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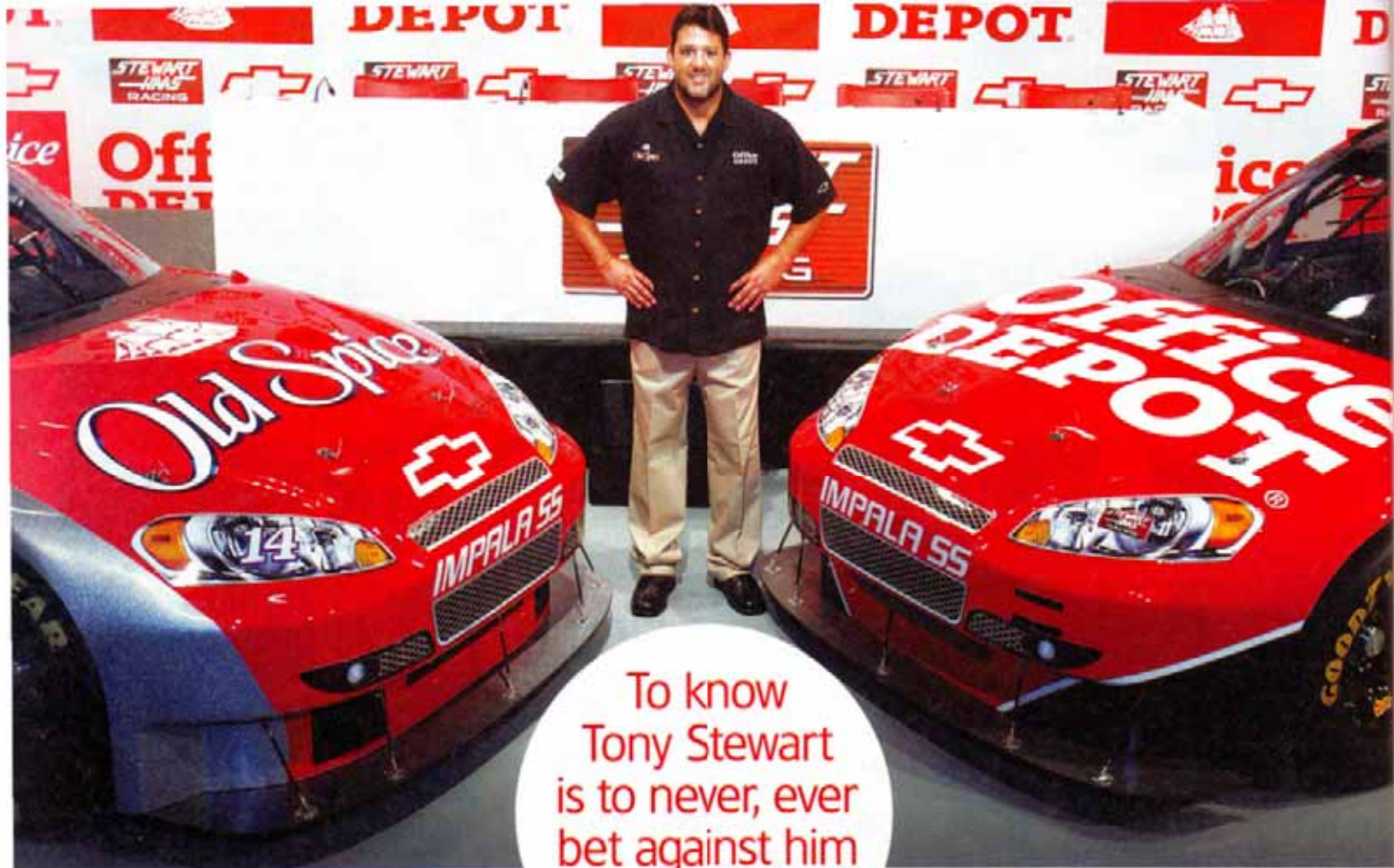


