

IT'S CHARLOTTE!

After months of speculation, NASCAR Monday announced Charlotte will be the home of the new hall of fame.

NASCAR INSIDER

THIS WEEK

Race: UAW-DaimlerChrysler 400
 Where: Las Vegas Motor Speedway
 When: Sunday, 4 p.m. ET
 Television: Fox
 Defending race winner: Jimmie Johnson



Beatin' the odds

Vegas performance an indicator of how season will go

By RICK MINTER
 Cox News Service

Atlanta **N**ASCAR's nationwide road show heads to Las Vegas this week for the 2006 UAW-DaimlerChrysler 400, and odds are that when the circuit hits the mecca of gambling, the talk will turn to, well, the odds.

Las Vegas Motor Speedway officials say oddsmaker Micah Roberts of Station Casinos is favoring Jimmie Johnson and Greg Biffle in Sunday's 400-mile race, putting the odds that they'll win at 10-to-1.

But the two can hardly be called clear favorites because Jeff Gordon, Carl Edwards and Jamie McMurray are at 11-to-1, and Tony Stewart, Matt Kenseth and Mark Martin are 12-to-1. The hometown Busch brothers, Kyle and Kurt, are at 14-to-1. The way Edwards talked last week, he's figuring he's got a good chance of making a few bucks for those who bet on him — and a lot of cash for himself.

"I feel real good going to Vegas," he said. "We have a better car than we had at California and we tested good [at Las Vegas]."

Edwards, in his second full year on the Cup circuit, has exceeded all expectations, especially when it comes to racing on 1.5-mile tracks like Las Vegas. He has won twice at Atlanta and once at Texas.

"These track are different in that they combine everything," he said. "As a driver, you get to do a little bit of driving, and the car's really important. The speeds you run are just spectacular. They're a lot of fun."

The UAW-DaimlerChrysler 400 at Las Vegas, like the



Jimmie Johnson crosses the finish line to win last year's DaimlerChrysler 400 at Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

Auto Club 500 at California Speedway, requires a car with good downforce, plenty of horsepower and a chassis combination that allows teams to take advantage of the aerodynamic forces and the horsepower under the hood.

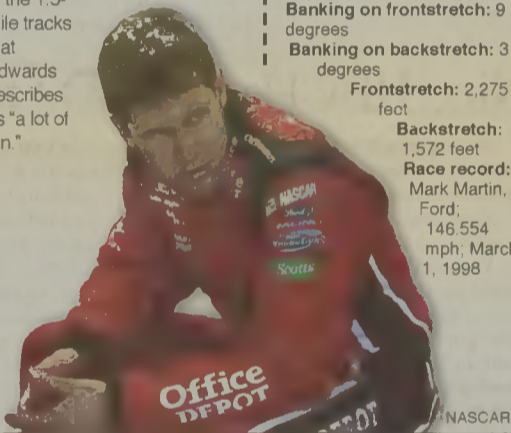
Las Vegas is a half-mile shorter than California, which means tighter turns and more emphasis on handling.

Therefore, success — or the lack of it — at Las Vegas this week will be a good indicator of how teams will perform for much of the rest of the season.

"If your cars are good, you'll run well at California, Vegas, Atlanta, Texas and so on," defending Nextel Cup champion Tony Stewart said in his team's weekly release. "Everybody wants to know where they stack up and shake up right now. If you can get off to a good start, it shows that your program is really where it needs to be."

"This is a huge week."

Carl Edwards suffered a disappointing season-opener at Daytona (above), finishing 43rd, but he rebounded with a third-place finish at California. Now, Edwards looks for success at Las Vegas, one of the 1.5-mile tracks that Edwards describes as "a lot of fun."



LAS VEGAS MOTOR

Track length: 1.5 miles
 Race length: 400 miles (267 laps)
 Grandstand seating: 137,000
 First race: March 1, 1998 (Las Vegas 400)
 Banking in corners: 12 degrees
 Banking on frontstretch: 9 degrees
 Banking on backstretch: 3 degrees
 Frontstretch: 2,275 feet
 Backstretch: 1,572 feet
 Race record: Mark Martin, Ford; 146.554 mph; March 1, 1998

Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

A weekly State of the Union as NASCAR heads to Las Vegas.

