

Bill France steps down as NASCAR President after 28-year stint

by Sandra McKee
The Baltimore Sun
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After 28 years, the National Association for Stock Car Racing has a president whose last name isn't France.

Tuesday afternoon, Bill France, the man who followed his father, Bill France Sr., as president of the sport in 1972, announced he is stepping aside immediately and named Mike Helton, NASCAR's vice president and competition director, as his replacement.

While stepping aside, France is not retiring.

Instead, France, 67, will be chairman of a new five-member sanctioning board that includes his brother, Jim, his children, Brian France and Lesa Kennedy, who are all NASCAR executives, and Helton. He also plans to be more involved as chairman of the board of International Speedway Corp., a racetrack development company operated by the France family.

"I guess the question is, 'What's prompting this?'" France said at the start of a conference call Tuesday. The answer is multilayered.

France said he does not want to wind up 92 years old and still trying to run the family business as a one-man band.

He said he also realized that since he put this transition in motion in February 1999 by naming Helton the chief operating officer, the sport has continued to expand. NASCAR has opened an office in Los Angeles, signed a \$2.4 billion television contract that kicks off in 2001 and added a third competing manufacturer, Dodge, which will return to the sport in the coming season.

And there is France's health. He has been battling cancer for more than a year. Tuesday, he said that the cancer, which he refuses to identify, is in remission, but he has continued to have several other health issues, including a cataract operation last week.

"I have mixed emotions," France said when asked about the absence of a France in the president's chair. "But life has to go on. ... This is something that has to be done for the good of the sport. This is a progression from the so-called one-man czar to a more corporate structure. It needs to happen, and we're moving in that direction."

Pac-10 might end relationship with BCS over Oregon State snub

by Chris Dufresne
Los Angeles Times
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The Pacific 10 Conference, tired of being virtually snubbed by the major college football bowls other than the Rose for the last 15 years, is threatening to pull out of the Bowl Championship Series after its contract expires in 2006 if the Fiesta Bowl does not select Oregon State.

"There is an extra burden on the Fiesta Bowl this year," Pac-10 Commissioner Tom Hansen said Tuesday. "I hope they feel that. I think the BCS has been very good for college football, but it has to be good for all the participants."

After a disastrous 1999 season, the Pac-10 has rebounded strongly and now has three teams ranked in the top 10 - Washington at No. 4, Oregon State at No. 5 and Oregon at No. 10.

Yet Oregon State may not end up in the Fiesta Bowl.

If that happens?

"The Pac-10 may be better off going back to the Rose Bowl and forgetting the rest," Hansen said. "I wouldn't want to continually subject our teams to the anticipation of being selected and fairly considered when it just doesn't happen."

The formation of the BCS three years ago was made possible because the Pac-10, Big Ten and Rose Bowl agreed to join the alliance in order to allow the No. 1 and No. 2 ranked teams meet in a "national championship" game.

In 1994, 1996 and 1997, a title

game between No. 1 and No. 2 was not possible because Penn State, Arizona State and Michigan were contractually obligated to play in the Rose Bowl.

Hansen has been disappointed that, since joining the BCS, the Pac-10 has not placed a second team in a \$13.5-million game and feels there may never be a more qualified participant than 10-1 Oregon State, ranked No. 6 in this week's BCS rankings.

In truth, the BCS was formed only to assure a matchup of No. 1 vs. No. 2, leaving the other bowls to negotiate pairings based on economic and regional ties.

The Fiesta Bowl is very interested in Oregon State, yet there are complicating factors, namely that ratings-bonanza Notre Dame has qualified for one of two at-large BCS spots.

"We've said all along we want to let the season play out," Fiesta Bowl spokesman Shawn Schoeffler said Tuesday. "Oregon State, we admit, is very deserving of a BCS bid, but we have to let it unfold and then we'll decide on Sunday."

The key for the Fiesta is Saturday's Big 12 championship game in Kansas City, Mo.

If No. 1 Oklahoma defeats Kansas State, the Jan. 1 Fiesta Bowl gets to choose both at-large selections and will be left with some tantalizing options.

The Fiesta could pair No. 11 Notre Dame vs. No. 2 Miami in a game pitting two of college football's most storied and fierce rivals.

In that scenario, Oklahoma and Florida State would play in the Jan. 3 Orange Bowl for the BCS national

title, but Miami could actually claim the Associated Press title with a Fiesta Bowl victory should Florida State defeat Oklahoma two days later in the Orange.

In the Oklahoma-beats-Kansas State scenario, however, the Fiesta would be under great pressure to work Oregon State into the mix. The Fiesta could match Oregon State against Miami (Story line: Dennis Erickson coaches against the school he led to two national titles) and allow Notre Dame to go to the Sugar Bowl or it could match Oregon State against Notre Dame and let Miami play in the Sugar Bowl.

The Fiesta Bowl has a much bigger problem if Kansas State upsets Oklahoma this weekend because the bowl is then required to take Big 12 champion Kansas State as the automatic qualifier.

That leaves the Fiesta to choose between Oregon State and Notre Dame as Kansas State's opponent. Oregon State obviously lacks Notre Dame's historical credentials, yet the Beavers are the better team this year on merit.