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To know  
Tony Stewart  
is to never, ever  
bet against him

# Watch This!

By **Bones Bourcier**

**A**fter all this time, there are still three things not enough people understand about Tony Stewart. The first is that, owing to a career in which he has driven a startling variety of race cars, almost nothing is new to him anymore. That was worth noting in the summer of 2008, when half the NASCAR press corps seemed hysterical over the idea that Stewart, after 10 full Cup seasons, was leaving Joe Gibbs Racing to drive for a restructured team of which he is a co-owner. How, they pondered, would he perform in unfamiliar surroundings? Dimwits, all of them. Check this out: In his diverse career, Stewart has won for—not worked for, but won for—at least two dozen different teams. That makes two dozen car owners, two dozen chief mechanics, and two dozen sets of crewmen. Sure,

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he will miss Coach Gibbs and his JGR mates, but having new faces around isn't going to make Tony feel like a homesick kid at his first summer camp.

The second thing is an elementary truth to anyone who has come to know Stewart well: You don't ever want to bet against this guy.

Stuff has a way of working out for him. He tries things, and these things go according to plan. Play him in billiards, and you'd better hang onto your wallet. Try to beat him to a burger joint across town, and he will find a shortcut. Put him on a racetrack, any racetrack, and magic happens.

His adult life has amounted to him saying, "Watch this!" and then doing something better, faster, more effortlessly than those around him. Some of this, I suppose, you can chalk up to supernatural hand-eye coordination, freakish decision-making skills, and a finely tuned sense of balance. And

some of it, sure, is because he is too damned stubborn to lose. But more and more, I think Stewart is simply one of those charmed folks—and haven't we all met one or two—who have that little extra *something*, that rare blend of talent, confidence, and just enough luck to see them through almost anything.

**Bones Bourcier:**

"How would you define confidence?"

**Tony Stewart:**

"When it comes to driving?"

**BB:** "When it comes to anything. Life."

**TS:** [*Quietly*] "God, I don't know."

[*Pause*] "I would say confidence is what you have when, whatever you're getting ready to do that day—talking in front of a big group of people, or driving a race car—you're not worried about it. Confidence means you just show up, and you do it."

**BB:** "Do you believe in luck?"

**TS:** "Absolutely. There have been days when I shouldn't have won races, but did win, and it was only because we got lucky. And there have been a lot of races we should have won, but we lost because of bad luck. Yeah, luck is a part of racing, a part of everything. [Pause] If I re-ran my life again, and everything happened exactly the same way but it came a year earlier or a year later, I would say the odds of me making it would have been only half as good. So much of being successful is being in the right place at the right time. [Long sigh] It's timing. It's all timing. There are thousands of drivers in the United States, but there's only 43 of us who get to start the Cup race every Sunday. And we're not the only 43 people who can drive those cars. You go to any local short track, and there's probably a driver hidden there who will never get a chance to get even close to where we're at, but it's not because he doesn't have the talent."

**Roger Penske is credited** with defining luck as that place "where preparation meets opportunity." That is a nice, tidy slogan for ginning up morale in a team meeting or a corporate pep rally, so it is exactly the kind of thing you'd expect from Captain Roger. It's also a philosophy that is too neat, too clinical, to pin on someone like Stewart, whose life runs more in emotional reds and oranges than in Penske-perfect black-and-white. And yet cold preparation and steaming emotion are not mutually exclusive, and they are the yin and yang of Tony Stewart, champion.

This, you see, is the third thing about Tony Stewart: Above all else, he is a thinker. Sure, he has made some very big headlines doing silly, impulsive things: accosting a NASCAR executive, slapping a tape recorder from a reporter's hand, shoving a photographer. (Stewart's apologists will point out that those things happened years ago. Yet, bless his silly and impulsive heart, he was at it again just last summer, slapping the headset off an official at a midget race because a car he owned was on the wrong end of a call.)

