

## MOTOR SPORTS | NASCAR CUP SERIES

## A year later, NASCAR reflects on a COVID-changed sport

BY DAVID BRANDT

Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz. — The big story at Phoenix Raceway one year ago was the remarkable recovery of veteran driver Ryan Newman, who strolled around the infield sipping a soft drink just weeks after a horrific crash in the Daytona 500 had everyone fearing the worst.

It was an entertaining race on a beautiful Sunday afternoon with Joey Logano holding off Kevin Harvick for his second win of the season. Kyle Larson finished fourth, continuing his rise with Chip Ganassi Racing.

Then came COVID-19, and everything in auto racing — and the world — changed.

“Gosh, it doesn’t feel like a year ago,” driver Ryan Blaney said.

After 12 long months, it’ll be a much quieter scene for this year’s spring race in the desert, with a smaller crowd, masks, social distancing and everything else that’s been deemed necessary for sports to continue during a pandemic. It’s a compromise that’s become somewhat normal, even if it’s less than ideal.

“I miss a lot,” Logano said. “Obviously, the fans not being at the racetrack, the energy that they bring is second to none, so that quietness is awful. I like hearing the cheering, the boo-



John Locher/AP

**Bubba Wallace, left, congratulates Kyle Larson after Larson won a NASCAR Cup Series race on March 7 in Las Vegas.**

ing and everything in between. I like that. I like having our sponsors at the racetrack and people walking through the garage thinking it’s the coolest thing they’ve ever seen when they see these cars up close.”

NASCAR’s season was paused for two months after Logano’s win at Phoenix. The sport was one of the first in the nation to return on May 17 in Darlington, South Carolina, during a one-day event in front of no fans.

The slow march to normalcy continues in Phoenix.

“Hopefully, we’re making progress on this thing of getting the world healthy again, but it’s changed the way that

our sport has operated,” Blaney said. “It’s changed the way everything has operated, from sports to businesses and things like that, and I’m looking forward to the day we can all get healthy again and put this all behind us and get back to normal life.”

## Larson’s return

Little did anyone know that Larson’s fourth-place finish in Phoenix would be his last race with Chip Ganassi Racing.

The driver’s use of a racial slur while participating in an online race last April cost him his job, his reputation and his ability to attract the corporations that fund a race team.

Larson wasn’t sure he’d race in NASCAR again until Rick Hendrick took a chance on a him.

Last weekend at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, Larson raced to his first NASCAR victory since he was reinstated from a nearly yearlong suspension. He was hired by Hendrick Motorsports when NASCAR said the suspension would lift at the start of this year.

Bubba Wallace, NASCAR’s only Black fulltime driver, was one of the first competitors to congratulate Larson.

“It meant a lot for Bubba to come to victory lane,” Larson said. “He’s always believed in me. That was special.”

## Homecoming for McDowell

Daytona 500 winner Michael McDowell will be racing close to his hometown of Glendale, Arizona, where he grew up racing karts before moving to North Carolina to pursue his NASCAR dreams.

The 36-year-old McDowell was an unlikely Daytona winner, earning his first Cup victory in his 358th start.

McDowell returned to his old kart track in Glendale on Thursday, where he raced under the lights against local kids aged 7 to 16. He signed autographs and brought his Daytona 500 trophy for fans to check out.

## Oregon State

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Then there’s Gulbranson, the big-armed true freshman who gave OSU a taste of what’s possible by leading the Beavers on a touchdown drive during the final two minutes against Arizona State.

“They get the whole spring, and all the reps in the spring,” Lindgren said. “We’ll know more after the spring. Our plan right now is to get Ben and Chance as many reps with the first two groups as we can.”

In a sense, Lindgren says 2020 wasn’t completely fair for Nolan and Gulbranson, as neither got much of last spring to develop. Spring practice was cut short after four practices due to the pandemic. Then there was the disjointed off-season, where the 2020 season was on, then off, then on again in an abbreviated fashion.

Spring practice gives Lindgren and the offensive coaches 15 good days to evaluate Nolan, a dual-threat type quarterback, and the pro-style Gulbranson.