THE STORYLINES

A few things that have developed since NASCAR opened the season Feb. 19 at Daytona:

- Denny Hamlin takes control: Just a year and a half removed from the Late Model tracks of his native Virginia, Denny Hamlin, 25, beat NASCAR's best restrictor-plate racers to win the Budweiser Shootout at Daytona International Speedway last month. Then on Sunday at Mexico City, he defeated a host of America's — and Mexico's — best road racers to win the Telcel Motorola 200 at Autodromo Hermanos Rodriguez.

It was his first Busch Series victory in 39 starts — just three of them on road courses — and it put him third in points, 22 behind leader Kevin Harvick. Hamlin has finishes of 30th at Daytona and 12th at California in the Cup series.

- What goes around ... It could be argued quite effectively that Matt Kenseth's victory at California Speedway, coupled with Tony Stewart's blown engine, proves that what goes around comes around. At Daytona International Speedway the previous week, Kenseth led 28 laps early and had a car capable of contending for the victory, only to be run off the track by Stewart on Lap 107.

Kenseth, in his weekly news release, sounds like he's among those who believe his surprise victory at California was one he had coming.

"Sometimes it feels like there is justice in the world," Kenseth said. "It feels good because I felt [at Daytona] we had a car that could have won."

"We've had those days where we were the dominant car, but it didn't work out, so it feels good to pop out and win this one when we maybe didn't have the most dominant car."

His victory at California came at the expense of Roush Racing teammate Greg Biffle, who blew an engine after dominating the race.

- Same driver, different series: The Toyota Tundra contingent likely would be dominating the Craftsman Truck Series if not for the driving skills of Mark Martin (right). Martin, driving a Jack Roush-owned Ford F150, has dominated the first two truck races at Daytona and California, leading a train of Toyotas to the finish line both times.



Martin's teammate Carl Edwards said there's no doubt in his mind that Martin's superior driving skills have been the difference in the first two races.

"You could put Mark Martin in a NASCAR-type vehicle — a Cup car, Busch or truck — and have him run 10 laps on any track, and you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who could better his time," Edwards said. "He's just that good."

- Earnhardt Jr. off to a good start: Dale Earnhardt Jr. hasn't raced his way into the headlines, but he and his cousin and crew chief, Tony Eury Jr., are off to a solid start. He was in the top five late in the Daytona 500 and still had designs on a victory until a last-lap shuffle dropped him to eighth. And in the second race of the season, he finished 11th at California Speedway on a track where he has been known to be a backmarker.

His average finish in the three previous races at California was 34.6.

After missing the Chase for the Nextel Cup last season, he's now fifth in points, 68 behind leader Jimmie Johnson and eight behind fourth-place Kasey Kahne.

"I think we're headed in the right direction at these types of tracks," he told reporters after the Auto Club 500. "We're not where we need to be, but we're getting there. I'm just proud of my team, proud of my pit crew."

- Stewart, Biffle struggle: The top two drivers in the 2005 final standings are far from those lofty spots after the first two races of 2006.

Defending series champion Tony Stewart is 22nd in the standings, largely because he blew an engine and finished 43rd at California after taking fifth at Daytona in the season opener. Last year's runner-up, Greg Biffle, also blew an engine at California, finishing 42nd. Biffle didn't fare much better at Daytona, where he was 31st due to a last-lap spin. He's 38th in points.

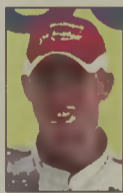
But neither driver appears to be in panic mode just yet.

"This is how we won a championship last year," a cool and calm Stewart told reporters after coasting into the pits at California. "The good thing is that the guys will leave here excited about the performance of how we ran. They're not going to be excited by how we finished, obviously, but we'll look past that and see the big picture."

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

2 Nextel Cup races that have been won from a top-10 starting position at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. Mark Martin won from seventh in 1998 and Jimmie Johnson won from ninth last year.

221 Laps led at Las Vegas by Matt Kenseth. That tops all other Cup drivers.



3 Top-10 finishes by Denny Hamlin (at left, after winning Sunday's Busch race) in nine career Nextel Cup starts.

5 Cup races won by Jack Roush-owned cars at Las Vegas. Jeff Burton won two, Matt Kenseth won two and Mark Martin won one.



Jack Roush is the winningest owner at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. Roush drivers include (from left) Mark Martin, Matt Kenseth and Greg Biffle.

What ever happened to ...

