

The Racing Reporter

A different racing game for Stewart

Will the next few months be heaven or hell for Tony Stewart?

Stewart is great race car driver, but during the winter months, he won't be doing much racing. Instead, he will be wearing a tuxedo and speaking into a microphone quite often.

Stewart won the NASCAR Winston Cup championship by 38 points over Mark Martin. By his own admission, Stewart says he's glad the season is over.

Will he continue to have problems as NASCAR's top-ranking ambassador or will he be able to adjust and take it all in stride?

"Boy, it's a good thing Stewart didn't go for an off track championship, because he would have finished several laps down after each race. That's how bad he was in the garage area."

The Columbus, Indiana native was 43rd in points after the season-ender at Daytona. His Home Depot team led by crew chief, Greg Zippadelli managed to stay focused on the racing aspect in spite of Stewart's misfires off the track to bring home the big trophy.

Stewart has repeatedly said he loves racing, but hates the P.R. part.

"I don't think I am running for a political office," said Stewart. "It's not an elected office. I've got to have one or two people with responsibilities. If everybody is going to make it a lot more complicated I'm going to be pretty disappointed, to be perfectly honest."

I personally don't think he will be all smiles during the winter months, but I do expect him to make it through and add his own unique style to the championship mix.

Stewart will probably be a different sort of champion. One that is not so politically correct. But I don't think he will be the worst champion in NASCAR's history. He will probably have one or two naysayers with photographers or other people, but I think Home Depot officials will see to it that he generally behaves in public.

I don't think we will see as much of him on television talk shows and other media programs as we have of other champions in the past, but don't look for him to embarrass the sport.

I don't think Stewart has reached the level of Dale Earnhardt or Richard Petty, but he has a lot of respect from the other drivers that he races with on Sunday, and that means a whole lot more when it comes to racing than what you and I think of his pushing and shoving.

Stewart's Winston Cup title marked his ninth driving championship in 23 years of racing, beginning with a karting championship at the Columbus (Ind.) Fairgrounds in 1980 at age nine.

Top-25 final unofficial points leaders: Stewart-4641, 2. Martin-4762, 3. Busch-4641, 4. J. Gordon-4607, 5. Johnson-4600, 6. Newman-4593, 7. R. Wallace-4574, 8. Kenseth-4432, 9. Jarrett-4415, 10. Rudd-4323, 11. Earnhardt Jr.-4270, 12. J. Burton-4259, 13. Elliott-4158, 14. Waltrip-3985, 15. Craven-3888, 16. B. Labonte-3810, 17. J. Green-3704, 18. Martin-3703, 19. Blaney-3670, 20. R. Gordon-3632, 21. Harvick-3501, 22. Petty-3501, 23. Sadler-3418, 24. T. Labonte-3417, 25. W. Burton-3362.

Wimmer is hottest Bush driver

Scott Wimmer is hotter than a jalapeno pepper in a hot Texas sun. Even though Greg Biffle wrapped up the Bush Series championship before the final race of the season, it was Wimmer that stole the spotlight during the latter part of the season.

Midway into the season, Wimmer's racing future was in doubt. Sponsorship problems surrounding the No. 23 Bill Davis team led everyone wondering what was in store for them.

But then, came Dover and Wimmer's team was in victory lane. Two weeks later at Memphis, they had won again. Wimmer wrapped up the season by winning the last two races at Phoenix and Homestead.

He won four out of the last eight races.

"We weren't running too well at the beginning of the season," said Wimmer. "We needed to up and perform, and we did. We worked harder and did the things that needed doing so we could finish better."

Top-25 final Bush Series points leaders: 1. Biffle-4919, 2. Keller-4655, 3. Wimmer-4488, 4. McLaughlin-4253, 5. Sprague-4206, 6. McMurray-4147, 7. K. Wallace-4078, 8. Hamilton Jr.-4058, 9. Compton-4042, 10. Riggs-4023, 11. LaJoie-4021, 12. Ramos-3804, 13. T. Sauter-3644, 14. Parker-3540, 15. J.

Sauter-3538, 16. Hmiel-3416, 17. Lewis-3279, 18. Hornaday-3268, 19. J. Green-3209, 20. Fry-3158, 21. Means-3144, 22. K. Earnhardt-3143, 23. T. Bodine-3071, 24. Grubb-2885, 25. LePage-2645.

Bliss wins truck championship, will move to Busch Series

Mike Bliss, who won his first NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series title, announced he would move to the Busch Series next season.

Meanwhile, several truck teams are having problems locating sponsors for the upcoming season. Interest among sponsors to jump on board a truck isn't as keen as it is in Winston Cup and Busch. While it costs just as much to run a truck race, the television ratings are much lower than a Busch race.

Travis Kvapil's team, the No. 60 1-800-Rent Car is one that won't be around next year. If the team doesn't land a sponsor, then Kvapil will take over Bliss' ride with Xpress Motorsports.

Petty Enterprises is also seeking a sponsor for their truck team. The plan is to run Adam Clarke for rookie of the year honors. Clarke, who has run two races, has extensive experience at a number of the tracks as an instructor for Richard Petty's driving school.

