

Big names fastest in preseason IRL tests

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS

Testing results in any series are tough to interpret, with teams and drivers concentrating on different aspects of performance besides pure speed.

Some teams work on aerodynamics, some on race setups and some on qualifying trim.

But after five days of preseason testing by IRL IndyCar Series competitors at 1-mile Phoenix International Raceway as well as the 2.21-mile road course and the 1.5-mile oval at Homestead-Miami (Fla.) Speedway, the cream rose to the top.

Five drivers were among the top seven on each day of testing, no matter the track configuration, and they represent three Indianapolis 500 wins and the past five series championships.

That includes Marlboro Team Penske drivers Helio Castroneves, a two-time Indy winner, and 2001 and 2002 series champion Sam Hornish Jr.; Chip Ganassi Racing drivers Scott Dixon, the 2003 series champ, and reigning Indy winner and series champion Dan Wheldon; and Andretti Green driver and 2004 champ Tony Kanaan.

A lot of attention was on Wheldon, who left Andretti Green at the end of 2005 to join the Ganassi team that has struggled since Dixon's title.

"Target Chip Ganassi Racing has won championships, and they've won all the big races," Wheldon said. "They should be proud to be on top (of the speed charts)," said Wheldon, who like Castroneves led the time sheets twice during testing.

Wheldon understands that testing well doesn't always translate into good racing.

He dominated preseason testing last year and continued his top form throughout the 2005 season. But new teammate Dixon was the most consistent driver in testing in 2004 and was never a factor in the championship.

In contrast, Buddy Rice had a breakout season in 2004 but didn't crack the top 10 in testing.

"Yeah, you feel good, but it's just a test," Wheldon said. "It means nothing, really. But I think we're in OK shape."

LOCAL RACERS' BIOS

Terry Gunn

Age: 40
Hometown: Greenwood
Family: Wife, Diane; son, Tyler, 15; daughters, Brittany, 13, and Shelby, 11

Occupation: Plumbing designer for Circle Design Group in Indianapolis

Type of racing: Has raced in the Hornets division at Indianapolis Raceway Park for three years

Racing vehicle: 1994 Plymouth Sundance powered by a 135-cubic-inch four-cylinder Plymouth engine

Of note: Gunn scored a feature win in his first Hornets race at the Speedrome. He is part of a five-car Gunner Motorsports team. His son, Tyler, plans to compete in some Hornets races this season.

Kody Hughes

Age: 12
Hometown: New Whiteland
Family: Parents Stacy and Kristin Hughes; brother, Ezra, 5

Occupation: Seventh-grader at Clark-Pleasant Middle School

Type of racing: 100cc clutch kart racing in World Karting Association Manufacturers Cup, Stars of Karting and various regional races

Racing vehicles: Birel karts and Hi-Rev engines in the Yamaha Junior Can and Stars JICA divisions

Of note: Kody started racing at age 6. He earned Midwest Sprint Regional Series and Indiana Yamaha Junior Sportsman championships and placed third in the WKA Manufacturers Cup national points standings in 2004.



GUNN



HUGHES

FORMULA ONE: SEASON PREVIEW

New look for Formula One

Schumacher vows return to top; Alonso ready for challenge

BY SALVATORE ZANCA
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAKHIR, Bahrain

For the first time in five years, Michael Schumacher will not have the No. 1 on his Ferrari as defending champion in Formula One.

There are new champions, Fernando Alonso and Renault; new teams; new drivers; and, once again, new rules and regulations to try to spice up the sport.

And, for the first time, the season begins in the Middle East as the sport continues to move away from its traditional European base.

Schumacher has vowed to come back, although he is the oldest driver on the grid. Alonso, who became the youngest F1 champion last season, says he wants to remain as No. 1 before moving to a new team in 2007.

"It is very difficult to win a championship, and you need a lot of things around you to have the chance," Alonso said. "Last year, I started the season dreaming of maybe winning one race and getting regular podiums, but we won the title."

"In 2006, I know we have a competitive car in the R26, so my only goal is to repeat the title."

Schumacher certainly knows what it takes to repeat as champion. He did it in 1995 for Benetton after winning for the first time in 1994. Then he had a string of five straight titles for Ferrari between 2000 and 2004 before the rest of the pack caught up with the car with the prancing stallion logo.

"My only goal is winning the championship. Ferrari feels the same way," Schumacher said. "When I see and feel how much effort everyone is putting in these days, I think I can be optimistic. We've been doing a good job in testing, and it's clear to see that the fighting spirit is back. We seem to be heading in the right direction."

After the final race of the 2005 season in Shanghai in October, most drivers went on an extended vacation. Schumacher was eager to get some work in; he cut short his annual Norwegian holiday and tested the new car in February, a month earlier than last year.



Two unidentified women walk past one of the many billboards promoting the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix in Manama, Bahrain, on Wednesday. The race will be Sunday.

But Alonso is ready, too. "After a whole winter off, I want to see the people in the grandstands and feel the emotion of Formula One again," he said. "Renault are the world champions, and the whole team is very motivated because of this."

Then there is Kimi Raikkonen of McLaren. He matched Alonso with seven wins last season and could have gotten a few more if not for engine failures during qualifying that cost the team a 10-place penalty in the starting grid on more than one occasion.

