

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Richard Petty holds the Daytona record for most wins (10), most top-five finishes (28) and most top-10 finishes (37).

# NASCAR INSIDER

**THIS WEEK**

Race: Pepsi 400  
Where: Daytona International Speedway  
When: Saturday, 7:30 p.m. ET  
Television: Fox  
Defending race winner: Tony Stewart



**Jimmie Johnson' No. 48 Chevrolet** rolls into Victory Lane after the Hendrick Motorsports driver won the season's first points event, the Daytona 500. Johnson holds the top spot in the standings as the Cup circuit returns to Daytona for the Pepsi 400.



Photos by BITA HONARVAR / Cox News Service



## PLATE PERFORMER

**Johnson returns to Daytona, where he looks to extend streak of restrictor-plate victories**

By RICK MINTER  
Cox News Service

Atlanta As the Nextel Cup circuit returns to Daytona International Speedway for the traditional start of the second half of the season, Jimmie Johnson is atop the points standings, just like he was when the series left the beach in February.

And it's a pretty safe bet that his Hendrick Motorsports team — and his teammates — will pad their points totals during Saturday's Pepsi 400.

Hendrick seems to have replaced Dale Earnhardt Inc. as the dominant race team at Daytona and Talladega, the two tracks where restrictor plates are used to slow speeds. The track also requires cars to have special engineering, to wring power from the air-starved engines, and bodies that can deal with the track's aerodynamics.

Hendrick's drivers have won three of the past four Daytona races. They have 10 victories in all, one behind Petty Enterprises and four behind the Wood Brothers on the all-time list. Hendrick has won two of the past three Cup races at Talladega and seven overall, which is second behind Richard Childress, who has nine.

Johnson, who has won both restrictor-plate races this season, told reporters at Infineon Raceway last week that he's confident he can make it three in a

row.

"I feel very good about my road racing program, but I feel even more comfortable about our plate program," he said. "I know it's strong. I've won [at Daytona] at the 500 and looking forward to coming back; really excited to go back."

Also in Hendrick's favor is the fact that one of his other drivers, six-time Daytona winner Jeff Gordon, enters the Pepsi 400 with plenty of momentum after snapping a season-long losing streak with a victory last week at Infineon Raceway.

Dale Earnhardt Jr., whose DEI team had the best restrictor-plate program for several seasons before Hendrick moved to the head of the pack, acknowledged that his team is in a catch-up mode. But he said the part he plays is simple.

"I just get in it and tell them whether it's slow or fast," he said at Infineon last week. "I don't really know what they change to make it better. We've got some gans to make at the plate tracks."

Kasey Kahne, who has driven his No. 9 Dodge to victory four times this season on intermediate-sized tracks, said he believes his team also is capable of winning with restricted engines.

He said he considers his team's restrictor-plate program "pretty good."

He said he had a good car at Talladega this spring but never really got to show it.

"Talladega was pretty disappointing," he said. "We got in that big wreck on Lap 8 when they tried to go five or six wide. We just got in a wreck and did-

n't really get to see what we had at Talladega, but I know at Daytona the car was handling perfect all day long."

"We ended up 11th with a car that could have been in the top six or seven. ... I feel like [car owner Ray Evernham] has put a lot behind our restrictor-plate stuff. The engine shop has stepped up and our cars are good. We just need to keep working on more horsepower."

**DAYTONA INTERNATIONAL SPEEDWAY**

**Track length:** 2.5 miles  
**Race length:** 160 laps/400 miles  
**Banking in corners:** 31 degrees  
**Banking on straights:** 3 degrees  
**Banking on tri-oval:** 18 degrees  
**Frontstretch:** 3,800 feet  
**Backstretch:** 3,055 feet  
**Grandstand seating:** 168,000  
**First race:** Feb. 22, 1959; Daytona 500  
**Qualifying record:** Bill Elliott, Ford, 210.364 mph; Feb. 9, 1987  
**Race record (400 miles):** Bobby Allison, Mercury, 173.473 mph; July 4, 1980

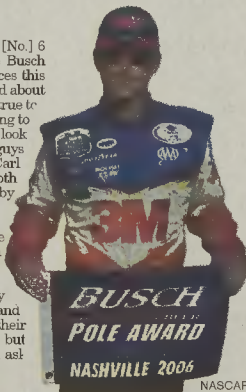
Jack's real big on if you can finish 15th, finish 15th, especially if you're going to wreck trying to run 12th. Fortunately we've been pretty good about that, but we did have some bad luck at the beginning of the year — getting caught up in wrecks that weren't really our fault. Obviously when as a team you're struggling and not running up front in these races, it's kind of like if you swim with sharks, you're going to get eaten."

**Q. What are your future career plans?**  
**A.** "We're going to be full-time in the [No.] 6 car in Nextel Cup and full-time in the Busch Series. We're going to run seven Cup races this year, starting with Chicago. I'm so excited about that because not only is it a dream come true to run a Nextel Cup race, but I think it's going to help our Busch program so much. If you look at what doing double duty has done for guys like Kevin Harvick, Greg Biffle and Carl Edwards and Denny Hamlin this year, both programs seem to benefit so much more from running both."

**Q. Is it intimidating for you as a rookie to ask for help from established veteran teammates like Mark Martin and Matt Kenseth?**

**A.** "They're always very open. The only concern I have with that is I understand those guys are busy. They're working on their cars. I try not to harass them too much, but I'm definitely not afraid to walk up and ask them something."

**Todd Kluever won the pole for the Federated Auto Parts 300 Busch race at Nashville Superspeedway.**



## Catching up with ... Todd Kluever

Todd Kluever of Sun Prairie, Wis., drives the No. 06 Roush Racing Ford in NASCAR's Busch Series. He's a graduate of Roush's "Gong Show" tryouts and is set to take over the No. 6 Ford driven by Mark Martin in Nextel Cup. Kluever plans to make his Nextel Cup debut at Chicagoland Speedway next week in a sixth Roush Racing entry, then replace the retiring Martin next year. He recently spoke with Cox News Service reporter Rick Minter.

**Q. What has your season been like so far?**  
**A.** "We've been up and down. The best thing that's helped us so far has been that test at Charlotte [after the track was repaved]. We're really grown together as a team since then. ... At Dover, we didn't have a very good car and we finished 18th. At the beginning of the year, if we didn't have a very good car, we'd have finished 35th, so we're slowly getting there."

**Q. Do you feel pressure to not wreck cars?**  
**A.** "[Team owner Jack Roush] always tells me that he's never more proud of me than when I take a 20th-place car and finish 20th with it

**NUMERICALLY SPEAKING**

**501** Points separating Jimmie Johnson, who is atop the Nextel Cup standings, and Denny Hamlin, who is 11th.

**151** Most laps led in a 400-mile race at Daytona International Speedway (Tony Stewart in 2005).

**Tony Stewart** (right) celebrates his victory in last year's Pepsi 400.



**60** Most lead changes in a Cup race at Daytona International Speedway (Feb. 17, 1974).

**0** Fewest caution laps in a Cup race at Daytona (12 times, most recently on Feb. 11, 1971).

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