

# NASCAR hopes for boost after big swings at spicing it up

By JENNA FRYER  
Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — NASCAR has a new sponsor, a new format and welcomes back its most popular driver, all providing optimism for a series eager to halt a steady decline in attendance, ratings and sponsorship.

Money is down across the board and everyone is doing more with less to try to save a buck.

The on-track product for the stock car series officially reports for work Friday at Daytona International Speedway, which hosts the Feb. 26 season-opening "Great American Race." It will kick off a season of hold-your-breath, we-really-hope-this-works efforts by NASCAR, the networks, tracks, teams and drivers to turn things around.

This season begins with Monster Energy roaring into its debut year as title sponsor amid promised marketing to millennials and the opportunity to lure new eyeballs to a sport with an aging audience. Part of the new razzle-dazzle approach is a wholesale redesign of the definition of a

NASCAR race.

Remember how NASCAR just ran in circles for 500 miles nearly every Sunday for hours on end? Well, this year it's about "enhanced competition" in segments broken up over three periods. Think of it like innings in baseball or quarters in football or basketball. More accurately, the quick first two segments are now the appetizer to the longer main event. In the meantime, you get to go grab a beer as the television networks promise to use the breaks between segments to dump all the commercials.

Even better, you won't have to wait for Nationwide's beloved "Water Cooler Dale" commercial to see NASCAR's most popular driver, Dale Earnhardt Jr. is cleared for competition after missing the second half of last season with a concussion. Earnhardt's sidelining absolutely cut into the audience, and had to send shivers down NASCAR's spine over its dwindling cast of superstars.

Jeff Gordon is in the TV booth now, Tony Stewart is retired. They had seven championships between



AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee, File

In this June 30, 2016, file photo, Dale Earnhardt Jr. gestures as he speaks during a news conference before the start of a NASCAR Sprint Cup auto racing practice at Daytona International Speedway, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

them and NASCAR is counting on Earnhardt to bring his fan base back to the track with him.

But even Dale is different! He's married, head-over-heels in love and you can double-click his Instagram account if you like photos of a man who has finally, in his 18th season, settled into his skin and found a peace that he is sharing with the entire world.

"Getting married has been incredible. I wish I would have figured this all out

sooner," he said. "I'm frustrated with myself that I took so long to grow up because I have an amazing wife and she's changed my life. She's really helped me as a person to become better on all fronts — personally, and all my friendships with people and how I react to people and treat people. And, obviously, in my professional life, she's helped me as a driver."

He wants a family, wants to be himself and wants to be in that race car.

"I got real close to not being able to compete and it being someone else's decision whether I competed or not," Earnhardt said of the long medical process to restore his health. "I don't know when I'm going to stop racing, but I want to be able to make that choice and not have it made for me."

NASCAR, though, must prepare for live after Junior, because Jimmie Johnson — who just won his record-tying seventh championship then had Snoop Dogg play at his party — and champions Matt Kenseth, Kevin Harvick and Kurt Busch aren't getting any younger.

NASCAR hopes it's off to a good start with Daniel Suarez, the only non-American in the Monster Energy Cup Series who has become a sensation in his native Mexico. Only he didn't get a promotion for becoming the first foreign-born series champion with an Xfinity Series title last November. No, the 25-year-old Suarez was promoted when Carl Edwards abruptly walked away.

That's right, the guy who came 10 laps away from winning his first champion-

ship last November gave up his seat at Joe Gibbs Racing. The 37-year-old Edwards gave no clear explanation on what he plans to do now, but his refusal to use the word "retire" seemingly left open a return in some form.

But none of this matters unless the racing is good, the characters come out and somebody provides drama. There was some Thursday, the day the garage opened to Cup teams, as the nasty fight between Danica Patrick's old sponsor and her race team. Stewart-Haas Racing has sued Nature's Bakery for \$31 million for dumping the final two years of its three-year contract. Nature's Bakery said Thursday it will fight and won't allow the team to "bully us."

NASCAR, meanwhile, introduced a new penalty structure and the rules for the upcoming season — on Thursday. That's right, the details surrounding the 36 championship races were locked down the day before the buildup officially begins to NASCAR's version of the "Super Bowl."

So we wait to see what this season brings, while NASCAR holds its breath.

# Investor remains optimistic about Seattle arena probability

By TIM BOOTH  
Associated Press

SEATTLE — More than five years into efforts to get a new arena built in Seattle, Chris Hansen remains confident that his goal of being the facilitator for getting the NBA and NHL to Seattle will ultimately be realized.

Even if that means dipping even deeper into his pocket to offer up a privately financed facility.

"We view that as a civic obligation to protect that and ensure that we do our part in bringing a team back," Hansen said. "It was with that mindset, we're not a for-profit enterprise that is attempting to generate a certain level of return on capital as we look at this project to justify it. We're like, 'What can we do just to make this work for the city and hopefully if we do that part, in the really long-term it will work out for us.'"

Hansen spoke with *The Associated Press* on Thursday, his first public comments in nearly two years about his arena efforts. During that time, the Seattle City Council denied a needed street closure that was part of a proposal that included a public contribution to the arena project. The 'no' vote forced Hansen's group to reevaluate the best way to move forward.

"I was surprised that other people didn't see it that way but then again that's what is great about a process like this, is you get to take in everybody's different opinions and considerations into account and we had an opportunity to de-risk it for the city a little bit more and do a little bit more," Hansen said. "Things happen for a reason."

Hansen also decried the reaction disappointed fans had toward the councilmembers after last year's surprising vote and said his group has a responsibility to "head that

off" in the future if another vote goes against his proposal.

"All the misogynistic comments that came out about the councilmembers was just way out of line," Hansen said. "I think it caught everybody off-guard that was in the process."

The answer for moving ahead ended up being a privately financed proposal that may ease the concerns of the same city officials.

Hansen said his group, which currently has five public members including Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, will have an equity stake in the arena and a possible NBA franchise.

He also reiterated the group has held discussions with parties interested in bringing the NHL to Seattle, but any group interested in hockey must be willing to pay the cost of the franchise and also have contribute a financial stake in the arena.

"We haven't attempted to bid on an NHL team. Bidding on an NHL team is their own responsibility," Hansen said.

Hansen must again go before the same City Council to move his privately proposed project forward since the same street closure that was denied a year ago must still be approved for construction to begin. Hansen has also pledged that no arena construction will begin until a team has been secured. He offered to help pay for transportation improvements in the area of the proposed facility.

Hansen's group has just resubmitted its plans. The city is also currently looking at a possible renovation of KeyArena, the former home of the Seattle SuperSonics.

The city issued a request for proposals for modernizing the arena in January and they're due April 12. Two groups — Oak View Group and AEG — have stated they intend to

submit proposals for the arena that could include the potential for housing a professional sports franchise.

While supporting the city's intent to examine options for the city-owned arena, Hansen cautioned that he believes the project at KeyArena could take several years. Hansen said his group fully supports the idea of KeyArena as a music and entertainment venue, but viewing the project as a sports facility could ultimately delay potential opportunities for the NBA or NHL.

"I think if there is the opportunity for the NBA or NHL to expand in the interim, having our project, which is a couple of votes away from being 100 percent shovel-ready, is a lot different prospect to the NBA or the NHL if something is ready to happen now, then sitting back and watching a process that could take a very long time," Hansen said.

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