

In the Pits-Chasing Hendrick 'not in spirit' of NASCAR rules?

Written by Staff Reports

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By JENNA FRYER

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — If garage gossip is to be believed, somebody dropped a dime on NASCAR champion Brad Keselowski and his Penske Racing team at Texas Motor Speedway.

The story blowing like wildfire Monday through NASCAR goes like this: Keselowski was parked at Texas next to Jimmie Johnson, while teammate Joey Logano was further down the garage parked next to Jeff Gordon. The assigned spots gave Hendrick Motorsports crews crystal clear views of the Penske cars all weekend.

As the story goes, there may have been eavesdropping on team chatter over the scanner during practice runs.

Did someone from Hendrick ask NASCAR to take a closer look at the Penske cars? On race day, NASCAR inspectors were indeed sniffing around looking for an infraction. What they found in the rear-end housings on the No. 2 and No. 22 Fords were confiscated — Logano barely made the start of the race — though NASCAR vice president of competition Robin Pemberton curiously avoided a very important word in explaining the problem with the Penske cars. Pemberton never said the cars were illegal.

The furthest Pemberton went Saturday in describing the problem in the rear-end housings was they were “not in the spirit of the rule.”

That might very well be the issue behind Keselowski's post-race rant, when he hinted that

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NASCAR was not treating the Penske teams fairly.

“There’s so much stuff going on, you guys (reporters) have no idea — you have no (expletive) idea what’s going on,” he said. “I can tell you there is no team in this garage with the integrity of the 2 team. The way we’ve been treated over the last seven days is absolutely shameful. I feel like we’ve been targeted over the last seven days more than I’ve ever seen a team targeted in my life.”

While those are certainly fighting words, NASCAR spokesman Brett Jewkes posted Monday on Twitter that Keselowski would not be punished for his post-race remarks.

NASCAR is still reviewing the actual alterations on the Penske cars and penalties are practically guaranteed. NASCAR traditionally hands out sanctions on Tuesdays and on this particular week, that’s the exact day that Keselowski and his No. 2 team just happen to be scheduled to celebrate their Sprint Cup title with NASCAR officials at the White House.

When the dust settles, crew chiefs Paul Wolfe and Todd Gordon will likely be sidelined for several weeks while Keselowski and Logano are stripped of critical points in the standings.

Remember, it will be for something that hasn’t been deemed illegal, at least not yet. It’s more likely this is a case of something in development that the Penske crew was trying and NASCAR decided was too close to the edge.

And there’s the rub in all of this. NASCAR gets to decide when a team has crept too close to a non-existent line in the rule book.

Johnson’s crew chief, Chad Knaus, has won five championships with one toe on that mark and the general public is only aware of the times he’s gotten his hand slapped. Nobody has any idea how many developments or experiments or trickery by Knaus and the Hendrick group have gotten through without a mention.

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What we do know is that teams complain often that they are chasing the Hendrick group in development. That's good for Hendrick, which has built the top team in NASCAR through hard work, strong hires, loyalty and a deep and devoted research and development program.

But the Hendrick group also knows how to play the system and it was the Hendrick cars that everyone was following last year in rear-end housing development. Eventually, when cars were so skewed it appeared they were crab-walking down the straightaways, NASCAR began to tighten the rules and add pages to the rule book that created a real line on the issue.

The crackdown took months, though, and from Darlington through Michigan, when NASCAR issued its first bulletin on the matter, Hendrick drivers won four of five races.

So now 2-car Penske Racing, which won its first Cup championship after many years of trying last season, is apparently trying new things to gain similar advantages. Only NASCAR came down fast and furious in this instance, confiscating parts and raising the threat of penalties.

It would be one thing if NASCAR made it clear the Penske guys were up to no good for weeks and had publicly warned them to clean up their act. Instead, all we've got to go on is Keselowski's allegations, which seem to indicate that everything innovative or new that the Penske crew has presented over the last week or so has been rejected by NASCAR inspectors.

If true, why is that? If true, how come the big team on top constantly gets to tinker with development that leaves everyone chasing them? Nobody is alleging Hendrick Motorsports gets away with anything it wants and Knaus' rap sheet is proof that NASCAR often deems he's gone too far.

But the mantra is the same year in and year out from all the other teams in the garage: "The Hendrick guys have found something and we're just trying to catch up to it."

Should the Penske organization get hit with stiff penalties this week, then NASCAR needs to answer the what, why and how to help everyone understand exactly what is and isn't "in the spirit of the rule."

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