A close up of a car

Description automatically generatedMotorsport Gone Digital

By [David Blue](https://twitter.com/dieselgoth)

## Analyzing the stories and consequences of racing industries’ hurried entry into a simulated space.

So far, 2020 has been a fascinating year for athletic endeavors of all kinds, indeed, including those across the motorsports cultural spectrum. Especially after [returning to racing simulation](http://dieselgoth.com/tag:gtsport)/video games as a whole earlier in the year, I have been invested in the exponentially-increasing interaction and its frictions between the greater “real” professional motorsports establishment and the fast-maturing world of eSports largely due to necessary countermeasures against the COVID-19 pandemic. From research, I found plenty of news coverage of isolated seismic events, but very little analysis of the tectonic collision as a whole, if you will, so I thought I’d endeavor to write my own. The ongoing reckoning of the relationship throughout automotive culture’s various demographic poles (especially age) has always been an especially fascinating subject for myself as a young auto writer and product of an unusually retrospective childhood for my generation. Auto Racing is as old as the automobile, itself, but its ability to adapt to the times has arguably been challenged more by the 21st century than ever before.

To declare this year’s circumstances to be *historic* is surely an understatement – the universality of the world’s response to the pandemic eclipses all but perhaps the World Wars in the scale of its impact on all human activity (and it’s important to remember that global population has *tripled* since the last one.) Influential pressures aren’t just biological, however. The unprecedented social repercussions of George Floyd’s recent murder at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department (atop a list of far too many late race crimes by American law enforcement) have managed to shine a brighter-than-ever-before spotlight on racism and race issues in car racing culture. Just this Wednesday, NASCAR announced a ban on displaying the confederate flag “[from all NASCAR events and properties](https://twitter.com/NASCAR/status/1270819350644211719)” after Bubba Wallace – one of very few black drivers in the history of the series – [first called for](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/sports/autoracing/bubba-wallace-nascar-confederate-flag.html) and subsequently [voiced his support](https://ftw.usatoday.com/2020/06/bubba-wallace-calls-nascars-confederate-flag-ban-a-huge-pivotal-moment) of the “pivotal” decision. The *very same day*, he also competed at Martinsville Speedway [sporting](https://www.roadandtrack.com/motorsports/a32823873/nascar-bubba-wallace-black-lives-matter-livery/) both Black Lives Matter apparel and an accompanying #BlackLivesMatter-themed livery on his stock car, which resulted in the [most contextually culture-shocking images of the sport](https://ftw.usatoday.com/gallery/bubba-wallace-nascar-black-lives-matter-martinsville-photos) I have ever seen. (One wonders how the livery was designed, approved, and applied so quickly.) Mack Hogan for [*Road & Track*](https://www.roadandtrack.com/motorsports/a32823873/nascar-bubba-wallace-black-lives-matter-livery/):

[Richard] Petty, though, owns the team that Wallace drives for. That makes this livery even more notable; not only is Wallace one of the most successful black NASCAR drivers in history, but he drives for a team that used to be staunchly opposed to acts of protest due to racism in America.

A picture containing person, road, car, boy

Description automatically generated

Out of all American institutions, it’s astonishing to witness NASCAR take such a prompt cultural lead. The news follows a [week of statements](https://global.espn.com/f1/story/_/id/29256676/lewis-hamilton-overcome-rage-racial-injustice) regarding American racial injustice from Formula One’s Lewis Hamilton – perhaps the most well-known black racing driver of all time. “I see those of you who are staying silent, some of you the biggest stars yet you stay silent in the midst of injustice,” [he wrote](https://global.espn.com/f1/story/_/id/29248814/hamilton-calls-white-dominated-f1-silence-george-floyd). “Not a sign from anybody in my industry which of course is a white-dominated sport.” Broadly speaking, the division between F1 and NASCAR represents by far the most clear-cut class divide in all of motorsport – the former originating from wealthy “gentleman drivers” while the latter came from moonshine-running scoundrels. To see both ends acknowledge just the *fact* of the movement – much less its general *sentiment* – all within a single week is indicative – if nothing else – of a greater cultural awareness from the public relations figures in these series than perhaps one previously imagined.

