

Racing veterans filling NASCAR seats

by Jane Miller

Only a few years ago, the trend in NASCAR was to hire young, inexperienced drivers for Nextel Cup teams.

Now, that trend has been reversed. Two vacancies on the Cup circuit are being filled by veterans who have even been out of the sport for a year or longer.

Sometime soon, Robert Yates is expected to announce 50-year-old Ricky Rudd as the driver for the high-profile 88 car (which may change its number to 28) and last week, Ward Burton, 45, was signed to drive the Morgan-McClure No. 4 Chevrolet.

The Rudd hiring is most interesting since Rudd drove for Yates from 2000 to 2002 but did not leave on the best of terms. From there he went to the Wood Brothers team, leaving in 2005.

He spent all of last year out of the circuit except for one race, when he was a relief driver at the June race at Dover for Tony Stewart after Stewart broke his shoulder at Charlotte.

Burton has been out of the sport for two years but did return for three races at the end of this season in the No. 4.

Not only did he get decent results, but his popularity with fans was a delightful bonus for team co-owner Larry McClure.

"I just was really pleasantly surprised at the amount of notoriety from fans he has," McClure said in a story in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. The team also had been receiving Christmas cards at the shop which read, "Happy Holidays, please sign Ward Burton."

PERSONNEL

Matt Borland, who had been Ryan Newman's crew chief for his entire Cup career, has moved to Michael Waltrip Racing to be crew chief for Dale Jarrett.

NHRA crew chief Wayne Dupuy, who abruptly left Doug Herbert's Top Fuel team mid-season, has joined Cruz Pedregon's Funny Car team.

Del Worsham released Phil Burkhart Jr. in favor of Jeff Arend, who brought sponsorship dollars to the family's Funny Car team.

CONGRATULATIONS

Jeff Gordon and new bride Ingrid Vandebosch are expecting their first child in July.

Gordon said Thursday the couple found out about the pregnancy five days before their Nov. 7 wedding in Mexico.

F1 TEST

Marco Andretti tested a Formula One car with Honda at Jerez in southern Spain on Dec. 15.

The third-generation driver, who was the runner-up in the Indianapolis 500 this year, said he had fun during the one-day session.

The team's sporting director, 2003 Indianapolis 500 winner Gil de Ferran, said Andretti did a good job.

"Marco looked comfortable straightaway with the car and the track, and overall it was a good first experience in an F1 car," de Ferran said.

MINARDI RIDES AGAIN

Former Formula One team principal Paul Stoddart has purchased a majority interest in the CTE-HVM Champ Car team and will rename it Minardi Team USA.

The Minardi team was the underdog of underdogs on the F1 circuit so it's good to see it, and Stoddart, get new life.

NEW SPONSOR

The Busch Series will no longer be the Busch Series after next season. NASCAR's No. 2 circuit just celebrated its 25th anniversary as the series sponsor.

SIRIUS GETS SERIOUS

It seems just about every day there is a press release about a new NASCAR program debuting on Sirius in January. In addition to Tony Stewart's weekly live show, the Morning Drive, featuring Charlotte Observer motorsports writer David Poole and TV broadcaster Marty Snider, will run from 6-10 a.m. Central time. Driver's Seat, anchored by former ESPN motorsports reporter John Kernan, will run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

All shows begin in January when NASCAR switches to Sirius from XM.

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