

**NASCAR QUIZ**

Q: Who is the winningest car owner at Chicagoland Speedway?  
A: Richard Childress

# NASCAR INSIDER

**THIS WEEK**

Race: USG Sheetrock 400  
Where: Chicagoland Speedway  
When: Sunday, 3 p.m. ET  
Television: TNT  
Defending race winner: Dale Earnhardt Jr.



## Take me to CHICAGO



Aging asphalt and unique shape make Chicagoland Speedway a fun place to race

By RICK MINTER  
Cox News Service

Atlanta  
Chicagoland Speedway in Joblet, Ill., is one of the tracks often referred to as a "cookie-cutter" track because its 1.5-mile racing surface is so similar to other mile-and-a-half tracks on the NASCAR circuit. But according to drivers like Ryan Newman, who won the 400-mile race at Chicagoland in 2003, it's altogether different than other tracks of the same length.

"It's kind of unique in the shape of the backstretch and the frontstretch," Newman said, adding that as the pavement weathers, it's also becoming a much better place to race than it was in 2001 when the Cup circuit ran there for the first time.

"The asphalt's aging is going to make it much more conducive to getting multiple grooves and pass easier," he said. "The way the aerodynamics are on the race cars right now, it'll be easier with multiple lanes."

Kevin Harvick, who won the first two Cup races at Chicagoland, seems to have figured out the track better than anyone else.

"Chicago has been very good to us, and I think that comes from the very first test we had there," he said. "Every time we've gone back, we've built on that and we've run well and been competitive, and that's what we have to do."

Dale Earnhardt Jr., who got his only victory at Chicagoland last year with interim crew chief Steve Hmiel leading his team, admits that before last year's race, the odds of him returning this year as defending champion were pretty long. He'd struggled throughout the first half of 2005 after a major crew shake-up at his Dale Earnhardt Inc. team.

"We didn't think we'd be saying [defending champion]," he said. "It's pretty exciting, a pretty good feeling. I hope that

[current crew chief] Tony [Eury] Jr. talks to Steve Hmiel.

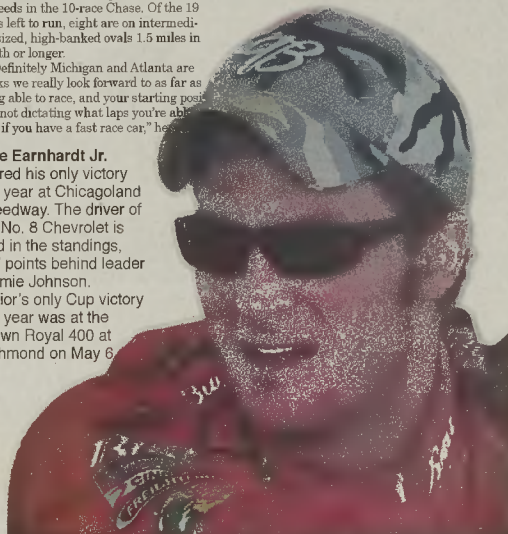
"We really learned a lot. Steve and I had a great setup there last year, and I hope we go with something sort of similar to that because Steve and I really had a great handling car and had it really dialed in."

"Hopefully, Tony Jr. can just enhance that package a little bit and we'll be great."

Newman said Chicagoland, like the other tracks similar to it, are fun places to race. They're also critical in the upcoming nine races that will determine who makes the cut for the season-ending Chase for the Nextel Cup, as well as who succeeds in the 10-race Chase. Of the 19 races left to run, eight are on intermediate-sized, high-banked ovals 1.5 miles in length or longer.

"Definitely Michigan and Atlanta are tracks we really look forward to as far as being able to race, and your starting position not dictating what laps you're able to lead if you have a fast race car," he said.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. scored his only victory last year at Chicagoland Speedway. The driver of the No. 8 Chevrolet is third in the standings, 267 points behind leader Jimmie Johnson. Junior's only Cup victory this year was at the Crown Royal 400 at Richmond on May 6.



