



What we learned in JANUARY



By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Concord, N.C.

NASCAR again took center stage at Daytona International Speedway in January when Nextel Cup, Busch and Truck series race teams traveled to the track during test sessions. Following are 10 things we learned before the Nextel Cup season opens Feb. 19 with the Daytona 500.



Bill Elliott posted impressive times in the No. 36 Chevrolet owned by MB2 Motorsports.

1. The rise of MB2

MB2 Motorsports can build some really fast superspeedway cars. From the first day of testing, the Chevrolets, owned by Nelson Bowers, sped to the top of the speed charts. The No. 36 driven by the semi-retired Bill Elliott was fastest opening day and second-fastest on the first Tuesday test. Sterling Marlin, MB2's newest full-timer, drove the No. 14 to the head of the class the following week. His teammate, Joe Nemecek, was fourth-fastest.

2. Hendrick finds horsepower

Hendrick Motorsports appears to be ahead of the competition when it comes to making horsepower when engines are stifled by restrictor plates at Daytona and Talladega. When the MB2 drivers, who use leased Hendrick engines, weren't pacing the field, they were following Hendrick drivers Jeff Gordon and Kyle Busch. Both drivers dominated a session of testing.

3. For better or for worse

The new Ford Fusion is better than the Taurus it's replacing, and the new Chevrolet nose and tail appear to be as good or better than the old design. The Dodge Charger, introduced last year, needs some help.

Drivers from the Ford camp are unanimous in their praise for the Fusion, but Dodge driver Kasey Kahne said NASCAR needs to make concessions for the Charger. Nextel Cup Series Director John Darby pointed out that Dodge has an alternative: going back to the old Intrepid body, which still is legal to run and was used with some success by several teams last fall at Homestead.

4. No 'five-peat' for Roush?

The consensus in the garage is that Roush Racing won't repeat its feat of putting all five of its drivers in the Chase for the Nextel Cup and that Hendrick Motorsports, the sport's other "superpower," will do better than the one Chase entry it produced last year. Even Roush's Greg Biffle, who finished second in points last year, conceded that his team will have a tough time taking five of the 10 Chase berths. "Odds are that one of us may have some trouble along the way," he said.



Photos by NASCAR

Nextel Cup Rookie of the Year contenders David Stremme, left, and Reed Sorenson talk during testing sessions at Daytona International Speedway.

5. Ganassi not yet ready

Chip Ganassi's race teams have work to do before Speedweeks. In the first week of testing, rookie drivers Reed Sorenson and David Stremme ran respectively in the draft

but were slow in single-car runs. Sorenson's two cars were 36th- and 47th-fastest; Stremme's were 79th and 82nd on the speed charts.

In the second week, Casey Mears was 59th and 66th in single-car runs but was 25th in the draft.



Brent Sherman found an unusual path to Nextel Cup.

6. Rookie on fast track

Of the seven rookies on the Nextel Cup circuit this year, Brent Sherman has followed the most interesting, most unlikely, and possibly shortest, path to NASCAR's elite circuit. Sherman was serving in the Air Force when he saw an ad for the Russell Racing school at Infineon Raceway. His dad gave him a driving experience as a gift, then Sherman returned to the track and won a competition that resulted in a one-year ride in one of Russell's cars. After two years in the Barber Pro Series, he moved to ARCA for another two years, then spent only a partial season in Busch before being hired to drive the No. 49 Dodge in Cup.

Fortunately for him, he's guaranteed a starting spot in the first five races because of the points Ken Schrader earned last year driving the No. 49.

7. Fan Fest a bust

The preseason tests at Daytona, which include "Fan Fest" sessions in which drivers meet fans, are not as popular as the old Winston Preview, which was held in Winston-Salem, N.C., when Winston was the Cup circuit's title sponsor. The Preview typically drew 12,000 or more fans from across the Southeast. Only a few hundred per week attended the Fan Fest gatherings at Daytona.

8. Edwards stays grounded

Carl Edwards, the surprise story of 2005, vows that he won't let success, or the distractions that come with his newfound fame and fortune, spoil him. "I'll be darned if I let anything get in the way of us having a good year and me performing," he said.

9. Stewart skips the test

Defending Nextel Cup champion Tony Stewart probably would have been better off to test at Daytona rather than have Mike McLaughlin drive the No. 20 Chevy. Stewart skipped the test to race in the Chili Bowl, a Midget race in Tulsa, Okla., but wound up flipping his car and injuring his arm.

