

Speed up races to slow critics

Commentary: Networks airing NASCAR shouldn't shoulder the total blame for sagging TV ratings.

By **JENNA FRYER**
The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Sagging television ratings have made NASCAR an easy target for critics who have panned everything from the cars, the races and the drivers themselves as reason for tuning out the past several seasons.

Listen carefully, though, and many a die-hard fan will explain it's actually the quality of the broadcast, not NASCAR, that has driven them away.

What had been a slight grumble about unsatisfying TV coverage — an animated gopher, negative announcers, unbalanced coverage and missed story lines — turned into a roar of frustration from fans following Saturday night's Sprint Cup Series race at Phoenix International Raceway.

Fox had no postrace reaction from Kyle Busch, who had victory snatched away by a late caution and NASCAR's version of overtime. And after devoting considerable air time on Denny Hamlin, who raced just 10 days after surgery to repair a torn knee ligament, Fox did not follow up on Hamlin's decision to stay in his car the entire event.

Fans instead sat through two commercial breaks after the checkered flag that totaled almost seven minutes, then were shown brief interviews with only the top three finishers.

After investing almost four hours on the broadcast, the pay-off just seemed sort of flat.

The frustration is not lost on Fox producer Barry Landis, who two days after the event had the hindsight to recognize what the network could have done differently.

"We didn't show exactly what happened: Mr. Kyle Busch didn't decline, but adamantly refused to be interviewed," Landis said Monday. "Denny Hamlin's situation, we followed him all day and certainly would have loved to do a follow-up. But the desire to get him out of the car to see the doctors ... we were standing by him waiting, we just ran out of time."

And time is at the core of this particular broadcast, which is being singled out as the prime example of why fans have grown frustrated with watching races on TV.

But in fairness to Fox, the network was backed into a corner Saturday night largely because

UP NEXT

WHAT: Samsung 500
WHEN: 3 p.m. Sunday
WHERE: Fort Worth, Texas
TELEVISION: FOX
2009 WINNER: Jeff Gordon

of Phoenix's quizzical decision to lengthen its race by 63 laps. Because of NASCAR's standard start times this season, Phoenix officials shortsightedly petitioned NASCAR to add laps Saturday night so it's estimated crowd of 70,000 would see an actual night race.

Doing so, though, wreaked havoc on both Fox's national broadcast and East Coast viewers, who had to stick with the broadcast until almost midnight for what turned out to be incomplete coverage. Because the extra laps and overtime pushed the broadcast 50 minutes past its allotted time, Fox was forced to make hard coverage decisions on the fly.

Among them was giving extended coverage to Ryan Newman, who snapped a 77-race winless streak with a come-from-nowhere victory. Landis said the length of Newman's drought warranted the extra time spent with the driver in Victory Lane, and the decision paid off.

Adding laps made Saturday night's race longer than all but three events in 2009, and almost an hour longer than both of the Phoenix races last season.

At 3 hours, 48 minutes, it was far too long of an event, and that's something NASCAR needs to address.

There's not a lot Fox, or any network for that matter, can do when races run long. With firm commitments to advertisers and local affiliates, commercial breaks are obligatory and getting off the air in a reasonable amount of time is not negotiable.

And while it's frustrating that network coverage is often caught in a commercial when a caution comes out on the track — one of the loudest arguments made by television viewers — broadcast partners can't be expected to predict when an on-track incident will occur.

There are things that could and should be done differently, and in many instances both NASCAR and its broadcast partners have worked hard this season to make changes designed solely to produce a better product.

Saturday night was a multi-layered setback, but one from which NASCAR can recover.



Photos by John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Cyrus Fenderson of Merriconeag, left, tries to work around tight defending by Stephen Webel of Falmouth. Some high school athletes say they are drawn to Ultimate Frisbee for the sport's freewheeling sensibility.

FRISBEE

Continued from Page C1

said Justin Hovey, a track and field athlete who left track practice a few minutes early to catch his game. "There's probably 50 different ways to throw a Frisbee."

