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SRT Motorsports: 2013 NASCAR Dodge Charger — Brand Identity Is Back

March 1, 2012, Auburn Hills, Mich. - Yes, NASCAR driver Sam Hornish, Jr, might be a bit partial to the 2013 Dodge Charger that debuts in the Sprint Cup series at the Daytona 500 next year.

But when he's right, he's right: "The car looks the best out of any of the new cars, that's for sure -- nice, sharp lines -- and you can see a lot of the street car in the race car. It brings the Charger's identity back onto the racetrack."

Hornish was the first Dodge driver to test the 2013 Charger, at a closed test earlier this year at the Homestead-Miami Speedway that was attended by all four manufacturers. Over the years, NASCAR race cars -- in the interest of parity and safety -- have strayed farther and farther from the appearance and character of the road-going vehicles they are based on. For a series that originally appealed to manufacturers with a "Race on Sunday, sell on Monday" philosophy, it has been challenging to maintain a level of by-brand enthusiasm when the cars look so similar on the track.

This is especially important to Dodge -- while the current rules in NASCAR prevent much sharing between the street car and race car, Dodge fans remain proud that the Charger street car is the only rear-wheel-drive model in Sprint Cup Series competition that is available with a V-8 engine. .

Soon, the relationship between the Dodge Charger street car and the Dodge Charger NASCAR race car will be unmistakable.

In 2010, NASCAR held a summit with representatives of all four brands. A central issue: Returning brand identity to the cars on the track. The concept was launched full-time for the 2011 racing season in the Nationwide Series, where Dodge debuted the Challenger, which looked very much like the road-going counterpart. "The response was phenomenal," recalls Ralph Gilles, President and CEO of Street & Racing Technology (SRT) Brand, which includes motorsports. "The fans were like. 'Hallelujah, finally, the race cars look a lot like the cars I can buy and drive.'"

Key to the stunning looks of the 2013 NASCAR Dodge Charger is the fact that NASCAR eased the ruling on where manufacturers could put "glass," and where they could put solid body pieces. This freed designers to make the "greenhouse," the area above the doors, hood and trunk lid, to much more closely resemble production cars. Rules were also eased for the front and rear, and especially the sides, allowing for character lines that come directly from the street car.

It is still important for NASCAR to performance-balance all four models, and that is being done in the wind tunnel, as well as on the track.

The new design has invigorated even people within Chrysler Group's performance division, like Mark Trostle, who heads the design team for motorsports, as well as SRT, and who worked on the Nationwide Series Dodge Challenger before the Charger.

Trostle said he found his own interest in Sprint Cup Series racing on the wane in recent years because the cars "did not look much like the car built by the company I worked for. But when I worked on the Challenger program, all of a sudden I became a huge NASCAR fan. I started watching because I could turn on the TV and say, "Hey, there's the Challenger!" I knew right away what it was without having to memorize the car numbers. I feel like we're helping change the feel of the sport and putting design and brand identity back into NASCAR. I think we've taken all the ingredients, and we've done a pretty awesome job with them."

The public debut of the NASCAR 2013 Dodge Charger comes March 11 at 10:30 a.m. in the Neon Garage at Las

Vegas Motor Speedway, just before the green flag falls on the Kobalt Tools 400.

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