

It got loose: NASCAR's expansion as flexible accumulation

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In the new millennium, stock car racing has achieved a level of success almost unprecedented in American professional sports. The National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), the sport's primary governing body, promotes a claim of 75 million fans - representing one-half of the United States adult population (NASCAR, 2005). Each week during the season, hundreds of thousands of fans pack into racetracks to watch its top-level Nextel Cup events with an average ticket prices exceeding \$100 (Bernthal & Regan, 2001). Millions more watch the races on television, drawing the second-largest sports television audience, behind only the NFL (Amato, Peters, & Shao, 2005). In just under 20 years, NASCAR racing has evolved from being largely overlooked by mainstream America and the mass media into one of the country's most important spectator sports. However, it still remains one of the least researched areas in the sport management literature.

NASCAR's intense popular expansion, as well as its parallel geographic expansion and economic processes, is rare among North American spectator sports. The purpose of this paper is to present flexible accumulation as a framework to situate this expansion and evolution of top-level NASCAR. Proposed by Harvey (1989), flexible accumulation depicts a post-industrial system of spatially decentralized and geographically mobile capitalism. Three major characteristics of flexible accumulation are visible within the evolution of contemporary NASCAR: spatial flexibility of capital and sectors of production and consumption, the emergence of fluidity in control and labor processes, and intensified commercial and technological innovation. Combined with other characteristics of the postmodern condition, flexible accumulation contributes to a richer understanding of the contemporary NASCAR experience.

By the 1980s, flexible accumulation had emerged as an economic framework of production and consumption in response to the rigidity of Fordism, the economic system characteristic of 20th century industrialization. The foundation of flexible accumulation is increased fluidity and spatial redistribution of labor processes, labor markets, products, and patterns of consumption. Though intended as a macro-level economic framework, flexible accumulation has been successfully applied to micro-level analyses of leisure and entertainment settings, such as the cinema (Yueh-Yu & Davis, 2002). This paper argues that flexible accumulation may be a useful framework for understanding contemporary transformations in the control and distribution of labor markets, production, and consumption within the sport of stock car racing.

The emergence of trans-national capital and identification of more profitable labor or consumer markets generally decentralized the rigid production centers of Fordism. It was no longer necessary, therefore, for production to be locally or culturally bound. Much in the same way that manufacturing abandoned traditional locations for more profitable areas, NASCAR spatially re-distributed its events in order to exploit new markets throughout North America. The first manifestation of this process occurred in 1996, with the closure of North Carolina's North Wilkesboro Speedway, which, at the time, was NASCAR's longest running facility (Edwards, 2006). NASCAR's decision to move North Wilkesboro's races to Texas and New Hampshire was a precursor to rapid change within the sport that, within ten years, saw NASCAR move top-level events from the southeastern U.S. and traditional racing centers such as Rockingham, N.C. and Darlington, S.C., to Southern California, Las Vegas, Chicago, Kansas City, Miami, and Mexico City. NASCAR's expansion has led to a new cultural vision for NASCAR that seemingly rejects local and regional traditions by reducing its linkage to the South (Hurt, 2005). As part of this process, NASCAR drivers are also no longer predominantly southern, with the majority of Nextel Cup drivers being native to California (Alderman et al., 2003). The sport has witnessed the recent arrival of several international competitors.

As flexible accumulation suggests, NASCAR has also re-structured many of its labor sectors. Drivers, the most visible labor in NASCAR, have experienced dynamic changes in their relationship to production. NASCAR drivers are no longer hired and retained solely on the basis of their success and skill driving a stock car. Contemporary NASCAR utilizes marketable young drivers to attract sponsors and new fans to the sport. With new economic systems, which rely as much on sponsor patronage and media imagery as stock car racing, top-level NASCAR drivers have to expand their skills to meet increased demands of marketability. The driver, according to Howell (1991) has become a "high speed salesman" who must be as adept in the corporate boardroom as on the race track. Another characteristic of labor in flexible accumulation is its increased specialization, independence, and mobility with temporary and out-sourced labor replacing life-time employment. Top-level NASCAR drivers, unlike athletes in other sports, operate more as independent contractors. Drivers, though having no collective bargaining and

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presumably less power in their relation to capital, have more flexibility in how they sell their labor. For example, top-level drivers are often able to participate in other racing series, including NASCAR's minor league Busch series, and some specialist drivers also participate only in certain events that better match their driving skills (i.e., the two road courses in the Nextel Cup series). Shifts in labor sectors have also occurred in technical areas with the widespread additions of mechanical engineers to NASCAR teams that have intensified uses of technology and science in competition and the increased outsourcing of many skilled mechanical functions, such as chassis and engine building.

Flexible accumulation also explains an economic shift towards a consumer-orientation and away from the production of goods to the production of events (the selling of experience and spectacle). While actual competitive races remain only a small fragment of NASCAR's entertainment and marketing sectors, they have become the ultimate entertainment and marketing spectacles. NASCAR events, more than other major spectator sports, are centered on the spectator as consumer. For example, pre-race festivities often feature concerts by popular musicians, fireworks shows, and celebrity guests. NASCAR is also one of the few major spectator sports where the creation and enforcement of rules remain in flux to enhance the entertainment value of races, such as the creation of the "green, white, checker" finish.

Approaching NASCAR within the framework of flexible accumulation reveals that the sport may be more vulnerable to future market crises than other major spectator sports in North America. Particularly, according to Harvey, flexible accumulation artificially creates value and demand for products through intense marketing. Patterns of consumption, therefore, may be more vulnerable to faddism and require sites of consumption to remain in flux. This characteristic reveals a deeper problem with flexible accumulation: the sacrifice of future labor and consumption for present gains. By abandoning traditional locations, and its most loyal fan base, in favor of emerging markets where the sport had little cultural meaning, has NASCAR jeopardized its long-term success? Indeed, attendance at new tracks, most notably in California, has decreased. At the same time television ratings have stagnated in recent years. Other issues in NASCAR may also mirror tensions inherent to flexible accumulation. This certainly does not suggest that NASCAR is in a state of crisis, though it may reveal areas of concern for the sport in the future.