

# Kenseth to shift gears, Suarez on a roll

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

At first glance, it's easy to perceive Matt Kenseth's start to the 2016 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series season as "slow."

## NASCAR NOTEBOOK

The No. 20 Toyota driver only has one top-10 finish in the first six races, one year after amassing five victories and 19 top-10 showings.

"The results have been disappointing, but we've ran pretty well," said Kenseth, who ranks 14th in the series points standings.

"We've been in contention in a couple races. Neither of them worked out. We had fast enough cars, if all of the stars were aligned, maybe we'd win a couple more. I think it all depends on how you want to look at it," he added. "I feel if you run well enough, over time the law of averages is going to work out, you're going to win some races, you're going to get some finishes. It's just tough to go through when you're not getting good finishes, but I'd much rather run the way we're running, perform the way we're performing, and not get the finishes then be a 15th-place car and luck into a ninth-place finish."

He'll try to get his momentum-building strong finish in Saturday's Duck Commander 500 at Texas Motor Speedway

(7:30 p.m., FOX), a place where he has excelled throughout his career, despite two disappointing showings of 25th and 23rd there last season.

In 26 career starts at the 1.5-mile oval, Kenseth boasts two wins, a track-record-tying 13 top fives, 17 top 10s and an average finish of 9.5.

"Ironically, Texas is one of those places that when I was at Roush (Fenway Racing) was probably my best track," Kenseth said. "I felt like even years we didn't run well other places, we always finished well there, always ran well there. We were able to win twice, were in position to win a couple more times and got beat real late. Since I've been over (at Joe Gibbs Racing), it's been a struggle for some reason. We haven't ran very well the last three years there, so I'm looking forward to going back and seeing if we can make it better."

NASCAR's loop data — a set of advanced statistics more indicative of performance than finishing position — shows Kenseth's results this season are bound to improve. The Wisconsin native ranks fourth in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series with 144 laps led and sixth on the circuit with a 97.9 driver rating and 10.4 average running position.

Kenseth reiterated his lack of early-season success is no reason to panic.



JEROME MIRON | USA TODAY

Sprint Cup Series driver Matt Kenseth is interviewed before practice for the Duck Commander 500 at Texas Motor Speedway on Thursday

"We've been having good times," he said. "Our (JGR) cars have been fast. Kyle (Busch) has a win (at Martinsville). Denny (Hamlin) won the Daytona 500. Ironically, we were in position to win both those races, but we didn't win either one of them. At least a teammate won if we couldn't."

"Things really aren't that bad. I still feel pretty good about it. It's only April. Kyle raced only half the season last year and won the championship, so I feel pretty good about where we're at to be

honest with you. We have the speed where we can go out and contend for wins and race up in the top five and six consistently if everything goes right and we all do our jobs. That's fun and that's encouraging. If we keep running like that, (good) finishes will eventually come."

## Suarez surging at top in XFINITY

Don't expect Daniel Suarez to concede his spot atop the NASCAR XFINITY Series standings any time soon.

Through his first five races, the Joe Gibbs Racing driver boasts a higher average finish (4.8) than the last five NXS driver champions through the first five contests in their respective championship-winning seasons: Ricky Stenhouse Jr., 6.2 (2012); Chris Buescher, 7.8 (2015); Stenhouse, 8.2 (2011); Chase Elliott, 8.8 (2014) and Austin Dillon, 9.8 (2013). In addition, Suarez's 112.8 driver rating was only outpaced by Stenhouse in his 2012 title-winning season.

Suarez will attempt to continue his sizzling start in Friday's O'Reilly Auto Parts 300 at Texas Motor Speedway (8:30 p.m., FS1). The NASCAR Next and Drive for Diversity (operated by Rev Racing) alumnus made his only two starts at Texas in his rookie season last year. He improved on his 18th-place showing in the spring to finish sixth in the fall.

"I'm excited about going to Texas and getting back in my Toyota Camry this week," Suarez said. "We were so close to the win in Fontana (finishing fourth) and all I could think about over the break was getting back on the track with my guys. I enjoy racing at Texas (Motor Speedway) and I think our mile-and-half program at JGR is really strong."

Suarez, who owns three top fives and a top 10 in all five races, hopes to hold off standings second-place Elliott Sadler (-10 points) and third-place Justin Allgaier (-19).

"Scott and the guys worked hard over the break to get our Camry ready to go," Suarez said. "We've had some good meetings this week and I think we have a solid plan in place for Friday night. I'm excited to hit the track and continuing to build on the momentum from the start of the year."

# Dexter

Continued from Page B5

eight matchups as some participants, including event organizer Josh Harvey of Corinth, are scheduled to compete at NEF's April 23 MMA show.

Larger headgear and gloves were used as well as leg equipment designed to provide protection from kicks.

"I figured this was a great opportunity to get my feet wet and fight in front of a crowd for the first time," said 28-year-old Glen Kasabian of Portland, who will make his MMA debut on the NEF card. "It was just a blast. It was over in a flash and super fun, and as it went on I felt a lot more comfortable."

