

Young upstarts looking to break up old gang

BY JONATHAN INGRAM
THE SPORTS XCHANGE

Just about the time people began to notice no driver under the age of 30 had won a Sprint Cup race in 2016, Joey Logano, age 26, dominated and won the 400-mile race at the Michigan **NASCAR** International Speedway. He was followed home by 20-year-old Chase Elliott and 23-year-old Kyle Larson.

“It was probably just coincidence,” Logano said of the sudden youth movement. And, he is probably right. Beyond the finish, the day was a reminder that not many drivers under the age of 30 in the Sprint Cup are competing on teams capable of winning races. But the youth movement is gaining momentum.

Elliott, who drives for Hendrick Motorsports, and Larson of the Chip Ganassi-owned Chevy team, continue to knock on the door of Victory Lane. Ryan Blaney, aged 23, is giving Elliott a run for this year’s rookie race, which also includes 23-year-old Chris Buescher. (But all was not well with the youth brigade on Sunday. Blaney lost control of his Wood Brothers Ford and hit the wall; Buescher lost control of his Front Row Motorsports Ford and knocked Dale Earnhardt, Jr. into the wall.)

“It’s cool to see the future is here,” Logano said. “And it’s fun for me. Shoot, I’m usually the youngest guy by a long shot, so it’s fun to be racing for the win with some guys that are close to my age.”

If Elliott wins this year’s

rookie title, he’ll be the youngest since Logano won it at age 19 in 2009. Prior to that, Kyle Busch was the youngest rookie title winner when he won in 2005 at age 20. Since the year 2000, when the now relatively ancient Matt Kenneth won Rookie of the Year at age 28 in a battle with 26-year-old Dale Earnhardt Jr., the average age of the rookie title winner has been 26.

So Elliott’s rise to prominence has been exceptional. He has inherited his father Bill’s championship smoothness and speed, in addition to benefitting from his dad’s coaching and backing with good equipment since he was teenager. But Sunday, he was kicking himself for losing a chance to win for the second week in a row. At the Pocono International Raceway, he tried to get into the lead on the final re-start and ended up third. At Michigan, he was the leader when he missed a shift on the re-start and dropped to fourth behind eventual winner Logano.

“I just did something dumb,” he said. “You can’t do dumb stuff and win these races. Completely my fault. The guys gave me a great car today. This whole NAPA group has been working so hard these past few weeks and that one was on me.”

In addition to being a sign of rare talent, there are more than a few reasons why very young drivers don’t make it to stock car racing’s major league.

Counting Busch and Logano, there have been only three phenomenal young talents in the last 16 years. Dumb mistakes aside, team owners are wary of younger



AARON DOSTER | USA TODAY SPORTS
Sprint Cup Series driver Joey Logano poses for a picture after winning the pole for the FireKeepers Casino 400 at Michigan International Speedway last Friday.

drivers due to the amount of maturity it takes to handle the role of de facto team leader behind the wheel of a Sprint Cup car.

Then there’s the sheer learning curve of the competition. Larson, who has yet to prove he can close the deal, is still looking for his first victory two years after winning the rookie title with Ganassi. (The wild card with Larson may be one of stamina; he often gets close at the finish but may be running out of gas physically.)

Generally, it doesn’t seem to hurt a driver’s career to arrive in one’s mid-20s. (Jimmie Johnson lost the rookie title to Ryan Newman at the age of 27.) But it can hurt a team owner if he chooses to promote a young driver too soon. Just ask Joe Gibbs and Logano.

The driver whose nickname was “Sliced Bread” (because he was the greatest thing since) faltered while at Gibbs, who essentially traded him for Kenseth after four seasons only to see Logano blossom under the banner of Roger Penske.

“I’ve been doing it for a while,” Logano said. “It definitely plays into my hand at this point, going through the struggles and maybe getting thrown into a situation too young and too soon and when I wasn’t prepared for it. Going through that has really changed me as a person and helped me kind of look at every race situation maybe a little bit different than I used to.”

