

Jimmie Johnson celebrates his victory in the Daytona 500.



NASCAR INSIDER

THIS WEEK

Race: Auto Club 500
Where: California Speedway
When: Sunday, 3 p.m. ET
Television: Fox
Defending race winner: Greg Biffle



Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

A weekly State of the Union as NASCAR leaves Daytona and heads to California:

TEMPERATURE'S RISING

A look at who's doing it

Jack Roush's driver development program: Better known as the "Gong Show," Roush's tryout format brings young drivers from the grass-roots level of racing to Martinsville Speedway and Darlington Raceway, two of NASCAR's toughest tracks, for trials by fire.



DARNELL

It seems to work. Erik Darnell, the 2005 Gong Show winner, finished fifth, right behind four veterans, in his debut in Roush's No. 99 Craftsman Truck Series entry at Daytona on Friday. On Saturday, Gong Show finalist Danny O'Quinn steered a Roush Ford to an 18th-place finish after starting eighth in his Busch Series debut. Todd Kluever, the 2004 Gong Show winner, was seventh in the Hershey's Kissables 300 at Daytona, which also was his first Busch race.

Busch Series drivers Stacy Compton and Jon Wood: The two Ford drivers have benefited greatly from car owner Tad Geschickter's decision to merge his organization with the Wood Brothers Nextel Cup team. Compton and Wood, a third-generation Wood racer, both were fast in the Busch season opener at Daytona. Compton was in contention for the victory but was collected in a last-lap crash while running in the top five in his No. 59 Ford. Wood finished fourth in his No. 47.

"We've worked awful hard the last couple of months to get this thing where it is, and I'm pretty pleased with the result," Compton told reporters. "We just have to have a little luck."

Elliott Sadler and Dale Jarrett: The two teammates at Robert Yates Racing started the season strong in their Ford Fusions. Sadler won one of the 150-mile qualifiers at Daytona and finished fourth in the Daytona 500. Jarrett finished 11th in the 500. Both started the season with new crew chiefs — Tommy Baldwin Jr. with Sadler and Richard "Sluggo" Labbe with Jarrett.

"This is a good shot in the arm that we need as a race team," Sadler said after the Daytona 500. "We've got a great leader now. We've got a great bunch of guys. I got the best pit crew on pit road, and I'm going to have a lot of fun driving this car this year."



Cox News Service

Elliott Sadler started the season strong, finishing fourth in the Daytona 500 (above) and winning a qualifying race.

Go WEST

As series heads to California, testing has prepared Cup teams for upcoming downforce tracks

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service
Daytona Beach, Fla.

Even before Matt Kenseth fired up the No. 17 Ford to start the Daytona 500, his crew chief Robbie Reiser already was thinking ahead to Sunday's race at California Speedway.

Actually, his thoughts already were on Las Vegas in three weeks.

Yes, the NASCAR teams had spent the past two weeks trying to run fast on a 2.5-mile track where restrictor plates slow speeds and where crews try to build a car so slick that it'll slip through the air with little drag. But now the focus turns to somewhat shorter ovals like the 2-mile California track and the 1.5-mile Las Vegas Motor Speedway where more downforce, an aerodynamic phenomenon that provides adhesion to the track, is the key to victory.



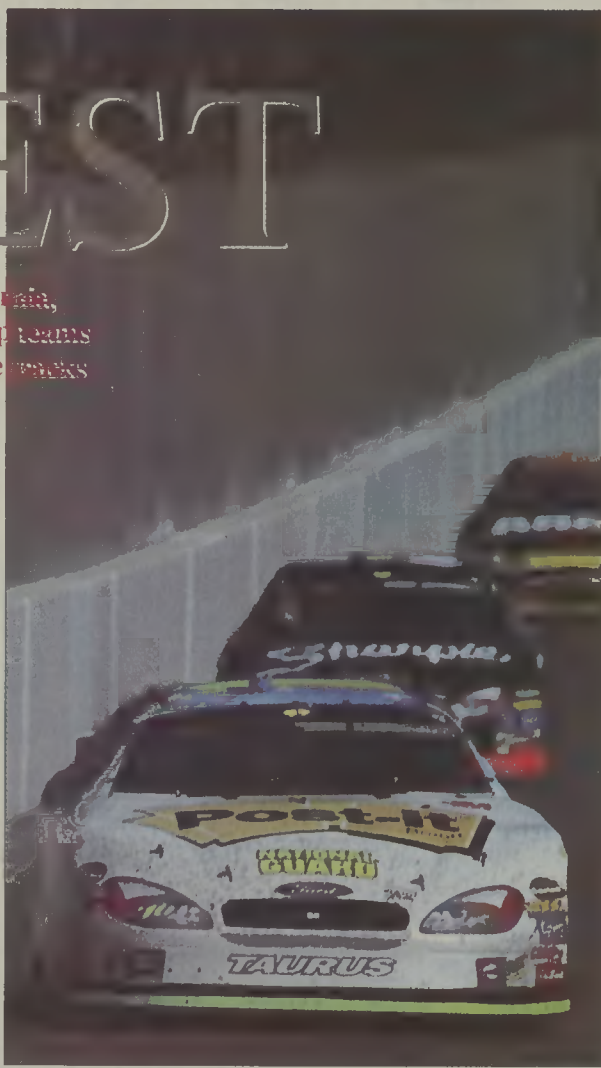
Casey Mears is confident about his prospects at California and other downforce tracks.

