INSIDE GROOVE: A HISTORICAL DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF
NASCAR AND INDYCAR’S
STANDING WITHIN SPORTS MEDIA

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my father, Jeff, and my mother, Shari, for always allowing me to pursue my goals, regardless of the sacrifice.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

On February 18th, 1979, a perfect media storm was brewing in the United States. As the network era of television was winding down and the dawn of cable television was on the horizon, a massive blizzard dropped upwards of 20 inches of snow in the Mid-Atlantic (Lotz, 2014, Junker & Halverson, 2015). Millions of Americans woke up on a brisk Sunday morning trapped in their homes, resigned to watching one of the three over-the-air networks on television.

Sports, and its respective television coverage within the country, was quickly becoming a large part of American society beginning in the 1970s. Monday Night Football debuted in 1970 on ABC, the World Series shifted to primetime on NBC in 1971, and 24-hour ESPN took to the cable airwaves in the latter half of 1979. Despite a push from cable, the 1970s was still a time when sports broadcasting was considered the “hallmark of institutional supremacy” for the three over-the-air networks (“Sports and television,” n.d.). This was evident by not only the financial contracts signed by the networks to televise professional sports, but also by their distribution of three classic television franchises – ABC’s Wide World of Sports, CBS’s CBS Sports Spectacular, and NBC’s SportsWorld.

Each of these programs brought an increasing amount of coverage to viewers across the country, but they primarily focused attention on sports that typically did not receive substantial coverage. This included rodeo, curling, skiing, gymnastics, and badminton, among others (“Series/Wide World of Sports,” n.d.). Strikingly, one sport televised by ABC noticeably grew in popularity, especially in the deep South and the industrial Midwest. The sport was stock car and open-wheel auto racing and their two signature events, the Daytona 500 and the Indianapolis 500, were being distributed in various time-shifted and highlight-driven ways across the country.
**NASCAR’s Striking Debut**

The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, commonly known as NASCAR, was founded by Bill France, Sr. in December 1947 (Fieldman, 2015). The series, designed to preserve and grow the footprint of stock car racing in the United States, held its first sanctioned event in February 1948.

CBS Sports quietly began televising preliminary NASCAR heat races in 1960, but the live broadcasts were largely viewed as an experiment for CBS. *Wide World of Sports* was a consistent home of stock car coverage from its outset in 1961, but races were taped, edited, and distributed up to six weeks after the race was completed. Despite its treatment, auto racing was viewed as one of ABC’s top-rated sports, and Roone Arledge, then-president of ABC Sports, commented “viewer interest in [NASCAR] confirms our belief that the time is ripe for automobile racing’s expansion on television” in the late 1960s (p. 208). ABC Sports fulfilled its commitment to NASCAR, showcasing the sport in 90-minute timeslots beginning in 1970, but most of the televised races were considered flops because of their lack of competition. ABC responded by transitioning NASCAR back to *Wide World of Sports*, but the show, as well as *CBS Sports Spectacular*, showed significant ratings increases when the sport was featured. Viewer interest brought ABC and CBS back to NASCAR by the mid-1970s, but to the organization’s displeasure, its product, nor its season-opening Daytona 500, could not obtain live, flag-to-flag coverage. Motorsports broadcaster Ken Squier wanted to change this fact.

A radio and public-address announcer at the Daytona International Speedway, Squier emerged as the direct line of communication between NASCAR’s Bill France Sr. and CBS Sports President Neal Pilson (Craddock & Lockhart, 2013). Squier, after receiving France’s blessing, pushed for CBS to televise the Daytona 500 in its entirety for the first time. The
broadcaster’s enthusiasm has been credited as leading to formal negotiations between CBS and the France family and after careful deliberation, CBS and NASCAR announced a five-year deal on May 16th, 1978 to televise the Daytona 500 live and flag-to-flag from 1979-1983. This television deal was the first of its kind within the auto racing industry. The agreement built a foundation for stock car and open-wheel racing to muscle its way onto network television, joining Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Basketball Association (NBA) ("Sports and television," n.d.). With its deal in hand, NASCAR saw the 1979 Daytona 500 as perhaps its best chance to make a lasting impression on the national stage.

As millions on the East Coast and Mid-Atlantic were trapped in their homes due to the "President’s Day Blizzard" of 1979, NASCAR’s Daytona 500 took to the national airwaves at noon eastern. On the final lap, leader Donnie Allison and second-place driver Cale Yarborough made contact and lost control of their respective cars in turn three, crashing just one mile from the finish line. As the two cars came to rest in the grass, CBS cameras scrambled to find the third-place driver, Richard Petty, the anointed “King” of NASCAR. Petty, roughly 15 seconds behind the leaders, took the lead with a quarter-of-a-lap to go and held on to win. As Petty and crew celebrated on pit road, CBS cut to a wide shot from the overhead blimp which showed a melee in the turns three and four grass. Donnie Allison, aided by fellow racer and brother, Bobby, broke out a fight against Cale Yarborough and the entirety of the incident was caught by CBS. By today’s standards, the fight would mar the sport in controversy, but in 1979, the altercation added an extra layer of drama to an already action-packed event on television. The race notched a 10.5 Nielsen rating and won the afternoon for CBS, vindicating Neil Pilson’s decision to air the Daytona 500 on network television (Fielden, 2015).
Today, the 1979 Daytona 500 is widely credited as the landmark distribution moment for
NASCAR in its entire history. The sport has maintained its position on network and/or cable
television since Petty’s victory, televised on networks such as CBS, NBC, ABC, TNN, TBS, and
ESPN. More importantly, the France family, the name behind the sanctioning body and its
television agreements, remains in charge of NASCAR and its various organizations today. Since
its inception in 1947 until 1972, Bill France Sr. served as a president of NASCAR, a privately-
held, family-owned corporation headquartered in Daytona Beach, Florida (“About NASCAR,”
2016). France Sr.’s tenure most notably included the first entitlement sponsorship (R.J. Reynolds
Tobacco Company) of NASCAR’s premiere Cup series and the construction of Daytona
International Speedway in 1959. The construction of Daytona International led to the creation of
a publicly-traded company, International Speedway Corporation (ISC). This organization
currently owns and operates 13 NASCAR racetracks across the country, most of which host
landmark events on stock car racing’s calendar (“The history of ISC,” n.d.). Known for their
firm, bold leadership style, the France family maintains clear control of NASCAR as well as
ISC. France Sr. passed leadership of the sport to his son, Bill France Jr., in 1972. After
transitioning to the positions of chairman and chief executive officer of NASCAR, France Jr.
passed both titles to his son, Brian, who retains both executive roles today. Brian France’s sister,
Lesa France Kennedy, is also heavily involved in auto racing. She serves as the chief executive
officer of ISC, also headquartered in Daytona Beach, Florida.

_Open-Wheel Racing’s Introduction to Television_

Nestled in the heart of the industrial Midwest, Indianapolis, the United States Auto Club
(USAC) was the organizing body of open-wheel racing in the latter half of the 20th century
(Whitaker, 2015). Founded by Indianapolis Motor Speedway owner Tony Hulman, USAC
operated the United States National Championship, the equivalent of NASCAR’s premiere series, from 1956-1979 and served as the sanctioning body of what is commonly known as the most famous race in the world, the Indianapolis 500.

During the 1970s, as NASCAR tried to break from its southern roots and onto network television, open-wheel team owners were growing frustrated with the stagnation of USAC’s National Championship. Driver-owner Dan Gurney called other races on the open-wheel circuit, excluding the Indianapolis 500, “orphans that nobody paid attention to” (p. 1). Gurney’s assessment was largely correct, because outside of the 500 which was edited and tape-delayed as part of Wide World of Sports beginning in 1965, open-wheel races were only sporadically covered on television for several years (Hall, 2016). As USAC grappled with drivers and owners in the late 1970s, the lore of open-wheel racing started to unravel. In 1977, founder Tony Hulman died of aneurism, leaving a significant void in USAC’s leadership. One year later, USAC was dealt a tragic blow when a plane carrying nine members of its front office, including its lead and deputy technical director, crashed in a field near the Indianapolis airport. The accident killed everyone on board, leaving USAC devastated and its premier racing circuit crippled. Seizing on the shakiness of the governing body, open-wheel owners, notably Roger Penske, Dan Gurney, Pat Patrick, and Jim Hall, founded Championship Auto Racing Teams or “CART.” Ironically, the year was 1979, the same season NASCAR was set to take the green flag on CBS.

Due to the USAC-CART split of 1979, the “IndyCar Wars,” a term coined by author Sigur Whitaker, officially began. CART released its own open-wheel competition schedule for the upcoming season, but USAC crafted its own schedule as well. The only thing keeping USAC in existence during this civil war was its crown-jewel event, the Indianapolis 500. The $1 million
purse, fueled by (tape-delayed) television money from ABC Sports, was a necessity for CART teams to compete and remain in business. This meant newly created CART could not fully break away from its struggling, oftentimes bitter rival.

In 1981, as CART featured open-wheel racing’s biggest stars, NBC reached an agreement with the sanctioning body to televise the first live, flag-to-flag open-wheel race. The 1981 Michigan 500 represented a breakthrough moment in championship car racing, topping ABC and its *Wide World of Sports* coverage of the Indianapolis 500. CART, despite its shaky beginnings, successfully forged its way onto television more and more by the mid-1980s. 11 races were televised in 1985 and a total of 14 races were scheduled to be broadcasted in 1986. As NASCAR began securing its own television agreements by the 1980s, USAC, CART, and open-wheel racing as a whole realized it had fallen behind when it came to television distribution. As a result, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway reached an agreement with ABC Sports to televise the Indianapolis 500 live and flag-to-flag for the first time in its history beginning in 1986. This was a landmark moment for auto racing in the United States, because effective immediately, the sport’s two biggest events were finally being distributed to an American audience live.

Today, open-wheel racing is commonly referred to as IndyCar. In the years following the original USAC-CART split, CART saw its own fortunes plummet in the mid-1990s. With the desire to return the sport to its Midwestern roots, Tony George, the then-president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (IMS), resigned from CART to create his own series, the Indy Racing League (IRL) (Whitaker, 2015). George, the grandson of USAC and IMS-founder Tony Hulman, used the power and financial support of IMS to support the series in an open-wheel battle against CART. Through the late 1990s and early 2000s, George was successful in luring CART owners and drivers to his circuit, but it came at a steep cost to George’s reputation and the
sport. Open-wheel racing in the United States became a posterchild of dysfunction in the early-to-mid 2000s as many attempts to re-unify the sport failed because of disagreements over equipment, engines, board of directors, and more.

In 2008, the second open-wheel civil war ended as CART, referring to itself as “Champ Car” at the time, merged with IRL to form today’s IndyCar Series. The cause of open-wheel’s unification was the slow loss of television viewers, sponsors, and fans who increasingly flocked to NASCAR during the battle for open-wheel control, according to Whitaker. The resulting merger has since left executive control over IndyCar in a state of flux. Today, IndyCar is a major asset of privately-owned Hulman & Company, a corporation which operates open-wheel racing, owns the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and controls other non-racing businesses. George, born directly into the business much like NASCAR’s France children, served as president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway from 1989-2009 (“George steps down,” 2009). However, George quietly stepped down under a cloud of suspicion at the end of his tenure. It was widely rumored that the Hulman-George family, citing the best interest of IndyCar and IMS, chose to remove George because of his frugal spending habits. George’s decision-making lost significant amounts of money for both the speedway and open-wheel’s governing body (“Tony George elevated,” 2016). According to Whitaker, it was estimated George spent nearly $600 million over a 13-year period, most notably to sustain IRL in its battle with CART, support his own auto racing team, Vision Racing, and to supply other open-wheel organizations with chassis, engines, and equipment to compete.

Hulman & Company and IndyCar’s executive staff fluctuated in the wake of George’s absence from 2009 through late 2012. In December 2012, veteran businessman Mark Miles was tapped as the new chief executive officer of Hulman & Company, replacing Jeffrey Belskus who
took over from George (Whitaker, 2015). During his tenure, Miles has streamlined the company by establishing a new executive structure that has separated the organization into many different parts (“Mark Miles announces,” 2013). Currently, Miles oversees all facets of the organization, most notably IndyCar, but six executives are slotted directly below him. One executive, Jay Frye, a former general manager of NASCAR’s Red Bull Racing, serves as IndyCar’s President of Competition and Operations, overseeing all racing and technical matters of IndyCar’s premier series (“Fan info,” n.d.). He has served in this position since November 2015.

Research Goal

The story of distribution for stock car and open-wheel racing is the foundation of this thesis project. As television has evolved and new forms of distribution have been invented, streamlined, and updated, the world of sports is entering a transitional media phase – the sharing of content amongst linear and digital platforms. This project will answer the following research questions.

- What is the current media state of NASCAR and IndyCar compared to other major sports organizations (NFL, NBA, MLB, etc.) in the United States?

- Between NASCAR and IndyCar, which organization is currently best positioned within this transitional state of media and why?

- What are the causes and effects of specific decisions made by NASCAR and IndyCar’s executive leadership as they relate to growing and strengthening auto racing?

- What future decisions should be sought by NASCAR and IndyCar to remain relevant in today’s crowded sports marketplace?
Sports organizations are seizing on this transition within the telecommunications industry, creating countless ways to promote, enhance, and grow their respective media footprint. The NFL, MLB, NBA, National Hockey League (NHL), PGA TOUR, and others, combined with their respective media partners (CBS, NBC, ESPN, etc.) have rapidly expanded linear television technology, cable television outlets (FS1, NBCSN, NFL Network, NBATV, etc.), digital applications, and social media publishing. As a result, the market has created an arms race within sports to distribute the best, most consistent content on every screen and device on a consistent basis. On television, the past ten years has resulted in television agreements becoming extensive, long-term relationships with hefty price increases compared to previous deals signed in the early 2000s. For instance, ESPN and Turner Sports increased its annual combined payment to the NBA from $930 million to $2.6 billion as part of a nine-year, $24 billion deal signed in 2014 (Lombardo & Ourand, 2014). The NHL saw a similar revenue spike of nearly $200 million per season as part of its ten-year deal with NBC Sports in 2011 (Pucin, 2011). Previously, the league only received about $75 million annually with NBC Sports Network’s predecessor, VERSUS.

The amount of cable options, coupled with invention and evolution of mobile applications is arguably overwhelming the consumer. A traditional TV Guide listing from 2000 reveals three of the most common sports channels at that time, Fox Sports Net (regional), ESPN and ESPN2. Today, the same TV Guide lists just some of the now common sports options on television – ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN Classic, ESPNU, Fox Sports 1 (FS1), Golf Channel, NBC Sports Network (NBCSN), and Fox Sports Regional. This brief list does not include the litany of single sport, league-owned networks such as NBATV (founded in 1999), NFL Network (2003), NHL Network (2007), and MLB Network (2009). Of course, all these networks, either league
owned or media owned, are combined with the emergence of smartphone and tablet applications designed for news, stats, and live sports streaming on-the-go.

NASCAR and IndyCar have two separate but overlapping distribution partners on linear television. Broadly speaking, auto racing is unique compared to football, basketball, baseball, and hockey in the sense that the sport is broken down into two competing organizations. This forces NASCAR and IndyCar to market toward the same group of fans, predominately baby boomers, according to the most recent Harris Poll on America’s favorite sport (“Pro football is,” 2016). To complicate matters for NASCAR’s Brian France and IndyCar’s Mark Miles, both organizations are in desperate need of the next generation of fans, ticket buyers, and merchandise shoppers. Unfortunately, the millennial demographic (12-34-year-olds) represents the largest decline in number of sports fans compared to every other age group (Mickle, 2014b). Sports as a whole, not just auto racing, is being forced to transition, both in terms of distribution and fan engagement.

_Iterature Review_

Before analyzing the methods and theory of this project, it is necessary to discuss some of the previous media research surrounding television distribution, the sports industry, and social media activity of brands and organizations.

_Television and Digital Distribution_

The most comprehensive study of the history and future of television distribution comes from University of Michigan Associate Professor, Amanda Lotz (2014). Lotz’s book, _The Television Will Be Revolutionized_, comprehensively describes three stages of television evolution — the network era, the multi-channel transition, and today’s current evolution into a post-network era of consuming content.
The network era of United States television dates to the earliest linear broadcasts of the 1940s. ABC, CBS, and NBC, the stalwarts of American television, were industry leaders who produced one show, distributed it to the widest audience possible, and sold advertisements to recoup production costs. During this era, television was a “non-portable, domestic medium,” meaning it was widely viewed as a form of entertainment in which the entire family consumed together in one sitting (p. 640). The content strategy of the network era of television was “least objectionable programming,” according to CBS executive, Paul Klein (p. 653). This led to evergreen, heterogeneous programming which characteristically was uniform and not specific to any of the three networks. At this time, it was the path of least resistance for ABC, CBS, and NBC and sports programming like *Wide World of Sports* played right into the network-era strategy.

Beginning in the 1980s, technology largely spurred the arrival of the multi-channel transition era, a reference to the introduction of cable and subscription-based television to the viewing public. The remote control, videocassette recorder (VCR), and advertising-free programming were just some of the newest technologies which gave customers the option of selecting what programs they wanted to consume besides selecting one of the three networks. As a result, the migration of the television audience to cable eroded the dominance of major networks like ABC, CBS, NBC, and newcomers FOX, WB, and UPN. The broadcast share, or the percentage of people watching over-the-air networks, fell from 90% to 46% by the end of 2004-2005 season. Viewers were becoming increasingly isolated and drawn to their own specific entertainment interests, resulting in a fragmented and polarized television audience.

Sports media was a direct result of the multi-channel transition era of television. It began with Bill Rasmussen’s successful launch of the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network
(ESPN) on September 7th, 1979 (Bodenheimer, 2015). Rasmussen’s hat-trick approach of acquiring a satellite, live-event programming, and sponsorship allowed ESPN to succeed. The emerging network slowly attracted producers and talent from the likes of ABC, CBS, and NBC and ESPN struck television agreements with major organizations like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), NASCAR, and the NFL for programming. The success of the network led the now Disney-owned property to launch ESPN2 in 1993 and a plethora of other channels (ESPN Classic, ESPNEWS, ESPNU, etc.) by late 1990s and early 2000s.

The blueprint of ESPN’s early success largely created an emerging, fragmented sports television audience. Carroll (2009) notes the next biggest non-ESPN sports station to emerge in 1995, Golf Channel. Relying heavily on its large, affluent male audience, Golf Channel quickly reached 40 million homes by 2001 after using a very ESPN-like model. The network, now operating as part of the NBC Sports Group, acquired large amounts of live golf content and offered a niche audience to advertisers. Golf Channel’s success proved to other media companies the benefits of entering the cable-sports market. Today, the sports industry is filled with numerous pay-television options ranging from NFL Network to Fox Sports 1 to the many others previously mentioned.

The post-network era, a time where user control and access to content substantially increases and the importance of networks and channels delivering said content decreases, could be the most significant development within sports media over the next decade (Lotz, 2014). According to Lotz, the post-network era is the fast-approaching, non-linear television environment where consumers have the ability to access any content on any device with full control over the viewing experience. Although the multi-channel transition and the post-network era overlapped in the late 2000s and early 2010s, it is the ease of access to content that truly
distinguishes this new era of television. Consumers are no longer beholden to the decisions made by industry executives on when and where television content is distributed. This era of television has been spurred by numerous technological advancements in purchasing and accessing content as well as the continuous cost increases many multi-channel video programming distributors (Comcast, Charter, DirecTV, etc.) have passed on to consumers. An additional factor in creating the post-network era is the generational shift of millennials who are accustomed to using multiple different technologies to view content. A 2006 research study showed 40% of mainly “boomer” parents only watched television at home in the evening. Meanwhile, 40% of their millennial children used anywhere from five-to-eight technologies in the same night. The “media agnosticism” of millennials, or the fluidity and frequency of transitioning between devices, has drastically increased the expectation of smartphones and tablets to deliver either professional or amateur content on-demand (p. 812). For more and more consumers, the lines are becoming blurred between television and computer technology as well as between broadcast and cable networks. The traditional network era and multi-channel practices of placing content on television and expecting users to pay for it through their providers is quickly becoming obsolete.

The effects of the post-network era are substantially influencing the decision-making process of league executives, conference commissioners, and network executives within sports media. Network-era television, and to some extent the multi-channel era too, was a mass medium. It had the ability to collectively bring large audiences together to create the prototypical “water cooler” discussion. Today, television is largely unable to do so or if it does, its only because a network or channel has collected a sweeping number of niche audiences, according to Lotz. However, live sports is one of the few remaining forms of television which still holds on to traditional network-era practices of sponsorship and branding; therefore, increasing the cost to
acquire and produce the content. Lotz describes sports as a product that can still unite large audiences at appointment times as well as retain viewers through commercials.

Starting in 2002, Major League Baseball became the first sports organizations to embrace mobile viewing, and the company’s success has spurred the growth of the streaming sports industry functioning today. MLB Advanced Media (MLBAM) was created to reach its target audience at work in the early 2000s via desktop computers, but by the end of the decade, MLB saw streaming on smartphones and tablets as the centerpiece of its At Bat mobile application (Brown, 2014). By the end of the 2014 season, MLBAM averaged at least 125 million streams of live games every year since 2002 on over 400 different devices. This content consumption resulted in an astonishing $7-8 million in revenue for each of baseball’s 30 franchises.

Lotz supports her conclusions about the abundance of mobile sports streaming by detailing the accomplishments of two other major streaming products – March Madness Live and NBC Olympics. Capitalizing on the prior technique of having to choose which game or event would draw the largest audience, these two streaming services have generated considerable sums of revenue by housing and distributing sports content not normally accessible by the public. In 2016, March Madness Live netted 18.1 million live hours of streaming for the entire NCAA Men’s Division I Basketball Tournament, its highest streaming figure on record (Durham, 2016). The tournament’s national championship game between Villanova and North Carolina-Chapel Hill produced the most video streams for an individual NCAA basketball game with 3.4 million live streams. Similarly, NBC Olympics saw record-setting performances of its own in Rio De Janiero with 2.71 billion minutes of streaming coverage in 2016, nearly doubling the combined number from Sochi in 2014 and London in 2012 (Holloway, 2016).
The post-network era is an important fact to consider when analyzing the past, current, and future distributions of NASCAR and IndyCar. However, others argue an increased digital landscape of distribution is overstated. Michael Wolff (2015), a journalist and columnist for British GQ magazine, published a book titled *Television is the New Television: The Unexpected Triumph of Old Media in the Digital Age*. Wolff points to the inability of individuals to separate television into two categories — the business model and the distribution model. This builds the foundation of his argument that the business model of television, powered by stable advertising revenue, remains strong. Although conventional distribution methods are changing, digital providers like Google, YouTube or Facebook cannot overtake television because the amount of money it would take to wrestle programming away from traditional media partners. Wolff illustrates this point by using sports as a vehicle. He notes the ability of sports broadcasting to offer brands and advertisers countless ways to integrate themselves into the game, and since sports happen in real-time and time shifting is almost non-existent, advertisers are willing to give more money to television because of the consistent audience it still retains in the post-network era. For example, game seven of the 1986 World Series netted a 38.9 Nielsom rating according to Wolff, but the much lower-rated game seven of the 2014 World Series (13.7) still brought in more advertising revenue than 1986, because a 30-second ad cost upwards of $520,000.

The downfall of old-fashioned television is a topic of conversation for many researchers, scholars, and analysts. Raymond Boyle (2014) echoes the sentiments of Wolff by broadly calling this new era of media distribution an “evolution rather than revolution” (p. 750). He stresses television is a remarkable and resilient form of media which remains central to the sports industry. Citing a United Kingdom study showing a slight increase in the amount of time spent watching television from 2002-2012 (3.73 to 4.01 hours/day), Boyle notes the impressive ability
of linear television to bring together a numerous amount of fragmented audiences despite the rise of second and third-screen viewing behavior.

Walter Gantz and Nicky Lewis (2015) acknowledge an increase in mobile behavior, but they too believe mobile is still not enough to supplant old-fashioned television as the primary screen. The two researchers analyze the affordances mobile brings to interactivity and lifestyle, specifically its ability to deliver live events, scores, and stats on the go. However, Gantz and Lewis concede mobile sports offerings present unique challenges such as battery life, coverage areas, buffering, and crashes that fans are not willing to permit when consuming live sports. The researchers believe wide-screen viewing and the “presence” television offers allows this medium to remain the primary source of content distribution (p. 762).

Meanwhile, the sports industry is a very profitable, yet complicated and cluttered business. Harry Anne Solberg and Knut Helland (2011) take a broader look at the corporate side of sport through a qualitative study in Nordicom Review. First, the two researchers detail the sports broadcasting value chain, a diagram that connects producers of sports content to viewers via the work of television producers and distributors. According to Solberg and Helland, the emergence of digital products like mobile applications and streaming services only strengthen the bond between each party in the distribution chain. This results in increased profits and stronger market power, especially within the sports industry. Integration is also a key component of this business as mergers, acquisitions, and the formation of alliances are just some of the recent business trends witnessed within sports. In the United States, Comcast’s acquisition of NBC Universal (including the NBC Sports Group) and CBS Sports’ alliance with Turner Sports to retain and expand control of the NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Tournament are just a handful of examples of this recent business trend. Solberg and Helland, despite focusing
primarily on sports television within Europe, point to deregulation as a cause of the current sports marketplace and this argument can largely be applied to the United States. An example of this is the emergence of “pecuniary externalities,” a literature term used by researchers to describe the maximization of profit for an entire company even if portions of the larger business deal lose revenue (p. 26).

A pecuniary externality within auto racing and this study is Comcast’s business decision to sponsor NASCAR’s second-tier circuit, formerly known as the NASCAR Nationwide Series. Despite the gradual decline in Nationwide Series television ratings over the past decade, Comcast struck a ten-year/$200 million agreement to re-brand the circuit as the NASCAR Xfinity Series (Mickle, 2014c). The business deal was largely viewed as Comcast’s attempt to increase subscriptions to its distribution platform (Xfinity) in strategic parts of the country with NASCAR tracks nearby. A second example includes the telecommunications carrier, Verizon Wireless. In 2014, Verizon became the title sponsor of IndyCar’s premier series in a ten-year/$100 million agreement (Mickle, 2014). Coincidentally, Verizon retains primary sponsorship of one of the sport’s most successful and winningest open-wheel teams — Team Penske. Regardless of Verizon’s financial success stemming from the title sponsorship, the company’s logo stitched across the 2014 IndyCar Series Champion (Will Power) and the 2015 Indianapolis 500 Champion (Juan Pablo Montoya) opens its own source of revenue for the wireless carrier from television exposure, driver appearances, merchandise, and much more.

Also, the contemporary market for sports television is causing battle lines to be drawn between traditional, “big four” sports and their television partners versus non-traditional, less mainstream sports and their respective television partners. Michael Scibilia and Brett Hutchins (2011) showcase this industry trend through the emergence of “High Stakes Hoops” (HSH), a
2010 Australian basketball league aired exclusively on a new, free-to-air channel in Australia known as One HD. Scibilia and Hutchins, citing sports programming as “critical to the commercial operation and survival of media and telecommunications companies,” acknowledge HSH as a league purely designed to meet the broadcast and schedule needs of One HD (p. 28).

Basketball, a second-tier sport in Australia, struggled to reach a mainstream audience as its pay-television provider, FOX Sports, reduced coverage of the sport to one game each week during the 2008-2009 season. As a result, a private enterprise created HSH with innovative rule changes (limited timeouts, four-point shots, etc.) in an attempt to attract new, predominately younger support. In addition, the eight teams competing in the league were not named after traditional cities, regions, or states. They were instead given generic names like Coasters, Cyclones, and Monarchs to intentionally prevent any team (or fan base) from identifying itself as the home or visiting team. As a result, the made-for-television basketball league on One HD was a resounding success. It pushed fans and spectators to become avid supporters of basketball rather than a fan of a single player or team. Scibilia and Hutchins identify this as “media sport market literacy” (p. 28). HSH fans, despite acknowledging the league’s artificiality, embraced basketball as a media product and pushed for the sport to remain on free-to-air One HD. Fans also demonstrated a unique awareness that since HSH was a made-for-television league, ticket sales and attendance at stadiums was nothing more than “icing on the cake” to investors and stakeholders (p. 33).

