



NASCAR WHELEN MODIFIED TOUR

Modified Tour teams mixed on starting season with reduced purse at Myrtle Beach

by  Paul Lambert May 25, 2020



NASCAR Home Tracks

Less than a week away from the Whelen Modified Tour season opener at Myrtle Beach Speedway, several teams are still grappling with the decision to race.

NASCAR revealed on Friday that the first race for the Tour would take place at the historic South Carolina short track. With a vast majority of Whelen Modified Tour teams stationed in New England and New York, that makes for a 12 hour commute. The northern teams spend several thousand dollars just getting to and from the Grandstrand in recent seasons.

A point of contention for some teams is a smaller purse and winner's share that will be distributed next Saturday. With tracks unable to bring in any sort of ticket, concessions, and merchandise revenue, there is less money to go around.

The winner at Myrtle Beach will be awarded \$4,000 – not enough to make-up the cost of travel with 10th-place on back only receiving \$500.

Some teams and drivers are confident that once fans return to the stands and there is more money flowing through tracks, the purses will go back to its pre-coronavirus levels.

Justin Bonsignore, the 2018 champion, sympathizes with NASCAR. The situation is one nobody has prepared for, so there is bound to be challenges to be overcome.

"It's something we're going to have to have some give-and-take, between all the parties involved, the teams, the tracks, and NASCAR all year," Bonsignore said. "I think it's going to be tough until some fans can get back in the stands and then they can up the purses. I have full faith and confidence in NASCAR that they will fight for us like they have the last bunch of years to get the purses to normal. Hopefully, it is this year, but it's such a fluid situation.

"If [lower purses] become a permanent issue, I think the teams will take that up with the appropriate people, and they just won't race, if that's what it's going to permanently be like... We're racers. Obviously we're not thrilled with losing money, but we're going to do down and race and put on a good event."

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Woody Pitkat, driver of the Eddie Harvey Racing No. 1, also recognizes the adversity NASCAR faces in scheduling a regional touring event.

"I know that they're in a tough spot with what's going on," Pitkat said. "With not having fans, having fans, looking at states where you can race. There's a lot involved. We appreciate what [Tour director Jimmy Wilson] and [NASCAR touring director Brandon Thompson] is trying to do... For us to tell them we appreciate everything you're doing and then to say 'we're not going to go' because we're not happy with the points structure or less money would just be not very nice."

There are other teams, however, who are worried that the drop in purses is more than just an aberration. Three full-time teams have already made the decision to skip out on Myrtle Beach.

RaceDayCT reported Saturday that the No. 85 team, driven by Ron Silk and owned by Kevin Stuart, won't be making the trip south to compete.

"What's going to happen when they come back up here to race?" Stuart said. "Let's just say everything gets cleared at some point and we can come back up here and race. [The tracks] up here are going to say 'Well, you drove all the way to Myrtle Beach to race for \$4,000 to win, so why can't you race here for \$4,000 to win?'"

Dave Sapienza, who is also planning to stay home next weekend, agreed with Stuart.

"Once everybody accepts the terms, that we're going to run for \$4,000, why should they ever raise it back up to \$10,000?" Sapienza said.

For Sapienza, the decision came down to the travel costs not being worthwhile.

"If you win \$4,000 and spend \$8,000 to get there, then that's a big loss," Sapienza said. "After first, it's a total loss, from second to last... If I'm going to spend that kind of money, I might as well just stay home and save it for a different occasion."

Danny Watts Racing, owner of the No. 82 driven by Chase Dowling, announced on Facebook Monday that he would not be traveling to Myrtle Beach either, citing "uncertainty around us" as the reason not to go.

While the plan still appears to be to run a substantial number of Tour races in 2020, NASCAR has not informed the teams of any other upcoming races for the Whelen Modified Tour besides the Wade Cole Memorial 133. That has left some owners, like Sapienza and Stuart, nervous that there may not be another race for a while, if at all in 2020. They're not sure what kind of schedule awaits them.

"What happens if we get this race in, and the second wave [of COVID-19] hits and facilities don't want to open, and they can't set something up with them where we can run our normal schedule, what happens then?" Sapienza said. "[NASCAR] doesn't have a contingency plan for race number two. We might not race for another two months."

In the end, however, most teams do plan on racing next Saturday, largely due to the fact that there will still be points on the line. Plus, the opportunity to race again is simply too much to resist.

"It's a tough situation for everybody, but we're a full-time team that chases points each year, and we're going to do the same thing this year," Bonsignore said. "The first points-paying event will be Myrtle Beach, so that's where we'll start, and we'll go from there."

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 Paul Lambert

Paul Lambert is an aspiring collegiate journalist. A writer and broadcaster, Paul's excited to cover New England short track racing in 2021. Paul has also been published in the Boston Herald, Speedway Illustrated and on Autoweek.com.

