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21

Things
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in 2021

A LEGEND IS BORN

Chase Elliott

10

INTRIGUING
PEOPLE
IN NASCAR

2021 PREVIEW

NEW-LOOK NASCAR
New Tracks,
New Layouts

Q&A

Chase Elliott
Austin Cindric
Zane Smith



YUMMY NASCAR

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CONTENT 2021
PREVIEW

16



**THE RISE OF
CHASE ELLIOTT** P.08

**10 INTRIGUING PEOPLE
IN NASCAR** P.30

**RECAPPING
SILLY SEASON** P.40

**NEW TRACKS, NEW
LAYOUTS FOR 2021** P.44

WORLD OF NASCAR

- 02 Green Flag
- 04 NASCAR Hall of Fame
- 06 2021 Schedules
- 14 NASCAR Food Sponsors

- 52 All-Star Race
- 60 2021 eNASCAR Preview
- 62 Driven by Die-Cast
- 64 A Lifetime in NASCAR

XFINITY SERIES

- 54 6 Drivers to Watch
- 55 Q&A with Austin Cindric

CAMPING WORLD TRUCK SERIES

- 56 6 Drivers to Watch
- 58 Q&A with Zane Smith

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Diversity a Goal of 23XI Racing

BY DAN GUTTENPLAN



23XI Racing, the new NASCAR Cup Series team founded by Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin, announced five “founding” sponsors. The signing of DoorDash, McDonald’s, Columbia Sportswear, Dr Pepper and Root Insurance means the team has full funding and has filled the inventory on the No. 23 Toyota for the upcoming season.

Apart from Dr Pepper, the sponsors followed driver Bubba Wallace, who had previously signed personal services

contracts with each of the four companies.

Wallace said the team’s sponsors share his goals of promoting diversity, inclusion and equality and that his talks with the brands are often about “off-track stuff.” The 23XI Racing team said promoting diversity will be a goal internally as well.

The team has been connecting with NASCAR’s Diversity and Inclusion office in order to consider more people of color for positions within the organization. //

DEALS ON WHEELS SPONSORSHIP NEWS

CASTROL BACK WITH RER

ROUSH FENWAY

Racing announced that Castrol, a company that joined the team prior to the 2020 season, has expanded its relationship with Jack Roush’s organization for this season and beyond. In addition to serving as the team’s official oil partner, Castrol will be as a primary sponsor on both Ryan Newman and Chris Buescher’s Cup Series entries in select races. Roush Fenway will continue to run Castrol Motor Oil exclusively in all of its Ford engines.

LLUMAR TO SPONSOR ELLIOTT

EASTMAN

Performance Film has become a primary sponsor of NASCAR Cup Series champion Chase Elliott and the No. 9 Chevrolet Camaro team after extending its relationship with Hendrick Motorsports for three years.

The sponsorship, which features the LLumar brand of window film and paint protection film, will run through 2023. LLumar will be a primary sponsor of Elliott for two races each season and a major associate sponsor in all other Cup Series events.

FREE STREAMING CONTENT

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MotorTrend have teamed up to provide race fans with a free, one-year subscription to the MotorTrend App, the subscription streaming service dedicated to exclusive motorsports content. Fans who are eligible include those who purchased tickets to 2019 or 2020 NASCAR Cup Series, Xfinity Series or Camping World Truck Series events at NASCAR-owned tracks.

The MotorTrend App is available on media players and streaming devices, including Amazon FireTV, Apple TV, Roku, Google Chromecast, as well as on the web and mobile devices.

THE FAVORITES

ACCORDING TO THE GAMBLING SITE, BetOnline.com, Kevin Harvick is the early favorite to win the 2021 NASCAR Cup Series Championship. Here are the odds for the top drivers:

5/1	Kevin Harvick
7/1	Chase Elliott
7/1	Denny Hamlin
7/1	Joey Logano
7/1	Kyle Busch
8/1	Brad Keselowski
12/1	Martin Truex Jr
16/1	Kyle Larson



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NASCAR HALL OF FAME

HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES MUST WAIT

BY DAN GUTTENPLAN

The NASCAR Hall of Fame has postponed the induction ceremony for its Class of 2021. The decision was made in partnership with NASCAR in consideration of the ongoing uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ceremony was set to take place Feb. 5, but is now tentatively slated for early 2022.

The Class of 2021 consists of Dale Earnhardt, Jr., Red Farmer, the late Mike Stefanik and Landmark Award recipient Ralph Seagraves.

The new date for the Class of 2021 induction ceremony will be announced sometime this summer. In addition, events celebrating both the Class of 2020 and Class of 2021 are hopeful for later this year.

The Class of 2020 exhibit in the museum's Hall of Honor will remain on display until the Class of 2021 is enshrined. The NASCAR Hall of Fame reopened to the public last fall with enhanced safety measures following six months of closure due to COVID-19 restrictions.

THE CLASS OF 2021



DALE EARNHARDT JR.

EARNHARDT JR., WHO retired from full-time racing in 2017, was voted NASCAR's Most Popular Driver 15 times. He earned 26 wins and 260 top-10 finishes in 631 Cup Series races. He also claimed two Xfinity Series championships (1998 and '99) during a NASCAR career that began in 1996. He becomes the second Earnhardt voted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame after his father, seven-time Cup Series champion Dale Earnhardt, was inducted in 2010 in the Hall's first class.



RED FARMER

FARMER WAS A THREE-time NASCAR Late Model Sportsman champion and the 1956 Modified champ. A resident of Hueytown, Alabama, he gained fame along with Bobby and Donnie Allison as members of the "Alabama Gang." Farmer served as the NASCAR Xfinity Series crew chief for Hall of Famer Davey Allison and won an ARCA race at Talladega Superspeedway in 1988 driving a car owned by Davey Allison. At age 88, he is still active as a driver.



MIKE STEFANIK

STEFANIK, ON THE BALLOT since 2015, made a name for himself with immense success in the NASCAR Whelen Modified tour. In 453 races dating back to his tour debut in 1985, Stefanik recorded 74 victories and 301 top-10 finishes. He earned his first of seven series championships in 1989 and also claimed a pair of ARCA Menards Series East titles during the late 1990s. Stefanik was killed on Sept. 15, 2019, in a private plane crash.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



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2021 SCHEDULES

NASCAR CUP SERIES

Tuesday, Feb. 9	Busch Clash at Daytona
Thursday, Feb. 11	Duels at Daytona
Sunday, Feb. 14	Daytona 500
Sunday, Feb. 21	Daytona International Speedway Road Course
Sunday, Feb. 28	Homestead-Miami Speedway
Sunday, March 7	Las Vegas Motor Speedway
Sunday, March 14	Phoenix Raceway
Sunday, March 21	Atlanta Motor Speedway
Sunday, March 28	Bristol Motor Speedway
Saturday, April 10	Martinsville Speedway
Sunday, April 18	Richmond Raceway
Sunday, April 25	Talladega Superspeedway
Sunday, May 2	Kansas Speedway
Sunday, May 9	Darlington Raceway
Sunday, May 16	Dover International Speedway
Sunday, May 23	Circuit of The Americas
Sunday, May 30	Charlotte Motor Speedway
Sunday, June 6	Sonoma Raceway
Sunday, June 13	Texas Motor Speedway -- All-Star Race
Sunday, June 20	Nashville Superspeedway
Saturday, June 26	Pocono Raceway
Sunday, June 27	Pocono Raceway
Sunday, July 4	Road America
Sunday, July 11	Atlanta Motor Speedway
Sunday, July 18	New Hampshire Motor Speedway
Sunday, Aug. 8	Watkins Glen International
Sunday, Aug. 15	Indianapolis Motor Speedway Road Course
Sunday, Aug. 22	Michigan International Speedway
Saturday, Aug. 28	Daytona International Speedway
Sunday, Sept. 5	Darlington Raceway
Saturday, Sept. 11	Richmond Raceway
Saturday, Sept. 18	Bristol Motor Speedway
Sunday, Sept. 26	Las Vegas Motor Speedway
Sunday, Oct. 3	Talladega Superspeedway
Sunday, Oct. 10	Charlotte Motor Speedway ROVAL
Sunday, Oct. 17	Texas Motor Speedway
Sunday, Oct. 24	Kansas Speedway
Sunday, Oct. 31	Martinsville Speedway
Sunday, Nov. 7	Phoenix Raceway



XFINITY SERIES

Saturday, Feb. 13	Daytona International Speedway
Saturday, Feb. 20	Daytona International Speedway Road Course
Saturday, Feb. 27	Homestead-Miami Speedway
Saturday, March 6	Las Vegas Motor Speedway
Saturday, March 13	Phoenix Raceway
Saturday, March 20	Atlanta Motor Speedway
Friday, April 9	Martinsville Speedway
Saturday, April 24	Talladega Superspeedway
Saturday, May 8	Darlington Raceway
Saturday, May 15	Dover International Speedway
Saturday, May 22	Circuit of The Americas
Saturday, May 29	Charlotte Motor Speedway
Saturday, June 5	Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course
Saturday, June 12	Texas Motor Speedway
Saturday, June 19	Nashville Superspeedway
Sunday, June 27	Pocono Raceway
Saturday, July 3	Road America
Saturday, July 10	Atlanta Motor Speedway
Saturday, July 17	New Hampshire Motor Speedway
Saturday, Aug. 7	Watkins Glen International
Saturday, Aug. 14	Indianapolis Motor Speedway Road Course
Saturday, Aug. 21	Michigan International Speedway
Saturday, Aug. 27	Daytona International Speedway
Saturday, Sept. 4	Darlington Raceway
Saturday, Sept. 11	Richmond Raceway
Friday, Sept. 17	Bristol Motor Speedway
Saturday, Sept. 25	Las Vegas Motor Speedway
Saturday, Oct. 2	Talladega Superspeedway
Saturday, Oct. 9	Charlotte Motor Speedway ROVAL
Saturday, Oct. 16	Texas Motor Speedway
Saturday, Oct. 23	Kansas Speedway
Saturday, Oct. 30	Martinsville Speedway
Saturday, Nov. 6	Phoenix Raceway



CAMPING WORLD TRUCK SERIES

Friday, Feb. 12	Daytona International Speedway
Friday, Feb. 19	Daytona International Speedway Road Course
Friday, March 5	Las Vegas Motor Speedway
Saturday, March 20	Atlanta Motor Speedway
Saturday, March 27	Bristol Motor Speedway
Saturday, April 17	Richmond Raceway
Saturday, May 1	Kansas Speedway
Friday, May 7	Darlington Raceway
Saturday, May 22	Circuit of The Americas
Friday, May 28	Charlotte Motor Speedway
Saturday, June 12	Texas Motor Speedway
Friday, June 18	Nashville Superspeedway
Saturday, June 26	Pocono Speedway
Friday, July 9	Knoxville Raceway
Saturday, Aug. 7	Watkins Glen International
Friday, Aug. 20	World Wide Technology Raceway at Gateway
Sunday, Sept. 5	Canadian Tire Motorsport Park
Thursday, Sept. 16	Bristol Motor Speedway
Friday, Sept. 24	Las Vegas Motor Speedway
Saturday, Oct. 2	Talladega Superspeedway
Saturday, Oct. 30	Martinsville Speedway
Friday, Nov. 5	Phoenix Raceway

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The Rise of Chase Elliott

**RICK HENDRICK'S GUTSY
DECISION PAYS OFF**

BY JARED TURNER

■■ All you can dream for is an opportunity, and I've been very fortunate to have that over the years – and that's all thanks to some great people.

—CHASE ELLIOTT



When Rick Hendrick decided a decade ago to sign Chase Elliott as a Hendrick Motorsports development driver, many observers considered it a gutsy decision by the veteran team owner.

While most people were aware of Elliott's rich racing pedigree as the son of 1988 NASCAR Cup Series champion Bill Elliott, it was still quite a bold move to commit to a driver who, at 14 years old, wasn't even yet eligible for his learner's permit.

But Hendrick, who at the time was already a Cup Series champion team owner many times over, trusted his gut instincts about pursuing the second-generation driver from Dawsonville, Georgia – regardless of popular opinion.

"I won't name any names at our company, but I think a lot of people thought I was nuts," Hendrick said in November 2020, about an hour after Elliott captured his first championship at NASCAR's premier level.

"Actually, (fellow team owner) James Finch told me, 'Have you seen Chase Elliott drive?' And I said, 'No.' He said, 'Man, he's whipping all these guys on dirt tracks.' So, I started getting some videos, and then I called Bill, and they came down, and we talked."

That conversation convinced Hendrick that he needed to bring Elliott into the fold before another team swooped in and convinced the youngster to ink a contract as a development driver.

"I just watched him in those Late Models and then actually saw one of the races he was racing Kyle Busch," Hendrick recalled. "Just the way Bill raised him and what a polished young guy he was and had a lot of talent; I thought, 'Man, he's just 14 years old, so I sure want to take a chance on him if we can.'"

"You've got to find a guy like that early. I think it was a combination of his skill, pedigree and just being a sharp young man."

Now, some 10 years later, everything that Hendrick believed about Elliott back then has proven true. After a few seasons in NASCAR's developmental series, including two in the NASCAR Xfinity Series where he won the 2014 championship, Elliott joined Hendrick Motorsports as a NASCAR Cup Series rookie in 2016.

After reaching the playoffs but going winless in his first two years in the Cup Series, Elliott took it up a notch with three-win seasons in 2018 and 2019, respectively. Then, in 2020, it all came together for the fifth-year Cup Series

driver as he earned a career-high five victories highlighted by a dramatic come-from-behind win in the season-ending event at Phoenix Raceway where he beat out Joey Logano, Brad Keselowski and Denny Hamlin for NASCAR's biggest prize despite starting at the rear of the field.

"It's unbelievable," Elliott said after winning his first Cup Series title at age 24. "All you can dream for is an opportunity, and I've been very fortunate to have that over the years – and that's all thanks to some great people. My parents, obviously, have played a huge role. Thanks to Mr. Hendrick, for taking a chance on me and believing in me when a lot of people didn't. I think it really says a lot about him."

The scariest part for Elliott's competition heading into the 2021 season? He's barely 25 years old, having celebrated a birthday just three weeks after the 2020 season.

"Chase being as young as he is, has a ton of wisdom and a ton of knowledge, and clearly he's been around the sport for a lot of years and has a lot of great people that he surrounds himself with," said seven-time NASCAR Cup Series champion Jimmie Johnson, Elliott's teammate for the past five seasons at Hendrick Motorsports. "I'm always amazed when we chat just how put together his thoughts are when we do talk. At his age, my head was scrambled, and I was all over the place."

After needing 99 starts to earn his first Cup Series triumph, Elliott has won 10 more times in the 86 outings that have followed. But even when Elliott wasn't winning, he was running well enough to be in the playoffs and contend for victories.

"From the time he showed up, he was ready to win," Elliott's crew chief, Alan Gustafson, said. "The thing that I look back at in the first couple years, there were so many races I felt like we should have won and were in position to win. It's almost like we were keeping ourselves from winning or obsessing over too much and not just being natural and doing what we know we can do and execute and just have confidence and trust in ourselves."

"That's what I see that's changed. I think he now trusts in his ability, and he is very decisive. And he doesn't second-guess himself, and he doesn't race not to lose, but he races to win." //

NASCAR's Most Popular Driver

BY JARED TURNER

Along with being the reigning NASCAR Cup Series champion for his performance on the race track, Chase Elliott is also NASCAR's resident king of the hill when it comes to popularity.

Following each of the three seasons since Dale Earnhardt Jr. retired from full-time racing at the end of 2017, Elliott has been named NASCAR's Most Popular Driver by way of fan voting.

His most recent National Motorsports Press Association Most Popular Driver Award came on the heels of his 2020 title, but the newly minted champ was no less humbled or grateful to be the people's choice.

"I'm grateful for the best fans I could ever ask for," said Elliott, who was formally announced as the award winner during the post-season 2020 NASCAR Awards Show.

"You guys show up every week when you can at the track, on the internet and all of the above, so just thank you, thank you, thank you."

Ironically, the last driver to be named Most Popular Driver and win the championship in the same year was Chase's father, Bill Elliott, who pulled off the rare feat in 1988. Bill Elliott – a 2015 NASCAR Hall of Fame

inductee who scored 40 victories at NASCAR's highest level – was voted most popular a record 16 times before Dale Earnhardt Jr. seized the mantle for 15 consecutive seasons. The only other NMPA Most Popular Driver Award recipients since 1984 have been Darrell Waltrip (twice) and Dale Earnhardt (once, posthumously).

Earnhardt Jr. considers Chase Elliott highly deserving of the honor, which he is likely to keep for many years and perhaps even a couple of decades to come, especially if he continues to pile up wins and adds more championships.

"Him being the champion, being the Most Popular Driver in our sport and also being a champion is nothing but good for NASCAR going forward," Earnhardt Jr. said in a December interview with CBS Sports.

Earnhardt Jr. was Elliott's teammate for two years at Hendrick Motorsports and served as Elliott's team owner for two years at JR Motorsports when Elliott competed in the NASCAR Xfinity Series. Earnhardt Jr., now an announcer for NASCAR on NBC, couldn't have been any more pleased to see Elliott ascend NASCAR's highest mountain – where he could stay for a while.

"Chase is such a humble, genuine, down-to-earth, mild-mannered guy," Earnhardt Jr. told CBS Sports. "Typically, you know, the good guy doesn't win, the nice guys don't always finish first kind of thing. So, I was happy for him."

6 Major Moments in Chase Elliott's Life



THE BIGGEST BREAK OF CHASE

Elliott's career arguably came in 2011 when – at the tender age of 14 – he became a Hendrick Motorsports development driver and made his full-time debut in what is now the ARCA East Series. The next year, he captured his first NASCAR victory at Iowa Speedway on May 19, 2012.



ON THE HEELS OF BECOMING THE YOUNGEST

winner of a NASCAR national series race with his victory in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series event at Canadian Tire Motorsport Park on Sept. 1, 2013, Elliott took the next major step in his career when JR Motorsports announced he would race full time in the NASCAR Xfinity Series for the organization co-owned by Dale Earnhardt Jr. in 2014.



DESPITE FACING A MUCH HIGHER

level of competition, Elliott wasted no time getting up to speed in the Xfinity Series as he captured the championship in his first year in NASCAR's No. 2 division. Along the way, the second-generation driver picked up three wins and rookie-of-the-year honors in his JR Motorsports Chevrolet.



