



IN MEMORIAM

Longtime NASCAR driver Bobby Hamilton Sr. died Sunday after losing a battle with cancer that struck him last February. Hamilton, who raced and won in all three of NASCAR's elite divisions, was 49.

NASCAR INSIDER



Calling the action: Former driver, crew chief and car owner Andy Petree, left, will join veteran announcer Jerry Punch, center, and former driver Rusty Wallace for ESPN broadcasts of NASCAR events in 2007.

Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

Some key storylines this week in NASCAR.

Stewart: Some Sirius radio talk

Tony Stewart often has said that his main passion is driving racecars, but he seems to be plenty serious about his role in Sirius satellite radio's NASCAR coverage this season.

Sirius has become the official satellite radio partner of NASCAR, taking the role held previously by XM Satellite Radio.

Stewart will host a show on Tuesdays from 8 to 10 p.m. Other NASCAR programming includes "The Driver's Seat," from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily, which features host John Kernan and a rotation of drivers and former drivers, including Buddy Baker, Johnny Benson, Randy LaJoie, Ron Hornaday, Ricky Craven, Phil Parsons and John Andretti.



STEWART

The day's coverage kicks off with "The Morning Drive," co-hosted by veteran NASCAR journalists David Poole and Marty Snider.

Stewart said he likes the idea of having a show in which he controls the content.

"I get to talk about anything I want for a few hours," he said. "I think anybody would like to have a show like that."

And he promises his show will feature more than just NASCAR content.

"We'll talk about NASCAR and other forms of motorsports and things that are outside of motorsports," he said. "Sirius has been very flexible in allowing me to talk about anything I want. ... We're always going to have to be on our toes, and it's going to be a great challenge."

In his first show, Stewart issued a challenge of sorts to Carl Edwards, with whom he had an on-track run-in at Pocono last year that angered Edwards.

"The next time that I hear Carl Edwards tell me that he's going to make me bleed, he'd better be ready to do it right then and there. Straight up," Stewart said, according to a transcript released by Sirius. "I don't care what the fine is from NASCAR. I've got \$50,000 saved."

Stay tuned.

Racin' on the side

Even in NASCAR's offseason, drivers are chasing checkered flags.

David Stremme raced his late-model car at Five Flags Speedway in Pensacola, Fla., in December, and among the entries in this week's 21st annual O'Reilly Chili Bowl Midget Nationals in Tulsa, Okla., are Cup drivers Tony Stewart, J.J. Yeley and Kasey Kahne.

Yeley's bringing along his Cup sponsor, Interstate Batteries, which will back the No. 47 he'll drive and the No. 18 owned by Yeley and driven by Ricky Gaunt. Yeley, who struggled in his rookie season in Nextel Cup, is one of the best ever in USAC. He has 51 career victories and five championships.

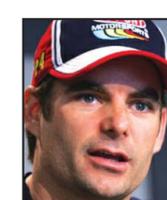
Stewart already has won two USAC races at Fort Wayne Memorial Coliseum.

The USAC Web site reports that Stewart stormed from midpack to the front in both races. He took just seven laps to move from ninth to first in the second race and now has four victories in four starts at Fort Wayne during the past three years.

Kahne has been racing this winter, too. The Evernham Motorsports driver won a heat race and finished fourth in a sprint car race at the Tyrepower Parramatta City Raceway in Australia.

No. 24 driver to run the 24

Jeff Gordon has joined a growing list of NASCAR drivers who also run road-racing events. Gordon, who rarely competes in anything other than his Nextel Cup No. 24 Chevrolet, spent last week running laps on the road course at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway as he prepared for his first Rolex 24 at Daytona, on Jan. 27-28.



GORDON

The four-time Nextel Cup champion and three-time Daytona 500 winner drove the No. 10 SunTrust Racing Pontiac Riley, which he'll co-drive with car owner/driver Wayne Taylor and Italian Max Angelelli.

"It's really been a great experience," Gordon told reporters at Daytona. "I've never been on this road course before, and it's a pretty challenging track to learn."

"That last time out, I was getting a good feel for it. I'm with the right team. I'm having fun and enjoying it. It's a lot different peeling off that banking at the start/finish line and turning into the infield."

Gordon is trying to become the third driver — A.J. Foyt and Mario Andretti are the other two — to win both the Daytona 500 and the Rolex 24.

Gordon's Cup teammate, Jimmie Johnson, potentially could be that third driver in the history books. He's the defending Daytona 500 winner and also is entered in the 24.

FAST TALK

Andy Petree eager to put experience to use in broadcast booth

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Atlanta

Andy Petree, the former NASCAR crew chief, car owner and sometimes driver, was out working the back 40 on his North Carolina farm last year when ESPN called, seemingly out of the blue.

The network invited him to audition for a role in its NASCAR coverage, which begins this season. The call was so unexpected that Petree didn't take it seriously at first.

"We get these calls from telemarketers all the time," Petree said. "A guy that works in my shop took the call. He said, 'Some lady from ESPN called. I don't know whether she's trying to sell you a magazine or what, but here's the message.'"

"I laid the message on the desk and didn't call until the next day."

Although the offer hit him completely by surprise, he agreed to do an audition and discovered that commenting on races came naturally.

"I realized I enjoyed it," he said. "I look at it as a whole different career. I've got a lot of background in the sport, and I can put it to use and share it with the viewers."

So Petree will work in the TV booth with veteran announcer Jerry Punch and former driver Rusty Wallace during Busch Series and Nextel Cup races that ESPN broadcasts.