The league had its first set of games last week at the Cumberland Fairgrounds, and it will include six more Wednesday games, one indoor tournament, a league-wide group practice and the state championships.

The winner and second place finisher there can earn a chance to represent Maine in the New England regional high school championships in June.

The basics of Ultimate are simple. It's seven players on each side, at least two of them girls. The disc can be advanced in any direction, but players can't run with it.

A point is scored when it is caught in the end zone — a 20-by-40 foot rectangle at either end of the field. In this league, games go to 13 points or 5 p.m. — whichever comes first. They begin at 3:30.

Players seem to take to the self-policing at games. There are no officials to determine if the disc went out of bounds — just a good, old-fashioned honor system.

Take Jake Lyscars, a senior at Merriconeag, who was introduced to the sport during



Merriconeag's **Zak Konstantio**, left, and Falmouth's **Anna Keeler** collide reaching for a pass. The league features games, a league-wide practice and a state tournament.

the summer.

"I fell in love with Frisbee," said Lyscars. "It definitely appeals to an individual who wants to be independent. It's all self-coached. We go play at lunch every day. It's fun, good natured and friendly. But it can get aggressive."

Other teams exist around the state, from South Portland to Bangor, but they have not yet joined the league.

"We wanted to take the next step and form a league this year," said Alex Pozzy, one of two coaches for Falmouth, who also runs an adult league

in the summer.

"One of our guys is a track star. Another just joined us from lacrosse. We have more athletes than not. It's not hippy kids running around anymore."

Among his players: Alyssa Yeung, an All-State middle hitter from the Falmouth volleyball team, runners-up this year in the Class A state championship.

"Everyone here is serious about the sport, but also relaxed," said Yeung. "I think the sport has changed a lot from what it was stereotypically. And this group of people is just so much fun."

Sean Enking, a senior at Freeport who also plays soccer, had several teammates who regularly play shirtless and barefoot.

"We like to have fun," he said. "We usually practice barefoot. It's just more comfortable."

Ultimately, it's a sport rooted in independence, and fairness.

Take the final rule in a list of 10 widely used by Ultimate leagues across the country: 10. Spirit of the Game — "Ultimate stresses sportsmanship and fair play. Competitive play is encouraged, but never at the expense of respect between players, adherence to the rules, and the basic joy of play."

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DEGREES

Continued from Page C1

ers sign free-agent contracts or amateur-tryout contracts with minor-league or NHL teams.

University of Maine forward David deKastrozza signed with the South Carolina Stingrays of the ECHL, and Black Bears goalie Dave Wilson signed an amateur tryout agreement with the AHL's Manchester Monarchs.

Among the 10 Hockey East schools, at least 20 players have signed pro contracts since the conclusion of the regular season.

Phil DeCarlo, the director of student-athlete support services at Boston University, said each year brings a different number of players who turn pro. BU already has lost four players to the pros — Kevin Shattenkirk, Colby Cohen, Eric Gryba and Nick Bonino — and while DeCarlo can't speak about each player's academic circumstances because of federal privacy rules that prohibit discussion of a student's academic progress, he explains that it's an individual player's decision to continue course work.

"Some are gung-ho about finishing their degree," said DeCarlo, who oversees academic support for four sports at BU, including men's hockey. "The likelihood of them finishing their degree increases dramatically depending on how long they stay in school before turning pro."

BALANCING ACT

Matt Generous had two classes left towards a macroeconomics degree from St. Lawrence University when he turned pro



The Associated Press

Travis Turnbull played for the Portland Pirates while he still had four courses remaining toward a degree at Michigan.

with the Portland Pirates last spring. He roomed with teammate Travis Turnbull, who had four courses remaining toward a degree in general studies from the University of Michigan.

"The biggest challenge is trying to stay focused," Generous said. "It's hard to motivate yourself away from the rink. Some days the last thing you want to do is schoolwork."

