

DID YOU KNOW?

A tornado caused extensive damage to Atlanta Motor Speedway last summer.

NASCAR INSIDER

THIS WEEK

Race: Golden Corral 500
 Where: Atlanta Motor Speedway
 When: 1 p.m. Sunday
 Television: WXIN-Channel 59
 Defending race winner: Carl Edwards



Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

A weekly State of the Union as NASCAR heads to Atlanta.

THE STORYLINES

No chief, no problem: With Chad Knaus, his longtime crew chief serving a four-race suspension for cheating during qualifying for the Daytona 500, Jimmie Johnson has rolled to two victories in the first three NASCAR Nextel Cup races of the 2006 season.

His dramatic victory at Las Vegas on Sunday came at the expense of Matt Kenseth, who led the most laps only to see the engine in his No. 17 Ford begin to falter in the closing laps.

Johnson and his No. 48 team, led by interim crew chief Darian Grubb, adjusted his car throughout the race and came up with a winning combination for the green-white-checkered-flag run. As the two leaders sped off Turn 4 on the final lap, Johnson motored to the outside and won by less than a car length. It was the only lap he led all day.

The final-lap dash to the outside wasn't a surprise. Johnson has used that move before to beat Bobby Labonte at Charlotte, and he lost in a similar scenario to Carl Edwards at Atlanta Motor Speedway last year.

"I won one that way and I knew I could do it again," he said in Victory Lane.

Johnson's latest victory, the 20th of his career, combined with his Daytona 500 victory and a runner-up finish to Kenseth at California, put him 52 points ahead of Kenseth in the points standings.

Making history: Bill Lester, a California native living in Mableton, Ga., is set to make history this weekend at his adopted home track, Atlanta Motor Speedway. Lester, who races in the Craftsman Truck Series in a Toyota Tundra fielded by Bill Davis, is expected to enter the Golden Corral 500 in a Davis-prepared car.

If he makes the field, he'll be the first black driver to race in NASCAR's elite division since Willy T. Ribbs blew an engine on the 65th lap of the Miller American 400 at Michigan International Speedway on June 15, 1986.

That race, won by Bill Elliott, was one of Ribbs' three Cup starts, the other two coming in 1986 at North Wilkesboro, N.C., and Riverside, Calif.

Kasey at bat: Although he has struggled at times in Nextel Cup, Kasey Kahne has been outstanding in his Busch and Craftsman Truck Series appearances. He's undefeated in trucks, winning his only two starts, at Darlington and Homestead in 2004. Last week he rolled to victory in the Busch Series race at Las Vegas, running his victory total to four in 108 career starts. The 25-year-old Dodge driver has one Cup victory, at Richmond last year, but he has six poles in Busch and Cup.

He's also getting better, it seems, in Cup. On Sunday, he backed up his Busch victory with a strong fourth-place finish in the UAW-DaimlerChrysler 400 at Vegas. He's third in Cup points, 85 behind leader Jimmie Johnson. "We had a great weekend," he said.

Pole record: Ryan "Rocket Man" Newman (right), who has won 35 poles in 155 career Nextel Cup starts, will try to claim a share of the pole record at Atlanta Motor Speedway this week. He already owns the record for consecutive poles, having won the top starting spot six consecutive times, dating back to the Bass Pro Shops MBNA 500 on March 9, 2003.

If he runs the string to seven, he'll tie his mentor, Buddy Baker, for most poles overall at AMS.

But success on Friday hasn't carried over to Sunday for Newman, whose best AMS finish has been a fifth in the spring of 2004. His average finish is 14.8.

In 93 races at AMS, the polesitter has won just 13. Fireball Roberts did it first in the track's inaugural race in 1960. Bobby Labonte in 1996 was the last to do it.

Youth being served: Joey Logano, 15, continues his steady march toward the Nextel Cup circuit. Last year, the former resident of Alpharetta, Ga., broke Brian Vickers' record for being the youngest driver to win a Hooters Pro Cup race. Then on Saturday, he drove his Joe Gibbs Racing entry to victory in Saturday's 250-lap Hooters Pro Cup race at South Georgia Motorsports Park in Cecil, Ga. He led 88 laps, then held off veterans Shane Wallace and Benny Gordon in a green-white-checkered-flag dash to the finish.



LESTER



Cox News Service



Cox News Service photo illustration

Carl Edwards, left, leads the pack on his way to victory in last year's Golden Corral 500. Edwards said he loves races at Atlanta Motor Speedway, a track that provides drivers with numerous racing grooves.