But he is a deeper, more contemplative fellow than casual NASCAR fans would imagine. They see him as tightly wound, and, yes, he often is; but at other times he is deliberate, even cautious. Again: He *thinks*. And my theory is that

his success owes as much to all this thought as it does to luck, or even to talent. A lot of gifted race drivers have been marginalized by the kind of bad career decisions that Stewart has almost never made. The romantic version of his days racing midgets and sprint cars—a version Stewart has helped along—is that he slept until noon most days and floated wherever the winds took him. The plain truth is that he always did a lot of the preparation Penske talks about. Even as a young man, he was analyzing things, plotting moves.

In the winter of 1992-93, Stewart, just 21, was earning five dollars an hour working in a machine shop in Columbus, Indiana, his hometown. His memories are literally chilling. The place was poorly heated, and his job involved dunking cold steel parts in frigid buckets of solvent. That February, he took a few days off to make his first USAC Sil-



**SUCCESS MAGNET:** When Tony Stewart looked for key personnel for his Sprint Cup team, he had no problem finding them, including fellow Hoosier, Ryan Newman. When Newman was asked about his primary motivation for joining Stewart-Haas he said, "It was mostly Tony."

ver Crown start in the Copper World Classic at Phoenix, and finished second. Stewart was standing on pit lane in the warm Arizona sun when he learned that the runner-up spot paid \$8,600. He was driving for 40 percent, so he had just earned \$3,440. It was the first real money he'd ever been close to. He asked himself how many eight-hour days he'd need to shiver in that machine shop to bank such a sum, and had immediate thoughts of leaving the workaday world behind. But in the next instant he reminded himself that not every Silver Crown purse was that fat, and that second place was a lot to hope for on a steady basis. Calmed and centered, he

came up with a plan. He would radically boost his midget and sprint car schedules—running "as many races as I could find"—to augment his Silver Crown income. At last satisfied that this could work, he declared himself a full-time race driver. Across the next two seasons he focused on USAC's national tours, but also found local midget rides in Illinois, Wisconsin, and even California, parlaying 117 starts into 59 top-five finishes (including 24 wins) and a soaring reputation. None of it had happened by accident.

The plotting did not stop. To that point, Stewart's bread-and-butter midget gig was with a car owner named Ralph Potter, and together they won the 1994 USAC championship. But when Potter's operation expanded to include a second car for '95, Stewart—analyzing again—decided that his own results might suffer. He quietly began looking around, and by May he was steering midgets for Steve Lewis, with whom he won another USAC title. That, of course, was in his "triple crown" season, when Stewart also won the USAC sprint and Silver Crown championships, and from there his career took off at full gallop. Billionaire John Menard hired him, sight unseen, for the 1996 Indy Racing League campaign, and just one year later Stewart was the IRL's series champ, not to mention the first new Indy car star in years who'd made his name on dirt tracks. Along the way he earned his stock car spurs in occasional Nationwide Series starts with Harry Ranier, and by 1997 he was moonlighting for Gibbs, running a limited Nationwide schedule as prelude to a 1999 NASCAR Sprint Cup rookie assault. You pretty much know how things went from there. With JGR, Stewart won the 2002 and '05 Cup championships, not to mention 33 races and more than \$70 million.

Preparation just kept shaking hands with opportunity, because Tony Stewart was always bright enough to put himself in the right place at the right time, looking up with open arms when all that wonderful luck came raining down.

**BB:** "You've always seemed unafraid to take the next step, and, looking back, a lot of those steps were not exactly sure things. Jumping into an Indy car was a great opportunity, but it was also a big gamble ..."