AFTER TWO HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL SEASONS in the NASCAR Xfinity Series where he came up just short of earning back-to-back titles, Elliott was tabbed to race full time in the NASCAR Cup Series for Hendrick Motorsports in 2016. Elliott started out in the No. 24 car, sporting the iconic number made famous by Jeff Gordon, but switched to No. 9 – Bill Elliott's old number – beginning in 2018.



IT TOOK 99 STARTS, BUT ELLIOTT FINALLY scored NASCAR Cup Series career victory No. 1 on Aug. 5, 2018, at Watkins Glen International. With his father in attendance, Elliott drove his No. 9 Chevrolet to a commanding triumph on the 2.45-mile road course as he led 52 of 90 laps and took the checkered flag more than 7.5 seconds ahead of runner-up Martin Truex Jr.



PUTTING AN EXCLAMATION POINT ON WHAT turned out to be by far his best season to date, Elliott won the 2020 finale at Phoenix Raceway in convincing fashion to claim his first NASCAR Cup Series championship in just his fifth season at the sport's top level. Elliott finished the year with a career-high five wins and 1,247 laps led – more than double the number he had led in any previous Cup Series campaign.



CHASE ELLIOTT

Going for Two Titles in a Row

BY JOSEPH WOLKIN

At just 24 years of age, Chase Elliott is one of the youngest champions in NASCAR's premier division.

His championship was no surprise, however, to those who followed the second-generation Georgia racer throughout his teenage years, as Elliott often dominated the competition in the late model ranks and then followed suit in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series and NASCAR Xfinity Series.

When Hendrick Motorsports announced Elliott would replace Jeff Gordon behind the wheel of the famed No. 24 Chevrolet, it was only a matter of time before he would follow in the four-time champion's footsteps. While it took Elliott two and a half years to score his first Cup Series victory, he's been getting better each year, culminating with the 2020 NASCAR Cup Series crown.

What's it like to be a NASCAR Cup Series champion?

It's been amazing. It was a whirlwind to be part of the Championship 4. It was a big deal as is, and it's been wild since. I had a very fun couple of days at home, enjoying all of this. I'm looking forward to having some great photos for many years.

Jeff Gordon couldn't be at Phoenix to celebrate with you, but what was your first conversation like with him after the championship?

He was so excited. Jeff has a role at HMS. He's been vocal and he's had a hand in our improvements. He's as proud as anybody. I'm glad he's on our side. Jeff has a lot of wisdom. He's been around for a long time. He's a good one to have in your corner, and I've been lucky to have him. He's always around in meetings, and he's become a great friend of mine.

How important is your relationship with NAPA Auto Parts as you've developed your career?

That relationship, in my opinion, defined my career. They came in at a time when I was going to run six races or a full season of Xfinity. It became a championship season with the way it all worked out. Without them, I'm not sure something happens.

What do you want to accomplish moving forward now that you're a champion?

I just want to win more races. I feel like winning races and winning them consistently is going to open opportunities. Guys who have that ability, do it often and are consistent in it are the ones you see have success for years and years. //

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Tantalizing the Taste Buds

BY ROB TIONGSON

In all honesty, food and sports are as synonymous and apropos as NASCAR stock cars with Goodyear tires and Sunoco gasoline. Through the years, NASCAR has seen some rather delicious sponsors. With this in mind, let's look back at five NASCAR sponsors that tantalized our taste buds during the 2020 racing season:



**MICHAEL ANNETT
NO. 1 OREO CHEVY CAMARO**

Paying homage to the car Dale Earnhardt Jr. drove to victory in the 2002 NASCAR Xfinity Series opener at Daytona, Annett scored a slam dunk with his No. 1 Oreo Chevrolet at Darlington. Moreover, Annett's fire suit perfectly replicated Earnhardt's from the 2002 season. Placing a respectable eighth at Darlington, one could say it was like having cookies and cream.



**J.J. YELEY
NO. 27 FATBOY CHEVY CAMARO**

If Harry Hogge from the movie *Days of Thunder* doesn't remind you to have ice cream on race day, Yeley's car likely did during the 2020 season. Driving this No. 27 FatBoy Chevrolet Camaro in select races, it's safe to say Yeley didn't need to chase his crew chief for ice cream like Cole Trickle did in the movie.



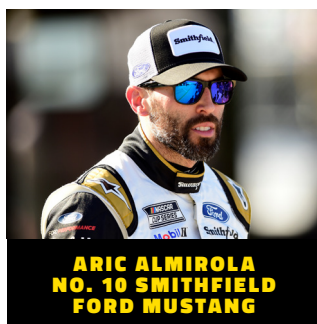
**DAVID STARR'S NO. 6
WHATABURGER
CHEVROLET CAMARO**

WHEN THE 2020 NASCAR XFINITY Series season kicked off at Daytona, David Starr showcased some local Texas flavor with this No. 6 Whataburger Chevrolet Camaro. While orange may not be the first color that comes to mind for fast food restaurants, it's the color synonymous with this regional chain along with the familiar white stripes. After Starr took a solid top-20 finish for JD Motorsports' entry, one must wonder if fries go with that car?



**KYLE BUSCH
NO. 18 M&M'S
TOYOTA CAMRY**

WHILE BUSCH DIDN'T HAVE TO change much on his fire suit at Darlington, his No. 18 Toyota Camry appeared to travel back to 2004. Throwing it back to Elliott Sadler's rendition of the M&M's ride, Busch drove to a solid seventh-place finish in the Southern 500, proving 2004 still has great tricks up its proverbial sleeve.



**ARIC ALMIROLA
NO. 10 SMITHFIELD
FORD MUSTANG**

SEEING THESE UNMISTAKABLE white, gold and black colors likely reminds grocery-store goers of Almirola's No. 10 Smithfield Ford Mustang. More than that, who doesn't enjoy the smell of delicious bacon cooking on a George Foreman grill? Hopefully, no one clamps their foot on this practical device like Dundler-Mifflin's former boss, Michael Scott, did in 2005 on *The Office*.



**RYAN PREECE
NO. 37 HONEY NUT
CHEERIOS CHEVY CAMARO**

IF BREAKFAST TRULY IS THE most important meal of the day, Preece made sure race fans appreciated this fact with a sweet paint scheme. Driving this special No. 37 Honey Nut Cheerios ride last year at Michigan and Phoenix, Preece made Buzz the Bee quite happy with finishes of 16th and 34th.



**MATT KENSETH
NO. 42 MCDONALD'S
CHEVY CAMARO**

SPORTING THE FAMOUS Golden Arches in various races last season, Kenseth drove this distinct red-and-gold paint scheme to a runner-up finish in the Brickyard 400. During the pandemic, Kenseth likely didn't help most race fans' cause for dieting with this unique livery that featured ketchup and fries on the sides of the No. 42 car.

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21 THINGS TO WATCH IN 2021

With the dawn of another NASCAR season, it's hard to make many bold predictions. If 2020 taught us anything, it's that it's impossible to anticipate the kinds of twists and turns that might occur over the course of a lengthy NASCAR campaign (who would have ever thought a global pandemic would shake up the 2020 schedule and put the season on hold for two months?). Even with all the uncertainty, here are 21 things to watch for in 2021:

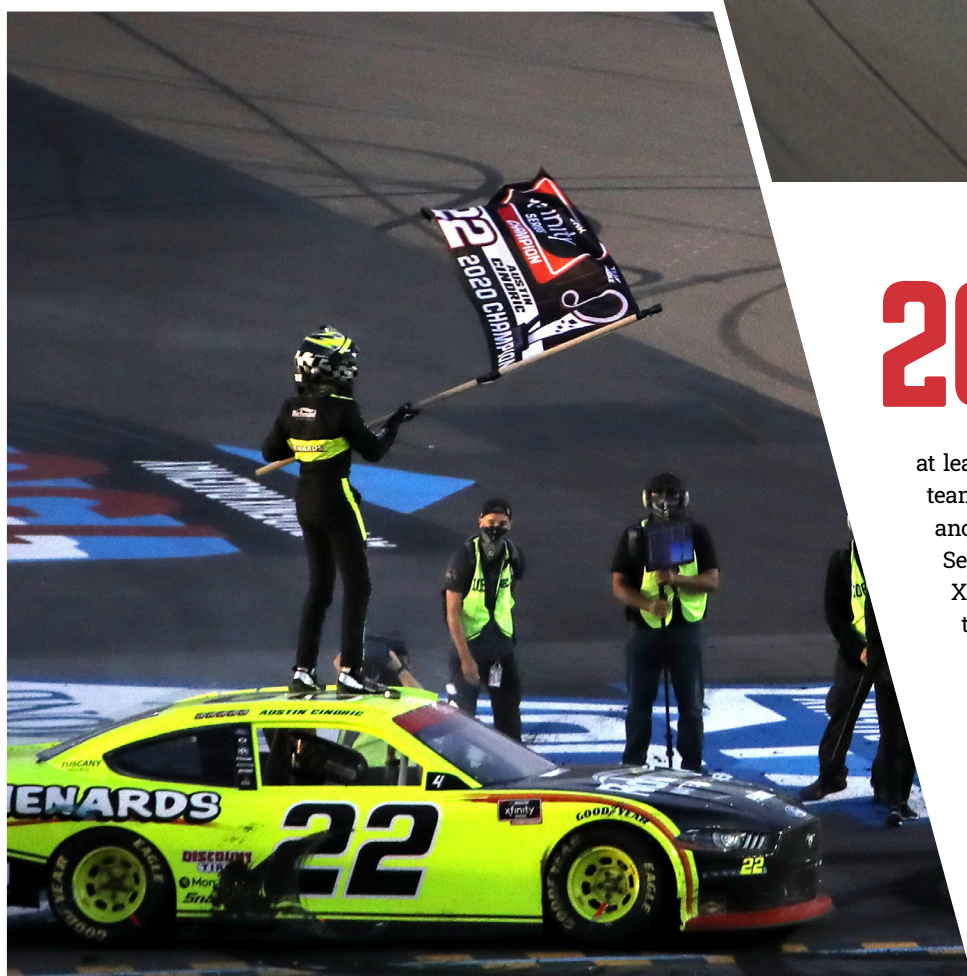
BY JARED TURNER

21 A WIDE OPEN BATTLE FOR TRUCK SERIES SUPREMACY

The battle for the 2020 NASCAR Camping World Truck Series championship ended on a surprising note, with three-time and reigning series champion Matt Crafton failing to reach the Championship 4 while largely unproven youngster Sheldon Creed took the title on the strength of five victories in just his second full Truck Series season.

Look for this year's championship fight to likewise be wide open, especially with 2020 NASCAR Cup Series rookie and former Truck Series standout John Hunter Nemechek returning to the truck ranks for a full season with the powerhouse Kyle Busch Motorsports organization.

"John Hunter is a proven winner in the Camping World Truck Series, as well as the Xfinity Series, and someone who we are confident will be able to put the No. 4 Tundra up front," team owner Kyle Busch said.



20 AUSTIN CINDRIC'S XFINITY SERIES ENCORE

While it used to be common for a reigning NASCAR Xfinity Series champion to spend at least one additional year in the division with the same team in hopes of gaining more experience and collecting another series title before jumping to the NASCAR Cup Series, the more recent trend has been for newly minted Xfinity Series champs to immediately bolt to NASCAR's top level.

That isn't happening this year, however, as 2020 Xfinity Series champ Austin Cindric is back in NASCAR's No. 2 division for another full season before graduating to the Cup Series level in 2022.

While Cindric is admittedly eager to make the jump, he's also excited for a third year in the Xfinity Series with Team Penske. Cindric is hoping to become the first Xfinity Series driver since Ricky Stenhouse Jr. in 2011 and 2012 to repeat as series champ with the same team.



19

ONGOING DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEXT GEN CAR

Originally set to debut this year, the rollout of the Next

Gen NASCAR Cup Series car was pushed back a year due to scheduling challenges related to COVID-19. Now scheduled to make its official debut in the 2022 Daytona 500, the Next Gen car will be the first new generation race car for NASCAR's premier series since the debut of the Gen-6 model in 2013.

Development of the Next Gen machine is ongoing, with one of the most recent on-track tests having occurred in mid-December at Daytona.

"We played with a lot of horsepower levels and drag levels to hit our target speed, which we were able to do pretty easily," said John Probst, NASCAR senior vice president of racing innovation. "Nothing surprising, and all good as far as the development of the car."

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18

POSSIBLE RETIREMENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

While Kurt Busch, Ryan Newman and Kevin Harvick have no intention of retiring from NASCAR any time soon, the proverbial clock is ticking on these three veteran drivers.

With Jimmie Johnson's retirement from NASCAR at the end of last season, Harvick – at age 45 – is now the oldest full-time driver in NASCAR's premier division. Newman, at 43, is the second oldest, while Busch, at 42, is the next in line.

With few drivers these days competing past their mid-40s, it seems likely that Harvick, Newman and Busch will all hang it up sooner rather than later. The question, of course, is when these announcements will come and who will be first.

While Harvick is the oldest of the three, he's been by far the most competitive over the last few years, which could delay any retirement plans.



17

THE PROGRESS OF ROOKIE CHASE BRISCOE

The 2020 NASCAR Cup Series season featured a robust rookie class consisting of four drivers: Tyler Reddick, Christopher Bell, Cole Custer and John Hunter Nemechek, who staged a competitive yearlong battle for rookie-of-the-year honors.

No such battle will exist this year, however, as Stewart-Haas Racing newcomer Chase Briscoe is the only full-time driver with rookie status. While it's virtually a foregone conclusion that Briscoe will be rookie of the year, what isn't known is how Briscoe will do in Year One at NASCAR's premier level after a nine-win NASCAR Xfinity Series campaign with SHR in 2020.

Briscoe's new ride is the No. 14 SHR Ford formerly driven by Clint Bowyer.

"Wins are my benchmark, and Chase has done a lot of winning," SHR co-owner Gene Haas said. "His stats alone merit his place in Cup."

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16 MATT DIBENEDETTO'S ONE-SHOT SEASON

It's pretty uncommon for a driver to begin a new season as a lame duck, but that's precisely where Matt DiBenedetto finds himself. After making the playoffs on the basis of points but going winless in his first season with Wood Brothers Racing, DiBenedetto was granted a one-year contract extension, with the caveat that 2020 NASCAR Xfinity Series champion Austin Cindric would be taking over the No. 21 car in 2022.

In other words, no matter how well DiBenedetto does this year, he's going to need a new ride for 2022. Nevertheless, DiBenedetto is thankful to be back in the iconic No. 21 Ford for another season.

"I'm confident that with a full season under our belt and working together as a team, we will produce even better results," DiBenedetto said.

15 CLINT BOWYER'S NEW LIFE IN THE BOOTH

After 15 seasons in NASCAR's premier series, including the last four with Stewart-Haas Racing, Clint Bowyer decided to hang up his helmet at the end of the 2020 season and put on a new hat – that of TV announcer for the NASCAR on FOX portion of the 2021 season.

Bowyer will be joined in the broadcast booth by veteran announcers Mike Joy and Jeff Gordon – one of Bowyer's old rivals on the race track. Bowyer will make his official debut as part of the three-member team with FOX Sports' coverage of the Daytona 500 on Feb. 14.

"Just like my driving career, I will be part of a great team and organization with great teammates," Bowyer said. "To say I'm excited would be an understatement."



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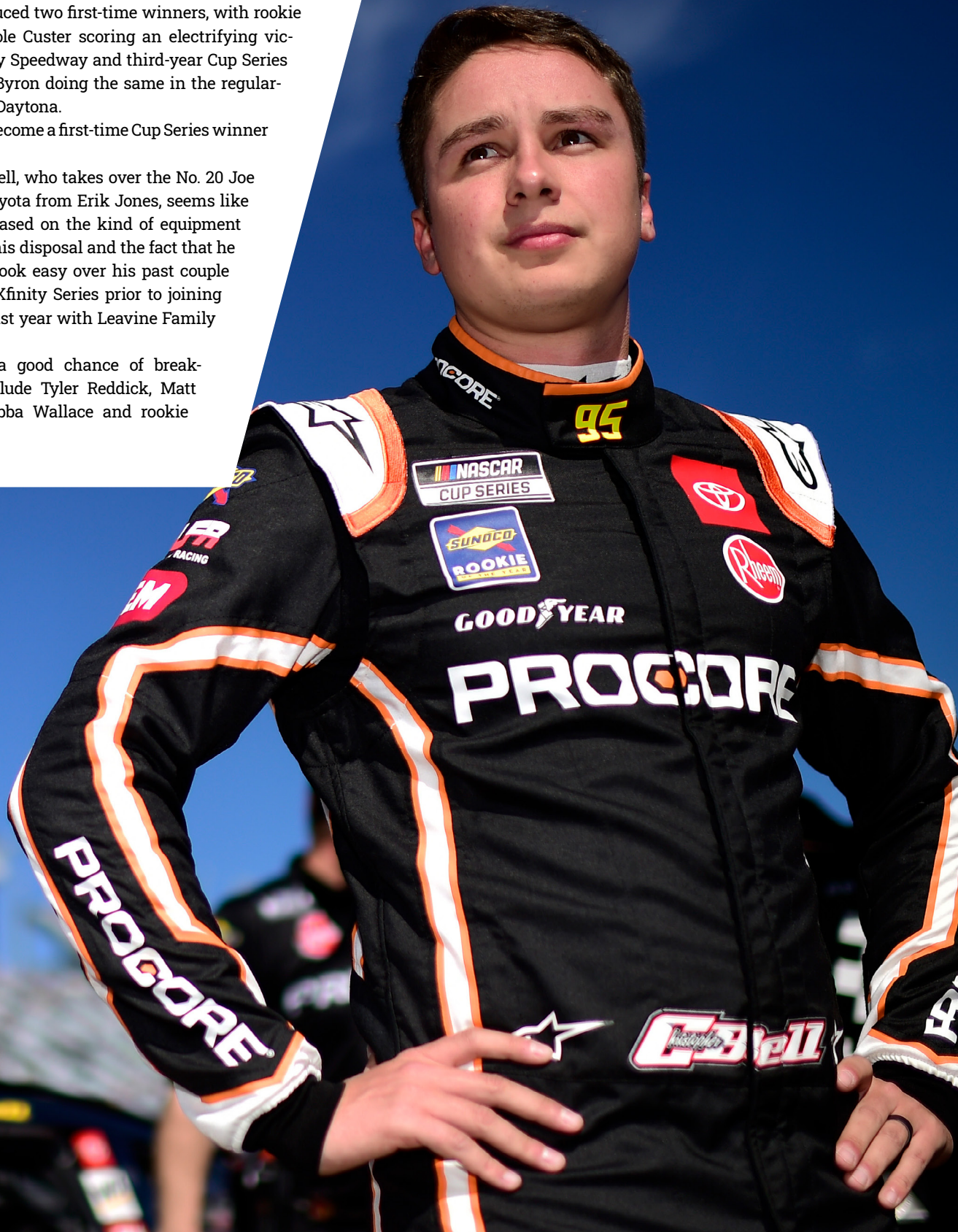
FIRST-TIME WINNERS

The 2020 NASCAR Cup Series season produced two first-time winners, with rookie Cole Custer scoring an electrifying victory at Kentucky Speedway and third-year Cup Series driver William Byron doing the same in the regular-season finale at Daytona.