## Geographic issues

The chance for new fighters to test themselves in front of a modest audience is one of several reasons such smaller exhibitions may become more frequent as combat sports continue to evolve in Maine.

Nearly all the MMA shows in Maine since the state legalized the sport in 2009 have been held from Lewiston south, save for one NEF card in Bangor in 2013.

That leaves many fans who are resigned to traveling south to watch such Bangor-area favorites as Bruce Boyington, Ryan Sanders and Harvey longing for at least some exposure to combat sports more locally.

"I think this gives fans a chance to come out and see what we're all about," said Fred Lear, a former wrestler at John Baptist Memorial High School in Bangor and a veteran of five amateur MMA fights who participated in the kickboxing exhibition. "The sport itself has a little bit of a negative connotation to it, but that's changing every day, and it's events like this that will allow more people to see that."

Mixed martial arts and professional boxing are staged under the oversight of the Maine Combat Sports Authority, a panel created in the aftermath of MMA's legalization in the state.

Events such as the Dexter sparring sessions are free from MCSA control so long as they involve amateur participants, don't involve judges — which means no winners or losers — and aren't mixed martial arts, according to Pinette, an authority member.

"We're actually going backward, taking some of the disciplines away and only giving them two (kicks and strikes) that they can do," he said. "But what it's doing is cleaning up those two disciplines so you can be sharper and better and then put them into the bigger discipline, which is mixed martial arts."

"So it is taking a step backward, in a sense, but it's to make going forward better."

Smaller exhibitions also allow competitors from different training facilities the chance to work out together in a state where the talent is scattered over a wide area.

Four different gyms, Young's MMA, the Choi Institute, Beserkers MMA of Rumford and The Outlet of Dexter, were represented at Friday's event.

"We don't have the depth in the gyms up here like they do in other places in the country because we don't have the population," said Harvey, who trains at Young's MMA and will make his professional MMA debut in Lewiston on April 23.

"We might have five guys in the gym who are fighting at the same time, but of those five guys only two are of the same weight, so you're always working with the same guys. Keeping these sparring events going and bringing guys together from different gyms is going to help us raise our level."

Individual fighters often travel great distances to offset the lack of training partners at their own gyms, almost to the point in some cases of creating a "Maine against the World" attitude.

"Things like this are going to bring our clubs together," Young's MMA co-owner Chris Young said. "We're competing against places like Massachusetts, where the schools have a lot bigger population to draw from, so it's important to have these opportunities because it's really going to bring our community together instead of us always fighting against each other. We're excited about things like this."

## The business side

While there is growing co-

operation among the state's gyms, there's also an ongoing battle for economic stability — and some in more northern locales see the lack of public events or formal shows in their area as detrimental to attracting new business.

"In the gyms surrounding Lewiston where the fights are, their numbers are up," Harvey said. "Not just fighter numbers but numbers as far as fitness and total participants. Those gyms are doing well because more people are aware they're there. We have gyms in this area of the woods and people don't even know they exist, so having people be able to spar here like this lets everyone know we are here and they can do this in front of their friends and family."

"Take The Outlet and Shatterproof Combat Club right here in Dexter. This is going to be good for them. I've already had three or four people ask where they can do this, and I told them there's a gym 3 or 4 miles down the road."

Gym operators anticipate similar exhibitions being held more frequently in Dexter and beyond.

"I think it's a great concept," Pinette said. "If you look at where the great majority of the schools are, between Bangor and Portland, and you find three different venues and put on between three and six of these shows a year bouncing from those three venues and include everybody who wants to be part of it, you're going to watch Maine's mixed martial artists grow better as a whole."

# Ebner gets chance with rugby team

BY DAVID WHARTON  
LOS ANGELES TIMES

Taking another step toward his Olympic dream, New England Patriots safety Nate Ebner has been added to the U.S. rugby team for a tournament in Hong Kong this weekend.

A spot on the Eagles Sevens roster opened when star Carlin Isles was sidelined by injury.

With rugby returning to the Summer Games this year for the first time since 1924, the Patriots granted Ebner a leave of absence last month so he could join the American squad at its Chula Vista training camp.

The 6-foot-2, 220-pound player was an All-American in rugby at Ohio State before being selected in the sixth round of the 2012 NFL draft. In four seasons with the Patriots, he has become a staple on special teams.

The Hong Kong stop in the HSBC World Rugby Sevens Series is scheduled to begin Friday. Sunday's concluding action will be broadcast live on the World Rugby website.

# Masters

Continued from Page B5

"I enjoy this tournament more than anywhere else," said Spieth. "We don't have any, or many, distractions in our preparation."

