

NASCAR’s Cup Series a three-car race? 2nd half will tell

By **DAN GELSTON**
Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Erik Jones created so much smoke during his burnout that he had trouble breathing afterward.

His first career Cup victory Saturday night at Daytona International Speedway was a needed breath of fresh air in a sport that has failed to see a supposed bumper crop of young talent emerge as bona fide stars.

The 22-year-old Jones had his motorcoach wrapped in toilet paper as a prank and awoke to a steady string of congratulatory tweets ranging from Kyle Busch to Dale Earnhardt Jr.

The feel-good, first-time win gave the sport a vital bump as it capped the official first half of the season.

The question lingers: Is this a sign that perhaps the so-called “Young Guns” are poised to break through over the final 18 races, or was this just an aberration as Jones became the latest benefactor to survive the wild wrecks that litter Daytona?

When the smoke finally cleared around Jones’ No. 20 Toyota, this much was still clear — Busch, Kevin Harvick and Martin Truex Jr. remained the only three drivers in the rarefied air of legitimate championship contenders.

“How many more wins can they get, playoff points can they get?” asked Earnhardt, now an NBC broadcaster. “Will anybody get in there and join the conversation?”

Led by five wins each from Busch and Harvick, the trio have combined for 13 wins over the first 18 points races.

All three have been the class of the field.

All three are former Cup champions.

Can any driver stop one from The Big 3 to ultimately



AP Photo/Terry Renna

Erik Jones celebrates in front of fans after winning the NASCAR Cup Series auto race at Daytona International Speedway on Saturday in Daytona Beach, Fla.

claim the crown?

Asked if Jones’ victory was a momentum-builder for the next generation, third-place finisher AJ Allmendinger cracked, “One of those three are going to win next week, so I don’t know.”

Jones, who joined Daytona 500 champion Austin Dillon as winners at the track this season who only led the final lap, certain has the talent and team to become a consistent winner. Joe Gibbs Racing thought so highly of his talent that it gave 2004 Cup champ Matt Kenseth the boot to make room for Jones.

“Regardless of who I’m replacing or where I’m driving, you want to win races, and you want to be a winner,” Jones said. “You don’t want to be riding around.”

It only seems like 35 other drivers have been riding around all season trying

to play catch-up to Busch, Harvick and Truex. But the first step toward a title is making the playoffs. With eight races left before the field is set, only eight drivers have clinched the automatic playoff spot earned with a win. Clint Bowyer, Joey Logano, Dillon, Brad Keselowski, Kurt Busch, Kyle Larson, Denny Hamlin, Aric Almirola, Ryan Blaney, Jimmie Johnson, Chase Elliott and Alex Bowman held the final eight spots on Sunday — an order sure to become jumbled after next week’s race at Kentucky Speedway.

You know, the track where Truex is the defending race winner.

So it goes, 18 up, 18 ahead.

Here’s what to watch for in the second half of the NASCAR season:

THE BIG 4?

Should Busch, Har-

vick and Truex advance to the championship finale at Homestead — and it’s certainly no lock all three qualify — who would join them as the fourth driver to race for the title?

Bowyer has two wins and has continued to enjoy a career rebirth at Stewart-Haas Racing. SHR has dominated this season with Harvick, Bowyer and Kurt Busch regular contenders and Almirola, in his first season as Danica Patrick’s replacement in the No. 10 Ford, has proved it was the driver and not the car that was the weak link in the top team in NASCAR.

Logano (one win) and Hamlin (winless) have come oh-so-close before to winning the title, and an Elliott championship would link today’s fans with the old-school loyalists who loved rooting for his dad, “Awe-

some” Bill Elliott.

BLAME CHEVY

Remember 2007 when Chevrolets won 26 of 36 races?

Yeah, well, neither does Chevy in a short-term memory sport as it’s mired in its worst slump since the 1980s.

Chevrolet extended its winless streak to 17 races, its longest since a 31-race drought in 1981-82. Bowman’s pole and Dillon’s win at the Daytona 500 remain the lone highlight of the season.

The American manufacturer replaced the maligned Chevrolet SS with the Camaro this year and it hasn’t mattered. Chevy won 13 consecutive manufacturer championships in the premier Cup Series between 2003 and 2015. But Toyota and Ford have clearly closed the gap.