“I wouldn’t change that for anything because now I’m able to use that for my advantage and I’m still only 26 years old.”

Gibbs has also been on the receiving end of this kind of deal. When Kyle Busch was known as “Shrub” due to the presence of his older brother Kurt, he spent three seasons with Hendrick Motorsports and won four races. But when team owner Rick Hendrick and the younger Busch couldn’t see eye-to-eye, he wasn’t re-signed and ended up at Gibbs, where he has won a Sprint Cup championship and 33 races. On the other hand, Hendrick took a chance on Jeff Gordon at age 21 and after a rocky rookie season Gordon won four championships and rose to superstar status.

Hendrick signed Elliott to a development contract when he was 15 years old. Development contracts have become the norm once the

economy started to rebound and they are one reason why there’s some good young drivers in the pipeline. Blaney (Penske Racing) and Buescher (Roush Fenway Racing) each have development contracts.

The most intriguing contract scenario belongs to the Gibbs camp. Erik Jones, age 20, is trying to win the Xfinity Series championship and rookie title in the same year. Last year, he did likewise in the Camping World Truck Series.

But Jones has his hands full with 19-year-old Brandon Jones of Richard Childress Racing in the rookie race and the Xfinity championship points lead belongs to fellow Joe Gibbs Racing driver Daniel Suarez, who became the first Mexican to win a major touring series race in NASCAR at Michigan by catching and passing Kyle Busch.

If Suarez, age 24, wins the new Chase format championship in Xfinity, will he be advanced before Jones to the Sprint Cup? If Gibbs moves either driver to the Sprint Cup next year, he will have to give up one of his four veterans. The most likely driver to be left standing when the music stops is Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin, the rookie title winner in 2006 who has never driven for any team other than JGR. The other candidate to leave would be Kenseth.

As yet, none of the current crop of Sprint Cup rookies has won a race and the competition is not getting any easier. The Michigan race marked the seventh different winner in as many races.

Former Cavs coach: LeBron was more important to team

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

Former Cleveland Cavaliers coach David Blatt isn’t watching the NBA Finals and still doesn’t understand why he was fired.

Blatt told Yedioth Ahronoth, a newspaper in Tel Aviv, **NBA NOTEBOOK** that star player LeBron James rated higher up the priority list than he did.

“In the reality of the NBA and this team, there is no doubt that LeBron is the center,” Blatt told the newspaper. “He is the cornerstone of the club, there is no doubt that LeBron was more important to the system than me.” Blatt was fired by the Cavaliers in January even though they possessed the best record in the Eastern Conference at 30-11.

The Cavaliers are pitted against the Golden State Warriors in the NBA Finals but Blatt said he can’t watch the games.

“It was hard for me watching the last (round of playoff) games,” Blatt said. “I can’t watch the Finals. So I just don’t watch the games and I settle on reading the

reports on the Internet.”

Blatt said he is moving on from being fired but still hasn’t any idea why he was let go.

“I can’t think of any reason in the world. Maybe for them, thinking forward, I wasn’t the person to lead,” Blatt said. “It hurt me very bad. It surprised me. I didn’t feel well, but you move on. There are disappointments in life, the question is what you do when you take a blow.”

Bogut likely to miss Olympics with injury

The knee injury that will prevent Andrew Bogut from playing in the rest of the NBA Finals also will likely keep him from playing for Australia in the Olympics this summer.

Bogut will be sidelined up to eight weeks after suffering multiple bone bruises in his left knee during Monday’s Game 5 against the Cleveland Cavaliers.

“I’m not great at math, but six to eight weeks minimum is what I’ve been told,” Bogut said during Golden State’s mid-day shootaround in advance of Thursday’s Game 6. “It’s very unlikely at this point, to be honest.”

