



Sizing Up Today's **Stock Car**

WHEN CONSTRUCTING a stock car racing program “to do” list, a good measure of “wait and see” conservative observation seems to have permeated stakeholders’ thought processes over the last 12 months.

Concerns ranging from regional geographic and national economic factors to outside obligations—and even politics, to some degree—have caused competition numbers in the stock car ranks to ebb and flow, lending uncertainty to decision making and planning industrywide heading into 2017.

“The economy has contributed to lower car counts for several years,” conceded Glenn Lockett of Championship Racing Association (CRA) in Salem, Indiana. “And the presidential election year also negatively affected car counts (in 2016).”

However, the overall outlook isn’t as downbeat as one might assume—and there is finally a new occupant in the White House.

To learn more, we reached out to sanctioning groups, tracks, engine builders, and parts suppliers to gauge the approximate rate of increase, or decrease, in stock car counts nationwide. We also asked what factors might be responsible for those changes. The responses, while mixed, certainly shed light on some overriding contributors.

And, while measuring the current market climate we also sought to shine a light on some of the latest technology to migrate through the stock car ranks, as well as some of the more effective means of communicating with racers.

Mind the Economy

“Overall we have seen a slight decrease in car counts, a 10 percent average, this past season as teams are just not racing as much, and are doing more picking and choosing on the events they race,” said Lockett, who added that CRA’s special events nonetheless have maintained strong car counts.

Lockett further noted that besides the hard costs of racing, factors like retaining help at the race track, family demands, and weather customarily play a part in participation.

Dave Grueneberg of the Mid-American Stock Car Series in Brooklyn, Wisconsin, also reported a drop in car counts over the last few years, citing racers’ family obligations as well as the economy. “In the past, if you were a race car driver, you raced all races,” he said. “Due to price increases, racers now pick and choose which races they will attend. If there is a family event or the kids have something going on, they are more apt to do those things.”

Jesse Olson of Medieval Chassis and Medieval Metalwerx

Rule changes can impact the flow and supply of stock car parts, which can affect driver participation. And that’s why some tracks have begun instituting rule changes that only meet certain criteria, officials told us, such as improved safety or cost reduction for competitors. It’s also why a number of stock car sanctioning bodies have gone multiple seasons between major rule changes.

Sanctioning groups, tracks, engine builders, and parts suppliers discuss current efforts to attract and retain competitors in this bellwether racing segment.

in Mayer, Minnesota, told us that in recent years, “most racers were holding tight on doing anything, even buying parts. The economy has a lot to do with racers being able to spend more money on racing. We also had a slight drop in car sales when the oil industry and agriculture industry started falling.”

Ed St. Germain of Seekonk Speedway in Seekonk, Massachusetts, also reported declines, but nationally believes it is mainly due to cost, and the lack of quality youth programs beyond karting. To turn this trend, the track has emerged as a regional leader in youth participation in the last several years, particularly among short tracks.

“We have found many families getting out of racing once they progress into stock cars due to the cost of parts, fuel, travel, etc.,” he said. “They see it as very expensive to race very little.” He added that Seekonk offers two affordable gap divisions for ages 8–18 to keep kids interested in racing.

However, Neal Reid of Las Vegas Motor Speedway (LVMS)

in Las Vegas, Nevada, reported a different experience. “Our numbers at LVMS short tracks, including The Bullring, have been holding strong in recent years,” he said. “There are always plenty of ‘weekend warriors’ looking to compete on the local and regional level. We don’t keep statistics on car counts, but the numbers have pretty much stayed the same the last five to 10 years.”

Rules & Regulations

Rule changes can also impact the flow and supply of stock car parts, which can directly affect participation, or vice versa, depending on which way you look at it.

In an effort to reduce racers’ expenses, CRA has not instituted any major rules changes for several seasons. “We are looking at trying to make some ‘cost savings’ minor rule changes in 2017,” said Lockett, in an effort to keep racers from having to purchase numerous new components.

By Louise Ann Noeth

Market



St. Germain explained that Seekonk Speedway tries to only change rules for two reasons: safety or cost reduction for competitors. “We try to modify rules that make it easy for drivers and teams to access readily available parts at inexpensive costs,” he said.

Mid-American Stock Car Series also reviews rules at the end of each season, and, when a change calls for a part, they work to ensure part dealers will have the items on hand, according to Grueneberg.

Officials at the Automobile Racing Club of America (ARCA) in Temperance, Michigan, understand that the bigger the impact of the change, the more advance notice is required. “We work to have rule changes occur as a transition from the end of one season to the following season, and with advance notice to provide race teams with the greatest opportunity to prepare for the change,” said Ron Drager. “However, some changes must be implemented more immediately based on the constantly changing nature of the sport, its technology, and in some cases, outside forces.

