

DID YOU KNOW?

Dale Earnhardt holds the record for most wins (10), most top-five finishes (23) and most top-10s (27) at Talladega Superspeedway.

NASCAR INSIDER

THIS WEEK

Race: Aaron's 499
Where: Talladega Superspeedway
When: Sunday 1:30 p.m. ET
Television: Fox
Defending race winner: Jeff Gordon



Cutting back on CONTACT

New rule designed to eliminate practice of 'slam drafting'

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

When the NASCAR circuit arrives at Talladega Superspeedway this weekend for the Aaron's 499, the cars will be equipped with a new front bumper designed to take the bump out of bump drafting.

It's the latest in an ongoing series of changes designed to make racing safer at Talladega and Daytona International Speedway, the two tracks where restrictor plates are placed on the engines to slow the flow of fuel, which reduces top speeds with the ultimate goal of keeping race cars from flying into the grandstands.

But drivers and crews always seem to find a way to run faster, despite rules designed to slow them down.

During the past several seasons, the technique known originally as bump drafting became the best way for two cars to advance in the huge packs that develop at Daytona and Talladega. But bump drafting, in which the trailing driver actually bumps the car in front of him to propel both forward, has intensified to the point that it's now regularly referred to as "slam drafting."

After a particularly rough Budweiser Shootout at Daytona in February, defending Nextel Cup champion Tony Stewart told the media — and NASCAR — that someone might die if the slamming got any worse. Series officials responded by instituting "no bump" zones in the turns, where drivers are more likely to lose control when bumped.

Still, the Daytona 500 was unusually rough, with several drivers, including Stewart, penalized for overly aggressive use of the front bumper.

Beginning this week, officials have



Kevin Harvick relaxes with wife DeLana before the start of last year's Aaron's 499. Harvick, who comes to Talladega following Cup and Busch victories at Phoenix, says NASCAR is "going down the right road" in actions to improve driver safety. Above, tight racing at the Daytona 500.

limited the bracing that teams can put behind the front bumper at Talladega and Daytona. If a driver bumps too hard, he'll likely damage his radiator, which could put him out of the race for good.

Stewart said in a teleconference that he applauds NASCAR's efforts.

"I give NASCAR 100 percent credit for being proactive," he said. "Hopefully it's the right thing... It's something we discussed when we were in there with our discussion with them in February. If it's

TALLADEGA SUPERSPEEDWAY

Track length: 2.66 miles
Race length: 188 laps/500 miles
Banking in corners: 33 degrees
Banking on frontstretch: 16 degrees
Banking on backstretch: 2 degrees
Frontstretch: 4,300 feet
Backstretch: 4,090 feet
Grandstand seating: 143,231
First race: Talladega 500; Sept. 14, 1969
Qualifying record: Bill Elliott, Ford; 212,809 mph; April 30, 1987
Race record: Mark Martin, Ford; 188,354 mph; May 10, 1997

something that makes the racing better for everybody and keeps everybody out of that situation, then it's done its job."

For teams that haven't significantly beefed up the bracing behind the bumper, the new rules won't represent a dramatic change.

"We don't really have to change a whole lot on the bumpers," Kevin Harvick told reporters at Phoenix. "I think it is going down the right road and is a good idea [but], all in all, the bumpers really aren't that much different."

Stewart's crew chief, Greg Zipadelli, believes the new bumper rules are an improvement, but by no means a cure-all.

"I think it's definitely a step in the right direction to make the bump drafting minimal," Zipadelli said, adding that the best thing that has come from the controversy over bump drafting and rough driving at Daytona is the increased awareness of the dangers involved.

"Everybody kind of received the message, and everybody will be a little more respectful," he said. "Hopefully this won't be a topic in the future."

Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

THE STORYLINES

Here are some things to watch as NASCAR heads to Talladega:

Trophy hunting

Maybe NASCAR team owner Richard Childress needs to go hunting more often. While Childress was off on safari in Africa, his driver, Kevin Harvick, was bagging some big trophies back home. Harvick has won three times, two in the Busch Series — at Nashville and Phoenix — and one in Nextel Cup, also at Phoenix.

Harvick's teammates Clint Bowyer and Jeff Burton haven't been slouching either. Bowyer was fifth in the Cup race at Phoenix, while Burton was ninth. Harvick is eighth in Cup points, while Bowyer is 12th and Burton is 13th. Also, Harvick and Bowyer are first and second in the Busch standings, respectively.

"Everything is going good right now," Harvick told reporters after his Cup victory at Phoenix. "The drivers all get along good. Clint and I are really close as friends. We do things off the race track together as much as our schedule allows. Jeff brings a veteran attitude to the team. He understands a lot of things and has a very politically correct approach to things, which is the exact opposite of me."

Childress' drivers and crew members seem to be following the co-operation model that Roush Racing used to put all five of its drivers in the Chase for the Nextel Cup last year. Harvick, who is in the final year of his contract with Childress, said that's a welcome change.