Federer races through to Halle quarterfinals

REUTERS

HALLE, Germany — Roger Federer hurried into the quarterfinals of the Gerry Weber Open in Halle on Thurs-
PRO TENNIS
day, wrapping up a 6-3 7-5 victory over Tunisia’s Malek Jaziri in 69 minutes.

The top seed, who has won eight titles at the German grasscourt tournament that has proved ideal preparation for Wimbledon during his long career, quickly overcame a second-set hiccup when he dropped his serve to go 3-0 down.

He rediscovered his rhythm, recovered the deficit and then broke the Tunisian in the 11th game before serving out the match.

Federer next meets Bel-

gian David Goffin, who was leading Sergiy Stakhovsky 4-6 7-5 2-0 when the Ukrainian retired hurt after an awkward fall.

“That’s life...some days are just not meant to be. I’ll try to be back for Wimbledon,” Stakhovsky tweeted.

Federer, 34, will be keen to enjoy as much match practice as possible before Wimbledon after pulling out of the French Open last month with a back injury.

He leads 25-year-old fifth seed Goffin 4-0 in their head-to-head tally.

The Swiss, ranked three in the world, is also joined in the quarter-finals by home favourite and eighth seed Philipp Kohlschreiber, who downed lofty Croatian Ivo Karlovic 6-7(7) 6-4 7-5 despite being on the receiving end of 26 aces.

Rangers’ Lewis flirts with perfection

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

OAKLAND, California — Colby Lewis lost a no-hitter in the ninth inning on a leadoff double by Max Muncy but rebounded to pitch a **MLB ROUNDUP** complete game, delivering the Texas Rangers a 5-1 victory over the Oakland Athletics on Thursday afternoon.

Ian Desmond broke a scoreless tie with a leadoff home run in the seventh, propelling the Rangers to a third win in four days against the A’s and their franchise-record-tying eighth straight series win.

Lewis took a perfect game two outs into the eighth before issuing a four-pitch walk to Yonder Alonso.

The right-hander had faced three-ball counts just three previous times in the game.

Rangers left fielder Ryan Rua then provided the defensive play of the game, leaping at the foot of the warning track to deny Marcus Semien’s bid for extra bases.

Lewis fell behind Muncy 2-1 leading off the ninth before the left-handed hitter

hit a high drive toward the right-field wall.

Rangers right fielder Nomar Mazara got to the fence at the same time as the ball, which deflected off his glove as he was crashing into the padded wall.

The hit was ruled a double, the first of Muncy’s career.

Two batters later, Lewis lost his shutout as well when Rua came up just short on another attempt at a spectacular catch, racing in on a Coco Crisp liner, diving and having the ball go in and out of his glove.

Crisp got a double on the play, scoring Muncy.

Lewis (6-0) retired the next A’s to complete his two-hitter, throwing 109 pitches. He walked one and struck out four.

Mariners 6, Rays 4

ST. PETERSBURG, Florida — Dae-Ho Lee was 2-for-3 with three RBIs to lead the Seattle Mariners to a 6-4 win over the Tampa Bay Rays on Thursday at Tropicana Field.

Lee, a first baseman, had a two-run double in the bottom of the fourth inning that proved to be the difference in the game.

A hustle play by Mariners

left fielder Norichika Aoki foiled a Rays comeback.

With the Rays trailing 5-3 in the bottom of the eighth and the bases loaded with two outs, Brad Miller singled to left to score Taylor Motter, but Aoki rushed the throw into home to keep Corey Dickerson at third. Mariners reliever Joaquin Benoit struck out Steve Pearce on a full count to in the inning and keep the Mariners ahead 5-4.

In the top of the ninth, third baseman Kyle Seager added an insurance run with a solo homer to right.

James Paxton gave up three runs and seven hits in six innings. Steve Cishek retired the Rays in order in the ninth for his 15th save of the season.

Braves 7, Reds 2

ATLANTA — The Atlanta Braves finally scored some runs for pitcher Matt Wisler and the right-hander bounced back from two poor starts to earn 7-2 win over the Cincinnati Reds on Thursday afternoon at Turner Field.

