

NASCAR QUIZ

Q: David Pearson holds the record for most Cup wins at Michigan International Speedway (9). What was his nickname?

NASCAR INSIDER

NEXT RACE

Race: GFS Marketplace 400
Where: Michigan International Speedway
When: 2 p.m. ET Sunday
Television: TNT
Defending race winner: Jeremy Mayfield

With NASCAR's growing success comes a greater ...

Pressure to PERFORM

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Atlanta
Aggressive driving already has become one of the big stories of the 2006 NASCAR season. And with four more races, including Sunday's GFS Marketplace 400 at Michigan International Speedway before the start of the Chase for the Nextel Cup, there likely will be a few more chapters written as drivers try to join the elite 10 who will run for the title.

Beating and banging used to be confined mostly to short tracks and road courses, but lately it has become almost commonplace on high-speed ovals. Defending Cup champion Tony Stewart blames much of the problem on younger drivers who don't show patience or respect for veteran drivers. But Stewart has triggered several incidents this season, including one in the Daytona 500 when he sent Matt Kenseth spinning into the grass at nearly 200 mph and another at Pocono last month when he wrecked Clint Bowyer and Carl Edwards in retaliation for being crowded by Bowyer earlier in the race.

Jeff Burton said it's not fair to place all of the blame on younger drivers.

"We do have some young drivers who don't get it, but we have some older ones who don't get it, either," he said.

He said that when he's behind the wheel, he doesn't try to treat a competitor any different because of his experience level.

"When I am out on the race track, I don't look at a guy and think, 'That guy is a rookie and I need to stay away from him,'" he said. "The quality of drivers and teams that we have today is so high that I just see somebody I have to pass or who is trying to pass me."

Burton also pointed out that aggressive driving is not new to NASCAR.

"I would be willing to bet that Cale Yarborough was pretty ticked off about somebody being young and aggressive," he

said. "It is part of the sport. It is part of what we do. It is an aggressive sport."

Burton said what really has changed about NASCAR is that the sport has become more visible, which has put more pressure on drivers to perform.

"The media coverage is more," he said. "You can't turn on the TV without watching something to do with NASCAR ... [and] I think the intensity of racing is at an all-time high."

"I really believe that from spot [No.] 1 to spot 30 is more competitive than it has ever been. If you are running 15th, you are in a dogfight. You can't imagine how hard it is to run 15th."

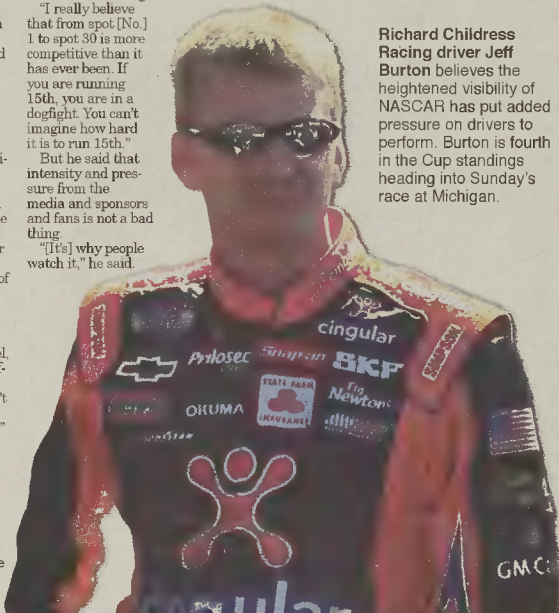
But he said that intensity and pressure from the media and sponsors and fans is not a bad thing.

"[It's] why people watch it," he said.

MICHIGAN INTERNATIONAL SPEEDWAY

Track length: 2 miles
Race length: 200 laps / 400 miles
Banking in corners: 18 degrees
Banking in frontstretch: 12 degrees
Banking in backstretch: 5 degrees
Length of frontstretch: 3,600 feet
Length of backstretch: 2,242 feet
Grandstand seating capacity: 137,243
First race: June 15, 1969; Motor State 500
Qualifying record: Ryan Newman, Dodge; 194.232 mph; June 17, 2005
Race record: Dale Jarrett, Ford; 173.997 mph; June 13, 1999

Richard Childress Racing driver Jeff Burton believes the heightened visibility of NASCAR has put added pressure on drivers to perform. Burton is fourth in the Cup standings heading into Sunday's race at Michigan.