Living in South Carolina, deKastrozza devotes his mornings to hockey and his afternoons to completing his course work before final exams at Maine, which begin May 3. His roommate, Johann Kroll, is in his second year of pro hockey

and is working toward becoming a chartered financial analyst after playing college hockey at Ohio State.

"It has a lot to do with time management," deKastrozza said. "You have to be up at 8:30, be at the rink an hour before practice and there's no sitting around or meetings. You go right into practice. Then in the afternoon, it's all schoolwork."

TECHNOLOGY

Twenty years ago, if a player chose to leave school to pursue a pro career, there was no way to continue class work during the semester. Instead, a player would have to return to school during the summer.

Enter the Internet, e-mail, Web tutorials, video conferencing and other technological advances that allow a hockey player on the road to stay connected with his school. But the connection can be tenuous.

Advances in technology, as well as an educational initiative at the pro level that allows players to continue their course work, have allowed players to work toward a college degree.

"The older I got, the NHL (Players Association) started working on programs for guys to complete their education," said Pirates assistant coach Eric Weinrich, who left Maine after 2½ years to join the U.S. national team before turning pro in 1988. "When the offseason comes, the last thing you want to do is work on schoolwork. Now that they have the opportunity to go pro, they can peck away at a class or two every year."

PLANNING IT OUT

Crissy Kerluke is an academic athletic counselor at Maine and is in the midst of planning out next year's academic schedule

with the men's hockey team.

If a player anticipates turning pro at the end of his senior season, she and that player will plan a long-term academic schedule in advance.

They will consult with professors and take into consideration summer courses and online courses and create a more flexible spring semester schedule.

During his three-week stint in Portland last spring, Turnbull finished three classes online but had to return to Ann Arbor after the Pirates were eliminated from the AHL playoffs.

Turnbull took an incomplete grade in a statistics class and had to retake the class during Michigan's spring term.

"You miss one thing in that class and it builds and builds and builds, and that's a class where you need to know your material," Turnbull said.

"It was a tough time to come here. (Professors) never really know what you have to go through. You've just signed, you have to make an impression (with the team), but you also have to get your degree at the same time."

Bartlett, who stayed at Princeton, will receive his degree in June. Then he'll consider professional hockey opportunities after the school year.

"In the long run, I don't think not playing 10 games would have made much of a difference," Bartlett said. "It's definitely more important to finish my classes and my thesis."

"It's what I came to Princeton to do, to earn my degree."

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SEA DOGS

Continued from Page C1

The Sea Dogs (2-3) roughed up starter Deolis Guerra (0-1), pounding out five hits and scoring four runs.

Ryan Kalish led off with a single and took third on a one-out hit by Nate Spears.

Luis Exposito lofted a sacrifice fly for the second out, but Yamaico Navarro doubled high off the left-field wall and Chang drove him home with another double.

Jose Iglesias then looped a run-scoring single to right to give the Sea Dogs a 4-0 start.

The Rock Cats have yielded 12 first-inning runs.

Red Sox Nation breathed a sigh of relief in the New Britain first when Rene Tosoni hit a shot back to the box that careened off Kelly's glove and into left field. Kelly then retired the side, stranding runners on first and third.

"Thank God I got my glove on it," Kelly said. "It was past

me before I even knew what was happening. I kind of hit the ground and asked myself, 'Is anything hurt?'" It was a good thing that didn't hit me.

"The first inning challenged me. I got a couple runners on base but it's good to get into the stretch and feel that pressure of guys in scoring position."

The Rock Cats reached Kelly for a run in the second.

Benson (2 for 3) worked him for a leadoff walk and took second on an error by shortstop Iglesias. Ben Revere's infield hit loaded the bases and Benson scored on a wild pitch.

New Britain reciprocated by allowing its seventh unearned run of the season in the fourth. Iglesias reached on Juan Portes' error at third and cruised home on a triple by Jason Place, and Portland regained its four-run advantage.

Portland blew it open with a three-run seventh.

Exposito drove in his second run of the game with a single, and Chang (2 for 5) drove in two with a double.



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