Ultimately, the non-artificial National Basketball League of Australia (NBL) struck a television deal with One HD, leaving FOX Sports behind. The NBL used HSH as a vehicle to “reclaim its position in the television market hierarch by appearing on free-to-air television” (p. 34). The industry leaders of both Basketball Australia and One HD realized a problem existed
with their non-mainstream sport and their non-mainstream sports channel. By embracing a made-for television style, both basketball and One HD became winners in the long run by accepting this critical fact: in an era of increasingly high digital sports, the need for television exposure on free-to-air television trumps traditional sports behavior.

In the United States, the movement toward manufacturing drama is becoming a reality for NASCAR and IndyCar. Auto racing has consistently struggled with the potential for long, sometimes parade-like competitions without drama or intensity. This has led NASCAR and IndyCar to alter their championship product in hopes of maintaining and attracting fan support in the new millennium. The specifics of these changes, a topic of discussion in the next chapter, are noticeably different amongst the two organizations, but they echo the sentiments of HSH. Since NASCAR and IndyCar are predominately broadcasted on pay-television, few people should criticize NASCAR or IndyCar for attempting to reach more viewers, especially late in the season when traditional sports like football, basketball, and postseason baseball are dominating the television landscape.

As television continues to sell viewers to advertisers, channel proliferation and competition has intensified due to deregulation (Whannel, 2014). This sentiment, echoed by previous literature, should lead to startups and newcomers entering the sports television market. However, the industry remains dominated by major television channels and websites. Newcomers like 120 Sports and league-owned television networks (MLB Network, NBATV, etc.) have attempted to wrestle news, highlights, and live events away from major networks, but have experienced little success. Since many conglomerates like FOX, NBC, and CBS own a predominate amount of sports rights in the United States, each media organization has strategically divided their content between the network and their sister cable channel (FOX to
FS1, NBC to NBCSN, etc.). This has forced many consumers to have to expand their television portfolio to include channels like FS1, FS2, NBCSN, CBS Sports Network, and others just to maintain the same access to sports content they enjoyed in the late 90s and early 2000s. This trend is even spreading to traditional over-the-air sporting events like the Olympics and World Cup. If the 2015 Women’s World Cup and 2016 Olympics are any indication, customers in the United States are being forced to gain access to a larger FOX and NBC Universal portfolio, because content from both events was exclusively distributed on channels like FS1, FS2, Fox Soccer Plus, NBCSN, USA, MSNBC, and Bravo, in addition to the usual FOX and NBC.

**Mobile and Social Distribution**

The emergence of mobile distribution is the next topic of discussion within this literature review, because sports are no longer delivered solely to the television receiver in the home (Hutchins, 2014). Two worldwide decisions, the NFL’s choice to stream Super Bowl XLVI and the Australian Football League’s (AFL) decision to stream its entire season on mobile-giant Telstra, are largely credited as unleashing the third-screen movement. The use of mobile Internet in the United States increased by 45% from 2010-2014, and 26.3 million people accessed mobile video in the third quarter of 2011 alone. This has forced sports organizations, including NASCAR and IndyCar, to accept the fact that the future of media sport requires significant amounts of attention to the relationship “between” screens, according to Hutchins (p. 511).

Stephanie Beltrame, the general manager of media rights for Cricket Australia, believes the emergence of content on mobile is a phenomenon that requires acceptance, not rejection.

“The reality…is that the best arrangement for fans is to be able to watch the content or stay in touch with the progress of an event on whatever device is applicable to them at the time.
There is no need to necessarily make a choice – [fans] can have both and more if they wish” (as cited in Hutchins, 2014, p. 511).

Hutchins describes the development of a “media sport content economy,” but keenly acknowledges the increasingly high power of telecommunications companies (Verizon, AT&T, Sprint, etc.) in obtaining and monetizing sports content (p. 512). This is not just a U.S. phenomena either, as Japan’s NTT, Belgium’s Belgacom, and France’s Orange are all scooping up sports content and selling it as part of their mobile services. Hutchins concludes the profits generated through exclusive mobile deals is currently uneven and modest, but as wireless capabilities and the transmission of data continues to improve, sports organizations and media executives will have to decide how content is “accessed, communicated, and commodified” (p. 520). NASCAR, most recently sponsored by telecommunications provider Sprint and IndyCar, currently sponsored by Verizon, have shown to leverage their content in free or exclusive ways to specific customers. This type of content traditionally includes additional in-car cameras, radio traffic, and enhanced statistical coverage of races, but the potential for these types of features to be monetized further arguably looms. Currently, NASCAR and IndyCar utilize two similar, but differing strategies when approaching second and third-screen content. As auto racing continues to be shuffled on television, the future decisions of both organizations when it comes to mobile distribution will be watched closely.

Legally, sports organizations such as the NFL and MLB in the United States and the AFL and National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia have viciously fought against any technological innovation that have threatened their traditional television audience. Mobile television services such as Aereo Internet (U.S.) and TV Now (Australia) were shuttered after powerful broadcasters, telecommunications operators, and sports organizations used considerable
resources to preserve the exclusivity of their content on linear. Hutchins (2015) calls this path dependence, a technique used by corporate actors to attempt to “manage and/or mitigate innovation processes in ways that deliver favorable outcomes in the marketplace” (p. 705). A primary function of path dependence is to prevent sudden and disruptive changes, referencing the longtime technique of resisting change, because “this is the way we’ve always done it.”

For stock car and open-wheel racing, critics have occasionally raised modern distribution questions (their path dependence) to both NASCAR and IndyCar. An example of this is the potential for NASCAR to boost its wavering television ratings if it pursued staging races in the middle of the week, particularly in the summer. Analysts point to NASCAR’s lowest-level series, the Camping World Trucks, and its staging of a dirt race on a Wednesday night in July. The inaugural event, held in 2013, was the tenth-most watched NASCAR truck race in its 22-year history and was the most watched event on cable that evening. Track owners and promoters are largely concerned about gate revenue, but industry leaders believe the combination of a slow sports evening in the summer, a less compact network television schedule, and auto racing’s biggest stars could land NASCAR a better television rating than its traditional Sunday timeslot.

In open-wheel racing, the Verizon IndyCar Series is deeply rooted in tradition. However, its path dependence could be the use and distribution of content on social media. This is an area of open-wheel racing that lacks significant attention compared to its stock-car counterpart. A social media presence could be viewed by IndyCar as a distraction from the traditional television audience the series is attempting to maintain.

Social media, although potentially shrinking the television audience, does offer sports organizations and channel distributors numerous benefits (Lim, Hwang, Kim, & Biocca, 2015). Second or third-screen activity during sports is called social television, and it is most prevalent
during downtimes of sporting events, such as commercial breaks, timeouts, and stoppages of play. The main benefit that social media usage offers brands and television networks is interactivity in the form of responses, @mentions, hashtags, and other features. Interactivity, according to the study, is what rallies sports fans together, creating a community of people regardless of where they consume the sport. Social media activity also creates a psychological experience known as social presence. Statistical data reveals that functional engagement (retweets, sharing of posts and photos, etc.) increases the social presence of those that consume a sporting event. As a result, those that feel an increase in social presence demonstrate an increase in commitment to the channel in which they are consuming the content on.

For the purposes of studying stock car and open-wheel racing, the same social theory can be applied to organization accounts instead of broadcast accounts like @NASCARonFOX or @IndyCaronNBCSN. If NASCAR or IndyCar is successful in interacting and engaging with consumers on various social media platforms, there is a likelihood that both organizations could increase the commitment level of fans to their brand, similar to Australian basketball. The thought process regarding social media is elementary in nature, but the return on financial investment for NASCAR and IndyCar can be very significant. As the hunt for millennial fans intensifies across the sports industry, social media could be the vehicle to finding the next generation of stock car and open-wheel fans across the country.

Method

The research technique of this thesis will be a historical descriptive analysis, a qualitative research method studied by Arthur Berger (2000). Berger defines a historical analysis as a chronological study using primary and secondary sources to select the most significant and revealing facts surrounding a topic. These facts are then organized in a specific way to determine
impact, perspective, and meaning for the reader within a larger societal context. This project will also be classified as an institutional study, one of the seven types of historical research identified by Phifer (as cited in Berger, 2000). An institutional study concentrates on specific organizations to determine how each have changed over time as well as allowing the opportunity to compare organizations to each other.

This paper will begin with a historical look at the linear distribution of auto racing, identifying common themes and traits of NASCAR and IndyCar coverage on traditional television. An extensive look at the frequency, length, and financial terms of previous NASCAR and IndyCar television deals will occur in this section. In addition, there will be special attention paid to the effects of cable television on both organizations. Next, this paper will take a comprehensive look at the web, digital, and social media platforms of both organizations. This will be accomplished through the study of NASCAR and IndyCar’s web/mobile applications in their current state. This allows this project to analyze and note the similarities and differences of both organizations’ use of these platforms, specifically identifying the types of products offered to consumers and how they are presented, commodified, and marketed. The concluding chapter of this historical analysis will also make critical observations on NASCAR and IndyCar based on the material obtained in the previous two chapters as well as current news emulating from both organizations.

The study of NASCAR and IndyCar’s social media platforms will occur through a critical look at both organizations’ marquee events in 2016 – the Daytona 500 (February 21st) and Indianapolis 500 (May 29th). These two events, respectively, are the largest gathering of stock car and open-wheel fans in the country in terms of attendance, media attention, and television coverage. As a result, this thesis will critically analyze the Facebook, Twitter, and
Instagram posts of NASCAR from Monday, February 15th, 2016 – Monday, February 22nd, 2016 and compare it to the posts of IndyCar from Monday, May 23rd, 2016 – Monday, May 30th, 2016. The goal of this analysis is to study the effectiveness of both organizations in reaching new, predominately younger audiences during these marquee events. The strategic use of video, graphic, and text-based content allows brands to share content in fast, mobile-friendly ways, especially during a live sporting event. Organizations that effectively use social media not only promote their brand and corporate sponsors to new followers, but also satisfy existing fans with consistent and shareable content on a routine basis. A Monday-Monday critique is an appropriate timeframe for this study, because it allows for the analysis of the days leading up to the event as well as the day after. The 24-hour window following a large-scale sporting event is especially important within social media, because it allows organizations like NASCAR and IndyCar to keep the conversation going after the event has concluded and promote future events. This analysis will look at how effective NASCAR and IndyCar were at celebrating and promoting their product even after the checkered flag fell.

Lastly, the best theory to guide the work of this thesis and to inform a descriptive critical analysis on distribution is the idea of medium theory (“Medium theory,” n.d.). Medium theory is born out of Marshal McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” statement coined in his 1964 book, *Understanding Media* (“Commonly asked questions,” n.d.). Medium theory focuses on a user’s reception and conveyed sense of information from various types of media, traditionally audio, video, and print. Researchers take information gathered using this theory and determine the efficiency of communication to the audience. Within this thesis, the effectiveness of NASCAR and IndyCar’s types of distribution will be a significant portion of study. As consumption methods start to blend between linear and digital, it is important to address the successes and
failures of both organizations on different media outlets as it pertains to audience reaction. This thesis will attempt to incorporate McLuhan’s theory within a stock car and open-wheel context.

*Preview*

This thesis will dive deeper into stock car and open-wheel distribution in the United States. The next chapter will be specifically devoted to NASCAR and IndyCar’s linear distribution model, analyzing the series’ past and current television deals as they relate to the current sports market. It is the goal of the next chapter to determine how both organizations, either fairly or unfairly, have been affected by the current trend of siphoning content away from over-the-air television to cable networks. In addition, it is important to address what effects NASCAR and IndyCar’s championship alterations have had on television viewership, if any. This portion of the next chapter will use Scibilia and Hutchins’ insight into HSH as a point of reference for this unique topic.

The third chapter will focus on web, digital, and social distribution of NASCAR and IndyCar, detailing the history as well as discussing the strengths and weaknesses of both organizations on platforms such as NASCAR.com, IndyCar.com, NASCAR Mobile, IndyCar Mobile, and more. An initial look at each platform reveals similar, yet slightly different content strategies as it pertains to fan engagement, regardless of device. A comprehensive look at each of these platforms will reveal how NASCAR and IndyCar are fitting into the today’s rapidly expanding mobile sports environment as well as how both organizations are positioned for the future.

Finally, a concluding chapter will close this research project with a goal of analyzing the state of both NASCAR and IndyCar, predicting and projecting some of the critical business decisions which loom for both parties. As the sports industry transitions into Lotz’s post-network
era, stock car and open-wheel racing face the same problems (aging fan bases, decline in television viewership, attendance, etc.) as many of the country’s most popular sports leagues. However, it is a reasonable assertion that both NASCAR and IndyCar are competing for the same audiences, sponsors, and drivers, which makes the next decade of decision making increasingly critical for both organizations.

Overall, this thesis’ central argument centers on NASCAR’s apparent advantages over IndyCar in many of the areas discussed above. With a stronger, more lucrative television agreement with FOX and NBC Sports, as well as enhanced social media coverage on every platform, NASCAR has demonstrated its ability to address its shortcomings and implement its vision of the future. However, this is merely a perception and not necessarily reality. IndyCar, capitalizing on its sudden rejuvenation of the Indianapolis 500, is beginning to show its ability to look ahead, adding new events and expanding its racing calendar to better accommodate media and traditional supporters. The open-wheel community, however, acknowledges its need for change and given NASCAR’s newest entitlement sponsor and championship format, IndyCar is undoubtedly a series deserving of extensive thoughts and analysis regarding the immediate future.
Chapter 2: Traditional Television Coverage of NASCAR and IndyCar

The Early Years of NASCAR

NASCAR’s ascension within sports, both publically and financially, is largely a result of auto racing’s linear broadcasts during the network and post-network era of television. Over the course of its 69-year history, NASCAR’s distribution on television should be analyzed in four different time periods—pre-1979, 1979-2000, 2001-2014, and 2015 through today. The reasoning behind this division in analysis is because each period reflects a different way in which NASCAR was televised and commodified by major media organizations and fans in the United States. Despite similar themes and messages which stretch across NASCAR’s television history, the end of each era signaled a change in media direction for stock car racing.

During the pre-network era of television, NASCAR first found its way onto television in a very limited capacity in 1960 (“Live from Daytona,” 2015). CBS Sports, with an estimated 17 million people tuned-in, broadcasted for an hour-and-a-half from Daytona Beach, Florida on Sunday, January 31st. The production was viewed as nothing more than a trial run for CBS to learn how to cover the sport of auto racing. Anchored by Walter Cronkite, CBS used eight cameras to showcase three preliminary races as well as a ten-lap, 25-mile pole race. CBS Sports designed the broadcast to show the speed and thrill of high-speed racing, an overarching theme which guides television producers to this day. Although competitor Fireball Roberts called the CBS telecast “the best thing that has happened to [NASCAR] since [founder] Bill France got into it,” the series’ patriarch and chief decision maker was not nearly as convinced. In July 1961, France invited ABC (Wide World of Sports), not CBS, to NASCAR’s summer race at Daytona, beginning a long, prosperous relationship for both entities. Wide World of Sports would come and go throughout the 1960s, as well as CBS, but this is a critical point of insight because of who
controls the decision-making progress as it relates to television. From NASCAR’s inception in 1947 through 2001, television networks such as ABC, CBS, and others negotiated broadcast contracts with the individual racetracks, not NASCAR (Hagstrom, 1998). This means for over fifty years, NASCAR’s place on television was at the mercy of track owners and ownership groups, the most prominent of course being the France-controlled International Speedway Corporation. Once a television deal was signed, NASCAR received 10% of the financials exchanged between the networks and race tracks.

*Wide World of Sports*’ earliest racing broadcasts, such as the 1969 Daytona 500, was much like every NASCAR broadcast before 1971 — pre-recorded, edited, and shortened (rowdyeverylap, 2011). This particular broadcast, just 45 minutes in length, was paired with a two-man bobsled event in Lake Placid, New York and advertised as “speed on the ice, speed on the racetrack.” As NASCAR entered the modern era, so did its television broadcasts on ABC and CBS. Roone Arledge, president of ABC Sports, announced an update to NASCAR coverage in December 1969. Given the success of auto racing on *Wide World of Sports*, ABC chose to begin airing the second-half of NASCAR races live on the network (Fielden, 2015). ABC agreed to nine additional telecasts, five of which would be partially live under Arledge’s new format beginning at Talladega Superspeedway (Wilber, 2010). Unfortunately, competition during most of ABC’s races was non-existent as the races at Talladega, North Wilkesboro, Darlington, Charlotte, and Nashville were runaway victories. ABC cancelled plans for additional live telecasts for the remainder of 1970, but chose to return in 1971 under much different circumstances.

On Easter Sunday, April 10th, 1971, ABC returned to NASCAR to bring viewers the Greenville 200 from the Greenville-Pickens Speedway in Greenville, South Carolina. The
broadcast was live and for the first time in NASCAR’s history, flag-to-flag (Hembree, 2012). Greenville-Pickens Speedway was owned and operated by brothers Tom and Pete Blackwell (“Long history hugs,” n.d.). ABC called the Blackwells hoping to bring its cameras to the half-mile track, because the facility was small, the race had little significance, and the event would be easier to televise than most others in 1971 (Keepfer, 2013). ABC only stipulated that the race conclude in ninety minutes. Tom and Pete Blackwell agreed to ABC’s demands, even shortening the field from 30 cars to 24 in hopes of lessening the likelihood of a caution flag or race stoppage. Jim McKay, ABC’s legendary broadcaster for 37 years, anchored coverage from the track (NASCARAllOut, 2011). He was joined by color commentator, Chris Economaki, and pit-reporter Ken Squier who was making his ABC Sports television debut. The broadcast began with this declaration from McKay:

“I don’t know what you’re doing on this Easter Saturday afternoon, but in Greenville, South Carolina, a capacity crowd of about 15,000 people is about to watch the Grand National, 100-mile NASCAR stock car race. The pictures you’re watching are live, what you see is happening right now and so it will be from the green flag that starts the race until the checkered flag that ends it!”

ABC’s production was aided by a handful of additional factors, notably slow speeds at Greenville-Pickens Speedway (about 85 MPH) and giant numbers that just-so-happened to be painted on the sides of the race cars. There was also just one caution flag meaning the race finished in one hour and 16 minutes. Echoing the theme of CBS’s original 1960 broadcast, ABC pushed to make viewers feel as if they were present at the track. Squier consistently added updates to McKay and Economaki’s analysis, interviewing drivers and key figures during the telecast from the pits. Camera cutaways also put viewers next to the cars as they were serviced
with fuel and tires. The ABC telecast from Greenville laid the foundation for all subsequent motorsports telecasts, regardless of whether it was NASCAR or its open-wheel equivalent. After showcasing live coverage and in-race reports from pit-road, ABC decided to expand its NASCAR telecasts to include live, second-half coverage of the season-opening Daytona 500 from 1974-1978 (Fielden, 2015).

During the 1970s, NASCAR was hounded by the weariness of car manufacturers who spent considerable sums of money to participate in the series. Ford severed its ties with the sport in 1971 because of its desire to focus more on dealerships and consumer products, and Chrysler also cut back, downsizing its operation from six cars to two. As a result, NASCAR was left with a shrinking number of competitive teams. Fields dwindled to the low-to-mid-20s which was a considerable drop from upwards of 50 teams in the late 1950s. Bill France Sr. and his soon-to-be successor, Bill France Jr., turned to tobacco-company R.J. Reynolds to provide a significant cash influx for the sport. R.J. Reynolds was facing its own problems at the same time as NASCAR. The federal government had recently decided to ban all tobacco advertising on television, meaning R.J. Reynolds was left with a significant amount of advertising cash that was now up for grabs. France Sr. took advantage by striking a deal with the company to become the first entitlement sponsor of NASCAR’s premier circuit. The new “Winston Cup Series,” a partnership that lasted remarkably through 2003, brought a wave of changes to the sport including a shorter schedule and a newly created $100,000 points fund.

One of the biggest changes, however, was visual. R.J. Reynolds chose to paint the walls at select tracks across the United States red and white, the same brand colors as Winston cigarettes (Hagstrom, 1998). This move catered to the growing number of cameras and media attention coming to NASCAR during the 1970s. At this point, ABC and CBS were both
interested in adding Winston Cup races to their portfolios, especially considering ratings figure for the second-half of the 1975 Daytona 500 topped the NBA and NHL which were airing on other networks.

**CBS at the 1979 Daytona 500**

In 1978, CBS made the first major television move in NASCAR history when the network announced an agreement with International Speedway Corporation to televise the Daytona 500 live and flag-to-flag from 1979-1983 for $650,000 (Craddock & Lockhart, 2013, Kim, 2011). This represented the first major automobile race to receive this type of television-media coverage in the United States.

As previously explained, the 1979 Daytona 500 is a landmark moment in auto racing history. CBS Sports did not shy away from the importance of the broadcast to its stakeholders. The company chose to use the same technical crew for the race they had used two weeks earlier at Super Bowl XIII in Miami, even sending veteran NFL producer Michael Pearl and director Bob Fishman to lead the telecast. CBS spent an additional $400,000 on production costs and utilized 12 total cameras — four on the front stretch, three on the back stretch, three in the infield, and one from an overhead blimp (Hagstrom, 1998, Craddock & Lockhart, 2013). However, two additional cameras became the hallmarks of the telecast. The network’s goal, as explained in a documentary surrounding the event, was to convey the speed of the cars to the television audience. Therefore, Fishman placed camera six on the racetrack, stationed a mere three feet from the concrete wall that lined Daytona’s backstretch. This camera, known as “SpeedCam,” captured the action as drivers exited turn two at approximately 180 MPH. Elsewhere, CBS debuted the “RaceVision” camera, a 35 pound robotic camera strapped into the passenger seat of Benny Parsons’ #27 Oldsmobile. A handful of drivers were weary of running
with the camera because of the increased weight, but Parsons agreed to carry it. During the broadcast, the camera’s reliability was spotty, but it represented a landmark achievement in auto racing production that still lasts to this day.

After Richard Petty won and Bob Fishman caught the Yarborough/Allison scuffle in the turns three and four grass, CBS left Daytona with an overwhelmingly successful broadcast. CBS won an Emmy for its production and netted a 10.5 Nielson rating that stood as a record-high for the race until 2002 (Fielden, 2015). The effects of this broadcast on NASCAR were lasting as CBS gradually increased its commitment to NASCAR during the transition to the multi-channel era of the 1980s. The network began striking additional television agreements with other race tracks around the country and remained the official broadcast provider of the Daytona 500 through 2000.

*The Effects of the Multi-Channel Transition*

The 1980s of NASCAR was about “smaller cars, bigger purses, and grand exposure” (p. 286). Culturally, Americans across the country were becoming more and more intrigued by the prospect of auto racing, aided by the popularity and lore of shows like *The Dukes of Hazard* (Kim, 2011). NASCAR’s newest television partner was ESPN beginning in 1981. At this point in television history, the three over-the-air networks had a strong hold on America’s “big four” sports. NASCAR, with a heavy amount of practice, qualifying, and race inventory, was the perfect partner for 24-hour ESPN who was seeking any kind of content. ESPN’s early NASCAR strategy was to snatch television contracts from any racetrack that had not previously signed agreements with ABC or CBS (Fielden, 2015). Since rights fees were still managed on a per-track basis, ESPN struck agreements for anywhere in the $40,000-$200,000 price range (Kim,
Until 1996, almost every NASCAR television agreement (outside of the Daytona 500) cost media companies less than $1 million (Hagstrom, 1998).

The 1981 North Carolina 500 was ESPN’s first NASCAR broadcast, albeit tape-delayed. Hosted by Bob Jenkins and Eli Gold, Rockingham Speedway (much like Greenville-Pickens Speedway for ABC) was the ideal track for ESPN to televise from given its one-mile length. At this point in the early 1980s, the pit-reporter position was becoming more of a staple. Since Ken Squier filled the role ten years prior in Greenville, broadcasters were being stationed on pit-road more often to give perspective to the broadcast away from the traditional media tower. ESPN tape-delayed three additional races that season, but went live from flag-to-flag in Atlanta on November 8ᵗʰ, 1981 (Hall, 2014). In the end, the 1981 season was the first of a 19-year broadcasting partnership between NASCAR and the now cable giant. At its peak, ESPN televised 20 NASCAR races in 1990, the most of any other network or cable channel.

ESPN also introduced a number innovations during its agreement with racetracks. In 1985, ESPN expanded NASCAR coverage to include qualifying and unveiled numerous technological advancements such as car telemetry, “crew cam” (a camera attached to an over-the-wall pit reporter), “RoofCam,” “SuspensionCam,” and “Tread Cam” (a camera buried in the asphalt for point-of-view). The importance of ESPN to NASCAR and NASCAR to ESPN is not lost on many individuals. Stock car racing was one of the first sports to receive considerable attention on what is now considered the “Worldwide Leader in Sports” due to its extensive amount of programming. NASCAR’s year-long schedule (February-November), along with its second-tier, “rookie” series formed in 1982, provided ample opportunity for television exposure on ESPN.
“NASCAR was this budding sport that had all this product, this great racing…and [ESPN] had an idea for a 24-hour all-sports television network…they needed sports, and they got together,” surmised Allen Bestwick, ESPN’s most-recent NASCAR play-by-play broadcaster.

“I don’t think that NASCAR would be the sport it is today and ESPN wouldn’t be the worldwide leader it is today if they didn’t have each other.”

NASCAR’s second era of television broadcasting would include two more additional partners than CBS, ABC, and ESPN. Since contractual agreements remained with individual racetrack, NASCAR’s barrier-to-entry was much lower from 1979-2000. In 1983, Time Warner/Turner Sports and the TBS Superstation latched onto the sport by agreeing to terms with the Charlotte Motor Speedway, Pocono Raceway, and numerous additional tracks that featured NASCAR’s second-tier series, then known as the Busch Series (“NASCAR, Turner,” 2014). Elsewhere, ESPN faced its stiffest competition in the early 1990s with cable’s TNN — “The Nashville Network.” TNN, along with its sister-channel, Country Music Television (CMT), was one of two channels owned by Gaylord Entertainment and was a network dedicated to the country, southern lifestyle, essentially the core demographic of NASCAR’s most loyal supporters (Hagstrom, 1998). This meant it was only natural for TNN to siphon five races away from ESPN as well as secure other agreements with most racetracks that featured the second-tier series.

As TNN became a bigger player within stock car broadcasting, NASCAR arguably entered its greatest television stretch in the mid-to-late 1990s. By the end of the decade, NASCAR was the second-highest rated televised sport in the United States, trailing only the NFL. CBS averaged a 6.1 Nielson rating for NASCAR in 1996, an increase of 22% over 1990. ABC (4.9) and ESPN (4.2) also experienced ratings increases during the same year. As
NASCAR was trending up, nearly everything else, including the NFL (down 17%), MLB (near record-low postseason ratings) and cable (down 10%), were trending in the opposite direction, specifically in 1996.

“Winston Cup racing,” explained CBS’s Neil Pilson years later, “is appointment television. If you’re a fan, there is only one chance each week to catch a race. Now compare this to football, basketball, or baseball — on any given weekend, there could be several games to choose from, not counting at least one more during the week. Miss one game, and you can easily catch another within a day or so” (p. 83-84).

