

Everyone goes for broke in the Bud Shootout

by Jane Miller

It's just an all-star race, really. No points are awarded and only 21 drivers - half of a normal field - are in the race.

But the Bud Shootout, which runs Saturday night at Daytona International Speedway, feels like the beginning of the season.

And when fans think of Daytona and the Bud Shootout, they think of Dale Earnhardt Jr., the 2003 winner.

"I'm glad we can finally start racing," said Earnhardt Jr., whose car is sponsored by Budweiser. "We've been testing a lot lately, mostly single-car runs, and that can be pretty boring. We've been testing the Car of Tomorrow quite a bit and I'm ready to get back in our regular race cars and cut 'em loose."

That may be the best description of the type of race the Shootout is. Because there are no points, because it is a shorter race than the 500, because most drivers are using backup cars and don't need to worry about all the things they normally worry about in a points-paying race, everybody can go for broke.

"The Shootout is a great way to start the season," Earnhardt Jr. said. "It's fun for me, because I've got some friends who are in the race ... like Tony (Stewart), Denny (Hamlin, last year's winner) and Elliott (Sadler). Since it's a non-points event, we can race hard without the pressure and laugh about it when it's over."

There weren't many laughs after last year's Shootout, when concern over aggressive bump-drafting became an issue for the rest of Speedweeks. "I didn't understand why everyone was making such a big deal about it," said Earnhardt Jr., a big fan of and quite an expert in bump-drafting. "I always thought it was fun when you can beat and bang a little bit. I mean, this is the Shootout! It's a race! With a lot of cash! It takes an hour and a half to run and the winner gets more than \$200,000. You shouldn't be able to earn that much money in that short of a time and it be easy."

That's why that race is so much fun, and also why that race bears no resemblance to what will happen in the Daytona 500 on Feb. 18. "Everybody wants to win it, so it's not like you're going to be overly friendly in the Shootout," Earnhardt Jr. said. "I remember feeling like I was going to crash about 30 times (last year)."

TOYOTA DEBUT

Toyota will have two entries in the Shootout, which will be the Camrys' on-track debut.

Brian Vickers is eligible based on his pole from the Texas race last fall and Dale Jarrett is a past Shootout winner.

Toyota Tundras have been competing in the Craftsman Truck series since 2004.

NHRA OPENER

While NASCAR is running an all-star race this weekend, the NHRA is getting on the board for real with its opening event, the Carquest Auto Parts Winternationals, at Pomona, Calif.

There are enough talking points in this series to fill a column by itself, what with Kenny Bernstein coming out of retirement, not to drive a Top Fuel dragster but a Funny Car; Whit Bazemore flipping from floppers to Top Fuel, and the new points system, which has elements of NASCAR's Chase format combined with elimination rounds.

Yet if anyone could be riding momentum left over from the 2006 season, it's Top Fuel champion Tony Schumacher, who accomplished the near-impossible on Nov. 12.

Schumacher, who was in 10th place in the points at mid-season, had to go two rounds further than points leader Doug Kalitta, win the race and set the national record to win the championship.

And he did.

"If I said I've stopped thinking about what happened that day, I would be lying," Schumacher said. "You can't forget about history. What the U.S. Army team did last year was incredible."

He knows, though, that he can't get off to a bad start this year with the changes in the championship chase.

"This year, in particular, you better be on your game right from the start," he said. "It'll be interesting to see how it all shakes out. As a team, you clearly want to be running your best toward the end of the year (and) in recent years, we've typically run well later in the season. I hope that trend continues this time around."

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