

## MOTOR SPORTS | NASCAR

## Harrison Burton, 20, set for Cup Series debut at Talladega

BY JOHN ZENOR

Associated Press

TALLADEGA, Ala. — Jeff Burton, the former NASCAR driver, sees some benefits to his son making his Cup Series debut at Talladega Superspeedway.

Jeff Burton the father is more anxious about it.

“As mom and dad, it’s going to be a little nerve-racking,” Jeff Burton said. “Obviously Talladega is a nerve-racking place.”

Harrison Burton, all of 20 years old, will make his debut on NASCAR’s top circuit Sunday, barreling onto a track that can prove harrowing even for the most veteran drivers. It’s not always easy on the parents either, even one who won 21 Cup races, though none of the victories came on the 2.66-mile oval known for its wrecks.

The elder Burton, now a commentator for NBC Sports, said he even got nervous walking in on Harrison’s film session from old Talladega races. Harrison, the reigning NASCAR Xfinity Series rookie of the year, will drive the No. 96 Toyota for Gaunt Brothers Racing this weekend.

He is set to become the first driver born in the 21st century to run a Cup Series race. This will be his eighth stock car start on a superspeedway and fourth at Talladega. He was 23rd in ‘Dega last October, his best finish at the massive track.

Burton said he definitely doesn’t feel comfortable about Talladega racing, but feels “comfort with the discomfort.” He is familiar with the track and the intensity of stock car racing’s top drivers from growing up in a racing family.

“Those Cup guys are aggressive, man,” Harrison said. “Those guys are



Steve Helber/AP

Cousins Harrison Burton, left, and Jeb Burton talk prior to the start of the rain-delayed NASCAR Xfinity Series race at Martinsville Speedway in Martinsville, Virginia, on April 11.

all about wrecks every lap. And being prepared for that and understanding that there’s going to be discomfort and trying to find a way to handle that adversity is something I’m excited about.

“It would probably be a little bit more simple to go to a short track and just kind of run where you’re going to run and do all that,” he said. “But gosh, it’s a crazy opportunity. I’m excited for it.”

Harrison Burton is scheduled to start 39th on Sunday, a day after making start No. 50 in the Xfinity Series. Starting in the back of the pack and taking some time to get acclimated to the car isn’t such a bad position for a youngster, especially with the absence of practice time these days.

“It’s a race track where he really

doesn’t have to just take off and have all the pressure of staying on the lead lap and all those kind of things,” Jeff Burton said. “He can kind of work up to understanding the car.”

Burton will be behind the wheel for the part-time team’s fourth Cup race this season. Veteran Ty Dillon ran the previous three races.

Burton won four Xfinity Series races last season with 15 finishes in the top five. His best finishes through the first seven races of this year entering Saturday were third at Daytona and Atlanta.

Ryan Blaney, who won at Talladega in each of the past two years, said he was struck by how quickly everything happens in his first go at the Cup level. “I remember it just happens quick,

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and you and your spotter have to be in sync with your movements and kind of how you’re going about your race and things like that and your lanes,” Blaney said. “That’s something that he’ll learn very quickly and I’m sure he’ll pick it up right away. . . . You can’t really prepare for that, you just have to experience it.”

Harrison, who started racing at age 4, is used to being the young kid on the track. Burton was the youngest Division I winner in the NASCAR Whelen All-American Series in 2014 at age 14. The following year he became the youngest driver to compete in the K&N Pro Series West.

With COVID-19 restrictions, Jeff and Kim Burton won’t get to hang out with their son before the start of his first Cup race. They plan to watch either from the stands or a family suite, and will probably have some white-knuckle moments along with Harrison.

“It’s just a crazy race track,” the elder Burton said. “It always has been, but it’s something that’s part of our racing. If you want to race and you want to be in NASCAR, Talladega and Daytona are two places you’re going to go and you’re going to go there often.”

## Slama

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Slama graduates this spring with a bachelor’s degree. She plans to work on a master’s in business administration next year, but Slama’s long-term goal is to attend physical therapy school.

That is, once Slama has exhausted professional golf opportunities.

Slama says she’ll assess how she’s playing after the OSU’s 2022 season as to whether she’ll attempt a run at the LPGA.

In the meantime, Slama has a chance to become the best player in Oregon State history.

The top three season scoring averages at OSU belong to Slama. Her career scoring average is more than a stroke better than No. 2. Slama is tied for career tournament victories, and has more top-10 finishes than any Beaver. She’s the only player to earn first-team all-conference honors.

