

NASCAR QUIZ

Q: Which manufacturer has the most victories at Watkins Glen?
A: Chevrolet (12)

NASCAR INSIDER

NEXT RACE

Race: AMD at The Glen
Where: Watkins Glen International
When: 1 p.m. ET Sunday
Television: NBC
Defending race winner: Tony Stewart



Tony Stewart's experience has made him a ...

ROAD WARRIOR

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Atlanta
I recent performances are any indication, it wouldn't be wise to bet against Tony Stewart this weekend at Watkins Glen International.

He enters Sunday's AMD at The Glen, a 90-lap race run on the 11-turn, 2.45-mile course, having won the past two races and three out of the past four there. He's also quite adept at Infineon Raceway, the other road course on the Nextel Cup circuit.

His two victories there, including one last year, give him five road-course wins in 15 career starts, and he has four other top-10 finishes on road courses.

Although Stewart came through the ranks driving sprint and open-wheel cars on oval tracks, he credits his early years in go-carts with helping him adapt to tracks that require turning right and left.

"As far as full-size cars, you didn't see a lot of road racing in my background, [but] the fact that I did race go-carts taught me a lot about road-course racing," Stewart said during a teleconference last week. "It was just a matter of learning and adapting to a 3,400-pound car on a road course."

He said the cars he drove didn't require him to shift gears, so that was something to which he had to adjust.

"It just took awhile learning what to do, shifting gears to figure out what we had to do to be fast," he said.

But like races at every other type of track, no matter how talented the driver, it takes a well-prepared car to win. And for Stewart, that's the responsibility of crew chief Greg Zipadelli, who has led Stewart's crew throughout his Cup career. Zipadelli, speaking on the same teleconference with Stewart, said he and his crew put a lot of effort into their road-racing program.

"We worked really hard two years ago and really spent some time and put ourselves out on a limb, bought some new cars and did a lot of things I didn't do the first couple of years," he said. "You know, just made some gains, made our cars a lot better. With that, that it's made Tony Stewart a lot better, and vice versa."

"Him being better has let me make my cars better," Zipadelli



said Stewart's skills and focus give him an advantage at all tracks, but especially road courses.

"The person that wins a lot of these road races is usually the person that makes the least amount of mistakes," he said. "So that goes back to that level of concentration and focus."

And, Zipadelli said, Stewart is open-minded about the car's setup and talented enough to adapt to new combinations of shocks and springs. That allows the crew to try new tricks and quickly abandon those that aren't producing the desired results.

"We've been together eight years, [and] I think he's looked at the setup sheet two or three times," Zipadelli said.

"He doesn't care what's in there. He gives you input, you go on and you do your stuff. ... His open-mindedness and the ability to just go out and drive and give you good feedback and adapt to what you give him, I think, makes him a big part of what he is."

An eighth-place finish at Indianapolis lifted Tony Stewart to ninth in the Nextel Cup standings. Sunday's performance marked the 11th top-10 finish for Stewart in 2006.



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WATKINS GLEN INTERNATIONAL

Track length: 2.45 miles
Race length: 90 laps / 220.5 miles
Road course: 11 turns
First Race: Aug. 6, 1957; The Glen
Qualifying record: Jeff Gordon, Chevrolet, 124.580 mph; Aug. 8, 2003
Race record: Mark Martin, Ford; 103.300 mph; Aug. 13, 1995

Catching up with ...

Chad Knaus

Chad Knaus, the only crew chief Jimmie Johnson has had since he joined the Nextel Cup circuit, recently signed a contract extension with his Hendrick Motorsports team that carries him through the 2010 season. His contract period is the same of Johnson and sponsor Lowe's. Knaus recently visited with members of the media, including Rick Minter of Cox News Service.

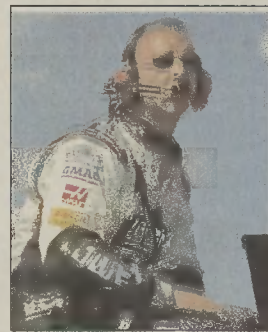
Q: Was it always your intention to stay with Hendrick Motorsports?

