By JENNA FRYER

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NASCAR had a real dilemma on its hands with this whole Jeff Gordon mess hanging over the season finale.

History suggested Gordon could have been suspended from Sunday’s race at Homestead-Miami Speedway as punishment for intentionally wrecking Clint Bowyer at Phoenix, sparking a brawl in the garage. That’s the punishment Kyle Busch got a year ago for retaliating against Ron Hornaday Jr. in a Truck Series event at Texas.

But was NASCAR seriously going to sit the four-time champion? From the season finale?

Nope. He instead got a $100,000 fine from NASCAR, which also docked him 25 points in the championship standings.

Maybe NASCAR should have also thanked him for triggering the fight and frenzied final sequence of events that had half the country talking about the series on Monday. Even without that, the penalty was the right call by NASCAR, which walks a fine line between sport and entertainment — and has only itself to blame.

Some viewed Sunday as a black eye for NASCAR, but others were celebrating it as one of the best races of the season. It wasn’t lost on Kevin Harvick, who snapped a 44-race losing streak

with the victory.

“The sport was made on fights. We should have more fights,” he said. “Fights are what made NASCAR what it is.”

NASCAR heard the complaints from fans that drivers had become too corporate, the sport had strayed too far from its rough and tumble roots and scores were no longer settled at the track. The 2009 finale at Homestead was one of those throwback races, and the crowd roared as drivers used their cars to deliver old-school justice.

President Mike Helton said at the time: “We didn’t certainly intend to make it too sterile, but the drivers were afraid to be themselves, and that’s not good.”

So NASCAR relaxed at the start of the next season, using a “Boys, Have At It” policy that allowed the drivers to police themselves.

The boys tested NASCAR just four races in when Carl Edwards waited 153 laps for his crew to fix his car for the sole purpose of getting back on the track at Atlanta to wreck Brad Keselowski. Edwards’ high-speed contact sent Keselowski’s car airborne, and there were immediate calls for Edwards to be suspended.

But doing so would have been the immediate end of the policy, and Edwards instead got off with a mere three races of probation. The boys have been allowed to have at it ever since.

There has been bumping and banging, and Tony Stewart’s threats to wreck each and every driver who blocks him from now until the end of time. There’s an occasional flare-up, an intentional act or two, and NASCAR intervenes when needed.

Then came last November at Texas, when Busch blatantly put Hornaday, a championship contender, into the wall under caution.

Unlike Edwards, he absolutely deserved to be suspended.

Where NASCAR erred was in insisting that Busch had been suspended solely for the Hornaday incident when he had been out of control most of last season and arrogantly behaving as if his talent made him untouchable. In fact, Hornaday had called for Busch to be suspended for that weekend’s Cup race, an option Busch seemed to dismiss in an interview after the accident.

By suspending him the next morning, NASCAR sent a message it was in charge and Busch better start behaving.

Gordon’s decision to wreck Bowyer — he says Bowyer deserved it for a season’s worth of misdeeds — is more like the Edwards incident. Or perhaps more like another incident last season, when Brian Vickers promised retaliation against Matt Kenseth and then rode Kenseth’s back bumper until Kenseth turned into the wall. Vickers got no penalty.

Gordon, however, seemed to have zero regard for others on the track. The wreck also collected Joey Logano and Aric Almirola, championship contender Keselowski had to dodge his way around it and the whole thing was a direct contributor to the last-lap wreck.

NASCAR needed to take action against the crew chiefs, and did by fining Brian Pattie $25,000 for failing to maintain control of Bowyer’s crew and placing Alan Gustafson on probation through the end of the year because he’s responsible for Gordon’s crew.

With that, NASCAR was done with the matter.

“There’s no doubt that a unique set of circumstances combined with a championship battle on the line resulted in raw emotions coming into play,” said NASCAR vice president of competition Robin Pemberton. “We consider the penalties appropriate and those involved understand our decision and we expect them to abide by them.”

It was the appropriate response from NASCAR. Either the series is going to be about immediate paybacks and justice — you know, the stuff that’s got everybody talking and moves the meter — or there’s no such thing as “Boys, Have At It” anymore.

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