

SPORTS

NASCAR wants to drive up popularity among blacks

By Dorothy Gentry Bodwin
Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA)—Stock car racing—long seen as a sport for White men—is in the midst of a nationwide diversity push that has as its center expanding its reach to people of color. The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) is seeking to become more familiar in minority communities.

"The NASCAR community is built on a shared passion for a sport unlike any other. With over 75 million fans, we want our sport to look like America and attract the best talent and the most dedicated fans in the world," said Brian Z. France, NASCAR executive vice president. "We recognize that to sustain our growth and broaden the appeal of our sport, a concerted industry wide commitment is required to promote diversity and help create opportunities throughout the motor sports industry."

To help it achieve its goals, NASCAR has begun various efforts, including the creation of a NASCAR Diversity Council, which meets several times a year to discuss issues and create strategies that promote diversity throughout the motor sports industry.

The council represents a cross-section of the industry and is comprised of 30 members of the motor sports community including the sanctioning body, corporate sponsors, team owners, drivers, track operators and other key industry areas. There are 36 members on the council and 47 percent of them are women and or people of color, including Bill Lester, the only Black driver participating in NASCAR's national circuits.

Subcommittees of the

council include driver development; crewmember development; professional development; and ethnic fan development. One example of the goals set by the council subcommittees includes the creation of an industry-wide job database to assist those seeking career opportunities in motor sports.

As further proof of its intent to reach more minorities, NASCAR hired Dora Taylor as senior manager of diversity affairs and to spearheads its diversity initiative. She is responsible for preparing and equipping the organization to integrate diversity—including the representation of minorities and women—into all aspects of the industry.

Taylor is no stranger to diversity initiatives. Prior to NASCAR, she served as director of diversity affairs for Denny's/Advantica, and was part of a team that helped turn the troubled company around during its much-publicized discrimination lawsuits in the late 1990s.

Taylor said NASCAR's attempts at diversity are going well.

"The NASCAR Diversity Internship Program has placed close to 50 interns since its inception in 2000. In addition, the NASCAR College Tour has visited North Carolina A&T and Bethune-Cookman College to raise awareness about the exciting career opportunities available throughout the motorsports industry," Taylor said.

"The NASCAR Technical Institute will graduate its first class in October of this year with more than 1,200 graduates. Corporate sponsors such as Dodge and UPS provide scholarships for minority students to attend."

Other steps NASCAR is taking to expand the diversity of the sport include the

NASCAR Diversity Summer Internship Program; scholarships to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-serving institutions; support of the Urban Youth Racing School; and most recently, the NASCAR College Tour presented by the Coca Cola Co.; and its partnership with the NASCAR Technical Institute.

William H.G. France founded NASCAR in 1948 to organize and promote stock car racing. According to officials, NASCAR is America's number one spectator sport in average attendance and the number two sport on television. NASCAR sanctions more than 2,200 events at 124 tracks, over 12 different series, in 37 states each year.

For almost 40 years, the only Black face on NASCAR belonged to Wendell Scott, who formed the first minority-owned NASCAR Winston Cup Series team. Scott competed from 1961 to 1972, in what was then known as the Grand National Division, and became the first African-American driver/owner to win a NASCAR race with his 1964 victory in Jacksonville, Fla.

A story associated with that victory says that after Scott crossed the finish line, NASCAR officials, worried about how the majority White crowd would react to seeing a Black man with the winner's trophy, declared another driver the winner. Hours later, with the audience now long gone, a review detected a "scoring error" and Scott was then named the official winner.

Taylor gave NASCAR's version of the story. "Prior to the development of the current electronic timing and scoring system, the laps were counted by hand and as a



CIVILITY AT CENTER COURT

Jennifer Capriati, left, and Serena Williams congratulate each other on Saturday after the women's finals of the NASDAQ-100 Open in Key Biscayne, Fla. Williams beat Capriati 4-6, 6-4, 6-1.

result it was not uncommon for final results of a race to be delayed," she said.

"The strength of the old system was that because we understood the potential for human error, results were frequently double and triple checked to ensure accuracy and to allow us the opportunity to correct mistakes. Even with the modern technology used to score our races today, NASCAR still waits until the day after its races to make the race results official.

At the Jacksonville, Fla., race in 1964, NASCAR's old system uncovered the error in timing and scoring and awarded Wendell Scott a rightfully earned victory," Taylor said.

NASCAR pays tribute to his relentless spirit, contributions, and passion for the sport by contributing annually in his name to the United Negro College Fund and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. These scholarships support the education of diverse young people pursuing engineering and sports management careers.

NASCAR officials say the industry's ethnic fan base has consistently grown over the last seven years.

"We've actually seen a continued growth in our ethnic fan base, which according to an ESPN sports poll, comprises approximately 25 percent of NASCAR's television viewing audience," Taylor said.

To build on this trend, NASCAR is taking the sport into larger markets and reaching broader audiences through its broadcast partnerships with FOX, FX, NBC and TNT.

With new tracks in major cities such as Dallas/Fort Worth, Miami-Homestead, Chicago, Kansas City and Las Vegas, new audiences are experiencing NASCAR's excitement firsthand.

According to a recent major polling organization,

NASCAR's fan base continues to grow more diverse:

- African American fans have grown 18 percent since 1995, an increase of approximately 2 million people.

- Hispanic fans have increased by 38 percent since 1996, an increase of approximately 3 million people.

- Female fans are up by 13 percent since 1995.

NASCAR programs geared toward building its ethnic fan base including:

Diversity Summer Internship Program—A 10-week, full-time, paid summer internship program designed to expose diverse youth to the many career opportunities within the motor sports industry. This program in-

(See NASCAR, Page 15)

WBC: Lewis must fight V. Klitschko

HAMBURG, Germany (AP) - WBC heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis can fight Mike Tyson, as long as that bout is followed by a mandatory defense against Vitali Klitschko.

WBC vice president Ruben Martinez said Saturday that Lewis has until June 30 to fight Tyson, a more lucrative fight than a bout against Klitschko.

"We want to let him have that," Martinez said. "But whoever wins that fight has to box for the title against Vitali Klitschko within 120 days."

Lewis pulled out of a proposed April fight against Klitschko, ranked No. 1 by the WBC, in hopes of a rematch against Tyson. He knocked out the Tyson in eight rounds last year.

Klitschko's camp sued, saying it had a contract, but has dropped the suit because of the WBC's latest ruling.

Tyson has not agreed to another fight against Lewis, saying he needs more fights to prepare. But he is bound by a contract signed for the first fight to fight a rematch with the champion.

If Lewis fails to fight Klitschko, the WBC could declare the title vacant and have Klitschko fight the next best contender for the title.

Klitschko, 32-1 with 31 knockouts, is the older brother of Wladimir Klitschko, who lost the WBO title to South Africa's Corrie Sanders three weeks ago.

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