He lost the title by 21 points (133 to 112) to Alonso.

In an effort to create more competition, Formula One officials approved a new qualifying format for this season and authorized the reintroduction of tire changes and a smaller engine.

Under the new format, qualifying in 2006 will be conducted in three phases. The five slowest cars will drop out after the first 15 minutes, and five more will depart after the next 15. The remaining cars will compete in a 20-minute ses-

sion for the top spots on the grid.

Alonso is not that concerned. "For the drivers, it will not change too much. I think the challenge is more for the teams and engineers, finding the right strategy and working very quickly," he said. "Last year, we had one opportunity for a quick lap; now, we have at least three occasions when we have to set a lap time."

Single-lap qualifying was used last season. Qualifying has been changed regularly in recent seasons, an effort to give smaller teams more TV time and shake up the starting grid.

There also a change from the V10 to the V8 engine in another effort to give smaller teams a chance. Tire changes were outlawed in 2005, except in rare cases, whereas in 2006 teams will be able to change tires.

There are new faces on the starting grid, including the first American since 1993.

Scott Speed, a 22-year-old Californian, will drive for Red Bull's second team, Scuderia Toro Rosso.

F1 TEAMS

The 11 teams going into the 2006 Formula One season:

Renault

World champion 2005; 25 wins; reliability helped the team win the constructors title and the drivers title in 2005 after taking over from Benetton in 2002.

McLaren-Mercedes

Eight world titles; 148 wins; challenged Renault throughout 2005 season but struggled with engine failures, especially for Kimi Raikkonen.

Ferrari

Fourteen world titles; 183 wins; dominant from 1999 until rule changes helped Renault and McLaren take over. Anxious to return to top, but Michael Schumacher just turned 37.

Williams

Nine world titles; 113 wins; once the epitome of a well-drilled team, has fallen off since last title in 1997.

Toyota

No world titles; no wins; Jarno Trulli was in pole position at the U.S. Grand Prix when the seven Michelin teams decided it was unsafe to race.

Honda

No world titles; two wins; took over from BAR team, last individual win as Honda was nearly 40 years ago in 1967.

Red Bull Racing

No world titles; no wins; took over from Jaguar last year and had a pair of fourth-place finishes.

Scuderia Toro Rosso

First season; the second team of Red Bull Racing has an American, Scott Speed, as one of its drivers.

BMW-Sauber

First season; BMW moved away from Williams and took over Sauber, hoping to show what it can do on its own.

Super Aguri

First season; Japanese team barely got to the starting grid, with financial agreements set late in January.

Midland

No world titles; no wins; former Jordan team was taken over by Russian group and has a Russian license.

NASCAR hall voters will have tough time deciding

BY MIKE HARRIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLOTTE, N.C.

Now that we know where the NASCAR Hall of Fame will be built,

the bigger question remains:

Who will be the building blocks of its legacy?

It was announced this week that the \$107.5 million hall, expected to lure hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, will open by 2009 in downtown Charlotte, the heartland of the stockcar sport. It beat out Atlanta and Daytona Beach in the final showdown of big plans and big dollars.

But no one knows how the first class of inductees will be picked, or by whom. Whatever the process, there is going to be a debate of enormous magnitude.

After all, when the Baseball Hall of Fame opened its doors in 1936, not even Babe Ruth was a unanimous choice of the baseball writers.

The Bambino wasn't even the top vote-getter of the five players in that first class: Ty Cobb was on 222 of 226 ballots, while Ruth and Honus Wagner each appeared on 215 ballots. Walter Johnson and Christy Mathewson also made it into the horsehide shrine in that first vote.

Of course, things could be easier for the NASCAR voters.

I mean, how could any voter



An artist's rendering shows a view of the proposed NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte, N.C. The hall is scheduled to open in 2009.

fail to mark an "X" by the name of William Henry Getty "Big Bill" France on that first ballot?

Without Bill Sr., there would be no NASCAR.

The somewhat redundantly named National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing was invented in 1947 in France's fertile mind, a way of giving the competitors a fair shake on purses and pursuing standards for racetracks.

The tough-minded, hands-on France oversaw construction of Daytona International Speedway and Talladega Superspeedway, the two tracks that personify the sport. His family continues to run NASCAR through a benevolent dictatorship that has seen the sport expand and flourish into a behemoth with an estimated 75 million fans.

So where do you go after picking a dictator?

How about a king? Richard Petty is NASCAR's Babe Ruth, a towering figure who dominated the sport for three decades. He won 200 races,

seven championships and the undying loyalty of a majority of NASCAR's early fans.

"Stockcar racing wasn't exactly a part of everybody's household back then, especially since it wasn't on TV a whole lot early in his career," said son Kyle Petty. "But, everywhere we went, people knew who he was. He was The King, and he still is."

It wouldn't be much of a first class with only two members.

How about adding the driver who surpassed Petty in popularity? Dale Earnhardt came from a hardscrabble, lunchpail life to become not only stockcar racing's biggest star but also its best salesman in the 1980s and 1990s.

And it would be hard to leave David Pearson out of the first group of inductees. "The Silver Fox" was Richard Petty's nemesis. Pearson won only three championships, but his 105 race wins were second only to Petty.

Mike Harris covers motorsports for The Associated Press.

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