

MOTOR SPORTS

NASCAR starting to allow access, full capacity a year after restart

BY JENNA FRYER

AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Kevin Harvick crossed the finish line at Darlington Raceway a year ago and was struck by the stillness and silence of the empty grandstands.

NASCAR was one of the first major sports to resume competition early in the pandemic, setting its own path in a strange new world of health screenings, temperature checks and empty race tracks.

"I didn't think it was going to be that much different, and then we won the race and it is dead silent out here," said Harvick, who paused to take in the eerie silence that day. "It's weird. There's nobody up there."

It has taken almost a full year but NASCAR's slow walk toward normalcy is ready to hit another gear: Daytona International Speedway, Darlington Raceway, Kansas Speedway and Pocono Raceway all announced last week their grandstands will open to full capacity later this year. Atlanta Motor Speedway plans the same for July.

NASCAR re-opened its infield to sponsors, guests and media at Darlington last weekend as a trial run. The garage and infield have been closed to nearly everyone since March 8, 2020, and NASCAR President Steve Phelps had said it would remain that way until a vaccine was widely available.

Vaccines have been available since early April to almost everyone in North Carolina, where most NASCAR teams are based, and it allowed NASCAR to put a plan in place for a reopening. There is no vaccine requirement for competitors, but NASCAR permitted teams, drivers and manufacturers to admit a total of 350 fully vaccinated guests and sponsors Sunday at Darlington.

"It's so important for us. Some of the key players and our sponsors have such interest in it, and they love being here and being a part of it," said Joe Gibbs, team owner for the winning car driven by Martin Truex Jr.

Gibbs included Bass Pro Shops CEO Johnny Morris among his guests.

"We had guys flying in from



Martin Truex Jr. talks on a cell phone as team owner Joe Gibbs stands nearby after Truex won the NASCAR Cup Series auto race at Darlington Raceway on Sunday in Darlington, South Carolina.

all over," Gibbs said. "It's very, very important to get those key people from the companies back into our sport, and I'm looking forward to getting to go again and do hospitalities."

The infield will be closed this weekend at Dover, but the footprint is expected to expand to 550 sponsors and guests at Circuit of the Americas in Texas and the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway later this month. Those two races will help set access protocols moving forward.

A year ago, NASCAR restarted its engines 71 days after the series shut down and it was the first major sport to complete its entire season last November. It did so by never changing its procedures during the pandemic.

NASCAR does not test for COVID-19 and the temperature check and health screenings that have been used since the sport restarted have not changed. The motorhome lot has been largely off limits to families, which created some grumbling as some drivers noted it was absurd to enforce banishment during races for those spending time together away from the track.

Motorsports are unlike any other sport in that the hall-

mark of the industry is the behind-the-rope experience offered to sponsors, fans and even the families of the competitors:

- A driver can bring his children to the pre-race meeting, the post-race news conference and can stand at his car with his entire family all the way up until its time to start his engine.

- The sponsor is given access to the team, can sit on the pit stand during the race, or mingle in a hospitality suite with clients and customers during a meet-and-greet with a driver and team owner.

- Fans can purchase passes into the garage and watch cars roll through inspection, walk down pit road and position themselves to chase their favorite driver for a selfie or an autograph. Infield camping spots are sometimes visited by drivers cruising by on a cart.

IndyCar has had two industry-wide mass vaccinations, will host 135,000 fans on May 30 at the Indianapolis 500 and has been operating as business as usual since the season opened last month. But some of NASCAR's drivers have expressed vaccine hesitancy, and Phelps called mandating the shot "a bit of a slippery slope" so re-opening the garage has

taken time.

It has also come with some confusion about the current rules for garage decorum, particularly as mask mandates are being lifted in various states. The Darlington weekend marked the first time Fox pit reporters Jamie Little and Regan Smith did not wear masks while on camera; some drivers took their masks off.

NASCAR clarified Monday that masks are still mandated in the garage for everyone except drivers, who are socially-distanced when they are being interviewed on camera.

Truex noted his brother-in-law works on Sheldon Creed's winning truck and couldn't be part of the photographs Friday night: "He's like 'They wouldn't let us in victory lane and I don't understand because we were all wearing masks and when we get done here in victory lane we're all going to get in the van together and drive home,'" Truex said.

It was the same for Truex as he celebrated his third win of the season, pretty much without his crew.

"I think it's time to get back to doing things like we always did, and I think it's slowly going that direction," he said. "I can't wait until it's back to the way it used to be."

Medina Spirit

Continued from A5

Those events will unfold with Baffert back in California instead of at the race where he will go for a record eighth victory.

"I go to Baltimore to have a good time. It's a fun trip," Baffert said. "I don't want to take away from the horses. I think it'd be a distraction if I went. I think it'd be a distraction if I win. The owners will be there. (Assistant trainer) Jimmy (Barnes) can handle it."