It has to pain the com-

pany to see SHR zip into a new stratosphere after it dumped Chevy for Ford in 2017.

HENDRICK SLUMP

Chevy’s woes are intricately connected to the winless season at Hendrick Motorsports. Sure, growing pains were expected as HMS had to replace retired stars Earnhardt and Jeff Gordon, and former Brickyard 400 champ Kasey Kahne over the last four years. But Elliott, Bowman and rookie William Byron are all not only winless this season — they’re 0 for their careers.

Not even Johnson, the seven-time NASCAR champion, has steadied the ship. He’s stuck in the longest losing streak of his career (39 races) and has just two top-fives this season.

Lowe’s, one of the last remaining corporate giants in NASCAR, announced it was cutting ties with Johnson at the end of the season, and that guarantees a new sponsor on the hood of the No. 48 Chevy in 2019.

Johnson needs checkered flags and checks — pretty heady stuff for any driver, no matter the resume.

“That’s a story line in itself is how and when they’ll return to their past performance and glory,” Earnhardt said.

YOUNG GUNS

When an ISC executive pinned part of the blame on NASCAR’s woes — TV ratings and attendance are still in the tank — on the failure of young talent to become stars, the under-25 crew fired back and said enough was enough with the criticism.

Jones’ win was a step in silencing the doubters.

But the point stands— for NASCAR to try and grow its fan base, it’s time for Elliott, Blaney, Daniel Suarez and Darrell Wallace Jr. to get it together and make their marks on the track instead of social media.

NBA draft eligibility age likely to be changed

By **TIM REYNOLDS**
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — NBA Commissioner Adam Silver is certain that changes are coming to the league.

Some are easy.

Others, not so much.

Speaking after the NBA’s Board of Governors meeting on Tuesday night, Silver said he thinks the league is ready to scrap the rule requiring players to be out of high school for a year before becoming eligible to enter the draft. That one should be relatively simple to move forward now, while notions such as how to find more competitive balance are still a puzzler to the league and its commissioner.

“I’m not here to say we have a problem,” Silver said. “And I love where the league is right now. But I think we can create a better system.”

Part of that better system, he thinks, will be reverting back to the policy that will allow players to go into the league right out of high school — something that should be in place in time for the 2021 NBA Draft, though that time-

line has not been formally announced. Silver was a proponent of making the eligibility age older, up to 20 instead of the current 19, though has changed his stance on that in recent weeks.

“My personal view is that we’re ready to make that change,” Silver said. “It won’t come immediately. But when I’ve weighed the pros and cons, given that Condoleezza Rice and her commission have recommended to the NBA that those one-and-done players now come directly into the league and in essence the college community is saying ‘We do not want those players anymore,’ I think that tips the scale in my mind.”

Michele Roberts, the National Basketball Players Association’s newly re-elected executive director — the players’ union announced a new four-year deal for her earlier Tuesday — has had talks with Silver on the topic, though she stopped short of revealing specifics. Any change to the rule will require that the league’s Collective Bargaining Agreement will have to

be amended.

“Stay tuned,” Roberts said, adding, “I suspect that we’ll have some news in the next few months.”

Now that Silver is on board, that switch should be painless. So, too, will be a relatively minor tweak to free agency rules, that being a likely change to what has been the traditional 12:01 a.m. EDT start time on July 1. Silver said he’s no fan of the all-night news cycle that has accompanied the official start of free agency, and without divulging what will happen he made clear that it’ll be different for 2019.

But creating parity, that one isn’t going to be simple.

Golden State has won three of the last four NBA championships, and this summer saw the Warriors land DeMarcus Cousins for \$5.3 million — a mere pittance by NBA standards for an All-Star, even one recovering from an Achilles’ tear. LeBron James left Cleveland for the Los Angeles Lakers, which will likely make the loaded Western Conference even more competitive.

Making the playoffs out

West will probably be much tougher than getting there out of the East.

“It’s on me and our labor relations committee ultimately to sit with the players and their committee and convince them that there may be a better way of doing things,” Silver said. “By that, meaning change ultimately in the Collective Bargaining Agreement. ... I don’t necessarily think it’s, per se, bad that the Warriors are so dominant. We’re not trying to create some sort of forced parity. What we’re really focused on is parity of opportunity.”

