

ON THE TUBE

Winston Cup: New England 300, pre-race coverage 1:30 p.m. EDT Sunday on TNT.
Busch: New England 200, 1:30 p.m. EDT Saturday on TNT.
Craftsman Truck: Dodge Ram Tough 200, 9 p.m. EDT Saturday on SPEED Channel.



Darrell Waltrip loves talking about racing

By DAVE LANCE
 Cox News Service

Sparta, Ky. Darrell Waltrip knows Winston Cup driver Dale Earnhardt Jr. about as personally as you can know someone.

And that's why Waltrip — a three-time Winston Cup champion turned television analyst — picks "Little E" as his favorite current driver.

"I changed Dale Jr.'s diapers," Waltrip said. "So I have a soft place in my heart for him. I'm a huge Tony Stewart fan as well. Those are two of my favorites."

Waltrip hit on several topics Saturday afternoon at Kentucky Speedway, including the fact that he will briefly come out of retirement Aug. 1. Waltrip will drive the No. 17 Tide/Give Kids The World Chevrolet in a Craftsman Truck Series race at Indianapolis Raceway. He's racing to help celebrate Tide's longtime involvement with the Give Kids The World charity.

"I love the Truck Series," Waltrip said. "It's the best racing NASCAR's got as far as side-by-side. It's exciting."

As is Winston Cup, with its different-winner-every-week storyline. But Waltrip would like to see one or two drivers dominate.

"I like dominance," Waltrip said. "I like powerhouses, like the Dallas Cowboys and Washington Redskins used to be. That's what the sport is built on. That gives everyone something to shoot for. Parity is about control."

Parity has made guesswork out of predicting who the points champ will be. Matt Kenseth holds a sizable lead over most everybody.

"When you can really determine whether a guy's gonna win a championship or not is Sept. 1," Waltrip said. "When they get to Darlington, that's when you can say, 'That guy's gonna win the championship.'"

"Because every year you've got four, five, six guys where you say, 'They've got a chance.' The field is slimmer this year than it's ever been. If you're over 350 points back, I don't think you have a chance."

Waltrip caught himself and revised his comments, saying that his brother Michael has a shot. Michael went winless in his first 462 Winston Cup races before winning the 2001 Daytona 500. He also won the rain-shortened Daytona 500 in February.

About his brother's long losing streak, Darrell said: "I think he played too much. He's 40 now and he's buckled down."

Darrell would like to see his brother race a Winston Cup event at Kentucky Speedway, a track Darrell helped design. Like everyone else associated with the track, Darrell hopes NASCAR officials decide Kentucky Speedway deserves a Winston Cup event.

"I think we're right at that point either we are going to get one or aren't," Waltrip said. "We've got a tentative (2004) schedule, but there's still some things in the works. We're still holding out hope that we'll be a part of that."

A LOOK AHEAD

- July 27 — Pennsylvania 500, Pocono Raceway
- Aug. 3 — Brickyard 400, Indianapolis Motor Speedway
- Aug. 10 — Sirius at The Glen, Watkins Glen International
- Aug. 17 — Michigan 400, Michigan International Speedway

UPCOMING ON THE TRACKS

WINSTON CUP

Race: New England 300
Where: New Hampshire International Speedway
When: Sunday, 2 p.m., EDT
Race distance: 317.4 miles, 300 laps.
Defending champion: Ward Burton
Race record: Jeff Burton, 117.134 mph, July 13, 1997.
Qualifying record: Ryan Newman, 132.241 mph, Sept. 13, 2002.
Storyline: Jeff Gordon jumped into second place in the standings, 165 points behind leader Matt Kenseth, following Sunday's Tropicana 400 at Chicagoland Speedway.

BUSCH SERIES

Race: New Hampshire 200
Where: New Hampshire International Speedway
When: Saturday, 1:30 p.m. EDT
Defending champ: Bobby Hamilton Jr.
Race record: Bobby Hamilton Jr., 110.368 mph, May 11, 2002.
Qualifying record: Kevin Harvick, 130.716 mph, May 11, 2001.
Storyline: Scott Riggs extended his lead in the standings to 23 points over David Green following Saturday's race. Only 80 points separate the top five drivers.

CRAFTSMAN TRUCK

Race: Dodge Ram Tough 200
Where: Gateway International Speedway; Madison, Ill.
When: Saturday, 9 p.m. EDT
Defending champ: Terry Cook
Race record: Jack Sprague, 113.726 mph, May 7, 2000.
Qualifying record: Stacy Compton, 133.093 mph, Aug. 19, 1999.
Storyline: Travis Kvapil holds the top spot in the standings following Saturday's race at Kentucky Speedway. Only 93 points separate the top seven drivers in the standings.



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Ryan Newman led the last 58 laps of Sunday's 267-lap race to claim his third victory in 2003. He is 16th in the points standings, 665 points out of first place.

Hot in Chicago

Newman grabs his third victory in 2003 season

By AL LEVINE
 Cox News Service

Joliet, Ill. Ryan Newman's strange odyssey through the 2003 Winston Cup season continued Sunday with another happy ending. You remember Newman: he ends up either in the care center or Victory Lane.

