

CALIFORNIA SPEEDWAY

Track length: 2 miles
Banking in corners: 14 degrees
Banking on frontstretch: 11 degrees
Banking on backstretch: 3 degrees
Seating capacity: 92,000

NASCAR INSIDER

A LOOK AHEAD:

What: Auto Club 500
When: 3 p.m. Sunday
Where: California Speedway
TV: WXIN-Channel 59

Looking ahead toward **TOMORROW**

Introduction of new car in Cup could yield changes in Busch Series

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla. NASCAR's Car of Tomorrow, which will be phased in this season in Nextel Cup, has few fans in the Cup garage, but there are plenty who like it on the Busch Series side.

That's because longtime Busch drivers and owners believe the introduction of the car in the Cup circuit at Bristol next month will spur an exodus of powerful Cup teams from the Busch Series, where they have dominated the racing in recent seasons.

In the past two years, Cup teams and drivers, using the Busch Series primarily as a testing ground for their Cup efforts, have won all but three races and both championships.

But with the Car of Tomorrow coming into the Cup Series on a limited basis this season, and not in Busch, there won't be nearly as much information gained by the Cup teams.

That could lead to greater chances for Busch teams and drivers to win.

"I think it'll make all the difference in the world," veteran Busch crew chief Ricky Pearson said.

"I don't think you'll see a lot of Cup drivers over here trying to learn something."

But that doesn't mean the Busch Series immediately will return to the days when it had its own identity and wasn't re-

garded as something of a "knock-off" Nextel Cup. The problem then could become a shortage of cars at some events.

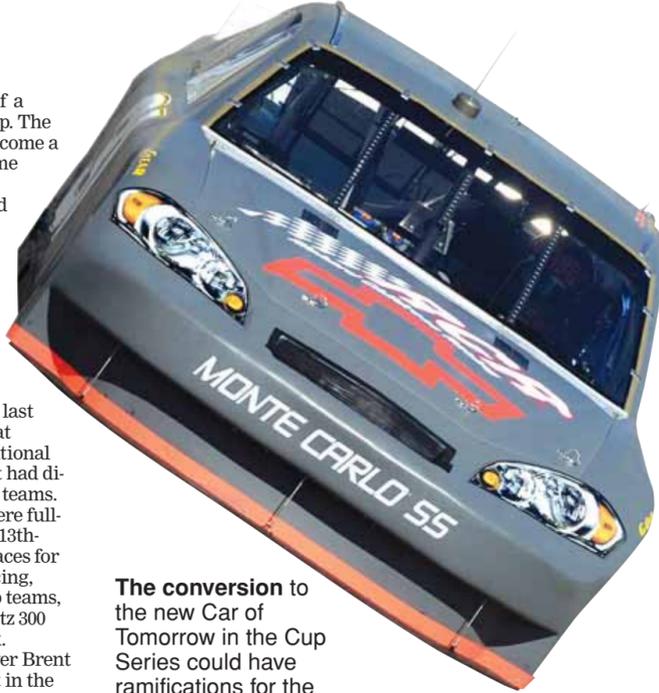
"I won't be surprised if there are some short fields because of so few Busch owners," Pearson said, citing the disappearance during the years of one Busch Series owner after another.

Of the 51 entries for last Saturday's Orbitz 300 at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway, all but eight had direct ties to Nextel Cup teams. The top 12 finishers were full-time Cup drivers, and 13th-place Scott Wimmer races for Richard Childress Racing, which fields three Cup teams, including one for Orbitz 300 winner Kevin Harvick.

Pearson, whose driver Brent Sherman finished 21st in the Orbitz 300 — it was the best of the teams with no direct Cup affiliations — said NASCAR should have placed limitations on the participation of Cup drivers and teams in Busch races before the series got so one-sided.

"If drivers are in the top 35 in points in the Cup series, they shouldn't be allowed to have a guaranteed spot over here," he said. "Let them race for the 13 spots (behind the 30 that are locked in based on owner points). That's enough Cup drivers over here. Let 'em race their way in."

NASCAR spokesman Kerry Sharp said officials are reluctant to place limitations on Busch participation because



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The conversion to the new Car of Tomorrow in the Cup Series could have ramifications for the Busch Series.

they don't want to deny fans a chance to see their favorite drivers, most of whom are Cup regulars.

Surprisingly, Kyle Busch said there should be some limits, even though he races competitively in both series.

"(NASCAR) needs to come up with a rule that states how many races we can run," he said. "Make it 10 races. Let us pick the 10 races, and in those races we have to fight to get in the show. If we're not fast enough, we don't deserve to be in the race."

Busch said he and other Cup drivers double-dip race in Busch to learn tricks about the

tracks and the tires so they'll be faster in their Cup cars.

He said racing in the Busch Series is "90 percent learning for Cup car, 5 percent fun and 5 percent money."

David Green, a veteran Busch Series veteran and the circuit's 1994 champion, is hoping a new TV package will help NASCAR's No. 2 circuit establish its own identity.

"We're all hopeful that with the new TV deal with ESPN2 that we can paint a picture week-in and week-out that's all about the Busch Series owners and drivers, and oh, by the way, we do have Cup drivers over here," Green said.

Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

Some key story lines as the Cup Series heads to California.