"We're thinking about our California and Atlanta cars already," Reiser said last Sunday morning, hours before the start of the Daytona 500. "This race is actually behind us, even though we haven't run it, because all the work for it is already done. It's already in the record books as far as what we're trying to accomplish."

But there will be a change in thinking as he and his crew prepare for a three-race stretch of downforce racing.

"You switch gears a little bit on your thinking," he said, adding that he's confident his team and the other Roush Racing teams can pick up where they left off last fall. Roush won three of the final four races — Carl Edwards at Atlanta and Texas and Greg Biffle at Homestead — on tracks where downforce is important.

"We tested real well at Las Vegas," Reiser said, adding that most of their



NASCAR

Roush Racing teams are proven contenders at tracks where downforce is important. Roush driver Greg Biffle (16) won last year's Auto Club 500 at California Speedway (above).

focus was on adapting to the Ford Fusion body that replaced the Taurus in the off-season. "We'll probably be where we were when the season quit last season."

Casey Mears, who drives a Dodge, also is optimistic about California and the other tracks coming up on the schedule. In last year's final race, at Homestead, he led 75 laps and was in contention to win before a late-race shuffle left him fifth at the finish.

Although he has switched cars within the Chip Ganassi stable, he's confident his No. 42 will run as good as the No. 41 did last year.

"We had a really good test at Vegas," he said. "You still can't wait to get there and let reality set in a lit-

tle bit and see exactly where we're really at. After a couple of long weeks [at Daytona] I'll be ready to get on the downforce tracks. I've been thinking about it quite a bit."

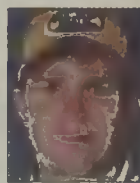
Although the schedule is sprinkled with numerous downforce tracks, Mears points out that it's not smart to rely too much on them during the course of the season.

"A lot of teams tend to throw out the superspeedways and say there's only four of those a year, so let's focus on the downforce tracks. That's good, but at the same time you need to win at all the tracks," he said. "All the points are valuable."

TEMPERATURE'S DROPPING

Things aren't going so

• Scott Riggs: A transmission failure in qualifying for the Daytona 500 set the tone for a miserable Speedweeks. Then problems on a pit stop in his qualifying race put Riggs out of the 500 because the owner points he needed to get in the 500 stayed with the MB2 team he left last season to join Evernham Motorsports.



RIGGS

Besides missing the sport's premier race, Riggs' team now is at a great disadvantage in the points standings. No matter how well he runs this season, it'll be tough to make the Chase for the Nextel Cup. "I hate it, but that's racing, and we'll regroup and go on from here," he said.

• Chad Knaus: Many questioned his decision to leave driver Jimmie Johnson on the track with apparent tire problems in last year's championship-deciding season-finale at Homestead. Johnson blew a tire, wrecked and dropped from second in points to fifth.

Then last week he was caught with a trick device that raised the rear window on the No. 48 Chevrolet during qualifying for the Daytona 500.

It was the latest in a string of infractions that have many in the garage talking more about Knaus' antics than the team's success — 18 victories and eight poles in the past four seasons.

"Every time I turn around, that 48 car gets caught cheating," said veteran car owner Chip Ganassi. Knaus was ejected from all Daytona activities and faces more penalties from NASCAR.



Many are questioning the decisions of Johnson's crew chief Chad Knaus.

• Team owner Larry McClure and his driver Scott Wimmer: McClure's No. 4 Chevrolet was once one of the most feared cars at Daytona International Speedway, and Wimmer's third-place run — in Bill Davis' Dodge in 2004 — was the best Daytona 500 debut ever by a rookie. But McClure and Wimmer missed the starting field this year.

When Michael Waltrip purchased the owner points accumulated last year by Doug Bawel and his driver at the time, Travis Kvapil, that knocked McClure out of the top-35 group that is assured starting spots in Cup races. McClure had been in the Daytona 500 every year since 1984.

