

Auto Racing: Tomorrow is just about upon us

by Jane Miller

Of all the NASCAR Nextel Cup drivers who will be racing at Bristol, Tenn., this weekend, Kurt Busch has the most to lose. A winner of five of the last 10 races at the half-mile, high-banked oval, the last thing Busch needs at Bristol is for something to change.

And this weekend it will in a big way.

The Car of Tomorrow becomes the Car of Today on Friday when practice begins for the Food City 500. Designed to be a safer and (eventually) more cost-efficient car, the COT, in its early stages, was widely reviled by drivers.

Many, but not all, have grown to accept it. Busch is one of those.

"I feel like the best opportunity to win and be successful is to embrace what's ahead of you, whether it's a challenging race track or a tire for race weekend or even the new direction of NASCAR, which is this Car of Tomorrow," Busch said earlier this week.

While he hopes his success at the track will translate into the new car, the fact is nobody knows what's going to happen this weekend.

"You just go in there and race the best you can, and hopefully experience comes into play and that will help our team move through the pack or continue to lead laps, if we're running up toward the front," Busch said.

The car has been extensively tested by various teams since the beginning of the year but another of the great unknowns is how it will race.

"The goal was to have better racing and safer vehicles," said Jeff Burton, one of NASCAR's most outspoken drivers on the safety issue. "I do believe, short term, we have the possibility of a larger gap from first to last because it's so new. Some people are going to figure it out faster than others. Long term, I think we have the opportunity for competition to be better because we're restricted in all the things we can do. Only time will tell but I think the potential for better racing is there."

IT'S A CAR

Now that the Car of Tomorrow is the Car of the Present, it's time to lose that Jetsons-like label.

But what to call the vehicle?

NASCAR is of little help here.

"It will have a decal on the A post that has NASCAR race car," said Nextel Cup series director John Darby. "Y'all can call it what you want."

MAYBE IT'LL HELP

Jeremy Mayfield has yet to make a race this year with his Bill Davis Racing Camry but hopes this weekend's debut of the Car of Tomorrow will equalize the playing field. "Maybe this whole Car of Tomorrow thing is exactly what this team needs right now," he said. "Something new, something different. We feel like we're working so hard day in and day out and we haven't got anything to show for it. It's tough to stay positive and not drive yourself crazy trying to figure out what you're doing wrong."

INDYCAR OPENER

The IndyCar Series (note the new name) opens on Saturday night at Homestead-Miami Speedway in Florida. Defending series champion Sam Hornish Jr. has been warming up for the event by running some Busch races but he's anxious to get back to his day job.

Saturday's race will be Hornish's 100th IndyCar start. "One goal I have for myself this year is to win on a road/street-course race," said the defending Indianapolis 500 champ. "I think that I've improved enough during the past two seasons that I should have a good shot of making that happen."

He'll get his first chance April 1 at St. Petersburg, Fla. MEDLEN UPDATE

NHRA Funny Car driver Eric Medlen underwent surgery Tuesday evening to relieve pressure and hemorrhaging on his brain following a crash during testing on Monday at Gainesville Raceway in Florida.

Medlen, one of four drivers on John Force's team, is in critical condition and will spend the next two weeks in a drug-induced coma.

Medlen's father and crew chief, John Medlen, asks fans to remember his son in their prayers.

"He's a fighter, but he has a long battle ahead of him," John Medlen said.

Auto Racing: Tomorrow is just about upon us by Jane Miller