Written by Nancy Spencer Friday, June 21, 2013 11:52 PM -

#### **Associated Press**

SONOMA, Calif. — The pressure is off Juan Pablo Montoya to win at Sonoma Raceway, where his road course background has created an expectation for him to win every year.

As he inches closer to finally winning on an oval track, the annual stop at the 1.99-mile road course has become less stressful. Montoya has four top-10s in six career starts at Sonoma, where he won his first career Sprint Cup race in 2007.

"We've been running really good on ovals but I'm excited to come here and see how we run," Montoya said Friday. "I think it's exciting to come here because first we've got a shot at a win; worst-case scenario, we can score a lot of points. We've got to make sure we execute and do our things right and see what happens."

Montoya arrived at Sonoma ranked 22nd in the standings, having made a slow climb behind stronger finishes in the last eight races. He's got three top-10 finishes and contended for wins at Richmond and Dover.

He wound up second to Tony Stewart at Dover, where some wondered if the fiery Montoya had mellowed because he didn't put up a fight when Stewart passed him for the win. The common thinking was the old Montoya might have wrecked Stewart to preserve a victory.

"Or old Stewart would have put the old Montoya in the wall. It's a 2-way street," Montoya explained.

But it wasn't a fight worth having with Stewart, who Montoya noted had a much faster car.

Written by Nancy Spencer Friday, June 21, 2013 11:52 PM -

"They told me he was coming on the bottom and he was making time on the bottom," Montoya said. "All I can do is go by what I know. Yeah, I could have been more aggressive maybe for a corner, but I know if I would have moved up, with the way my car was driving, he would have cleared me on the bottom. If I would have blocked him and tried to run high, the way my car was driving, his car would have passed me halfway through the corner like no problem. I knew my best chance was try to come off the corner as good as I could. That's all I could do.

"I'm like 'I can either wreck here trying to protect that when I know I'm not good enough right now and take second and go home happy, or I can finish 30th with two laps to go.' I decided to take the smarter way."

That doesn't mean Montoya doesn't want to win. He admitted Friday he's starving for a victory — the last of his two career Sprint Cup wins was in 2010 at Watkins Glen — but is focusing on making the 12-driver Chase for the Sprint Cup Championship field.

"It's hard because I think we're still in a position where we can make it on points, top 10," Montoya added. "I want to win badly but I want to make the Chase even more badly. We've got to take chances to win but we've got to take more chances to score big."

## **Hunter-Reay closes in on Castroneves**

NEWTON, Iowa — Last season, Ryan Hunter-Reay strung together back-to-back wins at Milwaukee and Iowa during a stretch that was crucial in clinching his first IndyCar Series title.

If Hunter-Reay can repeat the Milwaukee-lowa sweep again this weekend, the defending champion could find himself back in first place in the points chase.

Hunter-Reay heads into Sunday's race at Iowa Speedway in fantastic form. The win at the Milwaukee Mile last week was Hunter-Reay's fourth podium finish in five races and he's now just 16 points behind series leader Helio Castroneves.

Written by Nancy Spencer Friday, June 21, 2013 11:52 PM -

"Knowing that the potential is there is probably the biggest pressure that you can have. That you know you can get it done if you and the team just operate to your full potential," Hunter-Reay said. "We'll see. We know it's going to be challenging because there's other teams that have progressed this year and have improved, so we'll go out there, look at what we did last year and try and make it better this year."

In a series that's proven to be unpredictable in 2013, Hunter-Reay has been about as consistent as anyone outside of Castroneves.

He was knocked out twice in his first three events; done in by a bad throttle in the opener in St. Petersburg and by a crash at Long Beach. He then finished just 11th in Sao Paulo after winning the pole.

He sandwiched a win at Birmingham in between the first two incidents to stay within close range of the leaderboard.

In the last five races, the No. 1 Andretti Autosport car has been by far the best one on the circuit.

Hunter-Reay was third at the Indianapolis 500 and second in the first of two races at Belle Isle. He was second at Texas and first in Milwaukee — both ovals like the .875-mile one he'll run this weekend — and he's led laps four times in the last five events.

"Everything," Hunter-Reay replied when asked about what's been going right of late. "Having a steady ride, a solid home, one of the best teams in racing, especially in IndyCar, and just having that support system."

Despite all of his recent success, Hunter-Reay has yet to catch up to Castroneves. That's a tribute to how well the No. 3 Team Penske car has run all season.

Written by Nancy Spencer Friday, June 21, 2013 11:52 PM -

Castroneves is still chasing that elusive first IndyCar title despite over a decade of consistent success. But Castroneves has four podium finishes, including a win at Texas, and he's been in first place for all of June.

"To be honest, it's been a credit to the team," Castroneves said. "Week in and week out, it's the small details that we've focused on."

Still, lowa has been a mystery that neither he nor anyone else at Team Penske has been able to solve.

Even though the Penske cars have routinely come into Iowa Speedway with perhaps the strongest roster in the field and have twice won poles, they've never won a race here in six tries.

Castroneves has been particularly vexed by Iowa. He's started on the front row four times but the best he's been able to do is a runner-up finish in 2010.

"We've led so many laps here," said a chuckling Castroneves. "You can't give up. It wasn't meant to be and hopefully it will be this year."

Part of the problem for Penske has been Andretti Autosport.

Andretti drivers are four for six at Iowa; including three straight winners in Tony Kanaan, Marco Andretti and Hunter-Reay a year ago.

