

# Labonte wants to lead Petty team's resurgence

By CHRIS JENKINS  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## TRINITY, N.C.

Kyle Petty's improbable recruiting effort finally paid off.

For three years, Petty nagged Bobby Labonte to come drive the family team's famed No. 43 car.

He'd stop Labonte on the streets of their subdivision in Trinity, N.C., where Petty jogs and Labonte rides his bicycle. They'd talk on airplane rides. One day, they ran into each other getting a bite to eat at a bakery.

Petty delivered the same plea every time: "Come drive that 43, man."

Petty was joking, or at least he thought he was. Why would Labonte, the 2000 series champion, leave an elite team such as Joe Gibbs Racing for a once-dominant team that has fallen on two decades worth of hard times?

Turns out, the chance to help turn around Petty Enterprises proved more attractive to La-



NASCAR Nextel Cup driver Bobby Labonte, left, talks with crew chief Todd Parrott, right, and team owner Richard Petty during practice for the Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla., on Feb. 18.

bonte than Petty had anticipated.

"He had people throwing money at him, fortune and fame and houses and cars and all kinds of stuff," Petty said. "But in the end,

this is where he chose to come."

Labonte's move is the latest and most high-profile step in a recent talent infusion that has the Petty people talking turnaround.

## Dealer

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

appearance by WKLU-101.3 FM personality Kevin Spencer, booths for organizations that support biker safety, and Yamaha Pro team riders, including Chad Reed, one of the top performers in the national supercross series. Reed, the 2004 series champion, will sign autographs starting at 6 p.m. Friday.

Gates will open for the Amp'd Mobile World Supercross GP/Amp'd Mobile AMA Supercross Series race at the RCA Dome at 12:30 p.m. Saturday. Practice and qualifications also will begin then. Main-event races will begin at 7 p.m. Saturday.

Flat Out Motorsports, a full-line Yamaha dealership, opened in May. Starkey said the majority of its business centers around Yamaha's line of cruiser motorcycles, bikes designed for comfortable highway riding, not taking sharp corners and making steep jumps on a dirt track.

But Starkey hopes that young fans of the supercross series will want to come to his dealership, perhaps bringing their parents, to check out what Flat Out Motorsports has to offer.

"We wanted to associate a brand-new store with a major event in Indianapolis," said Starkey, who noted the impact that a visit to Indianapolis by a national racing series like the Amp'd Mobile World Supercross GP/Amp'd Mobile AMA Supercross Series can have on the city.

"It'd be close to like having a PGA Tour tournament in Indianapolis," Starkey said.

Starkey counts himself as a fan of supercross racing. He has attended past supercross events at the RCA Dome and will be on hand for Saturday's race.

What he'll see are remarkable athletes flying around the track on some serious performance machines. Supercross bikes typically weigh 230 to 260 pounds and are equipped with engines that produce about 70 horsepower.

Lightweight motorcycles, ample horsepower and a rugged course provide a challenge for supercross riders.

"They're in unbelievable physical condition," Starkey said. "Their bodies take a beating."

The riders will be cheered on by some of the most rabid fans in all of motorsports. The sound, the spectacle and the competition make for an entertaining show.

"I love it," Starkey said. "People just really get pumped up for this type of thing."

## LOCAL RACERS' BIOS

### Brandon Popplewell

Age: 8  
Hometown: Whiteland  
Family: Parents, Danny and Catina Popplewell; brother, Justin Minton, 13; sister, Brittney Minton, 11  
Occupation: First-grader at Sawmill Woods Elementary  
Type of racing: Will be a rookie in NHRA Junior Dragster racing, competing at Brown County Dragway, Indianapolis Raceway Park and New Hope Dragway, among other tracks  
Racing vehicle: 2004 chassis with 5-horsepower Briggs & Stratton engine custom-built by Justin Mellot.



B. POPPLEWELL

Hometown: Whiteland  
Family: Wife, Catina Popplewell; sons Justin Minton, 13, and Brandon Popplewell, 8; daughter, Brittney Minton, 11  
Occupation: Does body work and paints for Noshoj Enterprises of Greenwood  
Type of racing: Drag races in the Super Pro class at Brown County Dragway, Indianapolis Raceway Park and New Hope Dragway, among other tracks  
Racing vehicle: 1977 Chevrolet Nova with a 468-cubic-inch big-block Chevy engine. Popplewell has owned the car for 16 years.



D. POPPLEWELL

### Elizabeth Runyan

Age: 13  
Hometown: New Whiteland  
Family: Parents, Dennis and Rose Runyan; brothers, Michael Runyan, 33; Thomas Luttrell, 25; and Samuel Luttrell, 20; and sisters, Ginny Runyan, 26, and Rebekah Luttrell, 22  
Occupation: Eighth-grader at Clark-Pleasant Middle School  
Type of racing: Entering her eighth season of racing go-karts  
Racing vehicle: Owns karts with Birel, Heron and Speedemon chassis; races in Yamaha Junior Can, Yamaha Can Light, Yamaha Can Heavy, Jr. TaG and 80cc Junior Shifter classes.  
Of note: Runyan won the 2004 80cc Junior Shifter championship in the Southern Indiana Racing Association.



