

Brad Keselowski ain't your daddy's NASCAR champion

Written by Staff Reports

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By JENNA FRYER

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Brad Keselowski chugged his cold Miller Lite, the beer splashing down the side of his face as NASCAR chairman Brian France watched with amusement as his newest ambassador celebrated the crowning moment of his career.

Dehydrated after 400 miles of racing at Homestead-Miami Speedway, it didn't take long for his sponsor's product to take effect. Keselowski beamed a mischievous grin, wiped away his foam mustache, and tried to figure out how to accept the Sprint Cup trophy from France without dropping his oversized beer glass.

He's fresh, he's fearless and he's certainly not your daddy's NASCAR champion.

What Keselowski might be is just the guy NASCAR needs to appeal to the younger crowd as it closes a season that will likely be remembered for a jet fuel explosion, Twitter, a garage-area fight. If the season-ending image that stays with the public is of a slightly drunk Keselowski being, well, Keselowski, that's OK.

After all, the racing itself was largely forgettable this season, a huge problem for NASCAR, and France reiterated last weekend that work is ongoing on the 2013 cars "to improve" the quality of racing.

So Keselowski's championship reign is critical for NASCAR. He's the face of the sport, the spokesman, the guy who will bang the drum for all things NASCAR over the next few months.

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Keselowski proved he was different from the veteran drivers when he tweeted from inside his car during the season-opening Daytona 500, and his addiction to social media and his cellphone was a season-long theme. He's 28, tech savvy and unafraid to test his limits.

"I think because of that, he'll do great," said four-time champion Jeff Gordon, who helped broaden NASCAR's mainstream appeal when he emerged in the early '90s. "His ability to reach out through social media and the younger crowd, he's somebody that takes it, wants to take it, and because of that, he'll put a lot of effort into it. He's entertaining. You never know what you're going to get with Brad."

That's part of Keselowski's charm, and while he is indeed authentic, he very much enjoys being anti-establishment.

A year ago, Keselowski participated in the season-ending celebration in Las Vegas for the first time in his career. Although the awards banquet is the only actual black-tie affair, the week is packed with appearances, events, cocktail parties, receptions and one sponsor-heavy luncheon.

When he boarded the bus that took all 12 drivers to the luncheon, Keselowski was wearing an old pair of jeans and an untucked shirt. The other 11 drivers were all in suits. Someone on the bus offered suggested they stop on the way so Keselowski could pick up something else to wear.

Keselowski, who had announced a multiyear contract extension with Penske Racing just hours earlier, refused.

"I'm a race car driver!" he declared. "Why do I need to dress like that?"

Perhaps he had a point. But it wasn't a fight he was going to win driving for Roger Penske, and Keselowski was upgrading his wardrobe a few weeks later.

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Keselowski has changed on the track, as well.

He was rough and raw in the Nationwide Series, and he didn't care who he wrecked when he was trying to get noticed. He wanted a job, wanted to survive in NASCAR and thought it was every man for himself. When he feuded with Denny Hamlin and Carl Edwards, and they tried to explain etiquette, he didn't want to listen.

It was maddening to more experienced drivers, who quickly ran out of patience with Keselowski. Because he was in a developmental deal with Hendrick Motorsports, he got to drive a handful of races for them and sit in on some competition meetings with the big boys.

He was opinionated and outspoken, and the Hendrick group found him wildly entertaining.

"Brad, he rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. He was very aggressive," Rick Hendrick said. "But he learned how to control that and how to race, and he did it in a hurry."

And it happened at Penske, where he was paired in the Nationwide Series with Paul Wolfe, who didn't want the job when first approached. He ultimately changed his mind, and the duo won the championship in their first year together.

Wolfe said he wasn't deterred by Keselowski's reputation, and looked only at the talent level and potential.

"I'm kind of the guy that takes it one day at a time, try to be better each and every day at what I do, and never really looked at it from the standpoint of 'I want to go win a championship with him,'" Wolfe said. "It was, 'I want to go win races and continue to grow as a team.' We've done that each and every week and every year."

While things were clicking in the Nationwide Series, Keselowski was struggling in Cup races. So Penske moved Wolfe up in 2011 to Cup, and Keselowski took off, winning three races to make

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the Chase for the Sprint Cup championship.

It set the pace for this season, the breakthrough year for Roger Penske's first Cup title 40 years after first entering NASCAR.

And it showed that Keselowski has come a very long way in three very short years.

He looks back now at how he behaved, both on and off the track, and understands that coming up with his family's low-budget race team helped mold him into who he is today, even if it gave him a narrow view of the world.

"I think I suffered from some serious confidence issues when I first came into Cup that were a result of mostly just not having the speed to be successful and trying to do too much," he said. "I was trying too hard to be the 'I' in team, and there is none. That's pretty obvious looking back now. But I didn't know that. I do now. It's not until you have a group around you that shows you that you don't have to do all the work, that you can share it, and that as long as you respect them, care about them and work with them, you can be successful. That's something I had to learn on my own.

"I never had anybody teach me that. Nobody ever taught me about teamwork. My family and my parents, my mom and dad, they taught me about work ethic, they taught me what it meant to be a part of a family that had each other's backs, but it's a lot different when you're not family."

But Keselowski is part of the family. The Penske Racing family, and the NASCAR family. He's the champion, and underneath his fancy new clothes is a hardworking blue-collar kid from the suburbs of Detroit who loves NASCAR and wants to do anything he can to promote the sport.

"It's not like the champion is Miss America who goes out to civic organizations and gives speeches or anything like that," said NASCAR analyst Kyle Petty, son of seven-time champion Richard Petty. "He grew up in Michigan. He grew up working on these cars. He's a blue-collar guy from a blue-collar family and when we go back to Dale Earnhardt Sr., David Pearson, 'The King' and to Darrell Waltrip and guys like that, they worked their way up through.

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“Brad Keselowski traveled the same road to get to this point. He’ll be a great champion for this sport.”

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