So, who will become a first-time Cup Series winner in 2021?

Christopher Bell, who takes over the No. 20 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota from Erik Jones, seems like the safest bet, based on the kind of equipment he will have at his disposal and the fact that he made winning look easy over his past couple of years in the Xfinity Series prior to joining the Cup Series last year with Leavine Family Racing.

Others with a good chance of breaking through include Tyler Reddick, Matt DiBenedetto, Bubba Wallace and rookie Chase Briscoe.



13 THE NEW DE FACTO LEADER OF THE CUP GARAGE

Along with being one of the greatest drivers in NASCAR history for all of his success on the race track, Jimmie Johnson was also a leader in the garage area – particularly in the latter years of his career.

For example, it was Johnson who led the way last season in standing with Bubba Wallace on the grid at Talladega Superspeedway after it appeared Wallace had been the victim of a hate crime (which later proved to not be the case). It was after Johnson said he was going to stand beside of Wallace in a show of solidarity and support that everyone else followed.

So, who will carry the leadership torch in Johnson's absence?

If seniority and success mean anything, it will likely be Kevin Harvick. But others, including perhaps reigning series champion Chase Elliott, could step up as well.



12 LIFE WITHOUT FANS OR WITH FEW FANS

With COVID-19 continuing to impact the United States for the foreseeable future, it's unlikely any race tracks will operate at 100 percent capacity this year. However, it remains to be seen exactly how many fans will be permitted at which tracks and whether some tracks will once again be forced to ban attendance altogether.

In 2020, only four of the 36 NASCAR Cup Series races were run without capacity restrictions, with all four coming prior to the widespread arrival of COVID-19 on U.S. shores. As much as drivers prefer to race in front of grandstands that are full, they learned last season that it's possible to put on a good show regardless of how many in-person spectators are watching them.

Expect more of the same this year.

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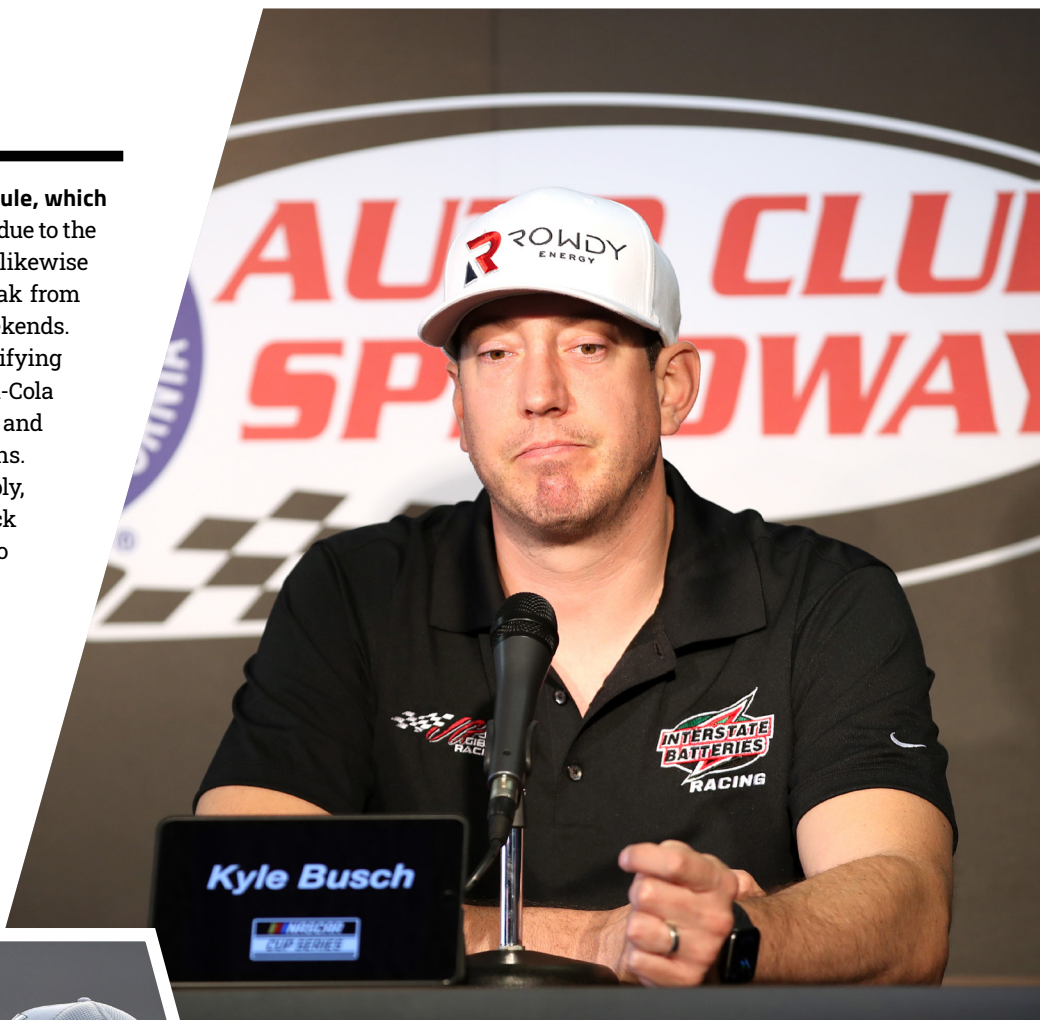
THE IMPACT OF MANY ONE-DAY SHOWS

Much like last season's schedule, which had to be significantly altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the new season will likewise feature numerous one-day shows – a break from the customary two- and three-day race weekends.

The only events that will feature qualifying and practice are the Daytona 500, the Coca-Cola 600, the championship race at Phoenix and those held at new venues and configurations.

Last season, some drivers – most notably, Kyle Busch – voiced criticism about the lack of practice sessions. It will be interesting to see how the continued absence of qualifying and practice at many tracks affects some drivers' attitude and performance.

At the very least, 2020 proved it's possible for NASCAR to have a season without weekly practices and qualifying sessions.



10

A NEW-LOOK HENDRICK MOTORSPORTS

On the heels of a legendary career, seven-time NASCAR Cup Series champion Jimmie Johnson retired from NASCAR at the end of 2020. Replacing him at Hendrick Motorsports is Kyle Larson, but Larson is driving Hendrick's No. 5 car, which hasn't competed for several years.

Meanwhile, Hendrick driver Alex Bowman has moved from the No. 88 to Johnson's old No. 48. William Byron is back in the No. 24 Hendrick Chevy while reigning series champ Chase Elliott returns in the No. 9.

With the addition of 28-year-old Larson and the absence of 45-year-old Johnson, the average age of Hendrick Motorsports' driver lineup is now 26 years old.

"I'm excited about our roster of young talent," team owner Rick Hendrick said. "We have a team that is built to win races and compete for championships for years to come."



9 DENNY HAMLIN'S CONTINUED PURSUIT OF AN ELUSIVE FIRST TITLE

Widely considered one of the best drivers to never win a NASCAR Cup Series championship, Denny Hamlin will take another crack at claiming the sport's most elusive and prestigious prize.

Since NASCAR implemented a season-ending championship race for its top division in 2014, Hamlin has been part of the Championship 4 three times – including in each of the past two seasons. Hamlin finished a career-best runner-up in the standings in 2010 under the old championship format.

"Most people gauge your success level or how good you are off of championships, but I also know that my competitors will probably say that I'm one of the toughest competitors and toughest guys to beat," Hamlin said. "That's all I really care about is having the respect of them."

8 THE M.J. EFFECT

Easily one of the biggest stories of the season will be the success of 23XI Racing, the new team co-owned by Denny Hamlin and basketball legend Michael Jordan. While NASCAR has had a lot of prominent, successful team owners through the years, none has carried a universal reach that compares to that of Jordan – a six-time NBA champion widely considered the greatest basketball player of all time.

"This is obviously very, very big," said Hamlin, who in partnership with Jordan will field Toyotas for driver Bubba Wallace. "It's very ground-breaking in our sport to have this new team come in here and be at the caliber that Michael is, and how big of an icon he is worldwide. It certainly brings a lot of attention."





7 KEVIN HARVICK'S QUEST FOR REDEMPTION

For most of the 2020 NASCAR Cup Series season, Kevin Harvick was rightfully considered the odds-on favorite to walk away with the championship. But, thanks to a rotten string of races in the Round of 8, the Stewart-Haas Racing driver narrowly failed to advance to the Championship 4 and finished a disappointing fifth in the standings.

This happened despite Harvick ending the year with the most wins (nine), the most top-five finishes (20), the most top-10 results (27) and the most laps led (1,531) among all drivers. Harvick's average finish of 7.3 in 2020 was also best among full-time drivers.

Rest assured that Harvick, the 2014 NASCAR Cup Series champion, will do everything in his power this year to atone for his heartbreaking 2020 finish and live up to his old moniker of "The Closer."

6 NEW FACES IN NEW PLACES

The 2020-2021 NASCAR Cup Series Silly Season was full of big movers. Of the four most elite multicar teams – Stewart-Haas Racing, Hendrick Motorsports, Team Penske and Joe Gibbs Racing – only Team Penske will campaign the same lineup of Cup Series drivers in 2021 that it did in 2020.

Rookie Chase Briscoe has replaced Clint Bowyer at SHR, while Kyle Larson has filled the vacancy created by Jimmie Johnson's retirement from Hendrick, and JGR has tabbed Christopher Bell to replace Erik Jones. Matt Kenseth's latest retirement opened up a seat at Chip Ganassi Racing, which has been filled by Ross Chastain.

Bubba Wallace has moved on from Richard Petty Motorsports to the new 23XI Racing team co-owned by Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin, which allowed Jones to take over his old seat – the iconic No. 43 – at Richard Petty Motorsports.



5 KYLE LARSON'S ATTEMPT AT REPUTATION RESTORATION

Considered one of the most promising young drivers in NASCAR, Kyle Larson jeopardized his future in the sport in a serious way with his use of a racial slur while participating in an iRacing event in early 2020.

As a result of his actions, Larson was released from his ride at Chip Ganassi Racing and suspended from NASCAR. But after undergoing racial sensitivity training and requesting to be reinstated by NASCAR late last year, Larson had his request granted.

Shortly thereafter, Hendrick Motorsports announced that Larson would return to full-time Cup Series competition in 2021 as driver of the No. 5 Chevrolet. Larson, who issued a public apology shortly after his use of the racial slur, will spend much of the year looking to fully restore his reputation in the NASCAR community.

How well he is able to do this will be something worth watching.



4 THE IMPACT OF THE NEW DRIVER/ CREW CHIEF PAIRINGS AT JGR

After a drop in overall performance relative to its history-making 2019 season, Joe Gibbs Racing announced a crew chief shakeup for the 2021 NASCAR Cup Series campaign.

While the 2020 crew chiefs for JGR drivers Denny Hamlin and Martin Truex Jr. remain in place, such is not the case for two-time Cup Series champion Kyle Busch, whose crew chief from the past five seasons – Adam Stevens – will now call the shots for JGR newcomer Christopher Bell.

Busch's new pit boss is Ben Beshore, who previously served as engineer for Busch's No. 18 team prior to moving to JGR's Xfinity Series program as a crew chief in 2019. Is Beshore just the spark Busch needs to return to his former dominance after what was a lackluster 2020 by his lofty standards? Will Stevens make Bell an instant contender with JGR? Stay tuned.

3 A NEW CHAPTER FOR BUBBA WALLACE

The 2020 season was a groundbreaking one for Bubba Wallace as the NASCAR Cup Series' only African American driver gained notoriety like never before as he became one of the loudest voices for racial justice, inclusion and equality following the tragic death of Minneapolis resident George Floyd in late May.

Wallace also didn't do anything to hurt himself on the race track, recording a career-best points finish and number of top-10 finishes. His reward was the opportunity to leave Richard Petty Motorsports for a new team, 23XI Racing, that not only has the support of Toyota and famous team owners Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin but also has the backing of several marquee sponsors and a close technical alliance with powerhouse Joe Gibbs Racing.

With all of those factors, Wallace has the best opportunity he's ever had to succeed at NASCAR's premier level.



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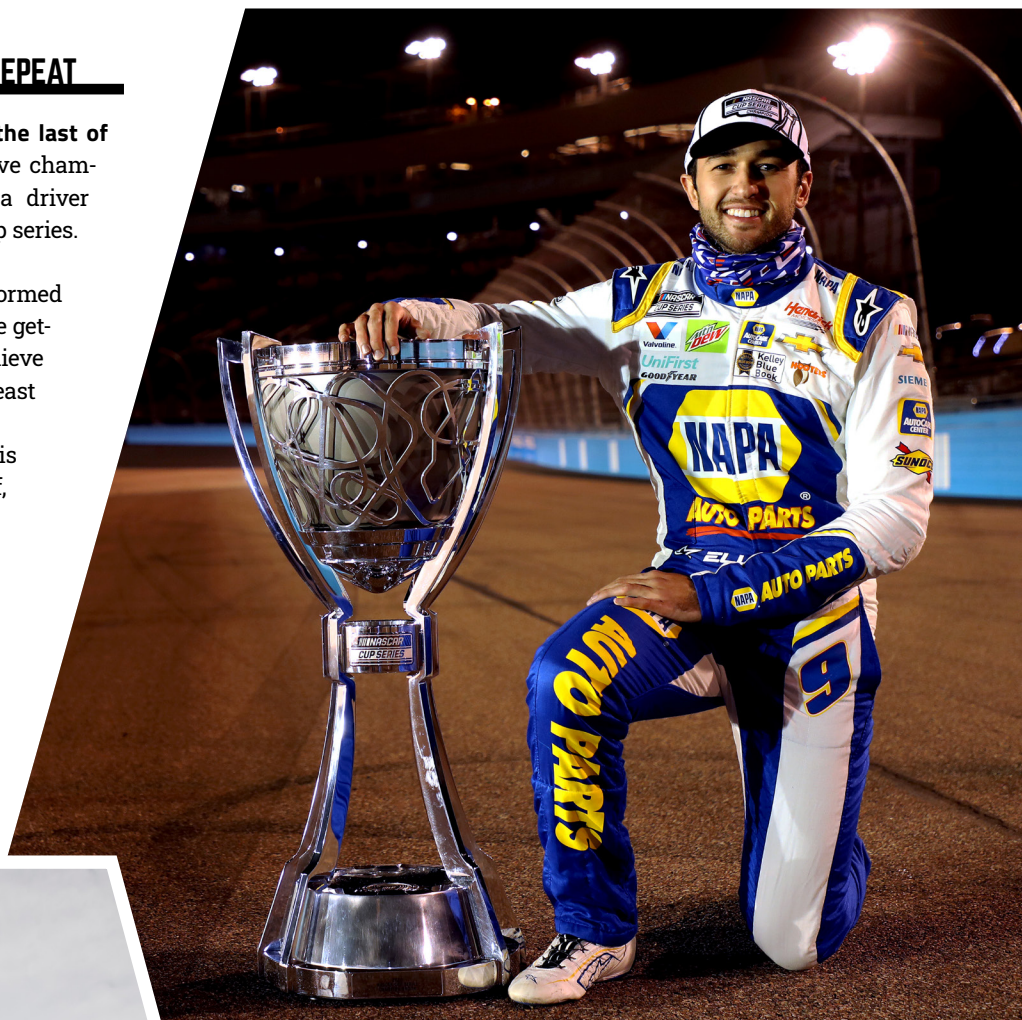
CHASE ELLIOTT'S QUEST TO REPEAT

Not since Jimmie Johnson won the last of his record-setting five consecutive championships from 2006-2010 has a driver captured back-to-back titles in NASCAR's top series. Will it finally happen again in 2021?

Considering how strong Chase Elliott performed in 2020, and considering he only seems to be getting better with time, there's no reason to believe the second-generation driver won't have at least a fighting chance at repeating.

Back with Elliott for this season is his 2020 championship-winning crew chief, Alan Gustafson.

"He's got the intelligence and the experience of someone much older and wiser, so he acts like he's a 35-year-old in his prime," Gustafson said. "He's very similar to the great champions I've worked with before (most notably, Jeff Gordon), and he's going to be every bit as good or better."



