

NASCAR INSIDER

COMMENTARY

'06 Media Tour was worth a hill of baked beans

By ALAN TAYS
Cox News Service

Charlotte

After three days of riding buses to race shops and generally being treated a whole lot better than we deserve, a couple hundred of us media clowns — er, correspondents — now face the bleak prospect of having to pay for our own crab puffs.

Not that the 2006 NASCAR Media Tour wasn't productive. We've learned a lot. We learned that Toyota is coming into Nextel Cup in 2007, which some of us already knew. We learned that Michael Waltrip will be a Toyota driver, which, considering his brother Darrell is a Toyota spokesperson, even Inspector Clouseau should have been able to figure out. We learned that NASCAR is very high on its "Car of Tomorrow" and we learned that team owner Felix Sabates thinks it's "a bunch of crap."

This is a good time to note that the official name of the tour is the "NASCAR Nextel Media Tour hosted by Lowe's Motor Speedway." We were asked to use that description whenever we wrote about it, but I confess I did not. Near as I can determine, neither did anyone else other than the hometown Charlotte Observer and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

Actually, most of us did mention the NASCAR and Nextel parts. Lowe's Motor Speedway got short shrift, and that's regrettable. Without them, there is no tour. They've been doing it for 23 years and I'm totally serious when I say they do a spectacular job of what basically is herding cats. Cats follow directions better than us, though.

Sponsorship is what this tour is all about, with sponsor logos prominently displayed at each stop. We even got some sponsor news. M&M's, for instance, isn't just a big sponsor of Elliott Sadler's No. 38 Ford. It's now the "official chocolate of NASCAR." And Combos, another member of the M&M/Mars corporate family, is the new "official cheese-filled snack of NASCAR."

This raises a couple of questions: What other cheese-filled snacks did Combos outbid for the contract with NASCAR? And do other snack fillings get their own categories? Cream? Caramel? Nougat? Lingonberries? As soon as I can persuade my editors to let me investigate this, I promise you'll have answers.

As we were leaving each race shop, public relations people handed us our "media gifts." Ethics being a sensitive topic in the media these days, let me say right away that it is my newspaper's policy to auction off such gifts and donate the proceeds to charity. So I have a suitcase — the first thing we got — full of swag to deposit in my boss's office. To clear my conscience, though, I have a confession that I ate the M&M's. The Combos are still in the suitcase.

I actually saw one of my colleagues try to refuse a gift bag. But the gift-giver looked so shocked — like she was going to get fired or burst into tears or her head was going to explode — that he gave in and took it.

Most of the gifts are the sponsors' products. So when we left Chip Ganassi Racing ("with Felix Sabates"), we were offered 18-packs of Coors Light beer, which sponsors Ganassi's No. 40 car. Knowing I couldn't take it on the plane and probably wouldn't be able to finish it on the bus before the next tour stop, I declined. But when we later got cans of Bush's Baked Beans from the Wood Brothers' shop, my decision appeared foolish.

After last year's tour, a few of us suggested that teams stop giving gifts and instead donate money to charity. We were pleased to see that Hendrick Motorsports did just that. Hopefully more teams will follow suit next year.

Just keep those crab puffs coming.

Alan Tays writes about NASCAR for The Palm Beach Post.



Roush Racing drivers Mark Martin, Matt Kenseth and Greg Biffle (from left) chat during testing sessions last week at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. Martin says he's upbeat about the '06 season.

Back and lovin' it

Mark Martin defers retirement to have more fun

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.

Mark Martin has done his best during testing sessions to put the pessimism of the past behind him, vowing to continue the fun-loving approach that served him so well last year.

Martin is back for an encore season in Roush Racing's No. 6 Ford after his retirement plans were put off a year when Kurt Busch's sudden departure to Penske Racing left a vacancy.

While at NASCAR testing a few weeks ago at Daytona International Speedway, Martin smiled broadly, laughed loudly and seemed quite at ease and optimistic about the upcoming season.

It was a remarkably different approach than he used for much of his career, when he appeared to be miserable despite his successes — 35 wins in Nextel Cup and a series-leading 47 in Busch.

"I tell you what, I had fun last year, which was really cool," Martin said. "It was the best year of my life professionally and personally."

"I just want everybody to make sure that they know that they're talking to a guy that had a blast last year."

It helped that he ran so well. He won the Nextel All-Star Challenge at Charlotte and a points race at Kansas and had 12 top-five and 19 top-10s in the Cup Series. He comfortably made the cut for the Chase for the Nextel Cup and finished fourth in points. In just eight Busch Series starts, he won twice, and he won two IROC races en route to that circuit's season championship.

