

# ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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IRON CHEF MARK DACASCOS  
DURING NEW TRACK SURFACE TESTS  
AT PHOENIX INTERNATIONAL RACEWAY

# CHECKING OUT THE NEW TRACK

## TIRE TESTERS AND SCREEN STARS PUT PIR THROUGH ITS PACES

Story and photos by Randall Bohl



### GOODYEAR TIRE TESTING ON NEW TRACK SURFACE

MONDAY-TUESDAY AUGUST 29-30

**PIR** has been very busy with their track paving project, but it seems that finishing was just the beginning. Once the surface was complete, things really started getting busy. It was time to lay down some rubber and see how it all worked.

The first NASCAR action on the slightly reconfigured and newly repaved surface at Phoenix International Raceway consisted of two days of Goodyear tire testing. Goodyear invited a few select NASCAR drivers to do laps and consult with engineers: Jimmie Johnson (five-time and current Sprint Cup Champion), brothers Kurt and Kyle Busch, Carl Edwards and Tony Stewart. Goodyear was also running their own "test mule" cars, with their drivers doing limited laps with extreme amounts of data recording gear onboard.

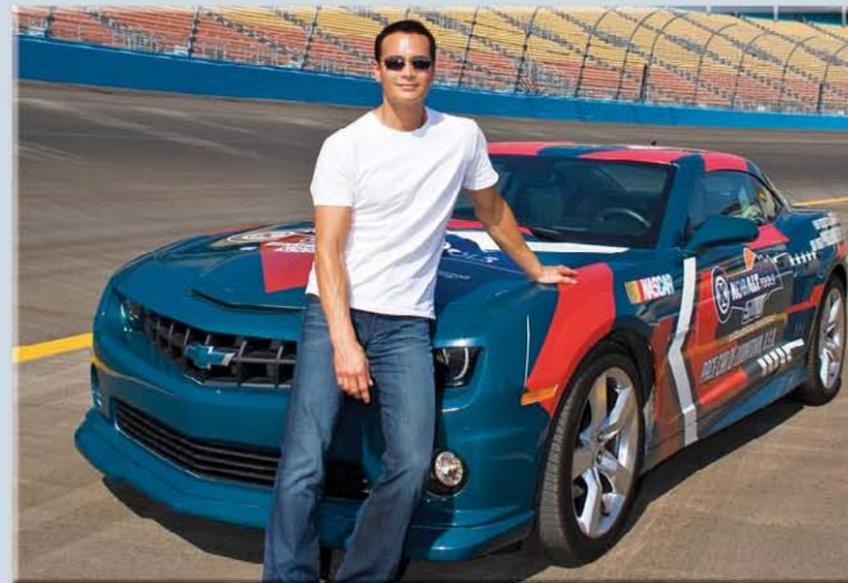
The first surprise of the day was that the NASCAR cars, normally wrapped in sponsor colors, were running this day only in primer, with just their numbers to identify the drivers, with the exception of the Busch brothers still running wraps. The second surprise of the day was when Kurt Busch unfortunately became the first driver to test the new safer barrier off turn 1, ruining the sponsor wrap on his No. 22 car, along with a lot of sheet metal. This was the only incident in two days of testing, and Kurt was fine for media interviews in the afternoon where the press didn't bother asking what happened. It was a given—fresh track, not enough rubber down yet.

Goodyear, not wanting to reveal any trade secrets, allowed photography only on-track—no cameras or recorders were allowed in the paddock area. We did wander through the paddock, less the tools of our trade—realizing that without a technical advisor, we couldn't pass on a secret if we saw one. Piles of Goodyear racing tires had odd grease pencil markings, and data recording devices looked perfect for a Hollywood sci-fi set. Folding tables were covered with laptop computers, surrounded by drivers, crew chiefs and Goodyear engineers, all sharing their thoughts and information—quietly.

#### JIMMIE JOHNSON

Jimmie Johnson shared his thoughts on the new track. "The first part of the day, we just really spent time working rubber in and trying to get the dirt out of the area," said Jimmie. (The track had been washed, but overnight the desert re-dusted the re-pave.) "It was slick for a long, long time. We've got a groove in now. Unfortunately we don't have a second groove, so it's hard to say what the racing will be like. We can't really explore yet but hopefully we can help Goodyear make a good decision on the tire and bring the right tire back for the open test. When we have 50-90 cars, we can start widening out the race track.

Changes in the track's shape were designed to promote side-by-side racing. While maintaining the integrity of PIR's oval—including the one-mile distance—the slight configuration changes are ultimately expected to increase average speeds by two to three miles per hour. On the first test day, though, they were about 1.5 seconds off last year. "The track will pick up some speed,"



Jimmie surmised. "I'm surprised we're not any faster than we are. Goodyear has a softer combination we might try once they marry construction and compound from everybody's opinions today.