[TWITTER EMBED](https://twitter.com/LewisHamilton/status/1267860399875133446?s=20)

However, the added intimacy of eSports and livestreaming on Twitch and YouTube has further exposed some unquestionably negative behavior from drivers in recent weeks. On Titanic Day in April, the prominent American racing team Chip Ganassi "[terminated its relationship](https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/14/us/kyle-larson-nascar-driver-chip-ganassi-racing-spt-trnd/index.html)" with its NASCAR driver Kyle Larson after he [verbalized a racial slur during an iRacing Twitch stream](https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/13/21219793/nascar-kyle-larson-slur-iracing-suspended-sim-racing) just two days before. If you desire to hear Larson’s use of the word for yourself (obviously be forewarned of a very adolescent-sounding voice audibilizing the n-word,) you can find [the clip on YouTube](https://youtu.be/oC0iZNQrvmk) (or from [my own backup](https://eileenlong-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/david_eileenlonglcsw_com/EcsS6lwtLelAqcloUSkG-nwB64yACVKoLw88Absw3cu_lw).) Though any use of the term is contemptible, it’s especially disappointing how casual the context was in this case. “Larson appeared unaware that the communication could be heard over a public channel,” [reports *AutoWeek*’s Matt Weaver](https://www.autoweek.com/racing/nascar/a32122163/nascar-star-kyle-larson-uses-racial-slur-during-virtual-race/). It followed the query “You can’t hear me?” as if “Hey, n-----” was an appropriate sample of his voice with which to test his microphone. “Larson himself is a graduate of the NASCAR Drive for Diversity, a driver development program designed to provide a path to the highest levels for those who strive toward it,” adds Weaver in [an *AutoWeek* column](https://www.autoweek.com/racing/nascar/a32149736/opinion-kyle-larson-mistake-a-lesson-for-everyone/) (emphasis mine):

The NASCAR industry has worked tirelessly to make its events more inclusive, not only in the garage, but well beyond it. This hasn’t been a perfect process, but **where there used to be push against inclusion there is now a push toward it**.

“As an athlete, we immediately become representative of something bigger than ourselves,” said Bubba Wallace [in response to Larson’s controversy](https://the-race.com/nascar/how-wallaces-intervention-shifts-nascars-racism-debate/). “We are ambassadors for our partners, our race teams, crews, families, and the sanctioning body. Every single person is affected.” This coming from a man who [publicly](https://twitter.com/BlueEmu1/status/1246878793790296067) lost his sponsorship from the heavily NASCAR-embedded company Blue-Emu after letting slip his temper and throwing a post-contact tantrum live on Twitch during the NASCAR iRacing Pro Invitational. “We thought this was a blessing in disguise for us. But then you find out that you aren’t sponsoring a NASCAR driver, you are sponsoring someone like my 13-year-old son who broke his controller playing some game where he builds houses,” snarked Blue-Emu executive vice president Ben Blessing, but *The Race*’s Jack Benyon implores viewers to remember that this is “an opportunity for drivers to let off steam and just be themselves.”

The question I’d personally like to propose: would Kyle Larson’s slur habit have ever come to light if the pandemic never altered the regular 2020 season and forced him to do his job publicly in front of a Twitch streaming audience? How significantly has the general populace’s accessibility to the working life of these professional athletes been amplified by the abrupt transition motorsport has made to simulated environments as of late? Should we expect to see *more* shitty online behavior from professional drivers before normal, non-simulated competitions are allowed to resume? Is it too much to ask professional racecar drivers to take virtual competitions seriously? Is it even *reasonable* to do so?