The excitement over stock car racing in the 1990s created the NASCAR programming and media ownership model that fans currently see today. Studio shows and original NASCAR programming expanded mightily at the end of the 1990s, most notably on cable. ESPN, TNN, and TBS created a bevy of NASCAR programming which was designed to capitalize on the rising attention paid to some of NASCAR’s biggest stars. In 1995, ESPN launched motorsports’ first daily news program, rpm2night, covering all things NASCAR as well as NHRA, CART, and the Indy Racing League (“RPM2Night,” n.d.). TNN countered with the motorsports series, Raceday, as well as Inside NASCAR (Hagstrom, 1998). Documentary-style programming on historic drivers and moments were also being produced and distributed to NASCAR fans during the 1990s. More importantly, this rush of NASCAR programming does not include the extensive re-airing of races, qualifying, and practice sessions throughout the workweek as well as season-long coverage of NASCAR’s second-tier Busch Series and newly created third-tier circuit, the Craftsman Truck Series, in 1994.

Soon after NASCAR’s explosion, the Walt Disney Company began consolidating and sharing sports programming on its two television entities, ABC and ESPN, after its acquisition of
Capital Cities in the late 1990s (Sandomir, 2006) This ABC/ESPN partnership resulted in extensive cross-promotion of programming and NASCAR was one of the first sports to experience this enhanced marketing approach. For instance, as qualifying was televised on ESPN2, fans were heavily encouraged to watch the Winston Cup race the following day on ABC. The production value of both channels was also streamlined to better exemplify the partnership and synergy between the two Disney-owned properties and this effectively was the first network/cable sports alliance in sports media.

CBS Sports chose to replicate this relationship too. In 1997, as the ABC/ESPN agreement began to form, Westinghouse/CBS announced a $1.55 billion acquisition of Gaylord’s TNN and CMT, two channels packed with race fans (Boyd, 1997). By acquiring TNN, CBS Sports gained control of 11 of NASCAR’s 32 Winston Cup races and established a CBS/TNN relationship that could compete with ABC/ESPN. Michael Jordan, chairman and chief executive of Westinghouse/CBS, described the acquisition as a “strategic move to expand the reach and scope of CBS’s media businesses into high-growth segments” (Hagstrom, 1998, p. 87). The high-growth segment was NASCAR.

NASCAR arguably was one of the first sports that helped create the network/cable relationship that exists heavily today with the likes of ABC/ESPN, FOX/FS1, NBC/NBCSN and others. The reasoning behind this enhanced exposure of NASCAR in the 1990s is simple: people were watching. Fans, sponsors, and corporate shareholders could not get enough of stock car coverage, regardless of it was on CBS, TNN, ABC, ESPN, ESPN2, or TBS. This increasingly high fan interest is also what caused television rights fees to skyrocket, well beyond the $1 million figure previously mentioned. In 1997, the inaugural Winston Cup races at Texas Motor Speedway and California Motor Speedway cost more than $3 million each to televise and rights
to broadcast the Daytona 500 cost CBS Sports $8.5 million at this point in television history. To recoup these costs, the cost of an advertisement in the 1997 Daytona 500 pushed $130,000 which was five times more than what it cost in 1979. Since NASCAR was now a hot media commodity, the France family realized the sport could glean more money out of its 10% rights portion negotiated by the tracks. As a result, NASCAR was about to upend its broadcasting model at the turn of the new millennium and share stock car racing with whichever media company was ready to write a significant check.

*NASCAR’s New Millennium*

After a decade of remarkable growth in the 1990s (attendance up 90% and television ratings up 19%), NASCAR was ready to cash in on behalf of the tracks, owners, and drivers (“Fox, TBS,” n.d.) In February 1999, NASCAR announced its intentions to consolidate the negotiations of its television rights on behalf of the owners and tracks (Macur, 1999). At the time of the announcement, the combined amount of television money that NASCAR tracks were receiving over 34 races was about $100 million per year, much less than what the NFL ($2.2 billion) and the NBA ($660 million) were receiving at the time. Television insiders believed NASCAR, if jointly negotiated as opposed to track negotiated, could fetch perhaps three times as much money in a new television package.

On November 11th, 1999, NASCAR achieved significant status within the sports world when it announced a six-year/$2.4 billion contract with FOX, NBC, and Turner Sports starting with the 2001 Daytona 500 (“Fox, TBS,” 1999). The deal gave NASCAR more annual money in television rights fees than baseball and hockey and boosted its exposure on free, over-the-air television by roughly 70% (Sandomir, 1999). Under the agreement, NASCAR significantly simplified how and where NASCAR was televised in the United States, eliminating four of its
longstanding broadcast partners, ABC, ESPN, CBS, and TNN, in one agreement. NASCAR Vice President Mike Helton also reaffirmed the sport’s revenue-sharing model – tracks would receive 65% of television money, followed by 25% to team owners, and then 10% to the sanctioning body. In the final year of NASCAR’s track negotiated rights era (2000), Winston Cup races were scattered across television. During that season, ESPN televised 12 races, TNN had 9, ABC had 5, CBS had 4, TBS had 3, and NBC had 1 (“2000 NASCAR Winston Cup,” n.d.). The problem with NASCAR in the late 90s was that its media rights package was too difficult and complex for average, non-passionate fans to understand. The confusion also did not factor in the numerous qualifying and practice sessions that were also televised, but on many different networks as well.

NASCAR’s new agreement welcomed FOX Sports. The sanctioning body’s agreement with FOX was technically for eight years and allowed the media company to broadcast the season-opening Daytona 500 in 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2007 as well as the rest of the season’s events through June (“Fox, TBS,” 1999). The deal also allowed FOX to split its NASCAR coverage on its sister cable channel FX, a practice much more common today. For FOX, the acquisition of NASCAR was a network strategy to fill Sunday afternoon programming after the conclusion of the NFL season in late January/early February. NBC, in a joint agreement with TNT, negotiated a six-year deal with NASCAR to see July-November stock car racing move predominately to the Peacock as well as the Daytona 500 in 2002, 2004, and 2006. The deal also stipulated that select NASCAR events would be carried by TNT, but with the same NBC production crew and on-air talent, mirroring what FOX was doing with its cable partner, FX.

NASCAR’s new linear agreement signaled a new era in television broadcasting for the sport. As Bill France Jr. described it, “this agreement will showcase NASCAR racing to millions
of sports fans like never before…in ways they could have never imagined.” Meanwhile, TNN Sports and ESPN were dealt a devastating blow. Because of TNN’s lack of stable programming, the channel was folded into Viacom’s merger with CBS in late 1999 and was re-branded as Spike TV in 2003 (Mifflin, 1999). ESPN was restricted by NASCAR from doing any on-camera interviews or work from inside the track under terms of the new agreement (Fay, 2001). This forced the network’s on-air reporters to huddle outside race tracks or at nearby helipads to talk to drivers as they exited. ESPN’s daily motorsports show, rpm2night, remarkably continued through 2002, but was later cancelled (“RPM2Night,” n.d.). FOX and NBC/TNT proved remarkably beneficial for NASCAR, the tracks, and team owners, but it left a sour taste in the mouths of certain media partners that stuck with NASCAR from the very beginning. The argument can be made that one of the major reasons TNN Sports was unable to survive was because it lost its NASCAR rights. The same can be said for the CBS Sports/TNN alliance which never materialized into the new decade. Although the joint venture echoed some of the current sports media moves occurring today, the failure of this particular agreement established the guiding principle that live event programming and broadcast rights are a necessity for television success. Without both, the demand for a television product, especially on cable, is simply not there.

**NASCAR on Television Today**

FOX’s coverage of NASCAR began at the 2001 Daytona 500. In its eight-year agreement with NASCAR, the network leveraged daily programming (shows like *NASCAR Victory Lane* and *Totally NASCAR*) on Fox Sports Net and later, SPEED Channel, a sister-network of FOX Sports which it purchased in 2001 (Mickle & Ourand, 2013b). As far as production value, FOX Sports has widely been praised by NASCAR and its fan base, highlighted by its use of former
driver turned broadcaster, Darrell Waltrip, and its use of “CableCam,” a mobile, gyro-stabilized HD camera suspended over the front stretch of Daytona International Speedway (Daytona 500 Broadcast Guide, 2016).

After officially beginning in 2001, NBC/TNT Sports began its coverage of NASCAR much like FOX — relying on a beloved driver of the 70s and 80s (Benny Parsons) to provide color commentary. In the early 2000s, critics grumbled over the quality of NBC’s production of NASCAR compared to FOX. NBC’s NASCAR strategy was arguably much more simplified and focused in the early 2000s as NBC Sports Chairman Dick Ebersol even told Sporting News that the tone of his company’s broadcast “tends to be… a bit more serious than that of FOX” (“Nationwide darling?” 2001). Regardless, the difference in production of NASCAR on FOX compared to NBC was miniscule and ratings were trending up into unchartered territory for both networks, including TNT. According to television ratings, NASCAR’s best season on its two new television partners came in 2005 (“TV ratings, 2005,” n.d.) FOX announced its 6.0 average rating (approximately 9.6 million viewers) for thirteen NASCAR events was the first sports-television package to break a rating’s record since Monday Night Football in 1981. Similarly, NBC’s average 4.7 rating was its best NASCAR season-to-date since beginning coverage in 2001. However, the excitement over television ratings was short-lived as the 2006 season saw ratings decline in 31 of NASCAR’s 36 races compared to 2005. Specifically, the final eight races of NASCAR’s season all declined in the final ratings category on NBC. The Peacock averaged a 5.0 rating in the final eight-race stretch in 2005, but saw that figure fall to 4.5 in 2006. This decline is a significant fact to consider, because the 2006 season was also NBC’s final year in its television agreement with NASCAR. Despite decent ratings, NBC suffered financial losses in all five seasons of NASCAR coverage up to that point. FOX reportedly suffered losses too, writing
off an estimated $297 million, but chose to return to the sport in the next round of television negotiations. With NBC out, NASCAR was in the position to strike another new television agreement in the mid-2000s. Although the sport had lost steam from the early 2000s, NASCAR was positioned to net its largest media agreement ever and the France family succeeded thanks to a reliable and familiar media partner.

In December 2005, NASCAR announced an eight-year/$4.5 billion agreement with FOX, TNT, and ABC/ESPN (Hinton, 2005). The deal represented a 40% increase over the 1999 deal and saw NASCAR align itself with three of the biggest media giants in the world — News Corp., Time Warner, and Disney. The terms of the agreement did not result in much change for the average NASCAR viewer. Beginning in 2007, FOX retained its rights for the first 13 races of the season as well as gaining exclusive coverage of the season-opening Daytona 500 as opposed to alternating it with another network. In addition, it marked the end of sharing race coverage on cable channel FX as each of FOX’s premiere-series telecasts aired on network television for the duration of the deal. TNT broke away from NBC and remained in NASCAR as Turner Sports created the “TNT Summer Series.”, agreeing to air races 14-19 on the Cup calendar in June and July with its own production and on-air talent (“TNT and NASCAR,” 2005). Races 20-36, including exclusive control of NASCAR’s recently created “playoffs,” went to ABC/ESPN.

The lasting takeaway for NASCAR and the sport of stock car auto racing was that this deal openly embraced the concept of new media. George Bodenheimer, the president of ESPN and ABC Sports, officially touted the agreement as one that fully embraced fans consuming sports somewhere other than in front of the traditional television (Hinton, 2005).
“NASCAR is a strong and growing property, and the ESPN of the 21st century — an array of new media platforms and content outlets reaching fans wherever and however they consumer sports,” he said, “will take the sport to even high levels of exposure and growth.”

Overall, NASCAR’s television ratings experienced a slow, gradual decline during its agreement with FOX, TNT, and ABC/ESPN. After just one year (2007), it was determined that NASCAR’s total ratings figure was down 21% compared to 2005, most notably on ABC/ESPN (“TV ratings 2007,” n.d.). From 2007-2009, Disney had initially televised the final ten races of NASCAR’s season on ABC, but this changed in 2010 when many of the final 19 races were shifted to ESPN. By 2012, the final ten races of the NASCAR season hit a record-low 2.7 rating with an average of just 4.2 million viewers (“2012 NASCAR Sprint Cup,” 2012).

Despite all the NASCAR coverage in existence, including daily programming on FOX’s SPEED Channel and ESPN with rpm2night’s successor, NASCAR Now, the sport was hurting. With negotiations looming, NASCAR television ratings were down 47% and admissions revenue for tracks was down 42% since the last television agreement (Pockrass, 2013). Insiders were convinced that NASCAR Chairman Brian France would not fetch nearly as much money as he did in 2005 because of declining fan and television interest, but somehow, he remarkably did.

The first agreement was an eight-year extension with FOX Sports for the first-half of the NASCAR season as well as exclusive coverage of the entire NASCAR Trucks Series, the lowest-level of NASCAR. The deal, announced in 2013, was for eight years (thru 2022) and valued at $2.5 billion, an increase in payout from $220 million/year to $300 million/year (Crupi, 2012). Although FOX had two years left on its 2005 agreement, they were quick to re-sign with NASCAR because of increasingly important sports media trends. Per the official announcement, FOX Sports significantly increased its digital rights to the sport of NASCAR, indicating a move
to a “TV Everywhere” strategy for FOX Sports and NASCAR. In 2013, FOX tacked on two more years to the above agreement (thru 2024) and acquired the rights to three additional Cup races and 14 NASCAR Xfinity Series races, the sport’s second-tier series. After bolstering its digital rights, FOX significantly enhanced the amount of live sports content in its portfolio, because FOX Sports was days away from re-launching sister-channel SPEED as Fox Sports 1 (FS1), a 24 hour, all-sports cable network designed to compete against ESPN. With the need for programming and professional sports, FOX made a commitment to make NASCAR a focal property for the new network, echoing what CBS/TNN tried to do in the 1990s, but failed to accomplish. Beginning in 2015 (under terms of the new agreement), FOX chose to air select Cup Series races on FS1, all of its 14 Xfinity Series races on cable, as well as an overwhelming majority of the NASCAR Truck Series races in its portfolio. This assessment does not include the numerous practice, qualifying, and daily NASCAR programming (*NASCAR RaceHub*) that was and currently is aired on the sister station. Much like the 1980s, live content was needed to support a new cable sports network. Back then, NASCAR supported ESPN and TNN. Today, it supports FS1 and one other cable station, NBC Sports Network (NBCSN).

Using the same theory, NASCAR finalized its current television agreement in 2013. The deal announced the sport was leaving Turner Sports/TNT as well as ABC/ESPN to sign a ten-year agreement with the NBC Sports Group. The deal, beginning in 2015 and lasting through 2024, cost NBC $4.4 billion (Mickle & Ourand, 2013). NBC’s deal with NASCAR echoes the goals and sentiments of its fellow broadcaster, FOX. With the re-brand of VERSUS as the NBC Sports Network in 2012, the network sought a list of programming to fill the newly created cable channel. Given the depth and scope of NASCAR’s programming (practice, qualifying, original shows, races, etc.), the agreement gave NBC an incredible amount of flexibility to spread content
across network and cable television to support the new station. At the time of the announcement, it had already been determined that no less than thirteen of the twenty races NBC was acquiring would be jettisoned to cable. NASCAR and NBC also announced that 15 of NBC’s 19 Xfinity Series races were bound for NBCSN an entire two years prior to the deal taking effect.

In total, NASCAR’s most recent television deal, despite sagging ratings and attendance from the early 2000s, topped its 2005 agreement because of FOX and NBC’s expansion into cable. Once both agreements were announced, NASCAR officially walked away with a ten-year/$8.2 billion agreement — a “jaw-dropping” 46% increase over its last deal (Pockrass, 2013). For NASCAR, it was a monumental victory considering the troubles facing the sport. For FOX and NBC, the financial investment was to acquire an overwhelming amount of live sports content for FS1 and NBCSN. Regardless of how well the broadcasts are received or viewed, any respectable media researcher knows an average television audience (two to four million viewers) is better than zero viewers. This deal also strengthened FOX’s and NBC’s ability to leverage a higher subscription fee for the two channels with its various cable and satellite providers (DirecTV, U-Verse, etc.). As this most recent deal shows, NASCAR’s timing when striking a new television deal proved to be largely beneficial for the bottom line of stock car racing’s governing body, its tracks, and its owners once again.

*The Early Years of CART*

The earliest broadcasts of open-wheel racing largely mirrored the coverage of stock cars in the 1960s and 1970s. Sports programs like *Wide World of Sports* and *CBS Sports Spectacular* brought the biggest names in championship car racing (Andretti, Foyt, Gurney, and others) as it was then known to viewers across the country. Research cannot clearly identify the first such example of televised open-wheel racing, but a search does reveal a litany of broadcasts dating as
far back as the 1967 Rex Mays 300 in Riverside, California. This event, aired as part of *Wide World of Sports*, was the season-finale for the USAC National Championship (movracefan, 2009). Just like other televised racing broadcasts of the era, the race was tape-delayed, shortened and aired alongside the World Figure Skating Championships in Vienna, Austria.

As USAC operated open-wheel racing into the early 1970s, television broadcasting was prevalent enough to attract a major corporate sponsor in tobacco’s Philip Morris. The company, after being banned from advertising on radio and television by the federal government, chose to become the title sponsor of USAC’s National Championship in 1970, a move fellow tobacco-company R.J. Reynolds mirrored with NASCAR in 1971 (Whitaker, 2015). Unfortunately, USAC chose to abandon road course and dirt track racing on its competition schedule shortly after the sponsorship agreement with Philip Morris which resulted in growing frustration from drivers and teams who openly preferred that style of racing.

Dan Gurney, who retired as a driver in the 1970s and became a USAC team owner, was one of the leading figures who expressed anger toward the governing body. Gurney was most flustered at promoters and tracks, because he believed they were doing a poor job of supporting open-wheel races outside of the Indianapolis 500. Gurney felt races outside of Indianapolis were “orphans” and that championship car racing “was more or less derelict” (p. 1). After speaking with fellow owners and drivers in 1978, Gurney penned his famous “white papers” of open-wheel racing which was a list of grievances and demands for USAC to review. One of his major beliefs was that too much control of open-wheel racing had been taken from the team owners and that the sport needed to unify together as drivers, teams, and race tracks to better entice media properties to cover the championship circuit.
USAC largely rebuked Gurney and other prominent open-wheel figures (Roger Penske, Pat Patrick, and others) because of their little desire to change the operating model. As a result, Gurney and his fellow car owners defected from the organization in 1978 to create “Championship Auto Racing Teams,” or CART. Television broadcasting, at this point in the sport’s history, became a pawn in the ensuing feud between the two organizations. One of the deciding factors to breakaway from USAC was the lack of growth in race purses, because CART believed a better, more lucrative television agreement from any network in the 1970s and 80s would translate to more money for the teams. Therefore, Gurney and his fellow CART owners became adamant that they should be the ones involved in the television negotiations with ABC, CBS, and NBC. This would replace the longstanding television model that negotiations take place between the networks and the race tracks in open-wheel racing.

Despite clear confirmation, research tends to reveal that most of the television revenue obtained by the tracks was not shared with the team owners of USAC, hence the growing frustration from the likes of Gurney, Penske, and other owners.

“It’s not that we want all the TV money, but those who negotiate the TV rights aren’t selling [the drivers/owners] for what we are worth,” Gurney said. “People in TV tell us that Mario Andretti and Al Unser are driving around for one-quarter to one-third of what some minor-league basketball players’ teams command” (p. 6).

CART continued to drive a wedge between itself and its newly created rival when Gurney singled out the USAC-sanctioned Indianapolis 500 as the first event that should comply with his organization’s list of racing and television demands.
“It appears that a ‘showdown’ with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway is or should be the first target,” Gurney said. “They are the ones who can afford it. We should negotiate the TV rights (our rights – not theirs) and we should double the purse” (p. 7).

With television negotiations as the backdrop, the open-wheel civil war between USAC and CART was officially underway. The two sides both released competition schedules for 1979, forcing drivers, teams, and television partners to choose which organization they were going to support. Generally, the top teams and drivers in open-wheel racing (Penske, Rutherford, Mears, etc.) chose to align with CART for a multitude of reasons. This paralyzed USAC, most notably in its television agreements with tracks and networks. A provision of certain agreements between the tracks/USAC and broadcast television was that a “representative field” of drivers would compete, meaning USAC needed to guarantee the top teams and drivers would race in their events and not CART’s events. One unknown network required 15 of open wheel’s top 20 drivers to compete or the agreement was terminated. Outside of one racing icon, A.J. Foyt, USAC had little representation and star power in its series post-1979.

Prior to the 1979 Indianapolis 500, ABC’s Wide World of Sports was set to televise two USAC races from Ontario (California) and Texas Motor Speedway, but abruptly cancelled the broadcasts with research not yielding any definitive reason. Then in April 1979, ABC chose to air CART’s race in Atlanta instead of its previously scheduled USAC race in Dover, Delaware, presumably because of talent and fan interest. The ensuing war between the two organizations was a topic of conversation in the CART telecast and truly showed just how bad things were getting in open-wheel racing.

Hosted by Al Michaels, Wide World of Sports brought the second of two “twin” CART races from Atlanta on ABC (SirDavids Motorsports Videos, 2012). Ironically, the broadcast
came on the heels of USAC’s sudden announcement that six CART teams (totaling 19 drivers) were banned from competing in the Indianapolis 500 (Whitaker, 2015). According to USAC, the six CART teams were not allowed to compete in the race, because they were “not in good standing” with the organization (p. 16). The fallout from USAC’s decision cast a cloud of controversy over the entire sport, but shadowed the ABC telecast as well (SirDavids Motorsports Videos, 2012). Michaels tossed to Chris Economaki who stood by with CART co-founder and team owner, Roger Penske. Speaking on behalf of CART prior to the race, Penske explained the lack of representation that he and his fellow owners received from USAC in 1978. He also announced that CART was willing to put up a “bond” to still compete at Indianapolis. Economaki then tossed to driver-turned-broadcaster Jackie Stewart who spoke directly to the camera for approximately one minute, pleading for open-wheel unity between USAC and CART.

“The situation here is very bad,” Stewart explained to viewers. “The most important thing right now is for these two groups to get themselves together, because I believe the Indianapolis 500 is too important for a war to take place.”

ABC’s interest in this telecast is noteworthy given the network’s position as a supplier for both USAC and CART coverage. ABC was clearly willing to give Penske a platform to speak about his grievances with USAC and was also comfortable giving Stewart ample time for on-air commentary. This broadcast in particular revealed the importance of the split in open-wheel racing and given ABC’s agreement to cover USAC’s Indianapolis 500, the network was going to have to tip-toe the fine line between both organizations. A federal judge later ruled in favor of CART and therefore, each banned team could now compete in that season’s Indianapolis 500 as scheduled that season.
**CART Turns to SportsWorld**

A by-product of the USAC/CART divorce was the introduction of a new media partner to the auto racing fraternity — NBC’s *SportsWorld* (“SportsWorld,” n.d.). Beginning production in 1978, the *Wide World of Sports* competitor became a reliable broadcasting partner of CART for much of the 1980s. NBC aired the series’ inaugural race from Phoenix in 1979 as well as a handful of other races outside the Indianapolis 500. Of note, none of NBC’s broadcasts at the time were shown live to viewers across the country. One of those early broadcasts though, *SportsWorld’s* coverage of the CART Michigan 500, seemed to have a small slant toward the newly created organization (RacingAccidents3, 2013). The broadcast touted the close racing and the exciting product that CART offered fans midway through its first season of competition. Paul Page, the color-commentator for NBC’s coverage, commented on how great of a job the creators of CART had done in creating a much better auto racing product than USAC.

“They found that [the owners] wanted to merchandise championship racing in a different way — one that might be happier for the fans,” Page said moments into NBC’s broadcast. “They now have the prestige of these great Indianapolis champions…they have been close races and I expect we’re going to have one this afternoon.”

With a growing list of open-wheel’s top drivers and teams, CART started winning the war against USAC. In 1980, the series landed a $250,000 title sponsor in PPG Industries, a partnership that lasted for nearly two decades and branded the series as the “CART PPG Indy Car World Series” (Whitaker, 2015). The series also agreed to terms with NBC for four more telecasts during the 1980 season. USAC and CART attempted to reconcile during the early 1980s, but squabbles over car specifications and seats on the governing board routinely ended any negotiations. Meanwhile, USAC struggled to maintain its level of competitiveness with
CART. The series’ calendar featured 18 races in 1978, but by 1980, USAC was down to just five races and down to just one, the Indianapolis 500, by 1985.

The 1981 Michigan 500 in July on NBC was the 1979 Daytona 500-equivalent for open-wheel racing. After rain initially postponed the race, NBC televised the event live and flag-to-flag making it the first major open-wheel race to be televised using this format (asopher, 2015). A key storyline and attraction was the second-largest race purse for CART outside of the Indianapolis 500 — $500,000. Since a leading cause of the USAC/CART split was Dan Gurney’s desire to control television rights and increase purses, the Michigan 500 was a symbolic representation of CART’s desire to breakaway.

Bruce Jenner, the 1976 Olympic gold medalist, was the first voice viewers heard in NBC’s telecast. Jenner served as a pit reporter, alongside Gary Gerould, and openly expressed NBC’s excitement and enthusiasm for making television history on a warm, muggy Michigan afternoon. After tossing to host Charlie Jones and commentator Paul Page, NBC aired a recap of CART’s two-year history, conveniently noting the hard work and accomplishments of the series’ drivers and teams. The recap also included a comment about NBC’s presence at many of CART’s marquee moments over the past two seasons.

In this telecast, 37 cars took the green flag and one driver, Bill Alsup, carried a small on-board camera in the front wing of his Indy Car. (CART commonly used the term “Indy Car” to describe its racing machine despite USAC operating the Indianapolis 500). The camera, positioned just four inches off the racing surface, was the first of its kind in open-wheel broadcasting history. The race was marred by a massive pit-road fire in the box of Herm Johnson just 29 laps into the race. Upon refueling, a fire broke out and engulfed the surrounding pit area
forcing NBC to cover a news event instead of a sporting event with Bruce Jenner as the de facto on-scene reporter. The race resumed after the fire was extinguished.

The early years of open-wheel broadcasting on television were very similar to NASCAR in terms of distribution on tape-delay and production quality. The biggest difference, however, was the role of television acting as a divider, rather than unifier. The founders of CART used television broadcasting as a weapon against USAC, ultimately beating the organization by starting a new series with top drivers and the occasional broadcast on NBC. However, NBC’s presence at CART races did not automatically eliminate the controversy surrounding open-wheel racing. The pit-road fire in the first live telecast is symbolic considering the language, tone, and feeling of some of open-wheel’s early broadcasts. USAC’s inability to counter CART programming, but its subsequent hold on the Indianapolis 500, cast an early cloud of confusion over the entire sport. USAC and CART also forced fans to answer tough questions when it came to understanding open-wheel racing: is this venue a USAC or CART track, which series does my favorite driver compete in, why is CART competing in the Indianapolis 500, etc. As NASCAR rode the wave of the headlining, yet crazy 1979 Daytona 500, the stories emulating from open wheel on television were about division, bans, and lawsuits. The opportunity for open-wheel racing to counter NASCAR with a solid first impression was missed and it would take years for CART to finally establish its reputation and consistent place on traditional television.

Open-Wheel’s Second Split

CART pushed forward with its brand and style of open-wheel racing in 1982 and beyond. The series, after defeating USAC, saw steady growth in attendance (up 13.8%) as well as overall revenue (Whitaker, 2015). At this point, CART was predominately supported by three television
partners — ABC, NBC, and newcomer ESPN. Like NASCAR, ESPN in the 1980s sought any sports content available and CART’s expanding schedule met its need for content acquisition.