A: Absolutely ... I have had every intention to stay at [Hendrick Motorsports]. I love Mr. Hendrick. He is a great friend and mentor of mine. He is the guy I have built quite a relationship with. He has turned me into a great adult and helped me become a great leader. I owe that to him to at least give him four more years.

Q: How is your relationship with Jimmie Johnson?

A: We have a friendship that goes way beyond what happens at the race track. He's a guy that I can grab by the collar and have a serious talk with, and it goes both ways.

If he's got a problem with something I'm doing, he'll come and pull me aside and



Chad Knaus has been Jimmie Johnson's crew chief since the driver's start in Cup competition.

we'll talk about it. That's something a lot of these guys don't have. They're intimidated by the crew chief or by the driver, and the communication level isn't as deep as what we have. ... I'd be silly if I wanted to go and get some other driver. Obviously, there are some things about Jimmie that I don't like, and there are things about myself that he doesn't like. But when you've got 80 percent of what you like in one person, why would you change it to find that other 20 percent when you're probably not going to find it

Q: Will crew chiefs begin to retire earlier than they have been?

A: Oh, I hope so. Being a crew chief is a wonderful job. I love it, and there's nothing else I could do, to be honest with you, because I don't know anything else. But it is painful. You go 36 weeks and you've got 75 guys back at the shop that you try to keep happy, and you've got one guy on vacation and the next guy is sick and the other guy has to take his kid to school. Then you come to the race track and you've got to worry about all the stuff at the track. It's stressful, no doubt about it, but I love it. I hope that when I'm 40 or 41 years old, I can scale back a little bit, but if not, I'll just keep being a crew chief and hopefully be winning championships.

Q: Have you been approached about a career in television?

A: TV is fun. I enjoy it. I can't wait to maybe go a little bit further with it. It's definitely not going to interfere with what I do in racing. Racing is my life. It's what I really, really enjoy. TV is more of an outlet for me, and I do enjoy it. You never know. Maybe five years down the line, if people still want me, maybe I'll do some TV.

Q: How has the job of crew chief changed since 2000, when you first served in that role?

A: Obviously, we're a lot more recognized than we were back then. The pressure is a lot higher. Expectations are a lot higher. If you don't go out there right now and perform, you're going to get sat down.

Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

Some key storylines as the Cup Series heads to Watkins Glen.

Big names seek spot in Chase

Maybe it's going to finally be Jimmie Johnson's year to win a Nextel Cup championship.

Johnson, who has finished second twice and fifth twice, can look to history for added hope now that he has won for the first time at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Five of the previous 12 winners at the Brickyard went on to win the Nextel Cup championship that year — Jeff Gordon in 1998 and 2001, Dale Jarrett in 1997, Bobby Labonte in 2000 and Tony Stewart in 2005.

For Johnson, just getting out of Indy unscathed is a good sign. Last year, he had dominated the points race up to the 400, where he crashed, finished 38th and lost his momentum. Stewart, last year's race winner, seized control of the points race from Johnson at Indy and topped the standings for all but one week the rest of the season.

This year, Johnson appears to be all but a lock to be among the top 10 who will compete in the championship-deciding Chase for the Nextel Cup, which begins after the Sept. 9 race at Richmond International Raceway.

Here are some other observations as the Chase comes more into focus:

• **Dale Earnhardt Jr.:** With five more races to run before the start of the Chase, the prevailing sentiment among the drivers in contention seemed to be relief that they had made it through another week without a major setback.

There was a collective, but brief, sigh of relief at Indy after three of the sport's top stars — Earnhardt Jr., Gordon and Stewart — overcame problems in the Allstate 400 that could have jeopardized their Chase hopes. Many feel the absence of Earnhardt and Gordon from last year's Chase took much of the luster off the title run.

Earnhardt, who had finished 43rd in the past two Cup races, was all but absent for most of Sunday's race. He was mired in 28th place when a caution flag with 18 laps to go gave him and his crew a chance to take a gamble that could stop his skid.

