

MOTOR SPORTS | NASCAR AT DAYTONA

Allmendinger back in 1st Cup race since 2018

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DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — A.J. Allmendinger is back, racing for wins this time, and eager to help young Kaulig Racing reach the big show.

Allmendinger will run his first Cup race since the 2018 season finale in Kaulig's first Cup race not at a superspeedway. The team last week made its second Daytona 500 — a critical first step in trying to become a full-time Cup team — and now its dusted off of 'Dinger to take another shot Sunday on Daytona's road course.

Allmendinger is a ringer with 15 appearances in the Rolex 24 sports car race in Daytona. Nearly everyone else? The bulk of the Cup field ran it for the very first time last August, when the pandemic pushed Daytona's winding 14-turn, 3.61-mile circuit onto the calendar for the first time.

His familiarity with Daytona made Allmendinger the smart pick for Matt Kaulig to take another step forward. NASCAR added Sunday's road course race to the schedule in December and Kaulig persuaded his "trophy hunter" Allmendinger to help pull the team to the top level.

"I am pumped to be racing in the Cup Series for Kaulig Racing," Allmendinger said. Allmendinger was weary of the grind when he lost his job at the end of 2018. He had no desire to drive for mediocre teams just to have a seat. He decided to move on with his life.

He planned to do television work and maybe moonlight for team owners he considers friends. Kaulig kept Allmendinger engaged in 2019 by giving him quality cars that could win in five Xfinity races. The program swelled to 11 races last season and the "Trophy Hunter" had three victories in 16 starts.

Allmendinger was helping Kaulig grow a program. The team started in 2016 and this season Allmendinger will run full time for the Xfinity championship as one of three Kaulig contenders. He'll also drive select Cup races as part of Kaulig's development.

Having a central role in Kaulig's push to the top has made NASCAR enjoyable again for Allmendinger. He remembered last week when Kaz Grala made his first Day-



A.J. Allmendinger climbs out of his car in victory lane after winning a NASCAR Xfinity Series race in Concord, North Carolina, in October.

tona 500 start just how special the sport had once been to him.

"I was standing next to Kaz by the car during driver intros and I think veterans sometimes, we lose sight of how big the 500 is," Allmendinger said. "When you are just standing there and you see somebody who has made his first 500, his eyes lit up — it made me feel good."

Track change

NASCAR this week tweaked the backstretch chicane on the Daytona course after dirt and grass played a pivotal role in the Feb. 9 messy Busch Clash.

Drivers in that exhibition learned the hard way not to cut that chicane because in short-cutting some asphalt they were dragging debris all over the speedway. Martin Truex Jr. wrecked while leading when he drove through dirt; others complained about windshield visibility.

NASCAR, based on driver suggestions, added rumble strips to the backstretch chicane to prevent drivers from using the grass. The rumble strip to the driver's right is about 36 feet long; the strip to the driver's left is about 30 feet.

NASCAR champion Chase Elliott wasn't convinced the strips were necessary.

"If there's dirt on the track, don't run through the dirt, that's pretty simple," Elliott said. "As long as there's grass there, I'd say there's going to be dirt underneath."

Going for 5

Elliott has won the last four points-paying Cup road races dating to 2019, a streak that includes NASCAR's debut on Daytona's course last August.

He fell short in the Clash after spinning good friend Ryan Blaney in the 13th of the 14 turns as the two raced for the victory. Kyle Busch cruised past Elliott and Blaney for the win. Blaney had words with his buddy as they stood alongside Blaney's wrecked car.

Elliott was remorseful for ruining Blaney's race, but the Cup champion said he probably wouldn't change how he raced.

"If I'm not trying to win, then what am I doing? And I think that's pretty cut and dry, right?" Elliott said.

Elliott is bound to be just as aggressive Sunday when he looks for a fifth consecutive road course victory. It would be his sixth overall and tie him for third on the career list with — get this — NASCAR greats Bobby Allison, Richard Petty, Ricky Rudd and Rusty Wallace.

Elliott in just five years has filled NASCAR's vacancy for king of the road. Jeff Gordon's record nine wins and Tony Stewart's mark of eight are within reach for the 25-year-old.

McDowell's momentum

Daytona 500 winner Michael McDowell has a strong opportunity Sunday to give Front Row Motorsports the best start in team history.