“I’ve always looked at Oregon State sports my whole life and been a huge fan. To be one of the best would be really amazing,” said Slama, a Salem native.

Unless Slama wins an NCAA title, there will be some debate as to whether she’s Oregon State’s best ever. Because there is a national champion in the school’s history, even if it’s not reflected

in the OSU women’s golf records.

In 1974, Oregon State’s Mary Budke won the AIAW national title. It was before women’s golf was under the NCAA umbrella.

Women’s golf was loosely a sport at Oregon State. Budke, who became a doctor and is now retired, said they had no more than four players on the team during any year of her college career. Practice wasn’t organized; it was on the individual.

Golf certainly wasn’t year-round. Budke also played volleyball and basketball at Oregon State. Spring was a time for golf.

But make no mistake. Budke, who grew up on a farm in Dayton, was a serious golfer. She won the 1972 U.S. Amateur, and is an eight-time Oregon Amateur champion. She won the 1974 AIAW title by four strokes over a field Budke recalls had 25 to 30 teams. Two years later, future LPGA Hall of Famer Nancy Lopez won the AIAW championship.

What kept Budke from pursuing golf at the highest level was two-fold. She wanted to go to medical school, and frankly, the idea of weekly travel to play professional golf had no appeal.

Even as women’s golf has advanced and become a year-round pursuit, Budke doesn’t think her career would change.

“I would have trouble with a lot of structure,” she said.

Budke knows of Slama, just from what’s she read and watched, but the two have never met.

“She has been a wonderful player,” Budke said.

Beginning this weekend, Slama hopes to add some important lines to her college resume. Slama is looking to qualify for her second NCAA tournament, where she finished 103rd in 2019. Slama is looking to contend for the conference title this weekend at Stanford; her best previous Pac-12 finish is a tie for eighth.

Slama enters the Pac-12 tournament on a roll. She won the Silverado (Calif.) Showdown earlier this month, and is averaging 71.1 strokes over her past nine competitive rounds. Earlier this month, Slama competed in the Augusta National Women’s Amateur, a field that includes the world’s best female amateurs.

Slama’s short-term ambitions are more than individual heading into post-season. Oregon State is ranked No. 29 heading into the Pac-12 tournament. The Beavers are a threat to make it past regionals and into the NCAA Tournament, where they have one appearance (1998) in school history.

“Making it to (nationals) my sophomore was fun, but it’s not the same as being with your team,” Slama said. “That would be amazing.”



Courtesy Oregon Golf Association, file

Oregon State’s Ellie Slama won the 2018 Oregon Women’s Stroke Play tournament. The junior has her sights set on becoming the best golfer ever at OSU.

## Prep sports

Continued from B1

Swimming, basketball and wrestling teams are now allowed to gear up and plan for their upcoming seasons, which start May 10. After watching the “fall” sports of Season 2 (specifically football) sweat out the decision from the OHA, the news breaking several weeks prior to the start of the season came as a surprise to wrestling and basketball coaches.

“I was expecting them to announce the Friday before we can start,” Combs said. “I was blown away they announced it this week.”

The added time before the season starts allows for wrestling programs to determine the parameters of competitions come mid-May. Wrestling is a sport that features many tournaments, with lot of teams competing at one site. Now teams have some time to iron out those details amid the ever-changing guidelines.

Three weeks to prepare is also beneficial for basketball, said Summit High boys basketball coach Jon Frazier. While his team has taken a couple of out of state trips to play games, the squad has not been allowed to scrimmage. Now it can, which Frazier hopes will help kids stay healthy and in shape once the team returns to a normal practice and game schedule after a year off.

“I just assumed it was going to be May 7 that we were going to get the green light,” Frazier said. “One of my concerns was not having any ramp-up period, and that you would see a lot of injuries because they haven’t gone full-contact or full-speed. Suddenly you are playing six days a week — that is how kids get hurt.”

The Bend High girls basketball team was starting to lose its motivation, according to coach Allison Gardner, especially as the COVID-19 case numbers recently began to rise again.

The thought among the players was that winter sports would not stand a chance of being played this spring.

About 30 minutes before a skills session with the team, word was announced that there would indeed be a season.

“There were tears of joy and relief,” Gardner said. “It was nice to deliver good news for a change.”

Just like wrestling teams, the clock is ticking to fill out a schedule for basketball teams.