Bobby Hamilton's three-truck stable is also in trouble. Hamilton would like to put Ryan Hemphill in one of his trucks, but to far there is no sponsor. Bill Lester, who has driven the No. 8 for the past two years, might not return.

The team has been funded by DaimlerChrysler, but it will not continue unless a major sponsor can be found. There is still no word on whether Robert Richardson will remain in Hamilton's No. 18 truck.

Final top-10 points leaders: 1. Bliss-3359, 2. Crawford-3313, 3. Musgrave-3308, 4. Lettler-3156, 5. Starr-3144, 6. Seitzler-3132, 7. Pressley-3097, 8. Cook-3070, 9. Kvapil-3039, 10. Gibbs-3010.

Racing Trivia Question: Which Winston Cup driver had the most wins during 2002?

Answer To Last Week's Question: Winston Cup driver Jimmy Spencer is out of a job at this time.

Dale Jr. in the Rearview Mirror

Dale Earnhardt Jr. and his No. 8 team finished 11th in the final Winston Cup points standings. Prior to the beginning of the season, Earnhardt had said, he hoped to finish higher in points.

"We didn't hit our goal, which was a top-five finish, but I don't think any of us will worry about this off-season," he said. "We finished really strong, and we just missed getting back into the top-10 in points."

If you look at the numbers, we did better than ever before. We had more top-fives, more top-10s and we led more laps, so I think we grew as a team."

"Yeah, we struggled after that big hit in Fontana (in April), but once we all got together and began communicating better, we really came on strong. I don't see any reason why we can't string together that sort of consistency all year next year. We were more consistent than we had ever been in the last 10 or 12 races of the year. We're a good team - and we can be a great team - so we're going to keep working on being the championship contenders I know we can be. The first few tests of the new 2003 Monte Carlo have made us really excited about the potential for that car and for the Bud team. Look out!"

For those fans that need a bit-season Dale Jr. fix, fret not.

Just because he's not going to be in your living room in the Budweiser car each Sunday, that doesn't mean he'll be completely out of sight. Dale Jr. will be featured alongside some of the world's biggest stars on television during the next two months.

Budweiser Shootout all set

The Budweiser Shootout, which marks the opening of the 2003 NASCAR racing season is all set for February 9.

The Budweiser Shootout is a non-points All-Star race that kicks off the 2003 NASCAR Winston Cup Series season. The 70-lap race will feature the 2002 Bud Pole winners along with past champions of the Budweiser Shootout.

The field for the Budweiser Shootout is now finalized at 19 drivers.

Included in the who's who of NASCAR stars are Kurt Busch, Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart, Jimmie Johnson, Bill Elliott, Dale Jarrett, Rusty Wallace, Ryan Newman, Ward Burton, Matt Kenseth, Ricky Craven, Ricky Rudd, Kevin Harvick, Mark Martin, Geoffrey Bodine, Ken Schrader, Todd Bodine and Terry Labonte.

Where is Petty Enterprises going?

With 200 wins, Richard Petty has more Winston Cup victories than any other driver in the history. No wonder he's called "The King."

He retired in 1992, eight years after his last win, but that was way back when Ronald Reagan was President. Richard Petty continued to run the teams and all of the Petty Enterprises until son Kyle took over the reins two years ago.

Since then, there haven't been many bright spots or consistency on the track for either of the three Petty teams.

"The past was fun, the future looks bright," Kyle Petty said. "A lot of great things are on the horizon for Petty Enterprises."

Let's hope so. Because all three of Petty Enterprises' Winston Cup teams have managed to land some pretty good sponsors. But with mediocre performances, a Fortune 500 Company is not going to leave their name on a losing team forever.

Though the effort has been there, the personnel wasn't always. Just changed before this season, when the team hired Robin Pemberton. Rusty Wallace's former crew chief, he created a lot of excitement, and he has confidence that their teams are on the upswing.

This past season, all three teams finished in the mid-20s or less. In the 43-Dodge, Richard Petty's old car, John Andretti had an average finish of 25.3 this season. Although that's about three spots from 2001, he also finished 28th this year - three positions better than last. The 44 Dodge has been driven by several drivers this year after Buckshot Jones was fired early, but it rarely finished better than the 20s. And Petty, driver of the 45 Dodge, averaged a 22.1 finish - almost 10 spots better than last year.

With Andretti officially committed to come back to the 43 car, and the sponsor set to return, and Petty set to take on a new sponsor for his 45 car, he believes the two cars continue to improve and average a finish at least in the high teens. He hopes the 44 team will come together soon and follow suit.

In three years, Petty believes the team can consistently finish in the top 10.

"That is what it is all about, running up front and winning races," he said. "That's the direction we're continually moving. There are cycles in all sports - look at dynasties like the New York Yankees and Boston Celtics - and we have made a lot of changes and a lot of strides to get back to the right spots in that cycle."