10. Daytona still king

NASCAR has truly become a national sport, but its biggest race is still the one held in its birthplace. The Daytona 500 winner's purse, an estimated \$1.5 million, is far from the \$6.17 million that goes to the Nextel Cup champion, but a victory in the Daytona 500 is one to be cherished and one that can make a career for a driver.

Two-time 500 winner Sterling Marlin said he'd rather have a Cup championship, largely because it pays millions more, but a Daytona 500 victory "goes a long way" toward making a career complete.

NOTEBOOK

Evernham says Car of Tomorrow needs work

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Concord, N.C.

NASCAR team owner Ray Evernham said NASCAR's Car of Tomorrow is well-intentioned but needs a lot more work to deliver the cost savings and competitive racing for which it was designed.

He said its shortcomings are evident by recent tests in which a rear wing from a Grand Am car was bolted to the prototype Car of Tomorrow.

"Aerodynamically, the car did not accomplish what they were looking to accomplish. Otherwise you wouldn't have to put a wing on it," he said. "I think they did a decent job developing the chassis. I think there needs to be more time put into the aerodynamics, and I think the tire manufacturer needs to be involved. You can't expect that car to run on the same tire we run on now. It simply won't work."

While other team owners already have built at least one car from the new design, Evernham is waiting to start his until the final specifications are issued by NASCAR.

Edwards backs out of IROC series

Carl Edwards said he considered his invitation to race in the International Race of Champions a great honor. A week after his selection was announced, he backed out, citing a scheduling conflict.

Ryan Newman will take his spot in the four-race series that pits drivers from various racing circuits in identically prepared cars. Edwards' problem was that the IROC season finale at Atlanta Motor Speedway on Oct. 28 will be held at the same time as the Busch Series race he's to run at Memphis, Tenn.

Repaving of Lowe's set to go

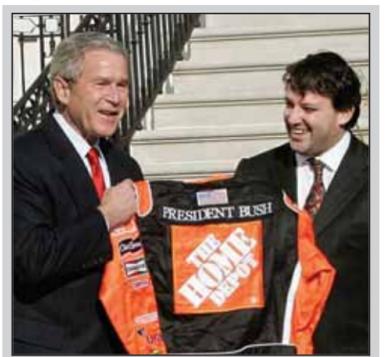
Preparation for a repaving of Lowe's Motor Speedway is well under way. The final sections of the track's SAFER barriers were removed last week.

Track President H.A. "Humpty" Wheeler said the \$3.5 million paving project will begin as soon as daily temperatures are 55 degrees or higher, which is the optimum temperature for paving. He said the track's bumps are being smoothed, which he feels will lead to more side-by-side racing.

Newman eager to make friends

Ryan Newman said that he's looking forward to building a good working relationship with new Penske Racing teammate Kurt Busch, something he did not accomplish while Rusty Wallace was driving the No. 2 Dodge.

"Hopefully (Busch) will have all the right morals and those things, so that when time passes, we're still on the same page," Newman said.



NASCAR

Presidential visit: Nextel Cup champion Tony Stewart met President Bush last week during a visit to the White House. Stewart gave Bush a driver's suit from the No. 20 team.

Oh, what a feeling! Toyota will take flag in '07

By RICK MINTER
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Concord, N.C.

It's official. The Toyota Camry will be racing in NASCAR's Nextel Cup division in 2007.

The long-awaited and much-anticipated announcements were made last week during the sport's annual media tour, hosted by Lowe's Motor Speedway.

David Illingsworth, a senior vice president of Toyota Motor Sales USA, said he expected to

have at least four, and as many as seven, teams in Nextel Cup next season and four more in the Busch Series. If sponsorship is strong, he hopes eventually to have 25 percent of the total entries in a typical race, which would be about 10.

Illingsworth said the Cup and Busch teams will be structured like the Ford, Chevrolet and Dodge teams now on the circuit and unlike Toyota's truck series efforts, where Toyota manufactures the trucks and engines and distributes them to teams.

But who's going to drive 'em?

Toyota has introduced the three team owners who will field Camrys next season in the Nextel Cup Series. Bill Davis Racing will field two cars, one of them the No. 22 Caterpillar-sponsored car driven by his current driver Dave Blaney. Michael Waltrip Racing will field two Cup entries in '07. Waltrip will drive one. Red Bull Racing will also enter a Toyota, but drivers are yet to be named.

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