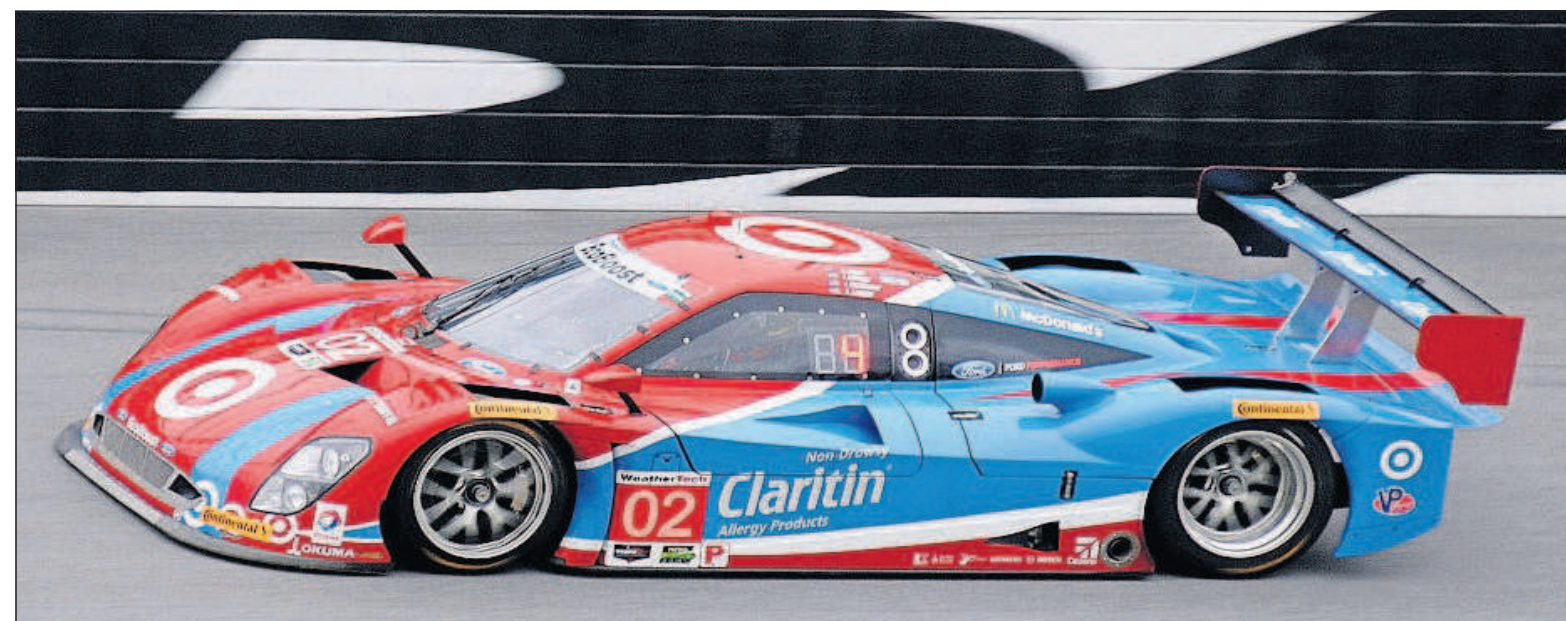


NASCAR THIS WEEK

ROAD TO DAYTONA SPEEDWEEKS

McMurray, Larson will team up at Rolex 24 run



This is the race car Ganassi Racing NASCAR drivers Jamie McMurray and Kyle Larson will be wheeling this weekend. It is the No. 02 Riley Ford Daytona Prototype. They will team up to run the Rolex 24 at Daytona International Speedway on Jan. 30-31. NEWS-JOURNAL/PETER BAUER

Ganassi Racing drivers believe 2016 Cup Series will be much better than last season

By Godwin Kelly
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Chip Ganassi Racing's Jamie McMurray and Kyle Larson will get some seat time this weekend while most of their counterparts in the Sprint Cup Series must wait until February to slide into the cockpit of a race car. McMurray and Larson will join forces with Chip Ganassi's IndyCar Series drivers Scott Dixon and Tony Kanaan to compete in the Rolex 24 At Daytona sports-car endurance race at Daytona International Speedway.

They are pretty good at it. Last season the four drivers teamed up for the Rolex 24 in the No. 02 Riley Ford Daytona Prototype and captured the overall victory. "The No. 02 entry has terrific drivers from in-house who can devote the time and attention to this race before the race season," Ganassi Racing team manager Mike Hull said. "They are all working together to freshen up and be ready to go racing when their series begins." This could be a big year for Ganassi's two-car NASCAR race team. McMurray and Larson finished the 2015 season strong, and they hope that carries over into 2016. Larson welcomes a new crew chief in Chad Johnston, plus additional hires in



Driver Jamie McMurray talks with team owner Chip Ganassi along pit road during a test session at Daytona International Speedway. NEWS-JOURNAL/JIM TILLER

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engineering. The 23-year-old driver enters his third Cup Series campaign without a victory, a drought that most insiders expect to end in 2016. NASCAR will use a different aerodynamic configuration for stock cars this season. The new aero package won't have as much downforce as last year's racers. The new package was tested in the races at Kentucky and Darlington with a great amount of positive

feedback from drivers. "I think that will throw a big curveball at a lot of teams to figure out where we are when we get to Las Vegas," said Larson, of NASCAR's next stop after the Feb. 21 Daytona 500. "I'm excited to get going as far as all the big changes we've done inside the shop." McMurray, 39, has won several big races, such as the Daytona 500 and Brickyard 400, but has not enjoyed the consistency that other drivers have shown in recent years. He is looking forward to racing at Daytona in both Ganassi's sports car and stock car in the next several weeks. "Daytona for me, since I went there when I was eight to race a go-kart, it's one of my favorite tracks," said McMurray, the 2010 Daytona 500 champion.

