By STEPHEN HAWKINS

The Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — The National Rifle Association is taking its relationship with racing to a new level as the title sponsor of a NASCAR Sprint Cup Series race. The deal with Texas Motor Speedway comes at a time when the NRA is involved in a renewed debate on gun violence in the wake of the December shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

“It’s not about politics. It’s about sports marketing,” TMS president Eddie Gossage said Monday after the announcement of the 1-year agreement with the NRA that includes a renewal option. The April 13 race at Texas, the first scheduled night race in the Cup Series this season, will be known as the NRA 500. This is not the NRA’s first title sponsorship in NASCAR. The group sponsored the second-tier Nationwide race last September at Atlanta, which like Texas is owned by Speedway Motorsports Inc. “They saw it was obviously a very attractive sports marketing opportunity and seized it. That’s what it’s all about,” Gossage said. “It’s about putting on one of the great sporting events in America. I know in Atlanta last year they saluted a lot of the people that make America free. They are going to salute American freedoms and American families with this race. That’s their plan so it seemed to be a good fit.”

NASCAR read a statement Monday that “race entitlement partnerships” are agreements directly between the track and the sponsor though NASCAR reserves the right to approve or disapprove those sponsorships. “The race sponsor for Texas Motor Speedway’s April event falls within the guidelines for approval for that event,” NASCAR’s statement read. Wayne LaPierre, the NRA’s executive vice president and CEO, expressed his excitement about the deal in a video message played during the track’s media day. Gossage said LaPierre wasn’t able to attend because of a scheduling conflict. “The NRA 500 is the latest announcement in the long history of a growing partnership between the NRA, Speedway Motorsports and the NASCAR community,” LaPierre said. “NRA members and NASCAR fans love their country and everything that is good and right about America. We salute our flag, volunteer in our churches and communities, cherish our families and we love racing. On April 13, we’ll all come together at Texas Motor Speedway.”

The sponsorship does seem like a natural. It's been a tradition at TMS that the winner of the Cup race gets to fire off a 6-shooter in victory lane. And the winner of the pole gets a rifle as a prize.

At the Cup season-opening Daytona 500, Michael Waltrip drove a Toyota with a paint scheme supporting a relief fund for victims of the Sandy Hook shootings.

The Newtown-emblazoned car of Swan Racing was unveiled by NASCAR chairman Brian France in a news conference at Daytona, part of a 1-race arrangement for the team. France and his wife announced they would donate $50,000 to the Sandy Hook School Support Fund, which the NASCAR Foundation would match.

Sprint Cup rookie Ricky Stenhouse Jr., who won the NRA American Warrior 300 at Atlanta last September, has no issue with the NRA sponsoring NASCAR races. "The NRA is our core fan base and we all have guns, and all us racers love to go out and shoot. It's part of who we are," said Stenhouse, the only Cup driver at TMS media day. "Anytime you have a sponsor that embraces their market and who their core customers are, it's great for us.

"I was able to win the NRA race in Atlanta and those guys were great to work it. They take their stuff serious, they're concerned with the tragedies that we've had throughout the nation. "I think they do a great job at working from their side to help things as well. I think it's a great partnership here at Texas."

Gossage said the NRA has been a generous supporter of Speedway Children's Charities, donating more than $500,000 to the charity's Texas chapter since 2000. He said the group has also had past sponsorship with signage at the track. NRA officials first expressed interest last fall to Texas officials about sponsoring the track's spring race. The event previously had Samsung Mobile as a title sponsor since 2002 but the company didn't renew its contract after last April's race.

Without a title sponsor, Texas had been promoting next month's race as the Texas 500.

“We’ve had other (sponsor) offers but a lot of people wait and expect you to drop your price. That’s not something we do. We’re not going to be a discount speedway,” continued Gossage, not revealing specific details. “They were willing to meet the price. They afford us some great marketing opportunities as well with their membership to reach out to them and try to bring their members to attend the race here.”

Gossage said TMS and the NRA reach similar audiences and that he expects a lot of tickets being bought by NRA members and people who support the group’s position.

“Obviously we know the NRA well and I can tell you from just looking at the demographics, I can tell you from the social media that I’ve been sitting here monitoring since that announcement was made, it’s probably 99 percent supportive. Some wildly supportive,” he added. “The public, it doesn’t seem to be they’re going to have any issue with it and I’m not sure why anybody would think they would.

“Like I said, know your demographic and we pride ourselves on being good at what we do. So we know what we’re doing and who we’re partnering with.”__PUBLIC__