If Hunter-Reay can make it four straight and two in a row for the No. 1 car, he might just leave lowa with the points lead. But Castroneves isn't ready to concede anything yet to the surging Hunter-Reay.

Written by Nancy Spencer Friday, June 21, 2013 11:52 PM -

## **NASCAR's Piquet frustrated with progress**

ELKHART LAKE, Wis. — Nelson Piquet Jr. was surging with confidence after winning the Nationwide race at Road America a year ago, optimistic that his success would lead to a full-time ride in NASCAR's second-tier series.

Now Piquet returns to the scene of his biggest stock-car racing moment still trying to find his footing on the next rung up the ladder.

"Obviously, I'm frustrated with our results," Piquet said Friday. "We're not where I wanted to be."

Piquet, the first Brazilian to win a race in one of NASCAR's major national series and the son of a 3-time Formula One champion, ended up getting the full-time Nationwide ride he was looking for this year. He moved up a level with Turner Scott Motorsports after driving in the third-tier Camping World Truck series full time last year.

He enters today's race a respectable 13th in the Nationwide points standings but has had a pair of races end in wrecks while managing only one top-10 finish — ninth place at Michigan last week.

"I think part of it is because it was a last-minute deal and we had to put a team together very quickly two weeks before Daytona," Piquet explained, which hurts given the level of competitiveness in the series. "Obviously, we're fighting against Cup teams, so I don't think we have the best cars out there, but I think if you get a team that works very well together, we can be competitive sometimes."

It's telling, perhaps, that Piquet's most notable moment this season was his infamous below-the-belt kick to fellow competitor Brian Scott after an altercation at Richmond International Raceway in April.

Written by Nancy Spencer Friday, June 21, 2013 11:52 PM -

If Piquet is to put that ugly moment behind him with another win this weekend, he might have to do it in the rain.

Lightning in the area interrupted the Nationwide practice schedule Friday afternoon — drivers ended up practicing part of the afternoon on rain tires, then changed to slicks as the track dried out — and there is a chance for more showers during today's race at the scenic 4-mile road course in Central Wisconsin.

That brings up the possibility of racing in the rain on specially designed grooved rain tires, something fairly common in other forms of road racing but almost unheard-of in NASCAR beyond a memorable 2008 Nationwide race in Montreal.

AJ Allmendinger said a wet race might be a blast for fans but not so much fun for drivers.

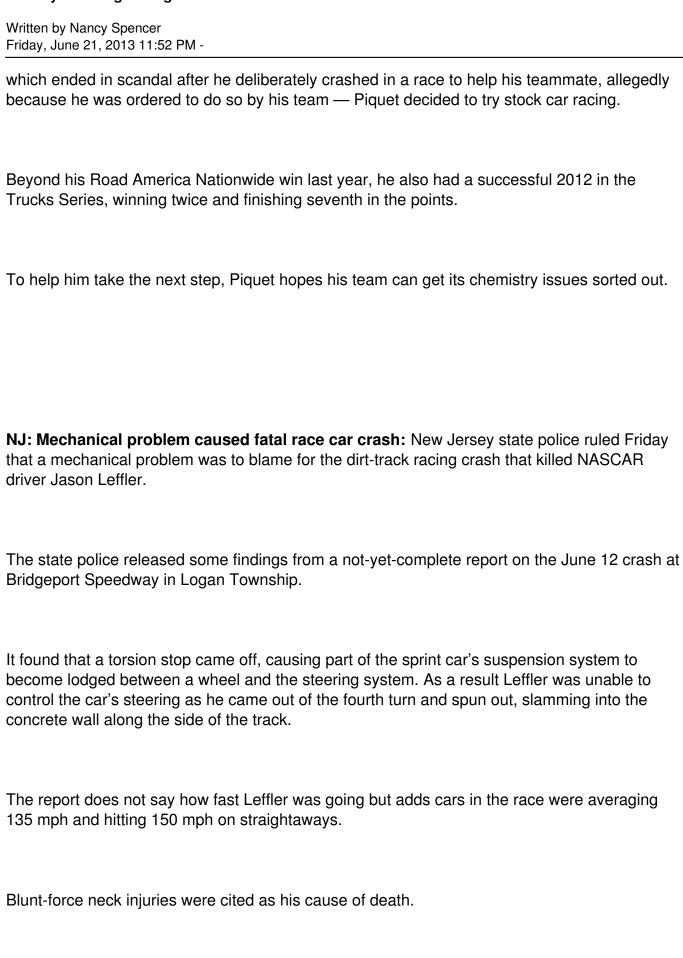
"It'll be entertaining for people to watch because it'll be insane," Allmendinger said.

Michael McDowell has a road-racing background and doesn't mind the idea of driving in the rain but has some concerns about other drivers who don't have experience in wet conditions.

"There's a lot of guys that don't have any experience," McDowell observed, "and because of that, when you have heavy rains and lots of mist and lots of spray coming off the cars and you barrel down into Turn 5 and all the guy sees is a red light, we're going to have a caution every couple of laps."

Added series points leader Regan Smith: "I think, at this point, I'd prefer that it stays dry and don't worry about it. It's tough enough learning a new race track."

After spending most of his career in open-wheel road racing — including a stint in Formula One,



Some racing officials and experts have raised concerns that local dirt tracks do not have the

Written by Nancy Spencer Friday, June 21, 2013 11:52 PM -

advanced safety features of the bigger ovals that host NASCAR events.