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COLE CUSTER

Rookie Season Culminates at Phoenix

KANNAPOLIS, North Carolina (Nov. 4, 2020) – Cole Custer will make his 39th career NASCAR Cup Series start in his No. 41 HaasTooling.com Ford Mustang for Stewart-Haas Racing (SHR) during Sunday's Season Finale 500k at Phoenix Raceway. This weekend marks Custer's final race of his rookie season. Next year, Custer will pilot the No. 41 without the yellow stripe across his back bumper signifying he's a rookie.

"I think what I'll remember most about my rookie season are all of the different things we went through, the challenges, from no practice or qualifying and to no testing," Custer said. "Having a completely different car from the Xfinity Series and having to figure that out was challenging. There were so many challenges during this season that I'll remember for a while, how unorthodox the season was and how we were able to persevere through that and figure out ways to get through that as a rookie."

Last weekend at Martinsville (Va.) Speedway Custer started 15th and the No. 41 team adjusted his Mustang throughout the 500-lap event. He ended the day 13th in just his second Cup Series start at the half-mile Virginia track. The result gave the rookie driver his fourth straight top-15 finish – ninth on Oct. 11 at the Charlotte (N.C.) Motor Speedway Roval, 14th on Oct. 18 at Kansas Speedway in Kansas City and 14th in the series' previous race at Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth.

Custer's first Cup Series start at Phoenix came in March, when he scored a ninth-place finish after starting 16th at the mile oval. The result was his first top-10 of this season. "The flat short tracks like Phoenix, New Hampshire and Richmond have been good tracks for us this year," he said. "We've run solid at those places, so I'm really looking forward to going back to Phoenix. It's a place where we got our first top-10 this year, and it's a place I circle on my calendar to go back there and have a good run. I'm looking forward to it. We've made our cars better since the first race and it's one of the tracks with the PJ1 (traction compound) that makes the track constantly change. Your line is going to change and how you get into the corner with the PJ1, so it's nice for a driver to have that much versatility."

In the NASCAR Xfinity Series at Phoenix, the California native has six starts and, with the exception of the March 2017 race, Custer started and finished in the top-10 each time. In last year's November start, he finished second to Justin Allgaier. Custer has an average Phoenix Xfinity Series starting position of 3.8 and an average finishing position of 8.3.

In the NASCAR Gander RV & Outdoors Truck Series at Phoenix, Custer has three starts with a best finish of third earned in 2014. In NASCAR's developmental K&N Pro Series West, Custer has three starts at Phoenix with two pole awards, one of which in spring 2014 ended in victory by a .376-of-a-second margin of victory while driving for Bill McAnally Racing. In total at Phoenix, Custer has an average K&N Series starting position of 2.0 and an average finish of 3.3.

In his last eight Cup Series starts at tracks 1 mile or less, Custer has two top-10s – Phoenix and Dover (Del.) International Speedway – with an average starting position of 17.0 and an average finishing position of 18.0.

Even though Custer is out of contention for this year's Cup Series championship, he still has one more opportunity to capture his second win of the season. This weekend, a limited number of fans will be allowed to attend the Phoenix event while following social distancing guidelines.

So far this season, Ford has won 18 races, and Custer and his SHR teammate Kevin Harvick have both earned wins for the Blue Oval – one for Custer and nine for Harvick. Ford's milestone 700th win in the Cup Series came at the hands of Harvick on Aug. 23 at Dover. Ford captured its first victory on June 25, 1950. Ford drivers made up 50 percent of this year's starting playoff field.

With Custer's Cup Series win July 12 at Kentucky, he became one of 10 drivers who have won in each of NASCAR's top three national series, as well as in ARCA and one of NASCAR's developmental series.

Team co-owner Gene Haas' newest holding, [Haas Tooling](#), was launched as a way for CNC machinists to purchase high quality cutting tools at great prices. Haas' cutting tools are sold exclusively online at [HaasTooling.com](#) and shipped directly to end users. Beginning July 1, [HaasTooling.com](#) products became available nationally. The cutting tools available for purchase at [HaasTooling.com](#) are even more important during the current COVID-19 pandemic as CNC machines have become vital to producing personal protective equipment.

