long.

Grassroots racing is built upon a foundation of local teams who remain loyal to a specific speedway and I doubt that limiting the number of choices will keep them away from the sport. With fewer divisions to choose from, race teams will simply con-

tinue to build cars that conform to what is offered in their own backyard.

To be successful, each track must have the opportunity to draw from the greatest number of competitors. Most dirt and asphalt speedways provide a tiered class structure that includes a four cylinder division, an intermediate class for production-based vehicles and purpose-built race cars at the top of the ladder.

I am not suggesting that there isn't a place for other niche divisions, as each race fan enjoys the variety that they offer. However, if a full field of cars is unlikely, they should not be part of the track's weekly core program.

As a pavement competitor, I envy the standardized rules enjoyed by teams that race on dirt speedways. They have the option to compete when and where they desire, which is made possible by following a common rule structure. It is the absence of this standard that prevents the region's paved ovals from becoming more successful.

For this challenge to be overcome, a standard platform must be jointly developed by area speedways to find common ground that will allow more teams to compete against each other. The close competition witnessed at special events proves that this is not an impossible task.

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But what prevents paved speedways from working more closely together? Each speedway is faced with only two options; to collaborate with other tracks or to defect by creating their own rules in isolation. It is not difficult to grasp that the entire industry would be better off with greater collaboration.

The greatest debate in the four-cylinder divisions is whether vehicles with overhead camshafts or multiple valves per cylinder should be allowed to compete. Although intended to be an entry-level division, safety must remain a priority.

Finding a compromise that keeps everyone happy is essential, as the four-cylinder division is where many competitors enter the sport.

In the Thunder Car division, where OEM parts are becoming more expensive and difficult to find, allowing aftermarket alternatives that do not provide a performance advantage must find their way into each track's rule book. The role of the crate engine must be determined, as several different platforms have been adopted.

Allowing General Motors' 602 offering that has been adopted by many Limited Late Model competitors would help teams to advance to the next division without requiring them to break the bank account.

With deep pockets becoming a requirement to be competitive in the Late Model divisions, track promoters and competitors must decide what the future holds for each classification. The original vision of the Weekend Warriors Series included merging the Limited and Late Models in a single entity. But as the Late Models continue to become more advanced, it is unlikely a merger will be possible.

The growth in popularity of the Limited Late Models provides evidence that few changes are required. But in the Late Model division, tracks are divided over which of the major sanctioning bodies rulebook should be followed. Unfortunately, some speedways have remained undecided and as a result, their competitors do not conform to any of the major sanctions from 'the South.'

For the Late Model division to continue to grow, undecided tracks must completely adopt either the ASA or ACT rulebook. With common guidelines in place, teams will be free to travel to other speedways for both regular and special events, including the most prestigious and highest paying races on the American calendar.

But it is the fear of travel felt by some promoters that will prevent them from working together. Through the development of unique rules designed to keep competitors loyal to their track, speedways continue to operate by what is perceived to be their own best interests.

Unfortunately, many of the paved speedways have incorrectly reached the same conclusion, preventing teams from 'traveling' without extensive changes.

Although I hope that Ontario's paved speedways will eventually see the light, it is the lack of collaboration that makes me consider trading my Late Model for a fishing boat. ♦