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Despite a reputation as a
hot-head, NASCAR racer

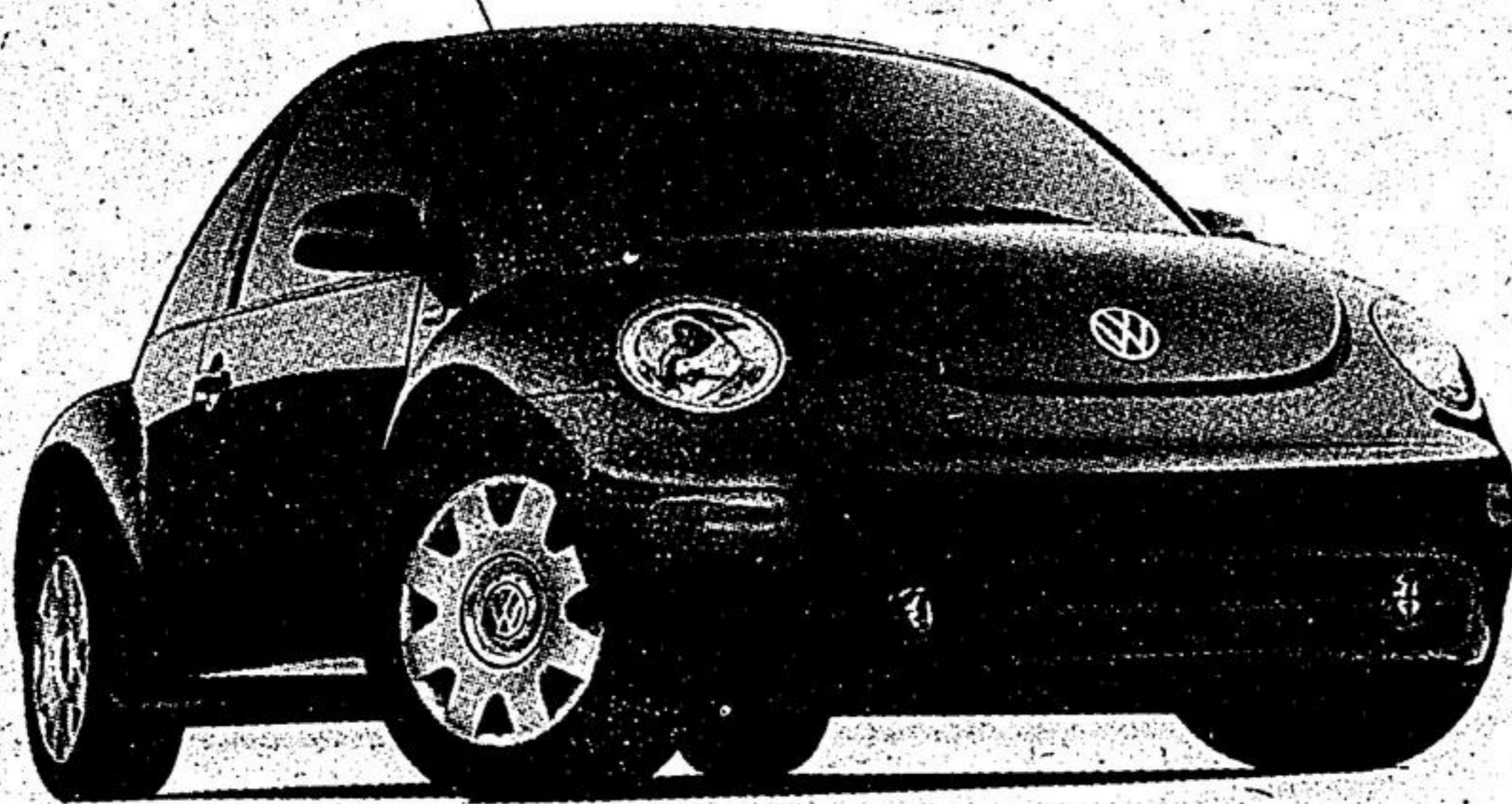
TONY STEWART

has cooled down and
settled in as a favourite
to win this season's
championship




Tony Stewart

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By JASON STEIN
FOR WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

Tony Stewart took a break not long ago — a brief little five-day lull in a 52-week storm, a momentary stoppage in his endless stop-watch of time and a sudden red flag on a course that's constantly green.

"The Bahamas," Stewart said on a frigid January day, about a month before the start of what could be his biggest season.

"You know, white sand and beaches and all that. It was the first time I'd actually remembered having a real vacation."

