

96

GBR
GAUNT BROTHERS RACING



DANIEL SUÁREZ

‘Mamba Mentality’

MOORESVILLE, North Carolina (Feb. 25, 2020) – Daniel Suárez, driver of the No. 96 Toyota Certified Used Vehicles Camry for Gaunt Brothers Racing (GBR) in the NASCAR Cup Series, is a fan of many sports and athletes the world over. The athletes he admires the most are the ones who not only show excellence on the field, or on the court, but off of it, as well.

One of those Suárez admired the most is the late Kobe Bryant, one of the greatest players in National Basketball Association history who for 20 years graced the court for the Los Angeles Lakers and was endeared by fellow players, friends and fans throughout Southern California and around the world – particularly in the Hispanic community.

During this weekend’s NASCAR tour stop at Auto Club Raceway in Fontana, California, Suárez will honor the memory of Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter Gianna, and the seven others who perished in a tragic helicopter accident last month. The native of Monterrey, Mexico, will don a pair of specially designed driving gloves and matching shoes that bear the likeness of Bryant, the Lakers’ iconic purple and gold colors, and Bryant’s jersey Nos. 8 and 24. Suárez’s racecar will carry the names of all nine people whose lives were lost. And he also plans to wear a No. 24 Lakers jersey on stage during driver introductions prior to the Auto Club 400.

Beginning Wednesday, Suárez’s custom gloves and shoes, designed by renowned shoe artist and Los Angeles native Salvador Amezcua – aka “Kickstradomis” – whose works are hugely popular among players in the NBA, National Football League and Major League Baseball, will be auctioned on eBay with proceeds benefitting Vanessa Bryant’s “Mamba on Three Fund.” The fund was established to support the families of the crash victims. A link to the auction can be found through DanielSuarezRacing.com.

Suárez and his No. 96 Toyota teammates will look to channel Bryant’s fierce “Mamba Mentality” when they take to the 2-mile, Auto Club Speedway oval for Sunday’s 400-mile race. They endured an unexpected hiccup at the season-opening Daytona 500 two weekends ago when an accident not of Suárez’s doing knocked him out of his Thursday-night Duel qualifying event and out the 500. He and the team rebounded last Sunday on the 1.5-mile Las Vegas Motor Speedway oval, where Suárez qualified 35th on a grid determined by owners points after Saturday qualifying was rained out. He weathered an issue that saw his racecar briefly lose power on the opening lap of the race and went on to soldier home with a 30th-place finish.

Sunday’s race marks GBR’s first Cup Series race at Fontana but the fourth for Suárez, the native of Monterrey, Mexico who in 2016 qualified on the NASCAR Xfinity Series pole and finished fourth at Fontana en route to that year’s series championship, becoming the first Mexican-born competitor to win a NASCAR national series title. In his three Cup Series starts at Fontana, he has a best start of 10th and best finish of seventh, both in his rookie 2017 season.

With an opportunity to honor the legacy of one of his all-time sports heroes, and the memory of those who left this life alongside him, Suárez feels honored and is very much looking forward to sporting the Lakers’ purple and gold, and Bryant’s Nos. 8 and 24, on NASCAR’s biggest stage in Southern California.

DANIEL SUÁREZ, Driver of the No. 96 Toyota Certified Used Vehicles Camry for Gaunt Brothers Racing:

You’re wearing a special pair of driving gloves and shoes this weekend at Fontana in honor of the late Los Angeles Lakers’ star Kobe Bryant and all nine victims of that helicopter accident last month. Talk about that.

“Mamba mentality is what Kobe always said and one of the great things he is known for. That’s what it’s all about. That’s something you have to have inside of you, to be hungry, to go out there and get out of that comfort zone. Kobe was a huge role model. I want to give back the way Kobe used to give back. So for the Fontana race, we have something special honoring Kobe Bryant. I’m going to be wearing a special version of my shoes and gloves with the (uniform) numbers of Kobe Bryant (8 and 24). As well, we’re going to have the names of every single victim of the accident on my car. To give back, we’re going to auction off the gloves and shoes after the race to try and donate as much money as possible to the Mamba on Three Fund. We’re going to put a minimum of a \$5,000 donation into this foundation. I have opinions about many athletes but I’ve always admired most the ones who are not only great at their game, but great outside their game. Kobe was that kind of athlete, and that kind of a person.”