NASCAR

**CHICAGOLAND SPEEDWAY**

Track length: 1.5 miles  
Race length: 267 laps/400 miles  
Banking in turns: 18 degrees  
Banking on backstretch: 5 degrees  
Banking on tri-oval: 11 degrees  
Frontstretch: 2,400 feet  
Backstretch: 1,700 feet  
Grandstand seating: 75,000  
First race: July 15, 2001; Tropicana 400  
Qualifying record: Jimmie Johnson, Chevrolet, 188.147 mph; July 8, 2005  
Race record: Kevin Harvick, Chevrolet, 136.832 mph; July 14, 2002

**Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS**

Here are some key storylines this week heading to Chicagoland

**Racing can be a bit like fishing**

It can be difficult at times to get Ryan Newman to volunteer a lot of information about his racing, but if the questions include references to his hobbies — fishing and antique cars — he's quite quotable.

During a teleconference last week, he was asked to compare his 2006 season to a fishing trip.

"It definitely rained at some point," he said. "I'd say a few times we've caught a couple of fish, no real big fish but a couple of keepers. We've had to look really hard for the fish. The fish finder tells us they're there, but they're not biting. It looks like the moon phase is coming in, and they should start biting pretty soon."

"So why weren't the fish biting?"

"In fishing terms, at the beginning of the year we were throwing the wrong lure. It's hard to get the fish to bite if you're throwing the wrong lure. Once we got the right lure on, you've got to throw it in the right spot, and we're finally getting around to doing that."

"The fish are there and they're starting to bite, which is what I was alluding to as far as the moon phase changes. The bottom line is we were trying to fish, but we weren't fishing really hard at the beginning of the season."

Newman finished 11th in Saturday's Pepsi 400 and remains 17th in points but shaved 27 points off the margin from 10th place. He's now 188 points out of the final transfer spot for the Chase for the Nextel Cup.



NEWMAN

**Drivers critical of fire compound**

Some of the most critical elements of a good-driving race car are the four tires that provide the connection from the car to the track. That fact was never more evident than during Friday's Busch Series race at Daytona International Speedway. There was a minimum of passing — Dale Earnhardt Jr. took the lead on Lap 16 and led the rest of the way.

Earnhardt Jr. and third-finishing Kevin Harvick blamed the lack of passing on the poor handling of the cars that resulted from the extremely hard tire compound Goodyear picked for the race.

Harvick called the Winn-Dixie 250 "a pathetic show of racing."

"The cars are usually fun to drive but they were a handful," he said.

Said Earnhardt Jr.: "I thought I had a flat tire, the car was so loose."

Goodyear officials said safety of the drivers led to the selection of the harder tire. They said a softer compound likely wouldn't have withstood the pressures of a long run on Daytona's worn asphalt.

**Changes ahead in Chase formula**

Look for NASCAR to tweak the formula for the Chase for the Nextel Cup in the off-season. NASCAR Chairman Brian France said as much last week. Among the issues being studied are whether 10 is the right number of drivers in the Chase and whether the 400-point threshold — any driver who finishes the first 26 races within 400 points of the leader gets in the Chase — needs to be raised to get more drivers into the championship hunt. France also said he'll consider giving race winners during the Chase more points. And there's a remote possibility of adjusting the makeup of the 10 tracks that host the final races.

France summed up the possible changes by saying they are "various things we think will build what we're hoping for, which are big moments and a bigger stage for the drivers. That's what the Chase has always been about. It's about showcasing their skills."

**Points battle heating up**

A somewhat unexpected bonus to the Chase for the Nextel Cup is the drama created by the points battle in the mid-summer races leading up to the Sept. 9 race at Richmond International Raceway, the final event before the start of the 10-race run to the title.

If Saturday's Pepsi 400 is an indicator, the upcoming nine races will see pressure-packed swapping of positions in the points standings.

At Daytona, Tony Stewart, who led 86 laps in winning the Pepsi 400 for the second straight year, rebounded from several disappointing weeks to move from seventh to fifth in the standings. He said he expects points movements like that to be a weekly occurrence from here on out.

"With the group of guys that are in the top 10 right now and the guys that are just outside the top 10, it's not going to be surprising at all to see them jumping around from week to week," he said. "There are a lot of teams that are running good right now, and on any given day you can have two or three of those teams have a really good day and two or three that just have an average day and you'll see the points jump up and down."

