

Toyota drives into NASCAR

Japanese automaker will start with three teams, six cars

By Mike Harris
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLOTTE, N.C.

It was not a little jarring several years ago when NASCAR fans began arriving at race tracks in Toyota Tundra trucks and other vehicles built by foreign manufacturers.

Now, Japanese automaker Toyota is preparing to leave the parking lot and drive into that bastion of American auto racing and culture, NASCAR's Nextel Cup series.

Not since the mid-50s, when British-made Jaguars ran a handful of races in NASCAR's top series, has a foreign make competed in the Cup.

From that time until 2000, when NASCAR allowed a Toyota-powered car in the now-defunct Goody's Dash series, even the suggestion that a car or engine built by the Japanese, the Germans or any other non-American could eventually race in NASCAR kindled everything from heated debate to physical confrontation among the parochial and rabid fans of stock car racing.

Once Toyota ratcheted up to the Craftsman Truck Series in 2004, though, it became clear the next step was stock cars.

It was announced earlier this week that a NASCAR edition of the Camry, the best-selling car in the United States in seven of the past eight years, will begin racing in 2007 in both of NASCAR's top stock car series, Cup and Busch.

"Like it or not, Toyota is a very important part of our economy today," said team owner Jack Roush, who fields five Fords in the Nextel Cup series and has won two of the past three championships. "We've got a lot of dealer investment dollars out there, and we've got a lot of our population that works in Toyota plants around the country. So they have every right to be here."

"I knew that it was inevitable, and I know that they'll be very tough competitors. ... I welcome their being involved because I think they'll be good for the sport. I think they'll be great for the fans, and the enthusiasm, I think, will sell more tickets to our race tracks."

Jim Aust, vice president of Toyota Motorsports and president and CEO of Toyota Racing Development, USA, said he isn't surprised that the response so far has



NASCAR Nextel Cup team owner and driver Michael Waltrip talks to the media as he announces that he will drive Toyota's new Camry in the Nextel Cup Series during the NASCAR Media Tour in Concord, N.C., on Tuesday.

been generally unemotional. He points out that Toyota will be celebrating its 50th year doing business in the United States in 2007.

"We're part of American business. The production Camrys are built in Georgetown, Ky., at one of our eight plants in the U.S.," Aust added. "And the company employs more than 140,000 Americans."

Toyota will start with three teams and six cars: the established two-car team owned by Bill Davis; the team owned by two-time Daytona 500 winner Michael Waltrip, which is moving up from Busch; and the all-new Team Red Bull.

For Waltrip, there was no hesitation about joining forces with Toyota.

"I think most people will accept it and be OK with it, and I think it will also springboard the sport forward," Waltrip said. "You know, you've got another manufacturer that's going to come in, buy more ads on TV, supply more vehicles for cats to race on the track."

"It will be one of those bumps in the sport, just like the TV pack-



The new NASCAR Nextel Cup Toyota Camry is shown during a stop in the NASCAR Media Tour in Concord, N.C., on Monday.

age, just like Dodge's venture into the sport was. It will just add more interest, more competition and more intrigue. True fans will say, 'This is cool. These guys are going to make more cars, and we're really not going to know who is going to win now.'"

Aust acknowledged there were fears among the Toyota hierarchy of a backlash when the company moved into the truck series.

It didn't happen. "We sold 2.2 (million) units in the U.S. in 2005. I think the numbers are a big part of the acceptance, as far as NASCAR is concerned," he said. "We don't really anticipate there is going to be a great surprise. Certainly there are going to be people that have their own opinions here and there, but overall we're very happy with the reaction so far."



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

HOLIDAY HOOPLA TOURNAMENT CHAMPIONS

The fifth-grade Franklin Cubs recently won the Holiday Hoopla Tournament at Indianapolis Southside Sports Academy. Team members include, front row from left, Jacob Williams, Keenan Wood, Jeremy McKinney, Mason Clark and Max Hensley; middle row, Alex Bramlett, Craig Maschmyer, Dalton Hittle, Austin Means and Daniel McGriff; and back row, head coach Greg Wood and coaches Jimmie Bramlett and Mark Hensley.



VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT CHAMPIONS

The seventh- and eighth-grade St. Barnabas Cadet "A" Team recently won the championship game of the Our Lady of the Greenwood Cadet "A" Volleyball Tournament. Team members include, front row from left, Jordyn Hurre, Alexis Waugh, Anna Fanelli, Caitlin Hansen, Amanda Finch and Alyssa Annee; back row, Caty Wilson, Stacy Klene. Not pictured are head coach Craig McKendree and assistant coach Derek Brickler.



