Toyota has come long way in a year

by Bill Center

When it comes to racing in America, Toyota doesn't fail.

Which is why Toyota's struggles last year in its debut season at NASCAR's highest level served as something of a warning to other teams.

"I don't think they are going to go away ... which makes you believe they are going to get a lot better," said Rick Hendrick, the leader of the most powerful Chevrolet team in stock car racing.

Guess what, Toyota has - and faster than most teams expected.

Bolstered by the offseason coup of luring Joe Gibbs' powerful team away from the Chevrolet camp, Toyota is suddenly a power to be reckoned with in stock car racing.

Yes, Dodge scored the biggest breakthrough at Daytona International Speedway when Ryan Newman ended an 82-race winless drought by leading teammate Kurt Busch across the line for a 1-2 finish in the Daytona 500.

But the Toyotas of Tony Stewart and Kyle Busch finished third and fourth, respectively, after dominating much of the race.

And in the prelims leading up to the Daytona 500, Denny Hamlin had given Toyota a taste of victory in a qualifying race while Stewart drove a Camry to victory in Saturday's Nationwide Series semimain event.

What a difference an offseason of engine development makes.

"The big difference from last year to this season is that last year we thought we had the possibility of winning and this year we know we can," said Jim Aust, president and CEO of Toyota Racing Development.

Just three months earlier, Aust had given Toyota a "C or C-minus" grade for its first season in NASCAR's

premier series. Many critics believed he was an easy grader.

The best finish Toyota had to show for 2007 was a third by Brian Vickers. Toyota finished the season with only one pole. And most of the Toyotas struggled just to make the races. When the season ended, only one Toyota driver, Dave Blaney, was ranked among the top 35.

Plus, Toyota had been stung with the specter of cheating when Michael Waltrip was penalized for using an illegal fuel additive to qualify for the 2007 Daytona 500, Toyota's first race with the big boys.

"Truthfully, given everything we were up against, our 2007 results were probably about as decent a performance as we could have expected," veteran Toyota Racing Development official Les Unger said recently.

"We really started from scratch. Not only did we have to build two new cars (a standard racing Sprint Cup car as well as a Car of Tomorrow body that was introduced in 2007), we started with two of our three teams also being new."

That meant Toyota went into the season needing to race its way into the field every weekend. Thirty-five cars automatically qualify for each field based on points. No more than eight other spots are available through actual qualifying.

"It was incredibly difficult for our teams," said Unger. "They were building two sets of cars from scratch. And when they arrived at each site, they'd have to try to race into the field, then change into pure race mode if they made it.

"It was incredibly stressful for our teams."

What Toyota lacked more than anything was a proven anchor team around which to build.

"Believe me, that was something we looked at from the get-go," said Unger. "But that's not something you can force. Teams have contracts with manufacturers. You have to see how contracts run out. No one of substance was available going into the 2007 season."

But one was after the season: Joe Gibbs Racing, whose driver lineup included two-time Sprint Cup champion Stewart and promising younger drivers Kyle Busch and Hamlin.

"It's hard to calibrate how huge that was for all of the Toyota teams," said Unger. "It paid dividends in the offseason with our existing teams because at Toyota, all teams share information. That's been our mantra since our open-wheel program."

Plus, when NASCAR adopted the Car of Tomorrow as its only car for 2008, the Toyota contingent could drop its catch-up efforts in the now-obsolete Sprint Cup car.

The result was a leap in Toyota's expectations and chances.

"We're anticipating winning races this year," said Unger. "And we expect to get at least two drivers and possibly more in the (12-man) Chase for the Championship field.

"I think we're going to see a major jump in Toyota's impact."

History supports Unger.

Last year was not the first time Toyota - which sold its first car in the United States in 1957 - stumbled upon entering an American racing series. But eventually, Toyota has won championships at every level at which it has competed.

The manufacturer's first success came in off-road racing with Ivan Stewart as its driver. Toyota then moved into sports car racing and won championships in the sedan and prototype divisions of the International Motor Sports Association with Juan Manuel Fangio II as its lead driver. Next it was on to IndyCar racing, where Toyota claimed four straight championships with car owner Chip Ganassi.

Now Toyota is committed to NASCAR with 11 Camrys on five teams in the Sprint Cup, six Camrys in the Nationwide Series and nine Tundras in the Craftsman Trucks series, including 2006 champion Todd Bodine.

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