In terms of national interest and television ratings, Notre Dame-Kansas State is a far more attractive game for the Fiesta Bowl than Oregon State-Kansas State.

But the Notre Dame-Kansas State pairing would create tremendous backlash at Pac-10 headquarters in Walnut Creek, Calif.

Hansen understands the Fiesta Bowl is the only logical option for Oregon State. For geographical reasons, the Sugar Bowl is not interested in Oregon State as an at-large selection.

The Pac-10 has placed one school - Arizona in the 1994 Fiesta - in a major bowl other than the Rose since 1985, when UCLA defeated Miami in the Fiesta Bowl and Washington beat Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl.

The knock on Pac-10 schools is that they don't travel well. UCLA, for example, brought only 3,000 fans to the 1995 Aloha Bowl in Honolulu.

In 1997, No. 5 UCLA was bypassed by the Sugar Bowl in favor of No. 9 Ohio State even after the Pac-10 offered to subsidize travel packages for UCLA to help secure the berth. UCLA went instead to the Cotton Bowl.

Hansen and Mitch Barnhart, Oregon State's athletic director, have been working overtime to sell Oregon State the Fiesta Bowl. Barnhart was in Tempe, Ariz., this week to make his case for the Beavers, whose only blemish this season was a three-point defeat at Washington.

"Our conference is very deserving this year of two teams in the BCS, and I'm proud of where our program is," Barnhart said. "Our kids deserve to be there. Having said that, we'll play wherever we're told to go."

Hansen said that the conference, as it did with UCLA in 1997, has agreed to subsidize travel packages to Tempe for Oregon State fans.

In terms of Oregon State's national appeal, Hansen notes the Oregon-Oregon State game on Nov. 18 outperformed ABC's ratings average in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston and New York.



Safety board still uncertain on reason for Stewart tragedy

by Don Phillips
The Washington Post
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WASHINGTON - The crew of a private jet that crashed and killed golfer Payne Stewart and three associates last year was incapacitated by a loss of cabin pressure, but the National Transportation Safety Board said Tuesday it could not determine why the cabin depressurized or why the crew did not get supplemental oxygen.

However, two of the scenarios that board investigators could not rule out were that the crew failed to don oxygen masks quickly enough after a high-altitude depressurization or that the supplementary oxygen bottle was empty or only partially full before the plane took off.

The Learjet 35, operated by the now-defunct Sunjet Aviation Inc. of Sanford, Fla., flew almost four hours on autopilot after taking off from Orlando on Oct. 25, 1999, before spiraling into a field near Aberdeen, S.D., when it ran out of fuel.

Military and National Guard F-16s shadowed the plane throughout most of its flight, reporting they saw no external damage but that the front windscreen and most of the other windows were blocked by ice or other condensation. None of the pilots could see inside the plane. An Oklahoma National Guard pilot reported that the plane began rolling toward the ground, and "it looks like he's out of control."

The board staff developed several theories for the crash and offered 10 recommendations to correct inadequacies in the pressurization and oxygen systems and in pilot training that were found during the investigation.

An 11th recommendation urged the Federal Aviation Administration to include smaller jets such as the Lear in its aging aircraft program. The jet that crashed was 25 years old.

Safety board Chairman Jim Hall said that no matter what happened to the plane, it is time to start treating business aircraft the same as larger airliners. He noted that poor airline service is leading to a proliferation of private charter operations and fractional ownership plans in which numerous individuals buy a "share" of a fleet of planes, usually based on time used.

Jetliner cabins are generally pressurized so that the inside never feels as if it is higher than 8,000 feet regardless

what altitude the plane is flying. At 10,000 feet, the altitude warning horn sounds, and at 14,000 feet passenger oxygen masks drop. The last radio transmission from the aircraft came as it climbed above 14,000 feet, and air traffic radio tapes indicate no horn was sounding and the crew was not affected by hypoxia, altitude sickness. The next effort by controllers to radio the plane was made six minutes and 20 seconds later, with the plane at 36,500 feet. The crew did not reply.

Mitchell Garber, the board's medical officer, said that there is some minor human impairment even at 10,000 feet, but that at 15,000 feet there are reduced physical and mental abilities. At 35,000 feet, a pilot would be incoherent within 12 to 14 seconds without supplemental oxygen, he said.

The plane hit the ground with such force that few of its instruments or parts survived sufficiently to tell investigators what happened. The investigation also was hampered because the plane was not required to have a flight data recorder, and the cockpit voice recorder contains only the last 30 minutes of cockpit sounds. The voice recorder contained no human voices, only engine sound and a constantly blaring altitude warning horn.

Nonetheless, investigators were able to determine that a flow control valve that normally pressurizes the plane was closed. A closed valve alone in the absence of any damage to the fuselage would allow pressure to bleed off over about three minutes.

However, investigators pointed out that one of the crew's troubleshooting duties in a depressurization is to close the valve and turn on an emergency pressurization system. But there is no indication the emergency system was used.

Board staff members said they looked at the possibility the crew failed to turn on the pressurization system, but that was unlikely because radio tapes indicate no early warning horns or crew confusion.

The crew's oxygen masks were plugged into the emergency oxygen system, and the emergency oxygen bottle was depleted, but whether the crew ever wore the masks or the bottle was ever full "could not be determined," they said.



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