

https://martinsvillebulletin.com/sports/auto_racing/martinsville_speedway/watch-now-the-day-the-track-stood-still/article_f5fa739d-0d6b-52d4-ba89-f23a102073b5.html

WATCH NOW: The day the track stood still

■ You Win, You're In. The First Data 500

Planning for race weekends at Martinsville Speedway happens months in advance. I don't have to tell you how many weeks, days and hours track employees, small businesses in Martinsville and Henry County, even race fans spend getting ready. It's like our town hosts a Super Bowl twice a year.



Bulletin photo by Cara Cooper

I think it was around Christmas when I started getting ideas for stories I wanted to do for this spring's race. The kind of ideas that would strike me either when I'm driving, in the shower, or just on the edge of falling asleep at night, all of which are pretty inopportune times to grab a pen and paper to write down my thoughts.

Instead, all those grand ideas I had, the people I wanted to interview, the places I wanted to sit to watch and write my race story, none of it happened.

This week I was tasked to write a story about ... well ... nothing.

There was no race. The NASCAR Cup Series race at Martinsville Speedway scheduled for Saturday night under the lights, likely the biggest race in at least several decades -- possibly ever -- at NASCAR's oldest track, did not happen.

Saturday's Blue-Emu Maximum Pain Relief 500 and Friday's NASCAR Whelen Modified Tour MaxPro Window Films 200 were both officially postponed by NASCAR on April 17, a no-brainer considering two weeks earlier Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam put in a stay-at-home order for the state and forbid any gatherings of 10 or more people until June in hopes of stalling the coronavirus pandemic.



The pace cars outside the ticket office at Martinsville Speedway read "Under the Lights, May 9, 2020" in celebration for what would have been the track's first NASCAR Cup Series race hosted under the LED lights installed in 2017.

Cara Cooper/martinsville bulletin

beers in hands, beanbags bouncing off of cornhole boards as black "3" flags on poles duct taped to the beds of their trucks waved above them. Maybe they would still want to go to the track for the fun of being there, even if their favorite drivers weren't.

Instead, I drove up and only saw a groundhog, unaware the spot he had chosen to sunbathe on the side of U.S. 220 should have been filled with parked cars and people walking with their coolers and stadium chairs.

The drive from the exit off of the highway to the Speedway's entrance took, I don't know, two minutes? On the morning of races, you only get easy breezy roads like that if you get to the track before the sun.

But I still had to write something. I couldn't let the weekend go by and have Sunday's newspaper have no mention of NASCAR and what might have been.

But how do you write a story about a race that didn't happen?

I drove to the Speedway around 11 a.m. on Saturday, hoping to see ... something. Fans in the parking lot tailgating, maybe? Tailgating 6 feet apart from each other and in groups of fewer than 10, but still in the grass,



Bulletin photo by Cara Cooper

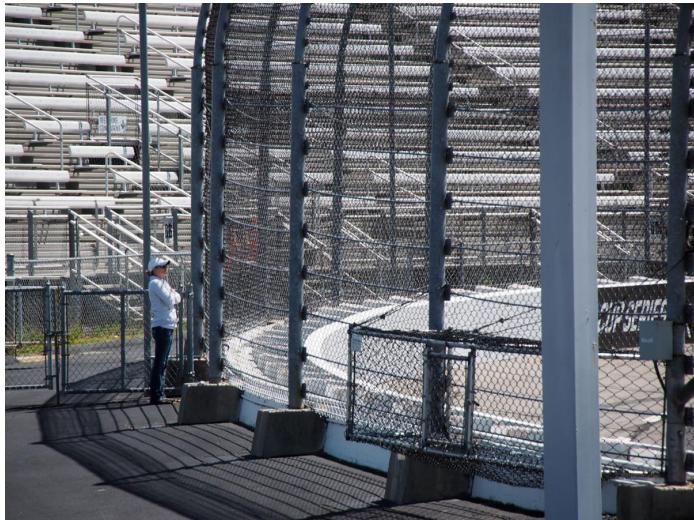
As I got past the Martinsville Speedway sign and drove down the empty hills, I parked my car under the walking bridge, a rare prime spot even on non-race days. The only other people there was a security guard in a red truck, who couldn't have been nicer as he told me good places to stand to get pictures of the track from the outside, and a woman in a baseball cap, sitting alone in silence on the lowered tailgate of her truck. I overheard her tell the security guard she had come up that morning from North Carolina.

