



DID YOU KNOW?

Actor Nicolas Cage, the star of the upcoming action-adventure film "Ghost Rider," will be the grand marshal for the 2007 Daytona 500.

NASCAR INSIDER

A LOOK AHEAD:

- **What:** The Budweiser Shootout
- **When:** 8:30 p.m., Feb. 10
- **Where:** Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway

Rick Minter's OBSERVATIONS

Some key storylines this week in NASCAR.

The money pit

The increasing amount of money required to field a winning Nextel Cup race team has even the most successful owners looking for outside investors. Richard Childress already has taken on partners, and Ray Evernham said last week that he would welcome someone who could add financial support.

Jack Roush said during a stop of the sport's media tour last week that he's close to finalizing a deal with Fenway Sports Group and John Henry, whose companies own the Boston Red Sox.

Roush said one of the main reasons he's seeking a partner is to help him take on Toyota and its vast resources.

He said Henry's contributions "could offset some of the financial energy that a company like Toyota could bring, as they bring the resources that they have not garnered from the sport, but from the success of their automobile business elsewhere."

Roush said he's confident he can beat back the challenge from Toyota, which is set to become the first foreign nameplate to compete in NASCAR's elite division.

"I expect to hand Toyota their head over the short term, and then it's just a matter of what happens in the long term," he said.

The mandate

Team owner Chip Ganassi acknowledged that it's time for his team, which he co-owns with Felix Sabates, to begin winning races.



GANASSI

"It seems like yesterday I got together with Felix, but I guess it's been about seven years, and quite frankly, I'm tired of being in the building-block process," Ganassi said. "I'm ready to arrive."

"They say everybody out there has the statistics about how long it takes to build a winning organization. We're down to about our last year or so in the statistic department."

One of Ganassi's drivers, sophomore Reed Sorenson, agreed.

"I think last year was the first year in my career that I haven't won a race," he said. "We've got to win. That's what (sponsor) Target wants us to do. That's what we want to do, and that's our job, so we're going to try to do everything we can to do it."

The negotiation

As Dale Earnhardt Jr. and his stepmother and car owner, Teresa Earnhardt, negotiate on a contract renewal, it seems clear that Dale Jr. is in the driver's seat in more ways than one. Jeff Gordon said Junior is the heartbeat of Teresa's Dale Earnhardt Inc. team, and she needs to realize that.

"If that thing is not going to blow up in a big way, they'd better figure out a way to come to terms, because Dale could write his own ticket," Gordon said. "He could go anywhere he wants, and his sponsors are going to go with him. The fans are going to go with him. He can start his own team, go to any organization. He's in the best seat you could possibly be in in this sport, and I don't know if Teresa is really recognizing that."

The dilemma

With race teams having to meet strict measurements to have Cars of Tomorrow chassis approved by NASCAR, there's considerable concern that there won't be an adequate supply of cars ready for the 16 events this season in which the cars will be used. That already has drivers concerned about the consequences of crashing one of the new cars.

"Teams are limited," Kasey Kahne said. "You crash one at Bristol, you'll have another one so you'll run that at Martinsville and hope you don't crash one there in practice because you'd probably be out."

Kahne said his Evernham Motorsports team is among those that still don't have a race-ready Car of Tomorrow. "We've got a really big test coming up, and we don't have the car ready yet," he said.

The search for victory

Kahne's circuit-leading six Cup victories last season apparently weren't enough to allow team owner Ray Evernham a stress-free off-season.

"Winning six races is good for Kasey Kahne,"

Evernham said. "It's not good for Evernham Motorsports to have one car capable of winning and the other two not."

Evernham said the key to the very survival of his race team is to get Elliott Sadler and Scott Riggs running on par with Kahne, to become competitive at Daytona and Talladega and win a Nextel Cup championship.

He said the sport's top four teams — Hendrick Motorsports, Roush Racing, Joe Gibbs Racing and Richard Childress Racing — have done all three while he, Dale Earnhardt Inc. and Penske Racing haven't.

CHANGES for the Chase

New formula for points system gets mixed reviews

By **RICK MINTER**
Cox News Service

Concord, N.C.

NASCAR's decision to change its points system for the 2007 season was made in an effort to put a greater emphasis on winning. But most people involved in the sport say that the changes will result in teams taking chances with pit strategy late in a race — no-tire pit stops and gambles with fuel — and that fans shouldn't expect to see wholesale changes in the way drivers race.

