

A breed apart: college grad Ryan Newman is making a run at the good ol' boys - Interview

Monte Dutton

RYAN NEWMAN HAS IT ALL HE'S young, good-looking, talented, and articulate. If anyone rides the wave of NASCAR's future, it's the 25-year-old Purdue graduate from South Bend, Ind. But Newman is still a little difficult for folks in NASCAR to figure out, and who could blame them?

It remains unusual for a college graduate to be racing at the front of the Winston Cup Series week in and week out, and the sport's been waiting more than a decade for Newman's arrival Alan Kulwicki--also a Midwesterner and a college graduate--won the championship in 1992. Unfortunately, Kulwicki's career ended only a few months later, on April 1, 1993, when he died tragically in a plane crash. Kulwicki remains the only college grad to win the championship and, like Newman, he was an engineer.

A college degree, takes time away from racing for a young driver. Other drivers get their lessons primarily from "seat time" and earn an informal education in the school of hard knocks. It's to Newman's great credit that, at age 25, he's so young, so proficient and, yes, so smart.

In a sea of men who speak so imprecisely--they "get in the fence," can't get "whoaed down," and refer to almost anything as "one of them racin' deals"--it's pretty unusual to come across a young man who says, of racing, "It takes the whole conjunctive effort"

Say what? Newman often sends people--including those in the press room and those equipped with microphones and camera crews--scurrying for their dictionaries.

When Newman was named 2002 Raybestos Rookie of the Year, there were some dissenters. The driver he bested, Jimmie Johnson, finished higher in the points and won more races. There were also whispers that Newman may be unbeatable in lime trials but he is prone to mistakes on race day.

No one's saying that anymore. As the season charged into its stretch driver, Newman had won more races (seven) and poles (six) than any other driver. After an erratic start, Newman also moved into the top 10 in points. During NASCAR's long, hot summer, Newman was its hottest commodity. "I've gained a lot of experience in the past year and a half," says Newman. "I think that has made a big difference for me personally. There are things you learn at one race track that you can carry over to the other, and there are things that are still specific to certain tracks.

"I've learned a lot and I know the team has learned a lot, and because of that we've been able to be more competitive. I guess when you make the right calls, you keep a cool head."

Newman's fundamental approach hasn't changed. It's no coincidence that Newman and Kurt Busch have developed into the sport's biggest winners. Neither is content to bide his time. A

commitment to victory sometimes has the reverse effect, but in Newman's case, increased consistency has begun to come as a by-product of "going for the win." "I go out there to win the races," says Newman. "In order to win the races, you've got to be there at the end to finish every lap. I'm not going to change anything I do. I don't feel that I jeopardize my finishes by making crazy moves on the race track.

"I guess it's the competitive drive to win in any situation. I can be running 15th with three laps to go and still figure I've got a shot to win the thing. Part of it is a racer's mentality, and every driver is different. That's the basis of it. There's always next week. You can dwell on the past, but you've got to focus on the future."

Of his team, he adds: "They're the same way. They don't put parts on the race car that jeopardize our chances to win. I don't think anything is going to change. It's just a matter of putting it all together."

Contrary to popular belief, Newman is not just an educated man, but an outspoken one as well. In August, after a practice crash in Watkins Glen, N.Y., Newman criticized NASCAR for what he perceived as lax safety efforts in fire prevention, soft walls and race procedure. That he did it without catchy one-liners, uninformed potshots and "just enough knowledge to be dangerous" lent his observations greater credibility, if not exposure.

"The drivers are lobbying for everything they can, safety wise," says Newman. "It still baffles me that certain race tracks have soft walls and some tracks don't. In my eyes, it's something that NASCAR could mandate. It could insist the tracks have soft walls in order to host a race. It would be a way for NASCAR to protect its drivers, the sport, and the perception of the sport--and that's a lot of what it's all about.

"I don't think it's anything specifically with the cars. In my opinion, the race tracks are the things that need to be fixed. I've said it before and I'll say it again until it happens: There's no reason we don't have soft walls at Chicago and Pocono, Kansas, and every place else out there. If they can put them at Richmond in time for the September 2003 race and Loudon [N.H., in July 2003] and Indy 2002, then they can put them at those other tracks. They're running out of time, and they're running out of excuses to be able to do that. I think the soft walls would be a big attribute to not explode the fuel cells when the car backs into the wall. It would lessen the impact [with] more cushioning and, hopefully, it wouldn't get to the point where it explodes the fuel cells, like it is [now]."

Newman thinks it's also time for NASCAR to provide the traveling safety/rescue teams that other major series have been employing for years. "I don't know why we don't have a traveling safety crew," he says. "Maybe it's a financial issue--which should never be an excuse when it comes to safety--but my point is, it's all about communication. If we could have a safety team in place every week ... it would make a difference. If we could communicate with those people week in and week out, they'd know where everybody's cut-off switch was. Some of these people don't know things that they ought to. Some of them are volunteers. Some of them get paid. For some of them, it may be the first time they've ever seen a race car. It might be their

free pass to the race track to be part of the safety crew. You never know. If we can create a little relationship with the team, I think it would be great for the sport and the drivers."

Newman also had a take on the relative difficulty he and other drivers are having making passes and on what he considered to be an accompanying increase in crashes. "I think the biggest thing is the rules have tightened in the two years I've been here," he says. "The cars have come so much closer that it takes a little extra to make the passes. I'm not saying passes relate to crashes, but it relates to racing, and that indirectly relates to crashing. I can't comment on any difference this year to last year, but I can say that there is a lot. The biggest difference is in the past 10 years.

"[At most races] there are 36 cars within half a second of each other, and that wasn't the case 10 years ago."

In effect, what Newman says is that because the competition has gotten so much greater in one sense, it has been diminished in another. That's complicated and analytical but also likely true. It's also an explanation that has seldom been offered by anyone else.

If Newman pointed a few fingers at NASCAR, it was only because he realizes that racers can't be left to their own devices. A racer's first priority is to go fast, and sometimes safety and speed are at odds with one another. That's why the ruling body cannot be similarly conflicted. "Guys have been caught [compromising safety]," he says. "It's always been done, and it'll always be done. We do everything we can do to make the cars as light as possible so we can go faster. Even to that extent, there are safety things we give up a little bit, but we try to make it as safe as we can."

Oh, things are going to change, all right. Newman is going to win even more often. It's time he started getting credit for being extraordinary, not just unique. He conscientiously tries to pass the glory around, however. "If I was out there doing it myself, it would be a little different, but the team has done an awesome job this year to overcome the things that we had at the beginning of the year," he says. "To come back and be the winningest team is really awesome. Winning never gets old. You just have to treat it a little differently."

Crew chief Matt Borland and Newman have been together from the start. Newman's apprenticeship was innovative. The two worked together in selected appearances in three series: ARCA, NASCAR Busch Series, and Winston Cup. "We've come through the stock cars together from the start," says Borland, "When you've worked together for four years, you have complete trust in each other. You build so much communication and confidence in each other that you trust what each other says completely. That goes a long way to knowing what each other is thinking.

"The radio isn't a necessity anymore," says Borland.

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