

NASCAR's Harvick Visits Luke Air Force Base

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Kevin Harvick hasn't seen the checkered flag in more than two years in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series, but he was a winner Thursday in the eyes of hundreds of airmen at Luke Air Force Base.

Harvick, partially sponsored by the Veteran of Foreign Wars, plays a key role in the Salute to the Military program at Phoenix International Raceway that began four years ago. In Thursday's visit to the base, Harvick answered questions from the fans and signed autographs.

He handled that flawlessly, and now he wouldn't mind a flawless race Saturday night at the Subway Fresh Fit 500 as he tries to move up from 14th place in the standings. But most of his focus on this day was on the moment.

"We've been fortunate to have a relationship with the VFW, and we've been able to do a lot of things like this," said Harvick, also a team owner in the Nationwide and Camping World Truck series.

"Today, it's obviously great to be a part of the people who make it happen for us to live our lives how we're able to live them. So we're all pretty fortunate to live in a country like we do, and to be able to support the people who make the sacrifices to make sure we have that is pretty neat just to be a part of."

Col. Henry Reed was grateful for Harvick's presence and involvement.

"It really connects our airmen in a sport that is generally very, very popular amongst military, so whenever we get the opportunity to have a great driver like Kevin come out and interact with our airmen and their families, sign autographs, talks to their kids and answer questions, it's a great morale boost," he said.

"You add into the fact that PIR and VFW gave us 2,000 tickets for these airmen . . . I'm continually amazed by the outstanding community support that we have here at Luke, and we're blessed to have it."

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PIP President Bryan Sperber said supporting the military and giving back to the community is a common theme of NASCAR: "I can tell you every driver and their teams, in their own way, support the U.S. military even when the cameras aren't there. The entire sport is so proud of the job the U.S. military does, and it's very easy for us to want to do everything that we can to say thank you and support them."

Now Harvick turns his attention to racing. He won consecutive Cup races at PIR in 2006, when he put together a five-victory season. Now he's looking to return to victory lane for the first time since the 2007 Daytona 500.

"This race is a good judge of where everything's at," he said. "The last couple of weeks, the Cup car hasn't been great, but if we don't run good here, we've got a lot of work to do."

"The Nationwide stuff has run good all year, and you come here expecting to run in the top five in both cars, so anything short of that is a disappointment if you leave here and don't have that."

Harvick, who calls PIR "a home away from home (Bakersfield, Calif.)," has raced there frequently. Every year, he said, he puts an X on the schedule for the two races.