FOOTBALL

Tony Boselli becomes 1st Jaguars player enshrined in Hall of Fame

BY ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

CANTON, Ohio — Tony Boselli looked out at all the teal-colored jerseys in the crowd and screamed: "Duuuval!"

Finally, the Jacksonville Jaguars have a player in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Boselli, the first pick in Jaguars history, was among eight members of the Class of 2022 enshrined Saturday at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium.

"I thank God for football, and I thank God for the people of Jacksonville," Boselli said before shouting the fans' rallying cry, the name of their county.

David Richard/AP

Former NFL player Tony Boselli speaks Saturday during his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

The Jaguars played the Las Vegas Raiders in the NFL preseason opener Thursday night, so No. 71 Boselli jerseys filled the seats.

A five-time Pro Bowl selection and three-time All-Pro left tackle in seven seasons in Jacksonville, Boselli saw his career cut short by injuries. But his dominant performance earned him a gold jacket. "It's a profound honor," Boselli said.

Linebacker Sam Mills, defensive back LeRoy Butler, defensive linemen Bryant Young and Richard Seymour, wide receiver Cliff Branch, coach Dick Vermeil and longtime head of officiating Art McNally joined Boselli in a class of guys who waited several years — some decades — to get the call.

Young delivered the most emotional speech when he broke down honoring his son, Colby, who died of pediatric cancer at age 15 in 2016.

Young, who excelled at defensive tackle in an era filled with talented players at the position, had 89½ sacks and earned four Pro Bowl selections in a 14-year career spent entirely with the San Francisco 49ers.

Vermeil gave the longest speech, blowing past the 8-minute limit by 15. The former Philadelphia Eagles, St. Louis Rams and Kansas City Chiefs coach seemed to thank everyone who helped him reach the stage. He credited players for his success and specifically pointed out fellow Hall of Famers Kurt Warner and Isaac Bruce, who were on Vermeil's "Greatest Show on Turf" Super Bowl championship team in St. Louis.

Vermeil wrapped up the ceremonies. Butler kicked everything off. The four-time All-Pro safety leaped in with the same enthusiasm he celebrated big plays at Lambeau Field.

"DJ Khaled said it best: 'God did,'" Butler began, referencing the song. "When you play for the Green Bay Packers, a lot of doors open up. When you win a Super Bowl, more doors open up. When you're picked for the Hall of Fame, football heaven opens up. It's rare company."

Butler helped restore Green Bay's glory days during a 12-year career. His versatility as a safety set the standard for a new wave at the position and earned him a spot on the league's All-Decade team of the 1990s. Butler originated the "Lambeau Leap" and had a key sack in Green Bay's Super Bowl victory over New England. He fell just short of becoming the first player in league history to finish his career with 40 interceptions and 20 sacks.

Mills, the 5-foot-9 linebacker nicknamed "Field Mouse" during his 12-year career with the New Orleans Saints and Carolina Panthers, and Branch were inducted posthumously. An inspirational figure, Mills overcame tremendous odds to even reach the NFL. Mills played Division III college football and was not drafted. He was cut by the Cleveland Browns and Toronto Argonauts of the CFL and began his professional career with the USFL's Philadelphia Stars. Jim Mora, who coached the Stars, brought him to New Orleans in 1986 and Mills never looked back.

"He was told he wasn't good enough to play college football or big enough to play professional football and at the age of 27, he wasn't young enough to play in the NFL and yet here we are today celebrating," said Melanie Mills, Sam's widow.

Mills became an assistant coach with the Panthers after his retirement. He was diagnosed with intestinal cancer before the 2003 season but kept coaching during his treatment and made what is known as his "Keep pounding" speech on the eve of the club's Super Bowl matchup with New England at the end of that season. Mills died in April 2005 at age 45. His "Keep pounding" remains the Panthers' tag line.

Branch, who died more than three years ago at age 71 of natural causes, was one of the best deep threats of his era with some of his biggest performances coming on the game's biggest stages, helping the Raiders win three Super Bowls. Branch made the first of his three straight All-Pro teams in his first season as a starter in 1974 and scored 67 touchdowns through the air.

"Clifford was delayed. He was not denied," said his sister and presenter, Elaine Anderson.

In a year with no first-ballot candidates, the inductees endured long waits to make the Hall. Defensive tackle Richard Seymour didn't wait too long to taste success in the NFL. He was part of three Super Bowl championship teams in his first four seasons with the New England Patriots.

