

NASCAR THIS WEEK

ROAD TO DAYTONA

Done deal?

Kauffman says RTA close to NASCAR agreement

By Godwin Kelly
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Rob Kauffman has partnered with team owner Chip Ganassi Racing after pulling his resources from Michael Waltrip Racing, which closed its competition department after the 2015 NASCAR season.

Kauffman arrived in NASCAR from the world of high finance and was picked by an elite group of Cup car owners to chair the Race Team Alliance. The RTA has been tasked with improving serieswide efficiency among race teams — such as saving money on travel and pooling together for things such as health insurance.

Last year, Kauffman and RTA members started a conversation with NASCAR to create some sort of charter system to give race teams more tangible value, similar to a league franchise. NASCAR and RTA are expected to announce the charter plan before the start of this season, which begins with the Feb. 21 Daytona 500. Motorsports Editor Godwin Kelly conducted an exclusive one-on-one interview with Kauffman during the Rolex 24 At Daytona for NASCAR This Week.



Rob Kauffman relaxes in his motorhome during the Rolex 24 At Daytona at Daytona International Speedway.

NEWS-JOURNAL/GODWIN KELLY

Define your function with Ganassi Racing.

“Business partner. This is the early days of us figuring it out. Both of us are pragmatic people, and we’ll see what makes the most sense for me and what areas I can help benefit the team the most. I’m pretty flexible.”

Based on your history at Waltrip Racing, you seem to be able to spark performance with a race team.

“We achieved some level of success at MWR, but not the level that we wanted to reach. Chip is pretty successful, and hopefully I can add to the mix. We did combine some parts of (Waltrip Racing) with Ganassi Racing, so some of the people, technology came over, and we hope that makes us stronger on the NASCAR side.”

What is your gut feeling about the Ganassi NASCAR team right now?

“I want to win the championship. We have a strong group. The guys have

worked hard on the program. They have all the tools they need. If I have a contribution, maybe it’s more to how the teams relate to NASCAR, how the rule-change processes evolve and communication between teams. We want to make sure the competition is good, but that we don’t spend ourselves into oblivion.”

How did you get the RTA going?

“I didn’t really get it going. If you go back a few years, you will find different CFOs comparing costs and seeing how they could save money on travel and things of that nature. It evolved over time, and it got to the point where the teams wanted more structure. For a variety of reasons, I wound up getting pushed to the front. The original thought was from a number of team owners and them inviting me to their meetings.”

Have any of the plans talked about

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in 2015 been activated this year?

“The travel stuff, we saved millions of dollars last year. The health insurance we are working on through 2016. Listen, from a fans’ standpoint, these are boring things. They want the teams to show up and race. Nobody really cares how we get there. The fact we are getting there much cheaper and safely and on time, that’s great.”

Talk about what you have been talking about with NASCAR.

“I think it is pretty well known by now, this is a charter system with NASCAR to put more

structure around teams so there is more value potentially to teams over time, so that NASCAR racing looks like other sports, which are organized and structured. We’d like team ownership to (look like) that of baseball or football. We are quite optimistic we will have something in place for 2016.”

Where does that now stand?

“We have worked on this for a while. The teams have been working on it with NASCAR for a number of months. I think we are quite close to getting something done for the 2016 season, and the season starts in three weeks. I think all the major issues have been ironed out at this stage, and now it’s a matter of dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s and getting the paperwork sorted out. I’m quite optimistic we’ll have something for this season.”

QUESTIONS & ATTITUDE

Compelling questions... and maybe a few actual answers

How close are we?

You’re down to just one more boogity-boogity-free weekend before you can start getting your fill of NASCAR on Fox, which means I’m only a few weeks away from collecting all those emails from the amateur TV critics who will insist Jeff Gordon go back to racing (or Manhattan) and turn in his microphone.

What if we love Jeff?

Those who are Jeff Gordon fans will love Jeff Gordon, regardless of how he performs in the Fox broadcast booth. Those who always rooted against him will likely not like him and begin mounting a campaign to “Bring Back Larry Mac.” Everyone else will fall somewhere in the middle. There’s your one certainty approaching a new season.

How 'bout Katherine Legge?

She’s been a known quantity for several years in open-wheel and sports-car racing. She’s been the face of DeltaWing the past few years, which has gained her some more attention. And at last weekend’s Rolex 24, she dominated the early stage and definitely raised her profile, which might help in the near future since DeltaWing is going away after 2016.

NASCAR, perhaps?

In earlier times, Legge would be a natural intrigue for a NASCAR team at some level, and who knows, maybe something will happen. She sounds open to it. She has a good temperament, a marketable persona, and a neat British accent with the edges slightly rounded off. Oh, and she knows her way around the track.

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Allmendinger wants to run Le Mans

By Godwin Kelly
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AJ Allmendinger, whose full-time job is wheeling the No. 47 Chevrolet in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series, co-drove the No. 60 Honda Ligier Prototype in the Rolex 24 At Daytona Saturday and Sunday.

Allmendinger has been doing the sports-car thing for more than 10 years with IMSA team owner Michael Shank.

Michael Shank Racing won the 2012 Rolex 24 with Allmendinger behind the wheel of the Prototype at the checkered flag.

Allmendinger can compete the 24-hour race because it starts before the NASCAR season begins. There is no conflict with his NASCAR schedule.

Allmendinger is one of those guys who can drive just about anything with wheels. Back in December, he competed at Daytona International Speedway in a go-kart.

The one race on Allmendinger’s bucket list is the 24 Hours of Le Mans in France. The 34-year-old driver may get his chance this year.

“If AJ can find a way to get to Le Mans, we’ll make it work from our end,” Shank told NASCAR This Week. “He has been with me many years. I would love to see it happen.”

“It sounds fun to talk about it, but the reality is, AJ has a lot of (NASCAR) sponsor programs built around him.”

The Le Mans 24 program will be staged on a NASCAR Cup Series off week, June 14-18. NASCAR races at Michigan on June 12 and goes to Sonoma June 26.

“Le Mans to me is that last prestigious race I want to compete in,” Allmendinger said. “It would be awesome to run that race. Le Mans, all those years I have watched it on TV, it looks so awesome.”

“I would do it in a heartbeat,” he added. “If the stars aligned and the right people said, ‘You can go do this,’ I’d jump at the chance.”

SPEED FREAKS

A couple questions we had to ask — ourselves

Did the Rolex get your blood flowing?

GODSPEAK: Love those sporty cars. Can they run a couple of Prototype 2 cars in the Daytona 500?

KEN’S CALL: It’s the perfect appetizer — enough to tease the palate, but not too filling.

Will we see Tony Stewart in a future Rolex 24?

GODSPEAK: I see a future “Dream Team.” How about

Jeff Gordon and Stewart as Rolex 24 racing teammates?

KEN’S CALL: I’m guessing yes, but the prediction game with Tony is always dicey.

Busch beer is back, this time as a team sponsor. Thoughts?

GODSPEAK: Kyle Busch wins Cup championship and now Busch beer is coming back; something is brewing.

KEN’S CALL: I still say “Busch Series” when talking about

the Saturday races, so to me it’s like they never left.

Which old sponsor would you also like to see return in some form?

GODSPEAK: Folgers, because I like coffee when I have a bag of M&M’s.

KEN’S CALL: Is Gwaltney Foods still around? If not, I’d like to see Buddy Baker’s old Crisco colors return somewhere.

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