

The Chase changes

by Jane Miller

NASCAR on Monday made changes to its Chase for the Nextel Cup and made a big step forward in rewarding race winners.

All victories during the season will be worth an extra five points, for a maximum of 195 if that driver also leads the most laps. But victories become more important once that driver becomes one of the 12 - another change from the previous three years - who makes the cut.

Chase drivers will be seeded based on wins as they go into the final 10 races. All 12 drivers, two more than in previous seasons, will start with a base point total of 5,000, then will receive an extra 10 points for each victory.

In 2006, for example, Kasey Kahne started the Chase in 10th place. Under the new points system, he'd have started in first place. Tony Stewart would have been fifth instead of 11th at the end of the first 26 races, and Greg Biffle would have been 10th. Neither of those drivers made the Chase under the old scoring system.

NASCAR chairman and CEO Brian France said the changes were made to put more emphasis on winning.

"Nobody likes to see drivers content to finish in the top 10," he said.

"We want our sport - especially during the Chase - to be more about winning."

SPEEDWEEKS SCHEDULE

Pertinent dates to keep in mind as Speedweeks approaches:

The Budweiser Shootout is Feb. 10 with a start time of 8:30 p.m. EST.

The ARCA race is that afternoon.

Daytona 500 qualifying is Feb. 11 at 2:10 p.m. This sets only the front row of the race but qualifying times will come into play for those outside the top 35 in owner points who did not race their way into the 500 via the qualifying races.

Those qualifying races, the Gatorade 150s, are Feb. 15 beginning at 2 p.m. These do set the field for the 500.

The Craftsman Truck race, usually the most exciting race of the week, is 8 p.m. Feb. 16 and the Busch race is at 1:15 p.m. Feb. 17. The Daytona 500 starts at 3:15 p.m. Feb. 18.

ROLEX 24

The Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona begins at 1:30 p.m. Saturday, an event which is pretty much a race of champions.

Jimmie Johnson, Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart, Juan Pablo Montoya, Sam Hornish Jr., Scott Pruett, Helio Castroneves, Kyle Petty, Bobby Labonte and Paul Tracy are just a few of the sports top drivers who will compete in this prestigious race.

Also competing is Indianapolis Motor Speedway CEO Tony George, who will team with his stepson, Ed Carpenter; Tomas Scheckter and A.J. Foyt IV.

SPEED and Fox Sports will combine for 15 hours of coverage from the race, which always provides plenty of exciting and heartbreaking moments.

MEETING THE PRESS

NASCAR's annual media tour is going on this week in Charlotte, so there are a lot of interesting quotes floating around from question-and-answer sessions.

Juan Pablo Montoya, one of the most quotable drivers in the world, addressed the issue of the Car of

Tomorrow, which will debut at Bristol this spring.

"I think the COT will be better for us because I'm not used to the cars and I don't know what they're supposed to feel like," he said. "When you take grip away and you've been used to grip for a long time, you think, 'What the heck is wrong with this?' From my ignorance, it could actually help me."

FORCE FAST

Ashley Force took part in her first NHRA test session at Las Vegas this week and turned in the fastest time of her team and second-fastest overall in the Funny Car class.

Force ran a career-high 4.729-second pass on Tuesday.

Tommy Johnson Jr. topped the time sheet with a 4.724.

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