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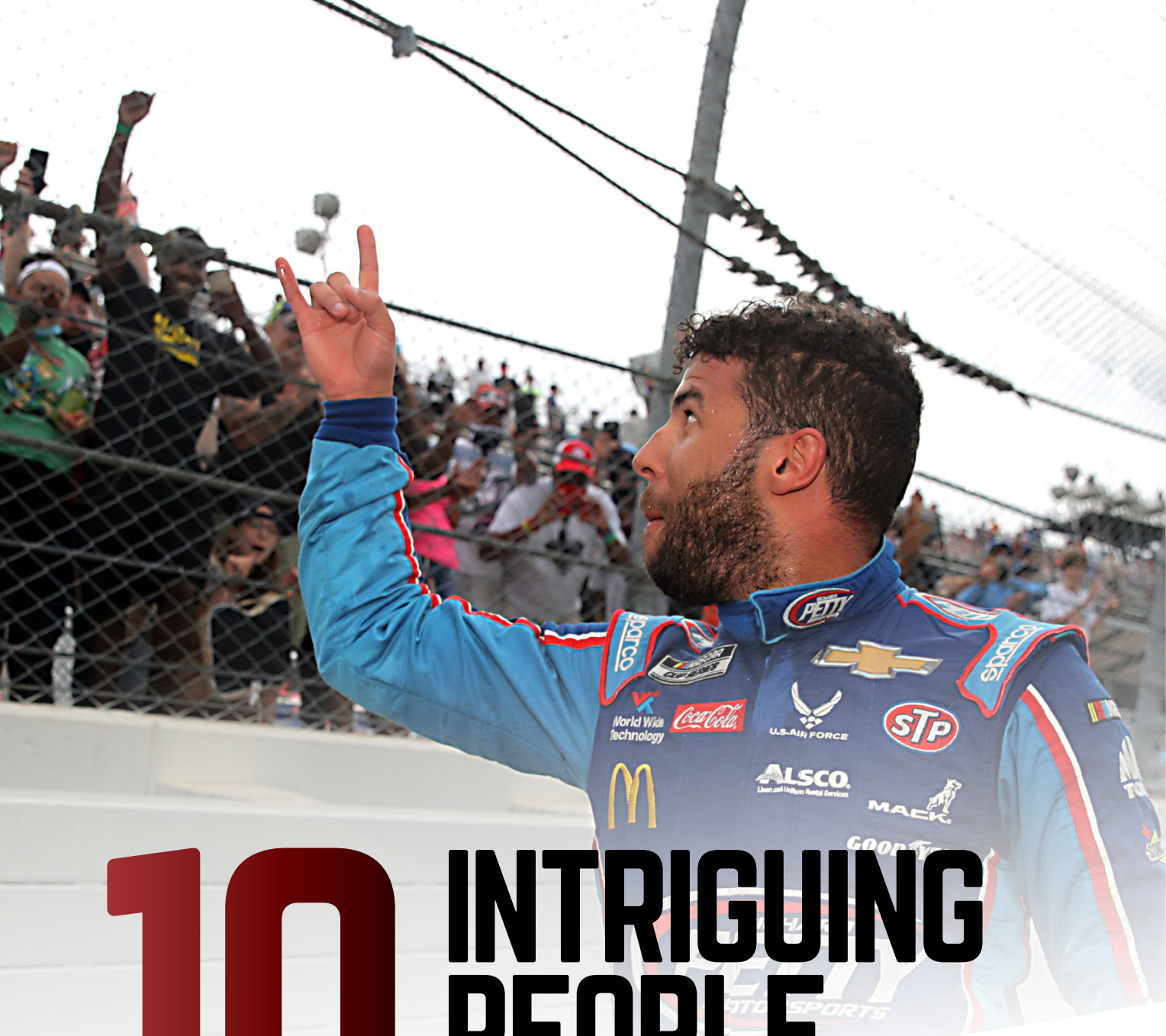
A VASTLY DIFFERENT SCHEDULE

Starting with Week No. 2, which features a race on the Daytona International Speedway road course, the 2021 NASCAR Cup Series schedule looks vastly different than the schedule from recent years.

Gone are Auto Club Speedway, Kentucky Speedway, Chicagoland Speedway and the traditional 2.5-mile Indianapolis Motor Speedway layout. Now on the schedule for the first time are Nashville Superspeedway, Circuit of The Americas, Road America and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway road course.

Rather than hosting two points races, per usual, Texas Motor Speedway will host one points race and the All-Star Race. Bristol Motor Speedway, meanwhile, will be converted to a dirt track for its annual spring race.

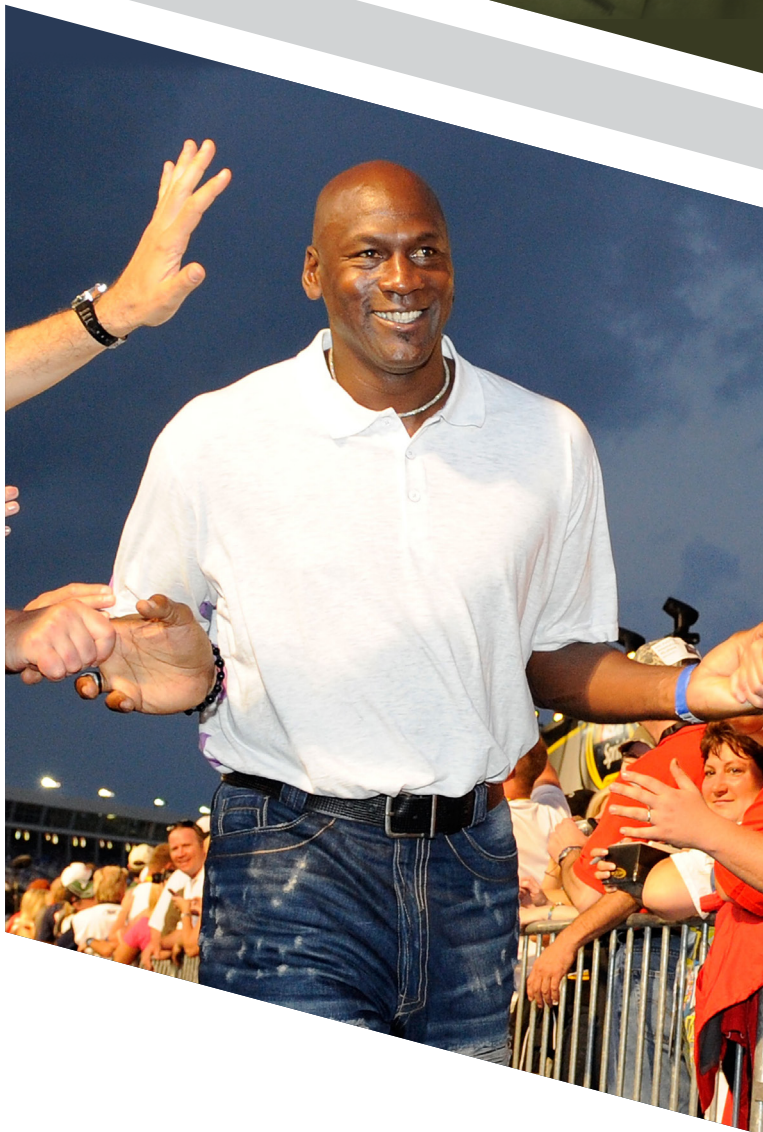
Most noteworthy of all is that a total of seven points-paying road course races are on the schedule – more than in any previous season.



10 INTRIGUING PEOPLE IN NASCAR

The NASCAR universe is comprised of a wide array of professionals who come from different backgrounds and have unique skill sets. Some pack star power and others have crafted a name for themselves behind the scenes. But they all share one thing in common – they all have a passion for NASCAR.

BY ROB TIONGSON



MICHAEL Jordan

Prior to the 2020 NASCAR Cup Series season, the prospects of Michael Jordan getting involved in stock car racing were truly quite remote. After all, the six-time NBA champion and five-time NBA Most Valuable Player is focused on his role as the principal owner of the Charlotte Hornets.

Prior to his tenure as the Hornets' owner, Jordan made his presence known as one of the greatest players to lace up on the hardwood from 1984 to 2001 with respites between 1993-'95 and 1998-'01.

The pride of Wilmington, North Carolina, was the face of the Chicago Bulls with two remarkable and memorable three-peat championships, basically the basketball equivalent of Dale Earnhardt.

Following NASCAR's return from the COVID-19 break and the introduction of the Black Lives Matter movement, Jordan joined his friend and Cup Series stalwart Denny Hamlin to form 23XI Racing.

Jordan's presence in NASCAR is quite remarkable not only with his contributions in the sports world but with his intentions as an authentic Cup Series team co-owner.

The 57-year-old sports icon made it known that he's not fielding this team merely to log laps.

"If you're asking me, I want to win tomorrow as soon as we get on the track," Jordan said. "I know it is a process. It's a process and you're going to have to learn it. But if every step, each day, you move towards winning the day, tomorrow is better than the day yesterday, I have hope."

Jordan and Hamlin recruited Bubba Wallace, a NASCAR Drive for Diversity graduate and the 2018 Daytona 500 runner-up, to drive the No. 23 Toyota Camry. With cars built by Joe Gibbs Racing and veteran crew chief Mike Wheeler at the helm, Jordan is wasting no time toward immediate NASCAR success. //

BRENDAN Droppo

When Brendan Droppo was introduced to NASCAR by his father during his childhood, little did he know that he'd combine his love of art with motorsports.

Developing a passion for art and design as a child, Droppo merged his talents in graphic design with conceptualizing the next paint schemes for NASCAR drivers and teams.

Hailing from Ottawa, Ontario, Droppo, much like the late Sam Bass, captures the thrill of speed, competition and victory in his designs. In fact, Droppo designed paint schemes for Jimmie Johnson's No. 48 car sponsored by Lowe's and Ally, Dale Earnhardt, Jr. and Alex Bowman with the No. 88 Nationwide ride, and Chase Elliott's No. 9 Chevy sponsored by NAPA Auto Parts and Hooters.

Studying graphic design at the Algonquin College of Applied Arts and Technology from 2008 to '11, Droppo's modern approach perfectly fits the designs appearing on various Hendrick Motorsports entries.

For the young Canadian, the memories of attending NASCAR races with his father left a lasting impression in terms of the paint schemes he saw during those years.

"I fell in love with the fact that it was more than just a sports jersey with a number and a color," Droppo said. "I loved how paint schemes changed every year. As a kid, I would dream of seeing my own designs on the track."

After earning one of his first breaks as the paint-scheme designer for Xxxtreme Motorsports' No. 44 car in 2013, Droppo was tasked with designing Johnson's No. 48 Lowe's Chevrolet. To say the least, it was the opportunity of a lifetime that led to more collaborations with Hendrick Motorsports.

"Any time I get a new project, I'm grateful for it and appreciate it," Droppo said. "I put a lot of passion into each one." //



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BEN Kennedy

The old adage “racing is in his blood” perfectly describes 29-year-old Ben Kennedy, a fourth-generation member of the France family. Much like his famed great grandfather, Bill France, Kennedy is a visionary with a driver’s passion.

Kennedy, a former Super Late Model competitor at Orlando Speedworld, worked his way up to the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series in which he was a consistent top-10 points finisher from 2014 to ‘16.

Earning his only Truck Series victory at Bristol in 2016, Kennedy also competed in several NASCAR Xfinity Series races with a strong fourth-place finish at Talladega in 2017.

While Kennedy was talented behind the wheel, his path in NASCAR took him from the driver’s seat to an executive role starting in 2018.

Named general manager of the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series on Jan. 30, 2018, Kennedy oversaw the commercial

and competition aspects of the division for two years. Utilizing his years of experience to help guide the Truck Series’ growth with fans and its competitors, Kennedy was eventually promoted to vice president of racing development.

In Kennedy’s current role, he supervises initiatives involving strategic racing development for the top three divisions, including the development of future schedules and potential expansion overseas.

Kennedy’s insights and contributions can be seen in this year’s schedules for the top three NASCAR series with new stops at Circuit of The Americas, Nashville Superspeedway, Road America and Knoxville Raceway.

“When we set out to build this ‘21 schedule, we want to make sure whatever we’re doing, it’s done with a very measured approach. I think that’s what you’ve seen in this schedule we put together,” Kennedy said.

Kennedy’s connection to NASCAR’s past will be beneficial to the sport’s long-term prospects. //

ZANE Smith

While 21-year-old Zane Smith may be one of NASCAR’s young guns with his confident swagger and demeanor, he’s got a distinct, old-school driver’s mentality.

The native of Huntington Beach, California, doesn’t care for podium finishes. Instead, the standout NASCAR Camping World Truck Series racer has his sights set on victories on any given weekend.

Perhaps that intensity and edge stems from his valuable experiences in BMX, go-kart, Legend Car and Late Model racing. After all, Smith had a good reason to be aggressive on the track during his formative years.

“I knew from go-karts on; I knew my family wasn’t going to be able to fund me or back me,” Smith said. “I’ve always had a lot on my plate but somehow, I keep my

cool. I’m not really a high-strung person.”

Despite the pressure to succeed as he worked his way up the racing ladder, Smith graduated to ARCA competition before a solid, 10-race audition with JR Motorsports’ NASCAR Xfinity Series team in 2019 netted him a full-time Truck Series ride with GMS Racing last year.

Logging wins at Michigan and Dover, Smith was in the fight for the Truck Series title before coming up one position short of teammate Sheldon Creed, the series’ champion, at Phoenix last fall.

Still, Smith carries his head high as he returns to GMS Racing for another year.

“I’ve never known what I’d be doing the next year before,” Smith said. “It’s never been my case. It’s super nice to have that and to work with a team like GMS, which is pretty special to chase wins every single weekend. The end goal is to win the championship. It’s another opportunity and I feel like now that I’ve had a year in trucks and been to these places, it’ll come a lot easier.” //



BUBBA Wallace

Through the years, Darrell Wallace Jr., better known to race fans as "Bubba," has made his mark in NASCAR as a talented driver with a remarkable presence. On the track, he's willing to trade paint, ruffle feathers and extract the most out of his car for the best results every race weekend.

However, Wallace's voice off the track has become prominent, respected and important. As one of the major stories of 2020, Wallace, the only African American driver in the NASCAR Cup Series, championed progress and racial equality in racing and in all walks of life. As poignant as the images were when he took an emotional runner-up in the 2018 Daytona 500, the image of Wallace with his racing cohorts at Talladega last June was quite powerful.

Despite the intense scrutinization from fans last year, the native of Mobile,



Alabama, intends to stay the course as an authentic individual who strives for excellence on and off the track.

"What you see is what you get with me," said the 27-year-old Wallace. "I don't change for anybody. Sometimes, it annoys me that fans take it to another level. I'll worry about myself at the end of the day. At the end of the day, it's about being the best race car driver that I can be."

Certainly, Wallace has shown his potential toward being the best racer possible as he scored his best NASCAR Cup Series effort in 2020 with a top-five finish at Daytona and five top-10 results to place 22nd in the overall standings. Moving from Richard Petty Motorsports to the new 23XI Racing team for 2021, Wallace looks ahead to his bright future.

"There's no more excuses why we can't run up front and compete for wins and show the true talents that I believe I have," Wallace said. "If Jan. 1 was (the Daytona 500), then I'm ready for it." //

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CLINT Bowyer

Prior to race day at Michigan International Speedway in the summer of 2018, Clint Bowyer reflected on the NASCAR schedule. While he had plenty of racing left in his tank, the normally animated and energized native of Emporia, Kansas, spoke with an earnest candor.

"That's the hardest part about our season," he observed when asked about the 36-race schedule. "It is so long and grueling and it's so hard to find a good balance there. And I'll be the first one to admit, right now, this late summer stretch right here – it's hard."

While Bowyer went on to place 12th in the overall points standings in '18, he improved to ninth in '19 before placing 12th last year. Competitive as ever, the popular racer announced his retirement from full-time NASCAR competition via Twitter on Oct. 8.

Along the way, an opportunity popped up with FOX Sports that Bowyer couldn't refuse.

"It was an opportunity of a lifetime, an opportunity to stay a part of this sport for many years to come, and that's the coolest thing about it," Bowyer remarked. "Was there a lot of things that happened this year in the schedule, where I was away from my family doing this on my own that kind of made that decision a little easier yet? Yes."

Bowyer looks forward to the next chapter of his racing life with NASCAR on FOX, even if it comes with some fun.

"Mike Joy, he's going to have his hands full," Bowyer said. "Can you imagine being up there trying to be a ringleader, trying to keep Jeff Gordon and I from arguing the whole race? There's no way in hell he can be right and there's no way in hell that I can be right all the time." //



CHASE Briscoe

If there was anyone in NASCAR who was tested to the core personally and professionally last year, it was Chase Briscoe, a third-generation sprint car racer from Mitchell, Indiana.

For starters, Briscoe survived a roller-coaster experience in 2018 before recording his first NASCAR Xfinity Series victory at Iowa Speedway in 2019.

Last year, Briscoe started his NASCAR Xfinity Series campaign with a pair of top-10 finishes along with a convincing victory at Las Vegas. When NASCAR returned to the track from the nearly two-month COVID-19 pause, Briscoe's heart was a bit heavier after his wife, Marissa, suffered a miscarriage. All told, the young couple stood by each other and turned to their faith for strength and comfort.

Digging deep and staving off Kyle Busch for an emotional victory at Darlington in



May, Briscoe knelt by his car as he dedicated his win to his wife.

Scoring nine victories last year in the Xfinity Series, Briscoe's reach goes beyond his genuine connection to his faith to his fans with whom he consistently interacts on Twitter and Reddit.

"A perfect example is when I get on the plane, I'm going to load the race thread that's on Reddit and I'll go through every comment that's good or bad," Briscoe said. "If they're bad, I'll joke around with them and have fun with it. And the same with people that congratulate me. So, I've always enjoyed doing that."

Briscoe opined that he needed to score eight wins in 2020 for his career to continue. In this case, Briscoe won nine times on various courses like Homestead, Pocono, the Indy road course, Dover and Bristol. Fittingly, the 25-year-old, who placed second in the championship chase, earned a promotion to the Cup Series, driving the Stewart-Haas Racing No. 14 Ford Mustang. //

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MATT Tifft

Prior to the fall race weekend at Martinsville in 2019, Matt Tifft was one of the promising, young racers in the NASCAR Cup Series. It seemed like he had a solid career ahead of him.

However, the Ohio native suffered a seizure prior to race day at Martinsville, sidelining him for the rest of the year. After suffering another seizure in December 2019, Tifft focused on his health and the next steps of his life.

"There is no doubt that I always have racing in the back, and at some points, the forefront of my mind," Tifft observed. "It is extremely frustrating at times to see what happened and knowing where things were going when the first episode happened. However, it has opened doors on the other side of being able to help my wife open a business, spend more time at

home and travel as well.

"I think the biggest thing is for me, it is easy to get down, so the challenge is to stay positive and keep on moving forward. Whether it was medical, professional or something else in my life I faced, I go with the attitude that there is a reason for everything, and you can not only learn from it, but make you a stronger person in the end."

Tifft's strength and support system drew him back to the track but not as a driver.

Instead, Tifft partnered with friend and fellow NASCAR competitor B.J. McLeod to create Live Fast Motorsports, a new NASCAR Cup Series team set to compete this season.

"I've talked of many years down the road wanting to be an owner in the sport," Tifft said. "I love NASCAR. I always thought I'd love to be a part of that side post-driving. I didn't think post-driving would come as quick as it did." //

JILL Gregory

For the past 14 years, Jill Gregory played a pivotal role with NASCAR, most recently serving as the sanctioning body's executive vice president and chief marketing and content officer.

As the head of the sport's marketing department, including official sponsorships, brand and consumer marketing and driver and team marketing, Gregory's efforts earned her a new opportunity in the early days of the new year.

