



NASCAR Driver Max Papis Happy to be a Contender

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By Rebecca Gladden

Max Papis may be a relative newcomer to NASCAR, but the 41-year-old is one of the most experienced racecar drivers in the world.

Among his accomplishments are two wins in the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona, a Grand Am Championship, and experience in F1, CART, IZOD IndyCar, and the Le Mans racing series. He made the move to NASCAR in 2006 and has competed at the Sprint Cup, Nationwide, and Truck Series levels.

Unfortunately, Papis struggled in Cup last year as pilot of the No. 13 GEICO Toyota for Germain Racing. The team made 18 starts, 11 of which ended in DNFs, and he failed to qualify for five races.

This season, Papis is competing full-time in the Camping World Truck Series, driving the No. 9 GEICO Toyota for Germain. Speaking one-on-one in the Truck Series garage at Phoenix International Raceway Friday, Max told me the decision to move from Cup to trucks was an easy one.

"When GEICO came to me and asked me if I wanted to run for the full championship (in trucks) or run 18 races in Cup, I told them what I really wanted to do was compete full-time. To answer your question, I am really happy where I am. I'm not at all disappointed about not being in Cup. I made a very strategic choice for me to be able to run for the championship."

Though it's not as high-profile as the Sprint Cup Series, Papis says the Truck Series is no less challenging.

"This year is going to be my first full season and it is definitely very competitive. It's a very tough series. You have very experienced people and very young people who want to prove a point. I really enjoy the atmosphere of the Truck Series and the way they go about the sport -- there's a competitive friendship."

In two starts this year, including the Friday race at PIR, Papis has finishes of 12th and 15th and currently ranks 8th in points.

A devoted workout enthusiast, he firmly believes his fitness regimen gives him an advantage on the track.

"I consider myself an athlete, that's for sure. I have a conditioning coach and I work with Chris Carmichael, the coach of Lance Armstrong. I am always taking care of my physical fitness because I feel that that's my engine and that gives me an edge, definitely, when I'm out there in the truck. I know that I have an edge on most everyone here in this garage because I've been taking care of my body. I lift weights, I ride (a bike) over a couple of hundred miles a week, and I go to the gym twice for very specific training. I believe that has kept me young and kept me motivated and kept me strong so far."

What would Papis say to critics who claim that NASCAR drivers aren't athletes?

"I would say that some are not athletes. I don't know the percentage of it, but you can definitely tell when you look at the fire suit and how wide their belt is," he laughed. More seriously, he added, "I feel that whoever says racing is not a sport and racecar drivers are not athletes, I might tell them, 'Just come out and follow me on a bike ride or come see if you can lift 240 pounds on the bench like I do.'"

As to his favorite bike paths in Phoenix, Papis said, "Usually, as I tell people, Lance Armstrong doesn't train for the Tour de France at the Tour de France. So, when I'm out here in Phoenix, I don't really bring my bike out here, but I did a couple of years ago when I came here. I went out mountain biking all around the race track and it was really special and I enjoyed it.

"But most of my training, I don't do while I'm at the track. I'm just focusing on doing my job."

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