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Editorial

View from the Topside NASCAR Media Tour Day 3 - Heavy hitters

by Rick Benjamin
January 24, 2007

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Some of NASCAR's biggest and toughest teams took center stage today as day 3 of the annual NASCAR Nextel Cup Media Tour organized by Lowe's Motor Speedway unfolded in Charlotte.

Roush Racing, Hendrick Motorsports, and Joe Gibbs Racing all unveiled their 2007 team lineups during the day, a day capped by the annual dinner visit to Penske Racing South.

After a breakfast session outlining some of the changes due this year in the Craftsman Truck series, the assembled reporters headed a bit north of the Speedway to hear Jack Roush and his squad talk about how they plan to return to prominence this year. In 2006 Greg Biffle and Carl Edwards struggled all season, and Jamie McMurray never really reached contender status. This time around, both drivers plan to use juggled crew lineups and renewed dedication to try to join Matt Kenseth in the expanded Chase for the Cup at the end of the season. Roush's fifth Cup team will look the same on the outside, but the AAA-backed 6 car will see the biggest change of all, as Mark Martin has taken his helmet bag to Ginn Racing's Army Chevrolet team.

Mark won't be far away, though. Roush revealed that a deal's been cut to bring Martin back to run a few Busch Series events this season, and that Mark is willing to run some Truck races for Roush this year as well. Martin's old Sunday seat will be filled, at least for now, by 21 year old rookie David Ragan, a second-generation Cup competitor. Whether Ragan can cope with the expectations remains to be seen, and Roush has a capable relief pitcher in the bullpen in former Truck champ Travis Kvapil, currently slated to wheel Jack's F-150s in the NCTS.

But the bulk of the session was devoted to Roush's discussion of the state of NASCAR racing. This year, in contrast to last January's Media Tour stop here, Jack says he's content with the Car of Tomorrow (which probably should be rechristened the Car of Today, since its racing debut is just a couple of months away). Roush, who in the past has rarely hesitated to criticize the sanctioning body, now believes NASCAR is on the right path with the COT. He feels new race car "will be safer, with no ill effect on the racing". Roush says the new, more tightly-controlled chassis and bodywork will be "easier to police", and will further close the gap between the more advanced, multi-car teams and the new single-car squads, keeping the playing field more level.

Roush's toughest words were reserved for Toyota, getting set for its Cup competition debut in a couple of weeks at Daytona. Roush has long voiced concerns about the impact of Toyota's arrival in the Cup series. He's one of those who alleges that the growing carmaker will spend considerably more than other manufacturers to win, and that Toyota will also be able to provide its teams with a real technical advantage thanks to the company's favorable financial picture.

The defending Cup champions at Hendrick Motorsports welcomed us at lunchtime, and there were visible changes inside the Museum building where reporters traditionally gather. For the first time in many years Terry Labonte was nowhere in evidence, having settled into retirement. And Rick Hendrick's bunch has gotten considerably younger, a solid strategic move. On the podium with the team owner were 4-time Nextel Cup champ Jeff Gordon, now the team's elder statesman, and the new champ, Johnson, now second on the team in tenure. Kyle Busch assumes a veteran's role as well, with the team's rookie stripe going to

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Casey Mears, who takes over the 25 car.

Rick Hendrick, as gracious a man in racing as there is, appears to be in peak form despite having endured more tragedy in the past few years than most of us can ever imagine. Rick spoke about how the challenge to excel in NASCAR racing gets tougher each passing year, while assuring the team's fans his group will battle hard to maintain their supremacy. Hendrick Motorsports' next Cup victory will be their 150th, a record of excellence largely unmatched in NASCAR's modern era.

The afternoon continued with a session featuring Joe Gibbs Racing's three Cup teams, two Busch Series efforts, and their slate of young development drivers, featuring former USAR Pro Cup standout Joey Logano. Clearly Gibbs and his son, company president JD Gibbs, are anticipating another title run by two-time Nextel Cup champ Tony Stewart. Stewart looks fit coming off his strong victory in a midget at the Chili Bowl a few weeks back. The Gibbs crew also expects Denny Hamlin's FedEx team to continue its rise to prominence, but it appears the pressure's beginning to mount on JJ Yeley.

Yeley took over the Interstate Batteries ride when Bobby Labonte moved to Petty Enterprises going into 2005. Yeley's as good an oval racer as I've ever seen. He's shown flashes, but has yet to take the 18 car to victory. I'd suspect Competition Director Jimmy Makar will push Yeley's team to improve enough to become a title contender this season. If they can't, changes may well come to the 18 team.

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