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Zane Smith finally earns elusive Truck Series championship

By **Michael Manny**

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Photo courtesy of Sean Gardner | Getty Images

AVONDALE, Ariz. — Zane Smith's Camping World Truck Series career could be described as nothing short of a roller coaster ride.

The 2020 Rookie of the Year has had rewarding highs and crushing lows in his three full-time seasons — six victories, 24 top fives and 46 top 10s coming into Phoenix. On the other end of the spectrum, he has come up just short in two consecutive Championship 4 appearances, finishing as the runner-up in 2020 and 2021.

As the old saying goes, third time's the charm.

Smith held off a charging Ben Rhodes and Chandler Smith in overtime to win the Lucas Oil 150 and finally earn his first championship, erasing two years of heartbreak at Phoenix Raceway.

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Zane Smith wins race and truck title in battle with Rhodes and CSmith.

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“Wasn’t going to — [Front Row Motorsports owner] Bob Jenkins was going to get a wrecked truck or a championship trophy at the end of the day,” Smith said. “I was not going to lose another one.”

It’s Front Row Motorsports’ first championship as an organization, and Ford’s first in the Truck Series.

The 23-year-old Smith had an outstanding first season with Front Row, winning at Daytona, Kansas, Circuit of the Americas and Phoenix and finishing with 14 top-fives and 19 top 10s.

And it almost didn’t happen.

Smith came into last season’s championship racing for his future, as he didn’t have a ride for 2022 at the time.

“Definitely a lot has changed,” Smith said. “I have literally stood in this parking lot three years in a row not knowing what I’m going to be doing next year. I knew going into this, because I’ve been through way worse times, and regardless of the outcome tonight, I’m going to have a job next year, and that’s such a weight off your shoulders.”

Fox Sports pit reporter Jamie Little mentioned on the race broadcast that Smith sent 120 voicemails to teams after last season, searching for a new home.

Smith was just looking for an opportunity. Front Row was looking to fill Todd Gilliland’s seat after he moved up to Cup this season.

It has ended up a perfect match, one Smith said he didn’t even realize was a possibility.

“I had a ride pretty much set up, and I was excited about it, but it was literally about 30 minutes later after, yeah, after these 120 phone calls probably in the past couple days,” Smith said. “I had gotten a call from Front Row Motorsports that they wanted me to run their truck. That really caught my eye because I knew the people that were on the truck, and the people are what makes these things go fast.”

What surprised Front Row general manager Jerry Freeze was Smith’s immediate fit with the team.

“The one thing I didn’t know when I had that initial conversation with Zane’s representation was the chemistry that Zane already had with these guys,” Freeze said. “He’s friends with them outside of racing, grew up racing against our race engineer. So they were all buddies. And when Zane walked in the door, it was like these guys had been working together for years.”

Not only did Smith finally capture the series’ ultimate prize — he gets to celebrate it having found the security he lacked earlier in his Truck Series career. Plus, he will have the chance to run select NASCAR Cup Series races next season.

Smith made his Cup Series debut earlier this season at Gateway, filling in for Roush Fenway Keselowski Racing’s Chris Buescher.

After facing an uncertain future as recently as last season, the coming years could not look much brighter.

“Just crazy where I’m at mentally and how great things are going in my life right now. I’m just trying to ride it as long as I can,” Smith said.

Author



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