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NASCAR catches up in numbers race

By TERRY BLOUNT

Statistical information never before available makes it easier to see why some NASCAR drivers do well and others do poorly at each event.

NASCAR has teamed with STATS LLC to develop a system of detailed statistical information that has transformed the traditional rundown of finishing positions after each race.

Greg Biffle won the Samsung/RadioShack 500 at Texas Motor Speedway last year. He was running well in the Dickies 500 last November before a loose lug nut ruined his chances.

The new stats make it clear why Biffle ran well at TMS. He led in seven of the 20 new categories listed from the TMS races last year.

Biffle was the fastest in Turn 1, Turn 3, restarts and early in green-flag runs. He also was the best closer late in the race and best in traffic with other cars close to him.

None of those tidbits of information was available in the past, but NASCAR statistics have entered a new era.

"This really is a fundamental change in how we view the results of a race," said Ramsey Poston, NASCAR's managing director of communications. "Along with knowing who won a race, we will know how the race was won."

Scoring loops at different points around each track, a change implemented a few years ago, led NASCAR officials to conclude that in-

depth numbers in various categories were possible. Those numbers put Biffle at the top at TMS for the new driver rating category.

The formula is similar to the quarterback rating used by the NFL. Each category is weighted, enabling the statisticians to calculate a numerical rating. Biffle's rating at TMS last year was 120.9.

Looking at the new stats package helps identify which drivers excel in specific situations. One new stat shows why Carl Edwards won the inaugural Dickies 500 last November. He made more green-flag passes (141) than any other driver at TMS last year.

Tony Stewart didn't win at TMS last year, but his 6.6 number was the best average running position on the 1.5-mile oval in 2005. An engine problem caused his car to catch fire on the backstretch last April, when he finished 31st, but he ran up front in both races. He was sixth in November.

Some of the stats from the 2005 TMS races are surprising. For example, Michael Waltrip posted the fastest speeds on both straightaways. He finished sixth in the April race and probably would have finished well in November if not for a blown engine late in the race. His speed on the frontstretch and backstretch shows why he ran up front in both races.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. finished in the top 10 at both TMS events. The new stats show a clear reason: He made the most passes among any driver running

in the top 15. Earnhardt passed cars ahead of him 84 times at TMS in 2005.

The statistical information also works in the other direction, showing why some drivers had no chance of racing well at TMS.

Scott Riggs ranked 41st in speed for Turn 3 and 42nd on the frontstretch. He finished 32nd in April and 34th in November.

Bobby Labonte ranked 42nd in speed when other drivers were within one car length of him. He also made only five passes while racing in the top 15. He finished 38th in April, 26th in November.

The new stats give teams a clearer picture of the areas where they need to improve. The stats are tabulated after every race, and a cumulative listing comes out early in the week that shows where each driver stands for the season.

The new information is totaled for NASCAR's top three series - Nextel Cup, Busch and Craftsman Truck. Many of the stats in the new package are listed in an advanced box score after each race. Among the items listed are a driver's lowest and highest position in a race, laps in the top 15 and passes made in the top 15. Also included are passes under green and the times a driver was passed under green.

So, if the new stats don't lie, Biffle, Stewart and Earnhardt look like good bets for Sunday's race.