On the racetrack, are you headed to Fontana feeling like there's something to prove?

“We obviously have a lot of work to do. We are pretty much a brand-new team. We're still building. It's kind of funny because every time I go to the shop, I see somebody new. I show up early in the morning with the guys and every once in a while I'm saying, 'Nice to meet you,' to a couple of guys. We're still building the team and I have a lot of confidence in Marty Gaunt and Toyota Racing. Some of these sponsors have been with me for a while, now – Coca-Cola, CommScope. I feel like we have everything, and I feel we have very good people around us. We just have to be patient and work hard, keep our head up and try to improve every weekend.”

How do you approach Fontana this weekend?

“I have to take it step by step. I am very used to specific lap times and seeing myself in the top-10, and right now it's not that. I have to start building that. It's going to be a process, but I feel like I'm with the right people to do it. Toyota has played a huge role. And obviously Marty Gaunt and all of the rest of the sponsors. I feel like we have a lot of great people around us, but that's what it's all about. Having good people around us to make it happen.”

What do you enjoy about going to Fontana?

“Fontana is a fun race for me. We don't get to race in Mexico, so Fontana is one of the closer tracks to home for me. A lot of Hispanic fans come to the race and it feels really good to see a lot of Mexican flags in the stands. I know when I see them exactly who they are supporting.”

Out of all the racetracks out West, which one is your favorite?

“I like Phoenix a lot, but Fontana is my favorite. It is just so different from everywhere else we go. You get into the corner and it's a super-wide racetrack compared to the other tracks we go to. We go into the corners on restarts four-, five-, or six-wide. It's just incredible.”

What was it like sitting on the sidelines for the Daytona 500? What did you do?

“It was not fun. It didn't really hit me all the way until Sunday. It was kind of weird. I told the guys, 'This is no fun, I hope we never have to do it again.' I had a lot of sponsor obligations and friends coming to the race, so I tried to do the same thing I would do if I was racing. I feel like every single time you hit bottom, there's one way to go. I feel like we have a long way to go, so we just have to keep working hard and hopefully, with baby steps, we keep moving in the right direction.”

This is a new chapter in your career. Do you feel it's kind of like a restart?

“I think so. Especially for the people that help me. Many people might think I'm crazy, but having Toyota and having somebody – maybe you don't really know him – but Marty Gaunt is a class-act person. Having him as an owner and the vision that he has and myself, we know where we are at. We know how fast we are moving forward, and we know where we want to go. If you have all these key people moving in the same direction, there's no reason why it won't happen. My goal is in six months from now we'll talk about the team that nobody knew and wasn't even making races – talking about that team that is going to be competing up front.”

How much emphasis do you put on qualifying versus working toward having a good car on race day during these race weekends?

“I don't think position really matters. These are very long races. You just have to be good in traffic, good in clean air. Good in the short run, good in the long run. If you can have a good package, it doesn't really matter if you are in the back or the front. To avoid going a lap down is extremely important. That doesn't really bother me much. I'm just trying to focus on making my car drive better and make my car last longer. If I can do that, I feel like we can be in good shape.”

When you look back on 2020, what will define a successful season?

“To improve every single weekend. If we start racing 30th, then 25th and we can improve every weekend, I feel like we can be good. I feel like we have everything to be able to do that. A lot of things are going to change through the year, especially with all the changes we're going to have for next year. We just have to be smart and hopefully by the end of the year we can be more in the top-10.”

DANIEL SUÁREZ'S FONTANA PERFORMANCE PROFILE

Year	Date	Event	Start	Finish	Status/Laps	Laps Led	Earnings
2019	3/17	Auto Club 400	13	20	Running, 200/200	0	N/A
2018	3/18	Auto Club 400	30	23	Running, 199/200	0	N/A
2017	3/26	◇Auto Club 400	10	7	Running, 202/202	0	N/A

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