Whether he is in Baltimore or not, the focus right now is on Medina Spirit and Baffert.

Medina Spirit and Concert Tour, who skipped the Derby, were being transported by van to Baltimore and scheduled to arrive late Monday. The field for the 146th Preakness will be drawn on Tuesday after being pushed back a day because of the uncertainty.



Trainer Bob Baffert watches workouts at Churchill Downs ahead of the

In the meantime, Baffert continued to deal with the fallout from his fifth horse to have failed a drug test in over a year.

Medina Spirit was found to have 21 picograms of beta-methasone, which is sometimes used to treat pain and

inflammation in horses. It was the same drug found in Baffert-trained filly Gamine, who finished third in last fall's Kentucky Oaks before being disqualified following a test. Baffert was fined \$1,500.

Baffert acknowledged the

criticism he is receiving on social media and understands the public scrutiny of him as the face of horse racing. He also expressed disappointment with Churchill Downs officials for a statement announcing his suspension soon after he revealed the failed drug test.

"I thought I had had a pretty good relation(ship) with them with all the stuff I've done with my Triple Crown winners," he said. "I'm the face of the sport and I'm trying to promote my sport. And that was a pretty low blow, what they did yesterday. I wish they would've called me."

With that, Baffert's hope is that Medina Spirit can make a strong showing in the Preakness and put the public skepticism to rest — for now.

"I want him to run a good race because now everybody's piling on him," Baffert said. "It's probably more pressure now that he's got to run well."

Tebow

Continued from A5

Tebow would become the sixth guy on Jacksonville's roster who previously played for Meyer, joining Farrell, running back Carlos Hyde, guard Andrew Norwell, defensive end Lerentee McCray and defensive tackle DaVon Hamilton.

Tebow played quarterback for Meyer between 2006 and 2009, helping the Gators win two national championships while becoming one of the most recognizable — and polarizing — athletes in college sports.

He was a first-round draft pick by Denver in 2010, but his long windup led to a short NFL career. He spent time with the Broncos, the New York Jets, New England and Philadelphia. His last NFL game came with the Jets in 2012.

They cut him in April 2013, three months after then-Jaguars general manager Dave Caldwell famously said he wouldn't sign Tebow "even if he's released."

Tebow has received rock-star media coverage at every NFL stop and might get as much attention in Jacksonville as franchise quarterback Trevor

Lawrence, the top pick in the 2021 draft.

Tebow won a playoff game with Denver in 2012, but never developed into a consistent NFL starter. He declined several suggested moves to tight end — he even asked Meyer for guidance — and then ended up switching sports and joining the Mets.

"When he was a quarterback in the NFL, that was a big topic," Meyer said at the end of the draft. "I was so busy I couldn't give him the time. 'What do you think? What do you think?' And I didn't know. I was too busy to even think it

through.

"I know playing a position in the NFL without (experience), that's a long shot. This was years ago."

But when Tebow asked about an NFL comeback in February, Meyer invited him to the facility for a workout. Meyer made it clear he didn't feel like he owed Tebow anything, either.

"I have one job and that is to win games with the Jacksonville Jaguars," Meyer said. "If Tim Tebow or Travis Etienne can help us win, then that's my job to get them ready to go play."

DEAR ABBY

Write to Dear Abby online at dearabby.com or by mail at P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, CA 90069



Dear Abby: I have been married to my second husband for more than 15 years. My 30+-year-old son from my first marriage, who was born disabled, lives with us. He walks and talks, but cannot be left unattended. He also needs medication. He cannot read or write, but looks like he has no medical issues at all.

I have no extended family members in the state. My husband and I were invited to a family wedding. However, my disabled son was not. Bride's rule: No children allowed. I pointed out that he is older than she is. He sees this relative several times a year.

Child care is hard to find and expensive. I do not know if others tried to get the bride to change her mind. My husband attended alone while my son and I spent the evening with friends and had fun. He didn't say anything to cause a confrontation.

Please share your thoughts. I get very sad whenever family events come around and she is there. Life is different when you have a family with special needs.

— *Hurt in the East*

Dear Hurt: I agree, life is different for families in which someone has special needs. If you haven't already, I think you have the right to express your feelings to the bride. It would be better than silently nursing a grudge and fuming when you see her.

While it would have been nice if she had included your son in the invitation, she was within her rights to invite — or exclude — anyone if she had concerns. Because your husband was able to represent the family while you and your son had fun elsewhere, from my perspective, everything turned out well.

Dear Abby: My boyfriend never gets off his phone — like ever! The first thing he does in the morning is wake up and grab his phone. He was off one day last week and — I'm not exaggerating — he didn't put it down for 13 hours.

He plays this one particular game, and it's all he does. It's affecting our relationship, but if I say anything about it, he laughs, gets mad or ignores me. I don't know what else to do. Help!