By the middle of the decade, CART was ready to expand the amount of live, flag-to-flag coverage of its product. The 1985 season saw 11 of 15 CART races aired live by a combination of the three networks listed above, and by 1986, the number increased to 14. CART’s live broadcasts largely forced USAC and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to try to negotiate a new, more lucrative deal with ABC Sports for the 500. Through 1985, the Indianapolis 500 remarkably had yet to air live in its entirety, a striking fact considering CART had live, flag-to-flag coverage by 1981 and NASCAR had it by 1979. It was not until the 1986 Indianapolis 500 that ABC carried the race live and in its entirety. However, by the end of the 1980s, CART was beginning to chase a different kind of open-wheel product. This began to anger some of open-wheel racing’s biggest powerbrokers, most notably, Indianapolis Motor Speedway President Tony George. CART was becoming more of a series for foreign-born drivers accustomed to racing on road/street courses than traditional, American ovals. For instance, the 1990 CART season featured just four oval/speedway races compared to 12 non-oval races. This was a stark difference from CART’s inaugural season in 1979 when the series featured only one road course (Watkins Glen) and 13 oval/speedway tracks. CART was even beginning to seek races overseas at this point, even securing a race in Australia as the 1991 season opener.

On television, ESPN and ABC Sports eventually became the home for open-wheel racing in the United States. In 1990, CART finalized a broadcasting agreement with ESPN for the next four seasons. NBC was in the midst of gradually phasing out its auto racing coverage by the end of the 1980s, but at the same time, ESPN/ABC was gradually increasing theirs. Although much of the news surrounding CART was positive at the start of the 1990s, the price of fielding a
competitive car in open-wheel racing was beginning to skyrocket. It was estimated that the price to compete in the Indianapolis 500 was around $350,000 (Whitaker, 2015). This translated to a significant drop in the number of competitors at many CART races, including the Indianapolis 500. The 1991 Indianapolis 500 saw a record-low 41 cars during the month of May and CART’s Michigan 500 only featured 21 competitors.

“The NFL has several cities seeking franchises and there are any number of individuals seeking to obtain an NBA franchise,” said William Stokkan, a Finn and the then-president of CART. “But when I open my office door, there’s no one in the hall waiting to buy a CART franchise” (p. 50).

Stokkan and IMS’ Tony George tried to work through this problem facing open-wheel racing. Despite CART’s success as a now-global racing series, a division still existed between the organization and USAC/IMS over a variety of racing-related issues. Tony George, USAC, and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway were worried at this point that CART was losing its roots as an oval-based, American-motorsports product as well as simply being too expensive to compete in (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2013). George believed there were too many road courses, too many foreign-based events, and too much promotion of foreign-born drivers instead of Americans. Heeding George’s concerns, CART reorganized its board of directors to include the president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (George), but the seat was non-voting and merely an advisory position (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2014, Whitaker, 2015). The move was not enough to appease George, and he responded with a bold, decisive move. On January 7th, 1994, Tony George resigned his seat on the CART board of directors and announced the creation of the Indy Racing League (IRL), a rival organization to CART that was slated to begin operation in 1996.
The single, most fundamental issue dividing CART and IRL was control of the sport. From a media standpoint, this becomes a key moment. IRL, whose 1996 season featured only three races including the Indianapolis 500, was able to directly negotiate with ABC Sports because of IMS’ long-standing relationship with the network (Whitaker, 2015). Soon after George’s IRL announcement, NASCAR was about to invade the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with its inaugural Brickyard 400 Winston Cup race in 1994. In a new television deal, ABC Sports reached an agreement with IMS to televise NASCAR’s newest race at the Speedway, but also to exclusively televise the Indy Racing League at the same time. Of note, as part of the agreement, the Indy Racing League (more specifically, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway) would assume the financial risks of the IRL telecasts, not ABC.

On January 27th, 1996, the Indy Racing League debuted with the Indy 200 at Walt Disney World on ABC (indycar, 2010). Ironically, it was Paul Page, formerly of NBC’s SportsWorld, who anchored coverage from the temporary race track constructed on Disney property. Decades prior, Page used his opening remarks of an NBC telecast to praise the formation of CART, but in 1996, his opening remarks now praised the creation of the IRL, explaining to viewers Tony George’s vision of an “affordable, American oval track series.” Page continued, emphasizing the Indianapolis Motor Speedway’s heavy involvement in the Indy Racing League. This included Tony George’s bombshell announcement (echoing USAC’s 1979 announcement) that the Indianapolis Motor Speedway had reserved 25 of the 33 starting spots in the 1996 Indianapolis 500 for only IRL drivers, drawing significant fire from CART team owners who were reliant on the 500’s race purse. On top of that, CART and IRL (Indianapolis Motor Speedway) were now going to court to fight over the terms “IndyCar” and “Indy Car,” two trademarks that CART had licensed from the Speedway to use many years prior (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2013).
A new open-wheel civil war was underway in the 1990s. Prior to the CART/IRL split, many racing observers thought CART could compete with NASCAR in terms of popularity in the United States (Ferrell & Hartline, 2013). In fact, CART enjoyed higher television ratings than NASCAR in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it was now forever in jeopardy beginning with the Indianapolis 500 on May 26th, 1996. This traditional day of open-wheel racing in Indianapolis now featured two competing races – IRL’s Indianapolis 500 and CART’s U.S. 500 at the Michigan International Speedway, a race formed in protest of Tony George and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

ABC televised the Indianapolis 500 (noon) and ESPN televised the U.S. 500 (2 p.m.) on May 26th. The Indianapolis 500 earned an 8.4 rating during the unified 1995 season, but fell 21.4% to a 6.6 in 1996 (Whitaker, 2015). (NASCAR’s 1996 Daytona 500 drew a 9.2 on CBS for comparison). This was a significant moment in auto racing, because throughout history, the Indianapolis 500 either exceeded or equaled NASCAR’s ratings figure for the Daytona 500. Now, open-wheel’s marquee event was no longer auto racing’s most watched broadcast on television. In Michigan, the U.S. 500 drew a cable rating of just 2.8, approximately equivalent to a 2.0 rating on over-the-air television. Symbolically, this race was marred by its own fire-like incident that occurred fifteen years prior on NBC at the exact same track. On the pace lap, ten cars crashed into each other without turning a green-flag lap. CART, with ESPN’s cameras rolling, chose to allow those drivers to race their backup cars instead without penalty, but the decision seriously harmed the organization’s competitive reputation in subsequent races.

Regardless, CART pressed forward and was seemingly well-equipped to fight IRL in the late 1990s. The 1996 television ratings revealed that NASCAR’s viewership was now twice as high as open wheel, but CART was still able to sign FedEx to a three-year/$15 million
entitlement sponsorship agreement (Siano, 1997). The new “FedEx Championship Series” continued its television partnership with ABC and ESPN through 2001, but its television viewership started to hemorrhage. The average television ratings of a CART event on ABC fell from a 2.0 to 1.4 from 1996 to 1999 and on ESPN, the ratings tumbled from a 2.2 to a 0.7 (Brockington, 2000).

The Indy Racing League was in a very similar situation as CART. Although it managed an entitlement sponsor of its own with Pep Boys in 1998 (a five-year agreement), its television numbers on ABC (and new partners CBS and TNN) were worse than CART’s numbers. IRL averaged a 1.8 rating for its three race-schedule in 1996 on ABC, and that number dropped to 1.3 by 1999. The ratings for IRL were so bad that Pep Boys ended its sponsorship of the series in December 1999 (“Pep Boys drops,” 2000). This decision came after the IRL moved its races (except the Indianapolis 500) to Fox Sports Net in 1999, a group of 22 regional cable channels which cratered ratings to a 0.2 (Brockington, 2000).

After the ratings disaster of 1999, the Indy Racing League, fresh off a sponsorship deal with Internet search-engine Northern Lights, reached a new television agreement with ABC, ESPN, and ESPN2 to return the entire series to the Disney-owned property (“IRL: ABC, ESPN,” 1999). The “multimillion-dollar broadcast partnership” was the largest television agreement at the time for the Indy Racing League and kept the famed Indianapolis 500 on ABC for the next five years. Although the agreement failed to release financial specifics, it was clear that ABC/ESPN preferred the IRL (and the Indianapolis 500, especially) over CART, sending the latter open-wheel series into a state of turmoil.

The organization fired its then-CEO Andrew Craig six months before his contract was set to expire in 2000 (Whitaker, 2015). At the same time, CART owners, notably Chip Ganassi and
CART co-founder Roger Penske, slowly began defecting to the Indy Racing League, because they were too enamored with the Indianapolis 500 to continue to race in Michigan. On television, CART’s media agreement with ABC/ESPN expired at the end of the 2001 season and there was no agreement in place to follow it. As a result, the organization tapped Joseph Heitzler as its new CEO in December 2000. Heitzler was previously the CEO of National Mobile Television Productions, Inc. and quickly identified television rights as his first and top assignment, but his results were mixed.

In August 2001, Heitzler announced a three-year broadcasting deal with CBS and cable-sports channel, SPEED (then-known as SpeedVision). The agreement was significant because it saw the creation and expansion of CART programming on television, specifically practice, qualifying, and pre-race coverage but much of this programming was slated for SPEED which was only in 50% of the homes compared to ESPN (“CART announces new TV deal,” 2001). CBS agreed to air seven of the 19 races on network television, but this was down from CART’s previous agreement with ABC which featured 13 over-the-air broadcasts in 1999 (Whitaker, 2015). To make matters worse for the IRL-rival, they were forced to purchase the television airtime on CBS at a rate of $235,000 per hour. CART was also subject to pay FOX Sports an average of $325,000 to produce the broadcasts, too (“CART announces new TV deal,” 2001).

By the end of 2002, the series lost three major competition partners — Honda and Toyota (engine and technical partners) as well as FedEx (Ferrell, Hartline, 2013). CART also lost an estimated $43.5 million by the midway point of 2003. The series was sold for a mere $3.2 million in January 2004 to a three-man ownership group who re-branded CART as “Champ Car World Series.” The ownership group moved exclusive control of the series to Spike TV (the
same one NASCAR abandoned in 2001 when it was TNN), but the television production was described by Whitaker as a “disaster” (p. 109).

Meanwhile, IRL began operating under a new, more popular name beginning in 2003. The Indy Racing League was now simply “IRL IndyCar Series,” because the lawsuit with CART over the “IndyCar”/“Indy Car” trademark resulted in George’s group winning and allowed them to use the phrases as long it was after December 31st, 2002. Despite the re-brand, a title sponsor for IndyCar was now absent as Northern Lights removed itself from auto racing altogether the previous year (“Northern Light,” 2002). During the early 2000s, IndyCar racing on ABC and ESPN failed to attract any significant television rating as from 2002-2004, viewership dropped by 25% (Ferrell, Hartline, 2013). The Indianapolis 500, the crown jewel of open-wheel racing, sank to a 4.7 Nielson rating in 2004, a far cry from its double-digit ratings in the early 1980s (“Indy on TV,” n.d.). By 2007, the world of open-wheel racing reached its breaking point. After rumors swirled that IRL-founder Tony George was attempting to purchase Champ Car throughout the 2000s, British journalist Gordon Kirby reported ABC/ESPN had told George it would cease broadcasting the Indianapolis 500 and IndyCar all together if the two organizations did not merge (Whitaker, 2015).

On February 27th, 2008 at Homestead-Miami Speedway, a formal announcement was made that the Indy Racing League and the Champ Car World Series were merging into one association — IndyCar. The merger resulted in Tony George’s league purchasing all assets of Champ Car, including its race contracts, intellectual property, and more for $6 million. IndyCar also provided financial assistance, chassis, and engines to Champ Car teams transitioning from one organizations to the next. The estimated price of unifying open-wheel racing in 2008 was $30 million. On television, ESPN/ABC stuck with its original programming plan as the
television home of the IndyCar Series, but later acquired three additional telecasts as Champ Car’s Long Beach, Edmonton, and Australia races were preserved and added to the 2008 IndyCar schedule. It did not take long for open-wheel racing to see a unified bump in its media exposure. At the midway point of the season, IndyCar viewership was up nearly 19% across ABC, ESPN, and ESPN2 in 2008. (‘‘IndyCar viewership,’’ 2008). Specifically, average viewership totals on ESPN reached 754,000 viewers compared to just 550,000 viewers the year before.

_IndyCar Today_

Although the unification of open-wheel racing provided a brief honeymoon phase to the sport, the now Verizon IndyCar Series is feeling the effects of its most recent television agreement. In 2009, one year after Champ Car folded into IndyCar, ESPN chose to significantly reduce its open-wheel racing coverage after its five-year, 2004 agreement with George expired. The 2008 season saw ABC/ESPN cover a total of 18 races, three of which were overseas. By 2009, ESPN offered to televise just five races — the Indianapolis 500 and four mid-major events throughout the season. As one racing blog put it, IndyCar had one of its arm “firmly twisted behind its back” because of ESPN (“How NBC and Comcast,” 2011). The sports-media giant was forcing IndyCar to agree to a “stripped-down contract” because there were few alternative media partners that could make ABC/ESPN regret its decision.

With a bevy of NASCAR, Formula 1, and sports car commitments at the time, FOX and its sister-channel SPEED were not interested in acquiring IndyCar. This forced Tony George and the IndyCar Series to a sign a ten-year, $40 million agreement with Comcast-owned, VERSUS (Schoettle, 2011). VERSUS, which was later re-branded as NBCSN, is the unofficial home of the Verizon IndyCar Series given the size and scope of its open-wheel coverage today —
approximately 12 races per season as well as select practice, qualifying, and pre-race coverage. Within the VERSUS/NBCSN agreement, IndyCar has extended its agreement on two occasions with ESPN/ABC. The first was ESPN’s reduced-coverage agreement in 2009 and the second was a six-year television agreement in 2011 which stipulates ABC (not ESPN) would broadcast five open-wheel races each season, most notably the Indianapolis 500, from 2012-2018 (Mickle, 2011). (This ABC agreement is set to expire the same season VERSUS/NBCSN’s agreement ends). The financial terms of the 2011 ESPN/ABC deal were not disclosed, but it is believed to be more than $6 million annually which is the reported price ESPN/ABC agreed to pay in 2009.

IndyCar is arguably struggling to find its niche on ABC and NBCSN, but recent years have shown there is some growth potential for the sport. It has a long a way to go, however, to gain any kind of significant sports status in the United States, something open wheel has not had since the late 80s/early 90s. In 2013, IndyCar viewership bottomed out on NBCSN, averaging just 282,000 viewers for its 13-race broadcast schedule (Karp, 2013). This was a record low for the series and was down 64% from the final season on ESPN/ESPN2 in 2008, the year of the Champ Car/IRL merger. During the same year, ABC averaged 2.1 million viewers for its five races on network television, however this figure is slightly skewed given the magnitude of the Indianapolis 500. The 2016 season saw IndyCar’s combined ratings hit its highest point since 2011 though, averaging 1.28 million viewers per race, a 10% increase over 2015 and a 35% percent increase since Mark Miles took over as CEO of Hulman & Company (Schoettle, 2016). Once more however, the six million viewers that watched the 100th running of the Indianapolis 500 on ABC offset the season-average figure. For sponsors and media analysts, the problem IndyCar faces is that too many races do not see viewership that tops one million consistently. In 2016, NBCSN’s average viewership was just 488,000, and its highest-rated race only reached
929,000 people — an NBCSN-CNBC simulcast. A factor to consider when looking at IndyCar’s average audience on cable is its shift to business channel CNBC instead of NBCSN for select races. Although the “official” IndyCar media schedule lists NBCSN as the television provider for races late in the season, programming conflicts traditionally force the NBC Sports Group to shift IndyCar elsewhere. For example, two races in 2016 were pushed to CNBC as well as one race in 2015.

Overall, IndyCar has shown signs of life because of its recent competitiveness and close races. The 100th running of the Indianapolis 500 in 2016 saw a near sellout crowd, leading the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to lift the live television blackout in the Indianapolis market for the first time since 1950. However, the race on national television tied for the third-lowest television rating in 500 history with a 3.9 mark and just six million viewers (Paulsen, 2016). Analysts fear that without the Indianapolis market, the race might have matched the record-low television rating (3.6) set back in 2010. This means that despite IndyCar’s on-track gains as well as its double-point award payouts at select races, the television audience on network and cable television has yet to fully respond.

Analysis

What can be gleaned from this extensive historical review of television information? The most important takeaway from this discussion is that NASCAR is better positioned on traditional television because of timing, strong leadership, and a commitment to its American roots. There are three critical years that have put NASCAR in the position that it is in today — 1979, 1996, and 2014.

While open-wheel owners Dan Gurney, Roger Penske, and Pat Patrick were fighting with USAC in 1979 over items such as television rights, NASCAR was reveling in the success of the
Daytona 500 on CBS. Commenting on Richard Petty’s victory, James Tuite of *The New York Times* wrote “it was like Arnold Palmer winning another Masters” or “Joe Namath winning another Super Bowl” (Hagstrom, 1998, p. 79). Hagstrom himself described a rapid spike in fan interest throughout the country with many individuals flooding the phone lines at the North Carolina Motor Speedway in hopes of attending the next race that season.

At this same point in history, the headlines emulating from open-wheel racing was not about the on-track product, but rather the feud between USAC and CART. *Wide World of Sports*’ broadcast from Atlanta in 1979 is a perfect representation of this fact. Instead of Roger Penske talking about one of his stars like Rick Mears, he was instead bashing USAC with Chris Economaki with a nation of people watching. Meanwhile, Jackie Stewart was pleading for peace and unity prior to the green flag instead of commenting and preparing viewers for the excitement of next month’s Indianapolis 500. Open-wheel racing’s first impression to the American people on television was simply too poor and it cleared the path early for NASCAR to win over fans, spectators, and more importantly, sponsors.

Mark Yost (2007) summed up America’s newfound passion for stock car racing on television as follows: “Unrefined and brutish? Yes. But Americans ate it up. At a time when pro sports were becoming more sanitized, polished, and corporate, the country began to fall in love with a sport…filled with real people, driven by real emotions, and real desire to win” (p. 26).

To open-wheel’s credit, the sport rebounded as part of the cable explosion in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As mentioned, some insiders believed that CART was rivaling, perhaps even passing NASCAR for racing supremacy in the United States. This is especially true considering the Indianapolis 500 long saw ratings that bested the Daytona 500 in its formative
years, but today, the Memorial Day staple struggles to beat NASCAR’s mid-season race in North Carolina held on the same day.

The running of the Indy Racing League’s first race at Walt Disney World in 1996 represents another critical moment in NASCAR’s overtaking of IndyCar on television. As open-wheel racing started to make gains, especially during the multi-channel era of television, Tony George’s action decimated the sport. Whether Tony George’s actions were justified is up for debate, but it is not a discussion for this research project. George’s actions opened the door for NASCAR in the late 1990s, a period where stock car racing started to explode thanks to CBS, ABC, ESPN, and TNN. NASCAR overhauled its media-rights procedure, removing the negotiating power from the tracks and taking it in-house, banking on a huge network payout which it received from FOX and NBC/TNT. At the same time, open-wheel’s crown jewel event, the Indianapolis 500, was cratered by CART’s decision to run a competing event with the most popular names in open-wheel racing (Andretti, Unser Jr., Rahal, and others) at Michigan. The media theme of open-wheel racing in the 1990s was not the competition, speed, or drivers, but rather the dysfunction of the sport and fans chose to gravitate toward NASCAR instead.

“Anytime, you have a strike or anything negative in your sport that boils over into the public, it’s a problem,” said NASCAR Vice President Jim Hunter after the CART/IRL split (Whitaker, 2015, p. 110). “It put open-wheel racing fans in the position of having to choose and I would say it had to help [NASCAR].”

As open-wheel tumbled in the early 2000s and NASCAR received significant coverage on FOX/FX, NBC/TNT, and SPEED, there was very little IndyCar or Champ Car could do to win fans back. To make matters worse, open-wheel drivers began leaving the sport, too. Tony Stewart (the 1997 IRL Champion), Dario Franchitti, and Danica Patrick (the first female to lead
the Indianapolis 500) all defected to NASCAR in the 2000s — a clear attempt on their part to crack the most popular racing series in the United States. NASCAR’s popularity seemed to be reaching new heights at this point, but as previous research indicates, the high point started to end about 2005 and faded shortly thereafter. It is here, however, that NASCAR’s timing proved to best IndyCar again.

After ESPN’s agreement ended with Tony George and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2008, the IndyCar Series was trapped. Ratings were down, interest was down, and outside of the Indianapolis 500, ABC/ESPN did not want them. This was compounded by the fact that the two networks just agreed to re-enter NASCAR beginning in 2007. So, IndyCar was relegated to VERSUS, a cable channel that was nowhere near the capacity, reach, or prestige of the “Worldwide Leader.” IndyCar also bizarrely entered a ten-year agreement with the Comcast property which sealed its current media fate today. Although VERSUS/NBCSN has brought more IndyCar programming (practice, qualifying, pre-and-post-race coverage) to the average consumer, the agreement came approximately five years too early.

In 2014, FS1 and NBCSN were willing to pay big money for any content they could attract to begin to challenge ESPN. NASCAR, whose television agreement was ending right at the dawn of cable sports movement, sold itself to these networks for a massive amount of money. Surely, Brian France and NASCAR knew its ratings and image would take a hit by agreeing to move most of its programming to FS1 and NBCSN, but the $8.2 billion was worth it. This is especially true considering race tracks and team owners are very reliant on the money broadcast television brings to the sport. Would IndyCar have fetched this kind of money had its television agreements ended around 2013? No, because the volume of NASCAR’s programming is just too much when factoring in three different series of competition, qualifying, practice, and studio-
based shows. However, IndyCar would have surely received a bigger stipend of cash when FOX, CBS, or NBC (who acquired IndyCar by default) were head-hunting sports content like never before at the start of this decade.

The Power of Executive Leadership

An additional cause of NASCAR’s advantage over IndyCar in broadcast television is its firm leadership ever since the organization was created. Throughout the auto racing industry, it is widely known that anything and everything relating to stock car racing in the United States is decided by NASCAR’s “first family,” the Frances, as they are the 53rd richest family in the United States (“France family,” n.d.) When Bill France Sr. founded NASCAR in Daytona Beach, Florida in 1948, he not only established a business, but a family lineage that still controls NASCAR and International Speedway Corporation today. As Hagstrom (1998) describes it, the family’s strategy of creating and marketing NASCAR has evolved with each of the three generations that have led the organization — “Bill Sr. thought of stock car racing as a sport; Bill Jr. saw it as a product; Brian and Lesa have extended it even further: they refer to [NASCAR] as an entertainment product” (p. 43-44).

Despite the steady leadership, questions remain about the leadership style of the family and whether the Frances meddle too much in the decision-making process. NASCAR is sometimes referred to as a “benevolent dictatorship” by even those who work in the sport and Bill France Sr. once threw drivers out of NASCAR if they tried to unionize in the early days (Ferrell & Hartline, 2013). Regardless, there is no question that the France family, especially since 2001, has used the power of television and the media to NASCAR’s advantage. Brian France’s negotiations with FOX and NBC in 2013 are the perfect representation of this fact considering all signs pointed to stock car racing taking a step backward rather than forward.
For open-wheel racing, fractured and divided leadership is one of the biggest reasons why IndyCar is in its current state today. As NASCAR has and continues to operate on the premise of sanctioning body and tracks first, IndyCar has fought itself trying to decide who should have the final say in making fundamental decisions, including the television agreements. In 1979, owner Dan Gurney made it clear in his “white papers” that open-wheel racing should operate using a team-first strategy. To him, owners are the ones providing the cars, drivers, and entertainment; therefore, they should make the decisions concerning the organization. USAC and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway disagreed and attempted to silence team owners like Gurney by banning them from the Indianapolis 500. No one should be surprised the renegade owners decided to create “Championship Auto Racing Teams,” orchestrated television agreements that boosted race purses to their liking, and ran USAC out of the open-wheel industry by 1984. CART operated under this guiding principle for over a decade without resistance, but Tony George upended the model when executives and team owners became infatuated with a non-American style of racing. CART’s CEO, Andrew Craig, commented on this “control” dilemma in early 1995.

“The Speedway and Tony [George] take the view that the sport should not be controlled by the race teams, and Tony’s always been very consistent on that point. Our teams, I think with justification, are very proud of what they’ve achieved in the past 15 years and have made a very significant contribution to developing the sport. [CART owners], for their part, would be very reluctant to see what they’ve built handed over to another organization and be relegated to a secondary role” (Whitaker, 2015, p. 62).

Open-wheel’s inability to rally around a central figurehead is another reason why NASCAR enjoys its successes today. Whether the France family is right or wrong, it is overwhelmingly
clear who guides the organization during the good times and bad. Meanwhile, open-wheel racing has been controlled by several individuals dating back to the days of USAC, CART, the Indy Racing League, and now the IndyCar Series.

Tony George recently led IndyCar through 2009, but was “removed” by his own family after it was believed he was spending too much money propping up the sport (“George steps down,” 2009). Professional Bull Rider’s CEO Randy Bernard replaced George in 2010, but he was removed by Hulman & Company only three years into his five-year agreement (Cavin, 2012). According to those within the media, Bernard was “wildly popular” with IndyCar fans, but he financially hurt the series and angered team owners, most notably taking to Twitter to express his frustrations. Roger Penske, an instrumental figure in creating CART and now a current IndyCar owner, ironically commented on the lack of leadership in open wheel a few years ago.

“We’ve never had a strong enough leader as they do in NASCAR to say, ‘Hey guys, here’s the rules, here’s how we race, and guess what, if you don’t like it, park your car outside and sit in the stands.’” (Whitaker, 2015, p. 169).

Today, it is Mark Miles’ job as the leader of IndyCar. He is tasked with finding the right balance of executive leadership and supportive team owners. There are many within IndyCar that believe Miles has righted many wrongs of George and Bernard, but one must analyze how much damage has been done to IndyCar in the past decade and whether it can be repaired. A closer look at the current state of the France family and Mark Miles in relation to NASCAR and IndyCar will be a topic discussed later in this project.
Artificial Drama: Does It Work?

In the preceding chapter, Scibilia and Hutchins’ analysis of the made-for-television league, High Stakes Hoops (HSH), was a focal point of the literature review. The results of their study revealed the positive media value in artificially creating a product (limited timeouts, four-point shots in basketball) that trumps traditional sports behavior. HSH spring boarded the sport of basketball in Australia from pay-television to over-the-air distribution after it significantly boosted fan interest and media attention.

In the United States, both NASCAR and IndyCar have injected both of their premier-series products with unique rules and regulations to try to manufacture excitement and drama. NASCAR’s Brian France announced in 2004 the “Chase for the Nextel Cup,” a new “playoff” format that would crown a champion based on the final ten races of the season, not all 36. According to France, the top ten drivers in the point standing after the first 26 races (dubbed the “regular season”) would essentially have their points reset back to zero for the final ten races. The champion would then need to be the best driver over the remaining three months of the season (September-November) to win the title. The reasoning behind the Chase was simple to many fans and industry leaders: avoid having the champion determined before the 36th and final race. In addition, the Chase better allows NASCAR to go head-to-head with the NFL for television viewers on Sunday in September-November.

According to the statistics, the Chase provided a honeymoon-like bump in the ratings for NASCAR. In 2004, the ten-race Chase resulted in a 12% ratings increase over the last non-Chase season in 2003 (“TV ratings,” 2003). An average of 7.3 million people watched the first Chase come down to the final race at Homestead-Miami Speedway where Kurt Busch won by only a few positions on the track. Unfortunately for France and the rest of NASCAR, the Chase’s
television ratings have slowly lost momentum and do not reflect the outcomes seen with HSH. Despite expanding the Chase to include “wild card” drivers and adding elimination rounds, NASCAR’s playoffs have seen ratings figures hit near record lows. Viewership of the Chase on both ESPN and NBC/NBCSN has fallen to just slightly above four million people (“TV viewership,” 2014-2016). The 2016 Chase and the entire 2016 season were particularly concerning for NASCAR as the season-finale race at Homestead, which drew a 3.5 rating and 6.1 million people, was the first NASCAR race since July to avoid hitting a multi-year low in ratings or viewership (Paulsen, 2016). In fact, the final 12 races of the 2016 season all saw a decline in ratings compared to the 2015 season. The heightened, more dramatic NASCAR playoffs is doing little to boost interest in the sport of stock car racing.

