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CASCAR series fights giant shadow

Canadians 'play second fiddle' to Winston Cup

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You might look at it this way: CASCAR is to NASCAR's Winston Cup what the CFL is to the NFL.

While the Canadian series produces its own exciting brand of racing, most of the attention of stock car fans is focused south of the border on the incredibly successful NASCAR series and its megastars such as Jeff Gordon, Mark Martin and Dale Earnhardt.

"As far as Canada goes we are the biggest thing going," said David Whitlock, the owner/driver of Whitlock Racing, who won the CASCAR championship for the third time last year. "We are the premier motorsport division in this country, but we play second fiddle to NASCAR. It's the television factor. NASCAR gets so much exposure on TV."

Despite the huge shadow of NASCAR, the CASCAR series has made major strides over the past four or five years.

"The prize money is getting better and more corporations are getting involved," said Whitlock.

It's poised to make an even greater leap this year. First, Bill Darmon, the new owner of the series, announced recently a 65 per cent increase in prize money for the top five finishers in this weekend's opening race at Delaware Speedway outside of London, Ont..

The winner will get $4,000, up from $2,400; second receives $3,000 (previously $1,800); third, $2,500 ($1,500); fourth, $2,000 ($1,200) and fifth, $1,500 ($1,000).

The biggest boost for the series, however, is the inclusion of a CASCAR race on the undercard of this year's Molson Indy Champ car race at Exhibition Place in July.

"This will really help racing," said Mark Dilley, 30, of Barrie, who'll be driving the second Whitlock Racing Ford Taurus, which was unveiled recently.

"The fans should have fun. They'll see a different kind of racing. There'll be fenders flying."

Dilley points out that stock car racing's image has changed thanks, in part, to the phenomenal growth of NASCAR. It's no longer considered the domain of rednecks wearing baseball caps and T-shirts.

"We're normal guys with jobs trying to raise a family," said Dilley, the 1994 CASCAR champion. "We're not moonshiners."

Whitlock has his eyes cast on eventually entering a team in the NASCAR Busch series.

"I've won the CASCAR championship three times, so it's getting to where it's time for me to move on," he said.

The cost, however, is prohibitive without major sponsorship and that's a problem faced by Canadians such as Whitlock.

"The difficulty is trying to get the funding," he said. "There are so many U.S. teams in line for the same money.

"We need to get a large corporation to sponsor us. We have to look for a U.S. company that is looking to get its produce into Canada or a Canadian company trying to get into the States."

As Whitlock sets out this weekend in search of a fourth CASCAR title, he knows there are some 60 teams out to put a wrench into those plans. CASCAR has about 135 registered teams, but about half compete in just two or three local events.

The CASCAR championship series is made up of 20 races — 11 in the east and nine in the west. There are four national races — two in each zone — in which a driver must compete to be eligible for the national title.

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