

Fresh start good for Earnhardt, Gordon

By JENNA FRYER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla.

The slate is wiped clean for Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Jeff Gordon, two drivers temporarily sprung from the shadows of their mortifying 2005 seasons.

They were failures. Busts. A pair of chumps ineligible to race for the biggest prize in NASCAR.

All that was erased the moment they drove through the gates at Daytona International Speedway. This track belongs to Earnhardt and Gordon; they've combined for 20 wins at the track in various events, including the past two Daytona 500s.

Now they'll both try to kick-start the 2006 season with strong runs in Sunday's season-opening event.

Gordon has no doubt he'll be strong.

"I think anybody that feels like we've slipped on the restrictor-plate tracks hasn't seen restrictor-plate racing for the last couple of years," he said. "I mean, I think that no matter what our seasons are like, what's happening with our team, we always seem to be pretty steady at restrictor-plate tracks."



Dale Earnhardt Jr. leaves his team's garage following a practice session Wednesday at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla.

Gordon won Daytona last year (his third 500 title), only to see his season fall apart just a few months later. The four-time series champion with 73 career victories struggled through the summer and found himself shut out of the Chase for the championship.

Gordon wound up 11th in the standings, his lowest points finish

since he was 14th during his 1993 rookie season.

His Hendrick Motorsports team didn't waste any time turning its attention to 2006, replacing crew chief Robbie Loomis with newcomer Steve Letarte for the final 10 races of last year.

The move put Gordon ahead of schedule when he arrived at Day-

ON TV

What: The Daytona 500, the first race in the 2006 NASCAR Nextel Cup season

When: 1:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla.

On the pole: Jeff Burton

Defending champ: Jeff Gordon

TV: WTHR-Channel 13

tona, and he proved it by placing second in the 500 time trials, then running away with a dominating win in one of the qualifying races.

Earnhardt used a similar strategy, reuniting with former crew chief Tony Eury Jr. late last year after the two spent the season apart in an ill-advised swapping of crews at Dale Earnhardt Inc.

The move made Junior an also-ran most the season, just a shell of his former self at Daytona and Talladega, the two places he was always a guaranteed contender.

But with Eury back as his leader, Junior's back among the favorites for the Great American Race.

"Working with Tony Jr. is going to be a lot of fun. There's a good, close bond there," Earnhardt said.

It has done wonders for Earnhardt's confidence. He had pretty much written off his title chances at the midpoint of last season but heads into Sunday's race confident that he'll be there at the end of the event and at the end of the year.

"I think we're going to come into the Chase being top three in the points," he boasted. "We'll have six or seven wins this season, if not more. If we lose the championship, it won't be by much."

Unlike Gordon, Earnhardt has yet to show just how good his Chevrolet is for Sunday's race. He finished second in an exhibition race, second in the qualifying race and will start seventh in the 500.

Although they are the favorites, Earnhardt and Gordon will have a slew of contenders to deal with.

Among them is Tony Stewart, who only needs a Daytona 500 victory to complete his résumé of NASCAR milestones. The defending series champion has come so close before, finishing second to Earnhardt in 2004 and dominating last year's race before fading to seventh at the end.

But he comes back this year buoyed by his Daytona dominance in July, when he embarrassed the field by leading all but

nine laps en route to his first restrictor-plate victory.

Now he'll try to cross the 500 off his list of things to do.

"I've got three goals this year, and this is No. 1 of the three," said Stewart, adding that winning at Indianapolis Motor Speedway and a third Cup title are the others.

"This is probably the highest thing on that list this year because it's something we haven't done, and I'm really big on trying to accomplish goals that I've never accomplished before ... I like proving that I can do something that I haven't done."

Add Elliott Sadler, who won a qualifying event and starts third in the main event, and two of Gordon's own teammates, second-year driver Kyle Busch and Jimmie Johnson, to the list of contenders.

Busch has been aggressive during Speedweeks and not afraid to muscle his way up front. Johnson is out to prove his team won't crumble following crew chief Chad Knaus' suspension for cheating during qualifying.

But the list of true favorites runs thin after that.

"There's always only five or six guys, maybe seven or eight guys that can win," Kyle Petty said.

Former crew chief emotional about making field for '500'

By MIKE MULHERN
WINSTON-SALEM (N.C.) JOURNAL

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla.

Sometimes dreams come true.

And there was no mistaking the glint of tears in Kirk Shelmerdine's eyes Thursday night as it began to sink in that he'd finally made the field for the Daytona 500.