Catching up with ...  
**Robbie Loomis**

After a long career as a crew chief (his last stint was with Jeff Gordon and the No. 24 Chevrolet), Robbie Loomis has returned to one of his previous employers, Petty Enterprises, where he now serves as executive vice president of race operations. In his new position, Loomis oversees the preparation of the No. 43 Dodge driven by Bobby Labonte and the No. 45 Dodge of Kyle Petty. Loomis recently spoke to Cox News Service reporter Rick Minter.

Q: How would you sum up your season to date?  
A: "Competition-wise, we're pretty happy with Bobby's performance. We're not happy with being 25th in points. We feel like we're an eighth- to 15th-place team. For Petty Enterprises as a whole, the big thing for us is getting more sponsorship and more funding so we can go forward."

Q: How does your new job compare to being a crew chief?  
A: "I was definitely ready for a change, and it's been a welcome change. I miss it a little bit on race day. I miss the competitiveness of being directly connected with that one car. I miss what aggravated me, which was that 110 percent focus to that car for that weekend."

"This year at Dover I wasn't even at the track on Friday. I was

meeting with sponsors. But once I got into the meetings, I was enjoying it. I've always been kind of a relationship-type of guy, so I think I'm working into fitting into more of my calling — bigger picture stuff to make Petty Enterprises healthier for years to come."

Q: How do you relax away from the track?  
A: "I love the ocean and the beach. And I like to golf, but I'm about a nine- or 12-hole golfer. I don't like 18. It takes too long, and I don't have the patience for it."

"Mainly, I like to sit on the balcony, look at the ocean and spend time with my family. That's the most relaxing thing."

Q: What's the last good book you read or the last good movie you watched?  
A: "I read 'Your Best Life Now' by Joel Osteen. That was a really good book. I haven't watched a movie in quite a while, but I'm going to see 'Click.' A friend of mine told me that was a good movie."

Robbie Loomis oversees the preparation of the No. 43 and No. 45 Dodges for Petty Enterprises.



Cox News Service

**STANDINGS**

**NEXTEL CUP**

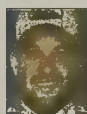
Following the Pepsi 400

- Jimmie Johnson, 2,501; previous: 1
- Matt Kenseth, 2,493; previous: 2
- Dale Earnhardt Jr., 2,234; previous: 5
- Kasey Kahne, 2,209; previous: 3
- Tony Stewart, 2,202; previous: 7
- Mark Martin, 2,177; previous: 4
- Jeff Burton, 2,152; previous: 6
- Kyle Busch, 2,095; previous: 12
- Kevin Harvick, 2,088; previous: 10

**Cup next up:** USG Sheetrock 400, Chicagoland Speedway  
TV: 3 p.m. ET, Sunday, TNT

**Busch next up:** USG Durock 300, Chicagoland Speedway  
TV: 4 p.m. ET, Saturday, TNT

**Truck next up:** Built Ford Tough 225, Kentucky Speedway  
TV: 8 p.m. ET, Saturday, Speed Channel



Tony Stewart won the Pepsi 400 at Daytona

**BUSCH SERIES**

- Kevin Harvick, 2,912; previous: 1
- Carl Edwards, 2,424; previous: 3
- Clint Bowyer, 2,389; previous: 4
- Denny Hamlin, 2,381; previous: 2
- J.J. Yeley, 2,360; previous: 5

**TRUCK SERIES**

- Todd Bodine, 1,909; previous: 1
- David Reutimann, 1,771; previous: 2
- Johnny Benson, 1,766; previous: 3
- Ted Musgrave, 1,657; previous: 4
- Rick Crawford, 1,636; previous: 8

**NUMERICALLY SPEAKING**

**28**

Most drivers finishing on the lead lap in a Cup race at Chicagoland Speedway (2005).

**11**

Fewest drivers finishing on the lead lap in a Cup race at Chicagoland (2003).

**7**

Drivers within 400 points of Jimmie Johnson, who remains atop the standings despite a wreck in the Pepsi 400 at Daytona.

**4**

Most wins by a manufacturer at Chicagoland (Chevrolet).

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