

## NASCAR QUIZ

Q: Which driver has the most wins at California Speedway?  
A: Jeff Gordon (3)

## NASCAR INSIDER

## NEXT RACE

Race: Sony HD 500  
Where: California Speedway  
When: 7 p.m. ET Sunday  
Television: NBC  
Defending race winner: Kyle Busch

# Planning for ... 'Tomorrow'

Drivers, teams preparing for next-generation car

By RICK MINTER  
Cox News Service

**Bristol, Tenn.**  
While most of the attention in NASCAR is focused on the points race and who'll make the cut for the Chase for the Nextel Cup, which begins after races at California and Richmond, the Car of Tomorrow is heating up as a topic of discussion.

"I've been so occupied with this year and working on the current package that I guess I forgot about that," points leader Jimmie Johnson said of the radically new car, which makes its racing debut next spring at Bristol and will be used in selected races next season with the goal of running it at all tracks by 2009 and possibly sooner.

Johnson's teammate, Jeff Gordon, tested the Car of Tomorrow at Michigan last week and said much more development work is needed.

"I have some concerns; there's no doubt about that," he said. Gordon said his main concern with the car is how it reacts in traffic because of aerodynamic changes like a splitter on the front and a spoiler on the rear that are designed to alleviate the aero push.

"I feel like a car punching that big of a hole in the air in a pack, has a lot of challenges," he said. "It seemed to me like the lead car was in full command of being able to control the field. I don't think that's really what we're looking for."

Gordon said he believes the concerns he and others have can be worked out as more

teams test the car.

"I think the one good thing that came out of it was that every test that happens, we get more teams and drivers involved and get more input to take to NASCAR," he said. "I think the more we get involved with it, the more they're going to be open to ideas."

Gordon said he and others in the sport didn't take the car seriously when NASCAR began working on it.

"I think for the longest time, none of us believed it and supported it because we thought that it was just a phase," he said. "Now we realize that that's not the case, and we've all got to get serious about it. And we are."

He said one of the big challenges will come when teams have to race the current car at some tracks and the Car of Tomorrow at others.

"I'd rather see them wait until 2008 and just run it everywhere," Gordon said. "The things that we're having to do as a team to try to build two different cars that are inspected totally differently — we're even having to change different things in the engine for that car. It's basically like running

## CALIFORNIA SPEEDWAY

Track length: 2 miles  
Race length: 250 laps / 500 miles  
Banking in straights: 16 degrees  
Banking in turns: 14 degrees  
Banking in frontstretch: 11 degrees  
Length of frontstretch: 3,100 feet  
Length of backstretch: 2,500 feet  
Grandstand seating capacity: 92,000  
First race: June 22, 1997; California 500  
Qualifying record: Kyle Busch, Chevrolet; 188.425 mph; Feb. 25, 2005  
Race record: Jeff Gordon, Chevrolet; 155.012 mph; June 22, 1997



Bill Elliott tests the Toyota Camry during Car of Tomorrow testing last week at Michigan International Speedway.

two different series."

Another concern expressed by many is the look of the car and how different it is from a production vehicle.

Forske Racing President Don Miller said NASCAR's intent in creating the car is correct, but he worries about several factors, including how the car looks.

"It is probably the ugliest race car I have ever seen," Miller said. "It doesn't look like a Ford, Dodge, Plymouth, Chevy, Lincoln or anything."

Miller said he believes NASCAR grew over the years, in large part, because the cars on the track resembled those in fans' driveways.

"America doesn't follow Formula One because the cars don't look like anything they drive," he said. "[NASCAR] has become so popular because NASCAR has done an excellent job of creating a relationship between the vehicles that are competing and the ones fans drove to the race track, even though they're entirely different internally."

## Rick Minter's

## OBSERVATIONS

Some key storylines as the Cup Series heads to California:

## Chasing respect

It's a given in NASCAR circles that a lot of fans come to races to watch wrecks. That's particularly true at Bristol Motor Speedway, where the high-banked, half-mile concrete oval tends to produce fender bangers and the accompanying hot tamper. That's one of the reasons the seating there has grown to 160,000. But Saturday's Sharpie 500 was relatively uneventful by Bristol standards as there were only 10 caution periods, no major multi-car crashes and few pit-road spots afterward.

Dale Earnhardt Jr., who raced from his 40th starting position to third at the end without having to use his front bumper to move competitors aside, said that's due to the tight points race created by the Chase format.

"With the Chase and everybody being so close, there was a lot more respect being shown on the track," he said. "You don't normally get that here."

