

Will the Confederate Flag Fly in NASCAR?

NASCAR wants to limit the Confederate battle flag's presence at its tracks after the murder of nine black worshippers in South Carolina, but getting U.S. motor racing fans to comply may prove difficult.

On the eve of a big holiday race weekend in Daytona Beach, David Childress was among those who ignored the call and packed a t-shirt festooned with the Civil War-era flag for his trip to the world-famous Florida racetrack.

"I don't think you're supposed to cherish it, but don't forget it," said Childress, 61, from Mississippi, who said he owns six Confederate flags.

The June 17 killings at a Charleston bible-study group have prompted politicians and businesses to try to banish the flag, widely viewed as a symbol of slavery, after photos of the white man charged in the shooting showed him posing with it.

NASCAR and track owner Daytona International Speedway Corp have not banned the flag at the track where it remains popular among motor racing's strongly southern, White and conservative fan base.

Instead, race organizer and owner NASCAR and its 30 affiliated tracks on Thursday asked fans not to bring the flags to races.

"This is an opportunity for NASCAR Nation to demonstrate its sense of mutual respect and acceptance for all who attend our events," it said.

For fans who ignore the request, NASCAR is offering to exchange Confederate flags for the stars and stripes to honor U.S. Independence Day at Daytona Beach.

Confederate flags typically dot the infield at Daytona but are far thicker at other NASCAR facilities such as the Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama, fans say.

"You ain't going to tell them boys they're not going to fly their flags 'cause they're Alabama rednecks," said Childress' friend Debbie Dionne, 57, a cook from Pascagoula, Mississippi.

NASCAR's attempt to get rid of the flags comes at the same time the organization and Daytona track owner have been announcing major new corporate sponsors including General Motors , Fifth Third Bank, and Microsoft.

Daytona Speedway needs sponsorships to help pay for a \$400 million renovation of the aging track's grandstand to turn it into racing's first modern stadium.

"Companies are very careful of their brands," said Hank Fishkind, an Orlando-based economic consultant.

While some fans will take umbrage at not being able to wave their Confederate flags, "NASCAR has the opportunity to broaden its base a bit by being more family friendly and more up to date in the positioning of their product," he added, noting that it had struggled with declining TV ratings and empty seats in recent years.

GM didn't immediately respond to calls for comment, but Fifth Third's North Florida president and CEO Brian Lamb said in an emailed statement that the company did not support the use of the flag at the races.

In a statement Microsoft said it agreed with NASCAR and others that the flag is a symbol that "does not represent the future of our country, and that we should remove this symbol from our culture."

Bob Almeida, 58, a fuel company manager from Cape Coral who was camping outside the track, said he's noticed a decline in

the flags over the past 10 years he's been attending Daytona races.

Several fans Thursday saw NASCAR's attempt to eliminate the flag as a capitulation to corporate sponsors.

"It's all about the American dollar. But I can see why a company doesn't want to lose hundreds of millions over a flag," Childress said.

David Fraley, 54, of New Port Richey, a tennis court contractor, said he thinks NASCAR is in a difficult position.

"NASCAR's selling a product. How can it be held responsible for what its customers believe in?" Fraley said.

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