

Larson overcomes obstacles to break into Chase pursuit

BY JONATHAN INGRAM
THE SPORTS XCHANGE

The difference between owning a Sprint Cup car and driving one was evident at the Michigan **NASCAR International** Speedway after Kyle Larson won for the first time in NASCAR's premier series. Larson shouted and screamed during his entire cool down lap. Team owner Chip Ganassi breathed a sigh of relief.

For Larson, it was an inaugural victory that was a long time coming — 99 races and nearly three seasons. For Ganassi, the race also broke his team's 99-race losing streak, which dated back to a Jamie McMurray win at Talladega in 2013. "Winning snowballs," said Ganassi, who now can count victories in all six of the series where his cars are competing this year. "Unfortunately, so does losing."

Under special low downforce rules that were being tested for 2017, Larson, who finished third at the 2.0-mile track in June, had the fastest car in the field. But his Chevy fell too far behind on a slow pit stop to catch a fleeing Chase Elliott, who

was also looking for his first career victory. A late caution and a better re-start put Larson on track for the winner's circle, where his burn-out in Michigan's track side victory lane — without the steering wheel which he had tossed out the window — demonstrated Larson's joy and relief.

Where Larson had struggled to catch leaders unsuccessfully in the past in the late going, this time he had clear sailing as the final ten laps clicked off. "I was pretty calm for a couple laps," he said. "Then I started shaking, legs a little numb there for a couple laps. Yeah, then the last I think with two to go, I was starting to get choked up."

"We worked really, really hard to get a win, and just haven't done it," he continued. "Finally all the hard work by everybody, hundreds of people at our race shop, people who have got me through to the Cup Series, it was all paying off. It was pretty awesome. I couldn't quite catch my breath there after I got out of the car because I spent two minutes screaming because I was so pumped up. It was pretty special and I'll remember it forever."



AARON DOSTER | USA TODAY SPORTS
Sprint Cup Series driver Kyle Larson celebrates winning the Pure Michigan 400 at the Michigan International Speedway on Sunday.

The timing could not have been better.

After getting drop-kicked in the points at Watkins Glen International and the Bristol Motor Speedway, Larson gained entry into the Chase with just two more races remaining in the regular season — which was a big part of Ganassi's sigh of relief. Assuming no other new winners like Larson, teammate McMurray is locked into a

tight battle with Elliott, Austin Dillon and Ryan Newman for the final three spots in the Chase available to those qualifying on points. With races at the Darlington Raceway this weekend and at the Richmond International Raceway the following week, Ganassi could well get both of his cars into the Chase.

During the victory celebrations, Larson was con-

gratulated by several other drivers, including six-time champion Jimmie Johnson and reigning Sprint Cup champion Kyle Busch. The other drivers realize the sport needs new heroes, but above all they like the way Larson has worked his way to the front without trading paint, much less banging bumpers. On the other hand, he was not shy about valiantly dashing be-

tween lapped traffic while pursuing Elliott, four-wheel drifting up a lane in the process.

There have been those among fans and the media, who think Larson was not aggressive enough, especially at this year's race in Dover, Del. In that one, Larson could pull even with Matt Kenseth in the battle for the victory, but could not get past — and elected not to put a bumper to him.

"Yeah, I mean, with Matt, I could have done something to get by him," said Larson. "But that's just not how I wanted to race him. Like I've said for a few months, you guys keep asking, 'What if? What if you would have moved him?' Now I won, so we don't have to talk about that anymore."

It was not a given that Larson would make it as a Sprint Cup driver. His friend Bryan Clauson, killed in a dirt track race this summer, signed with Ganassi to drive in NASCAR. But the likeable Clauson never made it as a Sprint Cup driver after competing in the Xfinity Series. Larson paid tribute to Clauson with special decals and in victory lane at Michigan.

Bangor

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sizes the run game but also features the balance provided by an effective passing game.

Workhorse running back Dane Johnson has graduated, leaving the rushing attack to a trio of newer faces in juniors Luke Tuell and Nick Canarr and senior Noah White — though Tuell is dealing with an apparent knee sprain suffered during the game against Brewer.

"What it boils down is we've got a new quarterback and two new backs — three with Noah in there," said Mosca.

Senior Derek McCarthy and junior Alex Yabuku are primary receiving targets, with junior Nick Cowperthwaite a first-year tight end.

Senior captains Ben Burt and Austin Labbe and classmate Onesimus Laraway are among the leaders along the offensive front, with Labbe and Laraway also keys to the defensive line, while Burt will spark the defensive second level at linebacker, where he was the team's second-leading tackler last fall.

