

Bowman thrilled with his run as Earnhardt Jr.'s sub

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

LOUDON, New Hampshire — Even though his dreams of a career-first top-10 finish in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series ended in a wreck against the front-stretch wall, Alex Bowman couldn't conceal his elation.

Bowman, 23, was subbing for Dale Earnhardt Jr., who was sidelined for Sunday's New Hampshire 301 at New Hampshire Motor Speedway after experiencing concussion-like symptoms earlier in the week.

And though Bowman had 71 Cup starts to his credit before Sunday's race, none of them came in equipment remotely comparable with the No. 88 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet he drove in Earnhardt's stead.

After starting 20th and getting the feel of the car, Bowman began advancing. He was 10th for a restart on Lap 228 and got by teammate and six-time series champion Jimmie Johnson for the ninth spot.

But calamity struck on a Lap 265 pit stop when contact between Bowman's Chevy and Carl Edwards' Toyota cut the left-rear tire on Bowman's car. The coup de grace came on Lap 273 when Bowman slid up the track into

Kurt Busch's Chevrolet.

With the left-rear flattened, Bowman crashed into the outside wall on the front-stretch.

Bowman stayed on the lead lap and finished 26th, but the way the race ended didn't mute the driver's enthusiasm.

"It was amazing," Bowman gushed. "I can't thank Hendrick Motorsports and all these guys enough. They took me to my worst race-track by far and made me look good. I just have to thank Mr. H (team owner Rick Hendrick). I had such an amazing time. Everybody, (crew chief) Greg (Ives) and all the guys were so welcoming. I hate the circumstances and really hope Dale is feeling well, but I had so much fun today."

"Obviously, I hate that we didn't get the finish we deserve, but I've raced with a lot of these guys for a long time. ... I raced around them, but I've never got to actually race with guys like Jimmie Johnson, Tony Stewart, Kurt Busch, all those guys. I had a lot of fun passing really good cars. Just really thankful for Nationwide and all of Hendrick Motorsports for letting me be here."

Gordon ready to step into Earnhardt's No. 88

Despite turning in a praise-



JEROME MIRON | USA TODAY SPORTS

Sprint Cup Series driver Alex Bowman leads driver Greg Biffle during the New Hampshire 301 at the New Hampshire Motor Speedway on Sunday.

worthy performance at New Hampshire, Bowman won't be in the No. 88 car if Earnhardt isn't cleared to drive next weekend at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

That duty will fall to Jeff Gordon, who is ready to interrupt his retirement, if need be. The four-time champion was on vacation in the south of France when team owner Rick Hendrick called.

"I asked him what he was doing next week, and he said he'd be in Indy for one of the appearances he has to make," Hendrick said. "I said, 'Well,

bring your driver's uniform just in case.' He said, 'Are you kidding?' And I said, 'No, I'm serious.' So if Dale can't go, then Jeff is ready to step in."

In fact, Gordon is the probable sub if Earnhardt is sidelined for additional races.

"I would think so," Hendrick said. "I haven't talked to him about it. We're just taking it a week at a time. Hopefully Dale's going to be back next week, and it's not even something that we really think is going to happen."

"But if it does, Jeff is a team player and he wants to sup-

port the organization, and I'm sure he'll do whatever he has to do."

Hendrick said Earnhardt wants to get back in the car as soon as possible and asserted that his driver is planning to continue in the sport long term.

"He and I talked about years beyond next year," Hendrick said. "And just around, I guess it was Daytona, if there was something major wrong, I think they would have seen it already. So I'm very hopeful and he's very hopeful."

"And I think the doctors

Fall

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Both Michaud and Presque Isle boys varsity soccer coach Joe Greaves had conversed with White about a possible schedule change for several years, and their endorsements also proved valuable.

"I just think this was coming, and last year was a good test," said Greaves. "When you step back and take a look, yes, you want the kids to play as much of your sport as possible, but then there's no time left for the kids and their families."

"By Mark doing that last year, we gave everybody a week off before practice started, and it really didn't affect our season. It didn't affect how we did, it didn't change the things we do, and looking forward we asked ourselves if we start like everybody else and give them two weeks with hands off, is this really going to impact us with harvest break? I don't think so."

The new schedule also brings Presque Isle — one of just two Class B athletic programs left in Aroostook County — into line with the majority of its regular-sea-



DAVE ALLEN

Presque Isle striker Madison Michaud (left) wins a ball at midfield against Hermon defender Morgan Buck during a game in 2015 at the Johnson Athletic Complex in Presque Isle.

son competition in the Penobscot Valley Conference that traditionally starts pre-season practices in mid-August after the Maine Principals' Association's two-week

hands-off period.

Historically there has been occasional talk among Presque Isle's more southern PVC Class B opponents about not wanting to face

the Wildcats early in the soccer season when the additional two weeks of pre-season practice might provide more of a benefit.