"It's going to give the winners more points, but I don't think it's going to change the people who win," Matt Kenseth said. "I go back to where we've run second at Indy a couple of times. It could have paid a 2,000-point bonus to win that race, and we still couldn't have won it. We were running as hard as we could to run second."

Kenseth thinks the new format will become more of a talking point during the season instead of having a major impact on the competition. In addition to expanding the playoff field for the final 10 races from 10 drivers to 12, NASCAR

also will seed the field based on the number of victories during the 26-race regular season. Race winners also will get five extra points for victories throughout the 36-race schedule.

"If you can pull off a win, you'll be like, 'Yeah, if I make the Chase I get an extra 10 points going in,'" Kenseth said.

Kasey Kahne, who made the Chase for the first time last season, would have been seeded first under the new system. He's not against the points change, but he said adding two drivers to the playoffs could take away some of the excitement in the final races of the regular season.

In the first three seasons of the Chase, the battle for the 10th and final Chase slot provided some unexpected mid-season excitement because one or two drivers ended up just a few points shy.

But Kahne said with the field expanded to 12, all of the sport's best points-earners will have pulled away from the rest of the field by the time the circuit runs the final race of the regular season at Richmond in September.

"I would say (that) going into

Richmond, you're not going to have the closeness we had last year," Kahne said. "The drama is going to be in the Chase this year, not getting to the Chase."

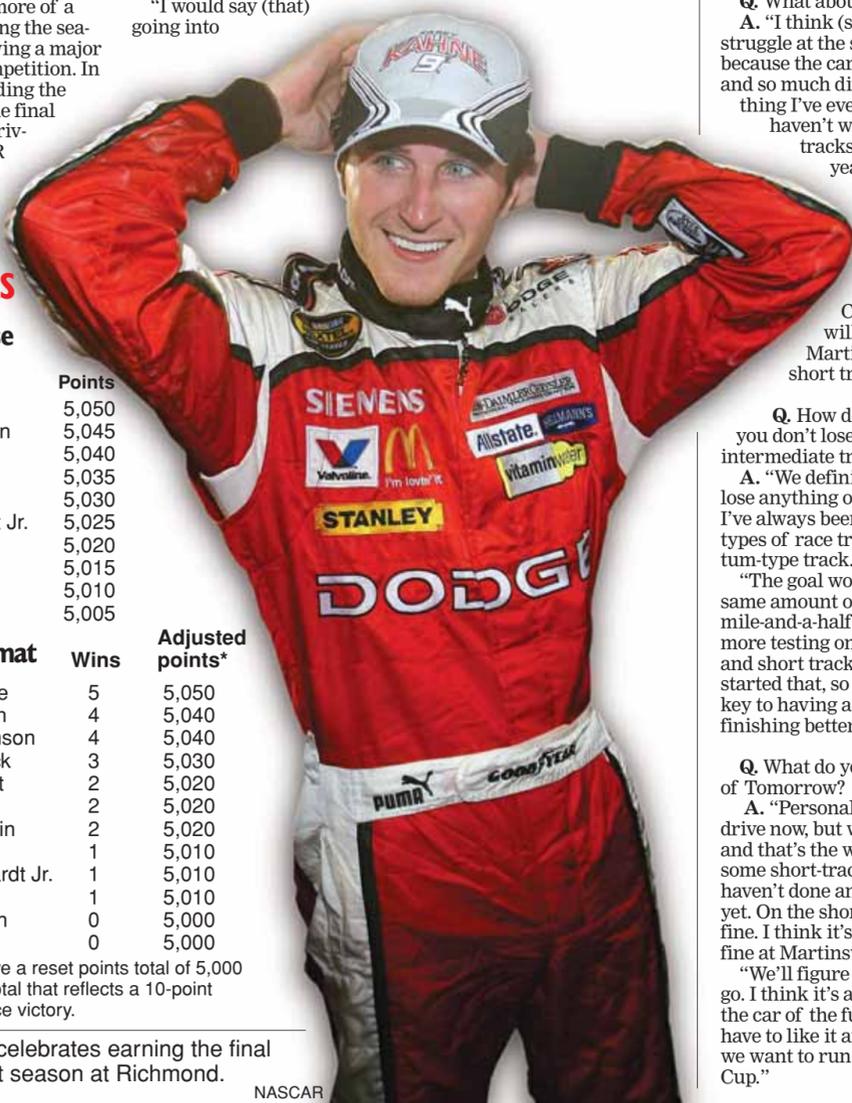
But adding two spots gives some drivers hope.

