



FROM LAST TO FIRST

Tony Stewart battles his way to the 2002 Winston Cup championship

BY AL PEARCE

Tony Stewart was a dead-last 43rd in the Daytona 500. He was 29th or worse in three of his next nine starts and stood seventh in points midway through the 36-race season. He had three more 30th-or-worse finishes the second half of the year... but still won the Winston Cup by 38 points over four-time series bridesmaid Mark Martin.

If you think that's odd, consider this:

NASCAR fined Stewart and put him on a "zero tolerance" probation for "improper contact" with a news photographer at Indy in August. Later that month, Stewart was charged (and cleared) with assaulting a female fan at Bristol. A month later, an EMT at Loudon said Stewart had shoved him the previous year. Then, barely 24 hours before the season-ending Ford 400 at Homestead-Miami Speedway, he reportedly changed course to bump another professional photographer.

Apparently all was forgiven after a half-hour meeting among Stewart, team owner Joe Gibbs, the photographer and three NASCAR executives.

But Tony, as we've come to recognize, can be a frustrating handful.

Some NASCAR fans think he is a loose cannon with a hair trigger primed to explode at anything. Others say he is about as PC as a skinhead, as cuddly as a porcupine. Nobody questions his talent or intensity, but that doesn't change their



Jimmy Spencer's fiery wreck was the first of two cautions that helped Tony Stewart get back on the lead lap and clinch the title.

LAT Photographic

opinion that he is immature and a poor loser with anger-management issues. NASCAR spokesman Jim Hunter said Stewart will be a good champion despite some weakness in his media-relations skills. "Maybe not all his actions are good," Hunter said, "but nobody's perfect. I don't need to tell him when his actions aren't right."

To an extent, Gibbs agreed. "Tony's an intense competitor who's very focused on driving," he said. "During or around the race weekend, he wears his emotions on his sleeve. He can get caught up and step over the line in some of those cases. That's why he's a little different."

Fans with long memories remember Stewart's explosive reaction to getting spun by the late Kenny Irwin at Martinsville in 1999. And his childish response to media questions after the '01 July race in Daytona Beach. They've heard him say he doesn't want to become a role model, that NASCAR should call Richard Petty if it wants an ambassador. ("What is that, anyway?" he asked about ambassadors. "I don't read the papers a lot. What does one of them do? Travel around and spend a lot of our money?")

Gibbs, an example of permanent decorum, knows he's got a 100-pound fish on a 50-pound test line. "But he's getting better about a lot of things," Gibbs said of his driver. "He's changed. His mind-set used to be, 'I want to win every race. If I can't, I'll take a chance.' He's watched [teammate] Bobby Labonte for years and that's made a difference. Bobby always composes himself, then goes ballistic in the hauler, outside the public eye. Tony is a product of racing different cars in differ-

ent series for different fans on consecutive nights. It's always been, 'I'll say whatever I want, get out of here and be gone.' There's more to it in Winston Cup."

But like any recovering (fill in the blank), Stewart can't afford to backslide. That's why noted sports psychologist Jack Llewellyn works with him on a weekly basis. "There's been a dramatic improvement since Indy in the way Tony has approached things, his self-control," Gibbs said. "I think he's had some times when he'd still get upset, but they seem to be fewer. I think we're making progress there."

"One good thing about Tony is that he's always come right back and said, 'Hey, it's my fault.' He's probably done that several times. This sport isn't just getting around NASCAR's rules. Over here, there's a different standard. In ways, Tony is an executive with Home Depot and represents them. Any action by him would have an effect on it. So, there were some discussions. But we were never close to saying, 'Tony, you're fired.' But, we had a big meeting with him and people close to him. We said, 'This is what we think we need to do. This is what the future needs to look like.'"

Despite evidence to the contrary, it says here that Stewart will be a good champion and represent NASCAR well. Many of his public obligations will be away from the track, where he is so focused and single-minded he sometimes snaps for no reason. Off the track, though, he can be charming. Dress him up and take him out, then watch him sweet-talk birds from the trees. He is witty, intelligent and passionate about things that

matter to him. He is more mature than you think, certainly more so off the track than on. His biggest problem is the man in his mirror, the one who hasn't learned to curb his tongue or how to kick back, relax and just go with it.