Presque Isle coaches have countered with how the longer duration of its fall sports season — particularly the combination of hot late-July and early August practices and the grueling daytime work and evening practice schedules during harvest break from mid-September until after Columbus Day — often left players more fatigued than their rivals as the playoffs approached.

"I think some of the other coaches felt like because we started early that gives us an advantage starting early," said Greaves. "I can see that, but I also have been through it, and I think we've found that it's not an advantage. In fact, it seems to be a hassle to ask a kid and his family to be obligated to our soccer team on [Aug 1]."

"And after about the second week of harvest going into the third week we start to struggle with what we call 'potato legs.' The boys are dragging because it's a long three weeks for them," he said.

Presque Isle typically has

scheduled weeknight practices during harvest break along with midweek games involving the Wildcats' longer road trips and home games on Saturdays.

"It was time to make the change," said White. "We have to play through harvest, we don't stop during harvest, and I think the intent of that dispensation from the [Maine Principals' Association] is that County teams stop during harvest, and we just can't do that. We have to travel to the Bangor area for weekday games during harvest to get those games in."

The change also may enable Presque Isle to line up a more challenging pre-season schedule against downstate opponents.

"The way I sold it to the coaches was No. 1, we could eliminate all the weeklong gaps in their schedules — sometimes we'd play Saturday and Saturday with nothing in between — because of the length of the season, and also I could get them into some competitive playdays in the Bangor and Portland areas during pre-season where they'd be playing more Class B and Class A teams."

Presque Isle will retain its

want to err on the side of being sure, because we want him for a long time. He loves the fans. He loves the sport. He loves to race. And we love him in the organization."

Harvick bemoans miscues that cost him wins

Kevin Harvick left Loudon with a chip on his shoulder — and justifiably so.

In Sunday's race at the Magic Mile, Harvick would gain positions on the track, only to lose them on pit road.

On the opening run, he drove from eighth to fourth, only to have a glitch with a tire changer's air gun drop him back to 11th for a restart on Lap 41.

On the long green-flag run that followed, Harvick advanced to fourth again but trouble with the left rear during a stop under caution on Lap 101 sent him back to 11th again for a restart on lap 109. During the balance of the race, Harvick ran as high as second but never led a lap.

At the finish, the 2014 series champion was fourth — and he was fuming.

"I'm disgusted, to tell you the truth," Harvick said. "It's the same thing every week. We just make mistake after mistake, and until we clean that up we don't have a chance to win races."

Brady

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training camp that they must get Garoppolo ready to play the first four games. Garoppolo has thrown only 31 regular season passes in the NFL, but plenty of talent evaluators around the league are convinced that he'll do just fine as the starter.

The Patriots' opener at Arizona was going to be difficult to win even with Brady playing. But their following three games are at home against the Miami Dolphins, Houston Texans and Buffalo Bills. It is not the most treacherous of early-season schedules. If the Garoppolo-led Patriots can manage merely to break even, with a record of 2-2, before Brady returns, little to nothing will be lost from Brady's suspension. It's not like another team is going to run away with the AFC East race.

In the bigger picture, the Patriots will have some idea about what sort of quarterback they have in Garoppolo as Brady's career winds down. Brady cannot play forever, despite his apparent belief to the contrary. Do the Patriots have his successor-in-waiting already in place? The answer to that will begin to come into sharper focus.

The Patriots clearly would not have chosen to be without Brady for the first quarter of the season. None of this is to suggest that this was the ideal outcome for them.

But maybe, just maybe, it's not quite as bad for them as it seems.

... AND TEN

Some quick thoughts on 10 other notable issues and developments as the offseason

winds down and the opening of training camps league-wide nears:

1. Wilkerson and Fitzpatrick: The New York Jets surprised many within the league by completing a five-year, \$85 million deal with franchise-tagged defensive lineman Muhammad Wilkerson by Friday's deadline. The added bonus for the Jets is that they now have additional salary cap flexibility to attempt to reach a contract agreement with quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick, who remains a free agent.

Of course, the issue with Fitzpatrick hasn't been the salary cap. It has been the Jets' unwillingness to pay Fitzpatrick as much as he wants, given the lack of any other NFL team seeking to sign him to what he regards as a suitable deal.

It now makes sense for the Jets and Fitzpatrick to strike a deal. But then again, it has made sense all offseason for the Jets and Fitzpatrick to strike a deal, and it hasn't happened yet.

2. Will NFLPA press ahead? The NFL Players Association did not abandon a further legal challenge to Brady's Deflategate suspension, as Brady did. In its written statement issued Friday, the union left open the possibility of attempting to take the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, while acknowledging that a stay of Brady's suspension would not be sought.

It actually would make sense for the union to keep at it, given the issues about Commissioner Roger Goodell's authority in the player-disciplinary system that go far beyond the Brady case. Even so, it remains highly unlikely that the Supreme

Court would agree to hear the case.

