

NASCAR

NASCAR INSIDER

by RICK MINTER / Universal Uclick

Legendary No. 3 to return with Austin Dillon at the wheel

David Pearson, Junior Johnson, the late Buck Baker and the late Dale Earnhardt all have something in common besides being members of the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

They all won races in the NASCAR division now known as Sprint Cup in a car numbered 3. Four other members of the Hall — Tim Flock, Cotton Owens, Fireball Roberts and Cale Yarborough — also drove cars numbered 3 in NASCAR's elite division.

All told, the No. 3 has had 73 different drivers since Bill Snowden made the debut run, finishing fifth at Occoneechee Speedway in Hillsboro, N.C., back in 1949. Fittingly, it was the third race ever for the circuit now known as Sprint Cup.

Legendary driver Dick Rathmann got the first-ever win for No. 3 at Oakland, Calif., in 1954. He wound up winning a total of three, with victories at North Wilkesboro, N.C., and at Santa Fe Speedway in Willow Springs, Ill. They were his final three NASCAR victories.

David Pearson got the first of his 105 Cup victories in a No. 3 Pontiac owned by Ray Fox, and Junior Johnson won nine times in cars numbered 3.

But since the start of the 1976 season, the No. 3 has belonged to Richard Childress, who drove the car himself until midway through the 1981 season when Earnhardt took the wheel for the final 11 races. Earnhardt left to drive for Bud Moore at the end of that season, and Ricky Rudd took over in 1982 and delivered Childress' No. 3 its first win at Riverside, Calif., in 1983.

Earnhardt returned to Childress and the No. 3 for the start of the 1984 season, and got the first of his 67 wins in the car at Talladega in the 19th race of that season. He had won six championships in the No. 3, plus another for Rod Osterlund in a No. 2 Chevrolet, before he died in a crash in the 2001 Daytona 500.

Earnhardt's final victory in the No. 3, at Talladega in the fall of 2000, gave that car 97 career Cup victories, which is third behind the No. 11, with 203 wins, and the No. 43, with 198.

Since Earnhardt's death, the No. 3 has not been used in Cup, but it will return next season with Childress' older grandson, Austin Dillon, driving. Dillon has used the No. 3, with the same shape of the number as his grandfather and Earn-



Richard Childress, right, announces Austin Dillon's move to the No. 3 Chevrolet in the Sprint Cup Series.

hardt used, since he began racing. It was on his dirt Late Model cars as well as the truck he drove to a Camping World Truck Series championship in 2011 and the Nationwide Series car he drove to a title this year.

The move, officially announced last week, has been common knowledge in NASCAR circles for months, and there has been little adverse reaction to Dillon using the car number most associated with the wildly popular Earnhardt. Most fans and insiders in the sport figured all along that the only appropriate candidates to bring back the No. 3 would be a member of either the Earnhardt or Childress family, and Dillon fits that bill.

Since the earliest races of Dillon's career, there's been speculation that one day he'd drive in Cup in a car numbered just like the ones his grandfather and Earnhardt drove. And from the beginning, Childress indicated that he'd be in favor of it.

When Dillon made his Super Late Model debut at a dirt track in Madison, N.C., years ago, Childress was asked about the number.

"I think it has to be a special deal to bring back the No. 3," he said that night

as he watched the youngster power his way around the clay oval. "And to me, this is a special deal."

Dale Earnhardt Jr. also has expressed support for Dillon and the No. 3 for years. And as one who is known for his great appreciation of the history of the sport, he understands better than most what car numbers mean in the entire history of NASCAR.

"The number is more of a bank that you just deposit history into," Earnhardt Jr. once said. "It doesn't really belong to any individual."

For his rookie Cup campaign, Dillon will have veteran crew chief Gil Martin, who most recently worked with Kevin Harvick at Richard Childress Racing. Sponsorship will come from Dow and General Mills.

Dillon said he's ready for the challenges that come with racing in Cup and is proud to be making the move.

