

Young & Hungry

Byron Hopes to Reverse Pole Trend at Daytona

Leading a powerhouse team of drivers for Hendrick Motorsports, William Byron edged out teammate Alex Bowman (last year's pole position winner) to secure the pole position driving the No. 24 AXALTA Chevrolet for Sunday's season-opening 61st annual Daytona 500.

Like Bowman last year, the 21-year-old Byron logged his first Monster Energy Series pole position driving the famed No. 24, once driven by NASCAR legend Jeff Gordon, in a flying start for the Hendrick team.

Byron is hungry to reverse his team's disappointing 2018 season, sitting alongside Bowman as the duo prepare to front a 40-car field for the "Great American Race." Byron is the team's fifth straight pole-sitter, tying a record held by Petty Enterprises.

"This was the goal to get the top two spots, and if we were second, that was great, too, but the pole is good," the Charlotte, N.C. native said in an interview following his win. "I thought we were going to be somewhere in the hunt," Byron told ESPN. "I was excited to get down here and see what we had. It's really cool."

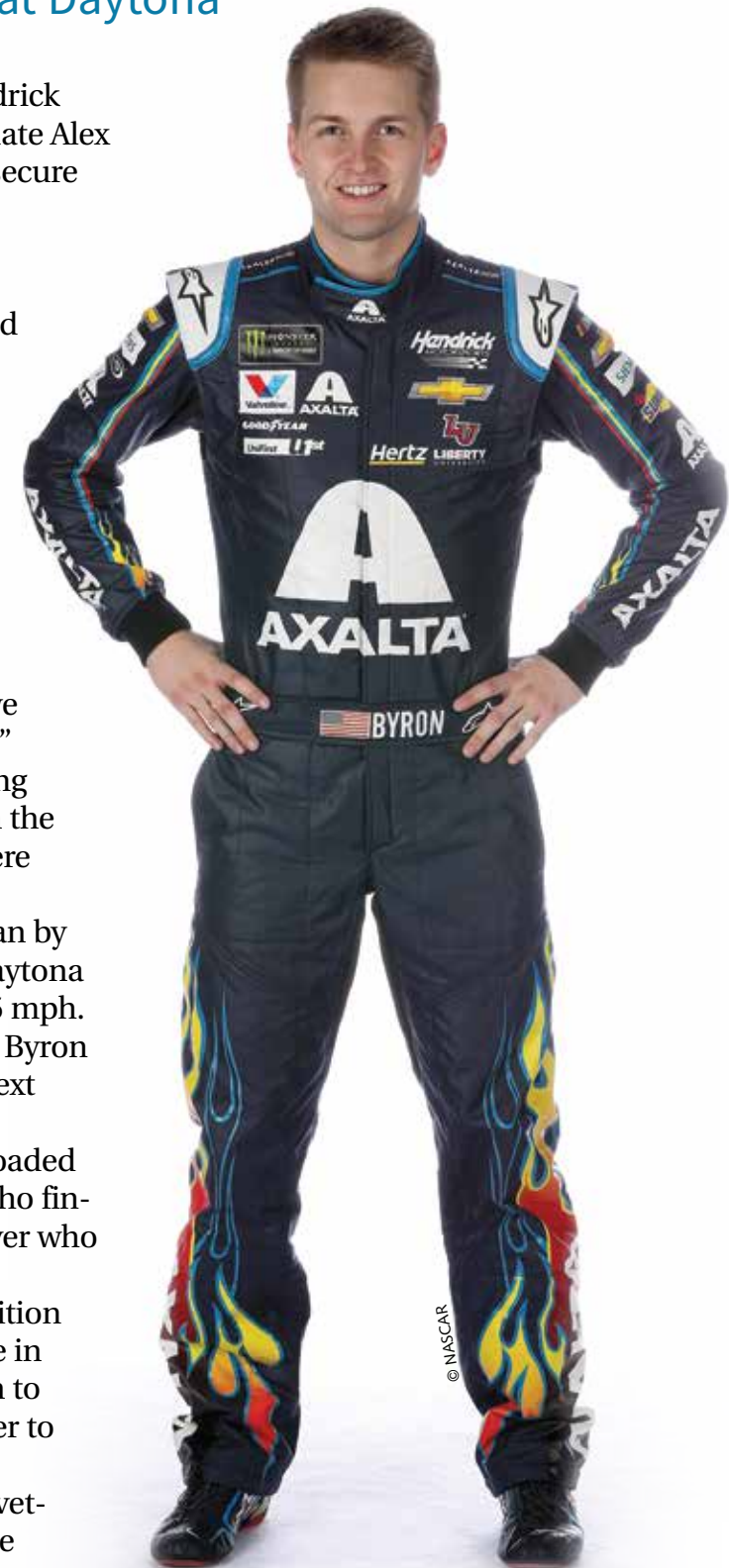
Byron earned pole positioning after besting Bowman by less than two-tenths of a second, speeding around Daytona International Speedway on an overcast day at 194.305 mph. "This is kind of our first step of our process together," Byron told the Orlando Sentinel, "so hopefully it goes well next Sunday."

Byron and Bowman lead a Hendrick-heavy, front-loaded team of drivers, including veteran Jimmie Johnson, who finished third, just ahead of Chase Elliott, the young driver who earned the pole position in 2016 and 2017.

Now comes the hard part — winning. The pole position has not been kind to drivers. Since Daytona's first race in 1959, only seven drivers in the front slot have gone on to pass the checkered flag. Dale Jarrett, the last pole-sitter to win, accomplished that feat in 2000.

Nevertheless, Byron and crew chief Chad Knaus, a veteran of Johnson's team, have strong hopes for both the 2019 field and themselves.

"The hard part was getting that opportunity, and now Mr. H and everyone, AXALTA, Liberty, everyone that's pitching in to make this happen, that part is fun, and it's exciting, and it's a chance to go out there and make a name for yourself," Byron said after the qualifying race.



Position	Driver	Car
1	William Byron	24
2	Jimmie Johnson	48
3	Daniel Hemric	8
4	Martin Truex Jr.	19
5	Brad Keselowski	2
6	Paul Menard	21
7	Kyle Busch	18
8	Kevin Harvick	4
9	Tyler Reddick	31
10	Ricky Stenhouse Jr.	17
11	Daniel Suarez	41
12	Chris Buescher	37

Watt, Owen, Earnhardt Headline Race

NFL star J.J. Watt of the Houston Texans will be grand marshal for the 2019 Daytona 500 on Sunday, the first professional football player to launch NASCAR's most famous race, according to the Associated Press.

Watt will join country singing star Jake Owen, who will perform a concert prior to the race, and NASCAR legend Dale Earnhardt Jr., who will serve as honorary pace truck driver, and the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division's All-American Chorus, who will sing the national anthem, to open the 61st annual race.

"I am honored to have the opportunity to serve as Grand Marshal for this year's 'Great American Race,'" Watt said. "The Daytona 500 is a truly iconic event with a rich history, and I am very much looking forward to taking in the action up close and personal this year."

Multi-platinum selling singer-songwriter Owen will perform the Daytona 500 Pre-Race Show. A native Floridian, Owen is no stranger to Daytona Beach, having featured the "World's Most Famous Beach" in the video and hit song "Beachin'."

WHAT: Daytona 500

WHEN: 2:30 p.m. EST, Sunday, Feb. 17

COVERAGE: FOX, MRN and SiriusXM NASCAR Radio