

NASCAR THIS WEEK

Q&A

Did the Daytona Road Course race get a new odds-on favorite?

It obviously depends a lot on the equipment, but if Kaulig Racing puts good stuff under AJ Allmendinger, don't be shocked to see the former Cup racer take full advantage of this one-off effort, which could become a two-off, three-off, etc., given the influx of road races. But Chase Elliott will still be the smart favorite. Meanwhile, Matt Kaulig has hired AJ to run the full Xfinity Series this year, and we should thank him, because every pad-dock and garage is more enjoyable with AJ around and carrying a helmet.

How 'bout that entry list?

Depending on some late pairings of sponsors and cars, we're looking at between 44 and 47 hopefuls to make the 40-car Daytona 500. It could be the most since NASCAR went from 43 to 40 starters in 2016. With 36 char-tered teams locked in, it'll be an in-teresting competition among the others for those four open parking spots on the grid. Austin Cindric will be in a Penske car, so you like his chances, but you never discount David Ragan (Front Row Motorsports) at a "plate race."

— Ken Willis



Don't be surprised if AJ Allmendinger makes some noise in Daytona's Feb. 21 road-course race. USA TODAY SPORTS

DAYTONA MOTOR MOUTHS

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WHAT'S ON TAP

Jan. 30-31: Rolex 24 at Daytona

NASCAR Speedweek at Daytona:

- Feb. 9: Busch Clash
- Feb. 10: Daytona 500 pole qualifying
- Feb. 11: "Duel" Daytona 500 qualifying races
- Feb. 12: Truck Series season opener
- Feb. 13: Xfinity Series season opener
- Feb. 13: ARCA Series season opener
- Feb. 14: 63rd Daytona 500
- Feb. 21: Daytona Road Course race

THROUGH THE GEARS

Derrike Cope jumps back in Daytona 500

Zach Dean

Daytona Beach News-Journal
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The Daytona 500, like this weekend's Rolex 24, is the race that everyone wants to be a part of.

Jeff Gordon retired from NASCAR in 2015, and then turned around to run in the Rolex 24 in 2017. Jimmie Johnson's doing the same thing this week. Next month, Jamie McMurray will pause his Fox broadcasting duties to run his first Daytona 500 since 2019.

Shoot, even Awesome Bill Elliott attempted to qualify in the 2012 Great American Race — nine years after he stopped racing full-time.

First gear

Which brings us to Derrike Cope. Yes, him ... the 1990 Daytona 500 winner.

Cope, now 62, will run next month's Daytona 500 for Rick Ware Racing in the No. 15 Chevy. It'll be Cope's first NASCAR Cup race since Darlington in 2018, and his first Daytona 500 since 2004.

The last time Cope turned meaningful laps at Daytona? Dale Earnhardt Jr. won the race. Front Row Joe Nemechek finished sixth. The late John Andretti finished 13th. Terry Labonte finished 20th in what would be his final full-time season.

Defending Cup Series champion Chase Elliott, meanwhile, was 8.

"I'm not your average 62-year-old," Cope told Sirius XM NASCAR radio last week. "I think I'm pretty young at heart. I'm in pretty good shape. So I'll go down there and drive within myself and my capabilities, and hopefully, I'll find the patience necessary to get myself to run all 200 laps.

"And if that transpires, then I think I can be in a position to go out there and do battle at the end, and it won't be easy for anybody if I get to that point."

Second gear

As long as Cope can stay out of trouble on race day, he'll get a chance to be there at the end, because he's in a chartered entry.

The same can't be said for everyone in this year's field.

An early look at Daytona's entry list shows at least eight non-chartered entries for next month's race, meaning there will be plenty of drama on qualifying and Duel day.

Some of the bigger names who will be vying for the final four spots include: Noah Gragson, David Ragan, Kaz Grala and Ryan Preece.

Third gear

One of the drivers not in the Daytona 500 field this year is Jimmie Johnson, who, by the way, finished fifth in Cope's last Daytona 500. That doesn't mean the seven-time champ won't be in Daytona Victory Lane this year, though.

Johnson's No. 48 Ally Racing Cadillac



Derrike Cope returns to Daytona 31 years after his only Daytona 500 victory. It will be his first Daytona 500 appearance since 2004. ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

had a strong showing at last weekend's Roar Before the Rolex 24, and will start sixth for Saturday's Rolex 24. Johnson's former Hendrick teammate, Chase Elliott, will be in the No. 31 Cadillac that will start on the pole.

Fourth gear

NBC Sports announced over the weekend that it will shut down operations at the end of the year. The move

will impact multiple sports, including NASCAR, which switches from FOX to NBC for the second half of its season.

In a memo, NBC said, starting this year, NASCAR races not broadcast on NBC will now be shown or simulcast on USA Network.

A quick check shows that USA Network used to broadcast Daytona Duel races from 1982-84.

Yes, Derrike Cope was in the Series then, too.

SPEED FREAKS

Chase or Jimmie? Who finishes higher in this week's Rolex 24?

KEN'S CALL: Jimmie's car is a one-off effort with nothing to gain by pacing, so I like that vibe — unless someone tucks it into the chicane barrier, of course.

DEAN'S DIRT: Chase is in a car that's starting on the pole and, don't know if you've heard, but he's pretty good at these road races. He'll figure out the new car.

Gotta ask, should Derrike Cope be allowed to race the Daytona 500?

KEN'S CALL: Blowing out 62 candles is one thing, but the troubling aspect is he hasn't done a "plate race" since 2006. I'll withhold judgement for now but reserve the right to second-guess. You know, the usual.

DEAN'S DIRT: Tom Brady's going to the Super Bowl at 43, so I don't see why Derrike can't win the Daytona 500 at 62! Look out!

2021 CUP SERIES SCHEDULE

- Feb. 9: Busch Clash at Daytona
- Feb. 14: Daytona 500
- Feb. 21: Daytona Road Course
- Feb. 28: Homestead
- March 7: Las Vegas
- March 14: Phoenix
- March 21: Atlanta
- March 28: Bristol (dirt)
- April 10: Martinsville

- April 18: Richmond
- April 25: Talladega
- May 2: Kansas
- May 9: Darlington
- May 16: Dover
- May 23: Austin
- May 30: Charlotte
- June 6: Sonoma
- June 13: Texas All-Star
- June 20: Nashville
- June 26: Pocono

- June 27: Pocono
- July 4: Road America (Wisconsin)
- July 11: Atlanta
- July 18: New Hampshire
- Aug. 8: Watkins Glen
- Aug. 15: Indianapolis
- Aug. 22: Michigan
- Aug. 28: Daytona
- Playoffs Round of 16
- Sept. 5: Darlington
- Sept. 11: Richmond

- Sept. 18: Bristol
- Playoffs Round of 12
- Sept. 26: Las Vegas
- Oct. 3: Talladega
- Oct. 10: Charlotte Roval
- Playoffs Round of 8
- Oct. 17: Texas
- Oct. 24: Kansas
- Oct. 31: Martinsville
- Championship Round
- Nov. 7: Phoenix