

DRIVERS: Jimmy Johnson returns to defend Nextel championship with the Number 48 car

FROM PAGE A6

Jeff Gordon

No. 24 DuPont Chevrolet Monte Carlo, Hendrick Motorsports:

Born: Aug. 4, 1971

Hometown: Vallejo, Calif.

Crew chief: Steve Letarte

Rebounded from a disappointing season to make the Chase and finish sixth in the points. ... His two victories were fewest since he also won two in 1994, his second full Cup season. ... Part-owner of No. 48 Chevy in which Jimmie Johnson won 2006 title. ... Married late last season, Gordon is scheduled to become a father for the first time in July.

Casey Mears

No. 25 GMAC Chevrolet Monte Carlo, Hendrick Motorsports:

Born: March 12, 1978

Hometown: Bakersfield, Calif.

Crew chief: Darian Grubb

Has yet to win in four full Cup seasons but finished career-best 14th in the points. ... Made the move to the powerful Hendrick Motorsports team, replacing Brian Vickers, over the winter. ... Got start in open-wheel racing and is nephew of four-time Indianapolis 500

winner Rick Mears.

Kevin Harvick

No. 29 Shell Oil Chevrolet Monte Carlo, Richard Childress Racing:

Born: Dec. 8, 1975

Hometown: Bakersfield, Calif.

Crew chief: Todd Berrier

At the forefront of an RCR resurgence in which two of three drivers made the Chase. ... Finished fourth in points after winning career-high five races and posting 15 top fives and 20 top 10s. ... Signed multiyear contract extension last season. ... Ran away with second Busch Series title, winning nine races and beating runner-up Carl Edwards by 824 points. ... Does not plan to run full Busch Series in 2007.

Jeff Burton

No. 31 Cingular Chevrolet Monte Carlo, Richard Childress Racing:

Born: June 29, 1967

Hometown: South Boston, Va.

Crew chief: Scott Miller

Many, including teammates Kevin Harvick and Clint Bowyer, give Burton credit for being a key to the turnaround at RCR, thanks to his technical expertise, communications skills and likable personality. ... Seventh-place finish best

since he finished third in 2000 with longtime employer Jack Roush. ... Victory in fall race at Dover was 18th of career but first since 2001.

Juan Pablo Montoya

No. 42 Texaco/Havoline Dodge Charger, Chip Ganassi Racing:

Born: Sept. 20, 1975

Hometown: Bogota, Colombia

Crew chief: Donnie Wingo

One of the most exciting rookies in NASCAR history, Montoya comes to stock car racing from Formula One, where he had seven career victories. ... Montoya previously drove for Ganassi in American open-wheel racing, winning the 1999 CART championship and the 2000 Indianapolis 500. ... Got some seat time in ARCA, Busch and one Cup event late last season. ... Gave Ganassi his second straight victory in the 24-hour sports car race at Daytona, co-driving with Scott Pruett and Salvador Duran for the endurance win in January.

Dale Jarrett

No. 44 UPS Toyota Camry, Michael Waltrip Racing:

Born: Nov. 26, 1956

Hometown: Hickory, N.C.

Crew chief: Matt Borland

Jarrett, nearing the end of a great career, left his longtime home at Robert Yates Racing to join friend Michael Waltrip in his new venture with Toyota, making its Cup debut. ... Waltrip lured Borland, a respected crew chief and engineer, away from Penske Racing South to work with Jarrett, and the two could make a potent combination. ... Jarrett hasn't finished in the top 10 in points since 2002 and must prove he still can be competitive. ... Finished 23rd last year, with one top five and four top 10s.

Jimmie Johnson

No. 48 Lowe's Home Improvement Chevrolet Monte Carlo, Hendrick Motorsports:

Born: Sept. 17, 1975

Hometown: El Cajon, Calif.

Crew chief: Chad Knaus

After starting his Cup career with four straight seasons in the top five in points, including a pair of runner-up finishes, Johnson and crew chief Knaus put it all together in 2006. Johnson won five times and charged from behind in the Chase to win his first title, despite Knaus missing the first four races after being caught cheating in Daytona 500 qualifying. ... Can they do it again?

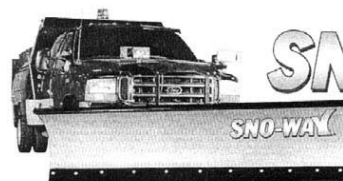
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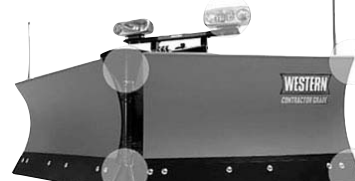
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