

Villagers pass on July Cup race at Daytona

Timing of Sprint Cup event, potential weather delays present travel problems

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By Keith Pearlman

Since The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club organized several years ago, the club has frequently planned excursions to Daytona Beach for races at the famed motor speedway. When it came time to put out the call for those interested in going to the Coke Zero 400 on Saturday, the response that came back was the sound of chirping crickets.



Terry Renna / The Associated Press
Workers drive jet dryers around the track in front of empty stands Feb. 27 at Daytona International Speedway. The Sprint Cup Series' Coke Zero 400 will run Saturday at Daytona, but racing fans from The Villages said the late timing of the race and potential for weather delays are reasons they won't be attending.

"We advertised the bus trip for two-and-a-half months and we passed out flyers at each of our last few meetings, but only two people signed up," said Gary Civiletti, the special events coordinator for the club. "It's going to be interesting to watch it on TV and see what the crowd is like. I have a feeling we're going to see a lot of empty seats."

The summer race at Daytona dates back to 1959 when it was called the Firecracker 400 because it was held annually on the Fourth of July holiday. The event is now held the first Saturday of July.

Villages Motor Racing Fan Club president Jerry Conkle said the time of the race makes it difficult for Villagers to attend.

"I think the main reason we didn't have many people who wanted to go to this one is because it's all at night," Conkle said. "It's just too late."

Wendy Touchette, who used to arrange trips for the club, agreed with Conkle's explanation.

"It's probably a combination of the time and the weather," Touchette said. "It's a late start and in the summer you have the potential for rainstorms. We've gone before when they've had rain delays and didn't get out of there until after 1 in the morning. Then you have a long drive back home. That will make you a little gun shy the next time you think about going."

Gerry Hafer, the former president of the fan club, said he thinks the problem is NASCAR itself.

"To be honest, I'd rather go to a race at a local short track than go to a NASCAR race," Hafer said. "NASCAR has become too much of a show. It's more about entertainment than racing. I think that has turned off a lot of fans."

Civiletti agrees that the racing isn't what it used to be, especially at Daytona and Talladega.

"I tell it the way it is and in my estimation restrictor-plate racing sucks," Civiletti said. "I have drifted to watching more IndyCar races lately. I gave up on IndyCar years ago, but I've been drawn to it again because you're getting a lot more good, competitive racing. You see guys going side-by-side and three wide and passing each other. In NASCAR, with the new cars and the new package they have, it seems like once one person gets out front, it's all over."

Mike Anderson, who serves as the webmaster for the club, said he still enjoys the races, he just prefers to experience them in the comfort of the “man cave” he set up in his garage.

“I’ve gone to many races and it’s a great experience,” Anderson said. “But now, I watch on my plasma TV and I have the home theater with surround sound. And people have called me a racing geek. I sit in front of the TV with my tablet and I can get real-time scoring through Fox’s website and I follow the NASCAR reporters at the track on Twitter to get their perspective on what they’re seeing and hearing as the race is going on.”

For Don Day, however, nothing replaces the thrill of being in attendance at a big race and he will be making the trek to Daytona. He ended up resorting to his “Plan C” and will catch a bus from Spanish Springs to the track through AAA.

“I used to go to the race in Dover (Del.) every year,” Day said. “I still like to get to one race a year. Now that I live close enough there’s no better place to go for racing than Daytona. There’s just something about the atmosphere at the track – you can smell the gasoline and the roar of the engines – everything is just more vibrant when you’re there in person.”