

FOR

Historically, NASCAR racers have been white men. NASCAR's Drive For Diversity program seeks to change that.

It is hard enough to be successful in racing for white men. For those drivers who are minorities in the sport, it can be all but impossible to become successful. Constantly battling preconceived notions about their abilities, based on stereotypes about their race and/or gender, minority drivers have a tougher climb to the top of the racing world than do white, male drivers.

Driver participation at NASCAR's top levels is not representative of the race and gender makeup of our country. Similarly, the race and gender of fans in the stands is also not representative of the race and gender makeup of our country.

The Drive For Diversity program seeks to provide an accelerated method of changing NASCAR competitors and fans into a reflection of modern society. Having a sport that is still largely dominated by white men does not send the message that racing can be enjoyed by everyone whether they are in the stands or behind the wheel of a racecar.

Discrimination is something that occurs regularly in our country whether we admit it to ourselves or not. While we have made great strides toward equality for all, we have not achieved that goal yet. Women and citizens of color are still at a disadvantage when it comes to competing with white men.

Every racer and fan knows that success in racing these days is largely based on sponsor support. Talent can take a driver so far, but sponsor support can take them even further to the highest levels of competition. Sponsors want to back drivers who will bring attention to their companies and make their sponsorship worthwhile. Implementing a marketing plan with a company's race sponsorship helps insure that the company will get the most reward for their investment. Even though not all sponsorships will produce winning teams, all sponsorships need to produce results for the cost or they will not continue.

Trying to bring minority drivers to the forefront of media attention helps send a positive message to other minority members who are considering entering the sport of racing. Seeing minority members having some success will encourage others to follow their path in racing. This brings more future racers into the sport and also more fans.

Based on census numbers, minorities are on track to become the majority within the next few decades. For a racing series that has been around for 60+ years, continued growth and survival means having to adapt to changing demographics. NASCAR can no longer ignore that a fast-growing population in this country is not yet following their series.

Minority fans will support minority drivers. Since those minority drivers are not coming through the racing ranks at a quick pace, NASCAR has little choice but to artificially accelerate the progress of these drivers. The Drive For Diversity program helps support these minority drivers and is a necessary part of keeping racing healthy both now and in the future.

AGAINST

NASCAR's Drive For Diversity (D4D) program is little more than a "dog and pony" show meant to make NASCAR and sponsors feel better about their treatment of minorities.

To begin with, the program is run not by NASCAR but by a marketing group funded by NASCAR. It's all about the marketing and not about the racing. Sponsors, hoping to attract minority customers to their businesses, fund minority drivers. The clear hope of sponsors is that these minority drivers will one day "make it big" in racing and bring more revenue dollars to the sponsors who gave them financial backing. The minority drivers become unwilling pitchmen and pitchwomen whose worth to the sponsors is not based on their racing talent, but on their skin color and/or gender.

Participants in the program are chosen based on their appearance, ability to photograph well and TV interviewing skills. While there is some consideration of racing talent, the majority of the selection process is based on superficial qualities that increase their marketability.

Rather than allowing minority racers (who are already racing on their own) to progress through the ranks based on their talent, these drivers are plucked from near-obscure and trotted out with their new sponsors and teams. Because of participating teams, D4D drivers such as Katie Hagar (from Maine) find themselves racing in California instead of in their home region.

D4D drivers are, in almost every case, not the most successful drivers from the tracks or series where they race. They are, instead, minority drivers who are artificially moved up the ladder of racing success. Consider that since 2004 twenty-two different drivers have participated in D4D. The total number of wins by this group is twenty-eight races. No championships, just 28 total races. That's a budget of \$4-6 million per year so that each participant can win slightly more than one race each.

Of all the participants in the program, none have gone on to have success in NASCAR's top 3 series. Those having success and being a minority in those top series achieved their success without the help of the D4D program.

For all of the corporate involvement and NASCAR hype, the Drive For Diversity program does not work. Unlike other drivers who climb the racing ladder based on their driving skills and on-track success, D4D participants are instead manipulated to make corporations and NASCAR feel better. The lack of success for the drivers is not fair to them or to the minority groups that sponsors are hoping to attract.

Rather than devote time and money to a program that fails from its very premise, NASCAR should instead create a program that gives young drivers of all genders and races an equal chance to succeed in the racing world. Whether they be man or woman, dark-skinned or light, no one should be given preferential treatment on the track or off. The D4D program is no different than giving minority drivers free spots on the track...and having them still lose the race.