"I don't know if the track's a little longer now," Johnson continued (it's still exactly one mile—Ed.), "but it sure seems different from this end (pointing) around the way the kink or dogleg, whatever it's called. Maybe



it's actually more than the old distance and that's where some of the speed lies? We all expected to go faster.

"Tomorrow will be a better day for sure. Goodyear is bringing us more tires to give us more options. I was just at a big pow wow with Rick Campbell, Kyle Busch, his engineering staff and my engineering staff as a group to feed Goodyear with the information they need, and I see that going on all around, so I think tomorrow we'll come back with much more as a group."

Since this was all being done under the extremely hot Arizona August sun, we asked about cooling systems in these testing cars—were they the same as in the cup cars? How bad was it today?

"They just put my normal stuff in so I had air to my helmet and some fans blowing air into my back," Jimmie noted. "It's actually decent on track, when there's air flowing through the car. Sitting in the garage waiting to go back out is the toughest part. We saw different failures today with mechanical parts and even electrical components, because when we came off the track nothing would cool down. We put heat strips all over the car to see how hot things got and every single heat strip on the car is pegged."

Johnson was definitely aware of the changes to track shape. "It is dramatically different," he said. "To me, it's turn 1, then the dog leg is almost a turn 2 situa-

tion." (He explains with hands wide on 2 then turning inside, basically cutting the dog leg off.) "You get to the gas much earlier and opening up the steering wheel, where in the past you were still rolling and trying to get the car to point before you ever got to throttle. I mean it's a lot different now." So does he like that? "It's fun to drive. We have a few elevation changes. It's tough to say on race day what it's going to be like from just this one groove. (For this test session, it's single file, to work for Goodyear's purposes). When we come back with everyone, we'll be able to widen things out."

#### KURT BUSCH

Kurt Busch offered an additional description of the race-track and some details on temperatures during testing. "The groove itself is a whole different feel," Kurt noted.



"It's exciting to feel something new like this, to have that exhilarating back straightaway. I don't know what words to use, but it's like a rollercoaster—drive up the banking off turn 2, you drop down, you actually see the most compression, the most

load in the dog leg, and then the car comes back up out of the hill into turn 3 and it's a nice light feeling when you get up top. So a real interesting back straightaway."

As for the heat, "What we're doing today is the hard work and the research for Goodyear. This is extreme heat, 164-degree track temperature, the engine 240-260 degrees, the ambient air is 110, inside the cockpit the coolest thing I could find was 123! So it's very extreme heat, and it's going to be tough to gauge the right tire due to that. We maybe needed to do this test at night, but still at night, I got in the rental car last night when I



### MARK DACASCOS THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 1

Two days after the Goodyear sessions, actor Mark Dacascos—The Chairman on Food Network's *Iron Chef America*—dropped in for a visit. After a stop in the winner's circle, Dacascos took the wheel of PIR's Chevrolet Camaro Pace Car (above left) and hit the track for several laps, topping 100 mph, with his manager riding along as copilot. Emerging with a wide grin, Dacascos told PIR communications team Paul Corliss and Nicole Scheider what a great thrill it was. "Now I get it. I've driven the Autobahn," Mark said, "but it was like... (acts out steering flat-out)...but this place was meant for it!"

Having had so much fun himself, Mark insisted that his manager Brian drive. After a couple of conservative laps with now-copilot Dacascos, Brian eased the car back in. Corliss quipped, "You took what we call the low line." The new driver defended his pace by stating, "I don't want to kill the talent." But his smile revealed just how much fun they both had had.

### RON PERLMAN SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 11

A week and a half later, the track was active with an ESPN film crew and actor Ron Perlman (above right) of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Hellboy* and *Sons of Anarchy* fame hard at work. ESPN was shooting a Sprint Cup Chase promotion, and we paid another visit to the winner's circle with Perlman. Production was on a tight schedule and the track was covered with camera and lighting gear, so no there was no opportunity for celebrity hot laps this time, but backstage activity during the taping and shooting was almost as exciting. ■

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## KYLE BUSCH

Following Kurt, younger brother Kyle—who had been doing an interview with SPEED network—joined us and offered his own take on turn 2 and the dogleg.

"It's fun," said Kyle. "You know it's going to add a new element and a bit different racing than we've seen here in the past. Seems like there's more room to race over there off turn 2. Maybe that means there's more area to pass. And certainly through the dogleg it's a little flatter than we expected, considering how much banking there is through turn 2 and then again in turn 3. So you know it's definitely added some new excitement."

As for the heat, Kyle noted, "It's hot out, that's for sure. It's not a refreshing day, by any means! But you know I'm a Vegas rat, so I'm from this kind of condition."



Being able to get some test laps here today helps us and allows us to take some information back to the guys at the shop, at Toyota, Joe Gibbs racing, and help ourselves out a little for when we're able to get back here.

"So doing some testing today and tomorrow, picking up some ideas for the racetrack that we can apply to the race when we come back, is good."