**TS:** "Sure it was. And before that, quitting my job to say, 'OK, I'm going to try to make a living driving race cars' was a

gamble. It's back to what we talked about before: confidence. When I quit that job, it was the toughest decision I had made in my life. But when that worked out the way I'd planned—or the way I'd *hoped*—it made the next big decision easier. That was moving from Potter's team to the Lewis team. It was another gamble, but, again, it worked. Then it was going from sprint cars and midgets, where I felt like I was at the top of my game, into Indy cars, something that was on the total opposite end of the spectrum. But that worked, too. And

every time you take a risk that pays off, it makes the next big step less scary. *[Pause]* I feel like I've taken calculated risks. I always had an *idea* what I was getting into. In the midgets, I had won a championship with Potter, but I had also won a lot of races driving other cars, so I knew it wasn't a situation where I could be fast with only one team. In the Indy cars, I'd had a chance to go testing with A.J. Foyt before I joined the Menard team, and because of that test I knew I could drive those cars. So all those steps were calculated.

No, you don't always have the ability to say, 'I'm pretty sure I want to do this, just give me six months to think about it.' But I always took whatever time I needed to be sure, when I laid my head down on the pillow at night, that I had made the right decision. No guarantees, but I had weighed out the options."

**Since every decision** is a no-brainer to those who don't actually have to make it, Stewart's career choices—from dirt tracks to Indy cars to Sprint Cup—look pretty basic on paper. Hungry drivers, logic tells you, automatically say yes to paying rides, especially any paying ride that represents a significant climb up the racing ladder. But here again you dig a little deeper and find that more than the usual amount of thought has gone into his professional roadmap.

It is not widely known, even among students of all things Stewart, that two years before his Cup debut with Gibbs he had spurned an offer to steer the No. 25 Hendrick Motorsports ride that had just been vacated by Ken Schrader. Then, as today, a Hendrick Chevy was the best seat in NASCAR—Terry Labonte and Jeff Gordon won the 1996 and '97 Cup championships with the team—and the list of would-be rookies bold enough to turn down a job offer from Rick Hendrick probably begins and ends with Tony Stewart.

**TS:** "I didn't feel like I was ready to make that big a step forward. I didn't think it was the right time for me to do that. Do I feel like, in the long run, that decision worked out? Yes. But it took more guts to turn down that opportunity than it would have to take it."

**BB:** "That's a case where *not* taking a risk probably added to your confidence."

**TS:** "Yeah. Because you can look back again and know you made the right decision, even if it's something you decided not to do. A lot of people don't see that; they think that if they get an opportunity, they *have* to grab it. But you have to know which opportunities are the right ones. Your heart and that feeling in your stomach might say you've got to go for it, but if your mind says, 'Hey, be smart, plan ahead,' that's what you should do."

**So here he is**, speeding into 2009 with another opportunity having been presented, analyzed, and acted upon. This

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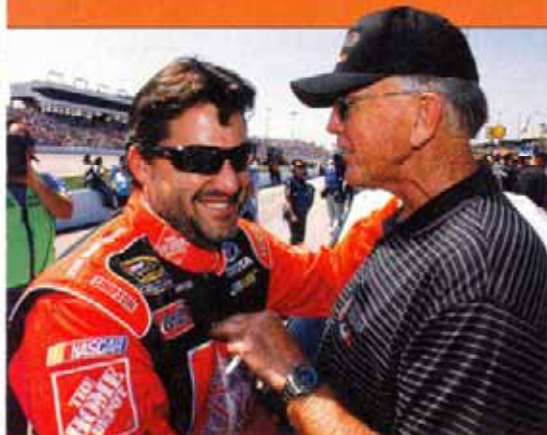
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# Coaching Success

**Tony Stewart tries to emulate Joe Gibbs' model for business and life.**

Anyone looking for clues as to how Tony Stewart might lead his new team need only look toward his old team. The relationship between Joe Gibbs and Stewart long ago surpassed the normal driver/owner dynamic and settled in an area somewhere between father/son and mentor/pupil. "I learned from a guy who has been successful at everything he's done, whether it's life, football, drag racing, NASCAR racing, whatever," Stewart says. "And when you're around somebody like that, you start noticing that there