Tuell, Canarr, Farnham, White, Yabuku and senior Mike Perkins also are expected to play pivotal roles at linebacker or in the secondary.

Class A North figures to



GABOR DEGRE | BDN
Bangor High School football head coach Al Mosca talks to his players Monday on the first day of practice.

follow a path similar to last year when southernmost entries Portland, Windham and Cheverus of Portland led the pack while Bangor and Kennebec Valley Athletic Conference colleagues Edward Little, Lewiston and Oxford Hills of South Paris battled for the remaining three berths in the six-team divisional playoffs.

Portland graduated 2015 Fitzpatrick Trophy winner Joe Esposito, but the Bulldogs return quarterback Isaiah Batchelder to lead the offense and four 2015 All-Class A North first-teamers — lineman Ethan

Hoyt, linebacker Nick Archambault and backs Jake Knop and Dylan Bolduc — to anchor the defense.

Cheverus has a new leader in Mike Vance, who replaces the legendary John Wolfgram in the head coaching post after spending 10 years as the Stags' defensive coordinator.

And Windham, a regional finalist a year ago after winning the Class A North crown in 2014, features one of the state's most experienced quarterbacks in senior Desmond Leslie.

And while Bangor is focused on getting off to a good start this fall, its

hope of moving into that upper echelon also faces a challenging stretch late in the season with back-to-back trips to Portland and Cheverus in Weeks 6 and 7.

"What we're going to get by on is our toughness and our conditioning," said Mosca. "We're not the most skilled team but the kids do have a lot of heart and pride and we're just going to have to run and throw the ball a little bit."

"We're going to have to do that but we're just going to have to get by on our physical and mental toughness."

Class A North football: 5 players to watch

BY ERNIE CLARK
BDN STAFF

Here is a list of five players to watch in the Maine Class A North football ranks during the 2016 season that begins on Friday.

Desmond Leslie, quarterback, Windham: After guiding the Eagles to the 2014 Class A North championship, the versatile Leslie rushed for nearly 300 yards and seven touchdowns while completing 50 percent of his passes for 376 yards during the regular season last year. He earned first-team All-Class A North honors as Windham returned to the regional championship game.

Nick Archambault, fullback-linebacker, Portland: Archambault will provide much of the power for what should be a deep Portland rushing attack. He provided 279 yards and three touchdowns in support of Joe Esposito's Fitzpatrick Trophy-winning effort last season. The senior also is one of the division's top returning tacklers with 107 last fall along with three quarterback sacks and two interceptions en route to first-team All-Class A North status.

Gary Farnham, quarterback-defensive back, Bangor: The senior will be a jack-of-all trades for the Rams this fall, particularly as a first-year starter at quarterback, where he will seek to blend the passing game with Bangor's traditional rushing attack. Farnham also will play a key defensive role in the secondary as well as serving as Bangor's kicker as coach Alan Mosca's club seeks a place in Class A North's upper echelon.

Rylan Benedict, running back-linebacker, Cheverus: Benedict should be a factor on both sides of the line of scrimmage as the Stags aim to contend for top regional honors in the first year of the post-John Wolfgram coaching era. The senior had a team-leading nine rushing touchdowns during the 2015 regular season and also ranks as one of Cheverus' top returning tacklers.

Jake Knop, running back-defensive back, Portland: Knop steps into the void left behind by graduated Fitzzy winner Joe Esposito in the Bulldogs' backfield but is expected to team with Archambault to give the defending regional champs a potent 1-2 rushing punch. Knop is a returning All-Class A North first-team defensive back after contributing 32 tackles and an interception last fall.

Farmington native joins men's soccer staff at UMF

Farmington native Blake Hart has been named an assistant men's soccer coach at the University of Maine at Farmington.

Hart joins head coach Tommy DiNuzzo and the UMF coaching staff as the Beavers are coming off a North Atlantic Conference semifinal appearance last season.

COLLEGE REPORT

Hart was a four-year letterwinner for the Castleton Spartans where he tallied 15 goals and six assists. He also was a member of the Castleton Student-Athlete Advisory Committee.

Hart has worked soccer camps at UMF youth summer camp, UMF high school preparatory camp, Thomas College and Colby College.

Hart's volunteer experiences include coaching youth soccer and basketball and officiating youth soccer with the Farmington Recreation Department.

He has a coaching soccer certification from the United States Soccer Federation and graduated from Castleton in May with a bachelor's degree in sports administration

Islesboro native is RPI's new assistant golf coach

Student-athlete James Jackson of Islesboro has

been named an assistant coach of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute golf team in Troy, New York.