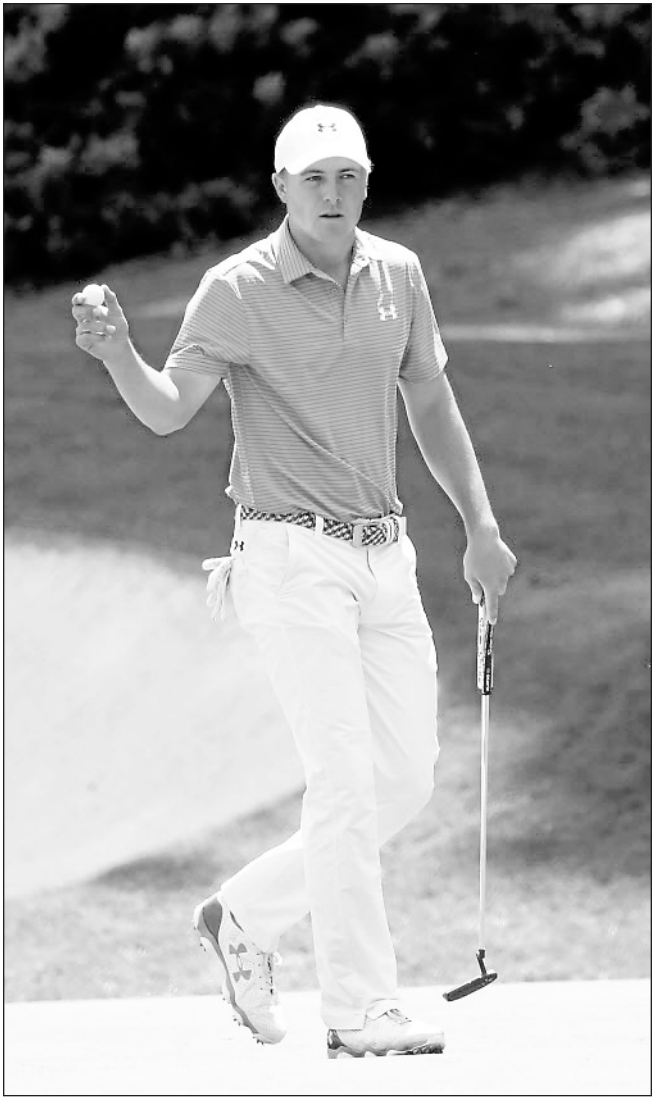
While Spieth flourished in Thursday's opening round, former world number one Ernie Els made a nightmare start as he six-putted from just two feet at the par-four first to run up a mind-boggling nine.

It was the highest ever Masters score on that hole and left South African Els, who has struggled badly with his short putting for more than a year, shaking his head in disbelief. He went on to shoot 80, tying his worst round at Augusta.

"It's unexplainable," said Els, a four-times major winner. "I couldn't get the putter back. I've made thousands of three-footers and I just couldn't take it back."

Australian Day, seeking a second consecutive major victory after winning his first at the PGA Championship in August, was just one stroke off the pace until he bogeyed the 15th.

He then triple-bogeyed the par-three 16th after hitting his tee shot into water, reloading and three-putting before he dropped another shot at the 17th.



ROB SCHUMACHER | USA TODAY

Jordan Spieth waves to the crowd after a birdie putt on the 13th hole during the first round of the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club on Thursday.

# Red Sox

Continued from Page B5

banished. He's going to help us (as a starter) at some point," Francona said. "You don't go through a whole year with just five starters."

Should one of the five starters get injured or pitch poorly enough to warrant a change, Bauer would obviously be the leading candidate to go back into the rotation.

Until then, Bauer said he's going to be a good soldier.

"When they tell me to go pitch, I'll go pitch. Whatever they decide my role is, that's what I'll do. That's the definition of being professional, right?"

NOTES: Boston's RHP Kelly makes his season debut Friday night after

going 8-0 in his final nine starts of 2015. His eight-game winning streak is tied with Texas' Cole Hamels for the longest active streak in the American League. ... Red Sox 3B Travis Shaw, who was born in Washington Court House, Ohio, a three-hour drive south of Cleveland, has a career .433 batting average (13-for-30) vs. the Indians. That's the second highest career average vs. Cleveland for active players with a minimum of 25 plate appearances against the Indians. ... Indians RHP Carlos Carrasco has struck out five or more batters in 19 consecutive starts, dating to June 13, 2015. That's the second longest active streak in the majors behind Clayton Kershaw (34). It's also the second longest streak in Indians history behind Bob Feller's 28-game streak from Sept. 9, 1945, to July 20, 1946.

# Princeton

Continued from Page B5

along as interim head coach for the remainder of the season. A search for a permanent head coach is expected to begin at that time.

Yozzo-Scaperrotta, a sophomore midfielder from Dobbs Ferry, New York, briefly looked back at Bates immediately after the incident and continued to run to his team's sideline during a substitution.

The Daily Princetonian, the school's newspaper, reported that Yozzo-Scaperrotta had collided with Prince-

ton midfielder Austin Butts just before the incident in the first minutes of the second half. Princeton lost the game by a score of 19-8.

Bates compiled a record of 53 wins and 42 losses during his seven seasons as head coach at Princeton. He helped the Tigers earn three Ivy League championships and two NCAA tournament appearances.

Madalon, a former Major League Lacrosse goalie in his third season with Princeton, told the student newspaper that his top priority will be to "take care of our guys for the next few games."