Seymour had 57½ career sacks in 12 seasons, the first eight in New England before finishing his career with the Oakland Raiders.

"I'm overwhelmed with humility because it's not about what this says about me but what it says about we and what we can do together," he said. "I'm overwhelmed with gratitude because I didn't get here alone. None of us did. None of us could have."

The 42-year-old Seymour choked up thanking his wife, Tanya. "Football is what I do, but family is who I am," he said. "Thank you for everything you added to my life. This day belongs to my family. Scripture teaches your riches are in your family."

MOTOR SPORTS | NASCAR CUP SERIES

Paul Sancya/AP

Kyle Busch watches during NASCAR Cup Series qualifying Saturday at the Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn, Michigan.

Kyle Busch thankful family escaped mall shooting

BY LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

BROOKLYN, Mich. — Kyle Busch's tumultuous year took another turn.

Busch, his wife and their two children escaped the Mall of America in Minnesota after shots were fired, three days before racing at Michigan International Speedway.

"If you look at that dark cloud that's over me lately, hence the other day, we're in the wrong place at the wrong time a lot of times," Busch said Saturday.

When shots were fired Thursday, Busch and his son Brexton were waiting in line to ride a roller coaster while his wife, Samantha, and their daughter, Lennix, were shopping elsewhere in the largest mall in the country.

"It's a lot to process as an adult but really hard as a parent to explain to your child what happened," Samantha wrote in a post on Instagram.

Bloomington Police Chief Booker T. Hodges said no one was struck by the gunfire, adding on Friday that the department was still searching for two people involved in the shooting.

The harrowing experience, though, did not appear to give Busch a newfound perspective on his life and career. A two-time NASCAR champion, he does not have a contract for next season and that appears to be his chief concern.

"This is a performance-based business," said Busch, who will start third in the FireKeepers Casino 400 on Sunday. "So it is life-or-death fear if you've either got a job and you're working and you're making a living, or you're at home figuring out what your next steps are.

"I've kind of thought about that like, 'OK, what are my next steps? What do I do if I don't continue to race? And I have no idea. I have no clue."

Busch, the 2015 and 2019 NASCAR champion and winner of 60 career Cup races, has one victory this year and is ranked 11th in points. During the last seven races, Busch has failed to finish within the top 10. That stretch includes a 36th-place finish at Pocono two weeks ago after he and Joe Gibbs Racing teammate Denny Hamlin, who won the race, were disqualified because their Toyotas failed inspections.

"It's a matter of luck, and there is absolutely none following the 18 car right now," Busch said.

Bubba's breakthrough

Bubba Wallace won his first career pole Saturday, becoming the only driver to break 190 mph in the Next Gen car during qualifying this season. Wallace also gave 23XI Racing, formed by Charlotte Hornets owner Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin in 2020, its first pole.

"With the speed that we have, there's no reason that we can't go out and win," said Wallace, who became the second Black driver to win a Cup race 10 months ago at Talladega Superspeedway.

Playoff push

Four races remain in the regular season, creating a sense of urgency to qualify for the playoffs. That's true even for some drivers who have won a race.

NASCAR has had 14 different Cup winners this season, closing in on the playoff-era record of 16 set last year. If a new mark is made and there are three new winners over the next four races, one driver with a victory would be eliminated from the 16-car playoff with a tiebreaker based on points.

Chase Briscoe, who has one victory and is No. 12 in points, is confident his postseason bid is safe if there is not a new winner at MIS, though he would love to seal a spot on his own.

"Another win would be the easiest way to take the pressure off 100%," said Briscoe, who will start 23rd in the 37-car field in the No. 14 Ford for Stewart-Haas Racing.

Ford's tough stretch

Chevrolet has 13 victories, including points leader Chase Elliott's series-high four wins, leaving Toyota (five) and Ford (four) searching for answers.

Ford is hoping its previous success on the track in its backyard will provide a much-needed boost. The manufacturer has won seven straight Cup races, including last year with Ryan Blaney, on the two-mile oval about 50 miles west of its world headquarters in the Motor City.

This season, though, Ford has gone two months without a victory since Joey Logano won his second race in 2022.

Logano said he plans to compete aggressively. "If you're not the one making the move, a move is going to be put on you," he said.

Relay

Continued from B1

Teams of 12 runners, split into two vans, take turns running portions of the course that range from three to 11 miles. For the 36-leg run, each participant completes three different legs (each does two legs for the 24-leg events) at all hours of the day and night.