**MENTOR:** Stewart learned a lot from his former team owner, Joe Gibbs, and has emulated his successful ways with his USAC and World of Outlaws teams and will implement them with his new Cup team

are all these variables in the equation, but there's also one constant. The constant was Joe. This one person did all those things, and did them well. He's a proven product. So you look at that, and you just have to say, 'How do I apply this to what I'm doing?' I've tried to do that, and that's how we've made our USAC and World of Outlaws teams successful, and our partnerships with all of our sponsors successful. It's because of what I learned from watching somebody who did it right." —*Bones Bourcier*

DAVID M. VAUGHAN/AT PHOTOGRAPHIC

*It's not like we're just jumping off a cliff and busting through the water without having any idea what's below. I've got a small idea what's down there.*

time Stewart's answer was yes, and thus last July he assumed a half-ownership stake in Haas CNC Racing, now known as Stewart-Haas Racing. I can't tell you what sort of heights this new enterprise will reach, any more than you can, or any more than Stewart himself could. But I can tell you this: Long before the rest of us started wondering aloud if he had finally bitten off more than he could chew, he had worked it all out in his head. Every time I've spoken with him about his infant-stage Cup team, it was soon clear that he was many, many moves ahead of where I'd have guessed he was.

He has a bit of a track record in the team-ownership game, having won sprint car championships with both USAC and the World of Outlaws. There, he takes a hands-off approach, something else which might surprise the casual Stewart-watcher. His job, he jokes, is to give his teams what they need and then stay the hell out of their way.

**BB:** "In your limited time as a team owner, you've been at least somewhat successful. As you look at what you're doing in 2009 with the Cup team, that has to be a plus."

**TS:** "If it weren't for the fact that I've had the World of Outlaws teams and the USAC teams and had some success there, I probably wouldn't have taken on this opportunity. Now, that's no guarantee that we're going to be successful with the Cup team, but it does add to my confidence. It's not like we're just jumping off a cliff and busting through the water without having any idea what's below. I've got a *small* idea what's down there."

**He's got a better idea than that,** I believe. Lots of other folks apparently believe it, too. Ryan Newman, his new teammate, took a huge leap of faith off his own cliff in leaving Penske Racing to sign with Stewart-Haas. But, don't forget, Newman has watched Tony Stewart's entire act. He, too, grew up as an Indiana

sprints-and-midgets kid, hitting his stride just a few years behind his boss. Newman saw every improbable step Stewart took, and he saw every improbable step pay off. Whatever confidence he has in Stewart is understandable, and Newman has plenty. At the press conference to announce his signing, Newman fielded questions about the team's resources, its connection to Chevrolet, and its pipeline to Hendrick chassis/engine technology, and yet when asked about his primary motivation for joining Stewart-Haas he said, "It was mostly Tony."

Stewart's other key hires sounded just as enthusiastic. Tony Gibson, who left Dale Earnhardt Inc. to serve as Newman's crew chief, said of Stewart, "He understands people, works well with them, and genuinely wants to see them succeed. And he's smart enough to know that their success is also his success." Darien Grubb, the Hendrick alumnus who will look after Stewart's own car, said he was "honored to join Tony."

But perhaps the most ringing endorsement came from Bobby Hutchens, the popular ex-Childress and ex-DEI hand who will serve as the team's director of competition. "Stewart-Haas Racing has an incredible amount of potential," Hutchens said. "To be an integral part of what we all believe can be a championship-winning organization was an opportunity I could not turn down."

None of these guys is new to NASCAR. They know the ups and downs of job changes, and they have seen any number of start-up race teams crash and burn. But I think they have seen enough to trust that it's all going to work out—again—for Tony Stewart. Check the record book. It almost always does.

Blessed are the confident, for they shall find victory lane.

**TS:** "Luck, talent, timing. All three of those things have to be there to get to the upper level. [Pause] Whatever you're doing in life." ♣