

NASCAR INSIDER



DID YOU KNOW?

Singer Kelly Clarkson has signed a marketing deal with NASCAR in which the Grammy Award-winning performer will be integrated into numerous aspects of the sport, including concerts at tracks, TV spots, charitable efforts and the Nextel Cup Series Awards Ceremony.



NASCAR

1. How will the sport react to the first foreign manufacturer as a regular competitor?

Since the late 1940s, NASCAR has been an American sport, with the starting fields composed primarily of automobiles with nameplates from the USA. But this year, the Toyota Camry makes its debut with three teams and seven full-time drivers planning to enter every race and at least one part-time team expected to run a limited schedule.

The Toyota camp includes some of the sport's biggest names. The driver lineup includes Dale Jarrett, Dave Blaney, Brian Vickers, David Reutimann, Jeremy Mayfield and A.J. Allmendinger. And on the crew chief side, two proven winners, Doug Richert and Matt Borland, are leading the teams of Vickers and Jarrett, respectively.

While the debut of the Camrys during preseason testing at Daytona International Speedway created little stir, most expect that to change in February when the cars make their debut in competition.

"A lot of people are going to be surprised," Jarrett said, adding that he has no doubt that a Toyota will visit Victory Lane this year.

"I don't think one is a question; it's how many we can get in there and win. ... I look for that to happen." And he wants to be the one doing the winning.

"I hope to be the lead dog that the rest can follow," he said.

2. Just how big an impact will Juan Pablo Montoya have on the sport?

The affable Colombian, who shocked the racing world last year by announcing he was leaving the elite Formula One circuit to race in NASCAR for Chip Ganassi, already has drawn international attention to NASCAR. The question this year is how much can he grow the sport's fan base.

And based on his initial runs last year, he's not afraid to mix it



MONTOYA

up with the stockcar set.

At Homestead in November, he tangled with Ryan Newman and wound up in a fiery wreck. Afterward, the NASCAR media corps found itself competing for time with Spanish-speaking reporters from international media outlets.

Montoya granted his first interviews in Spanish, then answered question in English.



4. Will the Car of Tomorrow meet NASCAR's — and fans' — expectations?

NASCAR's COT, which makes its debut at Bristol, will be run in 16 races, including five of the 10 in the Chase for the Nextel Cup.

It's difficult to find anyone in the garage who likes the car, which is boxier than the current vehicles and has a plywood splitter on the front and a wing on the rear. It's designed to be safer for drivers and produce better racing, but it has almost no fans in the garage.

"You've heard that old saying about the sharpest knife in the drawer," Sterling Marlin said. "Well there must have been a bunch of dull ones in there when they drew that thing up."

Mechanics say the front end tends to pick up litter on the track and block the air flow to the radiator, and it's difficult to adjust the car where it handles well.

The car is set to run in both races at Bristol, Martinsville, Richmond, Phoenix, New Hampshire and Dover, as well as at Darlington, Watkins Glen, Infineon and the second race at Talladega.

5. Will new players in television help NASCAR's sagging ratings, which dropped as much as 20 percent in some major markets last year?

There will be new faces — and some familiar ones — on TV and new voices on the radio as NASCAR brings on new media partners. ESPN is returning to the TV lineup, essentially replacing NBC, while Sirius replaces XM as NASCAR's official satellite radio partner.

NASCAR broadcasting veteran Dr. Jerry Punch will share the ESPN booth with former driver Rusty Wallace and former crew chief and car owner Andy Petree.

Rick Minter's

OBSERVATIONS

Some key storylines this week in NASCAR.

Martin's fresh start

After spending 19 years at Roush Racing, Mark Martin quickly has adapted to his new surroundings at Ginn Racing, where he'll run a partial Cup schedule and select starts in the Craftsman Truck and Busch Series.

"I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life," said Martin, who explained that he is comfortable driving the No. 01 Chevrolet instead of his familiar No. 6 Ford.

"Just because I stayed with Jack Roush for 19 years doesn't make it wrong for me to drive for someone else," he said. "It just makes it strange. I'm actually already beyond that. To me and many of my fans, I'll always be No. 6, and a part of me will always be No. 6, but that's emotions, and this is racing."

He said he might end up spending the next 19 years with Ginn.

"I probably won't be driving (racecars)," he said. "Maybe I'll be driving the hauler or something like that, but I expect to be around. The cool opportunity that I have is that I get to do whatever I want to do. That can be drive Cup cars or Busch cars, and I get to mentor young drivers or do whatever it is that I would like to do there."

Edwards: Enough is enough

The last thing Carl Edwards wants is to have the start of a potential championship season overshadowed by a running feud with Tony Stewart, so he's trying his best to put it to rest.

Stewart carried the feud into 2007 when he said on his Sirius satellite radio show that he was still waiting to settle the score with Edwards. Stewart angered Edwards last summer by starting a wreck with Clint Bowyer at Pocono that collected Edwards and doomed Edwards' chances of making the Chase for the Nextel Cup.

"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."

Edwards said last week that he believes he mishandled the incident and offered an apology.

"What I did wrong (at Pocono) was I got out of the car and made it a personal attack and said some things I shouldn't have said," Edwards said.

"Obviously I really upset Tony, and for that I apologize. ... The things that happen on the race track, sometimes you've just got to keep your opinion to yourself. So if I could take back what I said last year, I would have just talked to him about it, not the media."