Stewart's rise to this year's championship wasn't seamless. He started the season 43rd in points after the first of his six DNFs in the Daytona 500. He rallied with a fourth, fifth and the first of three wins, at Atlanta in March. But he had four more poor finishes in the first half of the season. At midseason, he was seventh in points, 212 behind Sterling Marlin. The No. 20 Pontiac team remained maddeningly inconsistent. In the 19-race stretch between Bristol in April and Bristol in August, it won twice and had eight other top-10s. But it also had six bad finishes and three mediocre ones.

Unwittingly, Stewart became embroiled in the 25-point penalty Martin's team took for an illegal spring at Rockingham in November. That post-race penalty boosted Stewart from 87 points ahead after 34 of 36 races to 112 ahead with Phoenix and Homestead waiting. Martin got it to 89 at Phoenix and 34 at Homestead, but he ran out of time. Thankfully for everyone, the penalty became moot.

"It was important for him to beat us by more than 25 points," Martin said. "It would have been 13 points either way, so I feel good about that. They beat us, they earned it and I congratulate 'em. I gave it everything I had from January testing to the last lap today. But their program was a little better than ours and we got a little too far behind."

Stewart finished 18th in the finale at

Homestead, 14 spots behind Martin. "I'm proud we beat Tony the last three races," Martin said. "I don't feel any letdown because I never allowed myself to think I could win. I'm not disappointed. We outran him late in the year, but were a bit too far behind."

Martin came from 34th to run top-10 most of the day. After starting sixth, Stewart backed up, briefly losing a lap and riding 22nd shortly after halfway. He got lucky when a well-timed caution helped him regain his lost

lap, but he never had a legitimate chance to win. "There's no shame in the day we had," he said. "We did what we had to do to accomplish the goal we tried to accomplish. Up to about the 10th lap, we were having a normal weekend. Then it was like, 'Whoa, we have issues.' I told everybody I thought we could win the race. Boy, was I wrong."

Martin's day wasn't nearly so dismal. "We were real good early in the race, got off in the middle, then got good again at the end," he said. "We came from the back of the pack [he qualified 34th] and wrestled with an ill-handling car. We worked our way up all day. My only regret is that I couldn't provide the leadership for this team to score another 100 or 150 points this year."

Almost overlooked in the Stewart-Martin battle was the race itself. Kurt Busch, one of Martin's teammates at Roush Racing, led the last 11 laps to win over Joe Nemechek, Jeff Burton (another Roush Racing teammate), Martin and defending series champion Jeff Gordon. The rest of the top-10: rookie-of-the-year Ryan Newman, '01 race winner Bill Elliott, rookie Jimmie Johnson, Elliott Sadler and Bobby Hamilton.

Busch, the pole-winner and winner of three of the last five races, was one of

the six drivers who swapped the lead 12 times. Nemechek led four times for 111 laps, Dale Earnhardt Jr. twice for 46, Busch four for 28, Newman once for 28, Johnson once for 27 and Jarrett once for 27 laps. Newman was leading late, but couldn't handle Busch and the four drivers in his wake.

The Cup is the ninth title in Stewart's 23-year racing career: four in USAC, three in go-karts, the '97 Indy Racing League title and now Cup. "If I had to

retype my résumé tomorrow," he said, "I'd put this one No. 1. I'd look pretty stupid right now if I didn't say the Winston Cup isn't my greatest accomplishment. And my heart tells me it is."

In some ways, this season offered us the Cup nobody seemed to want.

Marlin already was fading when he was sidelined after a wreck at Kansas City in September. Jeff Gordon won at Bristol and Darlington to get within 91 points and created some excitement in September, but he

spit the bit at Richmond, Loudon and Dover. Newcomers Johnson and Newman held strong until suddenly looking like the rookies they were in the fall.

