

Auto Racing: Race of Tomorrow just days away

by Jane Miller

The NASCAR Nextel Cup series is off this week, but not many drivers are getting much time for rest and relaxation.

Nine of them are competing in the Busch Series race in Mexico on Sunday. And another 50 teams were testing the Car of Tomorrow at a mid-week session at Bristol, Tenn.

The deadline to have the COT race-ready is looming. The first race with the new design is now less than a month away - March 25 at Bristol.

In all, 16 races will be run using the new design this season.

"The Bristol test should be a good dress rehearsal for the race teams, drivers and NASCAR as we prepare for the first Car of Tomorrow race later next month," said Robin Pemberton, NASCAR vice president of competition. "It should provide the teams with a good opportunity to fine-tune their set-ups and become more familiar with how their cars are going to handle and give NASCAR the chance to have a trial run in getting its inspection process for the new car all buttoned up."

KEEPING AT IT

The Cup regulars competing this weekend in Mexico are defending race winner Denny Hamlin, Carl Edwards, Dave Blaney, J.J. Yeley, David Gilliland, Greg Biffle, David Ragan, Juan Pablo Montoya and David Reutimann.

Joining them will be road-course specialists Scott Pruett, Boris Said, Ron Fellows and Adrian Fernandez.

This is the third year for the Mexican Busch race and Fernandez has competed in each one. He'll drive for Hendrick Motorsports this weekend.

"This race is special because it really gets a lot of the Mexican drivers together and is in an international event," said Fernandez. "Even though NASCAR is still very new to our fans, I think they've been embracing NASCAR pretty well."

SAFER

The first two Cup races of the season have featured some pretty spectacular crashes.

Clint Bowyer's upside-down on fire finish at Daytona certainly was the flashiest, but Tony Stewart and David Reutimann may have the biggest reasons to be thankful for the SAFER barrier.

Both drivers - Stewart at Daytona and Reutimann at California - hit at ugly angles and Reutimann's impact, according to NASCAR sources, was one of the hardest ever recorded.

The fact that both drivers walked away with little more than bruises, swelling and stiffness proves yet again that the sport as a whole is moving in the right direction in areas of safety.

MORE SPEED

There had been rumors and speculation since the 2006 Formula One season ended that Scott Speed might not return to Scuderia Toro Rosso this year. Those rumors were put to rest in a release from the team last week.

After spending three paragraphs talking about the team's recent test with Tonio Liuzzi at Barcelona, in which the word "speed" was italicized, the release ended with this note:

"And just in case you think from reading the above that we have a limited vocabulary when it comes to talking about speed, Scuderia Toro Rosso is happy to confirm that Scott Speed will once again race for the team this season."

Speed is the only American driver in Formula One.

GEARING UP

Nineteen Indy Racing League drivers conducted a two-night test session at Homestead-Miami Speedway last week.

Ganassi Racing's Dan Wheldon, the 2005 IRL champ, turned in the fastest lap at 214.858 mph, followed by defending IRL champ Sam Hornish Jr. of Penske Racing and Andretti Green teammates Tony Kanaan and Marco Andretti.

The IRL season opener is March 24, a Saturday night race, at Homestead.

MOTORCYCLES AT INDY?

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway has hired a motorsports management and consulting firm specializing in motorcycle events.

"The Speedway has been looking at looking at hosting a motorcycle event for some time and we continue to be enthusiastic about the prospects," said IMS president Joie Chitwood.

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