Woods look to expand

The Wood Brothers racing team, which has struggled as its competitors expanded to three and four teams, is steadily moving away from its one-car concept and putting much of its hopes on a third-generation family member, Jon Wood.

Wood, the son of team co-owner Eddie Wood and grandson of founder Glen Wood, is set to take the wheel of his family's No. 21 Ford at Las Vegas Motor Speedway in March. It will mark the first time a Wood family member has competed in NASCAR's elite division since his grandfather, Glen Wood, raced at Starkey Speedway in Roanoke, Va., in 1964. In that race, Wood started on the pole and finished third behind Junior Johnson and Ned Jarrett.

It also will mark the first time in years that the Woods have fielded two cars in a Cup race. Veteran Ken Schrader will move from the 20 to the No. 47 in Vegas. Jon Wood, who is moving up from the Busch Series, is set to run 10 races in the family's flagship No. 21 and one in the No. 47.

The elder Wood raced in the Cup division from 1953 to 1964, winning four times as a driver. The team he founded has 96 victories.

Hylton chases history

Seventy-two-year-old James Hylton drew a steady stream of media members to the far side of the secondary garage at Daytona last week. They came to talk to him about his attempt to become the oldest driver to start a Nextel Cup race.

For most of the three-day test, he was at the bottom of the speed charts, but eventually he turned a lap that put a big smile on his creased face as he climbed from his No. 58 Chevy. "That was a good lap," he said. "Let's go see how good it was."

Not having a computer monitor of his own, he walked rather briskly across the garage to view another team's monitor. His name, at that time, was 13th of the 57 on the screen. He wound up 15th, with a best speed of 185.445 mph.

"That's pretty good," he said. "I knew this was a good car." Hylton is driving a car purchased from his old pal, Richard Childress, who once raced against Hylton and now fields cars for Kevin Harvick, Jeff Burton and Clint Bowyer.

Memory Lane: Elliott Sadler takes the walk with Benny Parsons

The NASCAR world has lost its gentle giant. Benny Parsons, a championship-winning race driver and popular, folksy TV commentator, died last week at age 65 from complications resulting from a six-month battle with cancer.

His death leaves a giant void in the sport already trying to recover from the loss the week before of popular driver Bobby Hamilton to cancer. Elliott Sadler provided one of his fondest memories to Cox News Service writer Rick Minter at Daytona last week:

Sadler said he was only 12 when he first experienced Parsons' hospitality. At that time, Sadler's brother, Hermie, was a suitemate at the University of North Carolina with Keith Parsons, Benny's son.

"At the time, we were race fans and all, and we knew of Keith, but we really didn't put two and



PARSONS

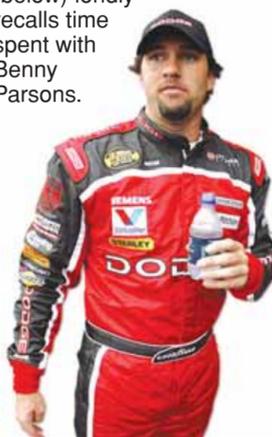
two together until he invited us all over to meet his dad," Sadler said. "They invited us to Thanksgiving dinner at Benny's house, and that was a treat for me, being 12 years old getting to go to his house. ... Spending the day with him and seeing his trophies and seeing his accomplishments in racing at his house was amazing to a 12-year-old kid."

"We even played Pictionary," Sadler said. "That's one day I'll always remember as a kid, going to his house and eating dinner and playing Pictionary. ... He was the same then as he was the last time I saw him at the racetrack."

Sadler talked about how Parsons spent time with everyone at the track, from the top stars to the tire changers, from media members to the top NASCAR executives, and enjoyed his interaction with them all.

"He really didn't put a value on what you did in the sport but what kind of person you were," Sadler said. "He was a good leader for a lot of

Elliott Sadler (below) fondly recalls time spent with Benny Parsons.



NASCAR

Catching up with ... CARL EDWARDS

Carl Edwards, driver of the No. 99 Ford at Roush Racing, met with members of the media, including Rick Minter of Cox News Service, at Daytona International Speedway last week. Here are excerpts from that interview:

Q. What has changed on

your race team heading into the 2007 season?

A. "The biggest thing that's new is Bob Osborne is back (as crew chief). We got to run the last couple of races (of 2006) with Bob. And a couple of other things with management and engineering and things

like that at the shop, but no huge changes, just things that we think that we could do better as a team to be faster even before we get to the racetrack. I'm really excited about all of the stuff at the shop, excited to have Bob, and hopefully the cars are just a tick faster."

Q. With your CD coming out, are you becoming a recording mogul?

A. "I'm no mogul, but my buddies, some of them are really musically talented, so we bought some recording equipment. It's been fun; it's been something different."

"The biggest thing I do is smile and say, 'That sounds all right.' They're having their first concert on Jan. 25 in Columbia, Mo., and all the proceeds are going to the Dream Factory, helping all the kids out there, so it'll be a lot of fun."

"But when I go to bed at

night, I think about racing. I wake up, I think about racing. I get to run the Busch series full time, and the Cup series, and (studio) is just something that's just a little bit different. So every once in awhile when I stop in at home, I can kind of see how that's going."

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