## Kahne watch

Kasey Kahne appears to be the only driver outside the top 10 in Nextel Cup points with any chance of joining the elite top 10 who will participate in the 10-race, season-ending Chase for the Nextel Cup.

Greg Biffle, 12th in the standings, and Carl Edwards, 13th, are more than 200 points behind 10th-place Mark Martin with almost no chance of getting into the top 10 in just two races. The most points any driver can gain on another in one race in which both start is 166, and there are just two races — at California and Richmond — left to run before the start of the Chase. Kurt Busch, 14th in points, was eliminated after his 37th-place finish at Bristol.

For Kahne to make the Chase, it would mean that he'd finish at or near the front while his competitors faltered.

Drivers ranked as high as fourth potentially could fall to 11th at California.

"We just need to put it together and have some real good races and see what everybody else does," Kahne said.

## Richmond fizzle

There are several scenarios in which the Chevy Rock and Roll 400 at Richmond could be anticlimactic.

Kahne, in many respects, is the key to the Chase field. If he stumbles badly at California, the field could be set before the circuit moves to Richmond on Sept. 9.

The drivers in positions three through 10 in the standings — Kevin Harvick, Kyle Busch, Jeff Gordon, Denny Hamlin, Jeff Burton, Tony Stewart, Earnhardt and Martin — all could clinch at California, depending on where Kahne finishes and assuming all of them run the last two races.

For example, if 10th-place Martin finishes 67 or more points ahead of Kahne at California, Martin would be assured of a Chase berth and Kahne would be eliminated.

## Fast lane

It doesn't seem to take long for rookies to make themselves at home on the Nextel Cup circuit.

Rookie Denny Hamlin already has his own airplane, and others, like the normally reserved Reed Sorenson, don't seem to be at all in awe of veteran drivers they know only from TV a couple of years ago.



SORENSON

Sorenson put on a rare display of emotion after being collected in a wreck at Bristol in Friday's Busch Series race.

After climbing from his battered car, he gave an insincere thumbs up to Ryan Newman, who triggered the crash by spinning a lapped car; then told a TV reporter that Newman "must be too fast to run in the Busch Series."

Saturday, after having time to cool off, Sorenson, a rookie in Nextel Cup and second-year campaigner in Busch, said he wasn't sure how he should have reacted.

"There's not much you can do about it at that point," he said, adding that it's hard for fans to understand the emotions drivers go through in incidents on the track.

"If you're watching it on TV, you don't really feel what a guy feels when he gets wrecked," he said. "There are a lot of things you don't see on TV, especially for the guys racing from 12th to 15th place."

"But everybody makes mistakes."

## Catching up with ...

## Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Dale Earnhardt Jr., ninth in the Nextel Cup standings entering this weekend's race at California Speedway, visited with members of the media, including Rick Minter of Cox News Service, to discuss his thoughts on the Chase for the Nextel Cup.

Q: How do you feel about racing Kasey Kahne for a spot in the Chase?

A: He's tough. He's a great race-car driver. There are some other good ones that aren't going to have a shot at it. I like it because he's a good friend of mine. I won't be too dejected, I guess, by being outrun by him, rather than being beaten by somebody else that I don't have as much respect for.

Q: Was Carl Edwards' \$20,000 fine for running into Earnhardt's car after the Busch race at Michigan appropriate?

A: I felt like years ago, we should have been stepping the fines up into the \$100,000-to-\$200,000 range. Nothing against Carl or the situation, but \$10, \$15, or \$20 grand don't mean

anything to these guys — myself included.

Q: When the Chase is over, will you be relieved whether or not you make the Chase?

A: No, not really. I'm always relieved. I really don't get worked up over stuff because it just aggravates you and gets under your skin and you can't go home and enjoy yourself. It's just always on your mind, if you let it. So I just focus on racing. When I'm in the car, I just focus on what it takes to get around the corner faster.

Q: With the way you ran at Michigan, does that give you hope for California?

A: Yeah. My guys are real excited, so I'm just sort of following their lead. Hopefully once we get there, I'll feel like I've known my way around there all along.

Q: Do you think you got a "superstar" break at the end of the Busch race at Michigan [when he spun Edwards from the lead on the next-to-last lap]?

A: Not really. I'm going to see



Dale Earnhardt Jr. jumped a spot in the Cup standings to ninth following a third-place finish Saturday at Bristol.

it differently. NASCAR is watched so closely for that — especially in the past — that they are more aware of it. I'm not in those situations all too often, but they really are careful not to give that perception, and they go out of their way to make sure that people aren't going to say that they man, they cut him a break. I don't feel like I get treated any differently. Of course I ain't been in that situation enough to know. If I was in it more often, I'd have a better idea of whether I was or not, but I have a lot of respect for those guys in there, and I've done the best I can to represent the sport well and not embarrass any of the employees or anybody at NASCAR.

