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Nascar Sends Fans Into Battle to Expand Its Racing Empire

By STUART ELLIOTT AUG. 21, 2014

NASCAR is continuing efforts to broaden its appeal while holding on to longtime fans with a campaign that will portray popular drivers and their supporters as nation-states fighting for hegemony.

The campaign, scheduled to begin this weekend, promotes a revamped 10-race playoff format known as the Chase for the Nascar Sprint Cup, which is to be covered by ESPN from Sept. 14 through Nov. 16. The campaign begins with ads carrying the theme “Sixteen nations. Ten battles. One will prevail,” and concludes with the theme “Four nations battle. One will prevail.”

The campaign includes online content and fast-paced commercials with an intensity that suggests the theme perhaps ought to be “Onward, Nascar drivers, racing as to war.” The spots include scenes of drivers, their teams at work on cars in garages and fans festooned in their favorite drivers’ colors and numbers. The concept is to present the 16 drivers who will qualify for the Chase — backed by their team members, sponsors and the manufacturers of their cars — as powerful nations preparing for rounds of challenges to determine the final winners and losers.

So far, 12 drivers have been selected to take part, among them Kurt Busch, the leader of “Outlaw Nation,” styled after his nickname; Carl Edwards, “Carl Nation”; Jeff Gordon, “Gordon Nation”; and Jimmie Johnson, “Jimmie Nation.” Each designation is accompanied by a hashtag for social media. For instance, Brad Keselowski of “Brad Nation” will be identified with #GoingFor2, and Joey Logano of “Logano Nation” will be identified with #TeamJL.

The campaign is being created by Ogilvy & Mather New York, which was hired

by Nascar early last year to woo the next generation of fans while remaining connected to core fans. The campaign represents what Nascar executives are calling the first advertising collaboration between Nascar and a television partner; typically, a network uses its own agencies or employees to create ads to promote its race coverage.

The “battle of nations” theme, says Brent Dewar, chief operating officer of Nascar, is “authentic to our brand and to our sport” because it reflects how fans regard their favorite drivers. It also echoes phrases that Nascar already uses in marketing and social media, like “Nascar Nation,” which serves as a Twitter handle along with @Nascar.

It is hoped that the premise of continual clashes that pit racecar titans against one another will “stoke the passion of the intensely loyal fans and reach beyond the core to younger, more multicultural audiences,” said Adam Tucker, president of Ogilvy & Mather New York, part of the Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide division of WPP.

There is data to suggest that Nascar faces an uphill road to reclaim the peaks in attendance and television ratings that it enjoyed in the mid-2000s. “Nascar, from a national standpoint, has been pretty flat in the past couple of years in perceived popularity,” said Jon Last, president of the Sports and Leisure Research Group, a consultancy, describing it as a “half full, half empty” situation, in that while ardor for Nascar is not climbing, it is also not tumbling.

“The big question,” he added, “is how legitimate” fans will perceive the new playoff format to be and whether “something like this generates more interest,” particularly at “this time of year, when college and pro football are gearing up.”

Mr. Tucker said he and his agency colleagues “feel great about the progress” that has been made since their initial ads, which celebrated drivers as heroes, began in February 2013.

And the Chase, said Terry Finley, senior partner and group creative director at Ogilvy & Mather New York, would “make for a more interesting product” to promote to current and potential fans.

“This year is an important year,” Mr. Finley said, because “this campaign has to educate people, make them aware of the changes” in the playoff formula “so they can enjoy the races.”

“It’s going to take a bit of time,” he added, “but it’s going to pull more fans in.

I'd be surprised if it doesn't."

Mr. Finley and Mr. Tucker said they believed that the imagery of battling nations at a time when some nations are fighting in real life would not put off the public. "It's all done in the context of racing," Mr. Tucker said.

Mr. Dewar said the campaign did not need to be changed after Tony Stewart, a Nascar driver, struck and killed Kevin Ward Jr. on Aug. 9 during a non-Nascar race on a dirt track in upstate New York. Mr. Stewart has skipped two Sprint Cup races since the crash and plans to skip a third.

"We respectfully recognize what a terrible tragedy it was, but nothing specifically impacted the direction" of the campaign, said Scott Parker, vice president for consumer marketing at ESPN.

The Chase "brings a new and heightened sense of anticipation and excitement to the postseason," he added, and the campaign offers "one amplified message across all the different elements."

It is difficult to estimate spending on the campaign because so much of it runs in media owned by and affiliated with Nascar, ESPN, drivers, carmakers and sponsors. Nascar is describing the campaign as its largest marketing effort ever. According to Kantar Media, a unit of WPP, Nascar significantly increased spending on paid ads in the first quarter, to \$3.9 million, compared with \$1.6 million in the same period of 2013.

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