

NASCAR preseason coming to Vegas

by Jane Miller

NASCAR preseason testing continued this week, not at Daytona, where the teams will begin gearing up for Speedweeks in just a few days, but at Las Vegas.

This track is a very important venue for a couple of reasons.

First, it has been reconfigured since last year's race and second, Vegas is much more of a driver's track than Daytona.

Early indications are that the track, which has more banking than the old configuration, is extremely fast and unusually rough for a new surface.

Defending Nextel Cup champion Jimmie Johnson has won the Las Vegas race the past two years. Despite his success on the old layout, he likes the changes which have been made.

"I think this is a good move for the racetrack," Johnson said. "It's going to put on better racing. The other track was a little bit of a single-file racetrack. So I think the changes they have made have been good."

Like everyone else, Johnson noted the roughness but said that really isn't all bad.

"The track is surprisingly rough for a brand new surface ... probably makes the track owners and everyone upset," he said. "But from a competitive standpoint, it will be more of a challenge for the team. I think it's going to be a good problem to have and something that's going to help this track age and give it some character and really force the second and third lane to come in."

Since Johnson wasn't one of several drivers who crashed during the two days of testing, he enjoyed himself.

"It's been fun," he said. "The track has a lot of grip and we're just trying to get used to this tire and the new facility."

The crashes - there were five on Monday alone - were a concern. Paul Andrews, crew chief for Bobby Labonte, was puzzled as to their cause.

"All the wrecks are scary," he said. "It makes you nervous about the (March 11) race. We just don't know what to think, what caused them. Some guys have lost tires and some haven't. We'll have to see, but it's pretty scary."

Tony Stewart, though he said he liked the facility, found the speeds unreasonable.

"We are running ridiculously fast speeds," he said. "It's stupid to be running this fast in a Cup car in my opinion. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me why we're running mid to low 29-second laps in a 3,400-pound stock car around here."

Elliott Sadler turned in the fastest time of the test, a 188.772-mph pass during the Tuesday afternoon session. The track record, set by Kasey Kahne in 2004, is 174.904.

DON'T FORGET SCOTT

It's great that Juan Pablo Montoya is getting so much attention for being part of the winning team at the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona. Earning a victory in that race on the first try - as he did in the Indianapolis 500 - is an outstanding accomplishment.

But don't overlook the contribution Scott Pruett made to that big win. Pruett was an accomplished driver in CART and NASCAR and is now considered one of the top road racers in the country.

His win Sunday was his seventh class win, putting him at the top of the career list.

Rookie Salvador Duran, the third member of the winning team, will pair with Pruett for the remainder of the Grand Am season.

READY TO GO

The NHRA opens the 2007 season the weekend of Feb. 10 at Pomona, Calif.

Defending Top Fuel champion Tony Schumacher and 14-time Funny Car champ John Force took part in a teleconference Tuesday to discuss the upcoming season.

Schumacher, though part of a seven-team effort, is now the lone Top Fuel car in the Don Schumacher stable, and he's glad.

"I'm as happy as I could be," he said. "(Crew chief) Alan Johnson is the best in the business and to give that information away, I just (wasn't) that happy about it."

Force, as most everyone knows by now, is field a Funny Car for his daughter, Ashley, this year, but one caller asked Force about his own goals for the season.

His reply?

"I want to be good. I want to race with my kid and the team. I'm building the next generation, because I don't lie to myself. I'm 57. I'm running out of time. I want to be good at what I do."

FISHER, RICE SIGN

The Dreyer & Reinbold Indy Racing League team will run two cars this year, one for 2004 Indianapolis 500 winner Buddy Rice and another for the series' four-time "Most Popular Driver" Sarah Fisher.

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