Among other matters Silver addressed Tuesday:

— The governors were briefed on the ongoing talks the league is having with the gaming industry, with sports betting now able to be offered by each state following a ruling in May by the U.S. Supreme Court.

— Silver called it “embarrassing” that the league currently has only one female referee, and said he’s hopeful that will be changed before long. There are 19 female referees at summer league in Las Vegas this month.

ALL-STARS: 11U baseball ends tourney play

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Pendleton push its lead to 7-1 in the fourth inning, and Boatman’s two-run inside-the-park home run followed by run-scoring singles from Schumacher, Wilks, Neveau and Moore helped the lead grow to 14-1 in the fifth.

Brooks and Schumacher both pitched in the game, with Shumacher striking out eight in three innings of relief and Brooks striking out three in two innings. Both allowed two hits and one run apiece and walked three.

Pendleton will play in the state semifinals on Wednesday at 3 p.m.

Pendleton baseball All-Stars ousted at state

The Pendleton 11U Little League Baseball All-Stars’ run at the state tournament came to an end on Tuesday evening as the team lost 8-3 to the Bend North All-Stars, eliminating Pendleton from the tournament.

Connor Cook was 2-for-3 batting with two RBI and Kaden Moore was 2-for-3 with a run scored to lead Pendleton’s offense. Jacob Neistadt, Miller Johnson, Anson Dressler and Vance Nelson picked up one hit apiece for Pendleton.

Pendleton scored first run of the game in the second inning, when Jacob Neistadt single to right to score Art Hill for a 1-0 lead. However, things unraveled in the top of the third inning for Pendleton, when seven fielding errors allowed seven Bend runs to score as Bend took control of the game 7-1.

Pendleton got one run back in the bottom of the third on an RBI single by Connor Cook to score Kaden Moore, and scored its final run in the fifth when Cook singled to left to bring

home Anson Dressler.

Bend will go on to play in the loser’s bracket final on Wednesday with a spot in the state final up for grabs.

Hermiston Legion thumped at home by Kennewick

The Hermiston Legion baseball team’s tough summer took another step back on Tuesday, as the team was swept by Kennewick 13-0 and 11-1.

In Game 1, Hermiston mustered up seven hits with Landon Jones and Ethin Randolph leading the way with two hits each.

Jones got the start on the mound but was replaced in favor of Gavin Hunter. Jones pitched 2 1/3 innings giving up six runs on three hits while walking three batters. Hunter couldn’t keep Kennewick at bay either, after allowing another six runs off 12 hits in 3 2/3 innings toeing the rubber. Randolph closed out Game 1 for Hermiston.

In Game 2, a RBI single off the bat of Randolph got Hermiston on the board early, but Kennewick’s offensive success continued as it handily took another double-digit victory.

Hermiston held its 1-0 lead until the top of the third when Kennewick put up a two spot, followed by five runs in the fourth and four more in the fifth to enforce the 10-run rule.

Hermiston continued to dig deep to try and find a pitcher to stop the streaking Kennewick squad but ultimately Jordan Ramirez got tagged with the loss after three innings of work. Ramirez surrendered six runs on four hits, walked two batters and struck out one. He was also one of only three players who recorded hits — Randolph’s RBI and Sergio Rosales’ single were the others.

MARINERS: Leake allows seven runs in four innings

Continued from 1B

cia went to the mound, and the right-hander quickly walked off the field. Richards has been plagued by injuries during his career and this was just his second start since coming off the disabled list after being sidelined by a left hamstring strain. He struck out eight in his previous outing.

Richards gave up three runs and four hits in 2 2/3 innings. Noe Ramirez (4-3), Cam Bedrosian, Jose Alvarez, Hansel Robles and Taylor Cole combined to pitch 6 1/3 shutout innings in relief.

Mariners starter Mike Leake (8-6) allowed seven runs — five earned — and 11 hits in four innings. Seattle has lost three of four.



AP Photo/Alex Gallardo

Los Angeles Angels’ Albert Pujols watches his three-run home run in front of Seattle Mariners catcher Chris Herrmann during the fourth inning.

TRAINER’S ROOM

Mariners: RHP Felix Hernandez (sore back) was placed on the 10-day dis-

abled list and is expected back in the rotation after the All-Star break. He had not been doing any side work