Six weeks after Kyle Larson’s blunder, *The Race* published [an excellent rundown](https://the-race.com/esports/the-esports-scandals-that-have-rocked-real-world-racing) of the “eSports scandals” that have affected “real-world racing” so far this year following another such scandal that ended in real professional consequences. “Some argued that the discipline as a whole, which had been built by a loyal legion of sim stars over 10 years, was being disrespected by professionals exiled into a virtual home due to the lack of real-world racing,” they wrote regarding some [possibly-unsanctionable contact](https://twitter.com/IndyCaronNBC/status/1256690928917442561?s=20) between Formula One’s Lando Norris and Simon Pagenaud during the season finale of the IndyCar iRacing Challenge, which metamorphosed shortly afterward into [mind-numbingly piddly drama](https://www.autoweek.com/racing/indycar/a32355645/mclarens-lando-norris-and-zak-brown-condemn-simon-pagenaud-for-poor-iracing-sportsmanship/). Vice president and executive producer of the platform Steve Myers complained the incident “made a mockery” of his product, but it “would not result in suspensions since the event was a private race hosted and promoted by IndyCar.”

A screenshot of a video game

Description automatically generated

Next, Audi suspended Formula E wheelman Daniel Abt after

Aside from reading auto news and [car media Twitter](https://twitter.com/i/lists/43457439?s=20), I have been largely disconnected from car culture for quite some time, but I’m imagining a fantastical NASCAR Fan, now – some amalgamation of my uncles, a few actual stock car fans I know/know of along with plenty of banal tropes, ill-informed by portrayals of such a creature in popular culture – a devoutly technology-illiterate working-class person who still adores their television and absolutely abhors email. It is all but certain that they voted for Tump in 2016 and find almost all progressive culture offensively exhausting. Of course, the truth of them is much more than these things, but the casual observer witnesses their post-workday TV and cheap beer intake at high volume occupying so much of their free time and energy that alarmist news discourse and televised sports appear to be the entirety of their being and aspiration. *This* Fan – this white sleeveless t-shirt and reflective wraparound sunglasses-wearing allegory for a people who may or may not still exist – *they* are relatively perturbed by the seemingly-abrupt permeation of the Black Lives Matter movement into the conversation around their sport and *entirely* uninterested in watching digitally-rendered stock cars jockey about simulated asphalt behind picture-in-picture face-on cams of their rookie pick’s badly-lit, overconcentrated visage *on cable*.

This is the lazy characterization of the NASCAR Fan and I have absolutely no idea if it has *ever* been all that truthful, to be honest, nor was I able to find much recent or trustworthy data on attendee *or* viewer demographics. We *do* know that the first “eNASCAR iRacing Pro invitational Series event” in late-March attracted 903,000 viewers on FS1 according to Nielsen Media Research [as cited by FOX Sports](https://www.foxsports.com/presspass/latest-news/2020/03/24/fox-sports-air-complete-enascar-iracing-pro-invitational-series), themselves, which made it “the highest-rated esports TV program to date” [according to *Engadget*](https://www.engadget.com/2020-03-25-nascar-esports-racing-series-sets-tv-record.html):

It was also the most-watched broadcast on FS1 since mass [sports event cancellations](https://www.engadget.com/2020-03-12-ncaa-cancels-march-madness-coronavirus.html) on March 12th and the most-watched sports broadcast on cable that Sunday, although those last two feats weren't too difficult given the dearth of live sports.

[](https://www.youtube.com/embed/umwqu0PWnoE?start=124&feature=oembed)

The very notion of an officially-organized “e-NASCAR” sounds quite goofy at best to both to the laymen and our Fan – at worst, excruciatingly dull. Though iRacing has become the gold standard for competitive sims in the past two or three years as the great, [hopeful, “democratizing” messiah](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/09/how-iracing-democratizing-motorsports/571567/) of virtual motorsport, it is *not* nice to look at or listen to for any significant length of time. Compared to the current titles in the console caste like [*Gran Turismo Sport*](https://flic.kr/s/aHsmL5R2kH), [*Forza Motorsport 7*](https://flic.kr/s/aHsm8xp5uE), and even [*Assetto Corsa*](https://flic.kr/s/aHskd6ixfa), the visual and auditory effects of its now-12-year-old platform have become dated and hopelessly behind