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Amid Countless Left Turns, Nascar Is Crunching Numbers

By VIV BERNSTEIN

Through nearly 25 years of racing in Nascar's premier series, Mark Martin has competed against an all-star list of champion drivers from Dale Earnhardt to Richard Petty, Jeff Gordon, Darrell Waltrip and Cale Yarborough. But ask Martin to name the best he has ever chased, and he mentions none of them.

"Tony Stewart," Martin said Tuesday during a telephone conference call with reporters. "He's just the man, in my opinion."

Martin has no statistics to back up his choice, no numbers to quantify Stewart's talent and dominance beyond the 25 career victories and two points titles since joining Nascar's Cup Series in 1999 after winning the Indy Racing League title.

But Nascar has come up with a statistic that might prove Martin is right, at least among today's Cup competitors. It is the driver rating, a ranking based on eight factors from speed to finish. Nascar officials want it to become the equivalent of the quarterback rating in football, a ranking that goes beyond victories and points to consider all of the factors that make some drivers better than others.

This season, the series has been offering driver rating with a package of new statistics from quality passes to top closers, a chart of drivers who make up the most places in the final 10 percent of races.

"Everyone knows who won the race; this helps talk about how the race was won," Ramsey Poston, Nascar's managing director of corporate communications, said of the new statistical package during a telephone interview last week. "This sport is certainly more than just making left turns. This sport is about strategy, it's about speed, it's about performance.

"We wanted a rating that measured something more than just the number of races any driver wins, and I think we've captured that."

For years, Nascar had no way to accurately track drivers on each lap to make those measurements. But two years ago, officials eliminated a rule allowing drivers to race back to the start-finish line when yellow flags come out during races. Instead, Nascar froze the running order immediately.

Officials then needed a way to determine everyone's place, so scoring loops were installed at every track. Thin wires were embedded in the surface, and transponders relay data to scoring officials during races.

What resulted, beyond the placements needed during caution periods, was a mass of raw data from each race that no one knew what to do with.

"I said, 'Let's get out and talk to these houses of geeks,'" Poston said.

Last summer, Nascar approached Stats LLC and other sports statistics companies to find a way to use the data produced by the scoring loops.

Stefan Kretschmann, systems manager of commercial products for Stats LLC, had been a rabid Nascar fan since 2003. But he was frustrated by the lack of statistics.

"I was just amazed there was so little information actually available," he said.

So Kretschmann, 34, devised his own statistics. And Stats LLC won the contract after Kretschmann showed what kinds of statistics could be based on the raw data. He developed a box score that included green-flag passes, fastest laps, consecutive laps with a pass, consecutive passes without being passed, passes on the backstretch, in turns and so on.

But the driver rating is the most crucial number. Produced through trial and error, it is derived from a formula that includes victories, finishes, top-15 finishes, average running position while on the lead lap, average speed under green, fastest lap, leader of the most laps and lead-lap finish. The

categories are weighted, and the maximum point total is 150.

By that formula, Martin is right. Stewart is No. 1 in the driver rating through the Dodge Charger 500, which was run on May 13 at Darlington, S.C., although Jimmie Johnson is the points leader and leads all drivers with three victories in 11 races this season. Saturday's nonpoints All-Star Challenge at Lowe's Motor Speedway will not count toward the driver rating.

Stewart, the defending Nextel Cup champion, has one victory and is second in points behind Johnson. But Stewart has 110.1 points in the driver rating, followed by Matt Kenseth (107.1), Greg Biffle (103.2) and Johnson (102.5).

Biffle is only 14th in the points standings, but his rating reflects his dominance during races in which he failed to finish in the top five. Other oddities of the rating system: Dale Jarrett is 12th in points but 26th in driver rating. The formula penalizes Jarrett for not running consistently among the leaders in each race. But Jarrett also ranks second among closers; he moves up nearly three places in the last 10 percent of each race. That perhaps helps to explain his position in the points standings.

No statistic can fully capture the intangible factors that make drivers like Stewart stand out. Martin's judgment was based in part on Stewart's ability to win in all kinds of racecars, not only stock cars.

Just as quarterback rating does not determine the Super Bowl winners — see Peyton Manning — driver rating will not decide the winner of this year's Chase for the Nextel Cup.

"I don't think you'll ever be able to pinpoint it and say that this race or this set of circumstances equaled the best driver," Johnson said. "There are just too many variables in our sport. To really pinpoint one is tough."