“Now the scramble begins to schedule games and get ready for the season,” Gardner said. “We are trying to play as many local schools as we can. We have to get creative and find teams that are willing to to play us.”

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## Judo

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The judo project is, by any account, an outside-the-box idea. Because the sport, known by insiders as “the gentle way” of martial arts, has little emphasis on striking and is considered less violent than some of its brethren, some leaders in judo, and in policing, saw an opportunity to use the discipline to rethink officer training. Last summer’s headlines pushed these courses, which had been in development since 2018, to the top of the priority list.

The main concept over the week of classes held at the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy centered on teaching cops how to engage suspects verbally, then employ physical judo techniques if needed, to deescalate confrontations without using deadly force.

The goal is to avoid situations the likes of which led to Floyd’s death and, two weeks ago, to the death of Daunte Wright, whose funeral was Thursday. Wright was shot and killed by an officer who said she thought she was reaching for her Taser when it was, in fact, her gun.

Jim Bacon, a former athlete on the U.S. judo team who now serves as a police officer in Lafayette, Colorado, says the most damning police-on-suspect encounters — many now caught on police body cameras or by onlookers holding iPhones —

have this in common: “The cop resorts to higher levels of force than should’ve been used. If they have more skills, they might not have to rely on the gadgets on the belt,” he said.

The workshop also offered a window into the different role an Olympic organization, and maybe the Olympics themselves, can play in society at large. The USA Judo P3 Program is sponsored by USA Judo, the six-person operation in Colorado Springs, Colorado, that has helped Kayla Harrison and Ronda Rousey, now of Ultimate Fighting Championship fame, bring Olympic medals back home, but that also must constantly nourish its own grassroots system.

The national governing body has been losing ground on both fronts, most recently because of the pandemic, and over the years because of the growing popularity of other martial arts.

With an emphasis not on hitting, but rather on using leverage and body position to execute holds and takedowns, judo has long been easy to overlook. “This hits a societal issue,” USA Judo CEO Keith Bryant said. “And for us, it has potential to get more people on the mat.”

In an exercise that cut to the core of the judo training, conference planners Taybren Lee and Mike Verdugo played suspects who were impaired, or mentally unstable, and challenged the officers to use judo



Eddie Pells/AP

Michael Johnson of the Billings, Montana, Police Department grabs hold of instructor Mike Verdugo’s arm while Harley Cagle, also with Billings Police, captures the action on his cellphone during a training workshop in March in Douglas, Wyoming.

to deescalate the situations. The scenarios were acted out as though they were happening in public, with pedestrians shooting the action from every angle on their phone cameras.

“If we can talk to you, if we can keep you up, that’s going to change the whole visual, espe-

cially when people have their iPhones recording,” Verdugo said.

Lee says the public would be alarmed at how little training the average police department provides to officers for street confrontations. And because so many more interactions are

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now caught on video, police are being scrutinized in ways previously impossible.

“Sometimes, the departments haven’t spent the money for the training, and in a lot of ways, the training hasn’t caught up to the realities of the technology that’s out there,” said Lee, an officer with the Los Angeles Police Department who also teaches judo for the youth-based Police Athletic League, a sponsor of the training program.

Spearheading this sort of endeavor is hardly the traditional role for leaders at an organization such as USA Judo, whose most high-profile mission is to help Americans bring home Olympic medals. But this could be an ideal time for the nonprofits that make up the backbone of the U.S. Olympic system to reinvent themselves.

USA Judo was among the 70% of U.S. national govern-

ing bodies that asked the government for loans under the federal government’s Paycheck Protection Program during COVID-19. It currently has one Olympic medal contender, Angelica Delgado. Bryant sees judo as one of those rare sports that has a spot both in a competitive venue and in real-world situations.

Among the program’s task force members are 2004 Olympic judoka Nikki Kubes Andrews, now a detective for the Fort Worth Police Department. And Bacon, the former U.S. national team member who is now an officer in Colorado.

“The public wants police officers to be better trained,” Bacon said. “That’s why we’re trying to integrate judo, so we can be more effective in these situations without hurting the other person.”

USA Judo is offering free memberships to officers who participate in the training, and has hopes the police initiative could spark new interest in the sport.

Bryant is also acutely aware that there are other ways to measure success during a difficult time in America.

“We sat down and started talking,” Bryant said, “and we agreed that when you look at George Floyd, and all these situations, we felt like if these officers had been trained in judo appropriately, it wouldn’t have happened.”