"Everybody helps everybody and does what they can to make sure everybody is going good," he said. "This is the first time I have ever been a part of that at RCR. It was usually everybody racing against each other."

Labonte: 'Bring it on'

Petty Enterprises continues to show that its off-season overhaul was far more than just fodder for preseason feel-good stories. Bobby Labonte, a former series champion who joined the struggling team at the start of the season to drive the company's flagship No. 43 Dodge, finished eighth at Phoenix, his third top-10 finish in the past four races. He indicated in his post-race comments that there's more to come.

"We've still got some work to do," he said.

"We're here, but we need to move it up."

He sounded uncharacteristically optimistic about this weekend's run at Talladega.

"We've got a brand-new car for Talladega, so bring it on," he said. "I'm ready."

The bridesmaid

Despite his prowess in restrictor-plate racing, defending Nextel Cup champion Tony Stewart can't seem to make the pass that really counts at Talladega Superspeedway. In 14 Cup runs on the giant trioval in central Alabama, he has finished second five times — including both races last year — but has never won. He said that doesn't bother him.

"No, not at all," he said, pointing out that to win at Talladega means finding someone willing to help push you to the front when it counts.

"You can't do anything on your own there," he said. "You have to strictly rely on what everybody else around you is doing."

All things considered, he said, his record is nothing to be ashamed of.

"I think our finishing average is pretty high, higher than most for the amount of races that we've run there," he said. "I'm pretty satisfied with the way we've run there."

Mixed bag

Four high-profile Nextel Cup teams went to Phoenix with new personnel in key positions and came back with mixed results.

Carl Edwards and his new crew chief, Wally Brown, had the best initial results, finishing fourth in the Subway Fresh 500.

"Wally did a great job," Edwards told reporters at Phoenix. "He had to do a lot of decision making. He had to do some things — fuel mileage, with adjustments. He argued with me and made the right decisions. It's cool."

Jamie McMurray and Bob Osborne, who moved to McMurray's team from Edwards' team, were 16th.

David Stremme finished 29th in his first run with Steven Lane as his crew chief, while teammate Rod Sorenson was 30th with Stremme's old crew chief, Jeff Vandermore. But Sorenson was better than his result indicates. He was the victim of a mid-race wreck.

"We came in just before that and made some real big changes," Sorenson told reporters after the race. "We went back out and that's the first time we were able to pass anybody all night. We got it a little bit better and then we wrecked, so we didn't really get a chance to see what we could do."



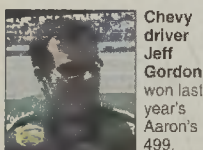
Tony Stewart's crew chief Greg Zipadelli (left) talks to a Speed Channel reporter before the start of last year's Aaron's 499. Stewart is winless at Talladega in 14 Cup attempts.

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

5 Victories by Dale Earnhardt Jr. in the past nine Nextel Cup races at Talladega Superspeedway

6 Career Nextel Cup victories by Kevin Harvick

13 Victories by Chevrolet drivers in the past 14 races at Talladega



Chevy driver Jeff Gordon won last year's Aaron's 499.

40 Consecutive races in which Joe Nemechek has been running at the finish, tops among all drivers

What ever happened to...

Chuck BROWN

The 1980 Busch Series champion captured six of his 11 career triumphs in his championship season.

From 1972 to 1989 he was a fixture in NASCAR. He made 73 Cup starts, 187 in Busch and 35 in the Craftsman Truck Series.

Today, at age 62, he's a partner in Crewschool.com, a business in Asheboro, N.C., that trains racing crew members.

Brown visited recently with reporters as part of the celebration for the 25th anniversary of the Busch Series.

On Cup drivers racing in the Busch Series: "A long time ago it was fun to race against them when they showed up because it was a chance to show your talent and maybe beat the best. On the short tracks, technology didn't matter. You had to drive it and get it handling. But today, technology's everything. I don't care if they put a new rookie in those particular cars, they're going to go to the front and they're going to stay there until the checked-out flag falls — if the rookie doesn't mess up. You put a veteran Cup driver in it, it's all the easier. But you need them

there to make Busch what it is, too."

On his career in the Busch Series: "It was a heck of a lot of fun. Those years in it were the best years of my career, really. You knew it was serious, hard racing because so many of those Cup guys raced with us on a regular basis. When you win races or won a championship there, you did something. You made your mark in motorsports. It was fun and difficult."

On whether he believes NASCAR owes former drivers a pension and insurance plan: "No, I think we all figured out many years ago that's not part of the deal. You just go out and do the best you can... Sure, it would be great if there was a great pension and insurance for life and stuff. We knew that way back then. That's the way it is. You just save some of those winnings, don't spend them all."

On his surprise start in a Hooters Pro Cup race last fall at South Boston (Va.) Speedway: "Billy Hess, one of the well-known chassis builders, kind of built an experimental front clip — little strut rod, he called it. He called me out of the blue and asked me if I'd drive it up there for him, see how it went. I said, 'Yeah, man, let's go. I brought my students up to do the pit stops and help out. We finished 12th. It was a heck of a lot of fun.'"