Sunday at Chicagoland Speedway he ended up in Victory Lane for the third time this season, winning the Tropicana 400 in the No. 12 Dodge by 2.63 seconds over Tony Stewart. Jimmie Johnson was third.

Kevin Harvick's attempt to make history with a third consecutive win at the new track was still a possibility with three laps to go. But while running second to Newman, Harvick's No. 29 Chevrolet ran out of gas.

"We all thought we had the pit strategy worked to perfection," Harvick said. "Before we came in that last time, we took a gas-and-go that we thought would make up for about six laps that we thought we'd be short. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way."

It wouldn't have mattered, according to Newman.

"I know Kevin — he runs really hard," Newman said. "With three laps to go, no way he was going to make up 10 car lengths on me unless something goofy happened."

And with the way Newman's season has been going, there was still a good chance for that. He has won more races this year than everyone but Kurt Busch and has eight top-10 finishes.

But he's also been in some dramatic crashes. His car flipped numerous times in the Daytona 500 and pretty much disintegrated. At Michigan, he suffered minor burns on his face when his car caught fire.

He has failed to finish five races this year, which has undermined what was considered for him to be a championship-contending season. Newman is 16th in the points standings.

But his team is resilient. He was driving the same car he won in at Dover in June and the same car that burned at Michigan.

"We've had great race cars all year, with the exception of maybe one or two races, I could say," Newman said.

"We've just been caught up in some goofy things. We've had some things happen that never should have happened, like breaking a gear at Richmond. It's something

that's a part failure, but it can be omitted. There are instances of blown tires and whatever, that's just part of racing bad luck, as they say.

"It's just an excuse." Newman, who started 14th, led twice for 67 laps, including the last 58 of the 267-lap race. Stewart's No. 20 Pontiac started from the pole and led the most laps, 80, proving that the car with the clean air up front had the big advantage.

But he found no fault with Chicagoland. "I think this was like finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for all of us drivers," Stewart said. "I don't think you could have asked for a better race track as far as being wide enough to race two and three wide. If you couldn't drive by the guy, it wasn't because he was holding you up, it was just because you couldn't drive by the guy."

Bobby Labonte escaped injury in a fiery crash after his car smashed into the wall and the fuel cell erupted in flames. "I'm fine," he said. "I smell like a barbecue pit, but I am OK."

Matt Kenseth retained his points lead with a 12th-place finish. His 165-point lead over Jeff Gordon is the ninth largest mid-season lead since the points system was established in 1975. Dale Earnhardt Jr. slipped to third after his No. 8 Chevrolet spun into the wall on Lap 206, relegating him to a 38th-place finish.

POST-RACE NOTES

Injured Elliott optimistic amid series of flat tracks

By AL LEVINE
 Cox News Service

Joliet, Ill. Bill Elliott isn't 100 percent healthy yet. His number is "99 and nine-tenths. I'm getting there," he said. Nothing like a smooth cruise on an Elliott-friendly speedway to make things all better.

Eight weeks after breaking three bones and the toe on his left foot in The Winston, Elliott is close enough to perfect and feeling confident.

He finished 11th in the No. 9 Dodge in Sunday's Tropicana 400 at Chicagoland Speedway. Sunday's race was the beginning of four straight races on mostly flat, fast tracks that Elliott favors. His improved health and the races next week at New Hampshire, then at Pocono and Indianapolis have him fairly pumped.

"It seems like here, [Las Vegas, Kansas City, Indy, Michigan are the kind of race tracks I like]," Elliott said. "[Crew chief] Mike Ford has been with me since 2000. He and I and some other guys on the team relate to these places. It kind of fits my style real well. It's a nice, rollin', speed-type [track]."

His team devised a protective device to cover his left foot and he managed to stay out of trouble in the seven races since The Winston.

The No. 9 team continued its early-season struggle in those seven races though Elliott has moved from 21st to 19th in points without missing a start. Twice he had relief drivers lined up if he didn't feel up to racing.

"People on the outside looking into this sport just don't realize how hard it is," Elliott said. "And how everything's got to come together. You've got to use all your senses to sense what you want the race car to do and try to tell the guys how you want things to be. When you're not there, it's impossible to do."

The past seven weeks have been difficult for Elliott, who brakes with his left foot.

"Pocono was extremely difficult because of the way you've got to drive that place," he said, "but then once I got through Michigan and got to Sears Point [Infineon Raceway], I was back pretty good again. I didn't think it would affect me that much but it did. When I'm used to driving a certain way for so many years, you just can't change in mid-stream. You just can't go to Charlotte and all of a sudden become a right-foot braker."

All he could do was protect his toes. "If I reinjured them and they got misaligned, then I was going to have to go in and have them operated on and pinned. That would have been a major deal."

Stewart swats down rumor

A rumor floating around the Internet has Tony Stewart leaving Joe Gibbs Racing after his contract expires next year. Stewart denied the rumor on Friday.

"You know why I don't say anything about it, because I don't read the papers anymore," Stewart said. "I use them to light my fireplace in the winter. I save them all year long; it makes very good kindling. That's why I haven't commented on it, I guess, and why I haven't read the latest rumor mill."

He did confirm that his contract is up at the end of 2004. "Joe wants to re-sign me, and I'm sure that'll happen pretty soon," he said.

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