We asked Kyle whether the progressive banking had had that second groove come in, as intended. Could he get a sense of that? "Not yet," said Kyle. "It's so dirty out there, but where grooving it in and it's gotten a lot better. You know once we develop that groove, we seem to produce better speed and better comfort. You know it's just so hard for Goodyear to make a tire that will withstand the conditions, the heat and coefficient of friction. After about three to five 'ice cream sessions'—what I like to call it—you know it'll certainly get racy."

## BOTTOM LINE

Overall, the drivers thought the new PIR track was fun, though after only one day of testing none would commit to predicting speed. They were all looking forward to putting some traffic on the track during wide-field October testing and the Kobalt Tools 500 on November 11-13. Meanwhile, as Kyle Busch said, Goodyear was learning to make a tire that won't melt. For PIR information and tickets, visit [www.phoenixraceway.com](http://www.phoenixraceway.com).



Jimmie Johnson

## BRAD KESELOWSKI MEETS THE FANS AT THE ARIZONA BILTMORE WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 14

No. 2 Penske Miller Lite car Sprint Cup driver Brad Keselowski (above left) was in town in mid-September, for a whirlwind media tour to promote the upcoming Kobalt Tools 500 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series Race at Phoenix International Raceway on November 11-13—and, as it turns out, to do his own evaluation of the newly resurfaced PIR track using a Dodge Caravan airport rental.

A fan appreciation breakfast was scheduled for 9:30 am at the Biltmore, but we turned on the KPHO CBS 5 News at 6:30 am to see Keselowski already being interviewed live in studio. His day had obviously started early and would probably run through the evening news cycle. At the Biltmore this morning, he would be interviewed by Richard Saenz of Fox 10 News and take questions from fans.

Having broken his left ankle on August 3 in a crash during testing at Road Atlanta, Keselowski was obliged to immediately answer questions about that and assure fans that his ankle is well on the mend. In fact, the broken ankle may have been a huge motivator in his run to qualifying for the chase. He went on to win at Bristol on August 28 and then clinched his spot at Road Atlanta on September 6 with a 6th place finish.

This actually brings to mind a quote from team mate Kurt Busch at the Goodyear PIR tire testing a few weeks earlier. When asked about the Dodge's chances in the chase, Busch said, "Brad Keselowski's been on fire, and it's good to see. I mean, who know that a broken ankle would put you into the mindset of 'this is what needs to be done to get into the chase'? For us on the No. 22 car, we've got a different set up than Brad so we might need to circle back around to get the feel that he's got in his race car."

When asked what his single favorite fan moment was, Keselowski says it came during that

win at Bristol. "Unlike other sports, where you can hear the fans, in NASCAR you can't," Keselowski points out. "But during that race, when my spotter opened the radio to give me a clear after passing Kyle Busch, I could hear the roar of the fans cheering my pass through the radio! It was thrilling."

His goal would seem obvious, to win the Sprint Cup (he's in sixth place as of this writing), but it is apparent from his passion when speaking of the car and the team that it's not about *his* winning it, as much as winning it for Roger Penske. He wants to deliver the first cup victory for the No. 2 car and the first Sprint Cup for Penske Racing.

As for his private run on the new Phoenix International Raceway surface the evening before, he stated flatly that "it was dark," and then smiled. "The track is as smooth as Kurt (Busch) had told me," Brad said, "and the back straight does seem narrow out of the dogleg. Kurt said that may get exciting back there and I agree, where the accidents are likely." He also notes that the Caravan had a lot of tire chatter over 80 mph. Ah, rental cars. We wish we could have been there. ■

landed, and it was 104 degrees. I think we're doing the right thing by being here at 6:30 in the morning and running until 2 pm, just trying to get a read for Goodyear."

Aside from giving input on the tire compound, did the drivers who were testing gain any sort of advantage for the Chase? "We do," said Kurt, "but we have to take it with a grain of salt. Goodyear could come back and change the compound on us before October. We could find all different types of scenarios. Yes, we get a feel for the racetrack and we get to use our data recording systems so you can't complain, but we're the ones trailblazing a new path." Being part of the test process was welcomed by Busch, though. "You want to be involved in as many tests as you can find. You know I've evaluated the cars here today. Of the teams that are going to be in the Chase, only RCR, Kevin Harvick is the only one who is not going to have information. What I mean by that is you have Jimmie Johnson, and he gives information to Jeff Gordon. Tony Stewart gives information to Ryan Newman. Kyle's here, my little brother, and he can give information to Denny Hamlin, and so forth. Any time you're doing tire testing for the initial time you just, it's like juggling all the balls in the air. You're grooming in the new track, figuring out the line for yourself, and you're helping Goodyear research which tire's going to be the best moving forward. So it's a lot of work in one day. We'll have a better picture on October 5th, which will be the second day with all the cars, fourth day total."



Kyle Busch



Tony Stewart