



COLE CUSTER

Looking Forward to First Daytona 500

KANNAPOLIS, North Carolina (Feb. 6, 2020) – The 2020 NASCAR Cup Series kicks off at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway with the 62nd running of the Daytona 500, and Cole Custer, driver of the No. 41 Haas Automation Ford Mustang for Stewart-Haas Racing (SHR), will contend for Cup Series Rookie of the Year honors in his first fulltime season behind the wheel of a stock car in NASCAR’s top-tier series.

The 22-year-old Custer, who hails from Ladera Ranch, California, moved up to the premiere series this year after completing three full seasons in the NASCAR Xfinity Series for SHR, having notched a total of nine wins, 12 poles and twice finishing runner-up in the championship standings. Additionally, he earned the Xfinity Series owners championship for SHR in 2018.

While most of the No. 41 team remains intact from the 2019 season, the biggest change to the team is veteran crew chief Mike Shiplett, who has more than 300 races under his belt in the Xfinity and Cup Series as a team leader. Shiplett led Custer to a career-high seven wins in 2019 Xfinity Series competition – second-most in the series. It was Custer and Shiplett’s first season working together, and they turned out to be a productive duo. In total, the crew chief from Amherst, Ohio added six poles with Custer, 17 top-five finishes and 24 top-10s, and 922 laps led in 2019.

Custer will contend for the Rookie of the Year title as part of one of the toughest classes in recent history. He’ll compete with notables Christopher Bell and Tyler Reddick, all of whom have battled against each other in the Xfinity Series and are making the fulltime transition to the Cup Series together.

Custer will enjoy an added measure of excitement during Daytona Speedweeks, taking part in training and a flight with the United States Air Force Thunderbirds before Daytona 500 media day festivities Feb. 12. It will be a first-time experience for the California native.

Haas Automation, America’s leading builder of CNC machines and owned by SHR team co-owner Gene Haas, will adorn Custer’s racecar throughout Speedweeks. In addition to Haas Automation, the No. 41 Ford Mustang will also feature Autodesk, Jacob Construction and Production Alliance Group this season.

While the 2020 season marks Custer’s first fulltime Cup Series season, he’s made three previous starts in NASCAR’s top series. All three were in 2018 in the No. 51 Rick Ware Racing entry at Las Vegas, Pocono and Richmond with a best finish of 25th.

Custer has six Xfinity Series starts at Daytona. He’s led eight laps in total during those outings, but finishing races at the 2.5-mile superspeedway has been a challenge with three accidents in the record books in those six races. The Ford driver also has one Daytona start in the NASCAR Gander RV & Outdoors Truck Series. In February 2016, he started 10th, but his day ended prematurely after an accident, which resulted in a 25th-place finish.

That latest addition to SHR’s four-car contingent in the Cup Series joins veterans Aric Almirola, Clint Bowyer and Kevin Harvick. Custer is looking forward to his first Daytona 500 as an integral part of the two-time championship-winning organization.

“It’s pretty surreal to think that I’m going to race in my first Daytona 500,” he said. “The Daytona 500 is the biggest race in our sport and I’ve watched it since I was a kid. And I’ve been around it a decent amount, so it’s going to be pretty crazy being part of it. The whole event, walking to the car before the race and the crowd, it’s just going to be surreal.”

Cole Custer, Driver of the No. 41 Haas Automation Mustang for Stewart-Haas Racing:

What do you think it would be like to win the Daytona 500?

“Winning the Daytona 500 would be surreal. It’s a race that I’ve watched since I was a kid and it’s a dream come true to race in it. If we win, there will be a huge party. When I think about the 500, I think about all of the close finishes and all of the guys who have won it. It’s a race that everyone wants to win and it’s very prestigious.”

What is the most memorable Daytona 500 to you?

“For me, I would have to say it’s the one in 2007 with Mark Martin and Kevin Harvick with the extremely close finish at the start-finish line. That’s the one that sticks out in my mind.”

What is it like moving up to the Cup Series after having a couple of successful seasons in the Xfinity Series?

“I’m ready for it. I feel like I’ve done a lot to prepare for it over the offseason. It doesn’t get any bigger and better than this. Obviously, starting with our biggest race of the season means there’s a lot of pressure. It’ll be different for me to experience the Duel (qualifying races) and the various different practices. I want to be consistent this season and build some good finishes to start and, hopefully, not wreck a bunch of cars. Once we build strong finishes, we can look forward to the playoffs.”

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