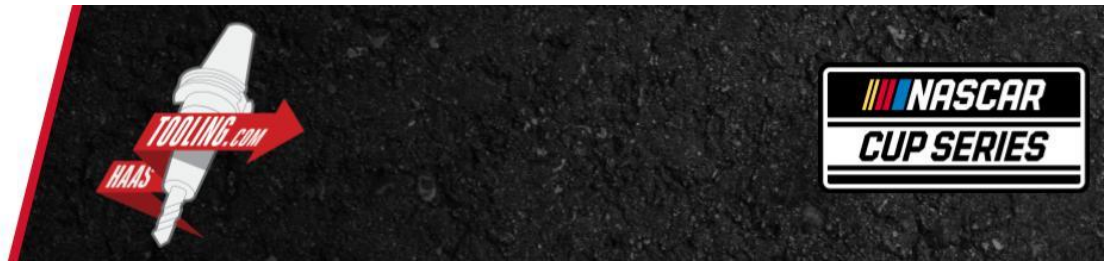


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COLE CUSTER

Ready To Return to Racing at Darlington

KANNAPOLIS, North Carolina (May 11, 2020) – Cole Custer and the No. 41 Haas Tooling Ford Mustang team for Stewart-Haas Racing (SHR) make the two-hour drive to Darlington (S.C.) Raceway for Sunday’s 400-mile race. Custer’s Mustang will showcase a new livery that highlights Gene Haas’ newest holding, Haas Tooling. [Haas Tooling](#) was launched just weeks ago as a way for CNC machinists to purchase high quality cutting tools at great prices. Haas’ cutting tools will be sold exclusively online at [HaasTooling.com](#) and shipped directly to end-users.

After a nine-week shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic that prevented large gatherings, the NASCAR Cup Series season resumes Sunday at the track that’s “Too Tough To Tame.” The remaining 2020 schedule is still fluid, but race fans and sports fans alike finally can rejoice with live racing action. While fans will not be allowed in the grandstands due to restrictions, NASCAR’s longtime television partner FOX will do its best to heighten the race action in living rooms across the nation and abroad.

What makes this weekend particularly unique for Custer is that he’s a rookie in NASCAR’s premiere series and will take the green flag on Sunday without ever turning a lap in NASCAR’s top series at the 1.366-mile oval. Even though that will present challenges to the California native, he’s ready. “I think the best thing I can do is learn and figure out as much as I can in the first part of the race and get more aggressive as it goes,” Custer said. “When you don’t have practice, you don’t have the time to learn how much you can push all the lanes and the track in general, so I’ll have to work up to it a little.”

In the NASCAR Xfinity Series at Darlington, the 22-year-old has three starts and managed stellar statistics. He hasn’t started or finished outside the top-10 in the Xfinity Series at the South Carolina track. He has one runner-up finish, as well as a victory, earned last year in the No. 00 Production Alliance Group Ford Mustang after the car that crossed the finish line first was disqualified. “It was a really strange ‘win’ for us,” Custer said. “I ran second there two years in a row and was definitely a little mad because that’s the coolest track you can win at. Then we ended up winning about an hour after the race was over. It’s definitely not the same as a real win, but we can take a little pride in it that we could go there and compete for wins with the best of them.”

During the quarantine period, the young driver figured out that do-it-yourself projects are not as easy as they’re made to seem on popular television shows. Custer spent several days working on a seemingly easy project of installing a brick pathway from his garage to his house. He chronicled the effort via his [Twitter](#) account, but the project is at a standstill after he felt like he needs to call in professional help. “I’ve reached a point of where it’s beyond me abilities,” Custer said. “I got everything dug up and got the stuff I need, but I need to move the edging around so I can fit the pavers and I really don’t trust myself with that project.” Additionally, he released more episodes of Cole Custer’s Cold Custard Review with his first [store-bought custard](#) review and a [homemade version](#).

The Ford driver participated in three eNASCAR Pro Invitational Series iRaces – Talladega, Dover and North Wilkesboro (N.C.) Raceway. The virtual races have aired on FOX and provided an outlet for drivers to participate in at some form of racing from home.

SHR has 35 starts at Darlington and one victory earned by No. 4 driver Kevin Harvick in 2014. In total, the Kannapolis-based Ford team has 10 top-fives and 18 top-10s in the Cup Series at the historic track.

Haas Automation, founded in 1983 by SHR co-owner Gene Haas, is America’s leading builder of CNC machine tools. The company manufactures a complete line of vertical and horizontal machining centers, turning centers and rotary tables and indexers. All Haas products are constructed in the company’s 1.1-million-square-foot manufacturing facility in Oxnard, California, and distributed through a worldwide network of Haas Factory Outlets.

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Even though Custer had a trio of starts in the Cup Series in 2018, 2020 officially marks his Rookie of the Year campaign in NASCAR's most prestigious series. He's competing for rookie honors with notables Christopher Bell and Tyler Reddick. The three have battled against each other in the Xfinity Series and are making the full-time transition to the Cup Series together. Custer was the highest finishing Cup Series rookie at Phoenix Raceway with a ninth-place finish in March.

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

What have you been doing to stay in race-ready shape?

“Since I haven't been able to go to the gym or anything, the best thing I feel like I've been doing is running to stay in shape. It definitely helps running long distances because it relates to how we run long races in the car.”