"There was supposed to be a race today, but there isn't, but I thought I might as well come up here anyway," she told him.

I spent a few minutes walking around taking pictures. The pace cars were sitting out, "Under the Lights May 9, 2020" flawlessly painted on their doors. The ticket office had no lines, and the turnstile entrances had no crowds or beeping metal detectors.



Bulletin photo by Cara Cooper



A lone fan looks onto the track at Martinsville Speedway on Saturday. The NASCAR Cup Series was supposed to race at Martinsville on Saturday night, but it was postponed due to the coronavirus.

Cara Cooper/martinsville bulletin

The woman in the baseball cap got up and walked to the track. No camera or phone in hand, she just stood at the metal gate and stared onto Turn 4. She looked through the photographer's box cut out of the fencing. What could she have seen in that spot with cars coming down the front stretch one final time after 500 laps under the moon and stars Saturday night?

I made sure to get a picture of the woman, so I could at least say, even if there wasn't a race, there was a fan at the track Saturday.

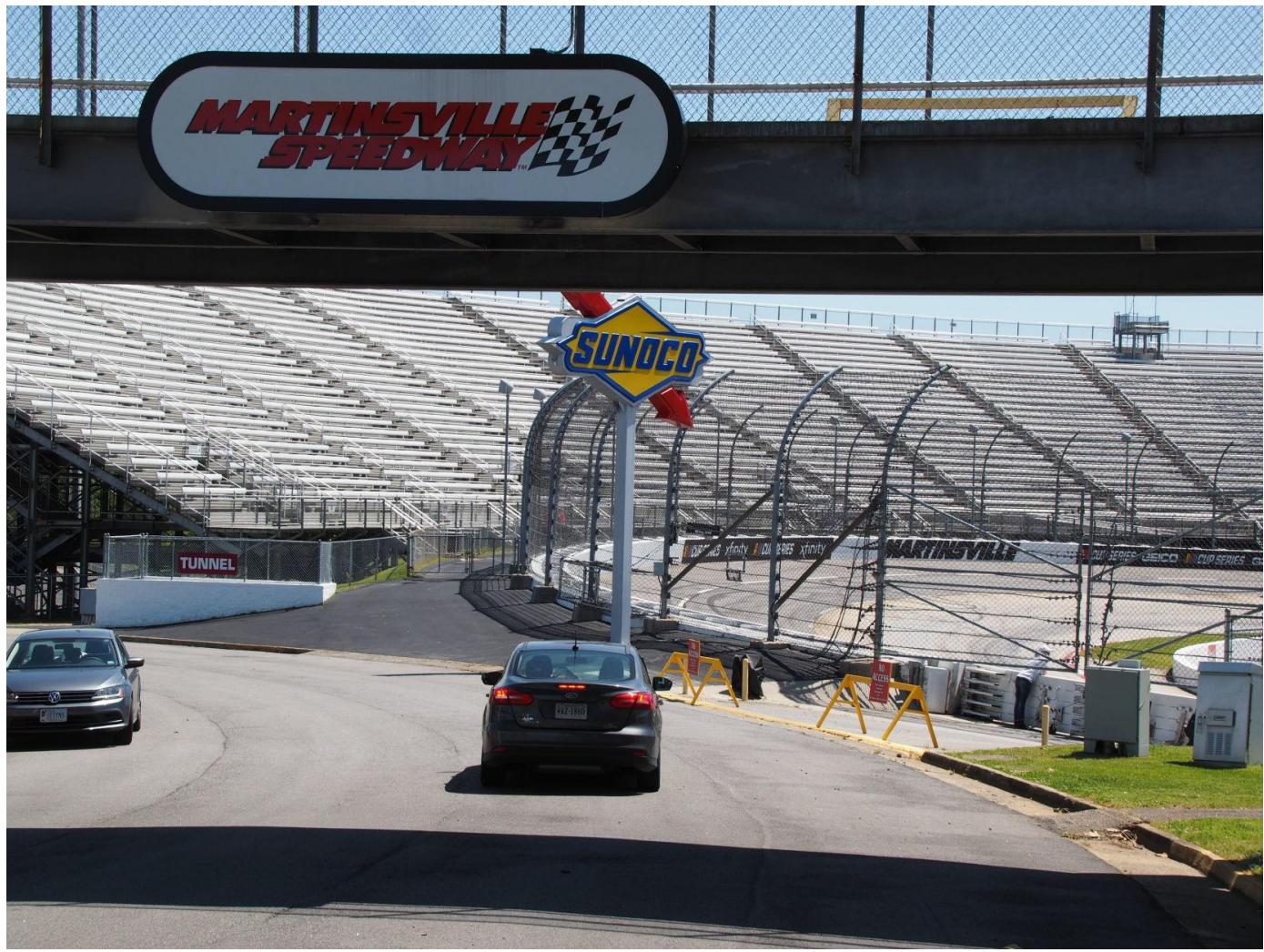
Is that something I could put in my story? A story I've been stressing about all week. How do you write about a lost race weekend? It's all so obvious. Were ticket sales for this race up? Oh yes, according to a track spokesperson. Especially compared to other recent spring races.