Wimmer's 27th-place qualifying effort and his 17th-place finish in his qualifying race weren't good enough to advance, and the team now finds itself already at a great disadvantage just as the season starts.

BY THE NUMBERS

76 Cameras used by NBC in its broadcast of the Daytona 500

50 Career Nextel Cup starts for Carl Edwards (right)

6 Nextel Cup victories at California Speedway by Ford, best among manufacturers



5 Victories by Rick Hendrick in Cup races at California, best among car owners

3 Victories at California by Jeff Gordon (below), best among Cup drivers



Catching up with TONY STEWART

The driver of the No. 14 Home Depot Chevrolet discusses goals, rulings and other things with Cox News Service reporter Rick Minter.

On his career goals: "I have a mental checklist. I've run 22 different types of cars, and I've won in 21 of them. The only thing I haven't won in is a sports car. I won in a monster truck at Talladega. That's from go-karts to winged sprints, you name it. ... That's something I take a lot of pride in. ... I don't care if I win seven NASCAR championships or not. If all your life is going down one path like that, then seven's important because you want to do better than the guy who won six. I am not going to beat Richard Petty's record or Dale Earnhardt's record. I am not going out to say I want to catch Jeff Gordon and win four of them. But Dale Earnhardt and Richard Petty can't say they won an IRL championship or three USAC national divisions in one year. That's something I take pride in. Hopefully, I will make it 22 of 22 types of cars I have run in."

On what makes a good champion: "The champion is the guy who got the most points at the end of the year. There shouldn't be such a thing as a good champion or a bad one. It's a matter of doing what we do."

On his life-long goal of trying to win the Indy 500: "Will I ever get that chance again? Who knows? If, and when, it comes along, will I be at an age where I feel I am not at my peak to go do that? I don't know. I am not going to say I am never going back. I will leave that opportunity open, but right now I don't have the answer to that."



NEXTEL CUP

Following the Daytona 500

- Jimmie Johnson Points: 185
- Casey Mears Points: 170
- Ryan Newman Points: 170
- Elliott Sadler Points: 165
- Tony Stewart Points: 160
- Dale Earnhardt Jr. Points: 152
- Brian Vickers Points: 151
- Clint Bowyer Points: 150
- Ken Schrader Points: 138
- Dale Jarrett Points: 134



Ryan Newman finished third in the Daytona 500 after running near the front of the field for the majority of the afternoon.

Next up: Auto Club 500; California Speedway TV: 3 p.m. ET, Sunday; Fox

BUSCH SERIES

Following the Hershey's Kissables 300

- Tony Stewart Points: 185
- Burney Lamar Points: 170
- Clint Bowyer Points: 170
- Jon Wood Points: 160
- Kevin Harvick Points: 155
- Jason Leffler Points: 150
- Todd Kluever Points: 147
- J.J. Yeley Points: 146
- Reed Sorenson Points: 138
- Mark Green Points: 134



Next up: Stater Bros. 300; California Speedway TV: 6 p.m. ET, Saturday, FX

CRAFTSMAN TRUCK

Following the GM Flex Fuel 250

- Mark Martin Points: 190
- Todd Bodine Points: 175
- Ted Musgrave Points: 170
- Mike Skinner Points: 165
- Jack Sprague Points: 160
- Bobby Hamilton Jr. Points: 151
- Erik Darnell Points: 150
- Rick Crawford Points: 147
- David Reutimann Points: 138
- Kevin Hamlin Points: 135



Mark Martin claimed his second Craftsman Truck Series victory at Daytona.

Next up: Racetracks.com 200; California Speedway TV: 9 p.m. ET, Friday; Speed Channel

What ever happened to

Tommy ELLIS

By Rick Minter / Cox News Service

The 58-year-old Richmond, Va., resident is semi-retired after running 78 Cup and 235 Busch Series races. His biggest success was in Busch, where he won 22 races and the 1988 championship. His favorite tracks: "First and foremost, Daytona. My favorite short track was Martinsville Speedway, without a doubt, and I

liked the Dover mile. It was made for me. I liked the way you raced on it. It was just a big, old short track."

His retirement: "Hardest thing I ever had to do in my life was walk away from it. For the first two or three years, I didn't know if I was going to make it. There were a lot of hard times. I can't even start to

tell you what goes through your mind because you don't know what's in store for you."

His competition: "I remember one time, Jack [Ingram] and I got wrecked up at Martinsville. You're really mad at him that day and at that moment, but the next day you're back over there and you're laughing about it."