"My role is to keep things, on the technical side, accurate," Petree said. "I can explain to the average viewer and to the die-hard fan the problems and the challenges in setting up these cars."

Petree is well qualified to do that. He got his first full-time racing job in 1981, when he was hired by Junior Johnson to

work on Darrell Waltrip's Buicks. From there, he went to Leo Jackson's race team, where in 1991, he led Harry Gant to four consecutive victories.

In 1993, he joined Richard Childress Racing and was crew chief when the late Dale Earnhardt won back-to-back Cup titles in 1993-94. Petree left Childress in 1996 and went back to Jackson's race team, which eventually became Andy Petree Racing, where he won races with Joe Nemechek and Bobby Hamilton before losing his sponsors and shutting down his shop in 2004.

"My heart wasn't in it like it needed to be," Petree said of his decision to walk away from the sport in 2004. "We weren't as competitive as we needed to be. ... I just took the opportunity to step away from it for a little while. From 1981 through 2004,

I'd spent my entire life in the garage area. It was a chance for me to spend some time with my daughter, Jonnie. ... I didn't get to do that with my two sons, who are now grown."

So while his former peers were traveling the continent, from one race track to another, Petree was following his daughter's softball team as it won state and regional championships.

"I got to be there for every game," he said. "It was a special time for me."

But now he's giving up the softball circuit and getting ready to make some hardball commentary behind the microphone.

For starters, he, like others in the sport, already is raising questions about the Car of Tomorrow, which makes its competitive debut at Bristol this spring.

"It's such a big question mark how that car is going to perform," he said. "We know how it looks, and I don't like the way it looks. ... But I can get past that if these guys can race side by side and nose to tail."

"That's going to be the biggest story of the year, whether that car is going to be a success or a failure."

He's also wondering whether the Busch Series will produce a meaningful points race this year after a rout by Kevin Harvick in 2006.

"Are we going to have a real championship race?" he said. "Harvick just ruined it last year. ... Cup guys are going to be a big part of it again this year. Hopefully, one of the other Cup guys won't step in and do what he did."

Petree says there's no doubt that whatever he says on the air will be backed up by hours of research in the garage.

"I'm going to work hard to understand exactly what these guys are doing, just as if I was still racing," he said. "And I'm going to share it with the viewers."

THE ANDY PETREE FILE

The driver

- Five Busch Series starts, average finish of 24th
- Seven Craftsman Truck Series starts, average finish 17.6

The owner

- Races: 322
- Victories: 2
- Top-five finishes: 16
- Top-10 finishes: 54
- Poles: 6
- Money won: \$24,890,445

Source: Racing-reference.info



Ed's crystal ball look into 2007



Cox News Service

Atlanta Motor Speedway President Ed Clark, left, plays the part of prognosticator this week, offering six predictions for the 2007 NASCAR season to Cox News Service writer Rick Minter. Here's what Clark believes will happen this season:

1. Richard Childress Racing will return to championship form, winning its first Nextel Cup championship since Dale Earnhardt won in 1994.

"I just think they're getting better and better all the time, and they're on a roll. ... With the improvement they showed last year, and the year they had in the Busch Series, Richard Childress, right, definitely has his organization back on track. They've got to go out and beat Hendrick and beat Roush, but they're going to be contenders, and it'll be a good story. We all like good stories."



NASCAR

3. Petty Enterprises will return to Victory Lane.

"The progress they made last year, with Robbie Loomis and Paul Andrews leading the team, is going to allow all the important factors to come together. They've had a year to weed out the bad cars and pick out a few that run decent. I think they can do it. Bobby Labonte is pretty enthused. (The breakout win) could come (at Atlanta Motor Speedway) in the March race."



LABONTE

2. Casey Mears will win his first Nextel Cup event in his first year with Hendrick Motorsports.

"He'll have the ingredients he has been missing as far as the calls from the pit box, the extensive testing. Everything he needs will be at his fingertips — better crew chief, all those things."



4. Reed Sorenson will get his first victory.

"He came close about three times last year, ran out of gas a couple of times while leading late in races. He ran way better than his finishes showed at times. I know Reed was very frustrated, but if he came that close three times last year, he should get his first win this year."



SORENSON

5. Carl Edwards, left, will get back in Victory Lane with multiple victories.

"He's back with (crew chief) Bob Osborne, and he's too good not to win, especially coming off the year he had last year with no wins (in Nextel Cup.) He's definitely going to be focused on getting back into Victory Lane."

6. NASCAR will alter the points system, giving more bonus points to race winners.

"But my guess is they won't do enough. ... I figure they'll add 10 or 15 points, but it needs to be at least 25. Thirty-five would be great, and 50 would be super. Do I hear 100? We have to put the emphasis back on winning races."

Changes keep coming during the offseason

The cars of NASCAR have been silent for more than a month, but driver- and crew chief-change announcements still come on a regular basis.

Roush Racing has announced that veteran crew chief Larry Carter will take over as crew chief of the No. 26 Ford driven by Jamie McMurray in Nextel Cup. He had been set to lead the crew of David Reutimann's Toyota, but that position now goes to Frank Kerr.

In other moves:

- Derrick Finley has been named crew chief for the No. 36 Toyota of Jeremy Mayfield.

- Andrew Randolph, who most recently served as director of engine development for Hendrick Motorsports, has moved to Bill Davis Racing's engine shop.

- Veteran crew chief Lee McCall, who contended for the Cup championship in 2002 with driver Sterling Marlin, has moved from Chip Ganassi Racing to BAM Racing, where he'll work with driver Mike Bliss.

The BAM team also has switched from Arrington Engines to Evernham Engines.

— Rick Minter, Cox News Service