



AP PHOTO

Jeff Burton drives his car during practice for the Bank of America 500 NASCAR Nextel Cup auto race in Concord, N.C., Oct. 12.

Burton full of high hopes

By Mike Mulhern

WINSTON-SALEM (N.C.) JOURNAL

Jeff Burton is so close to being back on top of the stock car racing world, he can taste it.

And few drivers have worked harder during the past two years to reshape their careers.

Midway through last fall's championship chase, just after Burton had broken back into the winning column at Dover in late September, it appeared that the NASCAR title might come down to either Burton or Kevin Harvick, his teammate at Richard Childress' operation.

Alas, an untimely flat tire doomed Burton, and he finished a disappointing seventh in the final standings.

But Burton will be optimistic as he goes to Daytona as Speed-Weeks opens the new season. After all, he won the Daytona 500 pole a year ago, and he and crew chief Scott Miller were among the hottest teams on the tour down the stretch.

When Burton ponders what to improve, the answer is simple: "I want to go a little faster," he said.

"We are mature enough to win a championship, we are together enough to win a championship, and focused enough. We've got the right people in place.

"I can't say our road-course program needs to be better, or our speedway program, or our 1 1/2-mile program. What we need to is a little more cushion — and a faster car will do that. What we need to do better is to lead more laps, get more bonus points.

"We need a little more speed, so, instead of running eighth, we can run fifth. We've got to find a way so when we're at our best nobody is going to beat us. Last year there were times we were at our best and somebody could still beat us."

However, one of this season's big challenges for NASCAR teams may not be technical. First, a number of new teams and sponsors are joining the tour. That means some disappointed CEOs on Monday. Second, TV ratings and ticket sales were suspect last year.

"The strength of our series is not judged on the number of cars in the garage but by the number of people in the seats," Burton said.

"We do have an issue that eventually will require attention if the car count stays up.

"If sponsors become dissatisfied or the economy goes bad or popularity of the sport falls, that's not good. It's not about our drivers; it's about our sponsors and owners. It's not healthy for them to have to earn their way into the field every week, considering we're asking sponsors for \$16 million, \$17 million, \$18 million. It's a big difference from when we were asking for \$2 million.

"The Dallas Cowboys know they're going to play every weekend. They don't know if they're going to make the playoffs, but they know they're going to have a chance. With the amount of money involved here today, we've got to get to that point."

Potentially a major question facing Burton this season is his sponsor, Cingular, which is about to change its name to AT&T.

Under NASCAR's series sponsorship contract with Nextel-Sprint, Cingular was grandfathered in as a sponsor for Childress, with the stipulation the name and logo couldn't change.

Will they need a new sponsor? "I can't tell you a whole lot, to be honest," Burton said. "I can tell you that Cingular is extremely excited about its involvement with AT&T. And they're excited about being involved in this sport."

Mike Mulhern covers NASCAR for the Winston-Salem (S.C.) Journal. Send comments to mmulhern@wsjournal.com.

Not your daddy's NASCAR season

Car of Tomorrow, Formula One driver guarantee 2007 will be wild ride

By Jenna Fryer

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLOTTE, N.C.

Buckle up, race fans, for a season that promises to be like nothing ever seen before.

With the mandated Car of Tomorrow, changes to the Chase for the Championship, Toyota's arrival, ESPN's return and the introduction of former Formula One driver Juan Pablo Montoya, 2007 will prove this ain't your daddy's NASCAR.

Indeed, this season will be a pivotal one for NASCAR, which looks to rebound after a mediocre 2006 that saw television ratings slip and made many wonder if the sport had reached its plateau.

But NASCAR chairman Brian France hasn't strayed from his belief that all is well in his family-owned business.

"We're in a very strong position," he insisted. "We are still the No. 2 sport on television. Promoters continue to enjoy great ticket sales throughout the year, and I know 2007, with all of the things that are going on, will make for an exciting season."