NASCAR

Up and coming ...

Shane Huffman

Shane Huffman, a 32-year-old Hickory, N.C., short-track driver, is set to take over the No. 88 Chevrolet fielded by Dale Earnhardt Jr. in NASCAR's Busch Series. Huffman, who has been racing in the Hooters Pro Cup Series in a Chevy owned by the Nextel Cup star, will take over for Mark McFarland, who was released last week. Huffman recently was interviewed by Rick Minter of Cox News Service.

On his Busch Series plans: "It looks like we'll get to go to Bristol. We'll have to miss California, then, pending NASCAR approval, go to every one we can following that and then do a full year next year."

On his Busch debut last month at Gateway International Raceway: "It was fun. We did some of what we needed to do there. I was really disappointed with the finish and the way the car ran. We

were just a little bit too tight all night. It was as much my fault as anybody's, with me not being experienced enough to get it freed up in practice. The next time I go, I'll have a lot better feel for what I need, so that part will be a lot better."

On having Dale Earnhardt Jr. for a car owner: "He's cool. It's a good time. He criticizes you when you do wrong and lets you know when you do good. He's just a cool guy to be around, a lot of fun. He's been pretty busy lately, so I haven't gotten to be around him much at all. He's got a lot on his plate, but he handles it well, to be as young as he is. If he can handle as much as he's got going on, then what little bit I've got going on shouldn't be anything."

On the pressure of coming into a ride in which the previous driver (McFarland) was released because of

lackluster performance: "I think we all realize we've got a little bit to gain as a team. And I think they realize I'm not an overnight answer. I certainly hope they feel that way I think we need to get a couple of people in some key positions ... I think it's going to get better, but it's going to take some hard work and determination to do it. It's a work in progress."

On racing against the top Cup drivers in the Busch Series: "In a Busch race, they're Busch drivers, so it doesn't really bother me. You're only as good as the people you race, so if you can outrun those guys on any given day, that makes you that much better."

On being one of the few drivers from the Carolinas to enter NASCAR in recent seasons: "That's about the truth. There are just a few of us out there. I'm just proud to be in this position. I hope I can make the best of it, but I know I'll have to work harder than I've ever worked in my life. A lot of things that come with this deal are new to me."



NASCAR

STANDINGS

NEXTEL CUP

Following the AMD at The Glen

- Jimmie Johnson, 3,241; previous: 1
- Matt Kenseth, 3,117; previous: 2
- Kevin Harvick, 2,918; previous: 4
- Jeff Burton, 2,879; previous: 3
- Kyle Busch, 2,871; previous: 5
- Mark Martin, 2,815; previous: 6
- Tony Stewart, 2,794; previous: 9
- Denny Hamlin, 2,762; previous: 7
- Jeff Gordon, 2,756; previous: 8
- Dale Earnhardt Jr., 2,726; previous: 10



Jimmie Johnson holds the lead in the Nextel Cup standings.

Cup next up: GFS Marketplace 400; Michigan International Speedway
TV: 2 p.m. ET Sunday; TNT

Busch next up: Carfax 250; Michigan International Speedway
TV: 2:45 p.m. ET Saturday; TNT

Truck next up: O'Reilly 200; Bristol Motor Speedway
TV: 9 p.m. ET Aug. 23; Speed Channel

BUSCH SERIES

- Kevin Harvick, 3,778; previous: 1
- Carl Edwards, 3,335; previous: 2
- Denny Hamlin, 3,281; previous: 3
- Clint Bowyer, 3,208; previous: 4
- J.J. Yeley, 3,121; previous: 5

TRUCK SERIES

- Todd Bodine, 2,454; previous: 1
- Johnny Benson, 2,310; previous: 2
- David Reutimann, 2,260; previous: 4
- Ted Musgrave, 2,215; previous: 6
- Rick Crawford, 2,199; previous: 3

Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

Some key storylines as the Cup Series heads to Michigan:

Chevy dominance

Despite rules that have made the bodies and engines of cars from various makes very similar, Chevrolet drivers are speeding away from the pack this year. Kevin Harvick's victory Sunday at Watkins Glen was the 14th victory for Chevrolet in 22 points races this season.

