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Old-timer sold on NASCAR 'data'

By ED HINTON

A hundred years ago, there probably were baseball writers who didn't see the need to analyze games and player performances mathematically, with batting and earned-run averages, box scores, etc.

But those long have been staples of the game -- addictive, in fact, to many fans.

History someday may look back reverently on 2006 as the birth year of NASCAR "loop data." At first, the concept seemed loopy, all right -- silly, fabricated, unnecessary.

For example, what in the world was a "quality pass?" How could you judge "quality" off computer printouts from NASCAR's electronic timing and scoring system?

Not even hard-core NASCAR fans would buy or even understand this stuff, I thought, let alone the media and the general public.

Then this week, NASCAR rolled out something called the "season-to-date box score." You know the feeling when The Wizard of Oz suddenly changes from a drab black-and-white movie into full color? That's how I felt, reading the numbers. Now I get it.

Just for openers, the box score challenges the archaic NASCAR points system with a number called "driver rating."

Jimmie Johnson leads the Nextel Cup standings. But for weeks, many of us have felt Tony Stewart consistently

was showing up as the best driver. It was difficult to document that -- until this week's driver ratings: Stewart 117.0, Johnson 109.0. A perfect score in the system is 150.0.

This isn't based on judgment calls. This is objective data from NASCAR's electronic race-monitoring systems.

Take "laps in top 15." Stewart has been there 1,860 times to Johnson's 1,527. Stewart has been the fastest guy on the track for 268 laps, to Johnson's 109. There is one category that correlates with Johnson's leading the points. "Quality passes" turns out to mean passes made on cars running in the top 15, and Johnson leads Stewart 332-268.

Mark Martin is second in points and Greg Biffle 18th. But have you noticed that Martin hasn't been much of a factor up front? He's just staying around until the end and finishing well. Or that Biffle has been flashy and aggressive early in some races, only to fall back or out with mechanical troubles?

Well, Martin's driver rating is 99.9, and Biffle's is 99.4. They're 16 spots apart in points, but almost even in driver ratings. The computers see what the fans and media see at a given moment, and much more -- and the computers don't forget details.

This is revolutionary. And there is no doubt what NASCAR is up to.

It wants to muscle in alongside the stick-and-ball sports on what newspapers call "agate pages" --

tabulated material in small print, baseball box scores being the prime example. It wants to generate statistical fodder for sports talk shows. And it wants to woo fans of other sports in terminology to which they are accustomed: interesting numbers.

So far there hasn't been much media interest. Wire services don't yet run the package -- understandably, because it's not quite ready for prime time. Currently the material, other than the "box score," is far too voluminous for newspaper space or air time. There may be glitches, and there may be a shakeout of categories and criteria, said Ramsey Poston, NASCAR's managing director of corporate communications.

But once established, the loop data -- all compiled by computers that can sense and record split-second events no human eye or brain could manage -- will prove more objective, and may be more interesting, than the pencil-and-paper methods of the other sports.

Point standings vs. driver ratings open a whole new arena for fan debate and opinion. Each component of the driver ratings is an interesting number, in and of itself: average start, average midrace, average finish, green passes, quality passes, etc.

And the traditional numbers, such as laps led and total laps, still are there.

Just as baseball has its box-score junkies, there soon may be loop-data junkies -- including me, one early naysayer.