



McMurray grapples with lofty expectations

Move to Roush's team increases pressure to succeed, racer says

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.
Jamie McMurray's move from Chip Ganassi's No. 42 Dodge to Jack Roush's team has taken him from an organization that was winless last year to one that dominated the Nextel Cup Series.

And that places the pressure squarely on McMurray's shoulders because his No. 26 Ford, which is the old No. 97 at Roush, has won 14 races and a championship in the past four seasons.

The lofty expectations were apparent to McMurray from his first meeting with his crew chief, Jimmy Fennig.

"When I first went in and spoke with Jimmy, we were just trying to get to know each other, and he talked about winning a lot," McMurray said.

He said he's well aware that his team and the other four Roush outfits won races last year and made the cut for the Chase for the Nextel Cup.

"I've thought about that a lot," McMurray said.

"I thought, 'What if you go halfway through the season and you don't win a race, or you go all year and you don't win?'"

But he said those thoughts are normal for competitive race drivers.

The biggest difference for him is the improved attitude that comes from taking the wheel of a proven winner. He hasn't driven a race winner in the Cup since October 2002 at Charlotte.

"I think mentally you're a lot more positive because you know that the cars that you're in are capable of winning because that's their record," he said.

"Racing, regardless of what people say, is a mental sport, and if you believe you can win, if you're in a car that can win, you more than likely will."



NASCAR

Jamie McMurray joins Roush Racing in 2006, taking over in the No. 26 Ford, which was Kurt Busch's No. 97 car.



Some drivers say today's cars are too powerful, producing speeds that make maneuvering difficult.

RENEE HANNANS / Cox News Service

Going too fast?

Jarrett: Cut speeds to improve racing

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.
Dale Jarrett says that if NASCAR wants to put on a better show, the way to go is slow.

During a break in testing last week at Daytona International Speedway, Jarrett said that cutting top speeds by 15 mph would produce more of the side-by-side racing that fans love to watch.

"I still like to go as fast as we can go. That's what the thrill of all of this is, but ... the cars are going too fast, and we can't run side by side, which is what this sport was built on," Jarrett said. "I think we have to seriously consider downsizing these engines."

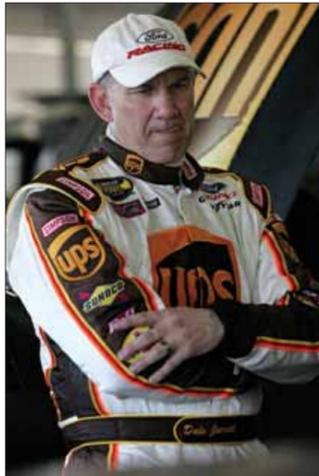
Jarrett said that during his nearly 20 years on NASCAR's elite Nextel Cup division, he has seen horsepower climb from around 620 to 850, giving drivers so much power and speed that it has become a challenge to maneuver around the track one car at a time, let alone side by side.

"We can't put on the show that we need," he said, adding that the only drawback to reduced speeds is there won't be any speed records set.

"I don't think anybody really cares about that," he said. "It's about Sunday and that race, and we have to put that product back out there."

It's an idea long embraced by Atlanta Motor Speedway president Ed Clark.

"That's one of many things that I



NASCAR

Dale Jarrett says "We can't put on the show that we need."

he appealed (to NASCAR) for on a continual basis," Clark said. "If they can run three-wide here at 190 [mph], then they would be four-wide at 178."

He said recent IROC races at AMS, which run at speeds far slower than those seen in Nextel Cup races, prove his point.

"IROC cars are five-wide some-times," he said. Robin Pemberton, NASCAR's vice president of competition, agrees that slower speeds might help at some tracks, but it's a difficult idea to implement and one that is not in NASCAR's immediate plans.

"It's not something that would be an across-the-board fix," he said, adding

that he considered some of last year's races at the faster tracks as competitive as any.

"I can't agree that you'd have better racing [with slower speeds] at places like Texas and Homestead," he said.

But he said NASCAR is looking at ways to reduce horsepower, and that once the Car of Tomorrow is on the track, work will begin on the "Engine of Tomorrow."

The idea of slower speeds on the fast tracks draws a mixed reaction in the NASCAR garage.

Sterling Marlin points out that the old tracks with worn, tire-shredding asphalt surfaces often produce slower and better races than newer ovals where speeds remain consistently high.

"At the old tracks, speeds drop off a good bit and you can race," Marlin said. "But everywhere else it's just wide open all the time."

Jamie McMurray said slower speeds aren't for him.