Harvick also had a victory at Phoenix this season, but the bulk of Chevy's victories have been scored by drivers from Hendrick Motorsports and Joe Gibbs Racing.

Drivers from those two teams had swept six consecutive races leading into Watkins Glen and have 11 this year.

Dodge has five victories, four by Kasey Kahne and one by Kurt Busch. Ford has three, two by Matt Kenseth and one by his Roush Racing teammate Greg Biffle.

Last year, Ford had nine victories at this juncture, but the speed is not quite there this year, according to Biffle, who appeared to have a fast car at Watkins Glen, only to be knocked into the wall, which relegated him to a 38th-place finish.

"Our cars just aren't as good as they have been in the past," he said during a teleconference last week. "We're off a little bit. I think the drivers are making up for a lot of it right now ... [but] I think our competition has got us beat a little bit, certainly more than they did last year."

Chase scramble

The top 10 in the Nextel Cup standings were scrambled somewhat by the finish of Sunday's race at Watkins Glen, but the players remain unchanged with four races left before the start of the 10-race Chase for the Nextel Cup that will determine the season champion.

The challengers just outside the top 10 held their positions in the standings, but most weren't able to close the gap on the top 10.

Kasey Kahne, who was third in points after the Save Mart 350 at Infineon Raceway on June 25, held onto the 11th position, but went from 37 points out of 10th to 54 back after crashing on the last lap for the second consecutive week.

Greg Biffle, last year's points runner-up, wrecked at The Glen and limped home 38th, which leaves him 174 points behind 10th-place Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Kurt Busch, the pole-sitter at The Glen, appeared to be in position to challenge for the race victory and gain needed points, but was sent to the back of the line for pitting too soon when a mid-race caution flag flew. He wound up 21st, but added just three points to his deficit to Earnhardt. He's still 138th in points, 177 points out of 10th.

Carl Edwards remains 14th in the standings despite an impressive fifth-place finish at The Glen, but he's 185 points out of the elite 10.

It's all silly

NASCAR used to have a "Silly Season" late in the year, when drivers and crew chiefs began revealing plans to move to new teams. But Silly Season has become a year-round event, and in many cases, the changes take effect immediately rather than at the end of the year as they once did.

Last week, veteran crew chief Todd Parrott left Petty Enterprises, which he joined this year, and returned to Robert Yates Racing, which saw two of its crew chiefs leave two weeks ago. One of Yates' ex-crew chiefs, Tommy Baldwin, already is at work at Bill Davis Racing.

And Jeremy Mayfield, after making the cut for the Chase the past two seasons, was fired by car owner Ray Evernham after the team dropped out of the top 35 in owners' points.

It's possible that Elliott Sadler, who already has announced plans to leave Yates, will take over for Mayfield, possibly as soon as this week, while Yates may turn to Mayfield as a temporary fill-in in the No. 38 Ford.

Mayfield is expected to join one of the teams planning to field Toyotas next season.

Yates team co-owner Doug Yates said mid-season swaps are best if a change is going to be made anyway. "There's no point in waiting until the end of the year if you can go ahead and get a start on next year," he said.

Foreign invasion

The addition of several new Toyota teams next year is going to swell the ranks of Nextel Cup entries, but that may not necessarily be a good thing, according to some of the sport's major players.

"There are going to be too many cars," said Chevrolet driver Jeff Burton. "I don't think it's healthy for our sport to have 47, 48, 49 fully sponsored, fully prepared teams because we're going to send major sponsors home."

Only 43 drivers start Nextel Cup races under the current rules.

Burton and plenty of others also believe that Toyota is spending freely on personnel and equipment, driving up the cost for every other team.

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