

Black driver set to make Cup history

By JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA

Bill Lester couldn't stand sitting behind a desk.

He walked away from a six-figure job to pursue his dream of being a racecar driver, not even thinking about the chance to leave his mark on history.

"I'm a racer," Lester said. "But now I realize that I have a unique opportunity and responsibility to make a change."

On Friday, Lester will attempt to become the first black driver in nearly 20 years to qualify for a race in NASCAR's top series.

He's a longshot to make the 43-car field for the Nextel Cup race at Atlanta Motor Speedway but hopes that his presence will inspire others to follow.

"There are a lot of black people out there who are closet NASCAR fans," Lester said. "They feel uncomfortable about coming to



Bill Lester, shown during a news conference in Atlanta on Tuesday, will be the first black driver to attempt to qualify for a NASCAR Nextel Cup race in nearly 20 years when he tries to make the field for Sunday's Golden Corral 500.

the racetrack because it's hard to identify with anyone there. I'm in a position to change that."

Willy T. Ribbs was the most recent black driver to compete in a Cup race, qualifying for three

events in 1986. His best finish was 29th.

NASCAR's most successful black driver was Wendell Scott, whose 13-year career spanned 495 races and a landmark victory in

1964. A few years after he retired, Richard Pryor starred in the movie "Greased Lightning," based on Scott's battle for acceptance in the white-dominated sport.

Lester, a regular in NASCAR's truck series since 2002, hasn't been as successful as Scott. He's managed to finish in the top five twice and been on the pole three times in the truck series but has yet to win.

At 45, he's probably too old to be considered for a regular ride.

Still, it's a lot better than his former job as a project manager at Hewlett-Packard Corp., where he grew bored with making presentations and meeting with board directors.

"At that point of my life, I didn't want to feel like it was a coulda or woulda situation," Lester recalled. "Grease, gas and rubber has given me a totally different effect than before."

Atlanta Motor Speedway president Ed Clark urged Lester to en-

ter qualifying for this week's Nextel Cup race, not far from the driver's home in suburban Atlanta.

Clark hasn't given up on the idea of Lester earning a regular spot on the Nextel Cup circuit.

"He is the kind of guy that represents NASCAR well," Clark said. "This isn't about a one-time race. He's going to have a chance to do this six or more times this year and maybe lead into a full-time opportunity next year."

Anthony Martin, a friend of Ribbs, said it's not enough for a black driver to compete in Nextel Cup. Pointing to the Williams sisters in tennis and Tiger Woods in golf, he said the best way to break through racial stereotypes is to win races.

"It can be a situation where he finishes 25th or 30th, and there is no significance," said Martin, founder and executive director of Urban Youth Racing School in Philadelphia.

Lester doesn't worry about the

long odds he faces in becoming the Tiger Woods of his sport.

"If I lived the way other people view me, then I wouldn't be where I am today," Lester said. "If I meet my goals and expectations, then I've easily exceeded everyone else."

It was initially tough for Lester and his wife, Cheryl, when he made the career change in 1987. For three years, they got by on smart investments and savings.

Lester struggled through 14 years of searching for a sponsor. In 1999, he finally raced in his first NASCAR event, a Busch Series event in which he moved into the top 10 before a crash left him with a 21st-place finish.

In 2002, Lester got a regular ride in the truck series. He finished 17th in the standings his first season, and moved up to 14th the next year. In 2005, he won back-to-back poles, and a pair of fifth-place finishes were the best of his career.

NBA star part owner of IRL team

By STEVE HERMAN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Carmelo Anthony of the Denver Nuggets will be a co-owner of the Hemelgarn team in the Indy Racing League, a partnership designed in part to broaden the series' appeal to a younger generation of fans.



ANTHONY

The deal between the IRL team and the 21-year-old Anthony, one of the top young stars in the NBA, was brokered by Kiss bassist Gene Simmons, whose marketing company signed a deal to promote the open-wheel series in January.

"It was my group, his group, going back and forth for a long

period of time," Anthony said Wednesday at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. "The opportunity was there, and I couldn't let it slip out of my hands to be involved in something like this."

Rookie P.J. Chesson, a sprinter-car driver and four-time World of Outlaws winner who debuted in the IRL developmental Indy Pro Series two years ago, will drive the No. 91 Dallara, which carries the name "Car Melo" and a likeness of the NBA star.