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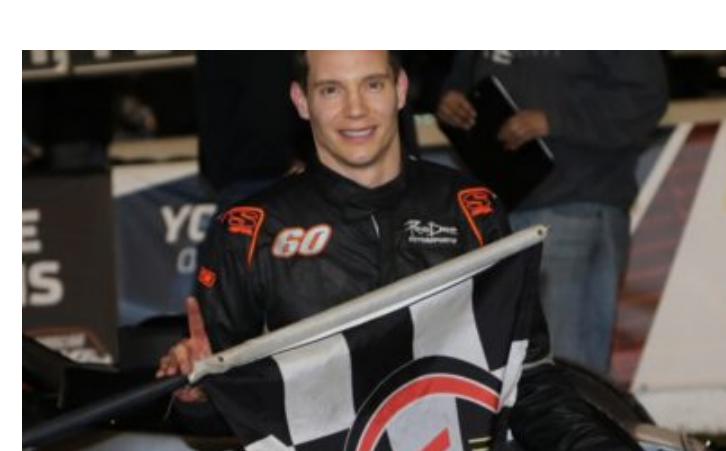
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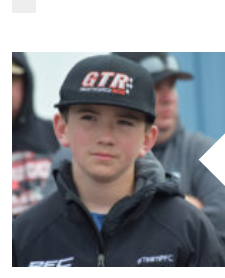
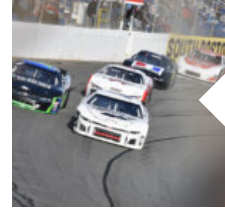
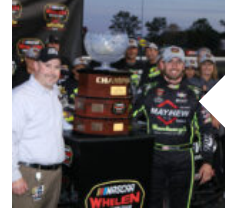
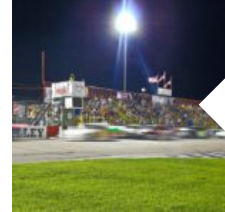

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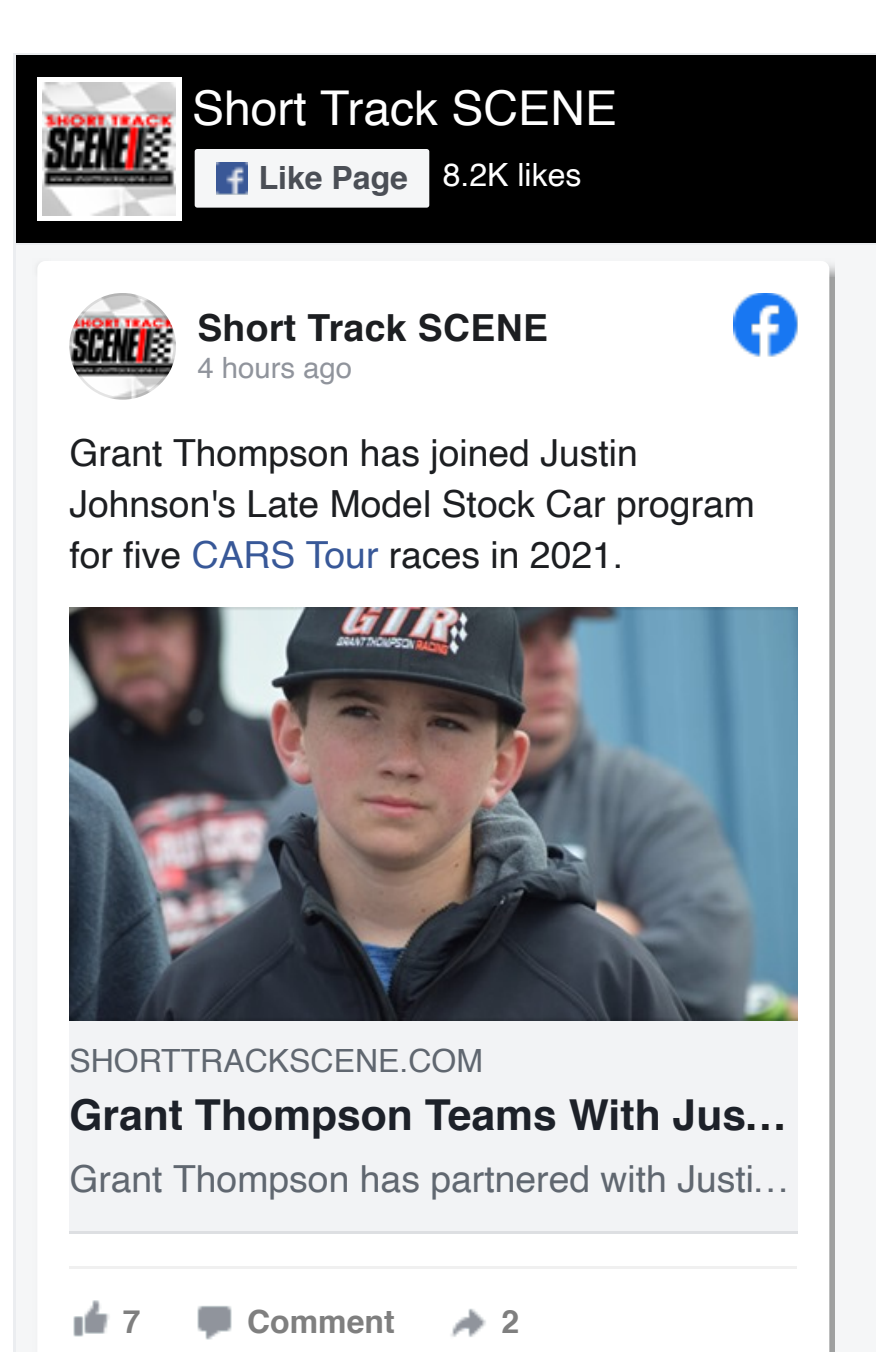
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