Bulletin photo by Cara Cooper

Are local businesses affected by not having a race? Of course. These are things I don't even think I need to ask anyone. The parking lots of hotels along U.S. 220 and throughout the area are sitting empty. Restaurants haven't been allowed to have patrons sit inside for a meal in nearly two months. The track itself brings in about 1,500 additional workers for various positions on race weekends, many of whom live right here in Martinsville and Henry County. How many of those part-time employees rely on that little bit of extra money every six months?

And even with these bleak thoughts running through my mind, I couldn't help but think why not having a race was necessary.



Martinsville Speedway will host the NASCAR Cup Series for a race on Wednesday, June 10. No fans will be in attendance for the race.

Cara Cooper/martinsville bulletin

As of Saturday morning, Martinsville, Henry County, and Patrick County have a combined 28 positive cases of COVID-19, and just one death. If tens of thousands were to packed into the stands of a race track, those numbers would surely skyrocket. So we don't have a race this weekend. There are so many places that have it much worse.

As I walked around trying to find inspiration of what to write, I stood under the walking bridge and tried to get photos of anything that seemed to show something, when a familiar sound bounced around. The Ridgeway winds blew through and rattled the bleachers, and it sounded like fans stomping their feet in excitement. With temperatures hovering in the mid-50s, it would have been a perfect day for a race.

But the next one will be, too. Because even though there wasn't a race this weekend, there will be another. Hotels will be full again. The wait times for a seat at Clarence's will be worth it. Cars will park along the side of 220 and force the groundhogs to find another spot.

And it may come even sooner than we all think. NASCAR hasn't announced a date for a rescheduled Martinsville night race, but October is still very much on the docket.

Three races in October, with the NASCAR Cup, Xfinity, and Truck Series all coming to town. There will certainly be more than one fan at The Paperclip for that.

The lady in the baseball cap walked to her truck and drove off before I was able to talk with her. One more time I crawled under the hole in the fence where the security guard told me was a good spot for pictures and took another look. The track was empty, quiet, serene. Its natural state, really, just not how many of us are used to seeing it.

As I drove off, the security guard pulled up beside me and asked, "Did you get everything you needed?"

"Yes, thank you," I said with a smile.