IndyCar has similarly infused tweaks to its season-long championship hunt. In 2014, IndyCar chose to award double points to drivers for each of the three 500-mile races on the schedule — Indianapolis, Fontana, and Pocono (“Should IndyCar scrap,” n.d.). The concept was not necessarily designed to manufacture drama for the championship, but rather to provide some extra importance for three oval track races. By adding double points, it makes the race for the championship fairer since the schedule is predominately filled with road/street courses, according to those within the sanctioning body. The impact of the decision has made zero significance on the television audience as the 2014 Indianapolis 500 saw a mild increase in ratings (a 3.9 vs. 2013’s 3.7), but the season-finale race at Fontana drew a 0.18 on NBCSN (Paulsen, 2014, Pryson, 2014). In the following year, IndyCar announced it would only use double points at the Indianapolis 500 and the season-finale at Sonoma Raceway, but again, there has not been a noticeable bounce in the amount of television viewers when double points are awarded.
Television Conclusion

Today’s arrangement of NASCAR and IndyCar as two properties split amongst network (ABC, FOX, NBC) and cable (FS1, NBCSN, and CNBC) should be considered the new normal of sports television.

NASCAR, despite its sagging ratings, continues to draw more viewers than IndyCar making it the best positioned form of motorsports on television in the United States through at least 2024. Each of America’s four major sports (NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL) have been affected by the rapid growth of FS1, NBCSN, and other non-motorsports properties like CBS Sports Network. The question today is of the four organizations and others like NASCAR and IndyCar, which property is the least affected? With NASCAR selling itself to these properties and IndyCar being relegated to them, an argument can be made that these two organizations are some of the more affected sports properties than others just solely based on past history when both were predominately positioned on network television.

Does this mean that NASCAR and IndyCar are no longer viable options on television? The answer is no because of the necessity for live-event programming and both organizations offer a substantial amount of programming compared to other sports. If FS1 or NBCSN were to lose their various forms of auto racing coverage, these networks take a collective step closer to extinction (TNN Sports) than they do to competing against the most powerful cable sports brand, ESPN. The fear of reducing (or worse yet, losing) programming is what leads executives to spend millions of dollars and strike long term rather than short term deals even on properties like NASCAR and IndyCar that are declining. This kind of deal making happens because long-term agreements guarantee shareholders that some form of content will continue to exist on their network. To the public, NASCAR and IndyCar are fading and there certainly are merits to that
argument. However, to the television powers of FOX, NBC, and ABC, these two properties are doing just enough from February through November to remain a flagship property.
Chapter 3: Web, Digital, and Social Media Distribution

Over the past decade, there has been a substantial increase in the amount of personnel and financial resources dedicated to the emergence of “new media,” a term used to describe web, digital and social media platforms. This trend is no stranger to the world of sports as many teams, organizations, and even networks have slowly lost their television reach and are now looking at creative ways to maintain and grow a new audience. As described in the previous chapter, NASCAR and IndyCar are two examples of sports organizations who are hurting because of the sagging momentum of television since the early 2000s. This makes the use of new media not only important in maintaining a fractured fan base, but also in recruiting new generations of fans who have and will continue to consume motorsports in non-traditional ways.

Based on this chapter’s research, NASCAR and IndyCar are substantially different as it pertains to the type of content distributed on sites such as NASCAR.com, IndyCar.com, smartphone and tablet applications, and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. NASCAR’s clear demonstration of a millennial-first, content heavy strategy is producing tangible audience results and presumably revenue for the Charlotte-based organization. Meanwhile, IndyCar’s very traditional, seemingly non-digital strategy puts open-wheel racing behind in new media. The reasoning behind this lack of a digital presence is most likely rooted in the lack of personnel and financial resources, but there are fillable gaps in IndyCar media, namely first-person, on-track content that the series should consider enhancing as soon as the 2017 season.

NASCAR and Turner Sports

NASCAR.com was originally created by ESPN Internet Ventures (EIV) in 1996, an online division of Disney specializing in the production and maintenance of league websites for
organizations like the NFL, NBA, and WNBA ("ESPN Internet Ventures," n.d.). In the late 1990s, NASCAR was soaring in popularity not just on traditional television, but on the Internet as well. NASCAR.com was consistently ranked as one of the top five sports organization websites in the United States, garnishing an average of 1.5 million unique users per month (King, 2000). Due to significant fan interest, the series was well-positioned to negotiate a new, more lucrative television agreement in 1999, but also able to expand its digital footprint far beyond ESPN’s online capabilities at the same time. Just two months after the France family and NASCAR announced a new partnership with FOX, NBC, and TNT, Internet-giant America Online bought TNT’s owner, Time Warner, for $162 billion in January 2000 (Sutel, 2000). The deal, which merged the top Internet service provider with the world’s top media conglomerate, came at the height of the dot-com era before it ultimately crashed years later. Regardless, it was NASCAR who largely benefitted from the financial and digital resources of Turner Sports (a Time Warner company) and America Online soon after the acquisition took effect.

On October 10th, 2000, NASCAR and Time Warner announced a six-year agreement, reportedly worth up to $100 million that made Turner Sports the “exclusive producer” of NASCAR’s official website (King, 2000, “Turner Sports Acquires,” 2000). This deal represented Turner Sports, not NASCAR, becoming the sole operator of stock car’s editorial and digital content including news, live timing and scoring, Garage Cam, audio feeds (radio broadcasts), and more. According to the company’s official announcement, Time Warner also announced its intentions to introduce video streaming of race highlights, fantasy leagues, and access to archived races via NASCAR’s new website (“Turner Sports acquires,” 2000).

“We perceive this to be a landmark deal on which all future online sports negotiations will be based,” said Mark Lazarus, the then-president of Turner Sports. “By combining the
resources of our successful companies, we will create the most comprehensive and technologically advanced sports site on the Web for racing fans.”

NASCAR treated its Internet rights much like it did its television rights, distributing 65% of the revenue to tracks, 25% to teams, and 10% for itself (King, 2000). Also, NASCAR agreed to share revenue gleaned from advertising and e-commerce with Time Warner as well as collect a rights fee for certain products. Some insiders believed NASCAR was ceding too much control of its own product in this agreement, but Brian France believed it was imperative for the organization to let “new media” be controlled by those who operated “new media” best.

“We’ve certainly got a background with [NASCAR.com], but we don’t have the technology or broadband width to deliver it,” France said. “[Turner]’s always had a vision to do something different than anyone else. There’s a level of sophistication and some nuances that are better left to others.”

The transition of online power from ESPN to Turner would not just stop with NASCAR.com. On the exact same day of this digital-rights agreement (October 10th, 2000) NASCAR agreed to an exclusive marketing and promotional alliance with America Online, the second stakeholder in the AOL-Time Warner merger (“America Online,” 2000). NASCAR chose to provide significant offline promotion of America Online in return for placement across several AOL brands. The most visible portion of this agreement saw the phrase “America Online Keyword: NASCAR” significantly promoted across television, radio, event vehicles, and most notably, as a subhead to Turner Sports’ NASCAR.com logo beginning in 2001. NASCAR was not only expanding its online presence at the start of the new millennium, but also receiving significant promotion to many new customers who were migrating online for the very first time on AOL properties.
NASCAR’s timing once again could not have been better for the sport of stock car racing and the France family. Although AOL’s acquisition of Time Warner failed, NASCAR was on the receiving end of valuable publicity, a revamped website to coincide with its new television agreement in 2001, and a slew of new online products that pushed NASCAR into unchartered digital territory. This transition for the sport was also happening at the ideal time, because the demand for online sports content in the early 2000s was rapidly increasing. From April 2001 through April 2002, the Internet saw a 9% increase in the numbers of users to 323 million (Hiestand, 2002). Of that figure, 79.3 million were considered online sports users, a 15% jump over the previous year.

To capitalize on this demand, Turner Sports launched its first major online NASCAR product, “TrackPass,” in February 2002 to coincide with the Daytona 500 (“RealNetworks and Turner Sports,” 2002). Prior to TrackPass, NASCAR offered fans basic online coverage, most notably live timing and scoring and free access to the traditional radio broadcast from either the Motor Racing Network (MRN) or the Performance Racing Network (PRN). TrackPass, however, brought a new wrinkle to NASCAR’s website: payment. For $4.95/month or $29.95/season, NASCAR fans would now be required to pay for live statistics and streaming radio on NASCAR.com, but the subscription also came with other advanced features. Turner Sports introduced live, in-car audio from selected teams, a personalized video highlight player called “RaceVault,” as well as other exclusive and interactive features made available just for TrackPass subscribers. In addition, Turner Sports’ announcement also included an offer for NASCAR fans to subscribe to another emerging media platform, “NASCAR.com on RealOne.” RealOne, an on-demand video player, was expanding its digital programming to now include twice-weekly studio shows previewing and analyzing the upcoming NASCAR race. NASCAR
was (at the time) the third major sports organization to offer programming to RealOne subscribers (known today as RealPlayer) to the tune of $11.95/month for access.

With an estimated 55,000 TrackPass customers at the $4.95/month level, Turner Sports followed-up its first major product with a premium feature at the end of the 2002 NASCAR season (Hiestand, 2002). “TrackPass with PitCommand” was the first-ever online dashboard that brought enhanced driver statistics and audio to fans away from the track (Sweet, 2002). Thanks to NASCAR’s partnership with SportVision, a data company who captured lap speeds, GPS telemetry, in-car audio and more for television distribution, Turner Sports essentially re-routed that same information to NASCAR.com and monetized it for the company and series. For $50/season in 2003, fans could now gain access to the first “second-screen” experience in motorsports — a product with driver-specific dashboards, various display options such as “top-ten mode” or “viewer’s choice mode,” and other interactive features that television did not always make available (“In the winner’s circle,” 2004). The success of PitCommand won NASCAR.com and Turner Sports an Emmy in 2003 for “outstanding achievement in advanced media technology for the enhancement of original television content” (Adams, 2003). It was the first time an Emmy had been awarded to a website in the history of the National Television Academy.

Turner Sports’ forward-thinking model of innovation not only translated to product success, but also to numerous fans logging online to visit NASCAR.com. TrackPass with PitCommand boasted 160,000 paid subscribers by November 2003, making it the 15th-most subscribed product on the Internet at that time. Moreover, NASCAR’s official site was climbing the ranks in terms of unique visitors as NASCAR.com became the second-most popular sports organization website by 2004 and was also classified as one of the top ten most visited sites
across all of sports. NASCAR and the France’s decision to sign a digital agreement with Turner Sports was validated by the mid-2000s. NASCAR’s popularity was soaring on the track and Turner Sports’ creative portfolio was solidifying the organization’s place in new media at the exact same time. NASCAR’s next steps were to begin looking at mobile offerings, specifically expanding wireless accessibility and tapping into new audiences not yet reached by the sport.

**NASCAR Goes Mobile**

By the summer of 2003, NASCAR was switching gears in a major way. In a press conference arranged at the NASDAQ Headquarters in Times Square, Bill France Jr. announced a ten-year agreement with wireless carrier Nextel Communications to replace R.J. Reynolds and Winston cigarettes as the entitlement sponsor of the NASCAR Cup Series (“NASCAR, Nextel,” 2003). Nextel was reportedly agreeing to an annual payment of $40 million in rights fees to NASCAR, as well as committing an additional $30 million in promotion of the sport. According to those close to the negotiations, corporations like McDonalds and Visa sought NASCAR in hopes of becoming the top sponsor, but the organization’s chief operating officer, George Pyne, said the series made the “strategic decision” to pivot toward technology and away from those types of traditional companies.

“I think certainly the youth market is going to be a market that we’re going to go after more aggressively,” Brian France said at the announcement (Coble, 2003). (His father, Bill France Jr., was NASCAR’s chairman at the time of the agreement). Joe Mattioli, owner of the Pocono (Pa.) Raceway, echoed the youngest France by telling *The Baltimore Sun* that Nextel could “hit all the demographics we want to hit” (“NASCAR, Nextel,” 2003). Insiders believed families, a non-target of Winston cigarettes, was a second group NASCAR intended to focus on with its new sponsor.
The NASCAR/Nextel partnership immediately led to improvements in wireless capabilities for stock car racing. In July 2004, Nextel announced the expansion of Turner Sports’ PitCommand application to cell phones. Much like desktop, the mobile version of PitCommand offered real-time race data such as speed, RPM, and throttle/brake indicators in a single, full-color display exclusively to Nextel products (“Nextel connects NASCAR,” 2004). The features were folded into Nextel’s data package and cost customers an additional $15.99/month. The most noticeable and certainly the most unique mobile product offered by Nextel was a series of NASCAR-themed i736 phones available for purchase. Fans, both young and old, could purchase a cell phone emblazoned with the number, color, and signature of one of NASCAR’s ten most popular drivers, such as Jeff Gordon, Dale Earnhardt, Jr., Tony Stewart, and others. The i736 phones were also pre-loaded with a variety of NASCAR content specifically designed for fans.

The 2004 season was significant for NASCAR not just because it featured a new entitlement sponsor, but also because it was the first year of its new championship format too. The “Chase for the Nextel Cup,” explained in the previous chapter, resulted in significant gains for NASCAR’s digital platform. During the inaugural Chase (September-November), NASCAR.com averaged 3.8 million unique users/month, a 16% increase over the same span during the non-Chase 2003 season. The 3.8 million figure carried over through the entirety of the 2005 season as well and according to Turner metrics, multi-media usage in all of NASCAR was up over 100% compared to 2004.

3D Technology

NASCAR’s next significant achievement in the digital realm came in February 2007 when Turner Sports announced its third TrackPass option, “RaceView.” RaceView was a subscription-based, three-dimensional product that allowed fans to select any driver and follow
them around the track during green and yellow-flag conditions (“NASCAR.com relaunches,” 2007). Mirroring the look and feel of a video game, RaceView was the first digital product to ever present a live three-dimensional rendering of a major sporting event on the Internet, according to SportVision who provided the technology. In addition to the live, overhead look of the driver, fans were also presented with an additional array of features commonly made available in previous TrackPass products — live scoring, data, and in-car audio. NASCAR fans now had a total of three TrackPass products to choose from by the start of the 2007 season, ranging from the entry-level TrackPass “Scanner” (in-car audio only) at $29.95/year, to TrackPass PitCommand (most features except 3-D renderings) at $64.95/year, to RaceView, the highest level of digital access costing $79.95/year. (Fans could also purchase monthly access to each of the above products).

“We’re proud to continue to lead the charge in providing cutting-edge technology products to race fans and give them better access to all things NASCAR,” senior vice president of Turner Sports Lenny Daniels explained at the start of the 2007 season. “NASCAR.com prides itself on being innovative…and we will continue to lead the way in providing the most ground-breaking and technologically advanced products and services.”

In addition to the new digital product, Turner Sports was also revamping the NASCAR.com site itself in the late 2000s, introducing a new portion of the website with a very social-like feel. The newly announced “Infield Community” of NASCAR.com was designed to be the “track away from the track” experience, allowing race fans to create personalized profile pages to connect and interact with other like-minded individuals. The community also allowed subscribers to assemble “crews” of people who would later be able to compete against each other in weekly challenges. With social media sites like Facebook and Twitter gaining popularity
around the same time (NASCAR joined Facebook before 2007 and joined Twitter in June 2009), this addition to the website was nothing more than the natural progression of online services giving NASCAR fans the opportunity to connect and share feelings with other fans. The obvious goal of Turner Sports with the Infield Community was for that comradery to take place on its own digital platform, not sites like Facebook or Twitter.

**NASCAR Remains with Turner**

NASCAR success with Turner Sports throughout the 2000s led to a multi-year renewal with the company in 2008 (“Turner Broadcasting, NASCAR,” 2008). After exercising a two-year option in 2006, the two organizations mutually agreed to extend their digital relationship through the 2014 season with Turner Sports retaining the rights it had occupied since the start of the 2001 season (content creation, e-commerce, race ticket sales, etc.). According to analytics, NASCAR.com increased its monthly unique visitors by 25% during Turner’s seven-year guidance, maintaining NASCAR’s official webpage as one of the top three sports league sites on the Internet.

The 2008 season also saw Turner introduce another new digital product to coincide with its mid-summer NASCAR telecasts on TNT — “RaceBuddy.” RaceBuddy was created as an online companion piece for TNT’s six Cup broadcasts during the 2008 season (“TNT revs up NASCAR,” 2008). Although the program featured items such as online chat rooms and an opportunity to submit questions to on-air talent, RaceBuddy was essentially NASCAR’s first television streaming platform. The application relayed live in-car camera feeds as well as additional camera angles from around the track online to fans free of charge. RaceBuddy gave users complete control of those camera angles too, but was only an exclusive feature made available during TNT’s six-race window. This meant fellow NASCAR broadcasters, FOX and
ESPN, were left with zero comparable products to complement their respective stock car coverage.

RaceBuddy’s debut, which received significant promotion during the linear television broadcast, saw a total of 712,000 streams which stood as a single-day record for the application until 2011 ("TNT RaceBuddy," 2011). RaceBuddy also gained noteworthy recognition in the world of digital media, earning Turner Sports a “Global Media Award” as the most outstanding interactive platform of 2008 ("NASCAR.com launches," 2011). The success of the product continued to grow in the late 2000s and early 2010s, ultimately expanding to include ten total camera views including mosaics, in-car cameras, a “Battle Cam” highlighting the best on-track activity, DVR functionality, and an enhanced leaderboard and position tracker for NASCAR Cup competition ("TNT RaceBuddy," 2011).

On the heels though of sagging Chase ratings (a record-low 2.7 average in 2012), NASCAR chose to expand its digital-streaming options in an attempt to boost a fading television audience. In September 2011, NASCAR announced the expansion of RaceBuddy to nine of the ten Chase races on cable-competitor, ESPN ("RaceBuddy, WatchESPN," 2011) In addition, after having to gain permission from Turner Sports, NASCAR’s television broadcasts were streamed on ESPN’s WatchESPN digital platform, a feature unavailable for NASCAR races despite the platform launching with much of ESPN’s live-sports content in October 2010. Although this agreement was touted as an expansive move for the sport, it was nothing more than an attempt to jumpstart streaming options that was limited by Turner because of its digital agreement. Although Turner Sports made significant gains for NASCAR in the non-television realm for over a decade, the expanding digital and newly emerging social media market was starting to pull the longtime industry partners apart.
As mentioned, NASCAR agreed to extend its digital rights with Turner Sports through 2014, but reportedly, a case of buyer’s remorse began to slowly sink in. By re-signing with Turner, NASCAR chose not to reclaim its digital, social, and streaming rights at a time when all three were becoming valuable commodities in rights negotiations, smartphone applications, and much more by the end of the 2000s (Mickle & Ourand, 2011). According to a 2011 article in *Sports Business Journal (SBJ)*, NASCAR was nearing an agreement to purchase its rights back from Turner in hopes of creating and managing its own digital business by the start of 2013. The reported reason behind NASCAR’s growing discomfort with Turner Sports was two-fold — NASCAR wanted its online video rights back so the organization could re-sell them as part of their next television package and NASCAR was heavily restricted as an organization when it came to new, more expansive digital initiatives like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. According to a NASCAR source who declined to speak on record to *SBJ* in 2011, the organization could not create a Facebook page or Twitter profile without Turner’s approval, nor could they operate any of the digital platforms. Turner also had to approve any smartphone application created by NASCAR as well as the race tracks themselves, according to terms of their digital deal.

The frustration over the all-encompassing agreement also extended beyond simple rights and social media. NASCAR reportedly blamed Turner for some of its technological (and linear) shortcomings in the late 2000s and early 2010s. As noted in chapter two, NASCAR’s television ratings took a slow nosedive a handful of years after the Chase was implemented back in 2004. NASCAR believed the drop off, specifically amongst males and millennials, was because there was no consistent option for fans to stream races over the Internet. By 2011, online streaming was becoming a standard for other sports leagues, and NASCAR was clearly cognizant of this fact, because it explains why TNT’s RaceBuddy was offered for a substantial portion of the
Chase that season. NASCAR’s social media pages were also not reaching as many people as the sanctioning body reportedly wanted. Mickle and Ourand noted the significant discrepancy in the number of “likes” NASCAR had on Facebook (at the time 2.4 million) compared to a similar organization like the NBA (10.8 million) to illustrate this point.

This landmark move precipitated by NASCAR was confirmed in January 2012 when the organization and Turner Sports announced a restructuring of its current deal to “better serve fans” (Hogan Ketchum, 2012). Under this updated agreement, NASCAR and Turner Sports extended their current arrangement through 2016, but only left advertising sales and sponsorship under Turner Sports’ guidance. All business, editorial, interactive, digital, and technological operations (including Turner’s TrackPass and RaceBuddy platforms) were moving from Atlanta to Charlotte as the series reportedly identified five goals as they pertain to the future: 1) communicating regularly with fans, 2) targeting the next generation of supporters, 3) improving the at-track experience, 4) marketing drivers, and 5) emphasizing social media. The reported figure for NASCAR to obtain these digital assets was eight figures, according to SBJ (Mickle & Ourand, 2011).

“Turner Sports has been, and will continue to be, a great partner for NASCAR,” said Brian France (Hogan Ketchum, 2012). “Taking a leadership role as it relates to our digital rights is something we as the sanctioning body know is important for the future of the sport, the development of our drivers, and, more importantly, the experience for both our current fans and future followers.”

The response from Turner Sports on the deal was professional, but the longtime partner seemed to take a subtle swipe at NASCAR’s decision and lofty expectations for the future. Matthew Hong, senior VP/GM of sports operations at Turner Sports said the following:
“[NASCAR] felt the need to have digital evangelize on behalf of the sport and turn folks that might not otherwise know about or be fans of the sport into fans, which is a tall task. We sat down with NASCAR, and, given the somewhat daunting task of trying to grow the sport and have digital lead the growth of the sport...we worked out that...there were certain things that they should control...and there were certain things that we mutually felt that Turner should continue to control.

Turner Sports and NASCAR continued its advertising sales partnership as previously mentioned through 2016, but the agreement was recently not extended (“NASCAR will take,” 2016). This marked the end of NASCAR’s longstanding partnership with Turner Sports which lasted for 15 years on digital and 32 years on television. Without question, Turner’s cutting-edge technology made NASCAR one of the first major sports organizations to create, market, and profit off second screen experiences in the early 2000s. Turner’s control in the late 2000s, however, made NASCAR feel it had fallen behind in the same category in which it arguably led just a few years prior. By choosing to move the entire operation to Charlotte, the France family was gambling the organization could somehow top what Turner Sports had done for them for the past decade plus.

**NASCAR Goes Solo**

By November 2012, NASCAR’s newest “Digital Media” division was beginning to take shape. *SBJ* reported NASCAR expanded its digital staffing from eight employees to more than 45 and that the department was already testing its new website and mobile/tablet applications in anticipation for the 2013 season (Mickle, 2012). The key hallmarks of both the website and mobile applications under NASCAR’s control were larger photos and the “emotion” of the sport, according to the vice president of digital media, Marc Jenkins. One of the other major
developments stemming from NASCAR’s takeover of digital was the creation of two different mobile applications, one for casual fans and one for more tech savvy, stat-driven followers of NASCAR. The applications were free of charge, but an overwhelming majority of Turner’s second screen features (audio, stats, RaceView, etc.) had to be purchased if the apps were on the Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile network. Sprint, who purchased Nextel and assumed title sponsorship of the Cup series in 2008, chose to provide each of the second screen features free of charge to its customers on mobile.

Soon after NASCAR’s new, fully controlled site launched on January 3rd, 2013, the organization created additional headlines by unveiling its “Fan and Media Engagement Center” in its downtown-Charlotte office (“NASCAR launches,” 2013). The room, filled with computer monitors and data-tracking software from corporate sponsor Hewlett Packard, represented NASCAR’s latest attempt to create a room dedicated to “real-time response and analytics of traditional, digital, and social media.” As Brian France promoted the room’s ability to be one of the best listening tools in sports, the Fan and Media Engagement Center was practically designed to help teams, tracks, sponsors, broadcast partners, and NASCAR determine its effectiveness in reaching fans and non-fans alike across the globe. Today, some of the center’s goals are to determine the effectiveness of ticket promotions for tracks, analyze the ability of sponsors in reaching fans, and educate television networks on which camera angles and features are most liked by those watching at home.

*Today’s NASCAR Digital Products*

After four years of managing digital and social media on its own, NASCAR currently offers a variety of platform and tier-based products to better enhance the second screen experience. On traditional desktops, NASCAR offers its in-house version of TNT’s RaceBuddy,
known to the organization as “NASCAR Drive” (“NASCAR Drive,” 2017). The product, marketed as the “ultimate live, race-day experience,” is a free, desktop-only portal that offers fans live leaderboards, real-time race data, driver stats, in-car video from select drivers, and more each week of the NASCAR season. In 2015, NASCAR expanded RaceBuddy for the entire season for the first time in the sport’s history, but this likely occurred because of the 2007-2014 television agreement with FOX, TNT, and ESPN expiring more than a decision to simply expand coverage (“RaceBuddy gets green flag,” 2015). One year later, Turner’s RaceBuddy began re-directing to Drive although no official announcement or release definitively states the re-branding or re-direction.

NASCAR fans can also enhance their viewing experience today by purchasing a variety of features for desktop or mobile consumption. The lowest level NASCAR digital product that fans can purchase is in-car and pit crew radio on desktop computers for $2.99/month or $19.99/season (“NASCAR Scanner,” n.d.). NASCAR’s most expensive, yet most inclusive product is NASCAR RaceView, the second-generation version of Turner’s RaceView. This product is nearly identical to what fans were offered under the Turner portfolio — a three-dimensional NASCAR experience with live stats, leaderboard, audio, telemetry and more, but with no advertisements (“NASCAR RaceView,” n.d.). The product costs $9.99/month or $79.99/season and includes access to a variety of PC-exclusive features (additional angles, lead prediction, and pit mode) as well as NASCAR RaceView Mobile on smartphones and tablets. If customers only want the mobile RaceView option, they are offered a mobile-only rate of $4.99/month or $29.99/season upon accessing the application.

Today, NASCAR continues to offer two mobile apps — the aforementioned RaceView and NASCAR Mobile. NASCAR Mobile is the traditional sports app, offering a variety of entry-
level features such as news, stats, highlights, and videos free of charge to all consumers, regardless of carrier (“NASCAR Mobile,” n.d.). For a slightly higher fee than the desktop audio scanner, $3.99/month or $24.99/season, NASCAR Mobile offers fans in-car audio, live leaderboards, and real-time driver data. This is arguably the best, most convenient product offered to NASCAR fans given the price, the number of features, and the availability on mobile and tablet devices as fans cannot purchase just scanner access on any device besides a desktop computer. Although research cannot uncover a definitive figure of subscribers, the NASCAR-controlled International Speedway Corporation found in 2014 that digital media consumption increased 20% since 2010 and that total digital viewing time doubled since 2012 (Krier & Swart, 2017). The same study also concluded that over half of online NASCAR retail traffic originated from mobile devices.

