

DID YOU KNOW?
Kevin Harvick's victory at Nashville was the eighth time a Nextel Cup regular has won in eight Busch races in 2006.

NASCAR INSIDER

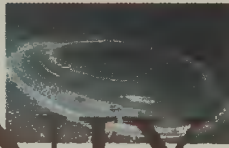
THIS WEEK

Place: Subway Fresh 500
Where: Phoenix International Raceway
When: Saturday 8 p.m. ET
Television: Fox
Defending race winner: Kurt Busch



Rookie Denny Hamlin anticipates ...

A HOT NIGHT IN PHOENIX



By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Perhaps no other driver is looking forward to this weekend's races at Phoenix International Raceway more than Denny Hamlin. Although he's officially a rookie this year, he made seven Nextel Cup starts last year, one of them at Phoenix, where he won the pole and finished 13th. That Phoenix pole made him eligible for this year's Budweiser Shootout at Daytona, which he won. Although the Shootout pays no points, Hamlin still is 14th in the Nextel Cup standings with one top-five and two top-10 finishes. He's second in Busch points with a victory, two poles and six top-10 finishes, including a third-place finish last week at Nashville, where he started from the pole in the Pepsi 300. He said he's looking forward to Phoenix and a lot of other tracks coming up on the schedule. "I think we're definitely performing better than what we expected on mile-and-a-half race tracks, so hopefully we'll be able to bring that to the shorter



Photos by NASCAR

Rookie Denny Hamlin pulls his car into Victory Lane after winning the Bud Shootout, a race he qualified for by winning the pole in last year's fall race at Phoenix International Raceway. Kurt Busch claimed victory in last year's Subway Fresh 500 (above).

tracks as well," he said. "We haven't had a ton of success, but I know Phoenix is a track where we can run well, and it suits my driving style so I'm looking forward to it." The Virginia native said he feels right at home on Phoenix's relatively flat (banking from nine to 11 degrees), odd-shaped, one-mile tri-oval. "It became my favorite track the first time I went there in the Busch car," he said. "It was a track I ran really well at. Every time I go there I seem to get a little better." He said his first Cup points victory could come in Saturday night's Subway Fresh 500. "I definitely think we have a shot at it," he said, adding that he has access to the setup notes generated by his Joe Gibbs Racing teammate, Tony Stewart, who has a victory, three top-fives and five top-10 finishes in eight Cup starts at Phoenix. "We have some good setup notes," Hamlin said. "We had a good top-15, top-10 car last fall. Hopefully, we can go back with that and improve on it."

He's even more confident about his No. 20 Busch Series car, which he'll drive in Friday's Bashas' Supermarkets 200 at Phoenix. "Our [Busch] team is head-over-shoulders better than it was last year," he said. "We're getting better in what we know. It's not necessarily people; it's learning a lot and bringing a lot of stuff over from the Cup shop." He also feels he has improved as a driver. "It's amazing how much better I am versus where I was last year," he said. "In Cup, I don't expect to be anything less than a top-10 car every week. We've run really well every week. We've run in the top 10 every week, we just need to finish it off." Another driver anxious to get going at Phoenix is Carl Edwards, who will be running his first race since Wally Brown replaced Bob Osborne as his crew chief. "We ran really well at Phoenix last year," said Edwards, who had finishes of sixth and seventh. "That should be a good spot for our team."

PHOENIX INTERNATIONAL RACEWAY

Track length: 1 mile
Race length: 312 laps/312 miles (500 kilometers)
Banking in Turns 1, 2: 11 degrees
Banking in Turns 3, 4: 9 degrees
Banking on frontstretch: 3 degrees
Banking on backstretch: 9 degrees
Frontstretch: 1,179 feet
Backstretch: 1,551 feet
Grandstand seating: 76,812
Qualifying record: Ryan Newman, Dodge; 135.954 mph; Nov. 5, 2004
Race record: Tony Stewart, Pontiac; 118.132 mph; Nov. 7, 1998

What ever happened to ...

Johnny ALLEN

From 1955-1967, Johnny Allen made 173 starts in the division now known as Nextel Cup. He won twice, once at Bowman-Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem, N.C., and again in the inaugural race at Bristol Motor Speedway, when he finished the race in relief of Jack Smith. He seemed to thrive on new tracks, as evidenced by his runner-up run in the inaugural Atlanta 500 at Atlanta Motor Speedway where three years later he was involved in one of the most spectacular wrecks in the history of the track. Allen, 72, is retired as owner of a paint and body shop supply company and divides his time between his hometown of Greenville, S.C., and his beach house in Daytona Beach, Fla. On his favorite track: "It had to be Darlington, although it wasn't that good to me. It was a challenge to be able to conquer it. I wanted so bad to be able to win it, and I loved racing it, running inches from the wall, hard passing, fast speeds. It had all the ingredients of a real challenge. I liked Daytona, too, but it was kind of boring."

