



Champ Stewart enjoying a special time in his life

By ALAN TAYS
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.

Tony Stewart, 2005 Nextel Cup champion, is eager to start the 2006 season.

But not for the obvious reason. "I've never been so excited to have the season start in my life," Stewart said last week during a videoconference from Indianapolis Motor Speedway, "because after the Vegas race, I think we actually get a week and a half vacation. So I'm excited to get started just to get my vacation finally."

Stewart, who wrapped up his second Cup championship in November at Homestead-Miami Speedway, spent his short off-season fulfilling the many media and promotional obligations that come with a series title.

And when he wasn't talking, he was racing.

On Dec. 30, Stewart won the U.S. Auto Club indoor midget race at Fort Wayne. Last weekend he was in Tulsa, Okla., for the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals. On Jan. 28-29, he'll drive in the Rolex 24 sports-car endurance race at Daytona International Speedway.

To allow Stewart to race in the Chili Bowl, team owner Joe Gibbs excused him from last week's Nextel Cup testing session in Daytona. As he did last year, Mike McLaughlin drove the No. 20 The Home Depot Chevrolet in Stewart's place.

"It's always been important to me to be able to go back and not forget where I came from," said Stewart, whose roots are in short-track racing. To go over and race midgets and sprint cars when I have time is something that's all been very important to me.

"When I go to the Chili Bowl, I'm no different than anybody else there, and I really enjoy that event."

With a (Winston) Cup title and an IRL championship already on his résumé, Stewart last year won the Brickyard 400 and the Nextel Cup championship. Now he's looking at the next logical goal, a Daytona 500 victory.

But he doesn't subscribe to the theory that not winning a Daytona 500 takes something away from his career.

"There's a lot of guys that haven't won the Daytona 500, but I think they've had great careers," Stewart said, citing Rusty Wallace and Mark Martin.

The opposite case, he said, is Michael Waltrip.

"Michael Waltrip has won the Daytona 500 twice and never won a championship, and he's won, I think, only three races in his career. I don't think anybody is going to say he's had a great career just because he's won the Daytona 500."

Stewart continues to savor his 2005 Brickyard victory.

"I haven't been married yet and haven't had children, and those are the only things that I can think would be a possible greater experience than what I had here," he said.



Photos by JOHNNY CRAWFORD / Cox News Service

Kurt Busch, who was suspended by Roush Racing for the final two 2005 races, has a new team this year. He'll drive the No. 2 Dodge for Penske Racing, previously driven by Rusty Wallace.

A NEW CHAPTER in the book of Busch

Tired of going counter, driver tries a right turn

By MARK BRADLEY
Cox News Service

Atlanta

Such inquiries weren't on the schedule. From the press release: "Kurt Busch will address questions regarding the Goodyear test, Penske Racing and the 2006 NASCAR Nextel Cup season only."

But asking Kurt Busch just about tires is like interviewing Jennifer Aniston and not mentioning Brad Pitt.

So there he was, standing in the garage area last week at Atlanta Motor Speedway, responding to the questions he wasn't supposed to hear: Maybe part of him wanted to turn and stomp off, but a bigger part of Kurt Busch has to know he's being watched in a whole new way, and how he handles himself in the coming season will go a long way toward solidifying the paying public's impression of him. And to NASCAR and its many sponsors, the paying public matters.

"There are things in your life that you'd like to press the 'reset' button on," Busch said, and what happened to him in November qualifies. He was stopped by police for running a stop sign near Phoenix International Raceway and charged with reckless driving. (Officers, who contended Busch was abusive toward them, smelled alcohol on his breath, but tests proved he wasn't drunk.)

Roush Racing, then his employer, might have let him off with a reprimand, but it suspended him for the season's final two races with this bla-



Busch said of his new ride with the Penske team, "In a career, things get ironed out and evened out. This is a unique opportunity to jump in."

tant kiss-off from team president Geoff Smith: "It's the last straw. We're officially retiring as Kurt Busch's apologists."

Busch, see, had gotten crossways with lots of folks — fellow driver Jimmy Spencer bloodied his nose after a 2003 race — and was bound for a new team anyway.

The catchall description of NASCAR drivers, good ol' boys, doesn't really apply to Busch, who comes across as something of an Eddie Haskell. He's smart and he's gifted, and he has a bit of a smirk about him. Roush Racing essentially said, "Smirk on this," and deprived the 2004 Nextel Cup champ of a chance to finish the 2005 season the way a champion should.

But now it's 2006 and Kurt Busch works for Roger Penske and is working on repairing a damaged persona.

"In a career, things get ironed out and evened out," he said. "This is a unique opportunity to jump in."

He's driving the Dodge vacated by Rusty Wallace, a car sponsored by Miller Lite. Without irony, Busch likens his orientation to "having a first beer together." He has nothing but nice things to say about Penske — he says nothing at all about Jack Roush — and he called the chance to work with his new boss "the best medicine you could get."

Busch has won 14 Nextel Cup races and is bright enough to fit the profile of what the sport wants to become, if he just could stop ticking people off.

Then again, Tony Stewart, once the bad boy of the gearbox set, mended multiple fences en route to the 2005 Nextel Cup title, pointedly saying at the moment of his victory that he'd won this championship "the right way."

Of Stewart's smoother dynamics, Busch said: "It definitely gives you motivation to be more well-run. You have to be a good guy and take care of your public image."

