

A good start at Daytona

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It was a day of firsts at Daytona International Speedway.

It was the first time a female driver finished in the top 10 of the legendary Daytona 500.

It was the first time racing on the newly resurfaced 3.1-mile tri-oval track.

It was the first time racing 500 miles in NASCAR's new Gen-6 cars.

Was it a perfect race? Winner Jimmie Johnson thought so, but perfect races don't exist, especially on superspeedways. This was no exception.

The drivers were anxious to race, but in the back of everyone's mind was the horrific crash during Saturday night's Nationwide race that sent nearly 30 fans to Halifax Hospital and other local emergency rooms.

The catch fence did its job. Barely. It did prevent even more parts and debris from going into the stands, but a tire and other dangerous objects were hurled over the fence and into the stands like missiles. One fan said it resembled a war zone.

Unless the drivers had been instructed to say nothing but good things about the new cars, most comments were positive. Like anything new, tweaking is standard procedure.

Racing two and three together at speeds as high as 200 miles per hour on the backstretch demands a driver's undivided attention. They found out that when the cars are side-by-side, the air produces a negative drafting effect that needs to be addressed.

But since NASCAR had proclaimed the new cars to be the best thing since Barney Oldfield was racing his Lightning Benz up and down the packed sands of Daytona Beach, it was impossible to match expectations.

Was there hard racing as when the Hueytown gang of Allison, Cale Yarborough, David Pearson and Richard Petty were bringing the sport into the mainstream? No. Not a lot of swapping metal, no punches in the infield.

They were reluctant to mix it up very much, and over the last 10 laps only Dale Earnhardt Jr. could gain significant ground to finish second.

Pole sitter Danica Patrick was content to ride along in third place in the faster upper portion of the track while those on the bottom part of the track found it difficult to pass each other and catch up to the field.

Patrick admitted she didn't know what to do when those around her made their moves to improve. She basically froze and that comes from having never been in that position before. Inexperience is a frightful thing on the high banks of Daytona. She will get better in her Go Daddy car.

She led some laps earlier in the race, didn't embarrass herself and didn't cause mayhem on the track during the run for the checkered flag. She settled for eighth place, a solid day.

The race gave the experts something to work off of now. It will be a work in progress as they tinker with the aerodynamics, handling and horsepower. Next comes working out the kinks on shorter tracks, as they are two different animals.

But it was unanimous around the garage area that the new cars are so much better than the joke NASCAR called the cars of tomorrow, it's not even funny.

It can't help but make the racing better and that is what everyone desires.

It's a start, a good start at that.

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