It was a lie. I didn't get what I needed, but that's okay. There'll be more chances on another day.

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CARA COOPER: Kobe's death is a horrible loss for the women athletes he supported so staunchly

By CARA COOPER

Jan 27, 2020

The last image most saw of Kobe Bryant before his untimely death early Sunday morning wasn't of him on the basketball court.

He was beside it.

Bryant was sitting courtside at a game, next to his 13-year-old daughter, Gianna, who also passed in Sunday's horrific helicopter crash in Southern California. Bryant, an NBA legend, was teaching her about basketball, the sport he loved first and, in that moment, the thing they loved together. It was a photo so familiar for so many women and girls who learned how to love sports watching it on the sidelines or in their living rooms next to their own dads.

Bryant's legacy will be in the stats and accolades that show up at the top of his Wikipedia page. Five NBA championships, two Finals MVPs, the NBA's Most Valuable Player in 2008, 18 all-star game appearances, four times being named the game's MVP. On and on the awards go. And for two decades that's who he was. A superstar on the court with a complicated life and legacy off of it.

But in the nearly four years since the Lakers' No. 24 (and before that No. 8) left the court for the final time, that legacy has become less complicated. His legacy is now one of someone who spent his post-playing days sharing his love of basketball with the world and making sure that game was accessible to everyone.

It would be irresponsible to say Bryant's past is without flaw. He was credibly accused of sexual assault in 2003, when he was 25 years old. The charges were later dropped, but not before doing major damage to his reputation and public persona.

But I'm a firm believer people can change, and when it comes to apologies, actions speak louder than words. In the time since those allegations Bryant has proven to be a champion for inclusion for women in sports, especially on the basketball court. He coached his daughter's travel team and let young female athletes know that the "Mamba mentality," for which he was known, wasn't just for men.

He forged a close personal friendship with University of Oregon women's basketball superstar Sabrina Ionescu, largely believed to be the No. 1 pick in this summer's WNBA Draft. He did an episode of his ESPN+ show "Details" breaking down her skills on the court.

In a time when every story and post about the WNBA comes with a response from keyboard warriors who spout nonsense about how they think they could defeat the women in a game of one-on-one and that WNBA players should "get back in the kitchen," Bryant saw female professional athletes as just that – athletes. It was just four days before his death that he told CNN, when asked if a woman could ever play in the NBA, "I think there are a couple players that could play in the NBA right now, honestly." He mentioned former MVPs Diana Taurasi, Maya Moore and Elena Delle Donne as those skilled enough to make the leap.

And Bryant's favorite female athlete was his daughter Gianna, the one known as GiGi seen next to him in so many basketball photos. A video of a recent appearance by Bryant on "Jimmy Kimmel Live" shows Kimmel asking if GiGi would like to one day play in the WNBA.

"Oh yeah," Bryant says. "The best thing that happens is when we go out and fans will come up to me and say, 'Hey you gotta have a boy. ... You've got to have somebody carry on the tradition, the legacy.' And she's like, 'No way, I got this,'"

Bryant then says that he always tells her, "Yes, you do."

For so many female athletes, you get used to hearing from outside voices that you're not good enough. It's often that one voice, a dad or a coach or just a fan of your game, that sticks out as the one saying everyone else is wrong.

Kobe Bryant was a dad, a coach and a champion for women's sports, and his words and his actions were hugely influential in that realm. His and his daughter's deaths aren't just sad because of what he did, they are gut-wrenching because of what the two of them still had left to do.

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EDITOR'S PICK

Hanging with Miss Cooper: Like everything else in this pandemic, when it comes to high school sports there are no good answers

Cara Cooper

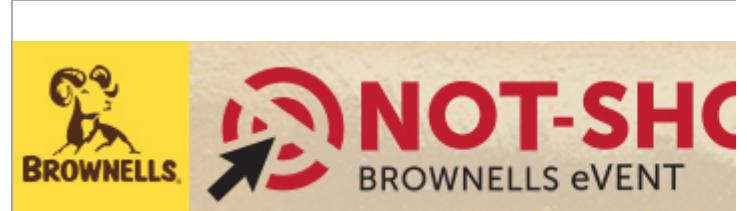
Dec 6, 2020



Local high schools have worked hard to make their offseason workouts safe for athletes, with the basketball seasons scheduled to start playing games on December 21.