It starts this weekend at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway, where the best of the Nextel Cup Series will kick-start the season with Saturday night's exhibition Budweiser Shootout.

Preparations begin the next day for the Feb. 18 season-opening Daytona 500.

The race will mark the first time a Japanese automaker will take the green flag in NASCAR's top series as Toyota's expected to have at least a handful of its Camrys in the field. Seven different drivers will race Camrys this season, including two-time Daytona 500 winner Michael Waltrip and 1999 Cup champion Dale Jarrett.

The inclusion of a foreign maker in a decidedly American sport has rankled many longtime



AP PHOTO

NASCAR drivers pass the green flag at the start of the Daytona 500 on Feb. 16. This year's Daytona 500 gets under way Feb. 18.

fans, which Jarrett believes is closed-minded.

"I'm as American as the next person that's here, and I pay my taxes just like everybody else, and I love this country," Jarrett said. "Toyota is a big part of the United States economy. They're going to put a lot of dollars in the sport, in promoting our sport, and that's going to be good for our sport as a whole."

The race also will include Montoya, a native of Colombia who will be the only non-white driver in NASCAR's top series this season. A former CART champion, Indianapolis 500 winner and popular F1 driver, Montoya is starting what is expected to be a bumpy transition from open-wheel dominance to stockcar struggles.

An aggressive and outspoken driver, he's also proven to be a quick study, leading many to predict he'll visit Victory Lane at least once this season.

Montoya just wants to take it one race at a time.

"This is a learning process for me, and there's no rush for me to be perfect," Montoya said. "But I am also not here for fun. This is serious business, and I plan on winning races."

Montoya is expected to bring new fans to NASCAR, and they'll have no problem finding him as he'll be featured heavily on satellite radio and television.

NASCAR is ramping up its exposure through Sirius Satellite Radio, which has an entire NASCAR channel that will provide flag-to-flag coverage on race day, and by welcoming back ESPN after a long hiatus.

ESPN was one of NASCAR's original broadcast partners, but the network was frozen out of coverage in the 2001 television package that awarded the TV rights to Fox and NBC.

But the sports network is back with a vengeance, promising to devote hours upon hours of air time and a nightly "NASCAR Now" news program.

'Nobody wants drivers in charge'

NASCAR racers skeptical of union

By Mike Harris

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In September 1969, NASCAR's best-known drivers formed the Professional Drivers Association, an organization they hoped would make their jobs safer, guarantee their futures and raise their paltry incomes.

Just weeks later, the PDA was dead, victim of the iron hand of NASCAR founder William Henry Getty "Big Bill" France and genuinely bad timing.

"The week before Talladega we had a meeting in Detroit," explained Richard Petty, one of the biggest names in racing and a key union organizer.

"Everybody sat down and said, 'It's time we did something like this.'"

That included drivers such as David Pearson, Cale Yarborough, Buddy Baker and Bobby Allison.

An earlier attempt to organize drivers — by NASCAR pioneer Curtis Turner and the Teamsters Union — was crushed by France in 1961. He banned Turner for "life," which wound up being four years.

But eight years later, the drivers were talking union again.

NASCAR ran 54 races in 1969, some paying as little as \$1,000 to the winner. In a far more dangerous era, drivers were insured for a maximum of \$15,000.

"When you go back to me and Allison and Pearson and all of them, we was just making a living," said Petty, who was elected president of the PDA.

"I drove 35 years and didn't take in but \$7½ million dollars. It took me 15 years to win the first million.

"These guys today start out with \$2 (million) or \$3 million dollars in their hand before they ever get in the racecar. Then they go out and win another \$2 or \$3 million or whatever. ... If they can't take care of themselves with the money flowing through their hands now then nobody could look after you."

Today's drivers appreciate the fact that NASCAR and the

"Can you imagine Kasey Kahne and Denny Hamlin talking about a pension plan?"

