

# NASCAR INSIDER

by RICK MINTER / Universal Uclick



Darrell Waltrip spent nearly 30 years behind the wheel on the NASCAR circuit. He's spent the past 13 years in the broadcast booth for Fox.

## Darrell dishes: NASCAR must make changes to succeed

Former Sprint Cup champion Darrell Waltrip, now an analyst for FOX broadcasts of NASCAR races, recently sat down with NASCAR Insider to talk about a variety of topics. Here are excerpts from that interview:

### On the difficulty of moving from the driver's seat to the announcer's booth, while still spending race weekends much the same way:

"It's frightening. The hardest thing you end up fighting is trying to be objective and call out somebody that's one of your best buddies because they didn't do something right or did something wrong ... it's hard. We live in the community. We're not outsiders.

"You have to call the race as you see it and not worry about who you're going to offend, even NASCAR. We've had [NASCAR president] Mike Helton come into the booth and say: 'What are ya'll doing? You guys do TV and let us run the race.'

"But I'm opinionated. [Future NBC analyst Jeff] Burton is opinionated. And that's going to get you in trouble, but it's the most fun thing I've ever done."

### On what kind of crew chief Dale Earnhardt Jr. needs to replace Steve Letarte, who is leaving Earnhardt at season's end to work in the broadcast booth for NBC:

"If you look at the guy he's been successful with, Tony Eury Jr., it was somebody he could argue with. They get mad at each other, disagree on the radio. That seems to motivate some guys.

"[Former car owner] Junior [Johnson] would call me Cale [a reference to Waltrip's rival Cale Yarborough, whom he replaced in Johnson's car], and that would make me want to bite the steering wheel in two. I'd be driving as hard as I could and Junior would come on the radio and say: 'Boy, you're not laying down on me are you?' And I'd pick up. "At this point in [Dale] Junior's career and in his life, he needs somebody that's a motivator and will keep him pumped up. When things don't go well, I think he had a tendency to let down a little bit."

### On his appreciation, as a one-time promoter of short-track races, of the challenges faced by NASCAR chairman Brian France:

"Just like a driver, as a promoter you're always looking for the perfect setup. But

there's no such thing. You just deal with what you've got. It never will be perfect, but maybe it'll be better than everybody else.

"One of the things that's kind of gotten NASCAR caught in a trap is they're trying to fix everything.

"Take points. You can change the points until you're blue in the face. Now, if you give bonus points for something, that's different. Drivers think, 'I gotta do something to get some extra points.' But if you're just going to change the structure -- more here, less there -- the outcome is going to be the same.

"They're constantly looking at all the wrong things. When the Chase was announced it was dramatic. People said: 'What are they thinking? They can't do that.' But it's accomplished what they wanted it to.

"The schedule. People say it can't be changed, but that's what needs to be done. The Chase is 10 races. That's too long. They say you can't take a Chase race away from the tracks that have them now because they'll go ballistic. But that's what needs to be done.

"The cars. They want them to be able to race close to each other and pass. They keep working on the aerodynamics. Change the gear rule instead. In the beginning, I understood the gear rule [which limits the gear-ratio selections by race teams to save costs]. They didn't want to blow up engines. But the engines now are so bullet-proof.

"A lot of the races I won with Junior [Johnson] were because I could pull a much lower gear and not blow the engine up. I managed it. I had an advantage. I had what I called a passing gear.

"I won all those races at Bristol [12] because I had a much lower gear in my car than everybody else. When the race got going and the pace slowed down, I was in perfect shape. When I'd get under a guy, I'd mash the gas and shoot right by him.

"The more things NASCAR tries to control the worse the racing is."

### On whether the expectations of fans and others are unreasonably high:

"Our salesmen don't do a real good job. A driver gets out of the car and he doesn't even look like he's been in a race, or if you watch on TV, it looks like he's sitting in there cruising.

"I want to hear a driver say how hard it is to go as fast as they go. These guys have become kind of nonchalant about that. And

when they complain about the racing or complain about the tires, who's listening? The fans.

"As a group, we could do a better job of making the sport seem exciting.

"And fans hear about NASCAR changing the rules, changing this, changing that, and they assume something's wrong. They think: 'This sport must be all screwed up because they keep changing things.' I think that perception is from within."

### On how racing has changed since his heyday as a driver:

"Back in our day it was interesting because you never knew if a car would last 500 miles. You'd pull for your driver just hoping he'd finish the race.

"Now you pull for your driver to win the race, and if he doesn't you're not going to pull for him anymore.

"Part of our problem is we don't have a love affair with the car anymore. Open the hood on a new car and you can't even see if there's a motor in there or not. With new cars and the technology, a lot of young folks have just lost interest in the love affair that people of my generation had with the car. To them a car is just a piece of iron, a way to get to work.

"NASCAR and the manufacturers have done a good job with the Gen-6 car in making it special. We'd gotten to a point in the broadcasts where we didn't even talk about the cars, just about the drivers. But a jockey can't win a race without a horse. Both are important. We're back trying to marry the two together and make the car just as important as the driver."