I try my best to be mindful of that as I get older.

Q: What did NASCAR officials tell you about the way the Michigan Busch race finished?

A: NASCAR expressed to me that they weren't negative toward my actions on the track, but they were negative toward how we allowed the race to finish and how ugly it was. It wasn't a very pretty finish.

When I got in Victory Lane, I didn't have a lot of pride in what just happened. I was happy for my team. They work hard. But for myself, personally, I was not really getting a whole lot of excitement out of it.

I don't like having controversial finishes. I like having clean, exciting finishes where we come down and are running side-by-side the last three or four laps and race clean.

## STANDINGS

## NEXTTEL CUP

Following the Sharpie 500

1. Jimmie Johnson  
3,499; previous: 1
2. Matt Kenseth  
3,492; previous: 2
3. Kevin Harvick  
3,178; previous: 3
4. Kyle Busch  
3,097; previous: 7
5. Jeff Gordon  
3,091; previous: 6
6. Denny Hamlin  
3,070; previous: 8
7. Jeff Burton  
3,064; previous: 9
8. Tony Stewart  
3,056; previous: 5
9. Dale Earnhardt Jr.  
3,051; previous: 10
10. Mark Martin  
3,049; previous: 4



**Jimmie Johnson** holds a 7-point lead in the Cup standings.

**Cup next up:** Sony HD 500; California Speedway  
**TV:** 7 p.m. ET Sunday; NBC

**Busch next up:** Amerquest 300; California Speedway  
**TV:** 10 p.m. ET Saturday; TNT

**Truck next up:** New Hampshire 200; New Hampshire International Speedway  
**TV:** 9 p.m. ET Sept. 16; Speed Channel

## BUSCH SERIES

1. Kevin Harvick  
4,095; previous: 1
2. Carl Edwards  
3,578; previous: 3
3. Denny Hamlin  
3,533; previous: 2
4. Clint Bowyer  
3,429; previous: 4
5. J.J. Yeley  
3,391; previous: 5

## TRUCK SERIES

1. Todd Bodine  
2,624; previous: 1
2. Johnny Benson  
2,470; previous: 2
3. David Reutimann  
2,394; previous: 3
4. Ted Musgrave  
2,380; previous: 4
5. Rick Crawford  
2,323; previous: 5

## Up and coming ...

## Jason Hogan

Jason Hogan, a 23-year-old Late Model racer from Cleveland, Ga., is ready to make

the move to NASCAR. When he's not racing, he's working the NASCAR garage, introducing himself to the sport's power brokers. He won the prestigious All-American 400 at Nashville in 2005 and has participated in Roush Racing's "Gong Show" tryouts the past two years. He recently spoke with Rick Minter of Cox News Service.

**On working the garage trying to get a ride:** "It's really difficult being at any racetrack and not being in the driver's seat



Cox News Service

tuning the car and getting ready to race. But I know that's what I have to do to further my career. It's also hard to look at people that have rides that I've outrun in the past. I know I'm just as good as them. I just haven't had the opportunity they have, but I know it will come."

**On the current job market for young drivers:** "Silly Season is pretty silly this year. There are a lot of people changing rides, but not a lot of people are talking. I do think that some of the established drivers are getting ready to move on, so that should mean that teams will be looking for younger drivers. It seems that teams are starting to look at series like the Southeast Series that I'm running in to

Jason Hogan has been preparing most of his life for a career in NASCAR. In this 1999 photo, he makes sure his water bottle is installed correctly while racing at Lanier National Speedway in Braselton, Ga.

find drivers."

**On the benefits of being in the "Gong Show":** "It was a real good thing, getting all the TV exposure. I wish it had turned out better, and I wish they'd show the '05 version on TV because I fared much better in that one. I put too much pressure on myself the second time."

**On his immediate racing future:** "I'm working on deals to either move to ARCA or the Craftsman Truck Series. I'd like to get something worked out to run the truck race at Martinsville in October. If somebody would just give me one chance, I know I can get a ride out of it."

## NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

**8** Chevrolet drivers in the top 10 in Nextel Cup points heading to California Speedway.

**5** The number of times that Jimmie Johnson and Matt Kenseth (shown below) winning Saturday's Sharpie 500 at Bristol have qualified for the Chase.



**5** The number of times that team owner Rick Hendrick has won at California Speedway, tops among team owners.

**0** Dodge drivers in the top 10 in points entering the Sony HD 500 at California.