One of the most accomplished golfers in school history, Jackson, a Belfast Area High School graduate, will aide 14th-year head coach Miles Nolan. A captain as a senior in 2015-16, Jackson was All-Liberty League and All-Region in 2015-16 after he averaged a team-best 76.7 strokes over 18 rounds. He had four top 10 finishes, including third overall at the NYU Spring Invitational, fifth at the ECAC Championship in the fall and eighth in the four-round Liberty League Championship.

The Liberty League Performer of the Week once, Jackson's best rounds included a 70 at The Ranch on the second day of the ECAC Tournament, three 73s and three 74s.

Jackson, the only golfer in Rensselaer history to earn National Academic All-America accolades, was a biomedical engineering major with a 3.93 cumulative grade point average.



Hart

Kaepernick's protest reaches new heights

BY MATT BARROWS
THE SACRAMENTO BEE

SANTA CLARA, California — On the same day Chip Kelly said Colin Kaepernick would play Thursday in military-heavy San Diego, the quarterback's anthem protest continued to be the talk of the nation, including by someone running for its highest office.

"I have followed it and I think personally it's a terrible thing," Republican nominee Donald Trump said on the Dori Monson radio show. "And, you know, maybe he should find a country that works better for him, let him try, it's not going to happen."

A day earlier, Kaepernick said he couldn't honor the flag of a country with so many issues. He said the two presidential candidates embody those problems.

"You have Donald Trump who's openly racist," he said. "We have a presidential candidate (Hillary Clinton) who has deleted emails and done things illegally and is a presidential candidate. That doesn't make sense to me because if that was any other person you'd be in prison. So what is this country really standing for?"

Kelly, meanwhile, said Kaepernick will play in the 49ers' preseason finale Thursday because the quarterback needs more work after miss-

ing two exhibition games with a fatigued throwing shoulder.

"We plan on playing him this week," Kelly said on KNBR radio. "How much? I don't really know yet."

Kelly has said recently that Kaepernick still is competing with Blaine Gabbert for the starting quarterback spot. However, a Fox Sports report over the weekend asserted that Kaepernick may not even make the team's opening roster.

The 49ers will owe him \$11.9 million whether he is on the team. But they could save as much as \$2 million in roster bonuses if he is released. The team also would have to pay the quarterback next year's base salary, \$14.5 million, if he gets hurt this season and is still injured on April 1.

That, plus Kaepernick's halting recovery from three surgeries, at least makes his spot a question mark. Offensive coordinator Curtis Modkins was asked Monday whether Kaepernick would be on the 49ers' Week 1 roster.

"I would anticipate that, but it's not, you know, that's not where we're at right now," Modkins said. "We're getting ready for the Chargers right now and he'll be there. So I don't anticipate that not being the case."

Kelly said Kaepernick had an "up and down" outing Friday against Green Bay, the

first time Kaepernick had thrown a pass in a game in nearly 10 months. The 49ers coach highlighted a third-down pass to receiver DeAndre White that gained a first down.

"In other instances, he didn't have a ton of time from a protection standpoint (and) just had to make the best out of it from a production standpoint," Kelly said. "But obviously it wasn't what we want from anybody on the offense during the time he was in there."

Thursday's game will be in San Diego, which has a heavy naval presence and the largest military population on the west coast. The biennial preseason contest against the 49ers typically is well-attended by military members.

One other NFL player, Eagles rookie linebacker Myke Tavarres, said he'd follow Kaepernick's lead by sitting during the anthem before his team's Thursday game against the New York Jets.

"Really what's at stake is my pride and what kind of man would I be and what kind of African-American would I be if I didn't stand my ground on this issue we have today?" he told Philadelphia area reporters. "(It) needs to be done."

Later in the day, however, Tavarres' agent said the linebacker had changed his mind and would stand during the

anthem because he didn't want to be a distraction.

Others also weighed in on the topic.

Jim Harbaugh, Kaepernick's ex-coach and one of his biggest backers, wrote on Twitter on Monday that he supports the quarterback's motivation. "It's his method of action that I take exception to," Harbaugh wrote.

The Michigan head coach handpicked Kaepernick in the 2011 draft and spoke highly of him this offseason following the quarterback's rocky 2015 performance. Harbaugh, however, also is a proud admirer of the military, often quoting admirals and generals and inviting military members to speak in front of his teams.

Alex Boone, an ex-49ers offensive lineman who is now with the Vikings, said Kaepernick's action "drove me nuts."

"That flag obviously gives (Kaepernick) the right to do whatever he wants," Boone said. "I understand it. At the same time, you should have some (expletive) respect for people who served, especially people that lost their life to protect our freedom."

Kaepernick's current teammate on the offensive line, Anthony Davis, wrote on Twitter that "Kap has made a lot of valid points and I feel that this conversation is very necessary."