UNDEFEATED CYO TEAM

The Catholic Youth Organization freshman-sophomore basketball team from Our Lady of the Greenwood finished the regular season 7-0 in Division IV. Team members are, front row from left, Collin DeMoss, Tyler Leitzman, Spencer Smith and Nick Smith; back row, coach Scott DeMoss, Daniel Bradbury, Aaron Huber, Eddie Schmitt and D.J. Coffey.

Vacation's over: IRL begins preseason testing in Phoenix

By Steve Herman
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Defending Indianapolis 500 and IRL series champion Dan Wheldon is back to work with a new car and a new team.

Wheldon moved from Andretti Green Racing to the Ganassi Racing after last season and got his first chance to drive one of the team's new Honda-powered Dallaras during the IRL's initial test session this week at Phoenix International Raceway.

All 15 of the league's full-time teams participated in the program, which was scheduled to end Wednesday.

"We just focused on some stuff that we need to work on for the short oval," Wheldon said. "Obviously, the Dallara is new to the team."

"Everybody at Chip Ganassi Racing has made me feel welcome. We just have some work to do to speed up the learning process for everybody, but overall it was a good first day," he said.

The Ganassi team, with Wheldon and teammate Scott Dixon,



PATRICK



WHELDON

and Team Penske, with Helio Castroneves and Sam Hornish Jr., switched to Honda in anticipation of Toyota canceling its affiliation with the IRL at the end of last season.

Chevrolet also withdrew at the end of the season, leaving Honda the only engine supplier for the open-wheel series.

"We've been trying to work through the biggest projects that we have with the new car. We're not running for time right now," Dixon said. "The car has been really consistent, and the new package with Honda and Dallara has been nice, so far."

"You kind of forget how long it has been (since the end of last season) after a few laps. Phoenix has always been fun for the drivers, so I'm happy to start the

year here," he said.

The IRL will open the new season with the Toyota Indy 300 on March 26 at Homestead-Miami Speedway in Florida.

Besides Wheldon and Dixon, other drivers testing at Phoenix included Castroneves and Hornish; Andretti Green teammates Dario Franchitti, Bryan Herta, Tony Kanaan and 18-year-old rookie Marco Andretti; and Rahal Letterman teammates Danica Patrick and Buddy Rice.

Patrick, the Indy and IRL rookie of the year last season, said Wheldon told her several months ago her second year would be a lot different from her rookie season.

"I definitely felt a lot more comfortable today than I did when I was here last March," Patrick said.

"I think as a team we are pretty happy with the first day of testing."

Marco Andretti, the son of team owner Michael Andretti and grandson of Mario Andretti, replaced Wheldon with Andretti Green for this season. He also took part in private tests at Sebring, Fla., last week.

America has three road-course events scheduled, May 5 to 7, July 7 to 9 and Sept. 29 to Oct. 1.

The new National Sprint Tour will pay a visit to Bloomington Speedway on June 2, marking a homecoming for sprint-car legend Steve Kinser.

The Kinser family grew up racing at Bloomington, and Steve Kinser, who won a record 20 season titles in the World of Outlaws tour, hasn't raced on the track's oval for several years.

Tickets for the National Sprint Tour race will be sold only on the day of the race.

• Twin Cities Raceway Park in Vernon recently released its tentative 2006 schedule, with racing beginning April 15 and continuing through Sept. 2.

Among the highlights: the Northern AllStars Late Models Series on May 10; the United Midget Racing Association three-quarter midgets May 27;

and USAC Indiana Sprint Week July 13.

• New Brownstown Speedway promoter Tim Keithley has put together an ambitious 2006 schedule including several big-money races. Brownstown's season will kick off March 25.

Among the big races: The Indiana Icebreaker, an April 1 race sanctioned by the Lucas Oil Late Model Dirt Series paying \$10,000 to the winner; the 23rd annual Hoosier Dirt Classic on April 22, sanctioned by the NARA Battle of the Bluegrass Series; a second visit by the Battle of the Bluegrass Series for the June 24 Lee Fleetwood Memorial; and the track's biggest race, the 27th annual Jackson 100 on Aug. 19.

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The track's marquee events are the Kroger SpeedFest, which includes the USAC Silver Crown Series, NASCAR Craftsman Trucks and NASCAR Busch Series, Aug. 3 to 5; and the 52nd annual NHRA Mac Tools U.S. Nationals, Aug. 30 through Sept. 4.

The Indy United Racing League will have seven events on the oval. The VP Fuels E.T. Bracket Racing Series has 16 races scheduled starting April 2. The Tuesday Night Street Legal Racing Series has 31 events scheduled beginning March 28 and includes three Midnight Madness Events (May 12, June 16 and July 21).

The Sports Car Club of