Atlanta: Where drivers go to have some fun

By RICK MINTER
 Cox News Service

After two consecutive events at tracks that tend to produce boring stretches of racing, the NASCAR circuit is headed to a place where the drivers can really race. The Nextel Cup, Busch and Craftsman Truck Series will run this week at Atlanta Motor Speedway, where a combination of wide, high-banking and worn asphalt make for a three-groove race track that tends to produce three-wide racing with an occasional photo finish.

Few have mastered the 1.55-mile track as well as Carl Edwards. In his three Cup starts at Atlanta, he has won twice and finished third. He won his only AMS start in the Busch Series and was seventh in his only truck race in Atlanta.

Edwards said he liked the track from his first practice lap because it offers a driver so many alternative racing grooves.

"I go out there and run five different lines," he said. "My crew members tell me my lap times, and whichever one is fastest, I stick to it."

Usually Edwards prefers the high groove he learned to love as a dirt racer years ago, but he said the multiple grooves at AMS allow drivers the luxury of solving handling problems on the go.

"At Atlanta, if your car's real tight running around the bottom, you can go up top and

maybe it'll work up there. If it doesn't work there, I can go to the middle."

Multiple grooves also add an element of drama because a driver never knows whether the challenge for position will come on the inside or outside.

Edwards slipped to the outside of Jimmie Johnson off Turn 4 on the final lap of last spring's Golden Corral 500 to get his first Cup victory in his 17th career start.

"That pass on the last lap of Jimmie Johnson, that's a perfect example," he said. "You can go anywhere here. That's what makes it so exciting."

Matt Kenseth has three career victories at California (one) and Las Vegas (two), the two tracks preceding AMS on the Cup schedule. He has never won at Atlanta, but he likes racing there.

"I like all the beginning tracks, (but) the most fun track as a driver is probably Atlanta,"

he said on NASCAR's weekly teleconference. "You can run the white line or you can have the right rear scraping the fence like Carl (Edwards) does and probably run the same lap times around there."

"You never have an excuse for not passing the car in front of you. If you're faster, there's no excuse for not getting around them."

Oddly, Edwards said running the Busch race on Saturday, which he and a host of other Cup drivers typically do, doesn't give him a huge heads-up on racing conditions for Sunday's 500-mile Cup run.

"This is one of the places where running the Busch car can't help you a ton because the speeds are so high," he said. "The spoiler's differences [rear spoilers in Busch are 6 1/4 inches tall, 4 1/2 in Cup] and the horsepower differences [less power in Busch] make the two series quite different."



ATLANTA MOTOR SPEEDWAY

Track length: 1.54 miles
 Race length: 500.5 miles (325 laps)
 Grandstand seating: 124,000
 Banking in corners: 24 degrees
 Banking on straights: 5 degrees
 Frontstretch: 2,332 feet
 Backstretch: 1,800 feet
 Qualifying record: Geoffrey Bodine, Ford; 197.478 mph; Nov. 15, 1997
 Race record: Bobby Labonte, Pontiac; 159.904 mph; Nov. 16, 1997



DAVID TULIS / Cox News Service

Flippin' out: In the above sequence of photos, Carl Edwards flips from the roof of his No. 99 Ford after winning last year's Golden Corral 500 at AMS.

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

36 Consecutive laps in which Stacy Compton passed another driver without being passed himself in the Sam's Town 300 Busch Series race at Las Vegas. That leads all other drivers.

270 Races run in the Craftsman Truck Series, including today's John Deere 200 at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

99 The number of Craftsman Truck Series races in which one or more female drivers have participated, including the past 54 dating back to 2004.

What ever happened to ...

Gerald Duke

By Rick Minter / Cox News Service

Gerald Duke, 77, of College Park, Ga., had an impressive start to his brief career on the circuit now known as Nextel Cup.

He ran one race in 1959, but in 1960 he had seven top-10 finishes, including a fourth in the inaugural World 600 at Charlotte, in 11 starts in a Ford Thunderbird he built and prepared himself.

He also had one front-row start, at Spartanburg, S.C.

By 1962, his family was growing and his bank account was shrinking. Four blown engines in a short span put him out of the series for good. For the past 36 years, he has operated Metro Transmissions in his hometown.

On his early superspeedway races: "In the first World 600, they started 60 cars, and I was 44th. I finished fourth. That was a miracle. Then at Daytona, I was running third

on the last lap and ran out of gas, so I finished ninth."

On his biggest career mistake: "Lee Petty came to me and said he was starting a third team at Petty Enterprises and offered me a job driving for him. I didn't take it because I had my own T-Bird running pretty good."

On being away from the sport: "I miss it every day. If I was a young man, that's where I'd be."

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