Teams face qualifying pressures at Talladega

For drivers whose teams are just outside the top 35 in owners' points, which is the threshold for guaranteed starting positions, this weekend's qualifying session at Talladega will be particularly frustrating. In qualifying at restrictor-plate tracks — Daytona and Talladega — the driver does little more than hold the accelerator wide open and aim the car. The important part — car preparation — is up to the crew and most of that must be done before the car leaves the shop.

"When you go to Talladega and unload, it's going to be tough to get in [the race] if you're off," said David Stremme, whose No. 40 Dodge team is 37th in owner points. "It's not like you can change a bunch of stuff."

Other drivers not guaranteed a starting spot in the Aaron's 499 include Michael Waltrip, Scott Wimmer, Travis Kvapil, Kevin Lepage and Brent Sherwin.

—Rick Minter

Catching up with...

John ANDRETTI

John Andretti, a veteran driver with 340 starts and two victories in Nextel Cup, is officially a rookie this season in the Busch Series. He drives the No. 10 Ford for car owner Greg Pollex. He's 23rd in points with one top-10 finish this season. He recently spoke with Cox News Service writer Rick Minter about racing in the Busch Series.

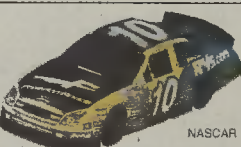
Q: What's it like being a rookie after all these years? A: "I'm having a good time with it. The fans, everybody on the team and the sponsors are having fun with it. And it's good to get to know all the other rookies. I didn't know any of them before this."

Q: Are you a mentor for these guys? A: "Former Busch champion]

David Green handles the rookie meetings and he does an excellent job. At the end of the meeting, he asks me if I have anything to add, and sometimes I do. I have a lot of experience, it's just that none of it is in the Busch Series... If they didn't care, I wouldn't care, but they all really want to accelerate their learning."

Q: What's the biggest difference between Busch and Cup? A: "There are more happy people in Busch than Cup. It's a different environment. The races are shorter in length and more in line with what I think is the right distance for a race. The strategies play different, but over there [in Cup] it's a whole different world. You have 40-something guys that have to win. Here you have guys coming over from Cup and this is their fun day. But when you get out there and race against them, they race you just like it's a Cup race."

Q: Would you like to race Cup again? A: "I had their last win. I'm really happy for them. I was happy when they got [former crew chief] Robbie Loomis back. They've got championship written all the way through them with Bobby Labonte, Robbie Loomis and [crew chiefs] Todd Parrott and Paul Andrews. They've all got a lot to prove... For now, it's still going to be a little up and down, which everybody should expect, but I'm so happy for them."



NASCAR

A: "I want to do some Cup races, but I don't want to do it unless it's fun, and the only way it's fun is to be in something you can fight with. If you don't have a good car over there, it's like taking a flyswatter to a gun fight. But we have a gun here [in Busch], and I like that."

Q: What about your former team, Petty Enterprises? A: "I had their last win. I'm really happy for them. I was happy when they got [former crew chief] Robbie Loomis back. They've got championship written all the way through them with Bobby Labonte, Robbie Loomis and [crew chiefs] Todd Parrott and Paul Andrews. They've all got a lot to prove... For now, it's still going to be a little up and down, which everybody should expect, but I'm so happy for them."

STANDINGS

NEXTEL CUP

Following the Subway Fresh 500

- 1. Matt Kenseth 1,218; previous: 2
2. Jimmie Johnson 1,209; previous: 1
3. Kasey Kahne 1,167; previous: 3
4. Mark Martin 1,152; previous: 4
5. Tony Stewart 1,141; previous: 5
6. Jeff Gordon 1,045; previous: 8
7. Dale Earnhardt Jr. 1,045; previous: 6
8. Kevin Harvick 1,044; previous: 9
9. Kyle Busch 1,010; previous: 7
10. Casey Mears 945; previous: 10



Matt Kenseth grabbed the lead in the points standings after a third-place finish at Phoenix.

Cup next up: Aaron's 499, Talladega Superspeedway TV: 1:30 p.m. ET, Sunday; Fox
Busch next up: Aaron's 312, Talladega Superspeedway TV: 3 p.m. ET, Saturday; Fox
Truck next up: Dodge Ram Tough 200; Gateway Int. Raceway TV: 8 p.m. ET, Saturday; Speed Channel

BUSCH SERIES

- 1. Kevin Harvick 1,469; previous: 1
2. Clint Bowyer 1,180; previous: 3
3. Denny Hamlin 1,174; previous: 2
4. J.J. Yeley 1,155; previous: 4
5. Carl Edwards 1,128; previous: 5

TRUCK SERIES

- 1. Mark Martin 720; previous: 1
2. Ted Musgrave 665; previous: 3
3. Todd Bodine 662; previous: 2
4. David Reutimann 576; previous: 4
5. David Starr 556; previous: 13