

NASCAR QUIZ

Q: Which driver won the first NASCAR Cup race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway?
A: Jeff Gordon, 1994

NASCAR INSIDER

NEXT RACE

Race: Allstate 400 at The Brickyard
Where: Indianapolis Motor Speedway
When: 2 p.m. ET, Aug. 6
Television: NBC
Defending race winner: Tony Stewart



CHANGES are around the corner



New namplate, drivers could shake up series in '07

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

The changes NASCAR has made during the past few seasons — a new way of determining the champion, moving races away from Southern tracks, a new TV package, a glitzier image — have been dramatic, even to the point of alienating some longtime fans.

But even bigger changes are just around the corner. The NASCAR of 2007 will see a foreign namplate. Toyota, become a major player in the Nextel Cup Series. A Colombian driver, former Formula One driver Juan Pablo Montoya, will join the circuit and drive the No. 42 Dodge for Chip Ganassi, one of his former open-wheel car owners. Racing's most famous female, IRL driver Danica Patrick, could join him. Also, the radically different Car of Tomorrow will be phased in, replacing the cars that have been used in recent seasons.

The changes are on the minds of many as NASCAR's Nextel Cup circuit heads into this weekend's mid-season break.

Three-time Cup champion and Fox analyst Darrell Waltrip sized up Patrick's NASCAR potential during a teleconference last week. He said her diminutive size might be a detriment when driving a 3,500-pound NASCAR race car.

"I'm not saying Indy cars are easy to drive, but I don't think they are as physically demanding as a stock car," Waltrip said. "That would be a concern if I were her."

He speculated that Patrick might be more interested in getting a raise from her current Rahal Letterman Racing team than in moving to a new circuit.

"She's had a huge impact on the IRL," Waltrip said. "She probably thinks she's a little underpaid."

She didn't know how popular and how big she was going to be. Now, she's trying to leverage that popularity."

He said from a competitive standpoint, Patrick probably should stay in the IRL.

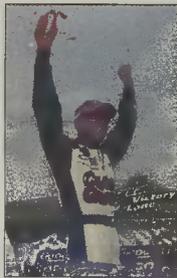
"She can realistically win an Indy car race," he said. "She could not realistically win a stock-car race anytime soon."

He said it will be a difficult transition for

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

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Laps led by Denny Hamlin (right) in winning the Pennsylvania 500 at Pocono Raceway.



Photos by NASCAR
Kevin Harvick rejoices in Victory Lane following his win Saturday at Martinsville Speedway.

23 Drivers within 1,000 points of Nextel Cup points leader Jimmie Johnson.

18 Top-10 finishes in Busch Series races this year by points leader Kevin Harvick, more than all other Busch competitors.

16 Top-10 finishes in Nextel Cup races this season by Jimmie Johnson, tops among Cup drivers.

Patrick or Montoya to move to the sometimes rowdy world of NASCAR.

"There's a huge amount of intimidation these [NASCAR] drivers use, like putting the bumper to you to knock and push you around," Waltrip said. "That takes some getting used to. The first time somebody puts a bumper to you going off into the corner at 180 mph, it is quite an experience; one that you've probably never had before and you're probably not going to want to do again for a while."

"I just don't know how you can jump out of an Indy car or a Formula One car and get in one of our machines, which is the hardest car to drive in the world."

Waltrip said it's not hard to understand why drivers from other circuits are wanting to switch to NASCAR. He attributes the increased interest to NASCAR's diversity program and to Toyota's growing participation in NASCAR (they've been in the Craftsman Truck Series for three seasons while planning a move to the Cup level).

"I think it's a great effort on everybody's part to

grow the sport in every direction that we can," said Waltrip, who owns a Toyota truck team. "I've got to give Toyota some credit for attracting the drivers from other series."

"Toyota has relationships with drivers from other series. ... Toyota is going to be there, and that's a new manufacturer. They are going to need drivers and there is opportunity there."

"I think that appeals to the other drivers."