Petty, at one time, wondered if it would be possible to succeed on the Cup circuit with a three-car team. But, after seeing how much the team was able to improve in one season, Petty is convinced he's got the right plan in place.

"You look around the garage, and a lot of people are having trouble making those multi-car teams work," Petty said. "Some people say three-car teams won't work, but maybe two-car teams will. Others say a two-car team doesn't give you enough information or tests, so you have to have three cars. Then you have Jack Roush, who has either four or five or six teams, depending on how you count them."

"We think we have hit on the way to make a three-car team work, and work well. And it's starting to show on the race track, especially this year. We're not where we want to be yet but we sure seem to be headed in the right direction."

Petty's plan hinges upon having everyone on the team, work as a team. Not just to help the 45 or the 44 car succeed.

"The thing if everybody has to be pulling in the same direction," he said. "The guys who work on the 45 car have to be just as happy - and I mean sincerely happy - when the 43 guys do well or the 44 guys do well, and vice-versa. Having everybody work together having everybody pull from the same drawer as far as cars and engines are concerned helps with that."

"There is a big picture. A lot of little pictures make it up but there is a big picture. Obviously, ours is to have three Petty Enterprises cars running from the front at the end of every race. That is when all of the little pictures will start coming to the forefront."

Petty Enterprises has been able to succeed by drawing on the Petty name and promoting several charitable organizations. But unless the Petty's begin to land some top-10 finishes, their sponsors are going to be gunning off faster than the Democrats in this year's elections.

Elliott receives most popular driver award

Bill Elliott edged out fellow racer Dale Earnhardt Jr. to win the NASCAR Most Popular Driver Award for 2002. Elliott and Earnhardt battled for the leader position in recent months as fans across the country placed more online votes than ever before as part of the only fan-based NASCAR award. The announcement was made Friday during the National Motorsports Press Association's.

Elliott, a 27-year racing veteran who drove a Ray Evernham/Dodge this season, has won the Most Popular Driver Award more times than any other driver - this marks his 16th victory.

"Everyone knows that the fans are the real heart of NASCAR. I owe many thanks to them because my fans have stuck by me and kept me going all these years," said Elliott, a Dayton, Ohio, native. "I am so fortunate to be part of this great sport and be recognized by this award."

Marlin cleared to race

MOORESVILLE, N.C. - Sterling Marlin has been cleared to race.

Marlin will begin testing the No. 40 Coors Light Dodge at Talladega Superspeedway on December 9 and 10. During this time, Marlin will be fitted for the HANS device.

Marlin suffered a non-displaced fracture of the #2 cervical vertebra as a result of his accident at Kansas Speedway on September 29. Due to the injury, Marlin was sidelined for the remainder of the 2002 season and Jamie McMurray took over driving responsibilities in the No. 40 Coors Light Dodge.

Racing Trivia Question: Who is the youngest champion in NASCAR Winston Cup history?

Answer To Last Week's Question: Ford won the Winston Cup Manufacturer's championship.

Recap of the Bush season

Greg Biffle, driver of the Roush Racing No. 16 took home the trophy as the 2002 Bush Grand National Series champion. Even though he entered the season as one of the favorites, the early going was rough. Although Biffle started out the season with a 22nd place finish in Daytona, he quickly moved to the front after

the next four races to take the early championship lead. That lead wouldn't last beyond one week as Biffle struggled over the next seven events, finishing in the top 10 in only two of them and suffering three DNF's and four finishes outside the top 20 that saw him slide to eighth in the standings. He regained the Bush Grand National Series championship lead after a second place finish in the Stacker 2/GNC Live Well 250 at Daytona in July and held it for the final 17 events.

Biffle ended the season with four wins, 20 top fives and 25 top 10 finishes.

Second-place Jason Keller had his strongest ever run for the title. Keller ended the standings on four separate occasions and although he was able to hold it through two consecutive events only once, he never dropped below fifth in points. He also added four wins to his total, the most he has ever had in one Bush Series season.

He settled into second in the points standings after Daytona in July and paced Biffle's step for step over the last 17 events, keeping the points deficit to double digits until mechanical problems and pit mistakes allowed Biffle to pull away over the last seven races. Keller finished the season with 17 top fives and 22 top 10 finishes.

A driver, who I think has lots of talent is Scott Wimmer.

He garnered three place honors in the Bush Grand National Series for 2002 but he wasn't even supposed to be there. His No. 23 Bill Davis Racing entry ran the season unsponsored. Davis planned to shut down his Bush Series operation after the July race at Daytona International Speedway due to the lack of sponsorship. The results at the start of the season didn't give him reason to continue the operation out of his own pocket.

Through the first 13 events the team had managed only three top 10 finishes and was situated 11th in the standings. The threat of closing the doors made the No. 23 team regroup and they racked up four consecutive top 10 finishes and climbed to sixth in points by the appointed Daytona event. Given the sudden improvement in performance, Davis didn't have the heart to pull the plug and was soon rewarded for his faith in the team. Wimmer got his first Bush Grand National Series win in the MBNA All American 500 at Dover International Speedway in September and would add three more

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