SHR has 74 starts at Phoenix with six wins – Ryan Newman in April 2010 and Harvick with five wins in March and November 2014, and March 2015, 2016 and 2018. SHR has two pole awards with 23 top-fives and 37 top-10s at the Arizona track, with an average starting position of 16.2 and an average finishing position of 14.2, along with 1,571 laps led.

Haas Automation, founded by Haas in 1983, 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.

Custer, who had a trio of starts in the Cup Series in 2018, clinched 2020 Rookie of the Year honors. Competing against fellow rookie notables Christopher Bell and Tyler Reddick, he was the only rookie to clinch a playoff spot this season.

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

Once Phoenix wraps up, you will be the Rookie of the Year. What does it mean to you to lock up that title? This was one of the toughest rookie classes in several years.

“To win the Rookie of the Year battle means a ton because of the people you're racing against for it and they're people that you respect. Looking down the road, five or 10 years from now, it's going to be a cool thing to look back on being able to win the rookie of the year battle against people you respect and guys who will probably go on and win a lot of races.”

This weekend is Clint Bowyer's last race with SHR and Jimmie Johnson is retiring. Do you think there will be a little bit different feeling at Phoenix this weekend, given all of the different scenarios going on this weekend?

“There will definitely be a little bit different feel, I would say. You have Clint (Bowyer) and Jimmie (Johnson), and maybe even Matt (Kenseth) retiring. Seeing guys like that who have meant so much to the sport and that I've looked up to since I was a little kid and being able to race against them in what's probably their final race is pretty surreal. I think a lot of people will cherish those final few laps with them at Phoenix. I think we'll remember that moment for a long time.”

What do you think made you and (crew chief) Mike Shiplett successful this year? Is there something about his style and/or personality that you really like that gels well with your personality?

“I think for us, it's a matter of me and Mike just taking it one step at a time. Mike is really good at looking at the big picture and figuring out what is important and what is not. I think we've steadily improved this year and worked on things I need to do to be better, and what we need in the car to make me better. It's a matter of taking it one step at a time. I think we would've seen some improvement faster if we would've had practice. I think it's just about us being methodical and how we make changes to the car and the things I need to work on. He's really good at digging into the root cause of things and what I need to do to get better. I think Mike is really good at figuring those things out and what I need to do to get better, or what we need to do to make the car better.

Is there anything that you had in your mind when the season started on how you thought it might be, and now at the end of the season you think, “man, I was mistaken on how I thought that would go?”

“I think at the start of the season it was a lot of overthinking, honestly. You don’t know exactly what you’re getting into with the cars because they’re so much different than the Xfinity cars. You start to overthink what you need to be doing and how you need to attack the corners, and how you need to race people. When it comes to when you’re halfway through the season and you have the feel for it, everything really starts to make sense. These guys that you’ve looked up to as a kid, they’re just another person out there, another car out there. When you go into your rookie season, I think you might overthink things a little bit and I think that’s something I experienced. There were so many new things going on and you don’t know how to address them.”

Do you have any plans for the offseason? Or what will you do to prepare for next season?

“For next season, we obviously won’t have practice again, so it will be a lot of going through notes from this year and methodically making a plan for next year. What areas do we need to be better, what tracks we need to be better at, how can I be better with my driving style and things like that we can perfect? I feel like we’re to the point on our team that we can run with the guys up front and compete for race wins when we hit everything right, but we need to be more consistent.”

Do you have any goals in mind for next season, yet?

“For next season, I want to win more races. I want to run in the top-10 more and get more stage points. This year was probably a lot about learning, but I think next year is the year we go into more of a kill mode and make ourselves a force to be reckoned with for the whole season. We’ve been to all of the tracks one or two times, now, so we need to hit it right coming off of the truck, and I need to focus on which driving style is right for that particular track.”

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