

NASCAR prepares for legendary Daytona 500



Annette Randall / Photo Editor
Rick Mast joins Elon's NASCAR class in No. 90 Ford Taurus.

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Photo Editor

The Daytona 500, also known as the "Great American Race," has kicked off the NASCAR Winston Cup Season each February since 1959. Teams spend months preparing for the race and the drivers look forward to the race each year, since the race is akin to the NFL's Super Bowl.

Around the time of the race, the Daytona, Fla., area hosts two weeks of racing action known as Speedweeks. During the two weeks, numerous races are held at various tracks in the area.

The Daytona 500, the Budweiser Shootout and the Gatorade Twin 125s are just a few of the Winston Cup races held at the Daytona International Speedway during Speedweeks.

The Budweiser Shootout, held on Feb. 10, is a 70-lap (175-mile) race for drivers who won poles during the previous season, as well as former Winston Cup champions and former Shootout winners who are not already eligible.

Qualifying for the Daytona 500 is held on Feb. 9. Each driver receives two laps to post his fastest speed, but only the top two positions are locked during the first round of qualifying.

Drivers may try to improve their times during a second and final round of qualifying on Feb. 11. The drivers' qualifying times are then used to determine the starting line-ups for the Gatorade Twin 125s.

The Twin 125s will be held Feb. 14, with the results from both races determining starting positions three through 30 for the Daytona 500.

The next six positions are determined by the six fastest qualifying times of drivers yet to make the field. Positions 37 through 43 are provisional spots based on points from the previous year.

The 44th annual Daytona 500 will take place on Feb. 17. Practices were held Jan. 7-9 and Jan. 15-17 in preparation for the race. According to the official NASCAR Web site, the five fastest drivers who practiced were No. 48, Jimmie Johnson; No. 22, Ward Burton; No. 1, Kenny Wallace; No. 8, Dale Earnhardt Jr.; and No. 24, Jeff Gordon.

Michael Waltrip won last year's race. It was his first Winston Cup points race win. However, the victory was overshadowed by the death of Dale Earnhardt, Waltrip's car owner, following a last lap crash.

Previous race winners entered in this year's race also include Bill Elliot, Geoffrey Bodine, Dale Jarrett, Sterling Marlin and Jeff Gordon.

The payoff for the 2002 Daytona 500 will be the largest in the history of the event. The race's total purse will exceed \$12 million, with the winner receiving a minimum of \$1,327,030 and the last place finisher receiving a minimum of \$114,236.

According to Web sites providing odds for the Daytona 500 winner, the drivers with the highest chance to win are Jeff Gordon, Dale Jarrett, Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Tony Stewart.

Men's basketball team enjoys first road win, hands loss to tourney champion Winthrop

Colin Donohue
Sports Editor

The Elon men's basketball coaching staff has added 1,300 new recruits to their squad, and their presence was evident after the Phoenix's win over Winthrop Monday night at the Nest, 71-64.

"The crowd was the difference in the game tonight," head coach Mark Simons said. "I wouldn't want to have to come here and play."

The enormous crowd stood all night and remained in the game until the final whistle. It all came to a head when they rushed the floor at the game's end.

"This was by far the best crowd since I've been here," senior guard Brendon Rowell said. "[The crowd] kept us going."

The win over Winthrop was a huge step for the Phoenix (11-11 overall, 6-3 Big South), but their confidence-building run began at the end of January.

On Jan. 26, the Phoenix traveled to High Point University still looking for their first win on the road this season. They endured a woeful shooting night (36 percent for the game) yet only dropped the contest 73-63.

Freshman forward Gary Marsh had 16 points to lead the Phoenix. Rowell added 13, and freshman guard Sean Newton had nine points in his first career start. High Point was led by guard Dustin Van Weerdhuizen's 26 points and 10 boards.

Elon finally felt the thrill of the road Jan. 29 when they defeated Liberty University 63-56 for their first road win.

Senior forward David Hall led Elon with 13 points and 10 rebounds. It was his first career double-double. No other Phoenix player scored in double digits, but each player chipped in to grab the win.

Liberty was paced by guard Chris Caldwell's 13 points and guard Jason Sarchet's 10. Liberty's porous 41 percent from

the free throw line led to their loss.

"We really started to play the day before Liberty in practice," Simons said. "[At Liberty] we didn't play great, but we played together."

Elon returned home Feb. 2 to face Birmingham-Southern University. Freshman center Jackson Atoyebi scored a career-high 14 points to go along with Marsh's 17-point and Rowell's 15-point performances.

Birmingham-Southern played a tough ballgame, led by Willie Rashard and T.R. Reed's 19-point outputs, but eventually lost 67-60.

Elon rode their two-game win streak into the Winthrop matchup Feb. 4. It was the first time Elon beat the Eagles in Big South conference play, and it was the first win over the team since 1997. The win also tied Elon for second in the Big South with a 6-3 mark.

"We're playing with confidence and playing smart," junior guard Ross Simms said. "We didn't play well offensively, but we came out with a lot of emotion."

Simms, who is playing with a torn ACL, finished the game with 16 points and seven assists. He was an impressive 4-for-6 from behind the arc, at one point sinking three straight three-point field goals.

"The knee feels good," Simms said. "I'm getting treatment on it everyday."

Rowell came out of the gates on fire, scoring 14 of his game-high 21 points in the first half. He was the only consistent offensive weapon for the Phoenix early in the game.

However, Winthrop never fell behind in the first half, their biggest lead being nine points (30-21) with 5:22 remaining. Elon would close the half by outscoring Winthrop 9-5 to make the halftime score 35-30.

Elon out-played Winthrop in the second half, opening with a

13-5 run over the first four and a half minutes. After taking a 42-20 lead, Elon would never trail again in the contest.

Marsh came out of the locker room at the half with a stronger effort. He notched eight of his 10 points in the final frame.

The Eagles would make a final push after trailing 64-58 with more than two minutes remaining.

Guard Pierre Wooten (12 points) hit two free throws, then made a steal off a Phoenix inbound pass that resulted in forward Tyrone Walker (15 points, five rebounds) being fouled under the basket. Walker knocked down both attempts to bring Winthrop to within two points.

Elon stymied the comeback attempt when Simms drove the length of the floor for an easy layup.

Hall (five points) hit three big free throws down the stretch to seal the game for the Phoenix.

Winthrop received other solid performances from forward Greg Lewis (13 points, seven rebounds) and forward Marcus Stewart (eight points, six rebounds).

"I'm enjoying it, enjoying it. We played as a team today and stayed together," Rowell said of the win following the game.

Rowell also said that the team was focused for the game. He said that the night before the game, players were calling each other in their rooms to ask if they were in bed.

"Today we responded," Simons said. "We came together and matured."

They enter a tough South Carolina swing facing Coastal Carolina University and Charleston-Southern University in 72 hour span.

However, Simons understands the impact of the Winthrop win for his team and the conference.

"I was jacked. We did a great job of playing tired tonight," Simons said. "But now we have a target painted on our backs."