He said those results mean so much to him that he might allow himself to lapse back into his old ways if he thought he would achieve similar results.

"I'm willing to be miserable if need be in order to have that," he said. "My tendency is to go off on that misery side to try to make sure that we get that performance."

But, he said, "I'm going to fight that a little bit." He said car owner Jack Roush has laid out a plan that calls for Martin to just enjoy himself in his final Cup season, which will be followed by a full-time gig in the Craftsman Truck Series.

"Jack has a strategy that says, 'Don't worry about it. Just go have fun with it this year. The pressure is off, and you might do better than you ever have,'" Martin said. "Boy, that sounds real good to me, but we all know that I'm going to fall over that misery edge as soon as I get close enough to it that I can jump over it."

Roush said his strategy for Martin shouldn't be construed as direct orders.

"I wouldn't presume to give Mark Martin instructions on anything," Roush said. "But I encouraged him to have fun and not lose any sleep over what we're trying to do and see if it might come to him a little easier if he just relaxed."

Roush also said that while Martin appeared to be enjoying himself by maintaining a positive approach throughout the 2005 season, there were times when he was under considerable stress, particularly toward the end of the season.

"As we got into the Chase and had to do all the tests, and he thought about how hard it was to face these race tracks for the last time and thought about what he was going to remember about the race track — the times he won or the times it didn't go so good — there was some anxiety there," Roush said.

"I was just trying to tell him not to be anxious about it, but that was just advice. I certainly wasn't telling him what to do."

Martin said he just can't totally buy into Roush's "take it easy and see how it turns out" advice.

"Doggone it, that's a good strategy," Martin said. "I wish that would work for me."

But no matter how this season turns out or regardless of how his truck racing career goes, he's undoubtedly upbeat about the future, particularly when it involves his driving.

"That's what I live for," he said. "If something were to work out that I wasn't in that truck, you'd catch me at the Saturday night short tracks across the country."

"I am not done racing by any means."

NOTEBOOK

Harvick defers talk of Toyota

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Kevin Harvick, the driver of Richard Childress' flagship No. 29 Chevrolet, has emerged as one of the leading candidates for a Toyota ride in 2007. But Harvick said it's too early to say what he'll do next season.

Harvick, whose contract with Childress expires this season, said he plans to focus on the start of the season, then discuss his future with Childress in April.

"I've been very open with Richard as far as where I sat with my situation," Harvick said. "I'm not in a hurry to do anything."

He said his seven-year relationship with Childress will be a big factor in the decision.

"Obviously, there's a loyalty factor that weighs very heavily with a guy who helped get my career going in the direction that it needed to go in," he said.

Harvick also said he will have to take into consideration the future of Kevin Harvick Inc.

"There are a lot of things that have to come into the equation, and that's part of the equation," he said.

Alternative tests

NASCAR's new limits on on-track testing, which were intended to take away some of the advantages enjoyed by multicar teams, likely will lead to increased use of expensive simulators, wind tunnels and scale-model testing.

The simulation and off-track testing, which the bigger teams can better afford, likely will still give them an advantage when it comes time to race.

"Anything you can do at the shop before you get to the track to better anticipate race-world conditions and what you're going to do for them, the closer you're going to be," crew chief Robert "Bootie" Barker said. "And that requires technology and money."

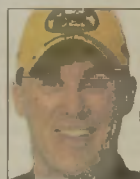
Is Honda coming, too?

There's been widespread speculation in NASCAR about whether one of the current race-winning, multicar teams will make the jump to Toyota sometime soon. Most team owners dismiss the talk, saying they're under contract with their current manufacturers.

Penske Racing South's President Don Miller said his team is signed with Dodge through the end of the 2009 season.

He also said Toyota might not be the only foreign nameplate looking to gain a foothold in NASCAR.

"I don't think Honda will stay away very long if Toyota comes in," he said. "Those guys are terribly competitive. They're going to have an impact." He said Honda and Toyota have strong engineering staffs and are well-prepared for racing in NASCAR.



HARVICK



"I just want everybody to make sure that they know that they're talking to a guy that had a blast last year."

Pedal power

NASCAR driver Kasey Kahne gives us the top five reasons he trains in the offseason with TEAm Lipton, an all-female cycling squad.

1. With cycling, you don't have to rely on a pit crew for maintenance.

2. I like to be surrounded by athletic women.

3. There are usually less crashes on bicycles.

4. I like to rub elbows with Armstrong — Kristin Armstrong, the No. 1 female cyclist, that is.

5. Two-wheeled training is a good build-up to the Daytona 500's four-wheeled race.



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