

Racing world is warming up for another season

by Jane Miller

The calendar has turned the page and the racing world is beginning to stir from its short hiatus.

Preseason racing magazines are popping up on the newstands and Daytona testing is only days away.

Some drivers have not been sitting idly by as they wait for the 2007 to begin. Greg Biffle became engaged to longtime girlfriend Nicole Lunders. Former Busch Series driver Burney Lamar married model Niki Taylor two days after Christmas. Lamar drove for Kevin Harvick Inc., last season.

Tony Stewart has, of course, been racing, winning both nights of the Rumble in Fort Wayne, Ind., indoor Midget race Dec. 29-30.

Stewart, as has been his custom in recent years, will not take part in the upcoming Daytona testing sessions. Mike McLaughlin will substitute for him. Drivers are split into two groups for the annual preseason tests, which will be watched closely this year with the Nextel Cup debut of the Toyota Camry. Included in the first group of testers, who will run Monday through Wednesday, are Jimmie Johnson, Dale Earnhardt Jr., Kasey Kahne, McLaughlin, Kevin Harvick, Greg Biffle, Jamie McMurray and Toyota drivers Dave Blaney and Dale Jarrett. Ward Burton and Ricky Rudd, both returning to fulltime competition after layoffs of a year or more, also are in this group.

In the second group, which tests Jan. 15-17, are Matt Kenseth, Jeff Burton, Kyle Busch, Jeff Gordon, Denny Hamlin, Carl Edwards, Juan Pablo Montoya and David Regan, who is replacing Mark Martin in the No. 6.

A word of warning about the test sessions: teams have been known to keep their cards close to the vest - the word "sandbagging" has been used in years past - so speeds during the test may not always be a true reflection of how good - or bad - a car actually is.

HAVE SOME CHILI

For NASCAR drivers with open-wheel backgrounds, the off-season would not be complete without racing in the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals at Tulsa, Okla.

This year's race is the 21st annual and it draws a who's who list of racing greats as well as those who want to be great.

Entered this year are 2002 champion Tony Stewart, Kasey Kahne, J.J. Yeley, Jason Leffler, Bobby East, Danny Lasoski, Tracy Hines, P.J. Jones, A.J. Foyt IV, Tracy Hines, Aaron Fike and NHRA Funny Car driver Cruz Pedregon.

Racing begins Jan. 9 with four nights of qualifying heats. The main event is Jan. 13.

It can be a wild affair - last year Stewart flipped during his qualifying event and on finals night, breaking his wrist.

BUSCH RIDE

Ward Burton, who will drive the No. 4 Morgan-McClure Nextel Cup car this year, also will run 20 Busch races for Brewco Motorsports in the No. 27. Casey Atwood finished the 2006 season in that car, which was driven by David Green for the bulk of the year.

The driver for the remaining races is expected to be announced in the coming weeks.

24 HOURS

The Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona has become a star-studded affair and this year's 45th running of the event offers more of the same.

Returning to defend their championship are Dan Wheldon and Scott Dixon, who will be joined on the Ganassi Racing two-car effort by 2004 champion Scott Pruett. NASCAR champions Jimmie Johnson and Jeff Gordon also will be in the field, as will Tony Stewart on his familiar No. 20 team with Andy Wallace and Butch Leitzinger.

Bobby Labonte and Wally Dallenbach also plan to run the Jan. 28-29 event. From the open-wheel ranks are entries for 2006 Indianapolis 500 winner Sam Hornish Jr. and his teammate, two-time Indy 500 winner Helio Castroneves. Other 500 champs entered are Buddy Rice, Wheldon and Eddie Cheever.

Champ Car is represented by Paul Tracy and Jimmy Vasser.

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