How it plays out heading into preseason camp is anyone’s guess. It’s partially based on how Gebbia bounces back from his injury, and what happens this spring between Nolan and Gulbranson.

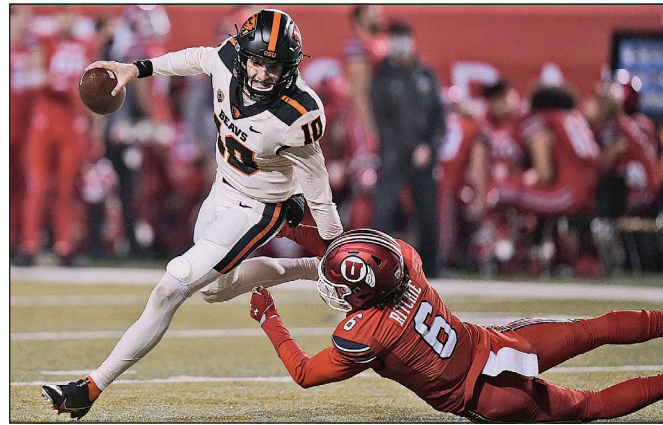
“Maybe one of those guys really runs with it in the spring, and then we’ve got some decisions, or maybe a competition potentially,” Lindgren said.

If Gebbia is back to 100 percent, Lindgren said that it’s possible he heads into camp with a slight edge, even if Nolan or Gulbranson shines in spring ball.

“I do think Tristan was on an upward trend, and we’re confident what he can do with what he can do,” Lindgren said.

In each of coach Jonathan Smith’s first three years at Oregon State, the starting quarterback job went down to the final week of preseason camp. In 2018, Jake Luton beat out Conor Blount for the job, and again in 2019, this time over Gebbia. Last season, Gebbia won the starting dual over Nolan and Nick Moore.

Expect nothing different in



Rick Bowmer/AP file

**Oregon State quarterback Chance Nolan (10) breaks the tackle of Utah safety Nate Ritchie (6) in December in Salt Lake City. Nolan started three games for the Beavers in 2020 after Tristan Gebbia was injured late in a game against Oregon. Oregon State was competitive but lost all three games.**

2021.

“Any time you’ve got some talented guys in the room, and they’re all on a level playing field, got a little taste of game action ... I’d be shocked if didn’t go to the end,” Lindgren said.

As for the production of Oregon State’s quarterbacks in 2020, it was a process. Gebbia was the only quarterback

on OSU’s roster with a career FBS start, and that was only one game. Lindgren said they knew there would be a learning curve at quarterback. He takes a glass-half-full approach to what he saw.

“We didn’t feel like we played at the level at that position that we need to,” Lindgren said. “But I think those guys learned a ton, got some good experi-

ence. But we’ve got to play at a higher level this fall.”

Lindgren said it wasn’t all on the quarterbacks. OSU lost seven starters on offense, four that ended up on 2020 NFL rosters. The Beavers never landed on a consistent group of receivers, and given that, Lindgren said “we never really clicked. Then Tristan got hurt ... I never thought we got into sync passing game-wise.”

The lack of spring football in 2020 was the biggest setback in Lindgren’s opinion. It hurt Gebbia to a degree in building a relationship with receivers, but Lindgren said it significantly impacted Nolan, as the JC transfer was trying to learn OSU’s offense.

“I think we missed some reps and it showed,” Lindgren said.

In retrospect, Lindgren said he wishes they had dialed back the playbook, particularly when Nolan took over starting duties.

“We probably should have done a little bit less and tried to get a little bit more detailed on plays we used,” he said.

## Outdoors

Continued from B1

“It’s both heartening and a little bit mind-blowing to think how things are going this year,” said Richard Hodges, the Nordic director at White Pine Touring in Park City, Utah. “It’s been really fun — a lot of work, but really fun. All we’re doing is trying to get people outside to go play in the snow.”