And how's that going? Said Roy McCauley, his new crew chief: "Kurt is definitely giving 110 percent. I believe he feels like he's in a great situation now."

Kurt Busch turned 28 this month and is scheduled to be married in July. He has a new ride and the chance to make a fresh start. He and Penske will attend the Super Bowl together in Detroit next month, and the only advice Busch said he has received from the car owner is the basic stuff: "Stand on the right pedal, turn left and go fast."

Did he make any New Year's resolutions?

"Usually those are more personal things," Busch said, but he shared his anyway. "Spend more time with my fiancée and challenge myself to be a better person."

NOTEBOOK

Labonte saw signs leading to Petty car

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.

Bobby Labonte has been saying since last fall that "signs" told him to join Petty Enterprises and drive the famed No. 43 Dodge.

Who knew that he was speaking literally rather than figuratively.

"I was in my office one day at my shop, and I went down the hallway to the fax machine, and there was a STP sticker laying there," he said of the decal from the Petty's longtime sponsor.

"I don't know where it came from but it was just laying there. ... I know that sounds kind of corny, but that happened," he said.

"I looked at my dad, and I said, 'What does this mean? Who put this here?'"

He also said his decision to move from Joe Gibbs Racing, where he won the 2002 championship, to the Pettys, who haven't won a race since 1997, was made in large part because he perceived that the Petty team is on the upswing.



LABONTE

Kahne: It's time to perform

After four poles, five runner-up finishes and Rookie of the Year honors in 2004, Kasey Kahne's results last year were a let-down. Even though he

got his first career Cup victory at Richmond in May, he finished a disappointing 23rd in points, far from a berth in the Chase. He said that just can't happen this year.

"I feel like there's a lot of pressure this year to make the Chase," he said. "I can't miss the Chase three years in a row when (team owner Ray Evernham) has got a car in it each year. It's time to get in (the Chase). It's time to perform and finish races."

Musgrave back behind the wheel

Ted Musgrave, the defending Craftsman Truck Series champion, has landed a driving job with Germain Motorsports. Musgrave found himself without a ride when his Ultra Motorsports team suddenly shut down after losing its financial backing. Musgrave will be a teammate to Todd Bodine.

Elliott still seeks victories

After three days last week at or near the top of the speed charts, Bill Elliott said a third Daytona 500 victory is a real possibility even though he is semi-retired and his No. 36 Chevy team is a part-time effort.

"I feel like I can (win it); I really do," said Elliott, who won the race in 1985 and 1987. "I feel like they have got the equipment to do it, given the right circumstances."

Kinser plans run at rookie title

Kraig Kinser, the 21-year-old son of sprint-car legend Steve Kinser, will run for Craftsman Truck Series Rookie of the Year honors in the No. 47 Chevrolet.

The team is a joint effort between MB2 Motorsports, the Nextel Cup team that ran Kinser in two ARCA races last year, and Morgan-Dollar Motorsports.

Petty matriarch dead at age 88

Elizabeth Toomes Petty, the matriarch of the racing Petty clan, died Jan. 8 at age 88 after an extended illness.

Survivors include her sons, Richard and Maurice; nine grandchildren, including Cup driver Kyle; 24 great grandchildren; two sisters; and two brothers.

Atlanta swimming in aquarium's success

City touts attraction to land hall of fame

By WALTER WOODS
Cox News Service

Atlanta

Atlanta officials, who have high hopes the city will land the NASCAR hall of fame, are buzzing over the overwhelming success of the Georgia Aquarium, which has drawn 400,000 visitors since opening in November.

Atlanta's bid organizers have been sending the aquarium's attendance figures to NASCAR on a timely basis as evidence that Atlanta is the best choice, said A.J. Robinson, president of Central Atlanta Progress, the business group that put together Atlanta's bid.

"We've got a very competitive bid," Robinson said. "Everybody's worked very



JOHN SPINK / Cox News Service

hard, our numbers are compelling, and I hope we make the final list."

NASCAR has scratched Kansas City and Richmond from the race for its hall of fame, leaving Atlanta pitted against two cradles of stock car racing — Charlotte and Daytona Beach, Fla. — for the highly prized attraction.

NASCAR expects to pick a winning city by March, and Atlanta's bid effort now faces off against two communities with historic ties to the sport and emotional bonds with racing fans.

Atlanta officials are upbeat over the success of the Georgia Aquarium since its opening in November 2005.

Charlotte, in particular, has the business clout of Bank of America and Wachovia behind its bid, besides its claim to be the Nashville of stockcar racing.

Stars such as Jeff Gordon live there, and racing teams such as Hendrick Motorsports keep their state-of-the-art facilities in the community.

NASCAR started as a series of small heats on Daytona's beaches, and the France family, which owns the sport, is still based there. But Daytona was the smallest community that NASCAR considered.

Save A \$1000 Shop

Community®
Chrysler Dodge Jeep

555 State Road 37 South,
Martinsville
765-342-5000
Toll Free 888-333-3954

COLUMBUS
Kawasaki
YAMAHA

Sales • Service
• Parts
• Accessories

Larry J. Stearns

Mon.-Fri. 8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
Sat. 8:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

4520 E. State St.
Columbus, IN 47203 (317) 378-8805

For advertising information on this page, call 736-2786