On Jan. 5, Gregory was named executive vice president and general manager of Sonoma Raceway, the picturesque northern California road course owned by Speedway Motorsports. When she starts her new job in February, it will be quite a homecoming for the California native who has long admired the vision of Bruton Smith, Speedway Motorsports' founder.

"I look forward to taking that same aggressive approach to further establish Sonoma Raceway as not only a premier destination for NASCAR events, but elevating

the historic road course as a year-round tourism and driving-experience attraction," Gregory said. "I'm grateful to have worked with such a talented team of people at NASCAR. I look forward to continuing those professional relationships from a new trackside perspective on the West Coast."

Named to Adweek's 2019 "Most Powerful Women in Sports," Gregory's contributions in recent years helped steer NASCAR toward younger, more diverse audiences. Notably, Gregory worked with the sport's digital platforms, including NASCAR.com, and she helped with the refresh of NASCAR's logo in December 2016.

In an interview with brandchannel, Gregory, who majored in journalism at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, Calif., reflected on the teamwork and experiences with NASCAR's much anticipated return to racing during the COVID-19 pandemic last spring.

"I'm really proud of the work we've done to bring live sports back to sports fans," Gregory said. "My advice would center on the approach we took, which was to lead and go forward boldly and decisively versus waiting to follow others." //



ERIC Moss

Rising from humble beginnings in Washington, D.C., 49-year-old Erik Moses' solid work ethic and vision have rewarded him with a historical opportunity in NASCAR.

In August, Moses was named president of the resurrected Nashville Superspeedway, becoming the first African American to lead a major NASCAR venue.

Moses, in a way, represents the much-anticipated revival and spark of NASCAR's new energy that intertwines with its classic charm. While Nashville Superspeedway last hosted a NASCAR race in 2011, the Cup Series has not competed in "The Music City" since 1984.

Moses' journey in the sporting world includes time as the CEO of the D.C. Sports & Entertainment Commission where he was the chief advocate for sports, entertainment and live event activity in the



nation's capital.

Recently, Moses was the founding president of the XFL's DC Defenders, a team that led its division and ranked among the league's best in ticket sales, game-day experience and engagement on social media. Moses' expertise in cultivating awareness and growth with fans will be welcomed at Nashville Superspeedway.

"I am excited to join the team at Dover Motorsports to lead the reopening of the Nashville Superspeedway and bring the excitement of Cup Series racing to middle Tennessee," Moses said.

Despite the incredible obstacles facing him prior to the Cup Series race on June 20, Moses is excited for his latest opportunity.

"We're working to get the facility up to snuff for a Cup race," Moses said in an interview with the Greensboro News & Record. "You can imagine my brain is popping with ideas. You're telling me I'm in Music City, USA, and I have 1,000 acres? And we're in the middle of a pandemic where people need to be socially distant? Well, let me at it." //

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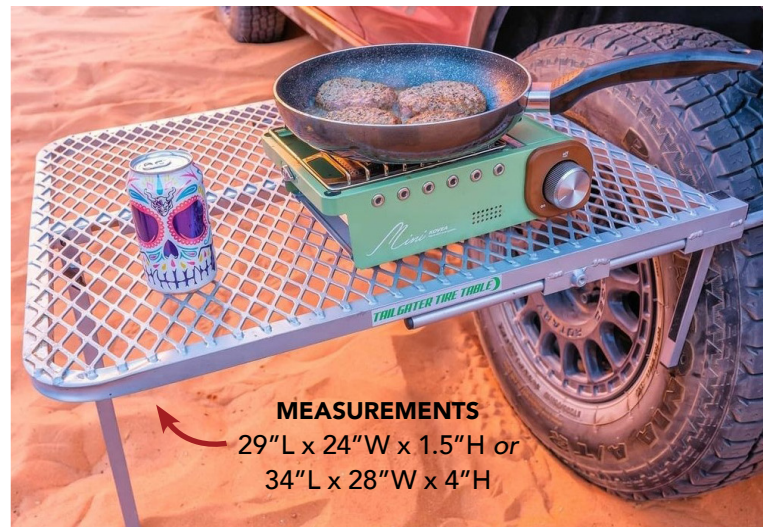
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WILD SILLY SEASON SEES NUMEROUS CHANGES

Erik Jones' shift from Joe Gibbs Racing to Richard Petty Motorsports was one of the many moves made in preparation for the 2021 NASCAR season.

BY JARED TURNER





In a typical year, the NASCAR Silly Season doesn't truly ramp up until after Memorial Day. Some years, it's even well into the summer before the proverbial movers and shakers start making their intentions known.

But 2020 was a year unlike any other, of course, so it now seems fitting that the first real domino of Silly Season fell all the way back in mid-April – at a time when the NASCAR Cup Series was on an extended sabbatical due to a global pandemic, no less.

With NASCAR in the early weeks of what turned out to be a more than two-month break due to the COVID-19 crisis, many drivers turned to iRacing to get their racing fill and to provide some entertainment for people quarantined at home at a time when virtually all sports were absent from television.

What no one could have ever anticipated was that something that happened during an iRacing event would have a major impact on Silly Season and which drivers ultimately landed with which teams for the 2021 NASCAR Cup Series season.

After being caught on a hot mic uttering a racial slur during an iRace, Kyle Larson was swiftly fired by Chip Ganassi Racing and suspended by NASCAR. Larson's poor decision inadvertently did two things: It opened the seat of the No. 42 Chip Ganassi Racing Chevrolet for a new driver and it left no doubt about the fact that if Larson was ever reinstated by NASCAR and returned to the Cup Series, it would be with another team.

As a result, it was then that team owner Chip Ganassi, needing to quickly fill Larson's old seat, called on Cup Series veteran and former series champion Matt Kenseth, who came out of retirement to drive the No. 42 for the rest of the season. However, when the season ended, Kenseth wasn't interested in returning, so it left a vacancy that was ultimately filled by Ross Chastain.

Larson, meanwhile, underwent extensive racial sensitivity training before petitioning NASCAR late in 2020 to be reinstated. When NASCAR granted that request, Hendrick Motorsports owner Rick Hendrick wasted no time offering Larson – whose talent behind the wheel has never been called into question – a ride for the 2021 season.

Larson quite graciously embraced the opportunity and is looking forward to competing in the best equipment he's ever had all while working to mend fences and restore his reputation among NASCAR's key stakeholders, including competitors, fans and sponsors.

"Hendrick Motorsports is a championship organization that has set a high bar for performance and for how its drivers represent the team and its partners," Larson said. "My goal is to win races, be a great teammate,

continue my personal efforts to grow, and hold myself to that high standard personally and professionally. Making the absolute most of this platform and the opportunity in front of me is my focus. I know what's expected of me and what I expect of myself, on and off the track."

If there's one driver who will be under perhaps a bigger microscope this season than Larson, it's Bubba Wallace, who after three full seasons with Richard Petty Motorsports jumped at the opportunity to compete for 23XI Racing – a new venture co-owned by veteran NASCAR driver Denny Hamlin and NBA legend Michael Jordan.

As the NASCAR Cup Series' only African American driver, Wallace couldn't pass on the opportunity to compete for Jordan – who along with being almost universally considered the greatest basketball player of all time now becomes the Cup Series' second African American team owner. With technical support from Toyota Racing Development and Joe Gibbs Racing, and a host of sponsors lining up to be on his No. 23 Toyota, Wallace is raring to go.

"I'm pumped to get the season started," said Wallace, who in 2020 became a major advocate for social justice and inclusion. "I wish Daytona was tomorrow. We're heading in the right direction and we'll be ready when we get to Daytona. As I've said before, this is an opportunity of a lifetime for me and there's no more excuses. We want to go out and win, and I know we'll have everything we need each week to make that happen."

Wallace's decision to leave Richard Petty Motorsports freed up the iconic No. 43 car, which will be driven this year by two-time Cup Series race winner Erik Jones, who needed a ride after learning in 2020 that he wouldn't be back at Joe Gibbs Racing for a third Cup season.

"It's an incredible honor to have Richard Petty want you to drive for his race team and with the car number he made famous," Jones said. "Richard Petty Motorsports has a rich history in the sport, but they are not resting on that history. They still have something to prove, and I have something to prove. We are both motivated to write a new chapter."

Jones' replacement at JGR is Christopher Bell, a former JGR NASCAR Xfinity Series driver who not surprisingly struggled a bit in his rookie Cup Series season with Leavine Family Racing – a single-car team that suspended operations at season's end. Bell was expected to land with JGR's Cup Series program sooner rather than later, so – unlike most of the other Silly Season happenings – his appointment came as no surprise. //

5 Who Have Switched Series

After an ultra-successful nine-win season in the NASCAR Xfinity Series last year with Stewart-Haas Racing, Chase Briscoe was looking for a potential opportunity to jump to the NASCAR Cup Series in 2021.

Turns out he didn't have to look far.

When Clint Bowyer unexpectedly announced in early October that he would vacate his Cup Series ride at SHR after the 2020 season to join the FOX NASCAR broadcast booth in 2021, a top-notch Cup ride suddenly became open with the organization co-owned by Tony Stewart and Gene Haas.

The natural choice to fill the seat was Briscoe, based on his enormous success not only in 2020 but the potential he showed in 2018 and 2019 by earning an Xfinity Series win in each of those two seasons despite running just half of the schedule in '18.

"Wins are my benchmark, and Chase did a lot of winning in 2020," Haas said. "His stats alone merit his place in Cup, but Chase has also proven to be a strong ambassador for our partners who appreciate his grit and determination."

One of those partners is HighPoint, a customer service and technology solutions company that joined Briscoe in late 2019 as a primary sponsor of his Xfinity Series efforts. After returning as a primary sponsor of Briscoe in 2020, HighPoint is now following Briscoe to the NASCAR Cup Series.

"Chase has worked incredibly hard to make his mark in NASCAR and has earned this promotion to the NASCAR Cup Series. Thanks to HighPoint and Ford, we were able to make it happen," said Stewart, a three-time Cup champion driver. "We've been able to do great things with Chase, and I feel there are more great things ahead of us."



■ Chase Briscoe

► While Chase Briscoe's move to the NASCAR Cup Series from another division is certainly huge, he's not the only one. Following are four others who've notably switched series for 2021.



JOHN HUNTER NEMECEK:

Rather than returning to Front Row Motorsports for a second season in the NASCAR Cup Series, Nemecek opted to return to the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series to compete for Kyle Busch Motorsports — arguably the top organization in the truck ranks. The second-generation driver is no stranger to the series, having earned six truck victories in 102 starts spread over eight seasons.

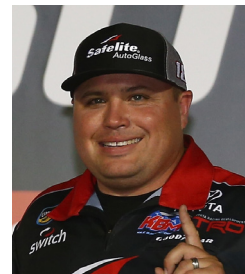


BEN BESHORE: After spending the last two years as a crew chief for multiple drivers associated with Joe Gibbs Racing's NASCAR Xfinity Series program, Ben Beshore has been promoted to the NASCAR Cup Series side of the company where he will serve as crew chief for two-time Cup champion Kyle Busch on the heels of one of Busch's toughest years in the sport.



ROSS CHASTAIN:

An eighth-generation watermelon farmer, Chastain is no stranger to hard work. He's also no stranger to the NASCAR Cup Series, having run a mostly full schedule in both 2018 and 2019 before cutting back to eight Cup races in 2020 while he competed full-time in the NASCAR Xfinity Series. Chastain takes over the No. 42 Chip Ganassi Racing Chevrolet driven mostly by Matt Kenseth in 2021.



RUDY FUGLE: The crew chief for Kyle Busch Motorsports driver Christian Eckes last season in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series, Fugle was tabbed by NASCAR Cup Series team owner Rick Hendrick to join Hendrick Motorsports as the Cup crew chief for William Byron in 2021. Fugle replaces seven-time Cup champion crew chief Chad Knaus, who had worked with Byron the past two seasons.

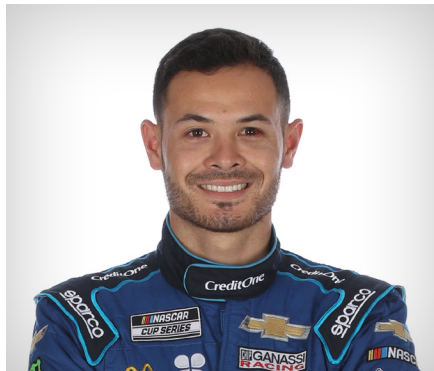
7 Who Have Switched Rides

Following are seven key drivers who have remained in the NASCAR Cup Series but switched rides for the 2021 season.



BUBBA WALLACE

No driver has more to be amped about this year than Wallace, who is campaigning the No. 23 Toyota for the new 23XI Racing team co-owned by Joe Gibbs Racing driver Denny Hamlin and NBA legend Michael Jordan. Wallace, who last drove for Richard Petty Motorsports, will have great resources from Toyota Racing Development and his new team's technical alliance with JGR.



KYLE LARSON

Arguably the hottest free agent of the 2020-2021 Silly Season, Larson ended one of the toughest years of his life on a high note by signing with Hendrick Motorsports to drive the No. 5 Chevrolet. Larson most recently drove for Chip Ganassi Racing before being fired by the organization in April 2020 for his use of a racial slur.

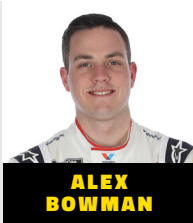
DANIEL SUAREZ

LEAVING GAUNT BROTHERS RACING AFTER JUST ONE SEASON, Suarez will compete for a new team known as Trackhouse Racing.



CHRISTOPHER BELL

AS WIDELY expected, Bell spent one season in the NASCAR Cup Series with Leavine Family Racing before Joe Gibbs Racing opened a seat for him by parting ways with Erik Jones. At JGR, Bell will work with two-time champion crew chief Adam Stevens.



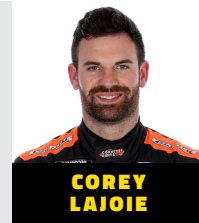
ALEX BOWMAN

BOWMAN MADE the offseason switch from Hendrick Motorsports' No. 88 team to Hendrick's No. 48 team and will take over the ride formerly occupied by seven-time NASCAR Cup Series champion Jimmie Johnson.



ERIK JONES

WHEN WALLACE left Richard Petty Motorsports, RPM's iconic No. 43 car became available. Not long before that, Jones learned he wouldn't be retained by Joe Gibbs Racing, so the timing was perfect for RPM and Jones to pair up.



COREY LAJOIE

AFTER TRYING BUT being unable to convince team owner Rick Hendrick that he was the person to fill the vacancy left at Hendrick Motorsports by Jimmie Johnson's retirement from NASCAR, LaJoie left Go Fas Racing for Spire Motorsports.



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New Tracks, New Layouts FOR 2021

BY ROB TIONGSON

Prior to the official release of the 2021 NASCAR schedules, fans were accustomed to traditional NASCAR events at Chicagoland Speedway, Eldora Speedway, Iowa Speedway and Kentucky Speedway.

Certainly, these venues offered unique racing styles from old-school, short-track, paint-trading action to intermediate, cat-and-mouse chasing. By all means, these tracks were regular stops for NASCAR's national touring divisions for the past several years.

Regardless of memorable finishes at Chicagoland and Kentucky and the local flare and pizzazz of Eldora and Iowa, NASCAR officials opted shake up the stock car racing scene in 2021. While these four tracks lost their standard weekend dates, new-to-NASCAR venues like Circuit of The Americas, a beloved, international venue on the Formula One schedule, and

Knoxville Raceway, the home of sprint car racing's most prestigious event, will host much-anticipated races in the new year.

Moreover, Road America will welcome the NASCAR Cup Series for the first time since 1956 while Cup Series racing will return to the Nashville market for the first time since 1984.

As if that's not enough, Indianapolis Motor Speedway will present a new challenge for the Cup Series with its 14-turn, 2.439-mile road course. Meanwhile, Bristol Motor Speedway will get a bit dirty, quite literally, with the first Cup Series race on a dirt track since Sept. 30, 1970. While there's plenty of changes with the tracks comprising the schedule, there's also a lot of potential for excitement with these venues.

Without further ado, let's look at the new tracks and new layouts for the 2021 NASCAR season:

► *Nashville Superspeedway*

Initially opened in 2001 as a multipurpose superspeedway 30 miles southeast of Nashville proper, Nashville Superspeedway will return to the NASCAR fold on June 19-20.

During its first 10 years of operation, Nashville hosted races for the NASCAR Xfinity Series, NASCAR Camping World Truck Series and NTT IndyCar Series.

Configured as a tri-oval, Nashville Superspeedway is the longest concrete oval in NASCAR, which is not a coincidence as it is owned by Dover Motorsports, the same company that owns Dover International Speedway's 1-mile concrete track.

While many fans hoped for the return of Nashville's Fairgrounds Speedway, a beloved short track just four miles from downtown, Nashville Superspeedway, led

by new track president Erik Moses, looks to create new racing memories.

On April 14, 2001, the NASCAR Xfinity Series made its first trek to Nashville Superspeedway for a 225-lap race won by Greg Biffle. Over the years, drivers such as Scott Riggs, David Green, Michael Waltrip, Reed Sorenson, Kevin Harvick, Carl Edwards, Scott Wimmer, Joey Logano, Jack Sprague, Jason Leffler and Clint Bowyer, among others, enjoyed "Music City" victories.

Less than four months after the Xfinity Series' inaugural race, the Truck Series stomped its way to Nashville for a race

won by Scott Riggs. Along the way, Edwards, Mike Bliss, Bobby Hamilton, David Reutimann, Johnny Benson, Jr. and Todd Bodine, to name a few, triumphed in mid-summer showdowns.

Prior to the track's anticipated return this summer, Nashville Superspeedway was distinct for being one of the few "standalone" tracks at which the Cup Series lacked a race weekend. That will end this year, but drivers like Harvick, Logano and Keselowski may feel a sense of familiarity when they make their first laps in their Cup Series cars. Then again, it may be a wide-open weekend with most drivers not having any experience on this speedway.

While the concrete surface may not be as pristine as it was in 2001, it will present a distinct challenge. Like her sister in Delaware, it's safe to say Nashville Superspeedway has a reputation where drivers "race the track" versus their competitors. With no similar tracks, a first-time winner may be possible.