Outdoor enthusiasts are certainly stepping outside to play in whatever environment — when pandemic restrictions permit it, of course, and in accordance with stay-at-home guidelines. But the numbers illustrate that many are heeding the call to the wild:

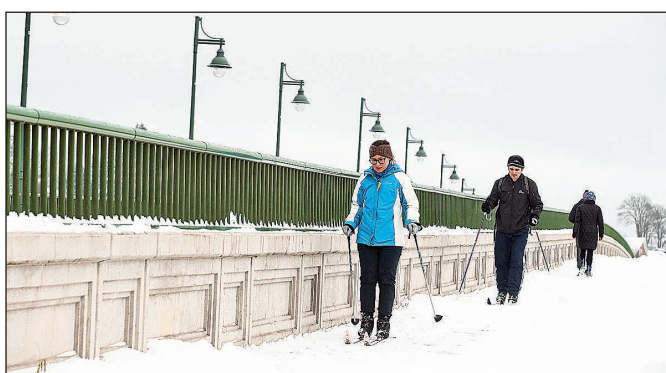
- 8.1 million more Americans went hiking in 2020 compared to ‘19, according to a preview of an upcoming outdoor participation report from the Outdoor Foundation, the philanthropic wing of the Outdoor Industry Association.

- 7.9 million more went camping last year.

- 3.4 million more participated in freshwater fishing.

The foundation’s research also reflected a decline in activity for most age groups and across all income levels. There was a 52.9% surge in outdoor participation, an increase from 50.5% in 2018 and 50.7% in 2019.

The upward trend in hiking doesn’t come as a surprise to Sandra Marra, the president and CEO of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.



Meegan M. Reid/Kitsap Sun via AP file

**Erin Jaske and Scott Sandridge cross-country ski across the Manette bridge in Bremerton, Washington, on a snowy day in February.**

From nearly day one of the pandemic, a myriad of hikers have been trekking along the Appalachian Trail, which encompasses about 2,200 miles (3,540.6 kilometers), traverses through 14 states and sees about 3 million-plus visitors a year.

Word of caution before going: Check the weather reports and dress accordingly. And don’t park on someone’s property, even if the trailhead lots are full.

“What’s happened is a whole bunch of people that never really recreated outdoors like this, suddenly discovered the fact there are these easily accessible trails not that far from their backyard,” Marra explained. “That’s wonderful. But we’re finding a lot of people are out there not prepared for just how rugged this trail is. It’s not a walk on the bike trail in the middle of the city.”

Daily walks — “constitutional” in another era, per-

haps — are on a rapid rise, too. No numbers needed to reflect that — just meander down any block or street in any city or any country.

In New York City, when the weather is good, people are out in droves — conjuring images of Edith Wharton characters strolling the promenade. It just so happens there is an Edith Wharton Walking Tour in New York. For now, it’s limited to an online stroll through the Gilded Age.

It’s the Gliding Age for cross-country skiing, which hasn’t seen popularity like this since the 1970s after waxless skis were introduced. Equipment is quickly leaving the shelves. Rentals have been booming, too.

“Every single day of the week is like a weekend day,” said Hodges, who has about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) of tracks at the Nordic center in Park City. “I’m stunned about the seemingly limitless interest right

now in cross-country skiing.”

Reese Brown, the executive director of the trade group Cross Country Ski Areas Association, envisioned this sort of surge happening after bikes — along with other outdoor equipment — became such a hot commodity during the summer.

“We started to see what was happening with biking and hiking and this mass flocking to the outdoors by people who generally would be running on a treadmill somewhere,” Brown said. “That’s when it kind of switched for us as an industry. We were like, ‘Wait a second. This is going to continue.’”

Golf remains on the upswing, too, according to an engagement study by the National Golf Foundation. There were almost 502 million rounds, which was the most since 2006 and the biggest yearly increase since 1997 — the season Tiger Woods captured his first major championship. The number of active, on-course golfers in the U.S. grew by half a million in 2020, the study found, up to 24.8 million.

The sport also grew by double digits around the world. Golf Australia said participation has increased by up to 15% since the lockdowns went into effect, with golf memberships up by 30% in the 24-39 age group.