SHELMERDINE

Shelmerdine was a Hall of Fame crew chief when he abruptly called it quits 13 years ago to prove himself as a driver, to follow a dream rather than just continue to hack away at a job.

During his championship seasons running with the late Dale Earnhardt, one of Shelmerdine's biggest goals, and one of his biggest frustrations, was winning the Daytona 500.

But since adding a helmet of his own to his toolbox, Shelmerdine's desire has changed, to just making the big show.

"There is probably a short list of men who have been both a

crew chief and a driver in the Daytona 500, and most of them have probably done it the other way around. But it's typical that I'm doing everything backwards here," Shelmerdine said.

"I didn't really expect it," Shelmerdine said slowly after pushing his black Chevy to the NASCAR inspection bay after finishing 21st in the day's second 150-mile qualifier. "I had myself prepared for another letdown."

"The 500? I haven't even thought about it. We'll just race like hell."

Shelmerdine has been coming to Daytona for SpeedWeeks since 1977, when he moved to North Carolina from Dover, Del., and signed on with car owner Richard Childress as crew chief.

"So this is my 30th year here," Shelmerdine said.

"How do I feel? I don't know. I just can't talk about that right now. I'll have to wait until you guys leave, so you can't see my face. I don't want to blubber all over your microphone."

Shelmerdine made the 500 based on his qualifying speed, but NASCAR's convoluted system isn't easy even for veterans to understand.

He didn't learn that he had qualified until he got back in the garage and started to push the car toward his rig for the haul back to Winston-Salem, only to meet a NASCAR official who said, "No, you've got to take it over there and get torn down, because you're in the race."

"And I was wondering how," Shelmerdine said.

A late yellow sent most drivers scrambling to the pits for fresh tires, and Shelmerdine gambled on staying out for track position, and he restarted seventh.

"We stayed out there at the end on old, worn tires, and we got almost turned around there once. I knew that was a lost cause," Shelmerdine said. "But I was thinking maybe something would happen, maybe we'd get another caution."

"But when we got shuffled to the back again, I thought it was over."

It wasn't, much to his surprise. Shelmerdine doesn't plan to run the entire Nextel Cup circuit because he doesn't have a primary sponsor. He hasn't thought beyond Sunday's race.

"The rest of the season? Beats me. If I win, I'll retire," he said.

NASCAR OK with showing its roots

By LORENZO PEREZ
RALEIGH (N.C.) NEWS & OBSERVER

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla.

The Daytona International Speedway's 21st-century play list includes blasting New Jersey's Bon Jovi before Thursday's qualifying races and inviting Fergie, the Black Eyed Peas' pop diva, to sing the national anthem before Sunday's Daytona 500.

Perhaps these are just another pair of signs that the sport has outgrown its Southern-fried origins, almost as clear as NASCAR president Mike Helton telling reporters in Washington, D.C., last week that, "the old Southeastern redneck heritage that we had is no longer in existence."

But a week after that statement served as the "A-ha!" moment for

longtime fans convinced that NASCAR would rather leave them in the rearview mirror, Helton sought to soothe any hurt feelings.

"NASCAR is absolutely as concerned about keeping its roots intact as it is about growing the sport," Helton said Thursday after the Nextel Cup drivers' meeting. "We're as proud of our heritage in 1948 as we are in 2006."

"At the same time, we're working to broaden the opportunities of the sport to anybody that wants to be a part of it and also broaden the exposure of the sport internationally."

Helton's original comment followed a news conference on Capitol Hill devoted to explaining NASCAR's efforts to diversify.

Helton said Thursday that his reply was blown out of propor-

tion, adding that he made a mistake of repeating the phrase "Southeastern redneck heritage" used by a reporter in a question.

"I've been called a redneck, and that's OK," the Bristol, Va., native said. "I'm proud of that. I have no bones about that. It's not a very nice term to use anymore. I don't think, because it's been stereotyped in such a bad way."

"But the point of it is, we're proud of our heritage. We're proud of where we came from, we're proud of how we got here, and we're proud of the things we're doing to grow the sport."

Those measures have included moving many of the Nextel Cup races from traditional locales such as North Wilkesboro, N.C., and moving them to such places as Las Vegas and the Chicago area.

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Riser 2: Beth Richmond, Ben Miller, Brian Phelps, Roma Bose, Adam Rochford, Erin Massengale
Riser 3: Mariah Roller, Melissa Hollowell, Chris Swift, Kelly Loman, Amanda Adams
Not Pictured: Adam Swift

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