“We believe a rule change should be very carefully considered; it impacts the entire community, and should first and foremost be in the interest of safety, then to improve the quality of the competition, make the on-track product better, and serve as a cost-containment initiative for the race teams, etc.

“If the rule change requires parts, technology, personnel—either from a single source or from multiple providers—everything contributing to making what is required available must be considered, together with the impact on the timeline,” Drager added.

It might be hard to believe, but WISSOTA’s board and regional engine builders work together to develop new engine packages that also control costs. This partnership came about because many racers were being forced to compete against the crate engine influx. “Starting in 2015, we came up with concept engines for all classes that would use spec parts from manufacturers as well as implemented rpm limiter rules,” explained Jim Beyer of Dakota Engine Builders,

Jamestown, North Dakota.

“We give certain classes certain options such as break-in weight, or spoiler options,” he continued. “Also, some of these engine packages have been successfully adopted by other sanctioning organizations, not to mention that there has been a big bump up in communication among engine builders.”

Technology Migration

Technologies, together with products, can migrate up or down in racing, and a number of stock car series and suppliers discussed their latest developments.

Early in 2015, ARCA Racing Series presented by Menards introduced the ARCA Ilmor 396 engine, which brought electronic fuel injection into the series. “This technology was already track tested in the NASCAR Cup Series, the IndyCar Series and elsewhere,” reminded Drager. “We selected the Holley Performance EFI system, a longtime ARCA contingency awards sponsor and technology partner.”

While proven in the upper echelons of motorsports, data acquisition is now becoming more prevalent in the CRA, however, Lockett noted, there’s “not much video logging. The biggest expense we have seen trickle down has been on the suspension side, mostly with shocks and the bump stop technology. There are also some increases in the cooling systems, where teams try to obtain more of an aero advantage with smaller openings as part of their air-cooling systems.”

For Medieval Chassis’ Olson, shocks have become a very big market for his race retail operation in the past couple of years. “It’s to the point now that we produce our own line of shocks and shock service,” he revealed.

He also stressed the value of using data acquisition and video logging in the stock car ranks, noting the increasing use of relying on data to remove the racer’s “opinion” from the equation. “There is a lot of data that we manufacturers can get from it to help improve the handling of a car,” he said. “We watch the attitude of the car, how much the tires are compressing, the position of the front wheels, as well as the relationship to other cars on the track.”

Due to their greater affordability, Greg Nicol of Speedway Motors in Lincoln, Nebraska, cited the popularity of small video cameras being used on race cars. “Everyone wants to be a YouTube or Facebook star,” he said. “We’re still seeing that most sanctioning bodies do not allow data acquisition, but it is starting to get used in private test sessions.”

In addition, Nicol believes the general racer is starting to understand that more stock car races are won with preparation in the shop. “They are paying more



These days, more stock car races are won in the shop with preparation, and more racers are starting to understand this. “They are paying more attention to getting the chassis correct,” one source said. “Rotating weights and friction reduction have become big.”

attention to getting the chassis correct,” he noted. “Rotating weights and friction reduction have become big. Most of this has come from the crate engine, and has the racers asking themselves how they can make their car even better.”

At Circle Track Warehouse in Mooresville, North Carolina, one of the largest used parts stores in the country that specializes in low mileage NASCAR parts and equipment, “We’ve seen a very big spike in the use of data acquisition, dart fish video overlays, pull-down machines and load cells,” said Bryan Rogers, who also owns and operates an in-house Super Late Model program.

From Rogers’ point of view, the technology migration is “happening much faster, it’s evolving at a much more rapid rate—from Late Models to modifieds to street stocks and into lower classes.”

Beyer of Dakota Engine Builders reported that electronic dashboards that

show lap times, chassis setup, shocks, and more have gained popularity, but not all of this is permitted in the regional sanctioning group WISSOTA.

"Lately, a significant portion has been in fuel injection and fuel system controllers," said Michael Eble of Muscle Motors Inc. in Boonville, Indiana, a custom engine builder who takes the opportunity to integrate upper echelon technologies and products into many of his engine builds.

CRA's Luckett, meantime, said his group sees migration occur more in its Late Model divisions, though its Sportsman and Street Stock divisions are embracing more technology-based products. "We have more rules in place in our lower divisions to try and keep some of the technology out, but there is no way to stop it all," he confessed.

However, technology and information do not always elicit the desired response. Eble noted, "Sadly, oftentimes racers trying to save money will ignore strongly encouraged upgrades to fuel systems, until they burn up a new engine. We find this trend most often in the very popular four-cylinder 'stock' car racing, as well as the race/performance marine market.

"Is it due to the 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' mindset, or the lack of experience? I don't know," Eble continued. "Customers do seem to be much more informed in recent years; however, individual understanding is often more of a hindrance than benefit."