As television ratings and in-race attendance gradually sink, the importance of digital products like Drive and RaceView is certainly not lost on NASCAR. Krier and Swart emphasize the value in virtual reality in targeting new, predominately younger fans outside NASCAR’s core group of supporters. The expansion of these products also creates a new revenue stream for the sport, as NASCAR can sell advertisements in virtual reality today to replace the “high-cost, low-action in-venue spectatorship of a field of cars turning perpetually left,” according to the authors (p. 188). As the organization looks to profit and monetize off those willing to pay extra for a better consumption experience, NASCAR’s most noticeable and perhaps most successful digital initiative has come in the world of social media, leveraging the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in framing and showcasing the sport unique ways to new audiences.
NASCAR Embraces Social Media

In 1979, the season opening Daytona 500 was the watershed moment for stock car racing on traditional television. The 2012 Daytona 500 is perhaps the social media equivalent for NASCAR, most noticeably on Twitter.

Juan Pablo Montoya, a driver for Chip Ganassi Racing, lost control of his #42 Chevrolet in turn three and crashed into a track-owned vehicle that was drying the racing surface during a caution flag. The crash caused a major fire as fuel from both the race car and pickup truck ignited which engulfed much of the entrance to the turn. NASCAR was forced to stop the race and park the drivers on the backstretch, but a seemingly embarrassing moment turned into a social media frenzy when driver Brad Keselowski tweeted a photo of the conflagration from the cockpit of his #2 Dodge. The tweet immediately spread across social media and Keselowski continued to tweet and interact with fans during the stoppage from his car.

“It was, as far as I can tell, unprecedented in modern racing,” blogger Matt Hardigree wrote for the website, Wired (Hardigree, 2012). “Keselowski was funny, charming, informative, and interactive. In other words, he was a perfect spokesman for everything that’s great about Twitter.”

NASCAR, despite still under the Turner portfolio at the time of the tweet, did not penalize Keselowski, even tweeting on its own account that the series encourages drivers to use social media to express themselves assuming they do it safely. This immediate and engaging response was a contrast to other professional sports leagues, because around the same time, the MLB and NFL enforced no-tweet zones up to thirty and ninety minutes before a game, respectively (Sandomir, 2012). In the end, Keselowski tripled his social media following on Twitter, increasing his number of followers from about 65,000 to 200,000 because of the
incident. The news of the tweet also reached several mainstream media publications, including *The New York Times* (a la 1979). Regardless of the fire and the fallout from it, the Twitter events of February 2012 brought two groups of people to Twitter and Keselowski’s account — NASCAR fans who were not on the platform and non-NASCAR fans who merely wanted a piece of the action (Hardigree, 2012). Keselowski eventually crashed out of the race, naturally tweeting his post-race thoughts afterwards, but something much bigger was happening for the sport.

By mid-summer of the same year, NASCAR became the first sports organization to reach an agreement with Twitter, a deal which saw the social media platform dedicate a portion of its site to a single NASCAR event at twitter.com/#NASCAR (Ashtari, 2012). The site used algorithms and editorial signals to select and display the top tweets and photos from not just drivers and teams, but also NASCAR commentators, celebrities, and insiders. By the end of the 2012 season, NASCAR was quickly touting its rise in millennial interest despite low ratings on television. According to a survey cited by *Forbes*, NASCAR found that 18-34-year-old fans were 61% more interested in the sport compared to 2011 (Jessop, 2012). Of those fans, 78% of them checked social media regularly for NASCAR content. The success of the organization’s push on social media resulted in a 136% increase in Twitter followers from 339,347 to 801,019 as well as a 34% growth in the number of ‘likes’ on Facebook from 2,406,347 to 3,212,729. NASCAR’s re-acquisition of its digital rights was also cited by professionals as reasons to believe the organization’s growth on social media would not just be a one-time affair.

“In the last year, NASCAR has gained really good momentum and it needs to capitalize on that,” said Angelina Lawton, the owner of Sportsdigital, a digital sports marketing agency. “NASCAR can use social media to educate its fans or potential fans. Using the re-acquisition
[from Turner] to reach new audiences and build new relationships will be really key for NASCAR.”

As of this publication, NASCAR largely believes it has accomplished this fact. Its social media following currently sits just outside the “big four” of American sports in terms of number of followers on Twitter and Instagram. NASCAR’s 3.14 million Twitter followers ranks just behind the NHL’s following at 5.41 million, but both organizations are well off the NBA’s worldwide audience of 24.3 million. On Instagram, NASCAR (652K) sees its largest audience discrepancy when compared against the United States’ four major sports organizations (fourth-place NHL has 2.4 million followers), but NASCAR outpaces the NHL on Facebook, making it the fourth-most followed American sports league with 4.68 million ‘likes.’

The 2016 social media season for NASCAR saw a generation of 3.8 billion total impressions on Twitter and Facebook, including 236 million total engagements which was an 89% increase over 2015 (Brown, 2016). Overall, all of NASCAR Digital Media (web, mobile, applications, etc.) tallied 890 million page views and 296 million on and off platform video views. These numbers, however, were juxtaposed by Forbes against overall television ratings which were down six percent compared to the 2015 season, but Chairman Brian France did not seem too concerned.

“We are well positioned for the digital age,” he said. “We’re making a big investment in it…so we’re building out a world-class structure and team. We’re not club focused in every market like some of the professional team leagues we see around the country. Digital and social media opens that up a lot for us.”

The spike in social numbers were largely aided by a handful of social-related initiatives created by NASCAR’s digital team. For the 2016 Daytona 500, @NASCAR on Twitter
promoted the “Hashtag 500,” a live online “race” during FOX’s television broadcast which encouraged fans to be the 500th person to tweet certain hashtags to win various prizes and trips. Although this is a topic that will be discussed later, the success of the program, as well as the closest finish in the history of the Daytona 500, made the opening week of the 2016 season one of the highest-reaching digital weeks in NASCAR’s history (Spencer, 2016). Later that season, NASCAR added the Twitter handles of each of its 16 playoff contenders to the windshields of their respective cars (“Twitter handles,” 2016). The September 2016 press release announcing the decision freely admitted the move was “part of an aggressive push by NASCAR to use Twitter, Vine and Periscope (both Twitter-owned platforms) to elevate the Chase experience for fans during the sport’s most social postseason ever.” NASCAR also extended its social reach by partnering with millennial-favorite Snapchat for three “live stories” in 2016, a collection of fan-submitted video and pictures that appear on Snapchat’s app for 24 hours (“Snapchat to bring,” 2016). The live stories occurred at the 2016 Daytona 500, the fall race at Charlotte Motor Speedway, and the season-finale in Miami.

“We are the most interactive sport given all the telemetry used at our events,” France later told Sports Illustrated (Burns, 2016). “We will continue to harness that data and deliver it to our fans in a way that will generate an even richer and more immersive experience.” He continued by saying, “some of our competitors wish that fans would get off their phones and focus on the live experience. We are not purists.”

*IndyCar’s Early Digital Years*

The earliest research detailing IndyCar’s presence online stems from its second-ever entitlement sponsor, search engine Northern Lights. On January 31st, 2000, IndyCar entered into a five-year/$50 million agreement with the online organization, a deal which represented the first
“long-term marketing and media partnership between motorsports and an Internet company,”
besting NASCAR and AOL by about nine months (“Northern Light announces,” 2000). For the
new Indy Racing Northern Light Series, expanding online was a key selling point for IRL-
founder Tony George in striking the deal.

“Northern Light will work with the Indy Racing League with a tremendous range of
cross-promotional opportunities, linking our growing series with the increasing importance of the
Internet,” George said. “Northern Light’s ability to grow the series to a whole new audience is a
very positive development, and we are very excited to be associated with this industry leader.”

Unfortunately for open-wheel racing, Northern Light failed to maintain this industry
standard. As the dot-com bubble burst and threatened Time Warner and America Online in the
early 2000s, Northern Light was forced to “re-evaluate its business plan” and chose to exit the
sponsorship agreement after only two years of promotion (“IRL: Indy Racing,” 2002). The
decision not only left the Indy Racing League without a title sponsor for 2002, but ended up
leaving the series without a leading promotional partner for another eight years.

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway streamed live video of open-wheel action (presumably
from only the Speedway) as far back as 2001, but the program failed to gain any traction
amongst fans (Schoettle, 2003). In a strange turn of events, IMS proposed a fee-based online
service in 2002, but “couldn’t get it off the ground,” yet, somehow found a way to re-offer live
video in 2003, according to Indianapolis Business Journal (IBJ). Open-wheel racing fans were
soon thereafter greeted with a much stronger, but costlier online distribution service for the entire
Indy Racing League later that season — “Yahoo Platinum Pay-Per-View.” For $9.95/month,
Yahoo agreed to stream open-wheel practice, qualifying, garage-area activity, press conferences,
and other behind-the-scenes action not shown on ABC and ESPN to customers across the globe.
IRL joined Major League Soccer, the NHL, Showtime Boxing, the NCAA, and even NASCAR as programs offered by Yahoo and reportedly netted somewhere around $2-3 million dollars for the digital rights.

The mid-2000s represented a harsh reality for the Indy Racing League as NASCAR and Turner Sports continued to innovate with the help of technology company, SportVision. As Turner marketed TrackPass and stock car fans were inundated with data-rich graphics and features on television and online, the Indy Racing League and SportVision simply could not find a way to share the technology with open-wheel racing. According to SBJ’s Bill King in May 2005, IRL officials told SportVision its cars could not accommodate the 35 pounds of data equipment that the company similarly used with stock cars in NASCAR. Open-wheel engineers requested to SportVision that the technology fit inside a box which would weigh less than one pound, and although SportVision believed they could create the technology, it would cost millions of dollars to develop. Given the Indy Racing League’s dispute with the then-Champ Car World Series, there was no way the series could invest that kind of money into developing better on-board technology for fans and broadcasters to utilize.

“It’s a matter of weight sensitivity, attached to speed, attached to all this metal around the track,” the vice president and executive producer of Indianapolis Motor Speedway Productions, Buddy McAtee told SBJ. “SportVision is a great company and we’ve got six other companies that have looked at it. They all say they can do it. And then they get in here and they try and, brilliant as they are, they just can’t.”

The problem with second screen technology for the Indy Racing League also stretched well beyond logistical reasons. One of the major anti-innovative groups in the series was the open-wheel team owners, the same group that setoff the sport’s split years prior. At the time of
the *SBJ* article, NASCAR did not allow its race teams to access any data beyond what fans could see online. In open-wheel racing then and now, there are hundreds of categories of data — tire temperatures, fuel amount, advanced-level telemetry, and much more. In 2005, owners did not want that data distributed online, because it could potentially be used by other teams to gain a competitive advantage, and they largely feel this way today as this kind of advanced data is not currently distributed.

“I’ve tried over the years, tried my best to talk these [owners] into doing stuff, but they constantly fight me,” McAtee continued to tell *SBJ*. “How great would it be to be able to show people how hot the tires are getting on the right side? They’re afraid that it will give away some of their position. I doubt that, but they won’t listen.”

Although IMS Productions, the production arm of the Speedway and the entire IndyCar Series, was the first to implement a 180-degree on-board camera, they and the series have struggled to innovate beyond that point. As King surmises in his article, “when the IRL tangles with its car owners, the car owners frequently win.” The lack of technology, even on television, was burying open-wheel racing behind its sports competitors, too. A poll cited by *SBJ* in the same article surveyed 400 senior-level sports professionals who were asked which sports property was making the best use of media enhancements (stats, graphics, telemetry, etc.) during television broadcasts in 2005. The IRL tied for last place out of nine organizations with the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) with 0.4% of the vote, falling behind “Other” (2.6%) and “No response” (9.0%). Meanwhile, NASCAR, fueled by the technology of SportVision, was the top vote getter with 37.8%. The organization bested the NFL (26.6%) who finished second and MLB (9.0%) who came in a distant third.
The Indy Racing League nevertheless persisted and experienced a major breakthrough at the Indianapolis 500 thanks to the IPTV-solutions company, WhiteBlox (Payne & Haworth, 2007). By the mid-point of the decade, the IRL and Indianapolis Motor Speedway were arguably years behind TrackPass in NASCAR until the 2006 Indianapolis 500. The 90th running of the 500 represented the first online broadcast of the “greatest spectacle in racing,” drawing in more than 1.25 million viewer minutes from fans across the United States and around the globe. The advertiser-supported portal featured seven simultaneous camera feeds as well as in-car video of some of the most popular drivers such as Dan Wheldon, Tony Kanaan, Danica Patrick, and Marco Andretti. After the race’s conclusion (which resulted in the second-closest finish in the history of IMS), the Indy Racing League agreed to a three-year deal with WhiteBlox to continue online streaming of open-wheel racing. In future IRL races, fans would be able to watch practice, time trials, interviews, and other behind-the-scenes actions in addition to the actual races through the 2009 season.

By 2008, the world of open-wheel racing was finally unified under the IndyCar banner, and not surprisingly, website traffic saw significant gains as a result. An April 2008 Motorsport article emphasized a 90% increase in unique visits to the newly re-designed IndyCar.com (“Indy Racing League,” 2008). Some of the new features touted by IndyCar in 2008 was the “IndyCar Nation” forum, a place where open-wheel fans could design paint schemes, submit fan photos, and interact with other like-minded individuals, echoing the social-like trend of the late 2000s. The article also noted a significant bump in the number of “new” visitors to the site, raising that at least a quarter of the total visitors to IndyCar.com from January through March were first-time users. However, a significant detail — actual numbers — were absent in this written piece.
making it seem as if the actual numbers were not nearly as good as the percentage increases were to the newly unified series.

The next biggest step for IndyCar and its digital portfolio came in 2010. On the heels of clothing company IZOD announcing it had agreed to become the third entitlement sponsor in IndyCar’s history (a six-year, reportedly $60 million deal to replace Northern Light), IndyCar.com was once again re-launched with a multitude of enhancements to the second screen experience (“IZOD dropping IndyCar,” 2013, “Indy Racing League re-launches,” 2010).

Significant improvements were made to IndyCar’s online race portal, “Race Control,” the open-wheel equivalent of NASCAR’s TrackPass/Drive. Race Control offered fans multiple camera views of each IZOD IndyCar Series event, including up to four in-car camera angles. In addition, the new portal added extra layers of data including a pit stop tracker and leader graph which compared the speeds of the cars at different points around the track. Although the features were an improvement over previous online products, the data was still a far cry from the numerous in-car data points that IMS Productions hoped IndyCar owners would unlock for viewers to see or perhaps purchase. Social media was given a significant place in IndyCar’s new website in 2010 as well with driver and team accounts aggregated directly onto the site. A unique fan option created by IndyCar was also a “Nomee Card,” a desktop background that allowed fans to download their favorite driver and follow all social media networks the driver participated in.

With a revamped website and some financial momentum, the IndyCar Series was looking to capitalize in the early 2010s. As NASCAR began tangling with Turner Sports over RaceBuddy and social media activity, research shows a small, but important opening for open-wheel racing in terms of digital and social distribution. This opening, however, closed because of cable partner, VERSUS. In March 2011, just days before the season-opening race in St.
Petersburg, IndyCar’s cable outlet reportedly told IndyCar to shutter its online streaming of races, practices, and qualifications for the season (Schoettle, 2011). *IBJ* reported that VERSUS wanted IndyCar to end its online streaming as soon as it signed its broadcast agreement in 2009, but it took two years for the network to finally follow through and “push all possible eyeballs” to the growing network. Schoettle also reported the pushback by IndyCar to retain its online streams was muted because of the amount of resources and television airtime VERSUS committed to the organization — expanded race coverage, Indy Lights coverage (the feeder series of open-wheel racing), in-studio broadcasts, etc. The only online alternative VERSUS was prepared to offer for the 2011 season was an online stream of two in-car cameras only and not the traditional broadcast. The biggest problem stemming from the VERSUS announcement was the potential effects on the next generation of fans, a lasting point raised by many of those connected with the sport.

“I have an 11-year old son that watches everything — past races, live races, [qualifying], and practices on his iPod Touch and/or the computer,” open-wheel viewer Mike Mooney told *IBJ*. “He’s a huge fan and the ability to watch on the Internet is a primary reason for that. If [IndyCar] is concerned with building a fan base for the series, taking away these online features isn’t the way to do it.”

The 2011 season, not just in terms of digital coverage, was a disastrous year for the newly minted IZOD IndyCar Series. In May, IndyCar sponsor Verizon released the first IndyCar smartphone application, a positive announcement for the sport looking to tap into the smartphone market (“Start your engines,” 2011). The app was loaded with news, highlights, and information about IndyCar, but it was only made available to Verizon customers, not the entire public. Also in May, IndyCar CEO Randy Bernard announced the creation of the “IndyCar World
Championship,” the series’ new season-ending event to be held at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway (nascarman, 2016). Bernard added a unique wrinkle to the race: any non-IndyCar driver who competed in the event and won would be eligible for a $5 million bonus. The move was IndyCar’s attempt to entice a non-open-wheel driver, preferably someone from NASCAR or Europe’s Formula 1, to compete, but to Bernard’s displeasure, no outside driver could make the logistics work to race in Las Vegas on that date. As a result, the rules were slightly tweaked to make Dan Wheldon, the winner of that year’s Indianapolis 500, eligible for the prize, because he technically was not a full-time competitor in the IZOD IndyCar Series at the time of the race.

Wheldon, per the rules of the event, started from the 34th and final position on the track to be eligible to win the prize, but sadly, a lap 11 crash resulted in a 15-car pileup in the first turn. Wheldon’s car was collected and went airborne into the catch fence cockpit first, killing the British-born driver instantly. The IndyCar World Championship was cancelled and was not classified as an official race as the entire theory and concept of the event was immediately questioned by those in the open-wheel community.

Unfortunately, this was just one of the many major setbacks for IndyCar in the first half of this decade, a time when IndyCar could have seized some of the attention away from a wavering NASCAR. Not only did Dan Wheldon lose his life, but IndyCar’s most popular driver, Danica Patrick, announced she was leaving for NASCAR at the beginning of the 2012 season (Newton, 2011). Then, an IndyCar race slated for China in 2012 was abruptly cancelled, costing IndyCar reportedly around $4 million with zero reimbursement (Oreovicz, 2012). CEO Randy Bernard was fired in October 2012 amid slumping television ratings and lost revenue, and IZOD announced it was ending its title sponsorship early at the end of the 2013 season (“IZOD dropping IndyCar,” 2013). (Bernard reportedly resigned his position, but many within the
industry cite him being forcibly removed as chief executive officer). IndyCar was unable to invest or promote any kind of digital and social media during this time, because it had major structural and competitive issues it needed to sort out at this point in time.

_IndyCar Digital Today_

After hiring Mark Miles as the new CEO of Hulman & Company in November 2012, the series came to terms with Verizon in 2014 as the new entitlement sponsor of IndyCar, a deal which remains in place today (Mickle, 2014). The ten-year, $100 million agreement (an annual payment of $5 million for the title sponsorship and $5 million for activation) was hailed by those in the sport as a pivot toward technology and innovation. Verizon announced its intentions to upgrade wireless connectivity at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, bring long-term enhancements to IndyCar’s online “RaceControl” product, and bring other technological improvements to the sport (“New entitlement partner,” 2014).

“I think of this day as a game-changer for IndyCar,” Mark Miles said about Verizon’s sponsorship back in 2014. “INDYCAR will provide a large audience of tech-savvy consumers who are eager for the latest technology to further enhance their experience. Verizon’s commitment to INDYCAR demonstrates its beliefs in the direction of our sport and further corroborates our long-term goals.”

The resulting entitlement sponsorship has certainly resulted in the boost of open-wheel technology, but it is currently restricted to select customers. As of this publication, the current IndyCar Mobile application on smartphones and tablets is produced and distributed by Verizon, not the sanctioning body. It offers all fans, regardless of carrier, baseline coverage of the sport—leaderboard and championship points during race weekends, access to IndyCar fantasy games, and a slimmed-down mobile version of IndyCar.com (“Go inside Indy,” n.d.). However, the best,
most exciting features are only available to Verizon customers and are not even made available for purchase for other fans on different networks. Verizon customers are given free access to in-car telemetry and audio, an interactive 3D track to follow the race in real time, live in-car cameras of select drivers, and streaming access to the INDYCAR Radio Network. On desktop computers, all fans are given access to RaceControl, but based off the marketing and promotion of the product, the portal only offers live timing and scoring without video. The only products marketed by the Verizon IndyCar Series which act as a direct revenue source for the organization are seemingly “IndyCar Nation,” the official fan community of the series, and credential access. IndyCar Nation offers three different levels of membership — “Rookie” (Free), “Champion” ($34.95/year) and “Legend” ($99.95/year) (“IndyCar nation,” n.d.). The Champion and Legend memberships give fans the opportunity for discounts and at-track experiences (garage tours, track walks, etc.) at select IndyCar events. In addition, the Verizon IndyCar Series sells credential packages on their website, ranging from a two-race package at $360 to a full-season credential at $2,500 (“Credentials and experiences,” n.d.). Although outside of the digital realm, this is one of the biggest differences when comparing NASCAR to IndyCar — the ability to pay to receive behind-the-scenes access through the sanctioning body itself. NASCAR has its own behind-the-scenes access (commonly referred to as “hot” or “cold” passes), but they are typically purchased through the individual race tracks, not NASCAR itself.

The Verizon IndyCar Series is currently well behind its NASCAR counterpart when it comes to social media. IndyCar’s social media platforms should not be compared to America’s “big four” sports like NASCAR’s portfolio because of sheer numbers. Instead, IndyCar is best compared to other forms of motorsport in the United States such as National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) drag racing, Supercross motorcycle racing, and even NASCAR’s second-
tier circuit, the NASCAR Xfinity Series. IndyCar on Twitter has 253,000 followers on Twitter, putting it roughly 123,000 followers behind the NHRA, 38,000 ahead of Supercross, but over three million behind NASCAR. On Facebook, it is a similar story as IndyCar manages just 486,000 ‘likes’ on the platform compared to NASCAR, the NHRA, and Supercross who all boast more than one million each. Social media following is certainly not the ultimate factor in deciding popularity and reach, but it does show the predicament in which IndyCar is currently in. As it tries to re-gain its place in the motorsports hierarchy, the Indianapolis-based organization has its work cut out for itself because other organizations have an advantage when it comes to reach and promotion. If the Verizon IndyCar Series is going to start challenging NASCAR, it must look at new and innovative ways for all consumers, not just Verizon customers, to consume open-wheel racing and its drivers.

Social Media Analysis

To better illustrate the difference in social media strategy between NASCAR and IndyCar, this thesis will take a critical look at much of the Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram posts from both organizations during their two signature events — the 2016 Daytona 500 (February 15th-February 22nd) and the 2016 Indianapolis 500 (May 23rd-May 30th). The goal of this analysis is to identify themes, traits, and characteristics from each organization and to determine who better leverages each platform in the world of social media. As previously noted, NASCAR has a distinct advantage over IndyCar, not only because of the financial resources it has, but also its number of employees.

Facebook

Facebook remains the king of social media because of its large popularity amongst all online users, regardless of age. According to Pew Research Center, 72% of online adults use
Facebook which is by far more than the second most popular social media platform Pinterest, sitting at just 31% (Duggan, 2015). In terms of style, “quality trumps quantity,” especially considering how Facebook’s “News Feed” sorts posts based on an algorithm, not an ordinary timestamp like Twitter (Handley, 2015). Jeff Bullas supports this assertion by stating one to two brand posts per day receive 32% higher ‘like’ rates and 73% higher comment rates than brands who post three or more times daily (Bullas, n.d.). Citing Bullas, an article on SOCi references the need for short captions on Facebook, specifically under 40 characters, because users typically strive to engage with a brand and move on quickly within their feed (“Facebook Business,” n.d.). The same article also recommends posting a variety of text-based and visual content to keep followers engaged on a consistent basis. Overall, IndyCar showed a strong use of the Facebook Live feature, streaming non-televised practice sessions from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway directly onto the platform. However, the organization could be better served by driving more traffic (link posts) to IndyCar.com as well as posting more in-race highlights that act as shareable, more engaging content amongst all Facebook users.

The week of the 100th running of the Indianapolis 500 began with IndyCar sharing embedded highlights from qualifications on May 22nd. The series then followed up that post with a live videoboard feed of practice in the afternoon with fans encouraged to log onto RaceControl for live timing and scoring. However, the next four days of Facebook posts were nothing more than simple, ordinary content such as highlights of driver Will Power in downtown Indianapolis, a short segment of “INDYCAR 101” (a promotional series educating fans on open-wheel race cars), and some photos taken around IMS. Although these posts were actively engaged with by followers (a photo of helmets lining the straightaway was the second-highest shared post of the week), an opportunity was missed by IndyCar on Facebook as numerous drivers travelled the
United States on Tuesday as part of Indianapolis 500 Media Day. There were no posts, no Facebook Lives, and no photo gallery showing the best content from top drivers in cities like New York, Chicago, or even ESPN Headquarters in Bristol, Connecticut.

Leading up to race day, IndyCar was unable to stream final practice on Friday to Facebook, because television partner NBCSN had exclusive rights to the broadcast. The same no-stream policy was applied to the Freedom 100, the Indy Lights feeder-series event that typically takes place after final practice on Friday. Although the race was marked by an incredible finish, IndyCar only posted one highlight of the race (the finish), but failed to post any content from pit road, promote RaceControl, or share any interview with a competitor.

On race day (May 29th), the IndyCar Series had its highest number of daily posts on Facebook during the week (seven) and used a series of hype-like videos to create buzz during the pre-race window shortly before 11 a.m. However, two of those posts were elements used on the ABC broadcast with one of them actually being ABC’s own television commercial promoting the telecast. This demonstrates IndyCar uses all available content, and although IMS Productions potentially produced these elements and shared them with ABC/ESPN, there does not appear to be any social-specific content created by the IndyCar Series for Facebook or other platforms.

During the race, IndyCar posted just two in-race highlights to Facebook — the start of the race and a turn-one crash involving driver Sage Karam. These specific video posts included promotion of live timing and scoring on RaceControl, but IndyCar failed to post any highlight of Alexander Rossi’s stunning upset victory after the race. IndyCar’s Facebook page only posted a video recap of the event which managed just over 1,000 shares, thousands short of its most shared piece of content from the week — a time lapse showing the IMS crowd that eclipsed over 5,000 shares. On the Monday following the race, IndyCar posted just twice on Facebook, a
picture promoting a Facebook Live with the winner and the actual live stream where Rossi took user-submitted questions from the press room at IMS. Remarkably, this Facebook Live was the first and only post across all IndyCar social media platforms where the driver physically held, managed, and operated the platform on the organization’s behalf.

In all, IndyCar’s use of Facebook during the Indianapolis 500 is a mixed bag. While using Facebook Live to its advantage to give non-televised practice additional viewers, the social content that could have stemmed from media day as well as the finish of the Indianapolis 500 are misses by the organization. In addition, on Tuesday, only one post (outside of the handful that linked to RaceControl) redirected Facebook users to an article published on IndyCar.com. This is another missed opportunity to drive website clicks considering the number of articles published around an event like the Indianapolis 500 (driver interviews, recaps, profile pieces, etc.) as well as the ease in which it takes to post this type of content to Facebook on a regular or semi-regular basis.