Wisler, who had received only 1.8 runs in support in his previous 12 starts, broke a four-game losing streak

and won for the first time since May 20.

The victory allowed Atlanta to split the four-game series and win back-to-back home games for only the second time this season. The 16 runs scored by Atlanta over the last two games were its most in consecutive games in 2016.

Wisler (3-7) had allowed 13 runs over eight combined innings in his previous two starts. But despite allowing a base runner in every inning Thursday, he avoided big trouble and gave up only two runs over 6 2/3 innings. He gave up eight hits, walked two and struck out five in a 116-pitch performance.

Ian Krol pitched two innings and struck out three, but walked two batters in the ninth and needed help from closer Arodys Vizcaino, who retired Joey Votto on a routine fly ball for the final out in a non-save situation.

The Atlanta offense was led by first baseman Freddie Freeman, who went 3-for-4, including his 12th homer, a two-run shot in the third inning, and scored two runs.

Freeman, who hit for the cycle on Wednesday, was 10-for-18 with three homers in the four-game series.

Arnie

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only through the golf side but also because of the kind of person he is.

“His impact with the tournament he has at Bay Hill and what he does for all of us, how supportive he is with the game of golf trying to make it grow, it’s really cool,” said Thomas, who won his first PGA Tour title at the CIMB Classic in November.

Englishman Fitzpatrick, playing his first U.S. Open as a professional this week after trying for 48th on his tourna-

ment debut at Pinehurst in 2014 as an amateur, agreed.

“Arnold Palmer obviously has not played as big a role for me in Europe but I also learned from him to make my name legible whenever I sign autographs,” said the 21-year-old, who is already a double winner on the European Tour.

“That was the first thing that I learned about Arnold Palmer while I was growing up, he would always sign every autograph that he had to do and make it legible so you can actually read it rather than just scribble it.

“Everything you read about him, he’s such a fantastic person and he has done so

much for the game of golf,” Fitzpatrick said at the annual Rolex U.S. Open evening in honour of Palmer, who won the 1960 championship at Cherry Hills.

The 86-year-old Palmer, who was a member of the “Big Three” with fellow golfing greats Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, will forever be linked to Oakmont where he competed in five U.S. Opens between 1953 and 1994.

In 1962, he finished second to Nicklaus after losing an 18-hole playoff on the Sunday while 1994 marked his final competitive round in his national championship after he missed the cut in front of mas-

Majestix

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School in Concord, New Hampshire, was their most influential midfielder.

Bernatchez said Messalonskee midfielder Autumn Littlefield had an exceptional tournament, Mt. Blue of Farmington’s Rebecca Harmon made a smooth transition from midfield to defense and was the cornerstone of

the back line, and eighth-graders Lexi Lewis of Lawrence High School of Fairfield and Brooke Richards of Belfast shone.

Lewis was a forward and scored a few goals, and Richards was the goalie.

Midfielders Weslee Littlefield of Winslow and Mo Hajduk of Winthrop and defender Amy Gaiero of Belfast headlined a quality supporting cast.

Bernatchez said Autumn Littlefield and Varney were

chosen among the nation’s top 50 field hockey players in the class of 2019 by Max Field Hockey. They were among those who played on last year’s U-16 National Club Championship team along with Gaiero, Smith, Hajduk and Kelsey Mehuren of Belfast.

The first-year players include Richards, Lewis, Weslee Littlefield, Skowhegan’s Lizzie York, Mackenzie McConnell and Julia Steeves; Mackenzie Handley and Macie Larouche

of Lawrence; Cony High of Augusta’s Sophie Whitney; Erin Lachance of Lewiston; Mt. Blue’s Harmon and Brooke Bolduc and Winthrop’s Katie Perkins.

They will practice twice per week beginning next week.

Bernatchez said the most important thing for the tournament is for the girls “to show pride for Maine field hockey, show well and showcase what they can do without being intimidated.”