Stop the press: Stewart took a lap off. Somebody else got a lap closer.

In the harried world of the Columbus, Ind. kid, any amount of time not spent on the accelerator is time-wasted.

When he's not going nose-to-bumper on an ever-expanding NASCAR schedule, he's going door-to-door on dirt tracks, paved tracks, short tracks or long tracks. When he's not going racing, he's thinking about racing. When he's not thinking about it, he's buying it. Like the morning about 19 months back when he went out for coffee and donuts and, on his way through the check-out lane, picked up a racing collectibles magazine, "cause it was one I hadn't seen yet and I wanted to see how our die casts were doing," Stewart says.

The only problem? His picture was on the cover.

At the checkout, Stewart placed the donuts on top of the magazine, and prayed the cashier wouldn't notice.

"Next thing, she moves the donuts, picks up the magazine, stares at the cover and says, 'Oh, it's Tony Stewart. I couldn't figure out who that was for a second.'" Stewart says, retelling the encounter.

"Well I just grabbed everything and got out of there in a hurry. I cracked up the whole way home."

How life has changed. These days Stewart describes his life as a living "zoo exhibit," a daily journey that is not only physically demanding, but a mental drain, most of it brought on himself.

He's a perfectionist to a fault, a racer to the finish line. He can't let things be left undone. He has to try everything. It's why his schedule is the way it is. It's why his personality, his fan base and his lifestyle are in full motion.

In early January, there was Stewart in the Grand American sportscar series at Daytona, driving an open-cockpit prototype that's a cross between stock car and Indy car. Last May, it was the Indy 500 on the same day as the Coca-Cola 600 NASCAR race. In between, it has been midgets and United States Auto Club (USAC) and on and on and on.

"Everybody knows that if I get an off weekend and can go race somewhere, I'll go race."

That theme has been lost on no one, least of all Stewart.

From his first ride in the seat of a go-kart at age 7, to his first karting championship at 12, then a world title at 16, Stewart has never wasted time passing

his way to the top.

He took kart racing to another level, then quickly turned higher-horsepower open-wheel machines, like Three-Quarter Midgets, into a career in USAC racing. By 1991, he was USAC's Rookie of the Year. By '94 he was a USAC champion. A season later he was USAC history — a Triple Crown winner in the National Midget, Sprint and Silver Crown series, and all in the same year.

After earning the Rookie-of-the-Year award in the Indy Racing League (IRL) at 25, Stewart won the championship the following year.

When he wanted to move to NASCAR, Stewart not only sharpened his skills in the Busch Series, racing in 22 events in '98, but also racing on every other kind of surface in sight. A year later he was ready for the Big Time.

But was Winston Cup ready for him?

Fistfights with reporters, verbal brawls with NASCAR and on-track altercations with other drivers made Stewart a household name on the circuit. And that was only his first year.

Despite winning Rookie-of-the-Year honors in his first season of Winston Cup, he was quickly labeled Tony the Tempestuous, Tony the Terrible and

Tony the Tantrum-throwing. He has thrown his helmet at passing competitors after being cut off in traffic. He has barreled into others in the middle of pit road.

"I don't back down," he said. "If people don't like that, there are 50 other drivers they can root for."

NASCAR had its white-hat cowboy in Jeff Gordon, another Indiana son. Tony would wear the black.

"From what I've seen of NASCAR, they're pretty hardheaded and set in their ways," Stewart told ESPN at the end of last year, after placing second in points. "Their approach is, 'It's our way or the highway.' I might be driving down the highway pretty soon."

And, despite retiring with a broken car after only a couple of laps of the 2002 Daytona 500, driving to a NASCAR title might be next... if last year is any indicator, that is.

After a late-season push, Stewart cooled off, gave up fighting NASCAR and drove to three wins, 15 top-five finishes and 22 top-10s. Had he not struggled in six of the first seven races, Stewart might have given Jeff Gordon, who won the championship, a run for his money.

Now he just wants his own run, albeit with a few extra perks, such as a private plane, three homes and the world (nearly) at his feet.

But first there's a dirt track here, a sprint car there...

"If I wasn't racing I'd probably be lost," Stewart says. "I have been involved in racing for 23 years now. I don't know what I would be doing if I wasn't driving race cars."

■ Jason Stein is a feature writer and the editor of Wheelbase Communications' SpeedWeek racing page. He can be reached at jstein@wheelbase.com. Wheelbase Communications supplies automotive news and features to newspapers across North America.



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