While most of the drivers ahead of him made pit stops, he stayed on the track, took over second place, but became a sitting duck to the shooters behind him with fresher tires.

The gamble paid off. Earnhardt led briefly and finished sixth, which put him back in the top 10 in points.

"I'd love to have a better car where we didn't have to make those kinds of calls," an exhausted Earnhardt said. "We took a chance and made it work."

• **Gordon and Stewart:** Gordon made a similar recovery, but it took him the whole race. He fell three laps behind when a part of his sway bar broke just after the start of the race. His crew made repairs, and he raced his way back to the lead lap and finished 16th, which boosted him one spot to eighth in the points standings.

Likewise, Stewart made a nice recovery in the Allstate 400, moving up a spot in the standings to ninth despite early race problems with loose lug nuts that put him as low as 35th. He recovered to finish eighth.

• **Kasey Kahne:** Kahne entered Sunday's race as a favorite to win and likely be a Chase participant, but that all changed before the checkered flag fell. He ran among the leaders for most of the race, but wrecked on the last lap and finished 36th, which dropped him out of the top 10 for the first time since the first race of the season and illustrated how quickly a solid points position can melt away. He has dropped from third in points after the road race at Infineon Raceway to 11th, largely because of five finishes of 23rd or worse in the past six races.

• **Matt Kenseth and Mark Martin:** Kenseth and Roush Racing teammate Martin continued their steady march toward Chase berths. Kenseth's runner-up run was his 11th top-five finish of the season, and Martin's fifth-place finish was his 10th top-10 finish. Martin said his car still needs a little tuneup if it's going to take the title, but he's ready. "This old man ain't gave up yet," he said.

• **Kevin Harvick and Jeff Burton:** Richard Childress' two veteran drivers, Harvick and Burton, continued their steady run toward berths in the Chase. Harvick finished third in the Allstate 400, while Burton, the pole-sitter, was 15th, but Burton heads to Watkins Glen a solid third in points, and Harvick is fourth.

• **Fresh faces:** It's looking as if there will be a fresh face or two in the Chase, or at least in the race to it. Kyle Busch and rookie Denny Hamlin continue to perform like veterans. Busch took the lead late in Sunday's race by staying on the track, like Earnhardt, while most of the leaders pitted. He parlayed that into a seventh-place finish that leaves him fifth in points. Hamlin finished 10th despite his involvement in a last-lap wreck. He moved up a spot to seventh in the standings.

STANDINGS

NEXTEL CUP

Following the Allstate 400

- Jimmie Johnson
3,124; previous: 1
- Matt Kenseth
3,017; previous: 2
- Jeff Burton
2,758; previous: 3
- Kevin Harvick
2,733; previous: 5
- Kyle Busch
2,733; previous: 4
- Mark Martin
2,712; previous: 6
- Denny Hamlin
2,638; previous: 8
- Jeff Gordon
2,627; previous: 9
- Tony Stewart
2,615; previous: 10
- Dale Earnhardt Jr.
2,612; previous: 11



Dale Earnhardt Jr. holds the 10th spot in the standings.

Cup next up: AMD at The Glen; Watkins Glen International

TV: 1 p.m. ET Sunday, NBC

Busch next up: Zippo 200; Watkins Glen International

TV: 2 p.m. ET Saturday, NBC

Truck next up: Toyota Tundra

200; Nashville Superspeedway

TV: 5 p.m. ET Saturday, Speed Channel

BUSCH SERIES

- Kevin Harvick
3,627; previous: 1
- Carl Edwards
3,253; previous: 2
- Denny Hamlin
3,154; previous: 4
- Clint Bowyer
3,093; previous: 3
- J.J. Yeley
2,991; previous: 5

TRUCK SERIES

- Todd Bodine
2,307; previous: 1
- Johnny Benson
2,125; previous: 3
- Rick Crawford
2,120; previous: 4
- David Reutimann
2,110; previous: 2
- Ron Hornaday
2,070; previous: 6

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