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT NASHVILLE

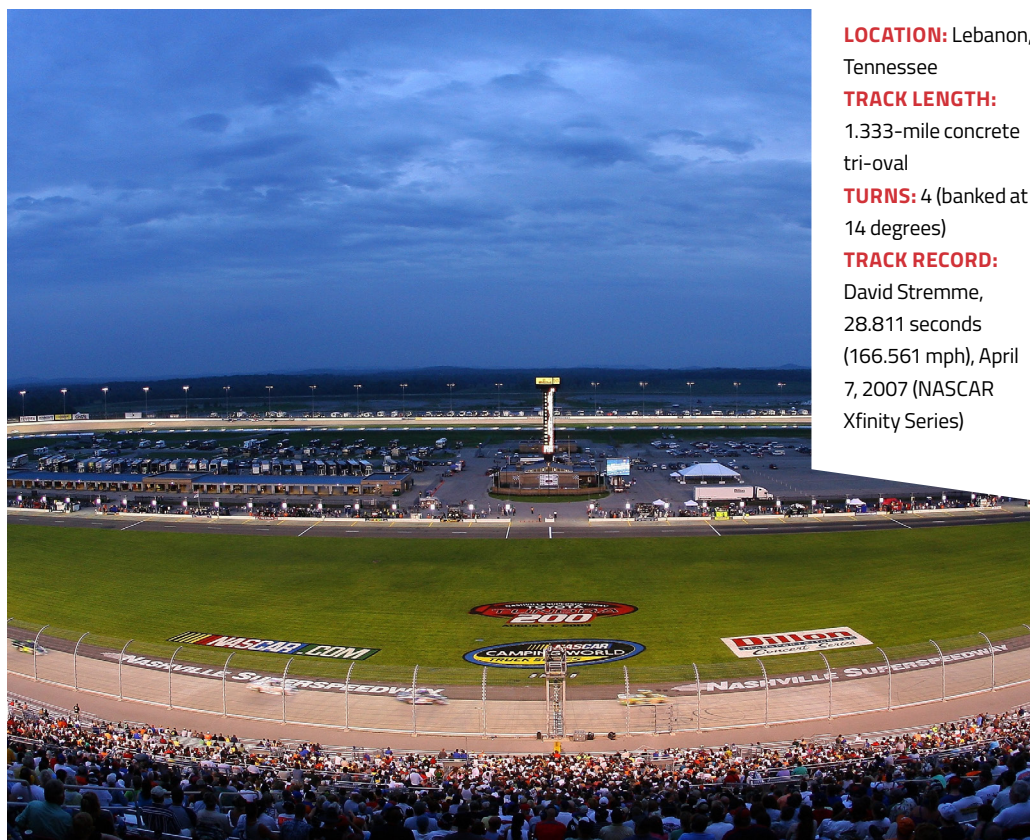
1 Carrying on the Fairgrounds' unique tradition, Nashville Superspeedway winners are rewarded with a uniquely designed Gibson Les Paul guitar versus a traditional race trophy.

2 This track hosted an infamous pre-race invocation by Joe Nelms, a pastor and race fan, who thanked a deity for his "smokin' hot wife."

3 After winning the 2009 NASCAR Xfinity Series night race at Nashville, Kyle Busch smashed his Gibson Les Paul guitar into bits in Victory Lane.

4 Carl Edwards holds the record for most NASCAR Xfinity Series wins at Nashville as he logged five victories, including three consecutive races from 2006-'07.

5 Chevrolet and Ford are tied for the most wins at Nashville by a manufacturer with eight, with Roush Fenway Racing bookending the track's victories.



LOCATION: Lebanon, Tennessee

TRACK LENGTH: 1.333-mile concrete tri-oval

TURNS: 4 (banked at 14 degrees)

TRACK RECORD: David Stremme, 28.811 seconds (166.561 mph), April 7, 2007 (NASCAR Xfinity Series)

► *Circuit of The Americas*

Located just outside Austin, Texas, Circuit of The Americas will add NASCAR competition to its impressive track record.

The state-of-the-art facility has been the site of the United States Grand Prix Formula One race since 2012, a pivotal event for that series' championship battle.

Previously hosting races for the NTT IndyCar Series and IMSA, Circuit of The Americas, or COTA – a 3.426-mile, 20-turn road course located in Austin, Texas – will host its first NASCAR race weekend on May 22-23.

With Speedway Motorsports serving as the race weekend promoter, the track promises plenty of passing opportunities along with some exciting restarts heading

toward the infamous Turn 1.

Located just 14 miles southeast of Austin proper, COTA features two distinct straightaways, five tight, close-quarter racing turns and a trio of s-shaped turns that will remind race fans of California's Sonoma Raceway. With an elevation change of 133 feet, only a few tracks will rival COTA in terms of undulations, or the sensation felt from the transition from a flat to a somewhat steep surface.

Notably, NASCAR Cup Series champion Chase Elliott provided praise for the renowned road course.

"I think it's a good addition," Elliott

observed. "It's a nice course out there. I feel like it's been quite the spectacle from the F-1 side. Obviously, that's a whole different ballgame. I'm looking forward to going. I think it's going to bring new challenges and things none of us have ever seen before. I look forward to it."

While Elliott, a road course ace, looks forward to COTA, Zane Smith of the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series, expressed excitement concerning the unknowns presented during this race weekend.

"That's going to be awesome," Smith said. "That is probably one of the most beautiful race tracks there is in the world. For us to get to visit there, we'll have a good shot at winning there and that's something super special. Props to NASCAR for making that happen. I'm really looking forward to that."

For a track nestled in the city that keeps things weird, it'll be a refreshing sight to see NASCAR deep in the true heart of Texas.

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT COTA

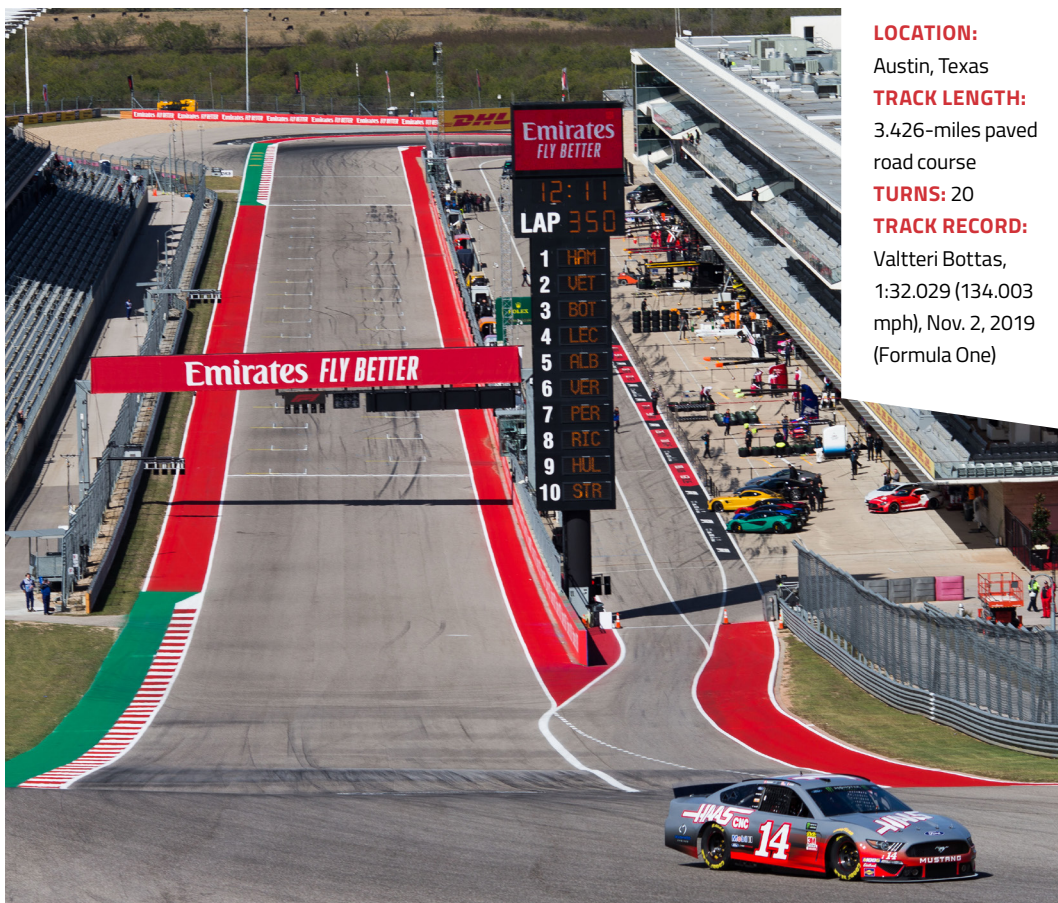
1 COTA's track design draws inspiration from Formula One circuits like Silverstone (Turns 3 through 6), Hockenheim (Turns 12 through 15), and Istanbul Park (Turns 16 through 18).

2 COTA's most famous facility, the 251-foot Observation Tower, was inspired by the imagery of sports cars and provides a 360-degree panoramic view of the track.

3 The city of Austin has served as a filming location for movies like *Miss Congeniality*, *Kill Bill: Volume 1*, and *Dazed and Confused*.

4 With nearly 200 live music venues, the city of Austin gained its well-known reputation as "The Live Music Capital of the World."

5 Despite being the capital of Texas, the city of Austin is the largest city in the United States without a professional sports team.



LOCATION:

Austin, Texas

TRACK LENGTH:

3.426-miles paved road course

TURNS: 20

TRACK RECORD:

Valtteri Bottas, 1:32.029 (134.003 mph), Nov. 2, 2019 (Formula One)

FUN AT EVERY TURN.



► **Knoxville Raceway**

Nicknamed the Sprint Car Capital of the World, Iowa's Knoxville Raceway will host the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series this season. Best known as the home of sprint car's most prestigious event, the Knoxville Nationals, this 143-year-old track is perhaps one of the most famous dirt ovals in the world.

While Knoxville is only a half-mile in length, it is a true action-packed track with blistering fast speeds. Although the Truck Series vehicles may not eclipse the 14.407 second track record established by sprint car driver Brooke Tatnell in 2006, based on the Truck Series races at Eldora Speedway, these rugged four wheelers will likely put on a good show for the fans.

Despite Knoxville Raceway's notoriety for sprint car racing, it shares a connection with NASCAR through racing icons

such as Jeff Gordon, Ken Schrader, Kyle Larson and Tony Stewart who have raced there during their careers. In recent years, various NASCAR Cup Series racers made the trek from Michigan International Speedway to either watch or compete in the Knoxville Nationals during the August race weekend.

Undoubtedly, the July 9 NASCAR Camping World Truck Series race may prove to be one of the most anticipated races not only for this division but for NASCAR. After all, from 2013 to '19, the Truck Series

drivers and teams competed in memorable midsummer races at Eldora, the first dirt-track races in any form or fashion for NASCAR since 1970.

As the host to Round 14 of the 2021 NASCAR Camping World Truck Series season, the penultimate race before the playoffs, it may be a make-or-break race for those looking to fight for the championship. Perennial contenders like Matt Crafton and Stewart Friesen have to be licking their chops for this summertime spectacular as they won at Eldora in grand fashion respectively in 2017 and '19.

Much like the history made with NASCAR competing at Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the first time in 1994, the Camping World Truck Series race at Knoxville may welcome sprint car competitors for this Friday night fight. Ultimately, when considering this track's humble beginnings, its progress and ascension in the 21st century is a testament to motorsports' endearing place with sports fans and its competitors around the world.

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT KNOXVILLE

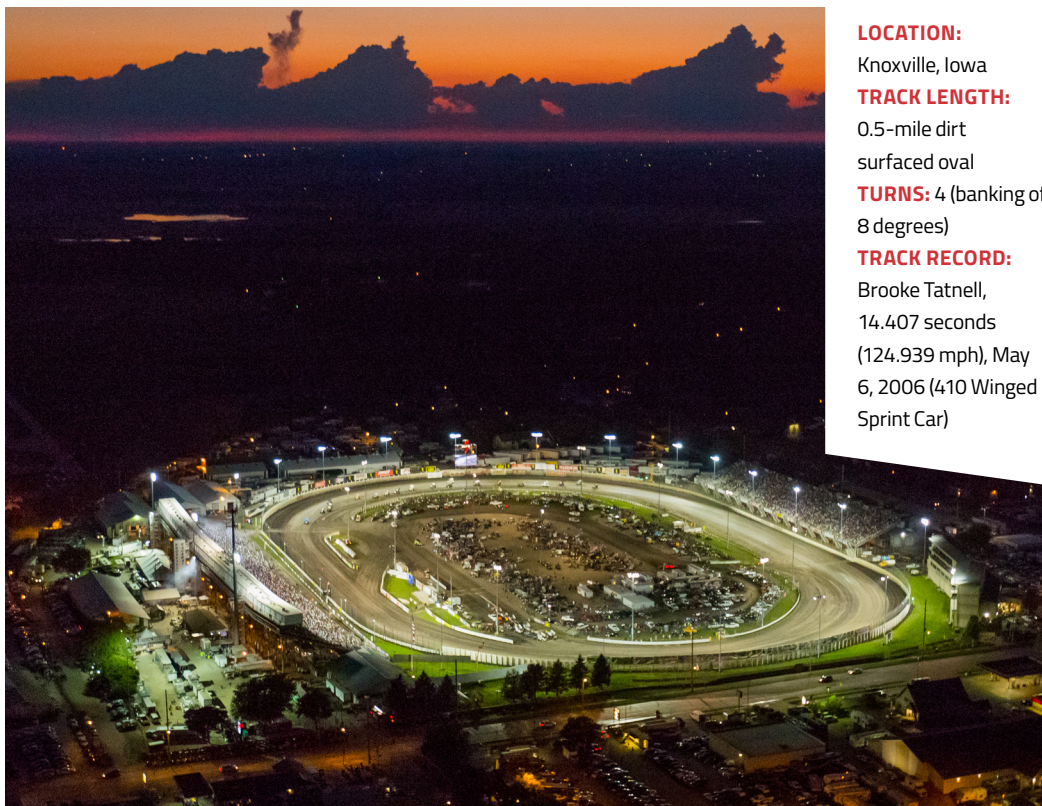
1 Despite its stature and place among motorsports fans as a world-renowned, dirt-surfaced half-mile track, it opened in 1878 as a horse racing track.

2 While horses raced at Knoxville starting in 1878, the familiar horsepower associated with race cars kicked off its history at this venue starting in 1901.

3 Knoxville held its first weekly races and had banking added to its corners along with fencing and lights around the track in 1954.

4 The National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and Museum, officially opened on Jan. 4, 1992, is located adjacent to Turn 2 of Knoxville Raceway.

5 While NASCAR makes its first visit to Knoxville on July 9, the first stock car races at the track were in 1950.



LOCATION:

Knoxville, Iowa

TRACK LENGTH:

0.5-mile dirt surfaced oval

TURNS: 4 (banking of 8 degrees)

TRACK RECORD:

Brooke Tatnell, 14.407 seconds (124.939 mph), May 6, 2006 (410 Winged Sprint Car)

► *Road America*

After a 65-year absence, the 4.048-mile, 14-turn Road America road course will welcome the NASCAR Cup Series back for an Independence Day special on July 4.

Opened in 1955, Road America has been an open-wheel staple for 39 years with greats like Mario Andretti, Jacques Villeneuve, Emerson Fittipaldi and Alex Zanardi among those winning Indy car races.

While the Cup Series makes its return to Road America for the first time since Tim Flock's victory on Aug. 12, 1956, the NASCAR Xfinity Series has made 11 memorable visits to the track since 2010. Suffice to say, despite being NASCAR's largest track in terms of length, the racing often resembles a Saturday night shootout on a short track.

Carl Edwards, Reed Sorenson, Nelson Piquet Jr. A.J. Allmendinger and Brendan Gaughan won five of the longest Xfinity Series races at Road America with a combined 27 caution periods for 62 laps.

In addition, this scenic road course has played host to some masterful driving like Austin Cindric's Xfinity Series victory a year ago in a race that started off rather soggy.

Featuring various elevation changes and undulations, Road America resembles highway driving with two straightaways that lead to distinct turns such as the

Carousel, Kink, Canada Corner and Bill Mitchell Bend.

Moreover, this road course demands precision and patience like a short track, which may be good news for those who enjoy racing at Martinsville and Bristol.

Overall, Road America features five passing opportunities. The straightaways, while long for a road course, are narrow in nature. Essentially, race starts and restarts won't exactly work if the field fans out to anything beyond two-wide racing.

Like most road courses, even with races broken down into stages, Road America can cause some headaches for crew chiefs with fuel mileage. The choice will be made between gaining stage points but losing track position for the subsequent segment or pitting before a stage's conclusion for maximum on-track positioning.

As a technical road course, drivers should be like the Borg from Star Trek by evolving toward a state of perfection.

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT ROAD AMERICA

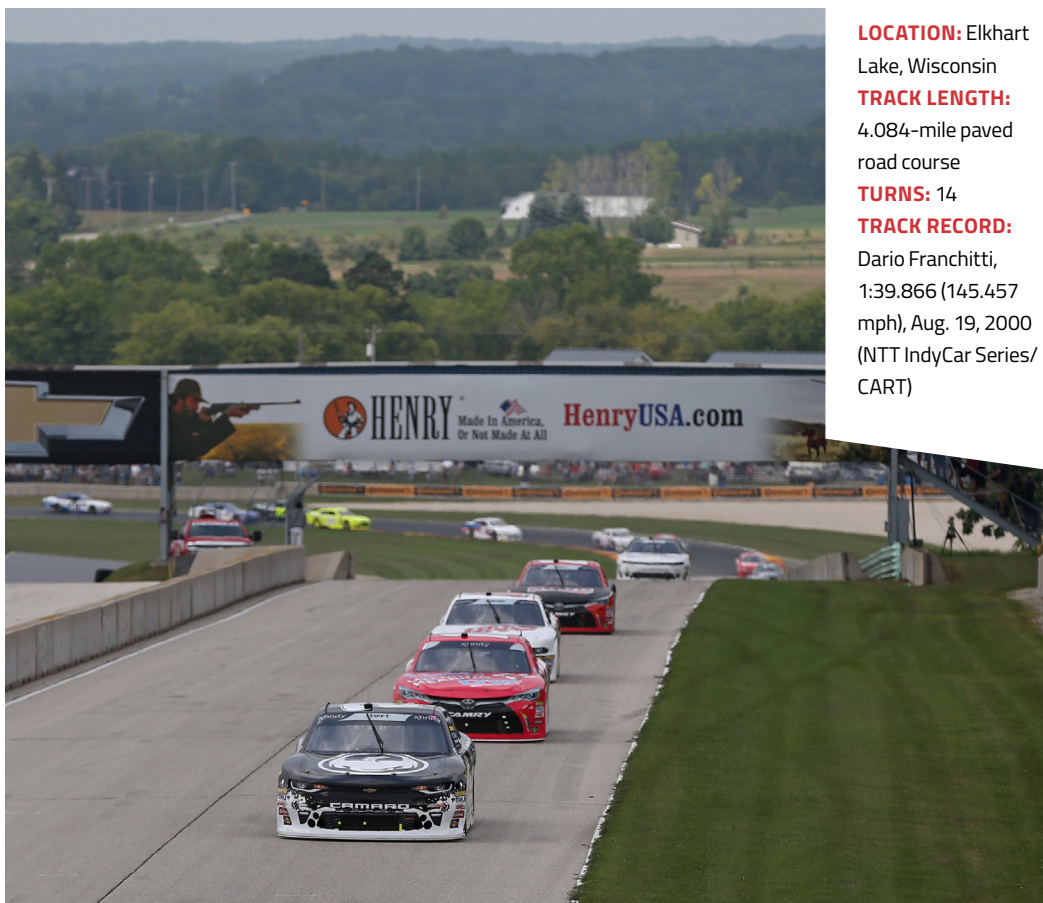
1 Road America, classified as an FIA Grade 2 Circuit, remains one of the few road courses in the world that's maintained its original configuration.

