

Cole Custer, who grew up racing at California tracks, is NASCAR's new rising star

By JACK HARRIS | STAFF WRITER
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Cole Custer celebrates with the trophy after winning a NASCAR Cup Series race on Sunday in Sparta, Ky. (Mark Humphrey / Associated Press)

Growing up in Ladera Ranch, Cole Custer looked up to California-born NASCAR drivers such as Jimmie Johnson and Kevin Harvick.

On Sunday, the 22-year-old Cup Series rookie beat them both, claiming his first career victory on NASCAR's top circuit in the Quaker State 400 at Kentucky Speedway.

"I didn't even shower after the race" before flying home, laughed Custer, who before Sunday had never even led a lap in his Cup Series career. "A few people met us at the house and had a party and that was it. I was just enjoying the moment."

While Custer's current residence is in North Carolina, his true home is California, where the Orange County native earned his stripes racing at tracks across the state — from Irwindale to Bakersfield to desert courses he'd cruise on weekends.

"You don't think of California as a racing and NASCAR kind of state, but there's a lot of guys from California that are in the Cup Series, that are in racing," he said. "There's a lot of competition ... a lot of different series you can run from sprint cars, the late models to whatever. I mean, Jimmie Johnson grew up racing off-road trucks. You have so much stuff going on in California, it creates a pretty diverse thing for people to work their way up."

Long before making a four-wide pass on the last lap to earn Sunday's checkered flag, becoming the first rookie to win a Cup Series race in four years, Custer drove in many of those formats. He dominated amateur series in his early teenage years, started competing in NASCAR's Truck Series in 2014 as a 16-year-old (he won in his seventh start), reached the second-tier Xfinity Series two years later (he won nine times and finished the season runner-up the last two years), and made his Cup Series debut in March 2018.

"You always go back to where you started and where you learned how to do what you're doing now," he said. "Guys like Kevin Harvick, Jimmie Johnson, all these guys that grew up in Southern California can all kind of relate to each other."



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Though he comes from a racing family — Custer's dad, Joe, is the president of the Stewart-Haas Racing team for which Custer drives — the Tesoro High alum fondly remembers his California childhood, from dirt bike rides around Lake Elsinore, ski trips to Mammoth Mountain and habitual lunch-time pit stops at In-N-Out.

"In-N-Out is probably the biggest thing I miss," he laughed, a proud collector of many of the burger chain's T-shirts.

On a more earnest note, he added: "Sometimes, when you get into a racing family, you're just traveling around the world, you're doing homeschooling and things like that. I didn't really do that. I played all the sports. I went to public schools. We just wanted to have more of a normal kind of life."

But Custer's life is normal no longer. If that wasn't clear before, his win Sunday made sure of it.

"It just takes a lot of stress off," he said. "I mean, you've still got to put the work in and make sure you're prepared when you show up. But, you're not going in second-guessing yourself as much. You're going to have more confidence."