NASCAR’s Facebook strategy covering the Daytona 500 was noticeably different compared to IndyCar’s coverage of the Indianapolis 500. Research was unable to access the entirety of NASCAR’s Facebook posts during the week of February 15th, but given the platform’s advanced search feature, an overwhelming majority of those posts and video content were accessible for viewing. The biggest difference between NASCAR and IndyCar on this platform is NASCAR’s use of Facebook to drive website traffic. An overwhelming number of posts throughout the week linked back to NASCAR.com including preview pieces, photo galleries, race recaps, analysis, and more. Facebook Live was not a tool utilized by NASCAR nearly as much as IndyCar, but the organization did use this tool once on Tuesday, February 16th with driver, Austin Dillon. In terms of video, NASCAR chose to post some of the best highlights
from each of its five stock car races from Daytona that week beginning with two Cup qualifying races on Thursday, the Camping World Truck Series on Friday, the Xfinity Series on Saturday, and the Daytona 500 on Sunday. These highlights were traditionally key moments in the race and depending on the highlight, received well over 100,000 views as those pieces of content were routinely shared by followers. It was not just video highlights, however, that NASCAR posted on Facebook. The organizations created and posted several countdown videos to Sunday’s race as well other videos that cross-promoted the “Hashtag 500,” the social media “race” on Twitter. On Sunday, NASCAR kept with its strategy of posting key highlights from the race such as the exciting finish which was viewed over one million times on the platform. NASCAR also posted a series of links to its website during the post-race window through Monday, recapping the finish, interviewing drivers, and more. One of the most striking Facebook posts from the week of the Daytona 500 though was winner Denny Hamlin promoting next week’s race at the Atlanta Motor Speedway. The video, which was shared on Monday, was only thirteen seconds in length, but it reflected NASCAR’s attempt to capitalize on the increased amount of interest on the series as well as attempt to carry momentum to the much smaller, less-hyped spring race in Atlanta.

Twitter

Although it has seen lukewarm growth over the past few years, the social platform Twitter is considered by many as “the place [fans] go for live content” (as cited in Burns, 2014). Pew Research shows that about one-fifth of all online adults are on Twitter with millennials making up about 32% of that figure (Duggan, 2015). The biggest benefit Twitter offers is not only its ability to promote a live sporting event, but also its power in “building and developing relationships” amongst followers, according to Dr. Jimmy Sanderson of Clemson University (as cited in Burns, 2014). Twitter’s own research especially proves its value in attracting and
harnessing millennials in the crowded social market. According to the company, 80% of the time a millennial checks their smartphone, they open Twitter (Moy, 2014). 71% of those users also believe that tweeting about a live sporting event, game, or show makes the overall entertainment experience more enjoyable for them. For brands like NASCAR and IndyCar, it is important to actively engage with potential partners, fans, and followers by liking, retweeting, commenting and interacting, according to online marketer Nick Schäferhoff (2016). He continues by emphasizing the need to establish the same voice and aesthetics across Twitter to better allow fans to identify a certain brand. Schäferhoff concludes by stressing the benefits of varied content on the platform, specifically behind-the-scenes photos and videos, because studies show images and visuals traditionally outperform text-only tweets in terms of engagement and reach. Lastly, Jessica Smith (2017), a sports and social media blogger, believes brands must go beyond simple play-by-play on Twitter. This means focusing on posts that are fun, making it seem as if those tweeting on the account are “sitting in the living room with you,” as opposed to just “dry and boring” updates from the event.

As stated previously, IndyCar has a much smaller following on Twitter than NASCAR. Similar to Facebook, research shows a handful of missed opportunities for IndyCar to better promote itself during its large magnitude event. On the Monday before the 500, IndyCar found itself posting video highlights of qualifying by linking the tweet to YouTube as opposed to embedding the content into Twitter. This is an important point to consider, because the “click rate” on Twitter, defined as the act of retweeting, clicking on a link, or clicking on a hashtag, is an astonishingly low 1.64% (Patel, 2015). It means very few users on Twitter click on something an organization posts, meaning the more content a brand can directly put on Twitter without requiring a click is very beneficial. For the remainder of the day, IndyCar did a decent job of
clipping highlights of practice using the tool, SnappyTV. SnappyTV is an online tool that allows companies and sports organizations to “snap” highlights of live video and post those videos directly to Twitter or Facebook. SnappyTV streams typically cut down on the time it takes to post content to social media and allows sports organizations to quickly capitalize on buzzworthy social moments.

IndyCar used SnappyTV to capture open-wheel practice highlights while also linking people to RaceControl for live timing and scoring. Unlike IndyCar on Facebook, the series did a better job of showcasing drivers around the country during its Tuesday media day throughout the United States. Based off the researched tweets, IndyCar drivers were in ten different cities and although the account only posted pictures (not video) of drivers at places like ESPN, the Cincinnati Zoo, and Busch Stadium in St. Louis, content from around these places certainly have a place on a platform like Twitter. Mid-week, @IndyCar slowed its postings because there was zero on-track activity, but the account resumed activity later that week with coverage of Carburation Day on Friday. IndyCar once again promoted RaceControl and clipped four Snappy highlights of the Freedom 100, most notably its incredible finish which resulted in 246 retweets and 260 likes, one of its top posts of the week. However, staples of Carburation Day at the Indianapolis 500 are the Pit Stop Challenge, a team-based event to determine the fastest crew in IndyCar as well as a Friday afternoon concert featuring a headlining performer. IndyCar’s Twitter account provided zero coverage of either event (not even a photo), despite the Challenge being televised on NBCSN and the concert attracting thousands of fans to the Speedway.

On the day of the Indianapolis 500, @IndyCar introduced the Twitter Mirror, a specially designed iPad that allows people to take pictures of themselves, draw on the photo, and post them directly to Twitter. IndyCar’s Twitter Mirror was deployed on the IMS “Red Carpet” where
stars such as actor Chris Pine, singer Darius Rucker, and others were promoted as being in attendance by using the Mirror. During the actual race, IndyCar snapped 19 highlights of the Indianapolis 500 ranging from the start of the race through the green flag on Lap 167 of 200. However, despite live highlights being an integral component of the Twitter experience, IndyCar’s SnappyTV clips were not synced with the traditional ABC broadcast. Despite the video footage coming from ABC/ESPN (which likely was routed to the videoboard which IndyCar used as their Snappy video), the audio underneath the highlights were from the INDYCAR Radio Network which created awkward social moments when the radio broadcast was not discussing what the video highlight was showing. For example, as a Snappy clip showed a highlight of driver Mikhail Aleshin crashing in turn one, the audio underneath was a radio commercial promoting a local Indianapolis company. This type of social experience occurred numerous times throughout the afternoon, and worse yet, @IndyCar did not produce a single highlight of the last 33 laps of the race including the chaotic finish. The only “winning” tweet sent by @IndyCar was a generic, text-only post that read: “.@AlexanderRossi wins the 100th running of the #Indy500 #INDYCAR.”

IndyCar’s use of Twitter during the Indianapolis 500 should be described as very basic and formal, not fun or engaging. Although the Twitter Mirror and Snappy highlights provided opportunities for interaction, this open-wheel series did not give fans or spectators any access they did not already get in-venue or on traditional television. There were no user-generated GIFs (moving pictures), no specially designed graphics, and more importantly, no consistent use of drivers. For the entire week, IndyCar did not post a single photo or video that originated from pit road or on the track (For example, “Marco Andretti climbs into the cockpit” or “Team Penske services the No. 2 car on Lap 124” would be a great social starting point for IndyCar). The
closest thing to a post coming from trackside was a victory lane photo of Lady Gaga during pre-race coverage and a post-race celebration photo of Alexander Rossi from an official race photographer. In addition, the fun and engaging Twitter Mirror was never used by a driver, but only celebrities, meaning the Mirror never made it beyond the “IMS Red Carpet.” These research notes clearly show that IndyCar’s social media team during the Indianapolis 500 was very small, because content was only coming from certain parts of the track, most likely the red carpet and press box only. If this assertion is true, it shows the commitment level and lack of resources IndyCar has when promoting and using social media platforms like Twitter during a live event.

For NASCAR, Twitter is clearly used as a tool with a well-defined strategy, not just a place to post content. Over the course of one week, NASCAR posted a balanced mix of link posts to NASCAR.com, GIFs, embedded video (not YouTube links), behind-the-scenes access, Vines (six second, looping videos), and informational graphics to promote the Daytona 500. In addition, NASCAR leveraged Twitter in a unique way by creating the “Hashtag 500,” a race on Twitter challenging fans to be the 500th user to tweet specific hashtags which would win them various race-related prizes. During the Daytona 500, the account held ten different giveaways which significantly made Twitter just as much part of the race day experience as the traditional television broadcast.

One of the earliest differences in social media activity between the two organizations on Twitter was NASCAR’s decision to turn over their account to drivers to give them the opportunity to interact directly with fans. During Daytona 500 Media Day on February 16th (Tuesday), NASCAR used a Twitter Mirror and #AskNASCAR to allow fans to submit questions which were then answered by drivers one-by-one throughout the morning and afternoon. For instance, fans asked drivers very general, non-racing related questions (favorite
NFL team, favorite food, etc.) and drivers then promptly responded to the Twitter user in short, ten-to-fifteen second videos using the Mirror. By the time media day concluded, 53 drivers stretching across all three of NASCAR’s competitive circuits answered questions directly on Twitter. As the week progressed, NASCAR utilized some form of a visual (photo, GIF, Vine, etc.) on every Twitter post except for some interactions with fans and one post from media day. NASCAR also consistently used emojis in their tweets making the combined visual/emoji experience a fun, relaxed style of posting throughout the week. This strategy also reflects a younger, more personable style as opposed to IndyCar’s traditionally text-based account which rarely used professional photos and did not use a single emoji during the entire week.

Unlike IndyCar, NASCAR is considerably aided by the number of races that take place at Daytona during the week of the Daytona 500. Thanks to an additional two qualifying races on Thursday, NASCAR is presented with five live events to tweet and post about compared to IndyCar’s two races during the week of the Indianapolis 500. For the purposes of this analysis, race coverage for NASCAR realistically began on Thursday with promotional tweets for NASCAR’s RaceView, a clear attempt to drive fans to purchase access to their second screen content. @NASCAR also began using creatively designed graphics and GIFs to educate fans on what was occurring in all races, not just the ones on Thursday. Generally, NASCAR’s account followed the same pattern for each event—promotional graphic to drive viewership, engagement with fans, GIFs of live action, video of key moment, posts of professional photographs from various wire services, and repeat. This established pattern reflects a clear, pre-determined social strategy and gives followers a consistent, but unique amount of varied content that makes following @NASCAR a fun social experience. A sense of community is also created by this style, because fans have a realistic opportunity for NASCAR to tweet and interact with
them during the race, something clearly not lost on the account given the tens of interactions with fans who merely tweeted @NASCAR about their excitement watching the race.

On Daytona 500 Sunday, NASCAR essentially capped off its Twitter campaign by escalating the volume of content it already began posting earlier in the week. NASCAR’s account did an effective job of sharing content directly from the track, including numerous Vines of drivers walking to their vehicles, cars being pushed to pit row during pre-race festivities, and more. The account also did a good job of using photos, graphics, and GIFs prior to the race, including a GIF of the pre-race concert in the infield. During the event, @NASCAR continued its social media push by using SnappyTV highlights, but unlike IndyCar, these highlights were from the traditional FOX television broadcast with the voice of FOX announcers underneath. The race resulted in the closest finish in Daytona 500 history with Denny Hamlin edging Martin Truex Jr. by 0.01 seconds. @NASCAR promptly responded with a litany of content surrounding the dramatic conclusion: a GIF celebrating the Hamlin victory, a Vine of the finish, a GIF of the finish, a photo of the finish, victory lane video, official photos from the photographer pool, and a #AskHamlin post-race Twitter session where fans submitted questions via text and Hamlin tweeted back.

Lastly, the Monday after the Daytona 500 saw NASCAR’s Twitter account continue to promote not just the finish, but the entire post-race experience. NASCAR resorted to tweeting a bevy of links to its website as well as a variety of behind-the-scenes photographs from Denny Hamlin’s victory tour to places like New York City and ESPN. The Twitter account also made moves echoing NASCAR’s Facebook page by crafting posts to promote the following week’s race at Atlanta Motor Speedway.
Today, one of the most intriguing and growing social media platforms is the photo and short-video platform, Instagram. Purchased by Facebook in 2012, consumer-insight firm CEB Iconoculture found that 73% of all Instagram users are between the ages of 15 and 35 (Clasen, 2015). Instagram was also cited by Pew in 2014 as the fastest growing social media network amongst all adults, besting Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). For brands and sports organizations looking for success on Instagram, professionals encourage content that is “current,” “friendly,” “trendy,” and “creative” (as cited in Clasen, 2015). Kue (2015) further argues that a predominate amount of Instagram users today no longer want to share text or posts with friends and family, but would rather share bold, creative visuals with their followers instead.

For IndyCar, its Instagram use during the 2016 Indianapolis 500 was lackluster at best. The organization only posted ten times throughout the week — three videos (all letterboxed, indicating incorrect sizing for the platform), two photos from media day, four posts from the Indianapolis 500, and one advertisement-like image promoting a sponsorship dinner in Indianapolis. IndyCar’s Instagram lacked a clear strategy during race week as content was seemingly posted to the platform on a semi-regular basis with a very professional, yet bland writing style. Of the six photographs, only two should be considered of the professional variety given the quality of the photograph. The remaining four were standard smartphone photos uploaded to Instagram by likely whomever snapped the photograph. On a platform filled with millennials and built on bold, creative visuals, there simply was nothing appealing to a younger generation of motorsports fans. Although the videos posted to the platform were fun, hype-like montages of IndyCar action, there were little exciting pieces of content that were Instagram-
specific. It certainly feels that IndyCar, given the research of the other two platforms, slotted Instagram as third in the posting order of open-wheel content during the week of the 100th Indianapolis 500.

For NASCAR, it truly was the opposite user experience on Instagram during the week of the 2016 Daytona 500. The account did an excellent job of leveraging media day content, re-gramming drivers (a phrase used to describe the re-sharing of someone else’s post on Instagram), and using professional photography in an overwhelming majority of its posts. The cause of this type of content sharing is likely rooted in NASCAR’s realization of the importance of Instagram as well as its decreased standing in terms of followers compared to other “big four” sports organizations in the United States.

Early in the week, NASCAR chose to rely heavily on throwback photos of legendary drivers like Dale Earnhardt and Terry Labonte to build excitement for the upcoming week. Next, NASCAR leveraged its Media Day content (promotional photographs, driver helmets, etc.) as simple posts to Instagram with little fanfare surrounding the captions to help emphasize the photo. Once races began on Thursday, NASCAR began executing its content strategy on this platform, echoing the organization’s similar strategy on Twitter. The Instagram account relied heavily on professional wire services to tell the story of the race, not traditional video. NASCAR routinely posted photos of the start of the race, action shots on the track, photos of the finish, and then closed with victory lane shots before repeating the process for other races during the weekend. Once Daytona 500 Sunday arrived, NASCAR again simply repeated its strategy, but amplified the number of posts given the circumstances of the race. The only video shared during the week by NASCAR on Instagram was a very social-like recap made specifically for social media. The video was a highlight montage of the Daytona 500, but its length was only 15
seconds. The purpose of this video was simply to capture attention and tell the story quickly and effectively using fast edits and key moments as opposed to simply posting a longer, more traditional highlight package commonly seen on traditional sports television programs.

Analysis

After careful review of the research, NASCAR clearly holds a distinct advantage over IndyCar in terms of digital and social media distribution. One of the biggest keys to NASCAR’s success in this domain has been the organization’s timing and decision making throughout the growth of both industries. Meanwhile, open-wheel rival IndyCar has been put in its trailing position by poor choices, stringent owners, and terrible luck over the past two decades.

To begin, consider how Americans began transitioning online in the late 1990s and early 2000s with one of the leading internet service providers, America Online. NASCAR was on that platform, wedging itself between not just AOL, but Time Warner’s Turner Sports as well. NASCAR and the France family could have attempted to keep its digital rights in-house at the start of the decade, but chose the riskier option by turning everything over to Turner Sports in conjunction with its bigger, more lucrative television agreement in 2001. Turner Sports re-paid NASCAR with TrackPass, RaceView, RaceBuddy, multiple revamped websites, and even an Emmy award during its longstanding digital agreement. An argument could be made that Turner Sports’ largest impact on NASCAR was the model showing consumers were willing to pay top-dollar to have access to advanced-level data and metrics through products like RaceView.

Elsewhere, IndyCar chose a similar path, striking an agreement with Internet search engine, Northern Light. Northern Light crumbled in the dot-com crash and not only did IndyCar miss out on valuable Internet coverage at the start of the 2000s, but it struggled to find another entitlement sponsor while it fought CART/Champ Car for open-wheel dominance.
Next, look at the emergence of cell phones and the increasing dependence on them in the middle of the 2000s. NASCAR likely could have made significant use out of an entitlement partnership with corporations like McDonald’s or Visa, but its decision to go into technology with Nextel (and later Sprint) saw a multitude of its features on NASCAR.com transition to cell phones and smartphones. It also allowed the organization to target families and young adults who were slowly discovering the power of the cell phone and the benefits of wireless connectivity in their daily lives. IndyCar signed with its own wireless carrier to tap into technology and innovation, but it came ten years after NASCAR was already there as well. Verizon has also been able to monopolize IndyCar data, because open-wheel racing executives in that environment do not have the negotiating or market power to force them to unlock its second screen technology for fans on rival carriers. As a result, IndyCar has little to no digital revenue flowing in like NASCAR does with its RaceView application on desktop and mobile devices. An argument could be made that the reason IndyCar offers elevated memberships as part of its fan club as well as credential access on its website is because Hulman & Company is trying to earn some secondary revenue for the sanctioning body from any non-traditional location.

Turner Sports elevated NASCAR to heights it had never seen before in the digital realm, but as sports media began to evolve and digital and social began to challenge traditional television, the France family clearly panicked. Similar to its ability to wiggle out of ESPN Internet Ventures to Turner Sports in 2001, NASCAR had an “out” with its upcoming television negotiations set to begin around 2013. This is another example of stock car racing’s precise timing, because knowing that it could sell itself to cable (FS1 and NBCSN), Brian France and NASCAR seemingly knew the organization could take the increased cash from its television partners and buy back digital from Turner Sports as well as heavily invest in technological and
human resources for new media. Although it came at the cost of NASCAR’s place on network television, the Frances are currently gambling on the future of the sport being somewhere other than the traditional tube.

IndyCar, meanwhile, had its chance at the start of the decade. As NASCAR was in its awkward state of trying to get back its own content from Turner Sports, IndyCar was finally through one of its low points in history. The second-screen streaming of the 2006 Indianapolis 500 courtesy of WhiteBlox was a success, IRL defeated CART/Champ Car by 2008, and IZOD agreed to sponsor the series in 2009 giving it a title sponsor and a much-needed influx of cash after an eight-year drought. Then, it all fell apart.

Comcast’s VERSUS (now, NBCSN) squashed digital streaming rights as mobile internet was beginning to gain steam in early 2011. Dan Wheldon, the Indianapolis 500 champion, was tragically killed at Las Vegas in October 2011 in an event that was supposed to be IndyCar’s grand finale with drivers from different racing backgrounds converging on open-wheel racing. CEO Randy Bernard, despite his popularity with fans, could not get along with the always powerful car owners, then flubbed a race in China, lost Danica Patrick to NASCAR, and was “fired” at a time when IndyCar finally seemed to be turning the corner. It set open-wheel racing back many years forcing new CEO Mark Miles to overhaul the company’s organizational structure, secure his own entitlement sponsor in Verizon, and revamp the open-wheel racing calendar in attempt to bring the sport back to its glory days of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

On social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, it is simply no comparison when comparing the two organizations as NASCAR’s significant financial investments, including central hubs like the Fan and Media Engagement Center, are translating to gains in digital metrics like engagement, reach, downloads, and video starts. Of course, an
overwhelming majority of these metrics are coming from NASCAR itself and traditional public-relations spin will always paint the best picture, but the reality is NASCAR is positioned to at least have these conversations within sports media whereas IndyCar cannot. NASCAR is clearly driven by a social media strategy to engage with its audience and direct content to new, predominately younger fans. This is evident by the consistent use of visuals, emojis, short captions, and driver takeovers across all platforms. Certainly, NASCAR has an unfair advantage over IndyCar given the number of races and its three divisions which allows NASCAR Digital Media ample opportunity to post and share content. IndyCar could at the very least though get back to social basics — on-track tweets, pre-race photos, and consistent use of (audio synched) video highlights. The study of the 2016 Daytona 500 and 2016 Indianapolis 500 revealed just how far IndyCar is behind when it comes to the volume of content as well as bringing the IndyCar experience to life for fans and spectators who cannot watch or attend the race.

In conclusion, the literature review from the first chapter raises two key pieces of information that best surmise the points illustrated in this digital and social media chapter. The first is the comments made by Stephanie Beltrame, the general manager of media rights for Cricket Australia. Beltrame believed that sports fans should be able “to watch the content or stay in touch with the progress of an event on whatever device is applicable to them at the time” (as cited in Hutchins, 2014, p. 511). Based off this study, NASCAR packages its content using this theory, distributing consistent and modern content to all web, mobile, digital, and social media platforms in existence. NASCAR fans can choose whichever platform is most convenient for them at any location and moment in 2017. IndyCar fans are not afforded this opportunity. If an open-wheel fan is away from the television and is an AT&T customer for example, they are restricted from many of the technological innovations Verizon proudly touts as title sponsor of
the IndyCar Series. Moreover, if a millennial auto racing fan is an avid social media user, particularly on Instagram, it is almost a guarantee that IndyCar will not provide that fan with the best user experience promoting its brand of racing, especially outside the live window. This should be concerning to IndyCar leadership.

Finally, Brett Hutchins raised the academic point of “path dependence,” a technique and theory where leadership effectively prevents drastic changes believing the way it was done in the past is the best viable option for the present and future. IndyCar does not intentionally withhold innovation; however, it is a fair critique to say that past techniques of relying on television, fan clubs, and credential access is an “old school” business model. Although IndyCar may tout its racing product as one of the purest, most traditional forms of motorsport in the world, the year 2017 is not the time to rely on old school methods to succeed in this transitional era of sports media. Open-wheel owners should be embracing data, monetizing it with corporate sponsors, and sharing it with paying customers across the globe, not restricting it.

One major point not fully discussed in this thesis is that IndyCar has one distinct advantage over NASCAR: it is a global series with many of its drivers coming from foreign countries. Hulman & Company is only a few digital products away from not only monetizing the United States, but also South America, Europe, and even parts of Asia. Unfortunately, if the Verizon IndyCar Series continues to maintain the status quo on all forms of media — web, digital, and social — there is little chance that the organization can re-claim its position as the most popular form of motorsport in the United States, let alone the world.
Chapter 4: Conclusion and Final Analysis

This thesis has taken a comprehensive look at NASCAR and IndyCar on a variety of distribution and structural levels — linear, digital, social, organizational and much more. However, recent announcements from NASCAR and IndyCar undoubtedly reveal how both organizations view themselves as a motorsports product in relation to other sports in the United States. This concluding chapter will analyze some of these latest corporate and competitive decisions made by NASCAR and IndyCar as well as revisit the research questions introduced in the first chapter. One of the major takeaways from this thesis is the emergence of a “new normal” for both stock car and open-wheel racing. Although many racing and distribution executives thought the 1990s and early 2000s was the benchmark for motorsports, recent indications (television ratings, network placement, sponsorship struggles, etc.) show those numbers were more of an anomaly than reality. This realization is what is causing a lot of dramatic and unusual steps taken by both organizations on traditional and digital media. Lastly, this research project will close by briefly analyzing medium theory as it pertains to auto racing as well as offering final analysis on why NASCAR and IndyCar are currently positioned where they are within the larger sports media arena.

NASCAR’s Latest Transition

On December 16th, 2014, NASCAR’s entitlement sponsor Sprint announced what many within the industry suspected and anticipated: the company was leaving the sport after 2016 (Gluck, 2014). Under new CEO Marcelo Claure, Sprint announced it was refocusing its business model and cutting costs within the highly competitive wireless and data industry. This company overhaul meant Sprint was no longer choosing to pay NASCAR somewhere between $50 million and $75 million annually for naming rights to the Cup Series, a significant source of revenue that
many insiders today believe NASCAR will never replace. Sprint’s desire to cease its naming rights was so apparent that *SBJ* reported the company told NASCAR it would leave with one year remaining on its contract (2015) if another brand wanted to take over sponsorship (Stern, 2015). However, no organization took NASCAR or Sprint’s offer and the wireless provider was obligated to return for a lame duck season in 2016. NASCAR went to market to find Sprint’s replacement reportedly asking for $100 million per year for a minimum of ten years, but the sell proved to be much more difficult than anyone anticipated. According to sources, the France family and other NASCAR executives were content with the idea of a foreign-based title sponsor (companies like Samsung or Hisense), because these companies would be willing to outspend others in hopes of penetrating the American market. Adam Stern reported NASCAR’s top targets to replace Sprint were companies in the consumer electronics, financial services, or telecommunications industry. By the end of 2016, NASCAR failed to attract any company in these three categories.

On December 1st, 2016, NASCAR and Coca-Cola’s Monster Energy announced an agreement to re-brand the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series as the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series (Gluck, 2016). The agreement was well short of NASCAR’s original intentions as terms of the agreement were not released by NASCAR, but later reported to be for only two years and $40 million with a two-year option. This announcement ironically contradicted what NASCAR chief sales officer Jim O’Connell told *Forbes* in July 2016 that the series would accept a new entitlement sponsorship for less than ten years, but “[the deal] can’t be too short term” (Heitner, 2016). In all, NASCAR’s two-year agreement with a beverage company for considerably less money is everything stock car racing did not want in a new entitlement partner contrary to what series executives say in public. NASCAR and Brian France described the deal as an exciting new
era for the sport, especially in its pursuit of younger, more millennial fans across the country. Monster Energy, primarily affiliated with action sports such as dirt bike racing and skateboarding, is known for edginess, targeted branding, and scantily-dressed Monster Energy girls at an overwhelming majority of their sponsored events.

“Motorsports is their DNA,” France commented at the sponsorship announcement. “We’re in the fun business. [NASCAR] is where people come to have fun. What better brand to have associated with us than people who understand that?”

Monster Energy’s strategy within NASCAR is described by some as taking the movie “Animal House” and mixing it with “Days of Thunder” (“Monster Energy tries,” 2017). There is no question, based off social media trends and specific driver promotion, NASCAR is hoping to reverse its aging, overwhelmingly male fan base that reportedly scared off several potential new sponsors who might have been willing to somewhat match Sprint’s commitment. The average age of a NASCAR fan is 48, according to research firm Nielsen Scarborough and although the series touts that the average income of its fan base is $70,000, longtime team owner Roger Penske believes it is closer to $35,000-$45,000 (Pockrass, 2017b, Mickle & Bauerlein, 2017). With this in mind, it is no surprise that NASCAR ultimately aligned itself with a company built on “girls, parties, and motorsports” (“Monster Energy tries,” 2017).

“We have to make sure we go where they are,” NASCAR’s chief marketing officer Jill Gregory said in February 2017, referencing 18-34 fans. “We can’t expect them to come to us…we have to give them a reason to do that. [Millennials] already have that affinity to the Monster brand, and we need to kind of translate that affinity from the Monster brand to Monster’s involvement with us.”
NASCAR’s newest sponsor is not the only major announcement recently made by Brian France and the sport’s governing body. Only weeks after Monster’s unveiling, NASCAR announced a significant enhancement for all three of its racing divisions — stage racing. Beginning with the 2017 Daytona 500, every stock car race is now broken down into three segments, approximately one-quarter distance, one-quarter distance, and one-half distance with championship points awarded after each stage (Pockrass, 2017). This overhaul is intended to officially create more dramatic moments and competition throughout the entirety of the race, not just the closing laps. The January announcement by NASCAR was not unprecedented, because of the sport’s constant evolvement throughout the 2000s (see the Chase, wild-card berths, knock-out qualifying, etc.), but it was significant in how it came together. Current drivers, former drivers, track owners, television executives, and NASCAR were all involved in creating this new stage-racing format, per the official announcement. This cohesiveness drew just as much attention from the media as the format itself, because it represented a general shift away from NASCAR (the France family) solely devising enhancements for the sport on its (their) own.