RUNYAN

### Justin Minton

Age: 13  
Hometown: Whiteland  
Family: Parents, Danny and Catina Popplewell; sister, Brittney Minton, 11; brother, Brandon Popplewell, 8  
Occupation: Eighth-grader at Clark-Pleasant Middle School  
Type of racing: Will be a rookie in NHRA Junior Dragster racing, competing at Brown County Dragway, Indianapolis Raceway Park and New Hope Dragway, among other tracks  
Racing vehicle: 2004 chassis with 5-horsepower Briggs & Stratton engine custom-built by Justin Mellot.



MINTON

### Danny Popplewell II

Age: 32

## Pit stops

The Indianapolis Speedrome will get an early jump on its 66th season, weather permitting, with the Spring Fling racing series, which begins Sunday at the east-side track.

Roadrunners and Hornets will compete in the three-race series. Other races are scheduled for March 12 and 19. The Speedrome also will be open to its other divisions for practice during the Spring Fling events.

Gates open at 11 a.m. Sunday, with racing at 2 p.m.

Anderson Speedway will have an open practice Saturday and then kick off its season with March Madness on March 11. Figure-8s, Legend Cars, street stocks, ThunderCars and front-wheel drives will be a part of the season opener.

Brownstown Speedway will host its annual car show from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. March 11 at the

track on the Jackson County Fairgrounds.

More than 50 cars from all of the track's racing classes will be on display. Admission is free, and door prizes will be given away.

E.T. Raceway near Bloomfield recently released its 2006 schedule.

The track will host a test-and-tune April 1 and its first bracket race April 15. Racing will continue on the 1/8-mile drag strip on Saturdays through Oct. 28.

New Hope Dragway near Freedom recently released its 2006 schedule.

The 1/8-mile drag strip will host a test-and-tune session April 9, with the first race scheduled April 23. The track will host Friday-night racing through October.

Jeff Decker is assistant sports editor for the Daily Journal. Comments can be sent to P.O. Box 699, Franklin, IN 46131 or by e-mail at jdecker@thejournalnet.com.

## RACERS' ROLL CALL

If you're a racer who lives in Johnson County or the Daily Journal's circulation area just outside the county, the Daily Journal wants to hear from you.

All racers should contact Jeff 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:

- Your name, age and hometown
- Your family (spouse and children)
- What you do for a living
- What kind of racing you do, where you race and in which series you compete
- Information about your race vehicle (year, make, model, engine, how long you've had your vehicle)

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.

Even if you've been featured prominently in the Full Throttle column before, drop us a line to tell us what's new with your racing efforts this season.

Also, if you're a reader and know of someone local who is involved in any aspect of racing, feel free to contact us so we can pass their story along to our readers.

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Robbie Loomis, who left the Pettys to become Jeff Gordon's crew chief in 2000, has returned to become the team's executive vice president. Todd Parrott, who won a championship with Dale Jarrett in 1999, is Labonte's crew chief. They join Paul Andrews, another championship-winning crew chief who came to the team last season.

Petty calls the four men cornerstones who form the foundation for something the team hasn't had in years: hope.

"In a short period of time, morale really went through the ceiling," Petty said.

Labonte and Petty were involved in crashes in the season-opening Daytona 500, but Labonte showed the team's potential in the middle of the race by getting into the top 10 and staying there, weaving his way to as high as sixth.

Asked to list reasonable goals for the season, Petty talks about trying to develop chemistry and becoming more consistent in the first half, then going after steady

top-five and top-10 finishes in the second half.

And this: "I think Bobby can win races," Petty said.

A Petty car hasn't visited Victory Lane since 1999, and the team, which won 10 championships from 1954-79, has only three victories since 1984.

Richard Petty said the team lost its edge in the 1980s, when new team owners with big ideas and even bigger budgets entered NASCAR.

"A lot of them also looked a little further down the line in the future than we did," Richard Petty said. "We always did everything out of Level Cross (N.C.) in the backyard, and we were fairly successful with the thing."

"Then it started being a bigger and bigger business. It started going and bringing more people in, more money, more technology, that kind of stuff. We still sat there in the backyard."

"By the time we got ready to do something about it, we were

so far behind on our money and our engineering and all that stuff it's just taken us a little time to get going."

The team widely is perceived to be at a major technological disadvantage to rival megateams such as Hendrick Motorsports, Roush Racing and Gibbs, but Labonte said the dropoff really isn't dramatic. An engine deal with another Dodge team, Evernham Motorsports, has boosted horsepower.

"They might not have the luxury stuff like some teams, but as far as having the stuff to work with, they've got it," Labonte said. "That's not a problem."

Petty suspects the chance to help lead a team back to greatness played a key role in Labonte's decision to join the team. Labonte seems to have embraced the role.

"When I quit driving it one day, I want to see 25 guys in line wanting to drive it, because it must be a great car," Labonte said. "You want people to want to drive the car."

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