Kyle Petty
NASCAR driver



PETTY

Frances, the founding family, have given them the platform to earn millions. But they also see NASCAR taking in massive amounts of television and sponsorship revenue, just like other major pro sports, without giving its athletes the benefits other players receive.

"Nobody is wanting to strong arm or anything like that because the sport is good; we don't want to rock the ship," said four-time champion Jeff Gordon.

That's probably not going to change.

Veteran Kyle Petty, who saw his father's effort to start a union fizzle, subscribes to the idea that today's drivers don't care about anything beyond who has the swankiest house on Lake Norman or the biggest flat-screen TV in his motorhome.

"Can you imagine Kasey Kahne and Denny Hamlin sitting talking about a pension plan?" Kyle Petty said. "They're not thinking about it, and they won't think about it, because they'll make enough money during a period of time where when they get ready to think about it, it'll be too late to do something."

Privately, drivers said they believe a union only would work if Gordon, Tony Stewart and Dale Earnhardt Jr. were on board. Without that trio, an organized effort wouldn't hold any weight.

Even then, there's skepticism.

"Trust me, nobody wants the drivers in charge of anything," Kevin Harvick said. "And I really doubt that even if there was some sort of union, nobody would agree on everything."

There's also the issue of who would be in charge. In the six years since Dale Earnhardt was killed, no driver has stepped up to replace him as the leader in the garage.

Even so, today's drivers have several issues they'd like to see addressed, with no leader and no leverage to force NASCAR to change.

SEASON AT A GLANCE

Here's a look at the 2007 NASCAR Nextel Cup schedule:

Saturday	x-Budweiser Shootout	Daytona Beach, Fla.
Feb. 18	Daytona 500	Daytona Beach, Fla.
Feb. 25	Auto Club 500	Fontana, Calif.
March 11	UAW-Daimler Chrysler 400	Las Vegas
March 18	Atlanta 500	Hampton, Ga.
March 25	Food City 500,	Bristol, Tenn.
April 1	Goody's 500	Martinsville, Va.
April 15	Samsung 500	Fort Worth, Texas
April 21	Subway Fresh 500	Avondale, Ariz.
April 29	Aaron's 499	Talladega, Ala.
May 5	Crown Royal 400	Richmond, Va.
May 12	Dodge Avenger 500	Darlington, S.C.
May 19	x-NASCAR Nextel All-Star Challenge	Concord, N.C.
May 27	Coca Cola 600	Concord, N.C.
June 3	TBA	Dover, Del.
June 10	Pocono 500	Long Pond, Pa.
June 17	TBA	Brooklyn, Mich.
June 24	Dodge/Save Mart 350	Sonoma, Calif.
July 1	LENEX Industrial Tools 300	Loudon, N.H.
July 7	Pepsi 400	Daytona Beach, Fla.
July 15	USG Sheetrock 400	Joliet, Ill.
July 29	Allstate 400 at the Brickyard	Indianapolis
Aug. 5	Pennsylvania 500	Long Pond, Pa.
Aug. 12	NEXTEL Cup at The Glen	Watkins Glen, N.Y.
Aug. 19	TBA	Brooklyn, Mich.
Aug. 25	Sharpie 500	Bristol, Tenn.
Sept. 2	TBA	Fontana, Calif.
Sept. 8	Chevy Rock-and-Roll 400	Richmond, Va.
Sept. 16	Sylvania 300	Loudon, N.H.
Sept. 23	TBA	Dover, Del.
Sept. 30	Kansas 400	Kansas City, Kan.
Oct. 7	UAW-Ford 500	Talladega, Ala.
Oct. 13	Bank of America 500	Concord, N.C.
Oct. 21	TBA	Martinsville, Va.
Oct. 28	TBA	Hampton, Ga.
Nov. 4	Dickies 500	Fort Worth, Texas.
Nov. 11	Checker Auto Parts 500	Avondale, Ariz.
Nov. 18	Ford 400	Homestead, Fla.

x-non-points race

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