

Careful negotiations have produced new rules that still define some required common areas on all NASCAR cars, but also areas that can be modified to better define each manufacturer's look and feel. Result: the next-generation NASCAR Ford Fusion looks like a Ford Fusion. Expect similar moves from Chevrolet, Dodge and Toyota.

Edsel Ford II on the origins and the return of brand personality in racing

By Larry Edsall

Henry Ford was devastated. In January, 1901, Ford's Detroit Automobile Company had dissolved. Ford was 38 years old, broke and would have been homeless had he not been able to move his wife and 7-year-old son into his own parents' house.

But, said Ford's great-grandson Edsel B. Ford II, Henry Ford was convinced he would become an automaker if he could find a new source of capital.

In the fall of 1901, the country's leading auto racers would assemble at the Grosse Pointe Blue Ribbon horse racing track on Detroit's east side. Not only would there be a \$1,000 cash prize to the winning car, but race day became an unofficial holiday with even the courthouse closing. Everyone, even the monied elite, would be watching.

Come race day, 8,000 people packed the grandstand and watched as Henry Ford, driving his own car because

he couldn't afford to pay an experienced racing driver, overcame Alexander Winton, the country's leading automaker, and acclaimed as the best driver as well, to win the feature race.

Driving in that race "scared the daylight out of him," Edsel Ford II said of his great-grandfather. But it also brought him attention and won him financial backers.

While Henry Ford never again ventured out behind the steering wheel of a racing car, his Ford Motor Company has remained active in auto racing "to showcase our products and technology against the best competition," Edsel Ford II explained.

And, he added, "racing fans are clearly our best customers."

Edsel Ford II was in Phoenix for the NASCAR stock car races taking place at Phoenix International Raceway. He has played an important role in Ford racing seemingly since he was a teenager who accompanied his father,

Henry Ford II, to Le Mans in the 1960s to see Ford GT40s beat Ferrari in the 24-hour race.

If Henry Ford's "Sweepstakes" was the company's first racing car, its newest is the 2013 Fusion that will make its competitive debut at the Daytona 500 in February. Unlike other recent NASCAR Sprint Cup cars, the Fusion will much more closely resemble the non-racing version sold by Ford dealers.

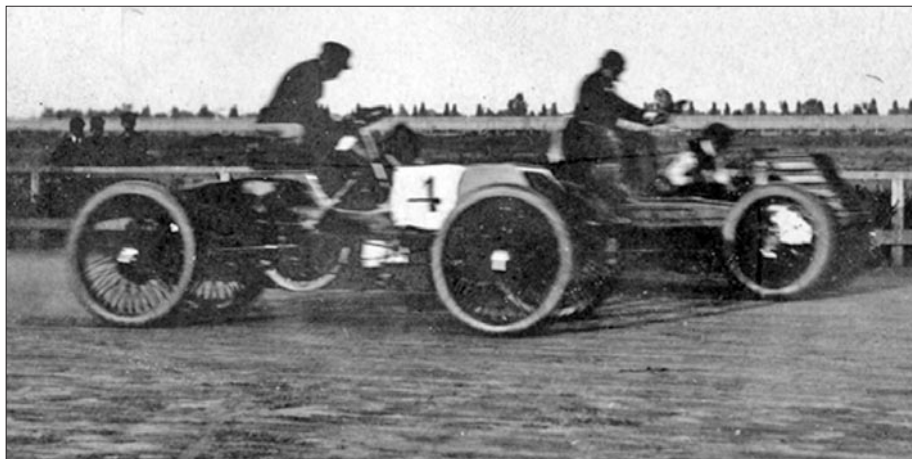
"This is really historic, bringing back brand identities to NASCAR," said Andy Slankard, Ford's NASCAR operations manager, who shared the new Fusion's evolution with the Phoenix automotive media group.

First, however, Slankard said how happy he was to be back in Phoenix, where he worked for a decade as a jet engine test engineer.

For much of its history, NASCAR racing involved true stock cars, modified for speed and safety. But to maintain parity among competing brands, the rules eventually led to the cars being virtually identical except for decals that mimicked the actual designs of vehicles such as the Ford Fusion, Toyota Camry and others.

After the 2011 Daytona 500, automakers and NASCAR met to see if more brand identity might be achieved without upsetting competitive balance.

Henry Ford and Spider Huff driving the "Sweepstakes" Racer, against Alexander Winton's car, at Grosse Pointe, Michigan in 1901. Photo: The Henry Ford Museum.



Edsel B. Ford II, a board member of International Speedway Corporation, is very influential in racing.

Parameters were established, and for 2013 the cars that race will look much more like those on the street.

Slankard revealed that Ford's early efforts focused on racing the Mustang in the Sprint Cup, but that NASCAR insisted on basing that series on four-door sedans and keeping sporty two-door vehicles such as the Mustang, Ford Challenger and Chevrolet Camaro in the NASCAR Nationwide series.

Ford turned its attention to the Fusion and, as Slankard put it, "got our design center engaged, and for the first time since the 1970s."

The result, he said, was dramatic. While all 2013 Sprint Cup cars must fit over NASCAR's safety-oriented chassis, and while all will share greenhouse, rear and front spoilers, rocker panels and front wheel arch shapes, the Fusion will look like a Fusion, not like a Camry or Chevrolet.

Ford also thinks it has strengthened its bid for the 2013 Sprint Cup Championship by adding the Penske and Petty teams to its racing stable.

But the Sprint Cup isn't the only trophy Ford would like to possess.

Edsel Ford II said that to make sure Alexander Winton would race his car in the big Grosse Pointe event, race organizers allowed Winton to select the trophy that would go to the winner. Winton selected a large cut-glass punch bowl and cups, in part because he and his wife already had chosen a place to display such a set in their home in Cleveland.

But it was Henry Ford who won the race, and took the punch bowl home to his wife, Clara.

Edsel Ford II said the bowl was displayed in the Fords' home for the ensuing 46 years, but apparently then was moved and misplaced.

In recent years, in addition to raising money for charities and serving on the Ford board of directors, Edsel Ford II has been on a mission to find the artifact he calls "a cornerstone of Ford racing history, of our family history." He's even become a regular viewer of public television's Antiques Roadshow in hopes someone might find the bowl and wonder about its history and its worth. ■

Where the roads are dry and the cars are slick.



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