"To get the opportunity to race in the Sprint Cup Series doesn't come around very often," he said. "To be able to compete in Cup and race for wins and championships is going to be awesome."

"I'm going to give it my all every time out."

NOTEBOOK

'Salute to the King' to mark Kinser's final run for a World of Outlaws Sprint Car Series championship

Steve Kinser, the 20-time World of Outlaws Sprint Car Series champion and a one-time Sprint Cup driver, announced last week that the 2014 season will be his final run for a championship.

His final tour will be called the "Salute to the King" and begins in February on the short tracks of Florida. Kinser, 59, has 576 career Outlaw A-main victories and drives a car owned by Sprint Cup champion Tony Stewart, who as a kid idolized his fellow Indiana racer.

"I never missed an Outlaw show in the area when I was growing up," Stewart said. "We waited for those nights like they were holidays."

"It was incredible watching Steve race with Sammy (Swindell) and Doug (Wolfgang). He was our guy, being from Indiana, and when he won, it gave us all something to brag about. And he won a lot."

"A few years ago, when we had the chance to get him to drive for [Tony Stewart Racing], it was like a dream come true."

"When we got him on board, my goal was for him to drive for us for the remainder of his career. I'm really excited for him to go out and have a great season. He's the best ever, and I couldn't be more proud."

Kinser, who did not say he is retiring completely from racing, said he's proud of what he's been able to do over the years.

"Racing with the Outlaws has been my life for almost 40 years," he said. "It's all I've known. My family has been around it. I've had the pleasure of running up and down the road racing all across this incredible country, and even in Canada, Mexico and Australia, with this series."

"I knew it wasn't going to last forever. I feel like we have a great team here capable of winning a lot of races and challenging for the championship this year."

Speedway Benefits program off to strong start

Forty-five days after longtime NASCAR promoter H.A. "Humpy" Wheeler announced his Speedway Benefits program for short-track promoters, he's signed 300 tracks to the program that offers a way for promoters to work together to save money on input costs and attract more sponsorships.

"This proves the idea was sound and greatly needed," said Trip Wheeler, the 20-year-old son of the company founder who also is working on the program. "We are signing up tracks as fast as our seven-person staff can handle."

You'd never know it, but Humpy is a great paralegal. While we will eventually get to 500 or even 1,000 tracks next year, the attendance our member tracks represent now makes us very appealing to global companies."

NASCAR announces several promotions in key positions for 2014

Brent Dewar, whose career at General Motors saw him rise to senior vice president of global Chevrolet, has been named the chief operating officer of NASCAR.

"Working closely with NASCAR over the last year, I've been very impressed by Brian [France]'s vision for NASCAR's future and the



Jimmy Small will take over as president of Iowa Speedway.

talented people he has put in place to achieve that vision," Dewar said in a release announcing his hiring. "I have great passion for racing and I look forward to adding my experience, ideas and relationships throughout racing to help the team drive NASCAR's growth and position it for a bright future."

NASCAR also announced that Steve Phelps, senior vice president and chief marketing officer, has been promoted to executive vice president, and that Steve O'Donnell, senior vice president, racing operations, has been promoted to executive vice president.

NASCAR's general counsel, Gary Crotty, has been promoted to chief legal officer/general counsel. Mike Helton remains NASCAR president, and as such, is in charge of all racing operations.

NASCAR also announced last week that Jimmy Small will take over as president of Iowa Speedway, which recently was purchased by NASCAR.

Small, 28, has worked for NASCAR for six years, most recently as a business and marketing liaison with teams and drivers in all three national series.

Small also helped manage the implementation of the NASCAR Industry Action Plan, which includes efforts to attract younger fans to the sport.

"I'm honored to be presented with this opportunity to help guide Iowa Speedway in the next chapter of its life," Small said in a release about his new job. "We will continue fanning the intense passion for motorsports that is prevalent here, and do our best to showcase Iowa Speedway's fast, exciting short-track racing in creative, fan-friendly ways."

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