"For the record, I'm not getting in the car. I can't fit into no Indy-car," the 6-foot-8 Anthony said. "I'm just excited about the project. I think we're going to have a lot of fun."

Anthony, seventh in NBA scoring at 26.3 points a game, was in Indianapolis for the Nuggets' game Wednesday night against the Indiana Pacers.

Last week, Anthony, LeBron

James, Kobe Bryant and 20 other players were selected to the USA Basketball team for possible spots on the world championship and 2008 Beijing Olympic teams.

"When I really like something, I try to put my all into it," Anthony said. "This is something that's different from when I was growing up on the basketball court, running up and down, scoring 30 points or something. This is totally something different."

Simmons, who wrote a 91-second promotional anthem called "I Am Indy," also attended the announcement at the Speedway, along with his marketing partner Richard Abramson.

"I'm perhaps the public persona of a really simple message: You should all be blessed because you're standing on hallowed ground," Simmons said. "This is the Indy, baby. ... These are the fastest cars on four wheels."

• Track

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Hornets cars) would cost," Krimmel said. "They left it on my driveway for me."

"I just thought it would be something to play with. It's a fun class."

Krimmel plans to race in Hornets figure-8 races on Friday nights and help Frye's racers on Saturday nights, when the late models are the Speedrome's featured division.

The final race in the Spring Fling will be at 2 p.m. Sunday.

Pit stops

• **Charlie Welch Jr.** of Franklin won the 70cc quad class at the Grand National Cross Country race in Washington, Ga., on Saturday. He finished sixth in De Leon Springs, Fla., on March 5.

Welch, a second-grader at Break-O-Day Elementary School, is first in the season standings after two events. His next race will be in North Carolina on March 25.

• **Shelby Howard IV** of Greenwood had a strong showing in his first USAR Hooters Pro Cup Series race of the season, starting 15th and finishing fifth in the South Georgia 250 at South Georgia Motorsports Park in Cecil, Ga., on Saturday.

Howard, driving a Pontiac owned by defending NASCAR Nextel Cup champion **Tony Stewart**, was one of 19 cars still on the lead lap at the end of the 259-lap race.

• **Wes Wells** of Greenwood is among the entrants in the Pro Stock Motorcycle category at this weekend's NHRA 37th annual ACDelco Gatornationals in Gainesville, Fla.

The race is the third of the season in the NHRA Powerade Drag Racing but the first event including the motorcycle category.

• **Brownstown Speedway's** annual car show was postponed March 11 because of wet grounds and has been rescheduled for this Saturday, when the track also will host a practice session, weather permitting.

The car show, free to the public, will be from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The pits for the practice session will open at 3 p.m., with cars taking to the track from 4 to 7 p.m.

• **Anderson Speedway** will host its March Motorsports Madness event starting at 2 p.m. Saturday.

Figure-8s, Legends Cars, street stocks, ThunderCars and front-wheel drives will race on Anderson's high-banked quarter-mile paved oval.

• **Indianapolis Raceway Park**, in conjunction with Automotion RaceCars, will offer free drag-racing classes starting in May.

The classes will feature the ins and outs of National Hot Rod Association bracket racing and will be taught by some of the top drag racers at IRP. The classes are open to experienced racers and newcomers.

The classes will be May 4, 11 and 18. Space is limited to 40 participants.

To register, call **Mike Myslinski**,

director of operations for IRP, at 387-7341; or **Scott Dillman** at Automotion RaceCars, 786-9300.

• It's not too late to have your picture and information published in the Daily Journal as a part of our roll call of local racers.

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All racers should contact Decker either by e-mail (jdecker@thejournalnet.com) or by mail (The Daily Journal, 2575 N. Morton St., Franklin, IN 46131, attn: Jeff Decker).

Here's what we need to know:

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• Contact information, including phone number (cell phone numbers come in handy) and/or e-mail address. This information will not be published in the Daily Journal.

• A high-quality head-and-shoulders photo of yourself.

Jeff Decker covers motorsports for the Daily Journal. He can be reached by phone at 736-2734 or by e-mail at jdecker@thejournalnet.com.

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