2 Inside Road America's Carousel section, the track includes an asphalt karting track known as the CTECH Manufacturing Complex that hosts two summer series karting events.

3 Chevrolet has the most manufacturer wins at Road America in terms of the NASCAR Xfinity Series with six victories, including five in a row.

4 Road America's original race course, established in 1950, was added to the United States' National Register of Historic Places on Feb. 17, 2006.

5 Perhaps owing to its scenic surroundings and lush greens and trees, Road America possesses the distinct, natural nickname of "America's National Park of Speed."



LOCATION: Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin

TRACK LENGTH: 4.084-mile paved road course

TURNS: 14

TRACK RECORD: Dario Franchitti, 1:39.866 (145.457 mph), Aug. 19, 2000 (NTT IndyCar Series/CART)

► Bristol Motor Speedway – Dirt

Following 60 years of on-track, springtime clashes on the high-banked oval, the NASCAR Cup Series will get dirty at Bristol Motor Speedway in 2021. In this case, the 500-lap race goes from the familiar concrete surface to a dirt surface.

For the first time since Sept. 30, 1970, at the North Carolina State Fairgrounds in Raleigh, the NASCAR Cup Series will race on dirt. Bristol is not unfamiliar with a dirt surface after it hosted a World of Outlaws sprint car event in June 2000.

While it's been 20 years since that event, it may be a NASCAR Cup Series race worth watching. Some drivers may feel at home while the race serves as an equalizer for those who'll seek a playoff berth.

LOCATION:

Bristol, Tennessee

TRACK LENGTH:

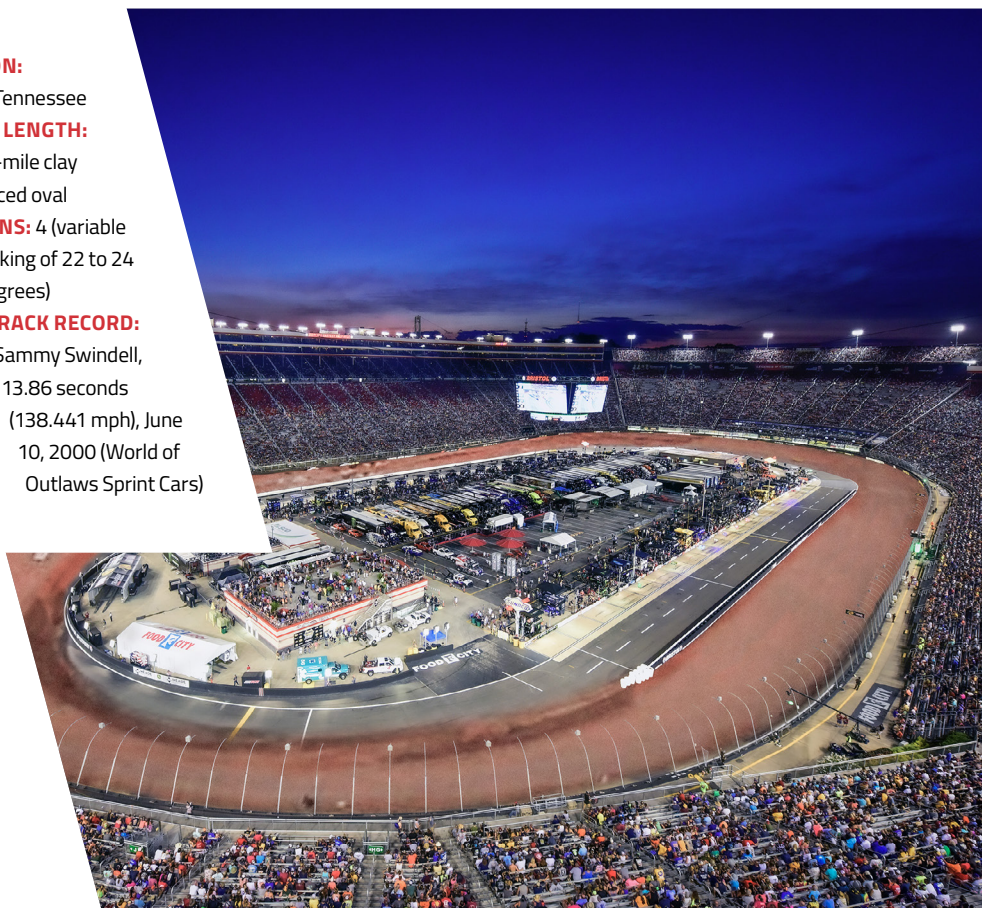
0.533-mile clay surfaced oval

TURNS: 4 (variable

banking of 22 to 24 degrees)

TRACK RECORD:

Sammy Swindell,
13.86 seconds
(138.441 mph), June
10, 2000 (World of
Outlaws Sprint Cars)



LOCATION:

Speedway, Indiana

TRACK LENGTH:

2.439-mile paved road course

TURNS: 13

TRACK RECORD:

Will Power, 1:07.704
seconds (129.687
mph), May 12, 2017
(NTT IndyCar Series)

► Indianapolis Motor Speedway Road Course

After 26 years of racing on the famous 2.5-mile Indianapolis Motor Speedway oval, the NASCAR Cup Series will take on the track's 13-turn road course this season.

Based on last year's incredible NASCAR Xfinity Series race won by Chase Briscoe, the Cup Series teams have reason to be excited about the Aug. 15 race on the 2.439-mile layout. For starters, the rush into Turn 1, a challenge for any racer in any car, will be exhilarating when drivers must go from anything beyond two-wide to single-file formation entering the infield segment of the track.

While all signs point to Chase Elliott as the odds-on favorite at Indianapolis, he may face staunch challenges from road course aces such as Briscoe, Martin Truex Jr., Kyle Busch and William Byron.

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NASCAR All-Star Race Moves to Texas

Last season, as a result of schedule changes brought about by COVID-19, the NASCAR All-Star Race was run at a venue other than Charlotte Motor Speedway for the first time since 1986.

BY JARED TURNER

That will happen again this year – but at yet another facility, as Texas Motor Speedway becomes just the fourth track to host the All-Star event in its 37-year history, joining Charlotte, Atlanta Motor Speedway (1986) and Bristol Motor Speedway, which played host to last year's race.

Texas Motor Speedway, a 1.5-mile track in Fort Worth, has traditionally hosted two points-paying races for the NASCAR Cup Series, but that will change this year as the All-Star Race replaces the facility's annual spring event. Not surprisingly, track president and veteran race promoter Eddie Gossage wants to make Sunday night, June 13, a date NASCAR fans will remember for a long time.

"(Track owner) Marcus Smith and I have talked about it, and we said if we do it exactly the way Charlotte Motor Speedway has done it, we'll consider it a failure," Gossage said. "It's got to be bigger and grander and bolder, because it's in a new place and we've got to make a bigger impression. So, that's what we're working on doing. Things like the format of the race are what we're working on to make it bigger and grander and bolder, to say the least. To me, when I look at the schedule, there's the Daytona 500, the Coca-Cola 600, the Southern 500, and there's the All-Star Race. Those are your big events that you look toward all year long.



"So, I couldn't be happier to have one of those tentpole events for the entire season here at Texas Motor Speedway. This was a distant dream; let me put it that way."

Gossage, who has been the president of Texas Motor Speedway since the track opened in 1997, believes there are numerous reasons for having the All-Star Race in the Lone Star State.

"First of all, the physical venue itself is unparalleled in the sport," Gossage said. "There's no other race track that has all these things like we have at Texas Motor Speedway – whether we're talking about grandstand seating for the crowd and simple things like having more restrooms

than Carnegie Hall has seats. More concession stands, those kinds of things you don't think are terribly important, but they're vital to having a successful event, and that was one of the things we built into it when we built this place 25 years ago. More skyboxes, VIP suites than any sports venue in the world.

"We've got the nine-story Speedway Club overlooking Turn 1, we've got condominiums in Turn 2 with 76 condominiums and 100,00 square feet of offices. We've got the world's biggest TV – 'Big Hoss' – overlooking the whole place. All of those things make it the perfect venue, the showplace." //

WHAT MAKES A GREAT RACE?

WHILE IT'S POSSIBLE THE NASCAR ALL-STAR RACE WILL rotate among different tracks in the years to come, Texas Motor Speedway president Eddie Gossage hopes TMS can become at least a semi-permanent home to the event.

While admittedly facing some challenges due to capacity restrictions tied to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Gossage believes TMS can still put on a great show regardless of how many fans are in the stands. As for what a great show would look like, Gossage turned playful in presenting his ideal scenario.

"Four cars. Photo finish. One or two of them upside down and at

least one on fire. Nobody gets hurt," he said with a chuckle. "No, you know, just a great race. The truth is I'm a purist, to be honest, and I like to see them race. Give me a race where there's no caution flags and that's the best of all, to me. Now, not everybody sees it that way, and I totally get that.

"What makes a great race is moments that occur during the race that take your breath away and a finish that in the last 10 or 15 laps the lead goes back and forth and as you come off Turn 4, you don't know who's going to make it to the line first. ... That's your goal every time you open the gates."



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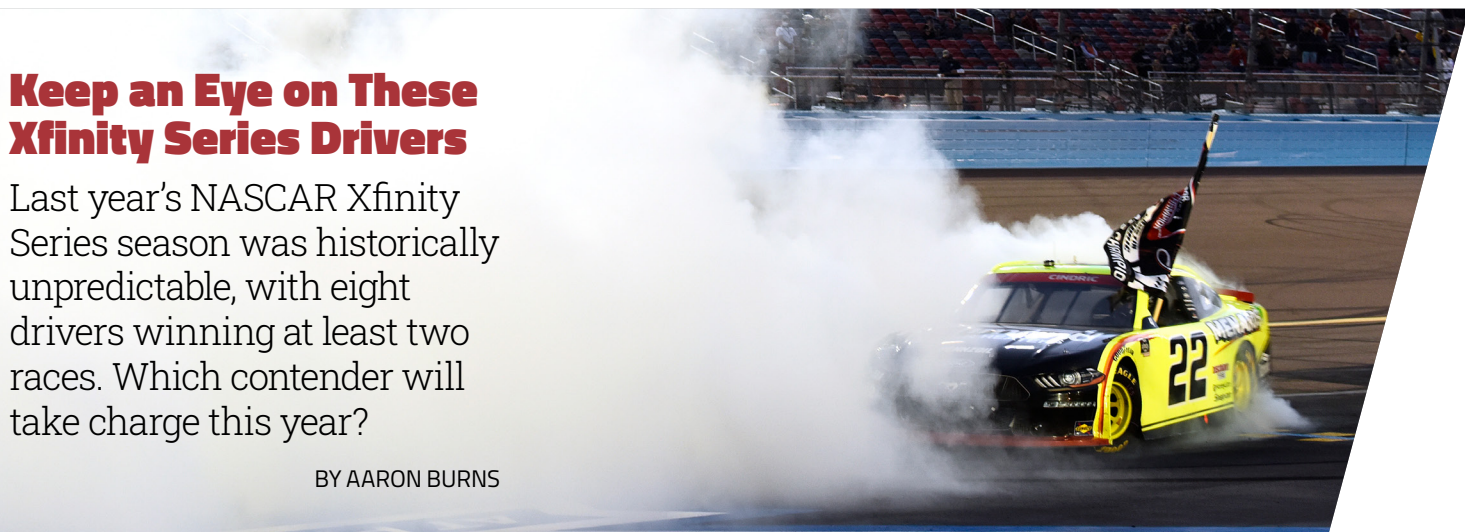


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Keep an Eye on These Xfinity Series Drivers

Last year's NASCAR Xfinity Series season was historically unpredictable, with eight drivers winning at least two races. Which contender will take charge this year?

BY AARON BURNS



There's something for everyone in the NASCAR Xfinity Series.

Want to see veterans going for a career-defining championship? Look no further than Justin Allgaier, Michael Annett and A.J. Allmendinger.

Interested in the title hopefuls employed by legendary car owners? Joe Gibbs has Harrison Burton and Daniel Hemric in the fold.

Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s operation features Noah Gragson and Roger Penske counters with Austin Cindric, the series' reigning champ.

Cindric is the early favorite to repeat as champion, with his team intact and plenty of motivation to prove last season was no fluke. He'll be challenged early and often, however, by a pack of drivers itching for supremacy and a shot at the NASCAR Cup

Series in 2022.

There's a lot to play for in the Xfinity Series' 40th season, with 33 races and a championship trophy awaiting the driver and team who rises above the rest when it matters most.

Here's a look at a half-dozen drivers who could lay claim to the series title once the season ends in November:



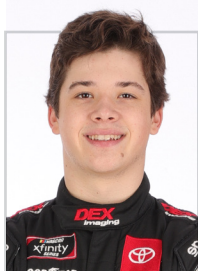
A.J. Allmendinger
"The Dinger"

enjoyed a scintillating 2020 season, which featured two wins in just 11 starts. This year, Allmendinger will chase his first NASCAR Xfinity Series title with Kaulig Racing, one of the series' most successful new teams. Look for Allmendinger to be at the front on every type of track.



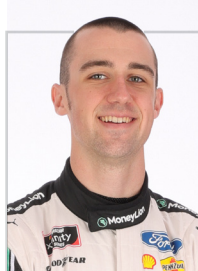
Justin Allgaier

Elliott Sadler must've passed down the title of "Most Successful Xfinity Series Driver without a Championship" to Allgaier, who's finished fifth or better in points seven times. Last year, he came closer than ever – a runner-up finish on the strength of three wins and 19 top-10 finishes. Is this the year?



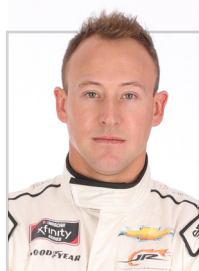
Harrison Burton

The Xfinity Series' reigning rookie of the year drives for one of the sport's best teams – Joe Gibbs Racing – so he has the speed that's necessary to win a championship. Burton won four races a year ago. If he can stay up front and avoid trouble in the playoffs, watch out.



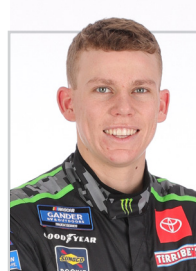
Austin Cindric

Six wins, 19 top-five finishes, 26 top-10 results and a championship did everything for Cindric except land him a full-time NASCAR Cup Series ride. Returning to Team Penske's Xfinity Series program, Cindric will look to replicate Tyler Reddick's feat of back-to-back championships in 2018 and 2019. He's once again the early title favorite.



Daniel Hemric

One of NASCAR's most well-liked drivers by fans, media and his peers, Hemric has bounced around the last few seasons. He's been competitive in Xfinity Series races, but make no mistake: This is Hemric's prove-it year. He'll pilot Joe Gibbs Racing's No. 18 Toyota, arguably the series' most sought-after ride.



Riley Herbst

Herbst takes over the Stewart-Haas Racing ride previously held by Chase Briscoe, the series' winningest driver last year. Briscoe parlayed nine wins into a NASCAR Cup Series ride. Don't expect Herbst to win nine races, but multiple visits to victory lane are likely. He's got the car to do it.



AUSTIN CINDRIC

Xfinity Series Return Part of Detailed Plan

BY JOSEPH WOLKIN

Every aspiring race car driver dreams of becoming a champion. It's the ultimate reward for life's hard work. However, Austin Cindric never imagined he'd be crowned a NASCAR champion just two months after celebrating his 21st birthday.

The Team Penske driver stood out in the NASCAR Xfinity Series last season, winning six races en route to his first title.

Cindric proved he's a great choice to wheel the No. 21 Wood Brothers Racing Ford in the NASCAR Cup Series in 2022, but there's still work to be done in the NASCAR Xfinity Series as Cindric will spend another season as the driver of his familiar No. 22 Team Penske entry.

Why was 2020 so strong for you as a driver? What did you do differently?

I'm not sure I necessarily changed anything about who I was or how I drove the race cars. If you look at the end of 2019, things were clicking between my team and I. We probably came on strong too late that year. We had momentum and focused on perfecting the little things. In 2020, we were able to do that and we were one of the most consistent teams going to each type of race track. We executed on the day it counted, and that's what it all came down to.

You'll be running a couple of NASCAR Cup Series races this year. How exciting is this opportunity for you?

It's awesome. It's something that I'm excited for because in 2022, when I race for the Wood Brothers, it'll be in the Next Gen car. To be able to get some seat time in the current Cup Series car with something my teammates know and have refined helps me learn in a more known scenario. I'll learn my strengths and weaknesses versus the guys who have been doing this for a really long time. I'll learn as much as I can, apply it to my Xfinity Series races and, hopefully, apply it to the races in my rookie year.

What was your reaction when you were told the plan for your future in NASCAR?

I was told about it in September. I wasn't imagining being able to come back to the Xfinity Series, get a full season in and also have an opportunity laid out for a couple of years to come. That's an extremely rare opportunity to have in motorsports in general. I feel very fortunate. The Wood Brothers have been very supportive of me since I started racing in NASCAR. I love chatting with them and seeing them at the race track. I'm really looking forward to that opportunity. I'm hoping I won't be racing for win (No.) 100 because I really think Matt (DiBenedetto) is going to do it this year. I'm excited to see what he's going to do and what I can do the following year, taking over in 2022.

