

# NASCAR

## NASCAR INSIDER

By RICK MINTER / Universal Uclick

### Learning curve

#### Daytona tests reveal issues with Gen 6 cars

With three days of restrictor-plate-track testing at Daytona International Speedway behind them, NASCAR's Sprint Cup Series teams and drivers now head to Charlotte Motor Speedway this week for another round of testing of the Generation 6 race cars that will make their competitive debuts in next month's Daytona 500.

The Daytona test seemed to show that the superspeedway versions of the cars don't work as well in the two-car pushing tandems that dominated racing at Daytona and Talladega Superspeedway in recent years. The bodies aren't well suited for pushing, as evidenced by a multi-car crash on Friday at Daytona that damaged 12 cars and sent several teams headed home early as they had no backup cars prepared.

That incident also brought to light just how much work remains to be done to have fleets of race cars ready for the early months of the 2013 season. With the radical changes to the cars since last year, teams are just now getting some of the key NASCAR-issued parts like hoods and trunk lids to use on those cars.

With NASCAR's encouragement, teams tried drafting at Daytona on Friday, and it wasn't long before a big lesson was learned. Dale Earnhardt Jr. in his Chevy and Marcos Ambrose in his Ford were near the front of the pack when Earnhardt tried to give Ambrose a shove to see if the tactic of the recent past would work with the 2013 Generation 6 cars, so named because it's the sixth different car that has run in NASCAR, dating back to the strictly stock vehicles that were used when the sport was founded back in 1948.

"I was just going to give [Ambrose] a push down the back straightaway and see if he could get the lead," Earnhardt explained. "I was trying to eventually get the lead myself. We got off the back straightaway and were just kind of pushing him along there and our cars sort of just didn't match up very well. I got him hooked into the fence."

Earnhardt said that earlier he'd pushed Martin Truex Jr.'s Toyota and had good results.

The Fords, he said, are different, which is not surprising given that one of the key aspects of the Generation 6 cars is that each manufacturer's car is unique and designed to more closely resemble the passenger car versions of the vehicles.

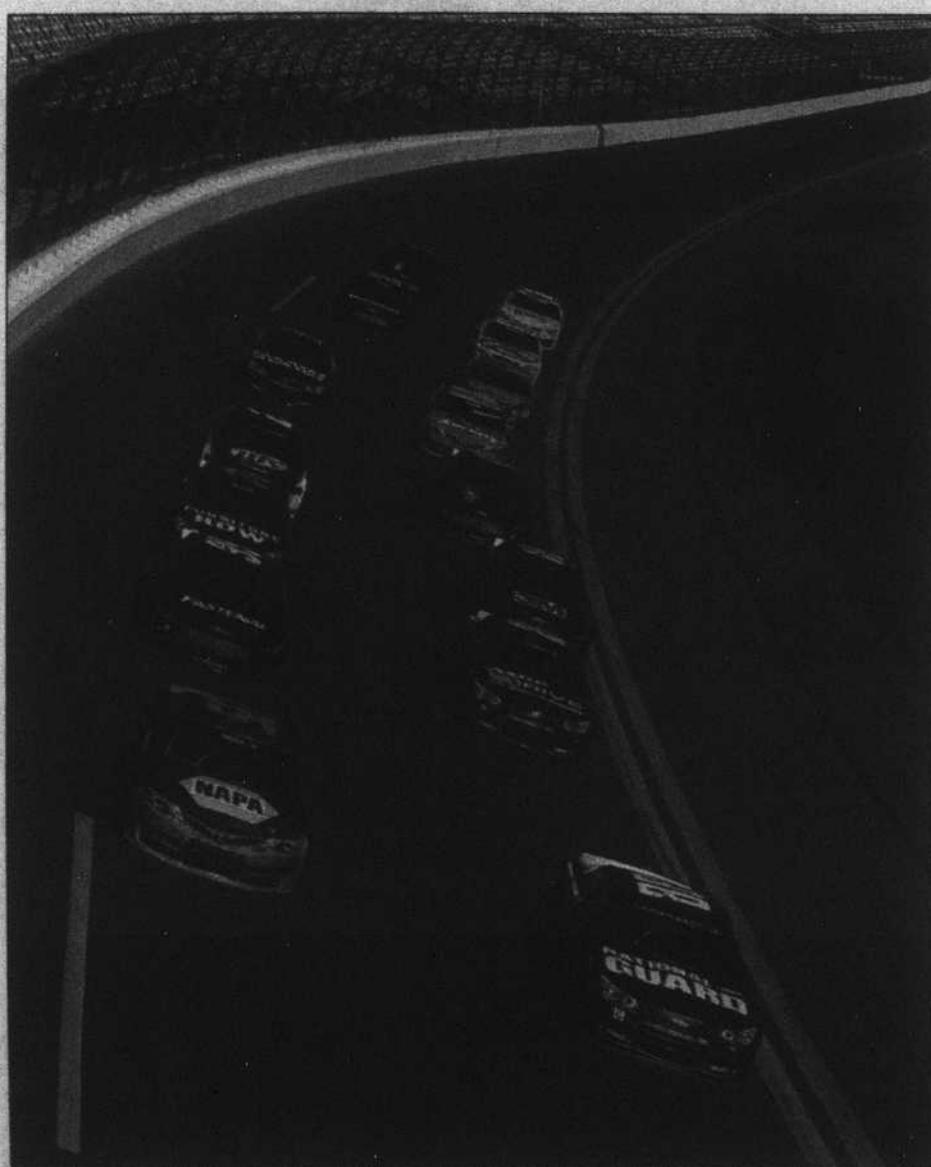
"The roll bar of the front of my car is just at the right place where [Ambrose's] car sits right up on top of that," Earnhardt said. "I sort of had him going down the back straightaway like a forklift."