### On whether today's drivers have become too much like rock stars for most fans' tastes:

"The drivers can't help it. As a sport, we over-promote. Drivers have to be out there every day. We can't go anywhere or do anything without being in PR mode.

"You can sit in an autograph session for two hours and when you say you've got to go, there are people in the line that didn't get an autograph and they're livid.

"We've become guilty of trying to please everybody. It's impossible. With social media there are so many ways for NASCAR to monitor what people are saying and thinking. But you can't run a sport off of social media. We get one complaint and that's what we react to."

## NOTEBOOK

### Ty Norris off suspension, remains on probation



Ty Norris

NASCAR has reinstated Ty Norris, the executive vice president of Michael Waltrip Racing, who was suspended indefinitely last September following the team's manipulation of the finishing order of the Sprint Cup Series regular season finale at Richmond International Raceway. He remains on indefinite NASCAR probation. Norris issued the following statement: "I appreciate NASCAR's action and respect their position. I am focused forward and dedicated to the success of Michael Waltrip Racing and the continued growth of a sport that has been my home for the past 24 years."

### Elliott notches Late Model win in Georgia

Chase Elliott, who is about to embark on his rookie season in NASCAR's Nationwide Series, added another trophy to his collection by making a late pass of Camping World Truck Series veteran Johnny Sauter to win the 200-lap Super Late Model portion of Speedfest at Watermelon Capital Speedway in Cordele, Ga., on Sunday.

John Hunter Nemechek, son of Sprint Cup racer Joe Nemechek, won the Pro Late Model feature for his first-ever victory in that division.

### Chevy takes top three spots at Rolex 24

Chevrolet swept the podium in the Rolex 24 at Daytona on Sunday as the No. 5 Corvette driven by Joao Barbosa, Christian Fittipaldi and Sebastien Bourdais took the win followed by two of their Chevy teammates. It was Chevrolet's first overall win in Daytona's 24-hour race since 2001.

A frightening accident just after start on Saturday took out the pole-winning No. 99 Corvette, driven at that time by Memo Gidley, who ran into the back of the slowing No. 62 Ferrari of Matteo Malucelli. Gidley underwent surgery on his left arm and left leg. Malucelli was hospitalized overnight.



## NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

**28** Most lead changes in a Sprint Unlimited (2011)

**1** Fewest lead changes in a Sprint Unlimited (1988, in a race won by the late Dale Earnhardt)

**20** Sprint Unlimited victories by Chevrolet, tops among all manufacturers

**44** Laps led by Greg Biffle in the 2005 Sprint Unlimited, the most of any driver who did not win the race

## NASCAR hopes new 'knockout' qualifying rules are a hit with fans

In recent seasons, some NASCAR qualifying sessions, particularly at long tracks like Talladega Superspeedway, took longer to run than the 500-mile races themselves.

And with just one car on the track at a time, there was little drama for fans in the stands and those watching on TV.

NASCAR last week announced a new "knockout" style qualifying procedure for the Sprint Cup, Nationwide and Camping World Truck series that should eliminate some of the boredom on qualifying day.

At tracks 1.25 miles or longer, there will be three qualifying sessions with multiple cars on the track at the same time. The first session will be for 25 minutes and open to all entrants.

The fastest 24 will advance to the second round with the rest placed in the starting lineup based on their best qualifying speed. After the second round, 10 minutes in length, the top 12 will advance to a five-minute pole session, with the remainder assigned starting spots. The final session will determine starting spots 1-12. There will be a five-minute break between each qualifying round.

At tracks less than 1.25 miles, there will be two qualifying rounds. The first, 30 minutes in length, will set the field for all but the top 12, and after a 10-minute break, the rest will run for the top 12 starting spots.

The new rules do not apply to the Daytona 500, which uses a combination of one-car qualifying and 150-mile qualifying races to set the starting field, and the truck race at Eldora Speedway, which uses a typical short-track formula of heat races and a B-main.

In the knockout qualifying, teams can only make adjustments during the breaks, and only minor changes as the hood of the car can't be raised during the session. And only one set of tires can be used, which means that at abrasive tracks such as Atlanta Motor Speedway, the pole-winner's speed likely will be lower than that of others who secured their starting spots in earlier rounds. That's because the pole winner's tires will be more worn, and therefore slower, after compet-



A more competitive qualifying format should make for a more watchable product for fans in the run-up to race day.

ing in three rounds.

Robin Pemberton, NASCAR's vice president for competition, said the change was made in hopes of adding drama to qualifying day as well as condensing the event.

"I've got to believe it's better for any of the sponsors ... and it's going to be a better show for TV, and the people at home will have a better opportunity to watch these guys qualify," he said, adding that the shortened program also helps NASCAR get qualifying in when the weather is threatening. "It will allow us, if we have the time and if all cars run during that first session, it will allow us to set the field in a 25-minute session."