"I would rather go faster," he said. Mike Wallace said Jarrett's position has merit.

"At Texas or Charlotte or places like that, the speeds are fast enough that nobody wants to run side-by-side for long because you know what the inevitable ends up being," he said, implying a wreck. "You have to agree [with Jarrett] that if you slowed them down a little bit, it would be more conducive to side-by-side racing."

"I think the fans want to see a good race and aren't really worried about how fast we're going."

Does Wallace foresee any drastic changes coming from NASCAR any time soon?

"No," he said.

ARCA driver thrilled to join IROC Series

The ARCA series, which struggles to fill seats on super-speedways and has its most popular races on the dirt tracks of the Midwest, got a big boost in publicity and stature last week when seven-time champion Frank Kimmel was picked to participate in the International Race of Champions series.

The four-race series puts elite drivers from various forms of racing in identically prepared Pontiac Firebirds. The opener is at Daytona International Speedway on Feb. 17, followed by a run at Texas Motor Speedway on April 7.

On June 29, the circuit moves to the road course at Daytona, and the season finale is at Atlanta Motor Speedway on Oct. 28. The overall points winner will earn \$1 million.

Kimmel said he was humbled to be picked to race against some of the sport's biggest names.

"We've had success in ARCA, but that's different," he said. "I'm just looking forward to doing the best I can."

Mark Martin, the defending IROC champion and the circuit's all-time leader in victories with 13 and titles with five, will participate for the 12th time in his career.

"You tend to take for granted what a privilege it is," he said. "This may be my last time to race in IROC — or it might not be — and I'm going to enjoy it."

Other participants include NASCAR drivers Tony Stewart, Martin Truex Jr., Ted Musgrave, Matt Kenseth and Carl Edwards.

— Rick Minter

NOTEBOOK

Edwards says focus essential for success

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.
Carl Edwards, winner of four Nextel Cup and five Busch Series races in his first full season on NASCAR's top two circuits, vows that his newfound fame and fortune won't affect his performance on the race track.

"I truly believe that if we run poorly this season — it could happen; it happens all the time — that it won't be because my head is not in the right place," he said during a break in testing last week at Daytona International Speedway. "I think it would be naive to think I would let something go that I've worked so hard for."



EDWARDS

"I'll be darned if I let anything get in the way of us having a good year and me performing."

He acknowledged that his life and the demands away from the track have changed due to his success behind the wheel of Jack Roush's Fords.

He said he's been advised by friends and others in the sport that even though off-track activities can be fun and lucrative, he shouldn't forget that what got him to where he is now was his unwavering focus on his driving.

Edwards said Bruce Kennedy, husband of International Speedway Corp. president and NASCAR board member Lesa France Kennedy, told him as much.

"That was kind of a little reminder, and I appreciate all of that I can get," Edwards said. "There are so many things that come that I never expected, so many responsibilities and so many things that seem like great opportunities because they pay really well or they're fun, but the number one thing for me is to be the fastest race car driver I can be."

A higher backing

Even though he qualified for just four races last season, Morgan Shepherd plans a full season this year.

With backing from Ohio brothers Tony and Brian Mullett, the 64-year-old Shepherd will compete in his No. 89 "Racing with Jesus" Dodge.

The Mulletts said in a statement that they're putting together a group of Christian businesses to back Shepherd's team.

"This is a great opportunity for Christians to help promote salvation and to promote the importance of our Savior to the world through one of the best means possible: motorsports," Tony Mullett said.

Vickers has surgery

Brian Vickers' No. 25 Chevrolet was sixth fastest in the Jan. 16 test session at Daytona International Speedway, but he returned home to North Carolina later in the week to have surgery to repair a hernia. Team spokesman Chris Haid said Vickers, 22, is recovering after a successful operation.

Repeat for Roush?

The consensus among drivers testing at Daytona International Speedway during recent testing sessions is that Roush Racing won't be able to put all five of its drivers in the Chase for the Nextel Cup as it did last season.

Even Roush's Greg Biffle, who finished second in the standings to Stewart, said it is unlikely.

"That was pretty extraordinary last year," he said. "I hope we do. I hope everybody runs that well, but odds are that one of us may have some trouble along the way."

Car of tomorrow

NASCAR's Car of Tomorrow will make its official debut on short tracks and road courses during the 2007 season.

John Darby, director of the Nextel Cup Series, said the new racing vehicle will be introduced in stages over three seasons, starting with tracks such as Martinsville and Richmond in '07. He will then go on to the bigger ovals — two miles in length or more — before coming to the 1.5-mile tracks like Atlanta Motor Speedway.

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