

Chase widens to 12; winning stressed

By JENNA FRYER
AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — NASCAR placed more emphasis on winning, widened the Chase for the championship field to 12 drivers and created a postseason seeding system under a series of adjustments announced Monday.

Starting this season, victories during the 26-race "regular season" now will be worth 185 points — an increase of five points. Assuming the winning driver also picks up other bonuses during the race, a victory now can be worth as much as 25 points more than second place.

In addition, those wins will be worth a 10-point bonus that will be used to "seed" the drivers when the 10-race Chase begins.

During the Chase's first three years, the drivers' point totals were reset in five-point increments when the postseason began. Now, all drivers' totals will be reset to 5,000, and each will receive a 10-point bonus for each victory during the first 26 races.

This new format would have drastical-



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NASCAR chairman Brian France talks about the changes being made for the 2007 Chase for the championship during the NASCAR Nextel Media Tour in Concord, N.C., in this Jan. 22 file photo.

ly helped Kasey Kahne, who won a series-high five races in the first part of the year but barely made the Chase and started it in 10th place — 50 points out. Under the new system, he would have

earned 50 points for his five wins and started the Chase in first place.

And, by widening the field from 10 drivers to 12, Tony Stewart and Greg Biffle would have made the Chase field.

"The adjustments taken today put a greater emphasis on winning races," said NASCAR chairman Brian France. "Winning is what this sport is all about. Nobody likes to see drivers content to finish in the top 10. We want our sport — especially during the Chase — to be more about winning."

France launched the Chase in 2004 to create a championship format similar to other professional leagues, and to drum up interest in NASCAR during the stretch of the season that competes with the NFL for TV ratings. The original format called for the top 10 drivers — and anyone within 400 points of the leader — to advance to a 10-race countdown to the Nextel Cup title.

The first season was a success, with five drivers entering the season finale with a mathematical chance to win the title. Kurt Busch beat Jimmie Johnson by eight points in the closest finish in NASCAR history.

NASCAR was slightly disappointed in Year 2, when Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Jeff Gordon — the sport's two most marketable drivers — failed to make the Chase. Stewart, meanwhile, used a cautious and consistent strategy to win the title.

Johnson won the Chase this past season, battling back after a regular-season crash dropped him to ninth in the standings.

Long before last year's Chase even began, France announced plans to tweak the system. He wasn't sure what he planned to do but repeatedly said he wasn't looking at widening the field.

Apparently that changed.

It's possible NASCAR always expected the field to occasionally include more than 10 drivers. The trouble was, no driver outside the top 10 was ever within 400 points of the leader. Now, that 400-point cushion has been scrapped.

Despite criticism from longtime fans who preferred the consistency-based championship format, France said he still believes the Chase is the best thing for NASCAR.

NEXTEL CUP SCHEDULE

By The Chippewa Herald

Here's the 2007 Nextel Cup season schedule, followed by where the race will be televised:

Feb. 18, Daytona 500, Daytona (Fox)
Feb. 25, California Speedway (Fox)
March 11, Las Vegas Motor Speedway (Fox)
March 18, Atlanta Motor Speedway (Fox)
March 25, Bristol Motor Speedway (Fox)
April 1, Martinsville Speedway (Fox)
April 15, Texas Motor Speedway (Fox)
April 21, Phoenix International Raceway (Fox)
April 29, Talladega Superspeedway (Fox)
May 5, Richmond International Raceway (Fox)
May 12, Darlington Raceway (Fox)
May 19, Nextel All-Star Challenge, Lowe's Motor Speedway (Speed Channel)
May 27, Coca-Cola 600, Lowe's Motor Speedway (Fox)
June 3, Dover International Speedway (Fox)
June 10, Pocono Raceway (TNT)
June 17, Michigan International Speedway (TNT)
June 24, Infineon Raceway (TNT)

July 1, New Hampshire International Speedway (TNT)
July 7, Daytona International Speedway (TNT)
July 15, Chicagoland Speedway (TNT)
July 29, Brickyard 400, Indianapolis Motor Speedway (ESPN)
Aug. 5, Pocono Raceway (ESPN)
Aug. 12, Watkins Glen International (ESPN)
Aug. 19, Michigan International Speedway (ESPN)
Aug. 25, Bristol Motor Speedway (ESPN)
Sept. 2, California Speedway (ESPN)
Sept. 8, Richmond International Raceway (ABC)
Chase for the Nextel Cup
Sept. 16, New Hampshire International Speedway (ABC)
Sept. 23, Dover International Speedway (ABC)
Sept. 30, Kansas Speedway (ABC)
Oct. 7, Talladega Superspeedway (ABC)
Oct. 13, Lowe's Motor Speedway (ABC)
Oct. 21, Martinsville Speedway (ABC)
Oct. 28, Atlanta Motor Speedway (ABC)
Nov. 4, Texas Motor Speedway (ABC)
Nov. 11, Phoenix International Raceway (ABC)
Nov. 18, Homestead-Miami Speedway (ABC)

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