Rick Minter's

OBSERVATIONS

Here are some key storylines as the Cup Series takes a week off:

A mad scramble

With six races remaining before the start of the Chase for the Nextel Cup, the field appears to have been narrowed to 12 drivers with realistic chances of being among the elite 10 who will run for the championship.

Points leader Jimmie Johnson and second-place driver Matt Kenseth appear to be virtual locks to make the Chase field, but it's a scramble behind them. Just 188 points separate third-place Jeff Burton from Greg Biffle, who is 12th in the standings.

Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s chances of making the cut appear to be waning through no fault of his own. He's recorded back-to-back last-place finishes — at New Hampshire and Pocono — both of which seem to be due to factors beyond his control. The engine in his No. 8 Chevrolet blew at New Hampshire, and he was involved in a crash at Pocono that he told TV reporters happened because his car was too slow leaving the corners. His latest setback dropped him four spots to 11th in points.

Still, he's upbeat. "We're a good team, and if we do what we're capable of doing, we'll be all right," he told reporters at Pocono.

Tony the tiger?

Defending champion Tony Stewart seems destined to make the Chase in spite of his own inattention, which has put him in bad spots the past two races.

Two weeks ago at New Hampshire, Stewart was leading the race early when he became involved in an on-track altercation with the lapped car of Ryan Newman. He wound up crashing and finishing 37th, which put him out of the top 10 in points.

Then on Sunday at Pocono, the 500-mile race was barely 30 laps old when he ran into Clint Bowyer after he fell. Bowyer crowded him into the outside wall.

After being hit by Stewart, Bowyer skated across the track into the oncoming car of Carl Edwards, who later spun Stewart, in apparent retaliation, as the two entered the pits.

Stewart and Edwards were docked a lap for rough driving. Stewart bounced back to finish seventh and move to 10th in points.

After the race, Stewart was asked by a TV reporter whether he should have been more patient. "I don't think so," he said.

Edwards' retort: Stewart was "spectacularly self-centered."

Winning is everything

There's been a lot of talk about how successful Michael Waltrip has been in attracting top-flight drivers and sponsors for his new Toyota teams that will hit the track next year. He's landed NASCAR for the car he'll drive, Dale Jarrett and UPS, and he'll have Burger King for his third team.

But his older brother, Darrell Waltrip, cautions that top drivers and lucrative sponsors aren't enough in the highly competitive world of Nextel Cup racing.

"It's come down to one thing and I harp on him all the time about it," Darrell Waltrip said. "That's what he is experiencing this year and that's performance."

Driving his own Dodge this season, Michael Waltrip is 36th in points with a best finish of 18th in the season-opening Daytona 500.

"If you don't perform, the sponsors are going to end up being mad at you," Darrell Waltrip said. "You've got to be sure that you get the people, the parts, the pieces and everything it takes to go out on Sunday and perform."

"If you perform, everybody is going to be happy. If you don't, it can be a nightmare."

Big blow for Yates team

The release of Elliott Sadler last week from the No. 38 Ford leaves the once mighty Robert Yates Racing team with no veteran drivers returning next season and many in the sport wondering how long it will take the team to regain its stature in the garage.

Dale Jarrett, driver of the No. 88 Ford, already announced that he was leaving at the end of the season, as is Sadler.

Rookie Stephen Leicht drove a Yates car at Pocono on Sunday, finished 33rd and is set to run Aug. 6 at Indianapolis in the same No. 90 Ford.

He's a contender for a full-time Yates ride next season, and Busch newcomer David Gilliland also has been mentioned as a candidate.

Team co-owner Doug Yates told reporters at Pocono last week that he's looking at both newcomers and veterans as he chooses new drivers.

"We want somebody that wants to be with us, somebody that's willing to dig in and be part of the organization, live it and help us do the things that we need to do," he said. "It's very critical to get somebody that wants us. There needs to be a mutual attraction. There's some good young talent out there that we're looking at. ... Then there are a lot of guys available that maybe need to revitalize their career or another chance, so we'll look at that as well."