Bulletin photo by Cara Cooper

Cara Cooper



The high school sports season is scheduled to begin again on Monday, almost nine months to that March day when the final pitch was thrown, the final kick was made, and the Virginia High School League canceled the spring seasons because of the coronavirus pandemic.

But, like so many issues we've faced in those nine months, there are no good answers for how to approach returning young athletes to the fields and courts. That has been the case with everything right? Do you return students to the classroom and risk each school day becoming a super-spreader event, or do you continue to do all-online learning and risk students not getting a proper education? Do you open restaurants and bars so employees can make a living and our favorite places don't go out of business, or do you keep them closed because, let's be honest, eating inside a restaurant is one of the most dangerous things you can do right now.

It seems like every issue when it comes to this pandemic has been an either/or, with both possibilities being bad.

And bringing students back to play high school sports is no different.

Having any sports right now seems to be of that "either/or, there are no good options" variety, but really that's not true. I love setting my fantasy football lineup every NFL Sunday, I loved getting the chance to watch Major League Baseball in the summer, but is there any good and moral reason to be playing professional sports right now?

The NFL has yet to cancel a game this season, a fact officials have worn as a badge of honor rather than an acknowledgement that, with dozens of positive cases the past four months, the league is not going about tackling this pandemic the right way.

Not to mention that NFL players are tested for coronavirus every day, whereas many hospitals in this country can't get enough tests. How many of you have tried to get a COVID-19 test and were told you couldn't unless you were showing symptoms? And if you could get a test, it still took at least a day, sometimes several days, to get the results.

Professional sports leagues have pushed through this year, and for what? Pure entertainment for us? Is that fair? It's not about saving jobs. Hundreds of employees were laid off across Major League Baseball at the conclusion of that season. Just this week Virginia Tech's sports department announced an undisclosed number of layoffs and pay cuts. College sports across the country are laying off employees and cutting teams/sports programs altogether to save money. And, fun fact, those colleges don't even have to worry about paying the salaries of their unpaid players.

But somehow high school sports feels different. Maybe that's my being naïve, but just about every coach I've talked to has told me kids need this. They need sports, they need interaction with their friends, they need structure, and, most importantly, they need hope.

Kids and teenagers have had their entire adolescent lives ripped away by this virus. Think back to your high school days and how quickly they went by. I can imagine at least 90% of us, if asked, would absolutely go back and do it again. Now think back to your high school days and imagine it included waking up every day and going straight to a computer. The only time you see your friends is by watching their TikTok videos or Instagram stories.

There is a way to be safe when it comes to practicing and holding workouts. I saw that first hand this week when Magna Vista girls basketball coach Kyana Smith graciously invited me to her practice. If there is a checklist for how to be safe and do everything perfectly, the Warriors seemed to mark every box.

Plus, we've seen from the Piedmont Youth Soccer League you can have a sports season, though that league had the benefit of being able to play outside. Can you duplicate that in indoor gyms for basketball, volleyball and wrestling?

So, do you let students play, knowing the risk, knowing they're not being tested for coronavirus and can take the virus back to their families, and knowing it likely isn't fair for students to be able to go to practice or a game when they can't actually go to class in person.

Or, do you cancel another high school sports season, knowing that's something else you're taking away from young people who have had so much taken from them already.

It's another one of those either/or situations, and, understandably, a lot of school systems are scared of which option to choose.

High school sports are set to begin officially on Monday, and the first games are scheduled for Dec. 21. I would caution everyone reading this not to save that date in any permanent way.

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