— *Woman vs. Phone in Ohio*

Dear Woman: Was your boyfriend always like this? If the answer is no, he may have become addicted to gaming, which, as of 2020, had become a multibillion-dollar industry. According to The Addiction Center, the "average" gamer spends six hours a week glued to his or her cell-phone. That your boyfriend went on a 13-hour binge is cause for alarm. One sign of addiction is when it interferes with daily life or relationships. That he blows you off when you try to discuss it tells me he is deep in denial.

There is treatment for gaming addiction, but only if the addict is willing to admit there's a problem. Treatment may involve private counseling or, in some cases, inpatient care. However, if this is unaffordable, On-Line Gamers Anonymous (olganon.org) may be a helpful alternative. It is a 12-step program based on the principles of AA. If you go online, you will find there is a fellowship of friends and family members of gaming addicts. You might want to check it out. If you intend to continue this romance, get out of the house when he binges and do something YOU enjoy.

YOUR HOROSCOPE

By Georgia Nicols

Stars show the kind of day you'll have

★★★★★ DYNAMIC | ★★★★★ POSITIVE | ★★★ AVERAGE | ★★ SO-SO | ★ DIFFICULT

MOON ALERT: There are no restrictions to shopping or important decisions today. The New Moon is exact in Taurus at 12 p.m. today.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY FOR TUESDAY MAY 11, 2021: You are talented, hardworking and very independent. You have high standards, and you know what you want. At times you are a perfectionist. Your year ahead will be more fast-paced and quicker in every way. You will be curious about more things, and you will be more excited about life. Many choices will be available to you!

ARIES (March 21-April 19)

★★★ Today you're impatient with restrictions, rules and regulations, especially with home and family. (Hey, it happens to us all.) You are a freedom-loving sign, and you need space to move! Define your boundaries, but be polite. Tonight: Obsessed about shopping.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

★★★★ Today you're eager for something fresh. You want to meet new people, see new places, hear new ideas — anything. "Bueller? Bueller? Anyone?" A spontaneous short trip or a chance to meet new faces will fill the bill. Be open to whatever comes your way. Tonight: Lighten up. Get a grip.

GEMINI (May 21-June 20)

★★★★ You're keen to earn money, which is why you're busting your buns. However, today you might entertain a wild and crazy idea that's a long shot. Conversely, some of you might impulsively spend money on big ticket items at a moment's notice. (Keep your receipts.) Tonight: Let go of worries.

CANCER (June 21-July 22)

★★★★ Fiery Mars is in your sign now until June 11. (Note: Mars is only in your sign once every two years for about six weeks.) This is a major vitamin B shot! Today this boost of energy makes you impulsive, energetic and ready for anything! "Next?" Tonight: Be gentle with a friend.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

★★★ You feel restless today, which is OK. Make friends with this feeling. What's happening is you are contemplating new changes, new ideas and new ways of doing things, but you're just not sure where to begin. Think of ideas and tell yourself, "It's going on the list." Tonight: Be polite with authority figures.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

★★★ You might be in competition with a friend or a group. In fact, something out of the blue will stir the pot. Be open to whatever happens. Stay flexible, because you're not sure in which direction to jump. (Hey, if you're moving forward you have to encounter new ideas.) Tonight: Avoid blind dogma.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)

★★★ You are ambitious now, which is why you're keen to expand your empire. Your reach might become vast! (Who knows?) The thing to know is that today your dealings with bosses, parents and VIPs are unpredictable, even surprising. (Note: this includes the police.) Tonight: Avoid obsessions about debt and finances.

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)

★★★★ Unexpected opportunities to travel might fall in your lap today. Admittedly, scheduled plans might be delayed or canceled. Yes, it's a crapshoot. The bottom line is you're impulsive and eager to explore new places and meet new faces. Relax; this will happen. Tonight: You will attract someone powerful to you.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

★★★ Be cautious about financial dealings with others, especially partners. Something unexpected might impact your arrangement with someone. (This includes your bank.) Keep your eyes open to protect your best interests. Tonight: Stay calm and get rest.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

★★★ In your dealings with your closest relationships today, a wildcard is at play. Someone else might do something you least expect. They might demand more freedom in the relationship. Could be anything. Be on guard. Tonight: Be patient with kids and romantic partners.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

★★★ Your work routine will be interrupted today. The trick to this is to give yourself enough wiggle room to cope with the unexpected. This is no biggie. Nothing you can't handle. But hey, "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" Tonight: Be flexible with family.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)

★★★★ Parents should be vigilant today because this is an accident-prone day for your kids. No matter what their age, know where they are at all times. Meanwhile, social occasions might have last-minute changes. You might receive a fun invitation out of the blue. Tonight: Don't be obsessed.