Medieval Chassis' Olson has seen a trickle-down effect in migrating technology. "Full containment seats and HANS devices all started out as an expensive option, but now the costs are down and more entry-level racers see the benefits the items provide."

The importance of using proper safety equipment was never more evident than following a spate of high-profile fire-related incidents in 2016, according to Scott Heintz of Heintz Performance in Concord, North Carolina. As a result, "We have seen a tremendous increase in sales of fire extinguishers," followed by some rules changes mandating on-board fire suppression systems in some series.

"The cost of a fire system is a small price to pay to help save a life," Heintz continued. "This technology is evolving, and I believe we will see many other organizations begin to look at requiring systems in the very near future."

Communicating With Customers

Heintz admitted that the best, fastest way to let customers know what's new and what's being introduced into the marketplace is by maintaining an up-to-date company website, as well as an active social media network. "There is still a need to visit the customer on a regular basis," he cautioned. "My father told me, 'People buy parts from people,' and I make every effort to drive our business with that mindset. I walk into their race shop to keep up with how they did over the weekend, but also take an interest in their life outside of racing, which can include their kids, hobbies, etc."

Rogers understands that successful social media requires an "all in or out" commitment. "You almost need a full-time social media employee to keep up with everything," he said, laughing guardedly. "We do see the positive return on social media advertising, and constant upkeep, but our base customer is the experienced racer who knows what they need.

"When you call us you will get me, every time," he stressed. "We have so much going on with buying and selling that spending a majority of the day staring at the computer was less than productive for us."

Betsy Grindlay of Speedway Motors agreed that sales are driven through constant communication with customers, but sees a shift. "You have to be where they are," she revealed. "Social media and email easily allow your message to be fluid and reach out to customers with the latest and greatest products hitting the shelf. New products are still being introduced through printed pieces—direct mail, catalogs, package inserts, print ads—but those pieces are becoming less timely when something new hits the market."

Muscle Motors' Eble has experienced varied results trying new products, from phenomenal to catastrophic. He is con-

vinced that the Internet, trade publications and social media do a far better job of introducing new products to consumers than what he as an engine builder can do to keep consumers up to date with the latest components. "Educating customers about their particular build falls squarely on the shoulders of the engine builder; however, the introduction rate of new products is an almost daily occurrence, and as such, would require an engine builder to do nothing else than monitor and track new products. Who has time for that?"



One series official sees notable migration of technology into its Late Model divisions, though its Sportsman and Street Stock divisions are embracing more technology-based products, too. "We have more rules in place in our lower divisions to try and keep some of the technology out, but there is no way to stop it all," he confessed.

The company slogan "Working as Hard as Our Engines Do" is bolstered with 400-plus product lines offered on its website, in print and on radio advertising; but Muscle Motors does not sell online, using the website only as a recruiting tool. "We occasionally post new product releases and sales on our social media site, and also directly contact our customers when something new comes out that will benefit them," said Eble. "As a hands-on, brick-and-mortar business, this allows us to tailor our expertise to each customer and their unique needs."

Circle Track Warehouse and 2nd Chance Race Parts focus on keeping their two websites and classified page up to date. "This gives our customers an idea of what we have in stock and can get more of," said Rogers. "Our advertising budget goes to race teams we do lots of repeat business with, and a local late model series (CARS Tour). We can

help racers with product before we start cutting checks.”

Grindlay noticed that customers who walk into the retail store now are typically ready to purchase, and have a general idea of what they want. “You may just want to ask a few questions about it,” she added. “We display our new product offers, but most of our messaging in our retail outlets is about engaging with our social channels, so that we can continue a much more tailored conversation with you after you leave.”

Finding New & Staying True

Heintz Performance adds chassis dyno testing in 2017 that they believe will bring in the new, as well as keep existing customers returning more often. “Brake caliper



While some series and tracks reported lower car counts in 2016, Las Vegas Motor Speedway, pictured above, had a different experience. “Our numbers at LVMS short tracks, including The Bullring, have been holding strong in recent years,” a track source said. “We don’t keep statistics on car counts, but the numbers have pretty much stayed the same the last five to 10 years.”

rebuilding and shock dyno servicing are a couple of services a retailer can offer to create more revenue,” stated Heintz. “Not only do we offer hose assemblies, we inspect and certify fire extinguishers.”

Muscle Motors reminds customers that it sells products without charging the \$11.95 “handling” fee that is a staple of most mail-order outfits.

And Circle Track Warehouse offers in-house spring rate and travel checks on a 10,000-pound load cell Roehrig spring rater. The shop also recertifies fire bottles for NASCAR and ARCA race teams, as well as offering sonic cleaning of small parts. “These are things we can do very easily, and [they’re] a huge service to local racers in a time crunch,” said Rogers. 

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