The team has always concentrated on its road course and superspeedway programs because those circuits give small teams a competitive chance. These are the exact tracks where FRM thought it would do well, and a pandemic scheduling change gave FRM a legitimate two-week chance.

The longshot Daytona 500 win earned McDowell his first playoff berth and FRM now is positioned to build a once unthinkable cushion. McDowell was 10th in NASCAR's debut on Daytona's road course last August.

This road course race was added to NASCAR's schedule in December because COVID-19 restrictions would not allow a stop at Fontana, California. It took maneuvering to make it work and Homestead-Miami Speedway, the original second race of the season, was pushed back one week into Fontana's original dates.

The Daytona road course was wedged into the open slot, creating two weekends of very different racing that very much suits Furniture Row. The team can now take gambles it never would dare before, and now McDowell can seriously attempt another upset. This one would make him just the sixth Daytona 500 winner to also win the next race.

NASCAR goes next to Homestead to begin a stretch of oval racing — typically the time the top teams begin to pull away.



Bend's Joey Janssen was named Route Setter of the Year for 2020 by USA Climbing.

Rocking

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"They were appreciative of that. It's a big event for a small community, and it was quite an honor to have that for a couple of years."

The USA Climbing website (usacimbing.org) noted that the Bend Rock Gym consistently hosts local and championship events.

"Not a year goes by that BRG doesn't host at least one championship, and they will often host two, including stepping up on short notice when hosting at another gym fell through for logistical reasons," the website noted. "Everyone with BRG is ready to step up when they're needed. From the setting team to the front desk workers, BRG is a family that is always looking out for others."

Bend Rock Gym's Joey Janssen was also honored as route-setter of the year by USA Climbing. Janssen designs the different routes — positioning the hand and foot holds on the wall at varying levels of difficulty — for events and competitions, both for youth climbers and adults.

"He has to be in the mind of a 9-year-old, and then on up to 17 and 18," Stone said of Janssen. "It's a different skill at each age level. And it's important to them to be able to say at the end of the day, the top climber was really the top climber. He's a tremendous asset. He's been all over the country setting national events."

USA Climbing said that Janssen — who has worked at the Bend Rock Gym for about 10 years — is an integral part of both setting and organizing championship events.

"He displays a love of setting and competition, always bringing new levels of creativity to his route-setting," usacimbing.org noted about Janssen. "His creativity and artistry in stacking volumes, color-coding

problems by age category for easy navigation, makes every event memorable for competitors and spectators."

Like many businesses, the Bend Rock Gym shut down in March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the country. Stone said he laid off much of his staff. But the gym reopened in June at about 25% capacity and business started to pick up by September. November was looking to be the first month since the spring shutdown that the gym would break even, but then came the shutdown the week before Thanksgiving.

When Deschutes County was moved down to high risk by the Oregon Health Authority earlier this month, the Bend Rock Gym reopened at 25% occupancy, or 50 people total, in each of its three buildings, which total 30,000 square feet just off Reed Market Road in southeast Bend.

"It's been a breath that was much needed," Stone said. "We need more. I need to be able to continue to stay open and increase our volume. I'm hopeful. We have a much skinnier operating budget and profile than we had before COVID. I think it'll be five years before I'm back to repairing the damage that has been done."

The gym has started offering two-hour sessions to members by reservation only but does not currently offer walk-ins.

"We'll start slowly," Stone said. "We have to get the systems all back up and get the employees back. Some of them have gone on to other jobs. Many of them — they're climbers — are on road trips."

He added that most members of the Bend Rock Gym will take whatever climbing they can get at this point.

"People are stressed to the max," Stone said, "and they really need an outlet."

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Osaka

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She never has been past the third round at the All England Club or Roland Garros.

Even more revealing was Osaka's response.

Asked whether her first non-hard-court Slam trophy will come on clay or grass, she said: "Hopefully clay, because it's the one that's sooner."

She is not about biding her time or patient improvement.

And she's been thinking about where she needs to improve.

"It was one of her goals this year to play well outside of the hard courts. She's still very young. It's time to grow on those surfaces. She also believes she can do well and, I'm sure, with the right preparation, with a few, maybe, tactical (and) technical adjustments, we're going to do well," said her coach,

Wim Fissette. "She's the person that wants to grow."