3. Miller's deal: The Von Miller deal underscores what a skilled front office executive John Elway has become. Yes, it took plenty of money to get Miller signed to a long-term contract. But the negotiations had become contentious and bordering on personal, yet Elway remained above that and got the deal done. The Denver Broncos should be able to remain in the Super Bowl-contending mix this season because of it.

4. Tucker's deal: The Baltimore Ravens' deal with franchise-tagged kicker Justin Tucker was overshadowed by the Miller and Wilkerson contracts, and rightfully so. But Tucker's four-year, \$16.8 million deal is significant for the Ravens as they try to rebound from last season's struggles. Tucker is among the league's top kickers, and keeping him in a positive frame of mind could be important if the Ravens are going to prevail in the sort of tight games they lost so regularly last season.

5. Cousins's situation: The lack of a long-term contract with the Washington Redskins does not seem to be bothering quarterback Kirk Cousins. Still, it is highly unusual for a quarterback to play on a one-year franchise deal. Cousins will become the first NFL quarterback to do so since Drew Brees with the San Diego Chargers in 2005.

But Cousins appears to understand his unique circumstances, having had only one productive season as an NFL starter. It doesn't seem to miff him that the Redskins want him to prove himself for at least one more season before handing him a mega-contract. Cousins's maturity and self-

awareness should serve him well.

6. Jeffery's situation: Wide receiver Alshon Jeffery will play this season on his franchise-player deal after he and the Chicago Bears failed to complete a long-term contract by Friday's deadline. There does appear to be some tension between the two sides in this case. But the Bears apparently would like to see Jeffery stay healthy and demonstrate that he is a true No. 1 wideout before making him one of the sport's better-paid receivers. It will be interesting to see how that plays out this season with Jeffery set to play alongside Kevin White.

7. Bosa's non-deal: The Chargers still have not signed first-round draft pick Joey Bosa. Did anyone tell them that long and combative contract negotiations with prized rookies are a thing of the past in the NFL?

8. Union's demands: Players want neutral arbitration for appeals of disciplinary measures imposed by the league under the personal conduct policy and integrity-of-the-game rules. They also don't like the franchise tags.

But will those remain negotiating priorities for them when they sit at the bargaining table to hammer out the sport's next labor deal with the owners? Or will those things be largely forgotten by then, amid the mad rush to figure out how to divide the sport's revenues and avoid a work stoppage?

9. Deflategate withdrawal: Deflategate is over. Is there anything left to talk about?

10. Not long now: Offseason? What offseason?

NFL veterans report to training camps next week. The wait for NFL football is nearly over.

Politics

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Duke may provide a career highlight for the UMaine players.

"There's nothing political about it either way. It's just an opportunity for our students to go down there and experience a great college basketball atmosphere, arguably the best in college basketball, at Duke," Creech said.

There is no threat of Gov. Paul LePage following in Cuomo's footsteps in regard to banning travel to North Carolina. In May, LePage pledged his name in support of a lawsuit by 11 states against guidance from President Barack Obama's administration that transgender students must be allowed to use the

bathroom of their choice.

LePage previously was among conservatives who asked a federal court in Virginia to block a transgender boy's challenge of his school district's bathroom-use policy, arguing he is "biologically of the female sex."

Two governors. Two distinctly different views on LGBT issues. UMaine will play at Duke, while UAlbany won't.

Sports, as a reflection of what's going on in society, are never likely to be able to exist without being influenced by key issues affecting our citizens. But at times like these, we should remember that competition is not designed to be a platform for political or social expression, rather a sanctuary in which we can kick back, relax and forget about the difficult situations we face, if only briefly.

UMaine

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UMaine plays an Oct. 30 exhibition game against Division II Stonehill, then officially kicks off the regular season with a Nov. 11 Tip-off Tournament contest against former Black Bears head coach Sharon Versyp and the Purdue Boilermakers. UMaine will try to extend its 19-game Cross Insurance Center winning streak after posting a 12-0 record on its home court last season.

Either Villanova or Mississippi State is the Nov. 12 Tip-off opponent. After traveling to Harvard on Nov. 15, the Bears travel to

Columbia, South Carolina, to play St. Peter's (Nov. 20), South Carolina (Nov. 21) and Hampton (No. 22) in the Hall of Fame Challenge. UMaine completes the tournament Nov. 27 against Chattanooga at Springfield, Massachusetts.

The Bears visit Clemson on Dec. 2 before finally returning home for games Dec. 7 (Northeastern) and Dec. 10 (Dartmouth). UMaine then travels to Bryant on Dec. 17 before heading to the Miami tournament, where the first-round foe is either Coppin State or ETSU on Dec. 19. The non-conference schedule concludes with games at Tu-lane and Boston College on Dec. 28 and Dec. 30, respectively.