That left only Martin to handle Stewart, and he simply wasn't up to it. He was 30th, 16th, 10th and eighth at Talladega, Charlotte, Martinsville and Atlanta in October and November, and still lost ground to Stewart each weekend. Martin beat him at the last three races, but it was too little, too late.

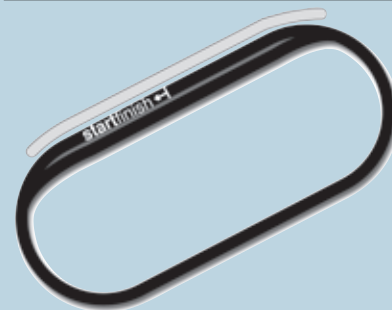
In the end, though, all's well that ends well for Stewart, Gibbs and crew chief Greg Zipadelli. What kind of champion will Stewart be? Tough question, but the early returns are promising. After all, he said all the right things during his first 45-minute interview as the champion.

Hey, it's a start. ■



Kurt Busch ended the 2002 Cup season on a roll, winning three of the last five races.

Results



Homestead-Miami Speedway 1.5-mile oval Nov. 17

1. Kurt Busch, Ford, 267 laps at 116.462 mph avg. speed; 2. Joe Nemechek, Chevrolet, 267; 3. Jeff Burton, Ford, 267; 4. Mark Martin, Ford, 267; 5. Jeff Gordon, Chevrolet, 267; 6. Ryan Newman, Ford, 267; 7. Bill Elliott, Dodge, 267; 8. Jimmie Johnson, Chevrolet, 267; 9. Elliott Sadler, Ford, 267; 10. Bobby Hamilton, Chevrolet, 267;

11. Mike Wallace, Pontiac, 267; 12. Ward Burton, Dodge, 267; 13. Johnny Benson, Pontiac, 267; 14. Rusty Wallace, Ford, 267; 15. Dale Jarrett, Ford, 267; 16. Ted Musgrave, Dodge, 267; 17. Steve Park, Chevrolet, 267; 18. Tony Stewart, Pontiac, 267; 19. Ricky Rudd, Ford, 267; 20. Kevin Harvick, Chevrolet, 267;

21. Dale Earnhardt Jr., Chevrolet, 267; 22. Jamie McMurray, Dodge, 266; 23. Kenny Wallace, Dodge, 266; 24. Ricky Craven, Ford, 266; 25. Greg Biffle, Dodge, 266; 26. Robby Gordon, Chevrolet, 265; 27. Ken Schrader, Pontiac, 265; 28. Terry Labonte, Chevrolet, 265; 29. Bobby Labonte, Pontiac, 264; 30. Jack Sprague, Chevrolet, 264;

31. Kyle Petty, Dodge, 264; 32. Geoffrey Bodine, Ford, 264; 33. Jeremy Mayfield, Dodge, 264; 34. Derrick Cope, Dodge, 264; 35. Jason Leffler, Dodge, 263; 36. Mike Skinner, Chevrolet, 263; 37. Casey Atwood, Dodge, 261; 38. Jeff Green, Chevrolet, 253 (engine); 39. John Andretti, Dodge, 235 (engine); 40. Matt Kenseth, Ford, 223 (engine);

41. Michael Waltrip, Chevrolet, 211; 42. Jimmy Spencer, Dodge, 194 (accident); 43. Dave Blaney, Ford, 19 (accident)

TIME OF RACE: 3h 26m 20s

MARGIN OF VICTORY: 2.07 seconds

PURSE: \$4,215,766, winner's share \$297,100

FAST QUALIFIER: Busch, 34.982s (154.365 mph)

PROVISIONALS: J. Gordon, J. Green, R. Gordon, Benson, Skinner, T. Bodine, Cope

DID NOT QUALIFY: Brett Bodine, Geoffrey Bodine, David Green, Hermie Sadler, Tony Raines, Boris Said, Carl Long, Mike Harmon

LAP LEADERS: 12 changes among six drivers

CAUTION PERIODS: Six for 41 laps

FINAL STANDINGS: 1. Stewart, 4800; 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

NEXT: Daytona, Fla., Feb. 16, 2003