Midweek races were a hot topic heading into this season. They're going to happen now, unexpectedly. What do you think about that?

“I think it's cool that during this time we can kind of try things in the sport that we can't during regular seasons. It will be cool getting to see how midweek races work and how we will manage that as a team.”

NASCAR hasn't seen a break like this before. Do you feel like you're starting the season over now, since it has been so many weeks since the last race?

“It's definitely a little strange because, during the offseason, you still have things to work on for the next year. But, during this time, we weren't really allowed to. So we went completely without racing for a couple of months and it has us all dying to get back.”

You talk to your teammates before each race, but you seem to really rely on Kevin Harvick for advice. Have you talked to him yet about Darlington? Or do you plan to? It seems his advice may be more important than ever, given that you will not have any time on the track there before you climb in the car.

“Yes, it's definitely going to be more important than ever to talk with my teammates about what to expect going into the race. They've been some of the best to get advice from and, especially for a track like Darlington, you'll want as much advice as you can get.”

What do you think it's going to be like to be at the track but not have any fans on pit road or in the stands?

“It will make before and after the race very strange, not having the fans in the stands. But, once you get in the car and get racing, you'll be focused on trying to not hit the wall more than anything at Darlington.”

You've participated in a few virtual meet-and-greets with sponsors How unique was that?

“It's pretty cool because you can really spend just as much time or more with guests and have them ask questions. It's pretty personable, too, because you're in the same situation as they are – sitting at home.”

The new car for next season has been put on hold given the current situation. How much of an advantage is that for you, given that you'll get another season in this year's car? Whereas, before, you were going to spend time this year learning this car, then having to turn around and have to learn a whole different car for 2021.

“It will definitely help me and the team having the new car delayed. Having that extra time to learn and figure that car out will be important, and I think something we all just don't want to rush into.”

Normally, you know every racetrack you're going to and when, well before the season starts. Now there are changes in the schedule and you only know a few weeks out which track you're going to. Does that make things more difficult for you? Or do you typically break the schedule up in sections, anyway, and not get too far ahead?

“I think the toughest part about it is getting prepared for the races when you only have a few days in between. When you have to go over everything from pit road, to the track, to restarts and everything in between, it makes it hard to get that all done in a couple days.”

Mike Shiplett, Crew Chief of the No. 41 Haas Automation Mustang for Stewart-Haas Racing:

What have you been doing during the break besides working from home? Any house projects, car projects, anything like that?

“I’ve been working on house projects that I have been putting off for too long. Working in my garage on my 1937 pickup truck. It’s a complete rebuild into a hotrod with a stock-looking body and modern suspension. It’s one of those long-term projects.”

There has been talk of midweek races for a while and now they’re happening this year, unexpectedly. What do you think about that? How hard will it be to prepare for multiple races in one week, especially given the restrictions placed on employees at the shop?

“I think it’s a great idea to have races on Wednesday night. It gives the fans something to look forward to during the week. It will be hard to get four cars ready to race in two weeks, but we always find a way to get it done. We do have to limit the amount of people that are in the shop at one time, which makes it harder to get things done. We have a great group of people at the shop and I’m confident they will build great Fords to take to the track.”

As of right now, it sounds like you’re going to go through tech and then immediately race. How do you prepare for that? Would this be similar to getting ready for a situation when qualifying and practice are rained out?

“When we go to the track and we have practice and qualifying rained out, we usually don’t know that going into the weekend, so we have spent a lot of time working on our practice plan. Since we know going into this race we have no practice, that’s more time we can use our tools we have to build a setup for the race. We will have to use our teammates’ notes to help us, since Cole has never been to these tracks with a current Cup car. It will make it a little more challenging, but we have a great group of engineers on the No. 41 team that will get the job done.”

Will Darlington sort of feel like the first race of a new season since it has been several weeks since the last race?

“It will be the first time back at a track since this happened, but we have been doing all the same stuff each week, just from home. It’s different during the offseason with just having a shut down. We never knew when we would get back to the track. In the offseason, you know when Daytona is going to happen, and you count down from the last race of the season before.”

What advice do you have for Cole, or do you have a plan to give him for Darlington? He’s a rookie in a completely different car, at a track he hasn’t been to before in the Cup Series, and this is a difficult situation to be put in at a track that’s known to be one of the toughest.

“Go run every lap and we will work on the car each pit stop. Seat time is the best way to learn, and he will get a lot of that in the next few weeks.”

How many hours do you expect Cole to spend in the simulator getting ready for Darlington?

“We will get him into the simulator as many times as possible. Since all the Ford teams use the same simulator, time will be at a premium.”

Do you see the first Darlington race as a little bit of test and practice for the second Darlington race for Cole, since he hasn’t been there before in Cup?

“Our whole plan from the start of the season was to use the first quarter of the races as a test for each week to build for the future. With the current car being able to race next year, this will help Cole in his learning curve a lot. We’ve never had back-to-back points races at the same track before in NASCAR, so I feel it will help all the teams to be better for the next race three days later.”

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You'll be driving to races for the next several weeks. Does that kind of bring back an old-school feel when several of the tracks were within driving distance of the Charlotte area?

“Sort of, but we would all go in one van. This time, we all have to drive ourselves to keep safe distancing practices.”

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