Although NASCAR seemed to be generating momentum after the January format change, a series of headlines shortly before and after the 2017 Daytona 500 has put the sport in a precarious position. It leads researchers to believe the door for motorsports supremacy in the United States is starting to open again like it did in the early 2010s. The Wall Street Journal sent shockwaves throughout the garage area on February 21st, 2017 with an article titled “NASCAR, Once a Cultural Icon, Hits the Skids” (Mickle & Bauerlein, 2017). Mickle and Bauerlein reported many within NASCAR blame the France family for the recent downfalls of the sport, because stakeholders are unsure who runs the sport on a day-to-day basis. According to the article, a power struggle exists between NASCAR’s chief executive, Brian France, and his older
sister Lesa France Kennedy, the CEO of International Speedway Corporation. The rivalry amongst Bill France Jr.’s children has created tension within NASCAR “making it harder to implement far-reaching changes.” The Wall Street Journal went on to report the two children do not spend holidays together and often speak through intermediaries when decisions are made. A unique wrinkle within the France family that supposedly is a source of this power struggle was Mr. France’s decision to sell his 25% stake in NASCAR more than ten years ago. It reportedly means he essentially works for his uncle, Jim France (who owns a 50% stake in NASCAR) and Lesa (25% stake) despite serving as the organization’s chief executive.

In October, the Wall Street Journal continued, NBC Sports executives brought both Brian and Lesa France to its corporate headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut to discuss ways to boost sagging television ratings, especially during NBC’s second half of the season. According to Jon Miller, the president of programming at NBC Sports, the idea of moving select NASCAR races to the middle of the week was a point of discussion in the meeting, but the notion “hasn’t been discussed since the fall and isn’t a priority right now.” Regardless, NBC Sports reportedly “pressed Ms. Kennedy and Mr. France to make radical changes” and not surprisingly, stage racing was announced in Charlotte, North Carolina just three months after this supposed meeting.

Although this article was enough to ruffle feathers in Daytona (team owner Joe Gibbs called the story “so far off”), a subsequent finance report revealed tangible proof of the struggles NASCAR race tracks are currently experiencing leading into the 2017 season. According to ESPN’s Bob Pockrass (2017b), admissions revenue for tracks that host a majority of NASCAR races dropped 7.4% in 2016 to $221.1 million, down from $238.8 million in 2015. This represented the ninth consecutive year that admissions revenue had fallen for International
Speedway Corporation (12 tracks), Speedway Motorsports Inc. (eight tracks) and Dover Motorsports (one track). It was also the largest admissions drop over the past four years. The only bright spot from the report, and perhaps the most important in the eyes of shareholders, was total revenue for NASCAR racetracks increased to $421 million, a 3.3% jump over 2015. This was caused by NASCAR’s recent television deal with FOX and NBC taking effect which compensated for the drop in at-track attendance during the 2016 season.

“The impact of Jeff Gordon’s retirement was underestimated, which was compounded with Tony Stewart and Dale [Earnhardt] Jr. missing races,” John Saunders, the president of ISC told investors about the cause of the decline. “The lack of activation from the outgoing series sponsor [Sprint] and the distraction of the presidential election further exacerbated the situation.”

The reasoning behind the decline in gate revenue for NASCAR tracks is a relatively moot point. A major takeaway stemming from the end of the 2016 season is the public relations hit NASCAR is taking from its underwhelming Monster Energy agreement, Wall Street Journal exposé, and track revenue reports. A combination of all three stories is causing many to believe the 2017 season is incredibly critical for NASCAR moving forward. If NBC Sports, NASCAR’s newest television partner, is already meeting with series executives demanding changes like competition stages after just two years, it is not a good sign for the long-term commitment of the network. NASCAR’s use of stage racing has received positive reaction from drivers and teams, but as many in the media have noted, some fans are starting to feel fatigue from the constant changes the organization has made since introducing the Chase in 2004. As one fan told the Wall Street Journal, “[The France’s] are struggling the fun out of NASCAR.”

Brad Keselowski, the driver who caused a stir with his tweet from inside his car at Daytona added his take on the state of the sport prior to the 2017 Daytona 500.
“Everyone knows there are issues, and we also know there is work to do,” he said (McGee, 2017). “That’s why we have changed the way we do things as a sport. That’s why we’ve not only given the drivers a seat at the table, but there are councils for the owners, the manufacturers, the racetracks, the sponsors. We wouldn’t have done that if we didn’t think we needed it.”

IndyCar Rises

NASCAR’s 2017 strategy was previously described in this chapter as “Animal House” meets “Days of Thunder,” courtesy of Monster Energy. IndyCar’s latest corporate and marketing strategy is described by those following the sport as “Back to the Future” (Oreovicz, 2017b). As auto racing in general struggles to find its niche within the current sports landscape, open-wheel racing is arguably the only form of racing worldwide trending up. This is based off recent news indicating an expansion of the IndyCar schedule to race tracks previously visited by open wheel as well as a pending announcement of a new bodywork that reportedly will mirror the look and feel of open-wheel race cars during the glory days of CART and the IRL.

One of the leading causes of this upward swing for the Verizon IndyCar Series is the aforementioned calendar and its growing stability and consistency. Since the beginning of the 2010s, IndyCar has gone through several racing schedules in which the series has either raced or attempted to race in non-traditional cities like São Paulo, Brazil, Motegi, Japan, China (cancelled), Baltimore, Las Vegas, Houston, New Orleans, and Boston (cancelled). Each of these events, despite the fanfare, experienced little success in terms of fan interest or financial return for the series and were soon dropped from the competition schedule. As a result, IndyCar has chosen to replace many of these races with more traditional venues loaded with open-wheel fans dating back to the 1990s. For example, the 2016 season saw IndyCar return to Phoenix for the
first time since 2005, the site of some of the earliest USAC and CART races in the 1970s. The series also returned to Road America in Kohler, Wisconsin as well as Watkins Glen in upstate New York, the first time either venue had been utilized by IndyCar since 2007 and 2010, respectively. Crowds were above-average for IndyCar at these events and enthusiasm surrounding the throwback race weekends were overwhelmingly positive. As a result, IndyCar is taking another step forward in 2017 by returning to Gateway Motorsports Park in St. Louis for the first time in 14 years and rumors are already circulating that the 2018 schedule could feature races in Portland, Oregon and Surfer’s Paradise, Australia, two former mainstays of the old CART schedule (Cavin, 2016).

“It appears we have some really good momentum,” IndyCar President Jay Frye said in January (Oreovicz, 2017b). “We’ve been very transparent with the plan that we’ve come up with and we’ve caught the power of the paddock…I think we’re all pointing in the same direction which is really good, obviously.”

As negative headlines stem from NASCAR, IndyCar headlines are seizing on the excitement and anticipation of the 2017 season, most notably for the organization’s biggest race. In May 2016, the 100th Indianapolis 500 set a modern-era attendance record for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and according to track president Doug Boles, ticket renewals for the 101st 500 are occurring at the fastest rate in 15 years. The 2018 IndyCar bodywork is also creating buzz around the garage area prior to the 2017 season, because the series is looking at giving fans a better visual and retro on-track product, according to IndyCar executives (Oreovicz, 2017).

“We looked at cars over the last 20 years and picked out pieces we liked, especially [pieces] our fans were calling for,” Frye said. “It’s kind of a reverse engineering exercise, where
we are working on the aesthetics first and hoping we can create a performance package around the new look.”

Lastly, seemingly out of nowhere during the 2016 offseason, IndyCar announced a ten-driver sponsorship program for the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals in Tulsa, Oklahoma (“Team INDYCAR,” 2017). The annual January event is an oval dirt track race which attracts hundreds of competitors from around the United States, most notably racing prospects with a history of competing on dirt. IndyCar used the sponsorship to activate its brand during the traditional stock car stronghold (NASCAR drivers routinely compete in the Chili Bowl) and to promote “some promising young talent that we hope to someday see in an Indy car,” according to chief marketing officer, C.J. O’Donnell. The move appears to be the first of its kind in recent open-wheel history and clearly represent IndyCar’s push to see some American born, dirt track racing talent gravitate toward its series and not NASCAR which has traditionally occurred ever since CART and IRL began fighting for open-wheel control.

Although most of these developments are encouraging for IndyCar, they still do not hide the fact that the series is well behind NASCAR in terms of linear and digital distribution as explained in this thesis. Michael Andretti, longtime open-wheel team owner, admits the series’ poor television contract makes sponsorship within the sport too expensive, but that IndyCar is committed to sticking with its contract through the 2018 season and advancing under terms of a new agreement (Oreovicz, 2017).

Mark Miles and the Verizon IndyCar Series have found something in the past two seasons, beginning with events at famous open-wheel hotspots and a bodywork/aero package that has made the Indianapolis 500 one of the most highly competitive races in all of motorsports in recent years. It is these developments which present open-wheel racing the best opportunity to
begin challenging NASCAR like it did in the early 1990s. IndyCar’s numbers are still well off what they were decades prior, but given its commitment to non-artificial drama and a traditional style of competition (no playoffs, no stages, etc.), there is no denying that IndyCar is building excitement and momentum for the first time in a decade.

*Research Questions Answered*

In the first chapter, a series of four research questions were presented to help guide this thesis throughout the many complicated layers and changes over the past several decades in sports media as they pertain to the development and consumption of NASCAR and IndyCar. This section is designed to revisit those questions and provide brief analysis and commentary based on the historical research obtained and detailed in this project.

What is the current media state of NASCAR and IndyCar compared to other major sports organizations (NFL, NBA, MLB, etc.) in the United States?

At first glance, it is easy to look at this question and believe that NASCAR and IndyCar rank well below the four major professional sports in the United States — baseball (MLB), basketball (NBA), football (NFL), and hockey (NHL). However, a closer look, particularly in terms of television distribution, reveals the shift from network/over-the-air television to cable is a common theme for every sport, regardless of media partner. For example, the 2016-2017 NBA television schedule calls for 165 nationally televised games — 82 on ESPN, 64 on TNT, but just 19 on ABC (“2016-2017 NBA TV,” n.d.). This means roughly 12% of regular season NBA games are made available to the widest audience possible. Similarly, the NHL is slated for 106 national telecasts with the NBC Sports Group in 2016-2017, but only 16 will appear on over-the-air NBC (about 15%) (“2016-2017 NHL TV,” n.d.). MLB has a similar ratio, because each professional organization is predominately televised by a regional sports network on cable from
April through October. The league has a national television contract with FOX Sports which traditionally translates to weekly national games on network television, but MLB’s two other national distribution partners are cable’s ESPN and TBS. Lastly, the NFL is a ratings powerhouse on Sunday afternoons during the regular season on CBS, FOX, and NBC, but the league moved Monday Night Football to ESPN in 2006 and still occasionally airs specialty regular season games on its own cable outlet, NFL Network.

NASCAR and IndyCar being jettisoned to properties like FS1 and NBCSN should not be viewed as anything out of the ordinary. The increased siphoning to cable after NASCAR’s 2015 television agreement and IndyCar’s 2008 agreement is more of a psychological blow than reputational blow, especially considering the 2017 NASCAR Cup schedule will still feature 17 of 36 races on network television (about 47%) and IndyCar’s 2017 season will feature 5 of 17 events on ABC (about 29%). Although viewership has generally trended downward (roughly to a 3.0/three million for NASCAR and a 1.0/one million for IndyCar), the NHL’s average viewership on NBC/NBCSN was just 503,000 people in 2015-2016, and the NBA’s viewership sank in 2014-2015 to an average of 3.58 million viewers on ABC, 1.67 million on TNT, and 1.51 million on ESPN (“2015-2016 NHL Regular Season,” 2016, Karp, 2015). NASCAR and IndyCar may seem outside the realm of America’s four major sports, but when factoring television placement and viewership, both organizations are on a similar playing field as the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL.

As far as digital standing, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the great equalizer in sports, because a follower does not necessarily have to be a fan to follow an account. The third chapter revealed NASCAR’s social media following in terms of followers rivals the NHL, but trails the NBA, NFL, and MLB. Regardless, NASCAR is either slightly above or
slightly below the four major professional sports in this new media category and arguably bests all four in terms of digital products offered to the consumer. The NBA, NFL, MLB, and NHL offer revenue generating second screen content to their consumers, but those products (MLB At-Bat, NBA League Pass, etc.) are overwhelmingly designed to replace the first screen experience if fans cannot watch on television. NASCAR and IndyCar offer applications like NASCAR Drive and IndyCar Mobile to enhance the television experience with audio, additional angles, and statistics. Although both organizations can be streamed on platforms produced by FOX and NBC, the concept of selling digital products with the intention of consuming the traditional broadcast is a concept predominately used by auto racing and few others sports organization. This elevates NASCAR and IndyCar’s standing when compared to the powers of the NBA, NFL, MLB, and NHL.

Between NASCAR and IndyCar, which organization is currently best positioned within this transitional state of media and why?

After three chapters of research and analysis, it should not come as a surprise that NASCAR is the motorsports organization best positioned during this transitional state of sports media. The reasoning behind this conclusion largely stems from one valuable commodity: money.

NASCAR’s sense of timing, dating back to years like 1979, 1996, and 2014, has led to a substantial amount of cash flow for the organization and has most recently fueled digital and social media initiatives that have put stock car racing well ahead of its open wheel counterpart. Despite NASCAR’s struggles and reliance on artificial drama and championship alterations, its ten-year/$8.2 billion agreement with FOX and NBC in 2014 is its current key to success as this revenue is offsetting the losses in attendance and entitlement sponsorship. Without Brian France
securing this agreement at the height of the cable sports boom in 2013, NASCAR likely would not have been able to take its digital rights from Turner Sports, would not have been able to invest heavily in NASCAR Digital Media, and likely would have had to sacrifice additional timeslots on network television.

IndyCar is currently positioned behind NASCAR because of its inability to appease team owners and reach a suitable agreement with CART sooner. As NASCAR ballooned in popularity during the late 1990s, IndyCar essentially reset open-wheel racing to zero when the Indy Racing League was created in 1996. This fractured the audience, divided sponsors, and forced media partners to have to choose which organization to align itself with. As a result, technological, digital, and social media innovation is about ten years behind NASCAR and IndyCar is still working to regain its credibility with major television partners and fans. The ten-year/$40 million agreement with VERSUS/NBC Sports is substantially low compared to other major sports in the United States and the series to this day still scratches and claws to turn a yearly profit (Oreovicz, 2016). IndyCar cannot legitimately threaten NASCAR until it sees an influx of cash from someone other than entitlement sponsor Verizon, but this will not occur until IndyCar’s television agreement with ABC/ESPN and NBC Sports expires after the 2018 season.

What are the causes and effects of specific decisions made by NASCAR and IndyCar’s executive leadership as they relate to growing and strengthening auto racing?

The biggest effects on auto racing as a sport have clearly been caused by the creation of the Indy Racing League in the mid-1990s as well as the introduction of the Chase for the then-Nextel Cup by NASCAR in 2004. These executive decisions still loom large over both organizations, because Tony George’s Indy Racing League is one of the major reasons why the Verizon IndyCar Series is positioned where it is at today and Brian France’s Chase was the first
move in stock car history that attempted to artificially manufacture drama to entice fans to start following NASCAR.

Whether Tony George’s decision was right or wrong, there is no denying what it did to open-wheel racing when the IRL took the green flag at Walt Disney World in 1996. It not only forced fans to choose which open-wheel series they would continue to watch, but it also pulverized the glory and prestige of the Indianapolis 500. As a result, the month of May is the most visible effect of open-wheel’s executive decision making. If one asks any non-millennial fan how popular the Indianapolis 500 was when they were between the ages of 18-34, it is highly likely that individual would describe a scene and experience in May that very few 18-34-year-olds would describe today. Granted, there has been a rejuvenation of the Indianapolis 500 in recent years in terms of ticket sales and attendance, but the “greatest spectacle in racing” still longs for the month-long consistency and broader fan interest it once enjoyed in the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s. The fight over open-wheel racing took a brutal toll on both CART and IRL, but it was the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the Indianapolis 500 that arguably suffered the harshest beating in this battle for supremacy.

NASCAR’s executives are stuck between a proverbial rock and hard place in 2017. As mentioned, the average age of a stock car fan is 48, but the organization wants to do everything it can to attract millennials to drive that number lower. Unfortunately for those in the sport, the predominately older, less wealthy segment of the population is still NASCAR’s core base and they overwhelmingly resist changes to their beloved NASCAR. Beginning in 2004, NASCAR’s Chase was immediately met with resistant by stock car fans and the message board postings and social media reaction to this day is almost always negative when the France’s and NASCAR make any executive changes.
For instance, the 2014 “elimination-style” playoff resulted in comments on FoxSports.com that ranged from “the change they should have made is to get rid of the Chase and go back to the old points system” to “the only thing this format eliminates is true race fans” (“Fans react to new Chase,” n.d.). A recent 2017 article in SBJ hinted that NASCAR is potentially looking at ways to quiet the noise of the stock car to make it easier for fans to communicate during a race at the track (Stern, 2017). Reaction on Twitter was swift as NASCAR fans commented things like: “that is the stupidest thing I’ve read,” “if [NASCAR does] this, my $$ will get quiet too,” and “this would be the last nail in the coffin” (Gluck, 2017).

Of course, fan comments and Twitter replies are no definitive way to judge if something is good or bad for the health of the sport, but it shows for every move NASCAR makes to attract millennials, it angers their core fan base. Then, for every move NASCAR makes to cater to its older, more loyal fans, they scare off 18-34-year-old followers with a more traditional, “old-school” product. The 2004 Chase for the Cup is what began this everlasting internal strife within NASCAR headquarters, and this playoff format has raised the talking point that NASCAR’s season-long championship battle is not pure or authentic, but rather a ploy for ratings and attention. This is a valid critique and something open-wheel fans routinely raise when discussing the prospects of both organizations within the larger sports spectrum.

What future decisions should be sought by NASCAR and IndyCar to remain relevant in today’s crowded sports marketplace?

NASCAR and IndyCar can certainly make structural and competitive changes to their organization based off the findings of this research project.

For NASCAR, the biggest problems facing the series are the sagging television ratings and the constant changes to its championship playoff format. Lower ratings are almost becoming
a constant headline after each NASCAR weekend and therefore, re-visiting the idea of shifting select races to mid-week is an idea the organization should pursue. There are very few benchmarks in stock car competition to compare this potential move to (only three NASCAR Truck races will be run on non-Fridays or Saturdays in 2017), but based off NASCAR’s history of major competitive changes with little comparison, the move should not be discounted. The obvious rebuttal to such an idea is at-track attendance, but as previously stated, FOX and NBC television money is already offsetting the loss in gate revenue, so whether attendance shrinks by 10% or 25% should not be much of a concern, especially if it is an International Speedway or Speedway Motorsports venue. Ideally, the mid-week race should take place in the summer months, because there is a better chance that fans could travel longer distances in June or July as opposed to busier months like September or October.

Lastly, NASCAR must consider placing a moratorium on its competitive championship changes. Over the past decade, Brian France and company have unveiled a litany of “enhancements” — wild-card berths into the playoffs, eliminations, caution clocks, knock-out qualifying, and more — each of which have left fans and viewers fatigued, confused, or both. The opportunity today for a casual fan to watch NASCAR and fully understand the product is almost non-existent. It requires too much explaining, too much detail, and too much conversation rather than just consuming the product. NASCAR needs to stick with its current stage racing format for at least five to ten years to allow it to normalize and become a fabric of the sport.

IndyCar’s biggest problem, as alluded to on numerous occasions, is its unattractive television agreement with ABC and NBCSN. This agreement, although placing some open-wheel competition on network television, is a very restrictive deal with zero daily programming and a second rate feel given IndyCar’s occasional placement on channels like CNBC. With just a
17-race schedule, IndyCar must look at a single television partner, specifically NBC, because given NBC’s full stable of motorsports programming (Formula 1, NASCAR, and IndyCar), the Peacock would nearly guarantee open-wheel racing would not go head-to-head with another auto racing series on television. In addition, ABC/ESPN has slowly reduced its auto racing coverage given the rising sports content fees it pays to other sports organizations. (It was ABC/ESPN who abruptly scaled back its open-wheel coverage that essentially forced IndyCar to enter the ten-year agreement with VERSUS in the first place). If the Verizon IndyCar Series can come to terms with removing the Indianapolis 500 from ABC, a relationship that dates to 1965, NBC should acquire ABC/ESPN’s five races. This move would provide immediate consistency, likely an increase in network television exposure via NBC, and potentially allow IndyCar to see some daily or weekly studio programming originating from NBC headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut.

One of the next items IndyCar must attempt to address is Verizon’s restriction of second screen content and features to only its customers. The entitlement sponsorship agreement likely stipulates this restriction, however, the fact that IndyCar Mobile’s full features are only available to a certain segment of the population hurts the credibility of the entire series. If an AT&T, Sprint, or T-Mobile fan wants to purchase access to Verizon’s second-screen content, they should be allowed to do so, even if the money goes directly to the provider and not IndyCar. During this sport media transition, content should not be restricted, especially to people who are willing to spend money and are likely passionate fans who follow open wheel on a consistent basis. IndyCar must also find a way to enhance its social media coverage of the sport. Although it takes money and human resources to effectively do so, there is valuable IndyCar content that is going unused and unfound on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. An increased amount of social
specific video, a fun, millennial-like posting style, and more first-person, on-track coverage would immediately boost IndyCar on every social media platform.

Medium Theory

In the opening chapter, medium theory, born out of Marshal McLuhan’s statement, “the medium is the message,” was a research method identified by this project. One of the major components of this theory is a user’s conveyed sense of information when consuming media on linear and digital platforms. From a stock car and open-wheel perspective, the most obvious user perception stemming from both organizations is the distinct American and millennial flavor of NASCAR and the broader, more civilized experience of consuming IndyCar.

NASCAR has always been associated with the United States. In fact, NASCAR’s premiere series has only featured four foreign-born race winners in its almost 70-year history. This leads television broadcasters such as FOX and NBC to hardly ever acknowledge nationality or country of origin in on-air graphics or commentary, because it has never been needed. This translates to an overarching theme that NASCAR is America’s series — by Americans, for Americans. The pride of Americans supporting NASCAR noticeably reached a turning point when Japanese-based manufacturer Toyota entered the sport as a manufacturer in 2007.

Dale Jarrett, a long-time Ford driver, was one of the first Toyota drivers in NASCAR’s premiere series, but he acknowledged a sense of backlash when he chose to pilot a foreign-based car with Michael Waltrip Racing.

“There are a lot of people that certainly understand [the switch to Toyota] and are sticking with me as the driver,” Jarrett said (Peltz, 2006). “But then you have the die-hard Ford fans that think I’ve totally fallen off my rocker.”
On digital and social media platforms, NASCAR overwhelmingly has a more informal, millennial-like voice that emulates from its posts as alluded to earlier. Captions are short, frequently utilize emojis, and often reference pop culture throughout the week. This style does not happen by accident, because it reflects NASCAR’s younger, more millennial self. Audiences can quickly convey a more relaxed style when consuming digital stock car content. The strategy is even reflected in certain sections of NASCAR.com as the website has a dedicated blog for humorous stock car content (“@NASCARcasm”) and buzzworthy, off-the-track articles (“Inside Groove”) for fans of all ages.

In IndyCar, the country of origin dynamic is a different story. Although there is just one race outside of the United States (Toronto) scheduled for the 2017 season, 12 of the 19 full-time drivers are foreign-born. This causes ABC and NBCSN to routinely identify the nationality of each driver on scoring graphics and lineup rundowns on the air. Since nationality bears zero significance over driver quality, the IndyCar Series isn’t afraid to tout its international background nor its desire to be a global racing product. The series is interested in returning to Australia as previously mentioned and attempted to schedule races in Brazil and China years ago. However, it is fair criticism of IndyCar’s to wonder if the series struggles to attract new fans because a predominate amount of its racing stars are foreign. The sport would be tremendously aided by homegrown drivers from areas of the country that are passionate about racing, particularly the industrial Midwest. The series obviously recognizes this fact, because it largely explains why the organization chose to sponsor ten American drivers at the 2017 Chili Bowl.

As far as IndyCar’s “voice,” there is a clear difference between the two social media styles studied in this project. IndyCar posts with an intent to inform, not entertain. Captions are formal, professional, and very rarely tip-toe toward pop culture or humor. This is not a
monumental problem, but it does reflect the perception that IndyCar’s fan base is wealthier, more particular, and not reliant on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for open-wheel entertainment.

Finally, the difference in marketing of the Daytona 500 and the Indianapolis 500 is also noteworthy as it relates to medium theory and user perception. The Indianapolis 500, as many know, is hailed as the “greatest spectacle in racing.” Similarly, NASCAR likes to promote its own tagline for its season-opening Daytona 500. In many commercials, advertisements, and interviews, the Daytona 500 is hailed as “the great American race,” and coincidentally, no foreign driver has ever won the Daytona 500. Meanwhile, the Indianapolis 500 has seen nine different foreign-born drivers take the checkered flag since the Indy Racing League began competition in 1996.

Final Thoughts

History is the biggest determining factor when analyzing NASCAR and IndyCar. Dating back to 1979 and the many subsequent years and moments after, the past heavily influences NASCAR’s distinct advantage over IndyCar in sports media more than any other factor.

Start with the breakthrough moment of the 1979 Daytona 500 on CBS. As NASCAR was celebrating its national distribution and on-track finish, USAC was splitting apart because team owners felt they were being unfairly treated by the sanctioning body. NASCAR pressed forward, enjoying all the benefits and perks of the multi-channel transition while open-wheel struggled to figure out what they were going to be in the early-to-mid 1980s. Then, as NASCAR capitalized on the popularity of American-born drivers like Dale Earnhardt and Jeff Gordon in the 1990s, open-wheel strangled itself with the Indy Racing League, leading CART to decimate the Indianapolis 500 with the creation of the U.S. 500 at Michigan. As that style of racing split apart,
NASCAR came together by consolidating tracks, teams, and the sanctioning body itself to sell stock car racing for millions of dollars to the highest media bidder.

At the turn of the century, NASCAR gambled by entering into a digital rights agreement with Turner Sports and America Online in which the organization essentially ceded all control of its product to another company. The gamble resulted in award-winning products like TrackPass and RaceView as well as a digital foundation that NASCAR still rests on today. IndyCar gravitated toward digital in 2000 as well, but it instead was with fledgling company, Northern Light. The deal failed miserably and instead of team owners unlocking advanced data and working with a company like SportVision, open-wheel leaders stood firm and essentially did nothing. The IndyCar Series had a small chance to crawl its way back into the upper-echelon of motorsports in the early 2010s when NASCAR’s ratings began to slide and Turner Sports was not delivering the digital numbers stock car racing wanted. This opportunity was squandered by IndyCar as VERSUS could not create new audiences, Randy Bernard failed as an executive leader, and Indianapolis 500 champion Dan Wheldon was tragically killed during a controversial race at a controversial race track.

Today, NASCAR and IndyCar are what they are. NASCAR is the most popular form of motorsports in the United States with America’s best drivers, a lucrative television contract, and superb digital offerings on every platform. Its momentum is stalling, however, and its core fan base is aging and resisting change. NASCAR’s foothold at the top of the motorsports pyramid in the United States is shaking. IndyCar is today’s purest form of motorsports with few gimmicks and even fewer competitive changes in its storied history. The series has an exciting future with a new bodywork and television agreement looming, but open wheel has a deeply troubled past.
This past continues to haunt IndyCar, but the recent hiring of Mark Miles and positive headlines stemming from its most recent offseason is breathing new life into the sport.

History is meaningful and powerful thing. What will NASCAR and IndyCar look like for the next generation of fans? The answer will most certainly tie back to the choices detailed in this project and the forthcoming decisions about to be made in the near future for stock car and open-wheel racing in the United States.


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