From start to finish, the runners gain 8,108 feet of elevation throughout the course.

"It was really hard," said 16-year-old Neftali Menendez, of Vancouver, Washington. "The first leg was really hard because it was super hot and there were a lot of hills. My third leg was really hard because there were a lot of hills, but I didn't want to let my team down, so I ran fast. But it was a lot of fun to hang out with the team and just run."

The 216-mile race started Friday at Diamond Lake, just north of Crater Lake National Park, then took runners east toward Silver Lake before heading north through La Pine. The final third of the race took runners along Wickiup Reservoir, Lava Lake, Elk Lake, Sparks Lake and down Century Drive, ending at Riverbend Park in Bend. The 24-leg events start at Buck Creek Ranch near Silver Lake and follow the same path to the finish.

Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

The crowd cheers after Dmitry Dukhovny catches a piece of candy in his mouth while running past his teammate Laura Waagmeester, second from the right, during the Cascade Lakes Relay on Saturday.

"I really enjoyed the scenery," Menendez said. "Having that scenery when you are running is really nice."

The 36-leg race takes more than a day to complete. The Fellowship Of The Run team nearly eclipsed the 24-hour mark, finishing 216 miles first in 24 hours, 21 minutes and 28.9 seconds, an hour and 42 minutes ahead of second-place Cascade Cakes, which finished in 26:04.18.5.

The fastest team to complete the 24-leg running relay was Just a Couple of Dudes, who finished in 17:18:19.2, while Enlightened Soles had the fastest walk, finishing in 29:00:27.5.

The Cascade Lakes Relay is a longer relay than the Hood to Coast Relay — which starts the final weekend in August — by about 17 miles. But it also has far fewer participants compared to Hood to Coast. But for Dalke, that is part of its charm.

"We like the smaller size, the intimate setting — it is less than a boondoggle all around," Dalke said. "We are Cascade Lakes fans."

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Bird

Continued from B1

Members of Seattle's previous championships teams are expected to be in attendance. There will be a pregame ceremony. And the largest crowd in Storm history — more than 18,000 at Climate Pledge Arena — is expected.

"What she's been able to do in her career, on and off the court, has been phenomenal and I don't think they'll ever be anyone like her," former Seattle teammate Lauren Jackson said this week. "I think the legacy that she's left on the sport, and that she'll be leaving on the sport, is enormous. But I'm really excited to see what she does next."

The 41-year-old Bird, the oldest player in the WNBA, announced in June that this would be her final season before retiring. The decision was expected, especially after Bird flirted with the idea of stepping away after last season before returning for a 19th season on the court and 21st overall with Seattle, missing two seasons due to injuries.

She'll conclude her career as one of the most decorated players of all-time: four WNBA titles, five Olympic gold medals, countless WNBA records that may never be matched and recognition as one of the great women's players during a golden generation for the league.

"If you want to talk the best generation (the league) is still pretty young, so we can revisit that conversation in like 20, 30, 40, 50 years," Bird said. "But as it stands right now, I do feel really lucky that I played in the generation I played in, and I do think a huge chunk there is probably going to go down as the best, most talented."

Ted S. Warren/AP

Seattle Storm's Sue Bird stands on the court during Wednesday's WNBA game against the Minnesota Lynx in Seattle.

Last year when Seattle's season ended at home with a playoff loss to Phoenix and Storm fans chanted "one more year!" the passionate plea resonated with Bird. She's cited that moment numerous times over the past year as a partial reason for her decision to return.

But in a sign of how at peace Bird is with her decision, she said when hearing the chant now, her primary thought is, "nice try. See you later," she joked.

Another sign that Bird knows she made the right decision came after she pressed the button to announce her decision. Instantly, the question of whether she'd play again was gone and with it an unknown weight that hung over her. That's led to more open and honest conversations with competitors, former teammates and fans without dancing around the uncomfortable unknown as the final days of her career have ticked closer.

"There were these other nice byproducts I didn't expect. Most of it comes in the form of people being able to share moments with me, or memories with me. Probably the most meaningful is your peers," Bird said. "Players on the other team sharing things with me, whether it's an actual moment or how I've inspired them, how they looked up to me, 'how the WNBA won't be the same without you.' I didn't do it to get that. But that has been really nice. And it really does help. It's part of my own closure and it'll help me move on when it's all said and done."