Cotton Owens

By Rick Minter / Cox News Service



Cotton Owens' 1964 Dodge.

The 81-year-old former driver and car owner on NASCAR's top circuit lives in Spartanburg, S.C., and still drives in a vintage-car series in the Carolinas.

He won nine times as a Cup driver and 38 times as an owner. Some of the sport's top drivers, including David Pearson, Bobby Allison, Buddy Baker, Charlie Gutzbach and Pete Hamilton, won races while driving Owens' cars. His NASCAR career began in 1950 and ended in 1973.

- On his biggest driving victory: "I came out of retirement in 1964 and won a 300-lapper at Richmond, Va. I hadn't been in a race car in more than two years. That was a big accomplishment for me, because I was teaching Pearson how to win races. That's what it amounted to."

- On his biggest owner victory: "That would be the Southern 500 in 1970 with Buddy Baker. That same weekend they inducted me into the hall of fame."

- On NASCAR's growth: "It sure has grown, and I don't know where it will be stopping. It's gotten to the point now where it's all about money."

- On how an 81-year-old can drive competitively: "You don't ever lose the touch. You might get a little slower with it, but you don't ever lose the touch."

Catching up with ...

Casey MEARS

Casey Mears, the nephew of four-time Indy 500 winner Rick Mears and son of off-road legend Roger Mears, opened the Nextel Cup season with a career-best second in the Daytona 500. Entering his fourth year in NASCAR's premier series, the 27-year-old Mears is the senior driver in the Chip Ganassi Racing stable, which also fields Dodges for 2006 Rookie of the Year candidates Reed Sorenson and David Stremme. He sat down with Cox News Service writer Jeff Hood to discuss life and racing.

Q: What's it like carrying the Mears name?

A: "I don't think about what type of legacy I want to have. I'm so focused on the following weekend, I don't know if I can even think that far down the road. I think whatever you're left with at the end, is what you're left with. Hopefully, the biggest thing I hope I'm left with is, 'Hey, that guy was a good, hard race-car driver and he was a nice guy at the same time.'"

Q: What about your former teammates, Jamie McMurray and Sterling Marlin?

A: "The whole ordeal that Jamie was causing and the fact we knew Sterling wasn't going to be back this year was a lot bigger distraction than I realized it was to the

whole team and organization. The team has so much of a comfortable feel now. They're all excited about the year."

Q: What are your thoughts about the large crop of Nextel Cup rookie drivers?

A: "One thing I've been told by guys who have been involved in this sport for quite a while is that every 10 years you see something like this. But this is the biggest change we've ever seen, with the driver changes, different sponsors and new guys coming in. I think it's kind of all in cycles. Now we're kind of getting that new group, and they're going to be around for the next 10 years."

Q: How do you feel about the 40-plus-years-old veteran drivers in the sport?

A: "I didn't feel worthy to sign autographs at all. Those guys have been around for so long, and everybody has so much respect for them for what they've done."



STANDINGS

NEXTEL CUP

Following the Auto Club 500

1. Jimmie Johnson 355; previous: 1
2. Casey Mears 316; previous: 2
3. Matt Kenseth 308; previous: 15
4. Kasey Kahne 295; previous: 12
5. Dale Earnhardt Jr. 287; previous: 6
6. Mark Martin 275; previous: 11
7. Ryan Newman 273; previous: 3
8. Clint Bowyer 271; previous: 8
9. Brian Vickers 260; previous: 7
10. Elliott Sadler 259; previous: 4



Cup next up: UAW-DaimlerChrysler 400, Las Vegas Motor Speedway

TV: 4 p.m. ET, Sunday, Fox

Busch next up: Sam's Town 300, Las Vegas Motor Speedway

TV: 6 p.m. ET, Saturday, FX

Truck next up: John Deere 200, Atlanta Motor Speedway, TV: 9 p.m. ET, March 17, Speed Channel

BUSCH SERIES

1. Kevin Harvick 467; previous: 1
2. J.J. Yeley 453; previous: 2
3. Denny Hamlin 445; previous: 10
4. Jamie McMurray 409; previous: 4
5. Clint Bowyer 400; previous: 3

TRUCK SERIES

1. Mark Martin 380; previous: 1
2. Todd Bodine 350; previous: 2
3. Ted Musgrave 335; previous: 3
4. Jack Sprague 320; previous: 5
5. David Reutimann 303; previous: 9