

NASCAR season begins with Truex reigning, series rebuilding

By JENNA FRYER
AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Martin Truex Jr. has been all over the country during his brief reign as NASCAR’s newest champion.

Since winning his first Cup title in November, Truex has celebrated in Las Vegas, New York, Denver, Charlotte, Toronto and last week, Minneapolis, where he watched his beloved Philadelphia Eagles win the Super Bowl.

It was the final party for Truex, who goes back to work this week along with the rest of NASCAR to get ready for the 2018 season. The season-opening Daytona 500 is Feb. 18, and qualifying for “The Great American Race” is Sunday.

Truex will get back behind the wheel of his No. 78 Toyota at Daytona International Speedway and race in an exhibition all-star event Sunday. It will be the first look at the Colorado-based Furniture Row Racing team since it manhandled the competition most of last year.

Truex led nearly every statistical category in 2017, including notching a series-leading eight victories.

“I feel zero pressure about starting the new season,” Truex said. “We’re comfortable in what we are doing and having a lot of fun at the same time.”

Truex doesn’t have a teammate this year as Furniture Row moves back to a one-car operation. The change is one of the small ripples in a major wave that affected the NASCAR landscape.



In this 2017 file photo, Martin Truex Jr. waves to fans during driver introductions at Daytona International Speedway, in Daytona Beach, Fla. Martin Truex Jr. has been all over the country during his brief reign as NASCAR’s newest champion. Truex will get back behind the wheel of his No. 78 Toyota this weekend at Daytona International Speedway and he’ll race Sunday in an exhibition all-star event.

AP Photo/Terry Renna, File

Erik Jones, who had been on loan to Furniture Row, moved to Joe Gibbs Racing. To make room for Jones, JGR had to bounce Matt Kenseth from his ride even though the two-time Daytona 500 winner didn’t really want to retire.

Kenseth wasn’t alone: Danica Patrick lost her ride, making the Daytona 500 her final NASCAR race, and Kasey Kahne was forced out at Hendrick Motorsports and took a lesser job with Leavine Family Racing that created decent upheaval among the mid-pack

racers.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. retired at the end of last season, but will still have a very heavy NASCAR presence. He will serve as grand marshal for the Daytona 500, will be part of NBC’s broadcast team and has been very clear he wants to be part of NASCAR’s future in a non-driving role.

The on-track attention will focus on NASCAR’s young drivers. Hendrick Motorsports hired Xfinity Series champion William Byron to replace Kahne and slid

Alex Bowman into Earnhardt’s seat. Hendrick still has seven-time champion Jimmie Johnson in the stable as well as budding star Chase Elliott.

Elliott spent the past two years driving the No. 24 but is switching to the No. 9 — the number his Hall of Fame father donned for most of his career. Before Earnhardt Jr. locked down NASCAR’s most popular driver award, Bill Elliott owned the category. With Chase Elliott now in the No. 9 Chevrolet, fans may flock to his camp.

But Elliott is out to win races and not a popularity contest. Entering his third season in the Cup Series, he’s still seeking his first victory.

“There’s guys that people like and there’s guys that people don’t like. That’s what makes the sport, not just one person that everybody likes,” Elliott said.

“Not everybody liked Dale. That’s just the facts. Most people did. The majority did. But a lot of other people have other drivers, too. It’s not just about one person.”

Team Penske has expanded to three cars to add Ryan Blaney to its lineup, and he’s already a hit with fans. Close friend Bubba Wallace got a promotion to the Cup Series this season and will drive for Richard Petty Motorsports.

Wallace is the first black driver to win a national series NASCAR race since 1963. Jones and Daniel Suarez, the only Mexican driver in the Cup Series, make up the other half of Gibbs’ lineup.

The grid is getting younger and younger, and there’s been disagree-

ment among veteran drivers about NASCAR’s push to spotlight the fresh faces.

The fans will be the big winners this year because the younger drivers are more accessible, and the veterans are aware of the need for increased fan engagement.

Wallace said newer drivers have to build brands and find sponsorship, unlike drivers of the past two decades, when fully-funded rides were far easier for no-name drivers to nab on the promise of future success.

“I have 13 (sponsored) races, so I have to put myself out there. I have to sell myself,” Wallace said.

Funding is an issue across all motorsports, and NASCAR’s teams are scratching their heads as they rework budgets.

Very few drivers have just one primary sponsor anymore; most split their season between dozens of brands in various funding roles, and some drivers have to bring their own money just to get a return call on a mediocre ride.

NASCAR is in its own sponsorship watch, too.