6 Camping World Truck Series Drivers to Watch

The youth movement is on in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series. Defending champion Sheldon Creed returns, but will he out-run all of his challengers again?

BY AARON BURNS



Last season's Truck Series championship battle saw Creed and fellow up-and-comers such as Zane Smith challenge the series' longtime veterans, like Matt Crafton, with phenomenal results. Not only did Creed and Smith finish first and second in points, but only two drivers older than 30 – Crafton and

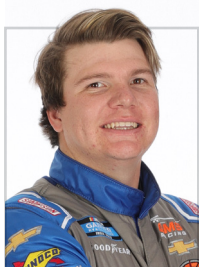
Grant Enfinger – visited the winner's circle.

Enfinger won four races a year ago and earned the pole for the Championship 4 finale at Phoenix, but the veteran Alabama driver led just two laps and finished 13th. He'll be looking for more this season, as will other "Old Guard" drivers like Crafton

and Johnny Sauter.

But they're likely going to have their hands full with the defending champion and a new crop of youngsters.

Here's a look at six drivers who fans should follow from the season opener to the final checkered flag:



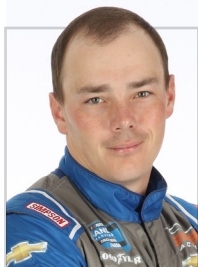
Sheldon Creed

"The Showstopper" could again be the show stealer. An accomplished off-road racer, Creed proved last year that he's mastered the art of racing on asphalt. Only one driver – Matt Crafton – has ever won back-to-back Truck Series championships. Creed will have the speed, but can he avoid trouble and prevail in the playoffs once again?



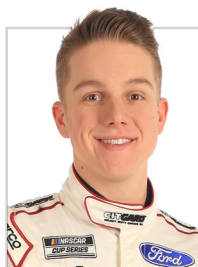
Hailie Deegan

Deegan is another rising star with off-road roots. The daughter of motocross legend Brian Deegan will be in the spotlight from the green flag at Daytona. She finished 16th in her lone Truck Series outing last season. Don't be shocked if she becomes the first female to win a Truck Series race.



Brett Moffitt

The 2018 series champion moves from GMS Racing to Niece Motorsports. Moffitt's proven he can win, provided he has good enough equipment. He's got it with Niece, the team that guided Ross Chastain to three victories in an impressive 2019 campaign. Moffitt could deliver even more for Niece in 2021.



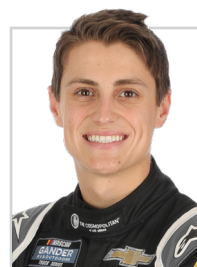
John Hunter Nemecek

Nemecek stepped out of Front Row Motorsports' mid-pack NASCAR Cup Series team and into Kyle Busch Motorsports' title-contending Truck organization. Expect multiple wins this year. There's also plenty of reason to believe Nemecek, who won races with his father's NEMCO team, could be the champion when all is said and done.



Chandler Smith

Smith, Nemecek's new teammate, is another young hot-shoe with the skills to win a title. Only 18, Smith's very good – and he'll only get better. A partial schedule with KBM in 2020 yielded two poles and five top-five finishes in his last six starts. His first win is coming soon.



Zane Smith

The OC's finest – a Huntington Beach, California, native – won twice and finished second in points to Creed on the strength of seven top-five finishes and showings of third, third and second to end the season. Can he top his teammate and bring home the Truck Series championship this time around?

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ZANE SMITH

Fear of Losing Delivers Success

BY JOSEPH WOLKIN

Zane Smith's fear of losing nearly pushed the California native to the championship during his rookie season in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series.

The year prior, Smith ran 10 NASCAR Xfinity Series contests for JR Motorsports and his impressive drives helped him land a full-time ride with GMS Racing for 2020.

The 21-year-old racer made the most of the opportunity, winning a pair of races during a season full of unknowns and without practice at several tracks he'd never even seen.

When all was said and done, the driver of the No. 21 GMS Racing Chevrolet Silverado crossed the finish line at Phoenix Raceway in the runner-up position, capping an outstanding rookie campaign.

Now, Smith is hungrier than ever to bring home more trophies.

What was it like for you to run well right away in the Truck Series?

I feel like it was the mindset of knowing that I had to do something to stand out in the sport. I had to prove something and make something work for what I had. A lot of people go in with that mindset, but it doesn't always work for them. Luckily, it worked for me.

How did crew chief Kevin "Bono" Manion help you get adjusted to running full time?

Bono has been awesome. He was my choice in bringing him over to GMS Racing. They asked me who I wanted my crew chief to be, and I had one truck start with Bono at DGR. I really enjoyed working with him. We've been clicking and we really hit our stride at the end of the year. Our personalities are really similar. I don't think he pushes the issue. We both know what situation we're in and know where we're at. We know what we want at the end of the day.

In what area did you exceed expectations last season?

Adapting to the trucks. Everyone who I've talked to and everything I heard is that the trucks are their own animal because they're hard to get used to. When you have a truck outside of you or anywhere around you, you lose so many counts of downforce. They're just a handful, but my driving style helps me with it in dirty air. It's a lot of fun.

What are your expectations for this season with GMS Racing?

I definitely want more wins. Obviously, I want to have another shot to win the championship. You can't really say to win the championship because it's so far-fetched. You just have to have a shot at it. That's how I look at it. You can't have too many expectations and give yourself a shot.

What has Chevrolet's support over the past two seasons meant to you?

Chevrolet has been a huge help. They're a reason why I'm racing in 2021. Without them and without all of the manufacturers, NASCAR wouldn't be NASCAR. They deserve a lot more credit than they probably get, along with the team owners. My time with Chevrolet has been awesome. I can't wait to see what the future holds with them.

CHEERS TO ZANE SMITH ON A FANTASTIC 2020 RACING CAMPAIGN

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ENASCAR GLADIATORS READY FOR BATTLE

BY ROB TIONGSON

Following an exciting eNASCAR Coca-Cola iRacing Series that saw Nick Ottinger win two races en route to the 2020 series championship, the 26-year-old, 11-year iRacing veteran from North Carolina knows there's no rest for the weary and he's ready to defend his title.

While Ottinger can take heart that he's the defending champ, he'll have heavy competition from perennial favorites such as Ryan Luza, Bobby Zalenski, Michael Conti and Ray Alfalla, to name a few.

Unlike NASCAR's on-track action, an eNASCAR victory during the regular season doesn't result in automatic entry into the playoffs. Thus, while wins are important, consistency is paramount.

In this case, Ottinger has to be the odds-on favorite to defend his eNASCAR crown based on the fact that he always has a Mark Martin-like calmness when he's competing in a high stakes race.

With NASCAR Cup Series competitor William Byron drafting Ottinger for his services last year, it was quite the potent combination with these driven and determined racers.

All things considered, Ottinger is expected to face a stiff challenge from Luza, a two-time eNASCAR Coca-Cola iRacing Series champion from Cypress, Texas, who is looking for redemption after last year's bitter defeat in the season finale at Homestead.

After tangling with Zalenski in the latter part of the race, Luza looks to establish consistency versus the streaky performances that were prevalent a year ago. Despite recording consecutive victories at Homestead, Bristol and Richmond, Luza had eight finishes of 11th or worse down the stretch.

California's Zalenski proved he's more than a road racing expert. While the Virtual Racing School ace visited Victory Lane at the Daytona road course and the Charlotte ROVAL, he also posted a summertime

■ The eNASCAR Coca-Cola iRacing Series delivers thrills to fans who can't get enough racing action.



victory on the familiar 2.5-mile Daytona tri-oval.

With 15 top-10 finishes that included those three wins, Zalenski, a 25-year-old entering his fifth season of eNASCAR competition, looks to build on his runner-up finish with the 2021 championship.

Despite being only 23 years old, Conti is an eNASCAR veteran as he's competed in this series since 2012. Winning the 2014 championship in only his third full-time season, Conti has driven for JR Motorsports for the past two years.

Nary putting a wheel wrong during the grind of the eNASCAR season, Conti scored a pivotal victory last fall at Texas to contend for the championship at Homestead. Placing 10th in the race to score a third-place points finish, Conti hopes to kick this season off on a stronger note by contending for wins from the get-go versus a slow start like in 2020.

While last season may have belonged to Ottinger, Alfalla had something of a comeback campaign with Virtual Racing School. After a 25-race winless drought, Alfalla returned to Victory Lane at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Parlaying consistency with good, steady driving, Alfalla placed a respectable eighth. Naturally, the Floridian hopes to make his strongest case in his "drive for five" titles.

Canada's Keegan Leahy looks to build on a stellar, three-win season in the quest for his first eNASCAR title. Despite a tough stretch during the playoffs, Leahy flexed his racing prowess at Daytona, Indianapolis and Darlington, essentially earning an eNASCAR version of the "triple crown." Undoubtedly, this 27-year-old, fourth-year eNASCAR competitor will be a contender worth watching this season.

At age 18, Garrett Lowe, of Charlotte, North Carolina, made some noise with the Wood Brothers Racing's eNASCAR efforts with a strong seventh-place points finish. Scoring seven top-10 finishes in the unmistakable No. 21 Ford Mustang, this versatile sim racer hopes to make a big splash this year while competing in Bandoleros and Legend Cars.

After battling through a trying season, 2019 eNASCAR Coca-Cola iRacing Series champion Zack Novak hopes to continue the momentum he built with a stellar effort in the iRacing Road to Pro Series. Certainly, the 19-year-old wants to prove he can still wheel it with the best in the eNASCAR arena.

With the new season kicking off in February, the field of 40 talented racers will battle like virtual gladiators chasing the checkered flag. //



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DRIVEN BY DIE-CAST

BY JARED TURNER

As the Official Diecast of NASCAR, Lionel Racing is the leading creator and distributor of diecast collectibles in the United States.

Lionel Racing's mass retail line is merchandised under the NASCAR Authentics brand and includes a vast and impressive array of 1:64-scale diecast cars, 1:64-scale haulers, and 1:87-scale cars that are perfect for adult and youth collectors alike. The company's collector lines (Action Racing Collectables and RCCA) are sold via authorized retailers, team stores, official at-track merchandise haulers and the company's website – LionelRacing.com.

In this exclusive and wide-ranging interview with NASCAR Pole Position's Jared Turner, Lionel Racing CEO Howard Hitchcock discusses COVID-19's impact on the diecast industry, the company's plans for the upcoming NASCAR season, the best way to take up the hobby of collecting diecasts, and much more.



■ Lionel Racing CEO Howard Hitchcock

/// ...The real, true essence of collecting is the stories that you can tell, the memories that this brings, and the joy that the collection gives you...

—HOWARD HITCHCOCK

Do you feel like because fans aren't able to get as up close and personal with the race cars these days that it makes the diecast industry even more important?

First of all, we've always believed the diecast car in our sport is sort of the jersey of the sport. In traditional stick-and-ball sports, folks collect jerseys or wear jerseys to symbolize their fandom for a particular team or player. In our case, there's certainly driver uniform-type stuff, but the reality is the car oftentimes is as big of a star as the driver is in terms of the way people connect to the sport.

For us, the car is kind of a jersey, so us having authentic replications of the car is a very, very important piece of it. I think having our cars as a representation for the fans is as important if not more important

these days. It certainly is a way of fans connecting to the sport while they're not able to physically be there.

How would you encourage a relatively new NASCAR fan to begin the process of becoming a diecast collector?

I think a great entry point into collecting diecasts is the 1:64-scale cars. They're a low price point, you can get a lot of them in a very little space, and really, quite honestly, there's a lot of detail in those cars. Now, they don't have potentially the moving parts and opening features that the larger 1:24-scales have, but it's a great way to dip your toe in the water and get a sense of what's going on and what you like, particularly if you haven't identified with a particular driver, team or maybe sponsor.



■ The No. 48 Jimmie Johnson Ally Throwback and the No. 43 Bubba Wallace #Black Lives Matter diecasts were the No. 2 and No. 3 top-selling diecasts in 2020.

■ The No. 1 diecast in 2020 was Chase Elliott's Cup Series championship-winning ride.

What do you consider to be your signature diecast type?

I think it really depends on how, as a collector, you identify. We certainly would say to anyone that the crown jewel of the collectibles is the RCCA Elite car. The Elite car is the most detailed, it has the most moving parts and features, it is typically almost exclusively produced in lower quantities than the ARC car and therefore it simply is less available.

Now, it is more expensive, so you're likely going to be a really committed collector if you're purchasing Elite cars. If you consider yourself to be a true enthusiastic diecast collector, that's the space you want to be in.

However, the real, true essence of collecting is the stories that you can tell, the memories that this brings, the joy that the collection gives you, and that is ultimately the most valuable aspect in terms of a diecast collectible.

How many diecasts in total are produced by Lionel Racing in a year on average?

In mass retail, we make hundreds of thousands of cars every year. In terms of paint schemes, there's several hundred that we offer. We typically offer the majority of the Cup Series paint schemes. In the Xfinity Series, we offer many. Depending on rights packages, some of the

independent teams we may not have rights to, but we try.

Trucks, it gets a little thinner there again, largely due to rights. But we do try to offer a good selection and certainly anything that seems to prompt interest within the collector base. We're talking about a lot of cars.

How does the time of production from start to finish compare between a 1:24-scale and a 1:64-scale diecast?

They all really go through the same steps. It takes just as much time to make an art file for a 1:64-scale car as it does a 1:24. The good news is that you build the 1:24-scale file and everything kind of runs down from that. The 1:64 file is the same file, just with things deleted.

In terms of scheduling and such, the car bodies go through the painting process, they go through literally the exact same paint booth process as the 1:24-scale; the 1:24-scale just has multiple parts to go through – the roof flaps, the hood, the deck, the chassis, as opposed to the 1:64-scale, which just has the body. The real time savings on the 1:64-scale is probably just in assembly time.

What do you see as the latest and greatest must-have diecast as we move into 2021?

This is a bit of an interesting year because 2021 was supposed to be the launch of the new Next Gen car, which was then delayed to 2022 because of COVID and testing and everything else. So, I think right now it's hard to say. The teams and sponsors are adapting to the fact that we really didn't have a typical season last year in terms of fans being able to see the cars in person. I think we're going to see some similarities in our cars from 2020 to 2021, but going into 2021, some of the hottest cars are going to be some of the late cars coming out of 2020 – Jimmie Johnson's final ride, Chase Elliott's championship, Chase Elliott's Phoenix win. There were a lot of really interesting things that happened toward the end of the year.

I think those are going to be sort of the hottest cars outside of just the new 2021 cars that will debut at Daytona such as Bubba Wallace's new ride; that's probably going to be one of the biggest hits early on because it's completely new and different.

We've been working on the Next Gen cars for quite some time. We had started work on those cars before NASCAR's decision to push them back to 2022. In terms of timing, we are well into those. We're pretty far into the process, and I expect a healthy complement of Next Gen cars at Daytona for the start of the 2022 season. //

HOW WILL NASCAR FANS REMEMBER 2020?

NASCAR endured a tumultuous 2020 season, but Kevin Harvick's nine wins and Chase Elliott's championship energized the sport and left us wanting more in 2021.

BY AARON BURNS

2020 was a year to forget, but there were plenty of moments worth remembering.

Seven-time champion Jimmie Johnson made his final start as a full-time NASCAR driver in November, enjoyed a fifth-place finish as a send-off and moved to IndyCar with Chip Ganassi Racing. Kyle Busch, shockingly, didn't win a race until the end of October when he claimed an emotional triumph at Texas Motor Speedway.

Bubba Wallace left Richard Petty Motorsports at season's end and joined a new team founded by Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin.

Oh, and Elliott claimed his first NASCAR Cup Series championship after winning the final two races of the year – including a charge from the rear of the field in his title-clinching victory at Phoenix.

Elliott's success firmly established the second-generation star as the man to beat in the roaring '20s, but the thing fans will remember most isn't the championship that Elliott won.

It's the championship that Harvick didn't win.

Harvick's regular season dominance defied conventional wisdom. Drivers are supposed to slow down after they turn 40. Jimmie Johnson, Jeff Gordon, Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Tony Stewart are four examples of competitors whose trips to the winner's circle became sparser once they hit 40.

Harvick was supposed to see his results take a dip last year but instead, the veteran driver won nine of the season's first 29 races. Maybe 44 became the new 30 and no one noticed.

Remember, Harvick delivered Stewart-Haas Racing its second Cup Series championship in 2014 and for much of last year, he was every bit as good as in 2014 – if not better.

Until it mattered most.



■ The 2020 season didn't conclude to Kevin Harvick's liking, but the former champ will be back in a big way in 2021.

The playoff points Harvick earned from race victories in the regular season saw him through to the Round of 8 in the playoffs. But a 16th-place finish at Texas Motor Speedway followed by a 17th-place finish at Martinsville Speedway in the season's penultimate race weren't enough to qualify for the Championship 4.

Nine wins led to a fifth-place finish in points.

Is the win-and-advance playoff format to blame when a dominant regular-season performance comes apart in the final 10 races?

"Winning a championship today isn't how (Dale) Earnhardt and (Richard) Petty did it," Harvick said before the playoffs began. "I think when you look at the point standings from (the regular season, where Harvick had a 115-point lead after 26 races), you see why the playoffs were put into effect – trying to make sure that we had an in-

triguing 10 weeks of racing as we went toward the end of the year.

"It's very difficult to get yourself to the last race of the season and be one of those four cars and trying to be able to race for, let alone win, a championship. It's very difficult to put yourself in that position and once you get there, to be able to put everything together against the other three guys."

Nearly everyone expected Harvick's No. 4 Ford to be the one of the four combatants in the championship finale. When he didn't make the cut, we were shocked.

To his credit, Harvick handled it well – probably better than most of his fans.

"You have to put together a few weeks and we didn't put together the last few weeks like we needed to and we just came up short," he said after Martinsville.

"We won nine races, had a great year, and, like I said, the championship is kind of a bonus. It would be great to win it, obviously, but I'd rather go through the year and win races and do the things that we did and just come up short."

Harvick's late-season struggles shouldn't diminish Elliott's remarkable performance, which showed he's earned the right to be the championship favorite this season.

Of all the things we've learned from 2020, though, there's one to keep in mind as this season unfolds:

Don't count out Kevin Harvick. //



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