Already popular in Sweden, the number of rounds increased a whopping 42%. And the first 18-hole course open to the public in Spain, Golf

Olivar de la Hinojosa, saw an increase of 30% in the number of rounds played. Gregorio González-Irún Velasco, the general director of a company that oversees Golf Olivar and another golf course in the Madrid community, said golf schools and driving ranges have been operating near capacity for some time.

Ana Fernández de Diego, a Spanish professional golfer who owns and teaches at Golf Video Escuela, said she has seen unprecedented growth in the sport.

“Golf is one of the things that people can do without any risks now,” she said. “It’s in open air, with safe distancing, and it gives you the luxury of not having to wear a mask for four or five hours.”

Tennis courts were popular as well with nearly three million first-time players, according to data cited by the United States Tennis Association through the Physical Activity Council’s Participation report. In all, more than 21.6 million Americans took the courts in 2020.

“It’s evident that many people recognize tennis as the ideal social-distancing sport,” USTA CEO Mike Dowse said in a story on the tennis association’s website.

Tennis is not alone. Hiking, anyone?

“This is the new future for us. The new reality,” Marra said. “There’s huge opportunity to build a whole new generation of land stewards.”

## Pitchers

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There’s even talk about using six-man rotations for some teams, including the Seattle Mariners, who used the strategy for much of 2020 during the 60-game schedule.

“Our primary thought behind it is to preserve the health and well-being of our pitchers,” Seattle GM Jerry Dipoto said. “In an era where teams are trying to find a competitive advantage by throwing their starters for shorter lengths of time and just running them harder, we feel like our advantage, our competitive advantage is by keeping our pitchers healthy and having our best pitchers pitch over the length of the season, rather than the potential dangers of running them into the injury.”

The Detroit Tigers have several young pitchers they’re trying to bring along slowly and new manager A.J. Hinch said the six-man rotation is a possibility.

“We’ve got a lot of guys that we’re wanting to stretch out and give a look, and obviously there’s a competition going on for five or six spots, depending on what we go with,” Hinch said.

But the strategy might not be a great decision for every team. The five-man rotation has been a durable staple for MLB teams over the past 30 to 40 years, even as sabermetrics have changed many of the game’s strategies.

The math is fairly simple. In a five-man rotation, pitchers make about 32 starts per season. Assuming an average of about six innings per start, that’s 192 innings through a 162-game schedule.

In a six-man rotation, the number of starts goes down to 27. At six innings a start, that’s 162 innings in a season, or 30 less than a pitcher in a five-man rotation.

Certainly, that means pitchers get more rest. But it also means a staff ace isn’t on the mound as much.

For teams like the Washington Nationals (Max Scherzer), New York Yankees (Gerrit Cole) or Los Angeles Dodgers (Clayton Kershaw and Trevor Bauer), that doesn’t seem ideal.

Colorado manager Bud Black is one who plans to stick with a five-man rotation if possible.

“A lot of times it’s what we can condition our players to do and right now our starting pitchers across baseball are conditioned to throw every fifth day,” Black said. “We can go on and on about pitch counts and 200 innings and all the things that go in with that, but we as an industry have created some of these standards — good or bad.”

Teams won’t necessarily have to go to a six-man rotation to preserve their arms. There are other strategies available, including fewer innings per start or skipping an occasional start when the schedule allows.

“I’m not in the logistics business so for me to try and gameplan would be above my pay grade,” Gallen said. “But there’s things I imagine you could do throughout the year. Maybe take a look at days off or whatever it is, push a start back.”

The goal is to avoid a situation where Gallen is shut down during important games in September or the playoffs. The Washington Nationals took a lot of heat in 2012 when they decided to sit young ace Stephen Strasburg during the playoffs. He was coming off an injury the year before and capped at about 160 innings.

The Nationals — who won 98 games that year — ended up losing to the St. Louis Cardinals in the NL Division Series. In baseball careers with finite chances at postseason glory, it was undeniably a lost opportunity.

“That would be the last time you would want to be sitting on the sideline,” Gallen said.

The flip side? Seven years later in 2019 the Nationals won it all and a healthy Strasburg was named the World Series MVP.