Earnhardt also said the Chevy front end isn't the best for pushing.

"Our bumpers on the Chevys have a little bit of a point," he said. "It makes it a little bit of a challenge to get into guys and kind of help them. We definitely weren't doing that in the corner at all because it was pretty hairy trying to do it on the straightaways."

Earnhardt's Hendrick Motorsports teammate Jeff Gordon said push drafting is a much riskier proposition, especially now that the superspeedway cars have less downforce, which means they're harder to control in some circumstances.

"The cars drive pretty well," Gordon said. "You can't push, which I think is a good



After the Sprint Cup Series Preseason Thunder testing at Daytona International Speedway last week, drivers take the Generation 6 race cars for further test runs in South Carolina. (NASCAR photos)

thing. "The bad thing is, you can still get to the guy's bumper, but the cars just don't line up very well. You really just shouldn't even be doing it. Unfortunately, that is kind of that last little bit of momentum that you need to sometimes make the pass or make your lane move."

"So, it's something that is going to have to be dealt with very carefully. You are going to have to be cautious when you do it and do it with the right guys, but most of the time you're going to need to stay away from it."

Carl Edwards, looking to put a miserable 2012 season behind him, said he's anxious to start racing with the new package, especially the reduction in downforce.

"The cars are stuck less, and they are looser," he said. "That is good for racing. It is good for the fans. It will make it more exciting and make pit strategy come into play."

"If you put [fresh] tires on you will be able to go faster. I think all of that is good. This is going to be a heck of a race. I like that the cars were sliding around and hard to drive. It will make it a fun race."

For many at the Daytona test, the most immediate concern was the lack of inventory of body parts like hoods and trunk lids in race shops with the start of the season just a little over a month away.

The issue is one being faced by teams large and small.

Donnie Wingo, crew chief of the Wood Brothers' No. 21 Ford driven by Trevor Bayne, said his team, which only plans to race a partial schedule, worked up to the last

minute to get its Daytona test car finished. And he said there was still some work to be done on the downforce car it plans to test at Charlotte this week.

Jimmie Johnson said the situation is basically the same over at the giant-Hendrick Motorsports complex.

"Generally speaking, we just don't have any cars," he said. "This is our only speedway car for the 48 car. We want to have that as a backup when we come back. We still need to go home and build our 500 car. We just don't have the inventory."

"I mean we have four deck lids for our cars that are legal and they are on the four Hendrick cars that are here now. We're playing a big game of catch-up right now."

NASCAR vice president Robin Pemberton addressed the parts shortage during a press conference at Daytona.

"It's just a fact that there's a lack of inventory," he said, adding that he's confident the parts soon will be flowing through the supply pipeline. "The only thing that is short is hoods from the manufacturers and deck lids that come from our supplier."

"We're on a pretty organized schedule for delivery dates on those. There are over 100 deck lids out there in service right now."

"We'll be on a shipping schedule that starts next Friday, 50 every Friday, so we should be pretty well handled by the time we head off to Vegas [for the third points-paying race of the season on March 10]."

Pemberton said that if necessary, teams could swap those parts from one car to the next among their fleets.

### NOTEBOOK

#### Gordon, Bowyer mum on party

After their high-profile run-in at Phoenix International Raceway last fall, Jeff Gordon and Clint Bowyer just can't seem to get away from each other. A week after the Phoenix incident, one that saw Gordon fined and placed on NASCAR probation for intentionally wrecking Bowyer, the two raced for the win - without issues - at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

Then they ended up at the same New Year's party on a yacht owned Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, the wealthy rapper and music executive.

During their media sessions at Daytona testing, both were asked about the party but neither offered much insight into what transpired or whether there are issues still to be resolved. "The question is how [Bowyer] got on the yacht," Gordon said with a smile. "That needs to be the real question ..."

"We were just hanging out having a good time and on walks Bowyer and [Kevin] Harvick and a couple other folks ... It was a great New Year's. I enjoyed myself very much."

Said Bowyer: "I'm pretty sure [Gordon] was on there. It was pretty late. Put it that way."

Pressed on the issue, Bowyer indicated he was growing tired of the subject.

"Who cares? Really, who cares?" he said.

#### Waltrip aims for Daytona 500

Two-time Daytona 500 winner Michael Waltrip plans to come out of semi-retirement and try to qualify the No. 30 Swan Racing Toyota for the Daytona 500.

"We're looking forward to Daytona," Waltrip said. "It's my favorite time of the year every year, to come down here and get to participate in the greatest race in the world, in my opinion. To have won it before just makes coming back that much more special. This year is going to be particularly cool for me because ... it's going to be basically a reunion of when we won a few of these things."

In joining the relatively new Swan team, Waltrip will be reunited with crew chief Tony Eury Jr. and competition director Steve Hmiel, both of whom worked with him when he drove for Dale Earnhardt Inc.

"It's just an amazing team that they've started, and I'm hoping that my driving the car can help us get sponsors and can help them jumpstart what is going to be a very exciting year for the Swan Racing team," Waltrip said. He added that he felt it was a bad idea for his own team to prepare a fourth car for him given the work it's taking to get the team's three regular cars prepared.

He said he's fairly confident he can make the starting field in the car normally driven by David Stremme.

"[Stremme] had a lot to do with the direction and the build of the car that he came here and made the race with a year ago, and his hands are all over the cars that I will be driving this year," Waltrip said. "Plus, Tony [Eury] Jr.'s confidence."

"We rode down [to Daytona] together and talked about some of the fun times we've had in the past, but mainly focused on what we're going to have in 2013 when we get back here in a couple of weeks."



Michael Waltrip (NASCAR photo)

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