Out of the shadows

In winning the Daytona 500, Kevin Harvick took one more step away from the long shadows of the late Dale Earnhardt. Harvick, who took over the flagship Chevrolet at Richard Childress Racing after Earnhardt's death in 2001, drove for the past six years with Earnhardt's longtime sponsor, GM Goodwrench, on his car.

But this year, he's racing under the yellow colors of Shell, the new sponsor of his No. 29 Chevy.

But he said that despite the change in car color and sponsor, it's still the people behind the scenes who make race cars into winners.

"No matter what the colors, GM Goodwrench and Dale Earnhardt and Richard (Childress) are the people that got RCR to the point that it is today," Harvick said. "Things change and sponsors change, and we had to move forward. But winning is what makes the shadow less, and being successful on the race track and making things happen."

But he said he doesn't ever want those shadows to completely disappear.

"None of us ever want to get rid of anything that ever happened at RCR," he said.

Empty seats

There's a good chance there will be thousands of empty seats for Sunday's Nextel Cup race at California Speedway, but there's plenty of debate about what the problem could be and how to fix it.

NASCAR Chairman Brian France said NASCAR track owners are selling more tickets than ever, but there are empty seats because NASCAR has added events in the Southwest.

"We've added a lot of events there," France said, citing second races being added at Texas, California and Phoenix. "That's a lot of supply coming online in just two or three years of time. It takes a little while to absorb that."

Tony Stewart, a NASCAR driver who owns three dirt tracks, said California Speedway's ticket-selling shortcoming is because "they don't have me promoting it."

"There is so much stuff out there entertainment-wise you have to go out and sell your product," he said. "It's not like you build it and they will come. You have to go out there and convince these people that your show is better to go to than what somebody else has."

But he acknowledged that California historically hasn't been a strong racing market. "There are not a lot of dirt tracks there," he said. "I'm not sure the interest in racing is as high out there as it is in the Midwest, the East Coast or the Southeast."

Crackdown aftermath

NASCAR took a public-relations hit last week, with story after story about teams cheating, but many feel that the sanctioning body has come out looking OK.

"I think it's been a bad week for our sport," driver Jeff Burton said. "We should be talking about how competitive the racing is going to be."

But he doesn't blame NASCAR and its officials. "I'd like to believe they're just trying to make sure the sport is fair," he said. "For our sport to be what it needs to be, they need to police it."

Foreign appeal

Juan Pablo Montoya, the Colombian Formula One driver who is making an unprecedented move to NASCAR, seems to be going out of his way to win over fans and media.

Montoya has been gregarious with media members he hardly knows. He sometimes walks through the fan paddock by himself, something most NASCAR stars rarely do.

NASCAR fans, from all appearances, have taken an immediate liking to him, too. At least he thinks so.

"The fans have been great to me," he said. "It's amazing to see. I think it's a cool thing. It's something I didn't expect as much of."

He theorizes that NASCAR fans, most of whom are interested in the technical aspects of the sport, appreciate the way he's shown respect for NASCAR racing, which some people consider inferior to the open-wheel circuit he left.

"I think, generally, all of the fans have respected me a lot, because I really respect their sport," he said. "It's great how passionate they are."

He said that unlike Formula One fans, many NASCAR followers stay in motorhomes at the tracks and soak up the entire experience.

"That's something in Europe fans can't do," he said.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A look at some of the people who shaped the sport

Dale Inman a role model for crew chiefs

By RICK MINTER
Cox News Service

When it comes to NASCAR crew chiefs, there have been some crafty ones through the years.

Leonard Wood led the Wood Brothers in their heyday. Ray Evernham helped make Jeff Gordon a star. Harry Hyde spearheaded the effort for Tim Richmond and others. Chad Knaus has been an integral part of Jimmie Johnson's success, and Greg Zipadelli has done the same for Tony Stewart.

But none have had the success that Dale Inman has enjoyed through the years. He has a series-leading eight championships, seven with his first cousin Richard Petty and another with Terry

Labonte. Most of Petty's 200 victories came with Inman as crew chief.

Today, Inman is still in the Nextel Cup garage, but his duties aren't as stressful. At age 70, he works as a consultant for Petty Enterprises. He stands off to the side at the tracks, carefully observing the Petty team and the competition throughout the weekend. He's not directly involved in the preparation of the cars, either in the shop or at the track.

He said the duties of crew chiefs have changed dramatically from the days when he



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and a crew of six prepared Petty's cars and Inman drove the hauler to tracks across the nation.

"When I was a crew chief, I had to work," he said. "It's altogether different today. It's the same 500-mile races today, and you have to figure the fuel mileage, the tire wear, but there's more for the crew chiefs to look out for."

Inman said that some things haven't changed. It still takes a combination of old-school racing knowledge and the use of the latest technology to lead a winning team.

"The crew chief should be the smartest one on the block," he said.

Inman said that although he's not on the front lines anymore, he still enjoys the atmosphere of the NASCAR garage.

"I enjoy being at the race track, seeing the people, the cars, the workmanship that goes into it," he said. "I just don't like the travel."

He said that of all the races he ever won as a crew chief, including seven Daytona 500s, the one that stands out was the Motor Trend 500 at Riverside, Calif., in 1969.

"It was our first race with Ford after we'd been with Chrysler for so long," he said. "That stands out pretty big for me."

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