

Wrecks and effects: Study finds fewer fans watching NASCAR races for crashes, more for the race

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A study by a University of Iowa economist finds that many car race fans do, indeed, watch NASCAR races because they want to see car wrecks, but more of them have been tuning in to see who actually wins the race since the circuit adopted its Chase for the Cup championship series in 2004.

John Solow, a professor of economics in the Tippie College of Business, and co-author Peter Von Allmen of Skidmore College, looked at 135 [NASCAR](#) races between 2001 and 2009. They used a formula that measured the impact on each race's television ratings by incorporating a dozen statistics, ranging from track length to the closeness of the Sprint Cup championship standings to whether there was an NFL game on another network.

Solow found that, indeed, the likelihood of a car wreck did increase viewership, as each additional crash per race increased the audience by about 6 percent in the pre-Chase era. Viewership didn't seem to be affected, he found, by how close the drivers were in the overall point standings for the Sprint Cup championship.

But Solow found significant differences in the results before and after 2004, the year NASCAR adopted its version of a year-end tournament to determine who wins the Sprint Cup. Before the Chase for the Cup was implemented, drivers were awarded points based on their finish in each

race through the 26-race season and the driver with the most points at the end was awarded the Cup.

But that often meant some races had little drama because, as the season wore on, one or two drivers separated themselves so that the Cup winner was often a foregone conclusion. So to build year-end excitement, NASCAR adopted a new system in 2004 in which the top ten drivers had their points re-set with ten races to go and only those ten were eligible for the championship.

Solow says creating this Chase for the Cup essentially brought NASCAR the excitement of a "second season," similar to year-end playoffs in other sports, and renewed interest to what had been irrelevant races.

Since the Chase for the Cup was adopted, and later expanded to 12 drivers, the uncertainty factor in Solow's formula that represents the Sprint Cup point standings became a much more significant factor in determining TV ratings. Moreover, that impact was greater the tighter the Chase standings.

For instance, a 50-point reduction in the overall points differential with 20 races to go in the season produces a 4 percent increase in the viewing audience. Another 50-point reduction with only 13 races remaining produces a 6.1 percent increase.

While crashes still made up an important part of the TV rating, Solow says the Chase diminished their importance relative to the overall point standings.

The Chase also closed the ratings gap between NASCAR and the NFL, the only professional sport that can beat NASCAR in the ratings. Before the Chase, NFL games lowered NASCAR ratings by about 20 percent, a significant drop as fans clicked from racing to football. But in the first

six years of the Chase, NASCAR held onto most of its audience in head-to-head match-ups as NFL games have had only a negligible impact on ratings.

Provided by University of Iowa

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