It’s the second season of Monster’s entitlement sponsorship of the Cup Series, but there’s been near silence from the company on its future in the sport.

Monster had a splashy debut race in which Monster-sponsored driver Kurt Busch won the Daytona 500, and that race alone was a massive return on its investment. Monster is back on both Busch’s car and as the series sponsor, but interest beyond 2018 is unknown.

BUCKS: Both players break string of Pendleton alums attending Eastern Oregon

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Both will head to the west side of the state for college, with Jerome attending Western Oregon University — an NCAA Division-II school in Monmouth — and Bower going to Pacific University — an NCAA Division-III school in Cottage Grove.

Bower chose Pacific over five other offers from the likes of Eastern Oregon, Linfield and Whitworth. He didn’t receive his first offer until EOU’s on Dec. 7, with Pacific following on Dec. 18. Bower, who plans to study either pre-physical therapy or education, says he has been in contact with Pacific since midway through his junior season, and the relationship he developed with the coaching staff helped seal the deal for the Boxers.

“It was a tough decision, a lot of sleepless nights,” said Bower, who verbally committed to the school on Jan. 23. “But it really came down to what schools could offer me academically and also the best fit for me to become an impact player on

the field. I just built the best relationship with (Pacific) and I really liked the coaches and it was a no-brainer for me.”

Pacific put together a 4-4 overall record in 2017 and finished fourth in the eight-team Northwest Conference with a 4-3 record. The Boxers are led by seventh-year coach Keith Buckley, who revived the school’s football program in 2010 after a 19-year hiatus.

Bower was a two-year starter at quarterback for the Buckaroos, though he flashed his potential as a sophomore when he threw a couple touchdown passes in some trick-play scenarios. After struggling with interceptions and accuracy as a junior, Bower flourished as a senior, throwing for 2,051 yards with 23 touchdowns to earn second team all-district honors.

“Nick is a grinder,” Pendleton head coach Erik Davis said. “He always wanted to be a student of the game. I remember a sit down we had where he asked me what it takes to be a quarterback at the next level and wanted to know it all.”

Davis added, “He was always special ... he had a good arm and could always spin it, as we coaches like to say. But he came in kind of small ... Nick will tell you, he owes a lot to getting into the weight room and really bought in there.”

Jerome has had his future planned out a little longer than Bower has, as the talented wideout committed to Western Oregon on Nov. 5. He chose WOU over an offer from Eastern Oregon as well as a collegiate baseball offer from Blue Mountain Community College.

“I’ve been going down there for four years, because that’s where our team camp is,” Jerome said. “I just grew over the years with the coaching staff down there, the campus, I’ve just always loved it down there.”

Western Oregon had a disappointing 3-8 overall record last season, which broke a string of nine consecutive seasons of a .500 record or better. The Wolves are led by 11th-year coach Arne Ferguson and have Hermiston native Tim Rude on staff as the Defensive Line Coach

and Video Coordinator, who was a primary recruiter for Jerome along with receivers coach Matt Overlin.

Jerome was a three-year starter at receiver for the Buckaroos, though he struggled to stay on the field as he battled through injuries as a sophomore and junior. However, as a senior, Jerome finally showed his full talent as he grabbed a team-high 51 catches for 636 yards with six touchdowns, leading to first team all-district and second team all-state selections.

“Shaw is just a natural athlete,” Davis said. “He really developed as a receiver, and is one of the best I’ve seen as far as route running and being prepared.”

Jerome’s commitment to Western Oregon was extra special for Davis, who is a WOU alumnus and was an assistant coach for the Wolves before coming to Pendleton. And Davis was also in the room with Jerome when WOU offered him his scholarship.

“It holds a special place in my heart,” Davis said of WOU. “It’s pretty cool and it gives me another

reason to head down there for homecoming and to wear the Wolves’ gear.”

Bower and Jerome will be the sixth and seventh former Buckaroo players to be on a college roster next fall, and the first not to be playing just down the road in La Grande for EOU. Both held offers from the Mountaineers and were recruited heavily by their former Pendleton teammates there before deciding to go elsewhere.

“Kai Quinn was a big recruiter for me to Eastern, talking to me at least once a week about it,” Bower joked. “He was pretty good at it, too. Just Eastern wasn’t the place for me.”

Now the two best friends will finish out their final months as Buckaroos before packing up their things and becoming western Oregonians. Though, it still may take some time for it to sink in that they will both be fulfilling a dream of playing college football.

“It’s exciting for sure,” Jerome said with a smile, “but I’m still wrapping my head around the whole thing.”

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