Part of what makes Osaka special is embracing challenges and knowing what she stands for.

That's been the case off the court and on.

With a racket in her hand, it's about, as Fissette put it, being able to "love big matches and big moments."

Osaka wanted to face 23-time major champion Serena Williams in the semifinals, for example.

No fear there.

"She was like when I bring my kids to the toy store: They are very excited. And Naomi was excited to go on court with Serena. It's just beautiful to see," Fissette said. "At the end, this is what you train for, right? To be on the biggest stage with the best player of all time, Serena."

Away from the game, Osaka says, it took time to find her



Naomi Osaka celebrates after defeating Jennifer Brady to win the Australian Open in Melbourne, Australia, on Saturday.

voice and express her views.

She was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father, and she moved to the United States when she was 3. Last August, she was the first tennis pro to join athletes from other sports in walking out to

protest the police shooting of a Black man in Wisconsin.

"Before I am an athlete," Osaka tweeted at the time, "I am a black woman."

On her way to the U.S. Open title in September, Osaka wore masks bearing the names of

seven Black victims of violence to draw attention to racism and police brutality.

On Saturday, Osaka was asked whether there was a message she wanted associated with her latest triumph, which made her 4 for 4 in Slam finals.

"Honestly, for me, when everything happened in New York, I got really scared, because I felt like it put me into this light that was a non-athletic light that I've never been in before," she said. "So I feel like there is a lot of topics that people suddenly started asking me about that I completely didn't know about at all. For me, I only like to talk when I'm knowledgeable about the subject or at least know, like, one tiny grain of what I'm about to start talking about. So for me, I just came into this tournament just thinking purely about tennis."

And yet, in the aftermath of winning the trophy, she was

ready to think about a larger role, too.

Many looked at her win against Williams as a passing of the mantle. Osaka also won their meeting in the 2018 U.S. Open final — who could forget that one? — and has eclipsed the 39-year-old American as the highest-earning female athlete because of millions in sponsorship deals.

But to Osaka, Williams is still, and always will be, an idol and an inspiration, a player whose example she wanted to follow.

And the best way to repay that, Osaka figures, is to hold that role for others.

"Hopefully I play long enough to play a girl that said that I was once her favorite player or something," Osaka said. "For me, I think that's the coolest thing that could ever happen to me. ... That's how the sport moves forward."

Shiffrin

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One good moment was this: Having just seen her record streak of four straight slalom world titles ended by Austrian upstart Katharina Liensberger in emphatic fashion, Shiffrin was the first racer to run over and congratulate the new champion.

"If this was last year, I would be maybe disappointed but not as grateful for the good moments in the day," Shiffrin said, referring to her nearly two-second deficit behind Liensberger.

This season, though, is a

different one for Shiffrin. She took a 10-month break from racing last year after the death of her father, Jeff Shiffrin, then had her comeback slowed by the coronavirus pandemic and a back injury.

No wonder she wasn't about to commit to taking the same, more relaxed approach to next year's Beijing Olympics.

"I would like to," she said. "It just totally depends on how next season is going leading up to that. Because I can feel amazing now, with a good mentality and then that totally changes. I feel like this past year lasted like 20 years. So I don't know what's in store for

the next year. But I imagine it's going to be eventful."

Having never before entered so many races at a worlds or Olympics, Shiffrin leaves Cortina with gold in combined, silver in giant slalom and bronze in super-G and slalom.

Perhaps even more remarkable is that Shiffrin has now medaled in 10 straight races at worlds — and in 11 of her 13 career starts at her next biggest event after the Olympics.

"I do have a safe now," she said. "So I'll probably put (the medals) in there. Or maybe hang them up."

"I like to put the globes (the crystal globes for World Cup

titles) around the house, because they're super pretty. But people ask to see the medals and I'm like, 'Oh yeah, sure, I'll get them.' But otherwise it just seems like a whole lot of value for me to possibly lose. So just put them somewhere where you just don't touch it."

While Shiffrin showed impressive speed last week in her first super-G race in more than a year, she won't be competing when the World Cup resumes next weekend in nearby Val di Fassa with two downhills and a super-G.

"No, I've got to go shave two seconds off my slalom," she said with a smile.



Mikaela Shiffrin competes in the slalom at the World Championships in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, on Saturday. Shiffrin took bronze.