"If we run 15th (in points) all year, and it comes down to four or five races before the Chase, we've got a shot," said Reed Sorenson, who finished 24th last season. "Obviously we'll have a better shot with 12 being in, instead of 10."

Speedway Motorsports Chairman Bruton Smith agrees with NASCAR officials who say the sport needs to place more emphasis on winning, but he said the change can't be made by tinkering with the points system.

He said most of the money that is paid to drivers finishing at the rear of the pack — last place paid from \$57,537 to \$281,682 last year — should instead be paid to the winner, increasing the winner's pay to \$1 million or so per race.

"Then the fans get involved. They'll want to know who won," Smith said. "The emphasis has to be on winning, not points."



NASCAR

A DO-OVER FOR DRIVERS

2006 pre-Chase standings

Rank	Driver	Points
1.	Matt Kenseth	5,050
2.	Jimmie Johnson	5,045
3.	Kevin Harvick	5,040
4.	Kyle Busch	5,035
5.	Denny Hamlin	5,030
6.	Dale Earnhardt Jr.	5,025
7.	Mark Martin	5,020
8.	Jeff Burton	5,015
9.	Jeff Gordon	5,010
10.	Kasey Kahne	5,005

Under new format

Rank	Driver	Wins	Adjusted points*
1.	Kasey Kahne	5	5,050
2.	Matt Kenseth	4	5,040
3.	Jimmie Johnson	4	5,040
4.	Kevin Harvick	3	5,030
5.	Tony Stewart	2	5,020
6.	Jeff Gordon	2	5,020
7.	Denny Hamlin	2	5,020
8.	Kyle Busch	1	5,010
9.	Dale Earnhardt Jr.	1	5,010
10.	Greg Biffle	1	5,010
11.	Mark Martin	0	5,000
12.	Jeff Burton	0	5,000

* — All drivers have a reset points total of 5,000 and an adjusted total that reflects a 10-point bonus for each race victory.

Kasey Kahne celebrates earning the final Chase spot last season at Richmond.

Catching up with ...

KASEY KAHNE

Kasey Kahne, driver of the No. 9 Dodge for Evernham Motorsports, met with members of the media, including Rick Minter of Cox News Service, during last week's NASCAR preseason media tour to discuss the upcoming Nextel Cup season.

Q. What do you think about the new points system (which gives race winners five more points and seeds the field for the Chase based on race wins in the 26-race regular season)?

A. "It would have been a big benefit for us last year. I think it's a neat rule. It's fine. It's something different. It puts a little more (focus) on winning. The consistency isn't quite as big a deal, but it's still going to be huge. Consistency is going to be a big part of winning the championship, but also winning races is going to be a little bit bigger, too."

Q. What's your outlook for the two road-course races?

A. "The road courses are definitely my weakest link. Last year, we qualified fifth and second at the road courses. It's not about making a lap. I can make a lap around them. It's just about putting the full race together and just being able to go fast the entire race. It's something we need to figure out as a team. We're going to test more on road courses this year. We're going to try to be more prepared when we go to Sears Point and Watkins Glen."

Q. What about the short tracks?

A. "I think (short tracks) were a struggle at the start (of my career) because the cars were so heavy and so much different from anything I've ever driven. We haven't won at any short tracks, but the last two years we've run up front at a lot of them. I'm getting better setups now for the short tracks. I don't think the Car of Tomorrow will be a huge deal at Martinsville. It's a pretty short track."

Q. How do you make sure you don't lose your edge on the intermediate tracks?

A. "We definitely don't want to lose anything on my best tracks. I've always been better on those types of race tracks. It's a momentum-type track."

"The goal would be to do the same amount of testing on the mile-and-a-half tracks and do more testing on the road courses and short tracks. We've already started that, so hopefully that's the key to having a better season and finishing better in the points."

Q. What do you think of the Car of Tomorrow?

A. "Personally, I like the car we drive now, but we have a new car, and that's the way it is. We've done some short-track testing with it. I haven't done anything over a mile yet. On the short tracks, it was fine. I think it's going to be just fine at Martinsville and Bristol."

"We'll figure out the rest as we go. I think it's a safer car and it's the car of the future. We'll just have to like it and get used to it if we want to run well in Nextel Cup."

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

Where recent Nextel Cup champions finished in points the year before winning the title:

2 The finish of Tony Stewart, right, in 2001.



8 Matt Kenseth's finish in '02.

6 Jimmie Johnson's finish in '05 and Tony Stewart's finish in '04.



11 The points finish by Kurt Busch, left, in '03.

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