



Nextel to sponsor NASCAR's top series \$75M-a-year deal replaces Winston

By Chris Jenkins

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NASCAR has scheduled a new conference Thursday morning in New York, where officials will announce that the Nextel brand of wireless phones will replace cigarette maker Winston as title sponsor of its top racing series next season.

Drivers Jeff Gordon and Dale Earnhardt Jr. and NASCAR chairman Bill France Jr. are scheduled to attend the announcement, which will be held at NASDAQ-AMEX headquarters on Times Square.

NASCAR chief operating officer George Pyne did not return a call seeking comment, but two people familiar with the negotiations said Tuesday afternoon that NASCAR's deal with Nextel was complete.

One estimated that the sponsorship will cost Nextel a total of \$75 million a year for at least 10 years, but not all of that money will go to NASCAR. Nextel has agreed to spend millions on ads during races. Winston reportedly paid \$30 million - \$60 million.

Despite a stagnant economy, NASCAR was able to complete a deal only four months after R.J. Reynolds Tobacco announced it would be willing to step aside after 31 years for a new title sponsor. Though the deal will be a boon to NASCAR and its TV partners, it may end up hurting at least one team.

Winston is the only cigarette brand allowed to advertise in NASCAR. Though Nextel will not be granted the same exclusivity – existing team sponsors such as Alltel and Cingular will be “grandfathered” into the series, even though they are Nextel's competition – Roush Racing officials are not sure what that means to their sponsorship deal with AT&T Wireless.

In anticipation of losing Citgo, an oil company, as the sponsor of Jeff Burton's car. Roush executives have been working the last few months to line up AT&T, one of the team's associate sponsors, to become Burton's primary sponsor next season. Team President Geoff Smith says NASCAR officials have not made it clear to him whether they'll allow the sponsorship.

“We have something in place there,” Smith says. “Whether or not it survives scrutiny, I don't know”

The team might have to find another sponsor for Burton's car, but Smith isn't giving up hope for AT&T: “It may still be a very real opportunity, depending on what the announcement is as to what the rules are”.