

NASCAR goes green with hybrid pace car

23 April 2009, By Jim Utter

Until recently, about the only thing green about NASCAR was Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s paint scheme.

Tuesday, a day before Earth Day, Toyota and Lowe's Motor Speedway unveiled something else green -- an environmentally friendly Toyota Camry Hybrid that will serve as the pace car for the May 24 Coca-Cola 600.

In a sport that still races cars with carburetor engines and only moved to unleaded fuel in 2008, why a hybrid?

"We see it as a demonstration of performance," said Ed Laukes, Toyota's corporate manager of motorsports marketing. "The fact we can take a car literally anyone can buy down at their local Toyota dealer and go out and pass the performance characteristics required by NASCAR, we think that is pretty exciting."

To be approved as a pace car, the Camry Hybrid had to pass a NASCAR-mandated performance test. To run at Lowe's, a pace car is required to reach speeds close to 100 mph from a stand-by position near the exit of pit road to the time it reaches the exit of Turn 2 -- a distance of about a quarter of a mile.

A Ford Fusion Hybrid paced the green flag in last season's Sprint Cup Series finale at Homestead, Fla., but wasn't used after that because it didn't meet the performance standards. The Toyota Hybrid will be the first to be used throughout a race and will be used at five more races this season -- the October race at Charlotte, at Infineon Raceway, Chicagoland Speedway, Watkins Glen, N.Y., and the October race at Martinsville, Va.

Denny Hamlin, who drives the No. 11 Toyota for Joe Gibbs Racing in the Sprint Cup series, was on hand Tuesday, giving demonstration rides.

Could he imagine NASCAR adopting a hybrid racing vehicle?

"I know as a fan, when I used to sit in the stands, how exciting it was to hear the engines roar," he said. "At the start of the engines, the ground kind of shakes. You're just not going to get that from a hybrid.

"It's quiet and smooth."

And green.

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