On his crash at Atlanta in 1963 in which his car flew out of the track: "I was down on the very bottom groove when I blew the right front tire. The car just shot straight up the race track and hit the guardrail. It broke through the top rail and the car stood up on its nose tearing up the guardrail. ... It finally got a good grip and just flew out of the race track. It flipped over once going out and ended up on its wheels. It seemed like forever before it stopped." On the lasting impact of the '63 wreck: "That pretty much ended my career in Grand Nationals. It put the car owner [Ratus Waters] out of business. It totally demolished his only car. I broke my foot and my hand and my nose, but I was very fortunate to not get hurt any worse." On the changes in racing since he retired: "Racing's racing, wherever you're running. You're out there to win and beat your fellow man and master the car and deal with the track conditions. That doesn't change. There's more politics and all that today. I wouldn't do good in today's racing business. But the money's good. In fact, I'd say most professional athletes today are overpaid."

- Rick Minter

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

- 0 Nextel Cup races won from the pole at Phoenix International Raceway
- 5 Car-owner victories at Phoenix by Jack Roush, tops among owners
- 11 Different pole winners in the past 13 Cup races at Phoenix
- 12 Victories by Ford drivers in 19 Cup races at Phoenix
- 13 Top-10 finishes by Mark Martin (left) at Phoenix, tops among all drivers



Rick Minter's

OBSERVATIONS

Four major questions worth answering as NASCAR heads to Phoenix:

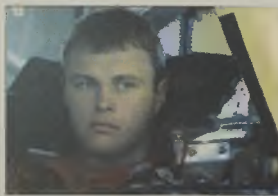
1. Why would Nextel Cup regulars want to compete on the Busch Series?
Busch Series points leader Kevin Harvick says he can answer that with a question of his own. "Would you rather be on a race track or sitting in your motorhome watching a race and trying to find something to do ... bored to death?" he asked last week at Nashville Superspeedway, where he was racing while most of his peers rested on Easter weekend. "I enjoy being at the track and would be here anyway with my cars if I wasn't driving." "I know there's talk that a lot of guys don't like the Cup guys in the Busch Series, but ... I don't think it's an issue of who's racing in the Busch Series until we start sending quality cars home." Harvick is atop the Busch Series standings despite driving different cars for different owners and with different sponsors. But for all but one race for the remainder of the season, he'll be in Richard Childress' No. 21 Chevrolet, which he drove to victory in Saturday's Pepsi 300 at Nashville. On the Cup side, he's ninth in points, 204 points behind leader Jimmie Johnson. "Right now, life is good," Harvick said following his 18th career Busch Series victory. Trailing Harvick in the Busch standings are fellow Cup drivers Denny Hamlin, Clint Bowyer, J.J. Yeley and Carl Edwards.
2. Just exactly when should a driver, especially a young one, take it easy in a race, rather than stand on the gas pedal every lap?
Carl Edwards said he's in the process of figuring that out for himself. Edwards, who finished the 2005 season tied for second in Nextel Cup points, enters this weekend's race at Phoenix 22nd in the standings and with a new crew chief, Wally Brown. His car has been fast every week this season, but the results don't show it. "And why is that?" "I don't think we need to be trying as hard," he said, pointing out that he was too aggressive too early in races at Atlanta, Daytona and Texas and wasted chances for good finishes. "I think that if we could calm down a little bit that we'd be awesome," he said. "This is all still pretty new, and you have to go through all of it to learn everything. I'm learning a lot, even through this bad stuff."
3. Is there a place in NASCAR for public pit-road confrontations between drivers' spouses or girlfriends or girlfriends?
The consensus in the garage is "No." The question arose after a pit-road confrontation two weeks ago at Texas Motor Speedway between Greg Biffle's girlfriend, Nicole Lunders, and Eva Bryan, Busch's fiancée, after the two drivers wrecked on the track. Television cameras showed Lunders in Busch's pit area, apparently scolding Bryan. "If I was Greg Biffle, I'd have been pretty irate when I got home and there'd have been a pretty serious conversation [with Lunders]," Kevin Harvick said. "I thought it was pretty embarrassing, and I think I would have been pretty embarrassed if I was him. If you leave it between the drivers, it gets handled between the drivers." Harvick's wife, DeLana, agreed. "There's absolutely no reason to confront another spouse," she said. "They absolutely have nothing to do with what happened on the track, period. It's inappropriate and it's unacceptable." But DeLana did acknowledge that emotions often run high at the track. "It's hard to hold it in," she said. "I understand the knee-jerk reaction, but you just have to hold it in a little bit, and that's not always easy."
4. As the Nextel Cup season gets in full swing, which driver will emerge to add his name on the list of likely contenders for a berth in the championship-deciding, season-ending, 10-race Chase for the Nextel Cup?
Kyle Busch is looking like one to watch when the championship field is cut to 10 following the Sept. 9 run at Richmond. After seven races, he's seventh in the standings, 113 points behind his Hendrick Motorsports teammate Jimmie Johnson, who leads the standings. Busch has two top-fives and four top-10 finishes and clearly is pleased with his performance. "It's been good just being able to run as good as we have," Busch said. "But I'm looking more toward the middle of the year and getting in the Chase." "Right now, we're trying to keep things working like they are and stay with in the top 10 and have that opportunity [to be a part of the Chase]," Busch said.