Up and coming ...

Brad COLEMAN

Houston native Brad Coleman, 18, appears to have been programmed to be a race-car driver from the start.

At age 12, he was discovered at an indoor karting center by sports-car driving coach Price Cobb and eventually moved to Virginia to live with Cobb's family and travel with them to races.

Last year, he raced in the Rolex 24 at Daytona, and this year, he's driving for Brewco Motorsports, a NASCAR Busch Series team. He recently got his first superspeedway victory, coming from two laps down to win the July 8 ARCA race at Kentucky Speedway. He recently spoke with Rick Minter of Cox News Service.



COLEMAN

Q: How did you get such a varied résumé at such a young age?

A: Our plan from the beginning was to get as much experience in race cars as we could with cross-training in open-wheel cars, sports

cars, the prototypes and Late Model Stock cars, so that no matter what opportunity I had, I'd be prepared.

Q: You seem almost programmed to race. Did you miss out on being a normal kid?

A: There was definitely a little give and take with it. I had to leave my home in Houston at the age of 15 to go live in Virginia, and I can't always hang out with my friends on the weekends because I'm always at races and I'm always working out. So it does take away some of my time, but it's definitely worth it.

Q: How important has it been to have proven talent like Price Cobb and [NASCAR veteran mechanic] Shawn Parker coaching you?

A: We definitely have a great team assembled. Price Cobb started my career, and Shawn has been such a great crew chief this year, helping me learn what the car does and how it's affected by changes. It's a great opportunity.

Q: How big was the ARCA win?

A: It's a huge milestone. It's tied with the 24 Hours of Daytona for one of the greatest moments of my career.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

A: We plan on doing some more ARCA races — Gateway, Nashville and Michigan — and we're going to do a couple more Busch races this year. Next year, we're planning on doing the full Busch schedule. I'm fully committed to doing NASCAR. I've always watched NASCAR growing up. Being in it is a dream come true.

Q: Have you gotten calls from other NASCAR owners since your win at Kentucky?

A: I don't get any calls. All I do is the racing. I have managers and people like that to handle those calls, which is very nice.

Q: What do you do for fun away from the track?

A: I love playing on my simulator, doing simulation race weekends. And I try to be a normal teenager whenever I can.

STANDINGS

NEXTEL CUP

Following the Pennsylvania 500

1. Jimmie Johnson 2,939; previous: 1
2. Matt Kenseth 2,842; previous: 2
3. Jeff Burton 2,621; previous: 3
4. Kyle Busch 2,582; previous: 4
5. Kevin Harvick 2,563; previous: 8
6. Mark Martin 2,557; previous: 5
7. Kasey Kahne 2,515; previous: 6
8. Denny Hamlin 2,514; previous: 12
9. Jeff Gordon 2,512; previous: 9
10. Tony Stewart 2,477; previous: 11

Cup next up: Allstate 400 at The Brickyard; Indianapolis Motor Speedway
TV: 2 p.m. ET Aug. 6; NBC
Busch next up: Gateway 200; Gateway International Raceway
TV: 8 p.m. ET Saturday; TNT
Truck next up: Power Stroke Diesel 200; O'Reilly Raceway Park
TV: 8:30 p.m. ET Aug. 4; Speed Channel



Jeff Burton scored his 13th top-10 finish of 2006 Sunday at Pocono.

BUSCH SERIES

1. Kevin Harvick 3,282; previous: 1
2. Carl Edwards 2,934; previous: 2
3. Clint Bowyer 2,880; previous: 3
4. Denny Hamlin 2,832; previous: 4
5. J.J. Yeley 2,774; previous: 5

TRUCK SERIES

1. Todd Bodine 2,161; previous: 1
2. David Reutimann 2,044; previous: 3
3. Johnny Benson 1,998; previous: 2
4. Rick Crawford 1,930; previous: 5
5. Ted Musgrave 1,913; previous: 4

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