

Stars light up the night

Out on the town with Darrell Waltrip, Lyn St James, Trevor Bayne and Danica Patrick



Trevor Bayne is urged to show off his brand new Daytona 500 championship ring. Danica Patrick meets the media. Darrell Waltrip and Lyn St. James share a hearty laugh. And Waltrip leads Bayne, Patrick and St. James in a Q&A session with the fans.



Phoenix International Raceway revved up the 2011 NASCAR season with their annual Night of Champions charity event on February 24. There was a twist of mystery in the runup to the event, as the winner of the Daytona 500™ would be crowned just four days prior. That winner would join NASCAR Nationwide Series driver and Valley local Danica Patrick, three-time NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion Darrell Waltrip, former IndyCar driver Lyn St. James and PIR President Bryan R. Sperber to help celebrate the start of the 2011 NASCAR season and the SUBWAY Fresh Fit 500™ event weekend at PIR on February 25-27.

And that winner? Trevor Bayne won the 53rd Daytona 500 just one day after his 20th birthday, thus tapping him to head the star-studded cast at Night of Champions. Bayne became the youngest driver to ever win the Daytona 500 and the second youngest to win a NASCAR Sprint Cup Series race.

The event was held at Frank and Albert's, in the legendary Arizona Biltmore Resort, on a beautiful February evening in the desert. Waltrip, who retired from racing in 2000 and is now a lead analyst for NASCAR on FOX, hosted the night. The charity event benefitted and raised awareness for research at the Arizona State University College of Nursing & Healthcare Innovation, and for Lyn St. James' Women in the Winner's Circle Foundation.

The purpose of St. James' Women in the Winner's Circle Foundation is to provide "opportunity for women's growth in the

automotive and competitive motorsports fields." One element of the Foundation is the Complete Driver Academy, of which Danica Patrick is a graduate. Patrick recalled to St. James that she "took it when it was in Indianapolis and cold". The Academy is now held here in metro Phoenix at the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving.

Patrick also shared some differences between driving at IndyCar and in the Nationwide car during her rookie year, the joke being on herself. In IndyCar, most of the controls are on the steering wheel, and engine information is transmitted to the crew chief by radio each lap. In NASCAR, the crew chief is asking you to read the gauges, and "I don't like looking down in traffic," Danica says. "During practice, the crew chief asks for the oil pressure and I can't find it. All the gauges are labeled at the bottom but I can't find oil, lap after lap. I finally had to pull into the pits exclaiming, 'I don't think there is one,' when crewman leans in, pointing to a gauge in the middle that says only says 'spec,' and it's labeled on the top!"

Patrick went on to say this year's car is fitted to her perfectly—and she knows where the gauges are. She was ready to race. And that she did, taking 17th place in Saturday's Bashas' Supermarkets 200, followed a week later in Las Vegas with a 4th place finish, making history (once again) as the highest placing female driver in a Nationwide Series race. It's a safe bet she's planning on being the first female driver to win a Nationwide Series race.

Trevor Bayne had been on the ride of his life, not just at Daytona, but for the four days from his historic win to the Biltmore event. He had driven his own Ford F-150 from Charlotte to Daytona with a friend, anticipating the same road trip home after the race. Instead, it was private jets and four days of interviews and national television appearances before we met him at the Biltmore. Is he as nice a "kid" as everyone says? Simply, yes. He had his huge Daytona 500 winner's ring on his right hand and was still determining how to show it to people. "Open hand seems kind of effeminate, so I kind of try to make a fist," he explained to a female television reporter. We asked what he did Sunday night to celebrate his win, and he said "I had to do laundry, since I wasn't going back home!" He later relived a bit of the last laps of Daytona for the guests on hand, saying he had asked his spotter if he should let Tony Stewart past and push him? The answer was, "NO—JUST GO!"

Unfortunately, Bayne had a rough weekend in Phoenix, placing 31st in the Nationwide Series race, after scrubbing the wall, and 40th in Sunday's NASCAR Subway Fresh Fit 500, again meeting that darned wall. But he handled it with aplomb, heading on to Las Vegas where he finished 5th behind guess who? Danica Patrick in the Sam's Town 300. And he finished 20th in the Kobalt Tools 400, with no more walls getting in the way. He is on his way to a solid race season, driving for both the Woods Brothers and Jack Roush.

As the evening wound down, we couldn't resist taking advantage of the food being served by Frank & Albert's. A bit of prime rib and a great big prawn seemed like just the ticket. Darrell Waltrip sat down at the table next to us, and being a three time NASCAR Cup Champion himself, and Fox broadcaster, he is quite the ambassador for the sport, signing autographs and answering questions even while attempting dinner. One particular fan question we caught was "why are you and the other drivers so willing to sign autographs for free, when football and baseball players often charge for autographs?" His answer: "Because we work more directly for the fans; our sponsors pay us to bring fans. And I'd guess there are maybe ten drivers out around this town appearing at other charitable functions tonight." Signing autographs, raising money for good causes and making new fans.

We hope he had some nice quiet room service later. ■



Story and photos by Randall Bohl