Kevin Harvick won Saturday's Pepsi 300.

Catching up with ...

Travis KVAPIL



Travis Kvapil, who drives the No. 32 Tide/Downy Chevrolet, is 40th in the standings. His average finish is 33.4 in five starts. (He failed to qualify at Atlanta and California.)

Travis Kvapil, a second-year driver in Nextel Cup, drives the No. 32 PPI Motorsports Chevrolet for a single-car team owned by Cal Wells and based in Hickory, N.C. Kvapil finished 33rd in the 2005 Nextel Cup championship standings while driving the No. 77 Dodge owned by Doug Bawel. The 2003 NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series champion, Kvapil is 40th in points entering Saturday night's Subway Fresh 500 at Phoenix International Raceway. He took a few moments to answer some questions from Cox News Service writer Rick Minter.

Q: How do you feel about racing at Phoenix?
A: "I'm looking forward to it. It's a mile race track, but it's kind of back to short-track racing. It takes a lot of the aero and horsepower out of the equation. It's back to just getting our car to handle and having the right springs and shocks under the car and the driver doing a good job. I had a decent run there last fall. I'm looking forward to getting back to it."
Q: How do you feel about Talladega and restrictor-plate racing, in general?
A: "I haven't had the greatest success, but I haven't been that bad. A lot of it is how you approach the day. For me, in the past I've been one of those guys that goes into the back and just sort of rides it out. And when it's time to go at the end, I try to make a run." "It has been successful for me in the fact that I haven't got torn up too much and have been able to stay out of the big wrecks. It's definitely a lot less stressful. A lot of times there's a big wreck and it's out of

control, and you can get caught up in someone else's doing. But at the same time, maybe you don't need to be putting yourself in a situation where you're in the middle of a 20-car pack. It's up to you how you want to race there."
Q: What's the biggest difference in single vs. multi-car teams?
A: "Probably the biggest thing is there's not a big chain of command. There's one or two people in management, and if you want to make changes or get the real scoop on the story, you know who to go to. In the multi-car teams, it just seems like there's a lot of managers and a lot of people running the show."
Q: How is it working with new crew chief Gary Putnam?
A: "I'm excited about it. James [Ince] did a great job for us getting us to this point. But we just didn't have speed and we had struggled on Fridays. So we had to make a change. I think Gary is going to be a good guy to plug in there. He's been with the team since January. The guys all really like him. He's a calm, level-headed guy. And he's done it before. I think it's going to be a good change."
Q: What do you like on TV?
A: "The only show that I religiously watch is '24' Monday nights on Fox. That's the only one I really like."

STANDINGS

NEXTEL CUP	
Following the Samsung/Radio Shack 500	
1. Jimmie Johnson	Tony Stewart
1,063; previous: 1	holds the race record at Phoenix (118,132 mph), which he set Nov. 7, 1999
2. Matt Kenseth	Cup next up: Subway Fresh 500; Phoenix International Raceway; TV: 8 p.m. ET, Saturday; Fox
1,048; previous: 3	Busch next up: Bashas' Supermarkets 200; Phoenix International Raceway
3. Kasey Kahne	TV: 8:30 p.m. ET, Friday; FX
1,017; previous: 2	Truck next up: Dodge Ram Tough 200; Gateway Int. Raceway; TV: 8 p.m. ET, April 29; Speed Channel
4. Mark Martin	
1,017; previous: 2	
5. Tony Stewart	
966; previous: 8	
6. Dale Earnhardt Jr.	
951; previous: 6	
7. Kyle Busch	
950; previous: 5	
8. Jeff Gordon	
911; previous: 7	
9. Kevin Harvick	
859; previous: 12	
10. Casey Mears	
845; previous: 10	

BUSCH SERIES

1. Kevin Harvick	1,284; previous: 1
2. Denny Hamlin	1,128; previous: 2
3. Clint Bowyer	1,075; previous: 3
4. J.J. Yeley	1,028; previous: 4
5. Carl Edwards	963; previous: 11

TRUCK SERIES

1. Mark Martin	720; previous: 1
2. Ted Musgrave	665; previous: 3
3. Todd Bodine	662; previous: 2
4. David Reutimann	576; previous: 4
5. David Starr	556; previous: 13