"I'm so lucky to win there in go-karts, the Daytona 500, the Rolex 24; I've won some pretty cool races there." McMurray will have a bullet for the 500, where drafting is a key component to winning the race. McMurray has seven career Cup victories, and four of those have come at Daytona and Talladega Superspeedway, where drafting is king. After that, he hopes to have a competitive car at other tracks on the schedule. McMurray and Larson can start the season with a win in their back pockets before returning to Daytona for the stock-car portion of Speedweeks. "We are a great sports-car team, a great combination of drivers," Larson said. "Hopefully, we can put another 24 hours together and get another Rolex."

QUESTIONS & ATTITUDE

Compelling questions... and maybe a few actual answers

Will the Rolex 24 get the racin' blood flowing?

It does sorta shake the slumber for NASCAR fans. For those who think racing is nothing but left-hand turns, the Rolex doesn't fully satisfy their desire to see Jimmie, Kyle, Matt and maybe even Kurt, but like the first sighting of tinsel on store shelves in early November, it signifies a certain season is approaching.

Why do you like Daytona's road course so much?

Because in combination with the high-banked tri-oval, it puts high demand on everyone from the driver to engineers, who have to compromise on car setup. And I'll say it again: In my perfect world, when NASCAR comes back here in July, they'd run the road course.

Did Tony Stewart call out Brian France?

It reads that way in print, but sometimes something is lost in translation. In a radio interview last week, he suggested Brian should be more visible to drivers — "He shows up at the drivers' meeting and you never see him after that," Stewart said.

Does Tony have a point?

Not really. Brian isn't Big Bill France or Bill Jr., two men who worked without all the layers of administration you have today. Brian's focus has always seemed to be the business and marketing end, from which Tony and the others benefit greatly, by the way.

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The other NASCAR driver in the Rolex 24

AJ Allmendinger has made eight Rolex 24 At Daytona starts in his career and took home the big trophy in 2012. All those starts were with Michael Shank Racing, which moved to a Honda-power Ligier Prototype 2 in 2015. During winter testing at Daytona International Speedway, the No. 60 Ligier showed an incredible leap in speed thanks to Honda increasing the engine displacement. The larger engine provides greater torque, which allows the exotic-looking car to come off flat turns much quicker. Allmendinger can't get enough of Daytona International Speedway. He was at the Speedway for December's national go-kart races, will compete in the Rolex 24 and return to run in the Feb. 21 Daytona 500. Allmendinger is a regular on the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series. He'll be joined in the Rolex 24 battle by stock-car regulars Jamie McMurray and Kyle Larson wheeling the No. 02 Ganassi Racing Riley Ford Prototype. "The Rolex 24 is such a tough race to win," Allmendinger said. "Every year teams show up and they have a lot of speed in their race cars. In the end, the race itself is the toughest thing. "If you don't get to the end of 24 hours, then you don't have a shot to win, so that's the focus. No matter what, it's going to be difficult. There are a lot of cars here that have a lot of speed, but I really do think we have the best lineup, the best team and the best car, and if we get to the end of the race we'll have a great shot to win." Allmendinger will co-drive Shank's machine with John Pew, Ozz Negri and Olivier Pla, who was named to the team roster in early January. "My expectation from a pure results side is that we're capable of being a podium car," Shank said. "With how strong this lineup is, and how much more we understand about this Honda-Ligier than we did at this time last year, I think we are strong enough to be fighting for a podium if we can avoid any trouble and be there to race on Sunday afternoon."

SPEED FREAKS

A couple questions we had to ask — ourselves
You like the Chase coming to Xfinity and Trucks?
GODSPEAK: I'm thinking along the lines of too much of a good thing...
KEN'S CALL: Not sure, but if it draws some eyeballs to Friday and Saturday at Homestead, it serves a purpose.
And the "caution clock" for Trucks?
GODSPEAK: I don't understand the concept. What am I missing here?

KEN'S CALL: Can't wait to see the strategy sessions atop the pit boxes. The calculators will be buzzing, assuming someone still owns a calculator.
Shouldn't more Cup drivers run the Rolex 24?
GODSPEAK: Yes, but of the three in the 24, two are racing for their car owner, while AJ Allmendinger can't get enough of Daytona. He was there for go-karts in December.
KEN'S CALL: In a perfect world,

yes, but in a sponsor-driven world, these things are complicated.
Are you buying the idea of a physically fit Tony Stewart?
GODSPEAK: If he wins the Daytona 500 and does the Spider-Man deal up the catch fence, I will believe.
KEN'S CALL: Yes, and by next Christmas I'll be a Rockette.
— Ken Willis, ken.willis@news-jrnl.com

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