



Todd Gilliland weathers challenges in second Cup Series season



By **Michael Manny**
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Photo courtesy of Meg Oliphant | Getty Images

AVONDALE, Ariz. — The beginning of Todd Gilliland’s second season in the NASCAR Cup Series has likely not gone how he imagined it.

A little under two weeks before the 2023 Daytona 500, Front Row Motorsports announced that 2022 Craftsman Truck Series champion Zane Smith would run six races for the team in Gilliland’s No. 38 car. Suddenly, the 22-year-old was a half-dozen races short of the full-time schedule he expected.

“I really wanted to just race something on the weekends I wasn’t even racing, whether it was a Truck, Xfinity car, Cup car. I really just didn’t think the Cup car would be an option,” Gilliland said.

Thanks in part to Kevin Harvick Inc, the talent marketing agency co-owned by the 2014 Cup Series champion, Gilliland found the opportunity he was looking for, with Rick Ware Racing.

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"I was recently with KHI and Josh Jones and Kevin Harvick and those guys to help me guide through this, and it was really good timing to get with those guys because they had just kind of signed Riley [Herbst] and gotten a good relationship with the 15 car," Gilliland said. "So personally, I feel like that definitely helped that the management group had a relationship with them."

Gilliland will drive the No. 15 car for RWR at Phoenix, Charlotte, Sonoma, Texas and the Charlotte Road Course. Herbst is set to drive the car at Talladega on April 23, so Gilliland was originally still one race short of full-time.

With support from Ruedebusch Development and Construction, FRM announced March 2 that they will field a third car at the superspeedway, completing the Sherrills Ford, North Carolina native's schedule.

Through a tough situation, Gilliland is making the most of the opportunity and focused on how the experience with RWR and a new teammate can help him grow as a driver.

"It's almost kind of fun in a sense, right?" Gilliland said. "You're seeing it from almost the other side of the fence, and I think it'll make me definitely better as a driver, better as a person in this sport, to be working with a different group of people."

As he has worked through the uncertainty, Gilliland said he has received support from around the sport.

Wood Brothers Racing No. 21 driver Harrison Burton is close with Gilliland and came into the Cup Series at the same time last season. Burton said the two have talked quite a bit and that he thought Gilliland's spirits have remained high.

"I think he's making the most of it," Burton said. "I feel like he's not really a very negative person, he's kind of like a big Great Dane puppy, when you talk to him he doesn't know how big he is, kind of goofy kid. He could be really mad for all I know but he's not very good at showing it, so overall I think he's handling it well."

FRM teammate Michael McDowell has been a veteran presence for Gilliland to lean on since he has been at the sport's top level. Despite the changes, McDowell still looks at the second-year driver as his full-time teammate.

"I talked to him this week, leading up to this week about just maximizing his opportunity," McDowell said. "Yeah, it's not fun and it's not ideal for him but to go out there and learn and maybe even figure out something new."

"I'm thankful that he's able to put together the full season because I think there's a good possibility he wins a race this year," McDowell added.

Gilliland made strides as his rookie season continued in 2022, finishing fourth at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Road Course and seventh at the fall Talladega race.

Through it all, Gilliland has had a support system to rely on, including his wife, Marissa, who he married in January.

"I love bringing Marissa to the races," Gilliland said. "This is a tough business, it can knock you down really quickly, so having someone super supportive and it's really cool to bring her along. We travel all over the country and experience some good and bad times, so it's definitely really, really nice to have her."



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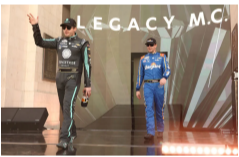
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