



Dynasty in the Making: How Kenneth Massa Motorsports turned into a Whelen Modified Tour juggernaut

BY PAUL LAMBERT | NASCAR.COM | DECEMBER 9, 2020

With Justin Bonsignore behind the wheel, Ryan Stone as crew chief, and Ken Massa as owner, the No. 51 Phoenix Communications-sponsored Modified has become the team to beat on the Whelen Modified Tour.

Go ahead, count up the stats. They're so outrageous, they can be hard to believe. Over the last three years, they've notched 17 wins in 41 races. Only four of those 41 races have finished outside the top-10. Two seasons with an average finish below 3.5. Nobody else has come close.

What the No. 51 team is doing is nothing short of one of the most dominant runs in the history of Whelen Modified Tour racing.

This ground-pounder superpower didn't assemble itself overnight. In fact, there was a time where the possibility was real that there would be no more No. 51 team.

Assembling a force

It was the end of 2017.

The No. 51 team had just wrapped up a season that ended winless on the year with only four laps led. Sure, they finished third in the points, 16 behind champion Doug Coby, but that wasn't good enough for either Bonsignore or Massa.

In need of a crew chief, they began discussing the possibility of walking away from the Tour entirely.

"Ken and I racked our brains for weeks just wondering what to do, where to go," Bonsignore said. "We felt if it wasn't going to be something that we thought we could contend and go out and try and win races, we just wouldn't do it anymore."

Massa remembered feeling much the same way.

"We were close, very close, to calling it quits," he said.

Then, it happened: Stone, then working down in North Carolina for the JR Motorsports Xfinity Series program, was thinking about moving back up north to his home state of Connecticut. After some convincing from both Bonsignore and Massa, Stone agreed to crew chief the team in 2018.

"I just kept nudging him and nudging him, and Justin kept nudging him, and he finally agreed," Massa said. "His dedication to the sport is unmatched."

The decision for Stone to join the team would turn out to be a game-changer beyond Bonsignore or Massa's wildest dreams.

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A legendary start

The first thing Stone did when he agreed to join the team was put two brand-new FURY chassis together.

The next thing he did? Help propel the team to a championship in 2018, winning eight of the season's 16 races, along with five poles, 12 top fives and 15 top-10s.

It was a season so successful that it exceeded even Stone's high expectations.

"I knew we were going to win, I just didn't think we'd win eight [races]," Stone said.

Chemistry to the nth degree

You don't have to question the buy-in from anyone on this team.

Massa recalled a group call with the team before the season started. Because of the pandemic, NASCAR limited teams to bring eight crew members to the track. Massa had to ask for one of the nine crew members to stay home along with him.

"There was silence," Massa said. "This team was ready to go. Nobody wanted to stay behind. That was a tough moment for me, but it showed their dedication. Nothing wanted to stop them."

"Everyone was dying to go," Stone said. "I really believe that everyone was so fired up that by the time we got racing, we wanted to capitalize on every opportunity that we had."

Chemistry is simple for Stone: it's either there or it's not.

"I don't think you can build it," he said. "When I started with these guys in 2018, as a group, [the crew members] are buddies... They had that established when I got here and it was more about me fitting in with them.

"We all have the same sense of humor, we all have the same passion for racing and the same drive to perform at a high level. I just had to come in and fit with them. I knew Ken's commitment was there. Justin had been driving for Ken for almost 10 years at that point. The commitment was always there, they just needed to get the rest of the pieces of the puzzle together to be a championship-winning team."

The pieces are there. It was arguably more clear than ever in 2020.

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Making 2020 happen

After coming oh-so-close in 2019, finishing eight points shy of a second straight title, Stone knew where and how to get the team back to the promised land: consistency.

"We knew where we goofed up," Stone said. "We had a couple miscues and lost by eight. We just felt like we knew we were good enough to win even though we didn't. It was about winning races, but we focused on the championship because we lost it in such a close battle in 2019 with just one little hiccup at the very first race."

"We said 'listen, we can't stub our toe at all this year. We've got to be smart,' and even though we came out this year with nine races, we never finished out of the top-five. We really focused hard on those days where you can't win and you're not going to win, to get the best finish. Don't try to win and spoil a good finish."

In terms of accomplishing that goal, it's hard to be any closer to perfect than the No. 51 team was this year. They led laps in eight of the nine races contested. They finished no lower than fifth all season long. They won three times. And they set a record for lowest finish ever by a Whelen Modified Tour championship-winning team (2.7).

The fact that the team performed so well, practically immaculately, in a year where things were anything but predictable is what made Massa so proud.

"Some people say the shortened schedule helped us, but to be honest, I think our advantage is more races," he said. "I think the adversity of wondering when the next race was going to be... It was not an easy thing to do. I think that's the part that makes this title special."



Looking to the future

After being on the brink of shutting it all down, Massa has put all of those thoughts entirely in the rearview mirror. Now that the winning has started, there's no way he's just going to let it end.

"To see it pay off is worth everything to me, but I'd like to see it continue for sure," Massa said. "I just think this team is fully capable of it. I think everyone wants to continue doing it, so I think we should be able to."

And now that the team is once again at the top of the Tour garage, the spotlight will once again be on them to back up what they've done for the last three years.

Stone is excited to do just that all over again.

"You want to do it again. We've got so many more records to tie and try and catch up to... But to think you're on the cusp of doing something like that, you've got so much more work to do to get there. It's not that easy.

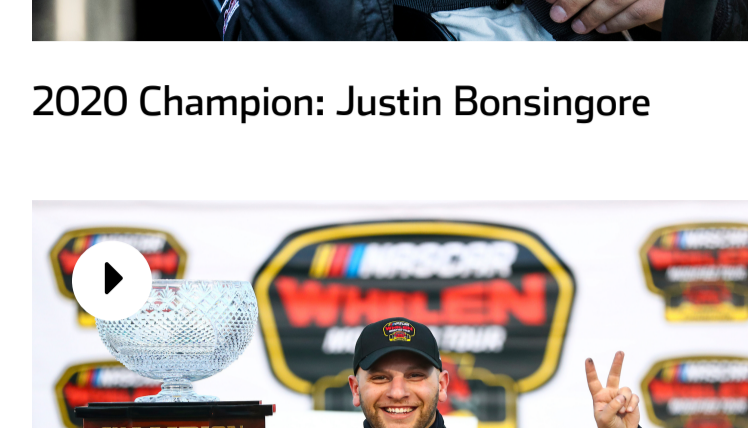
"If we can stay on this roll, god only knows what we can continue to do."

Equipment. Talent. Smarts. Chemistry. The No. 51 team has it all. And they show no signs of slowing down any time soon.

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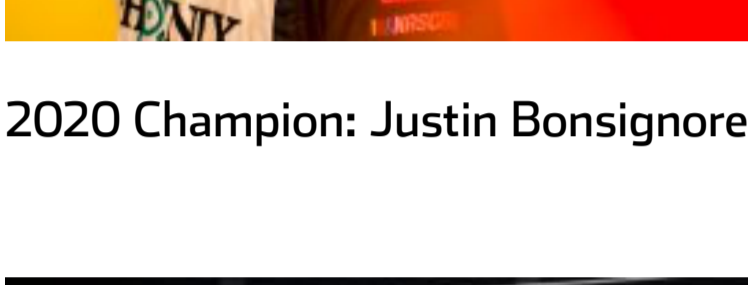


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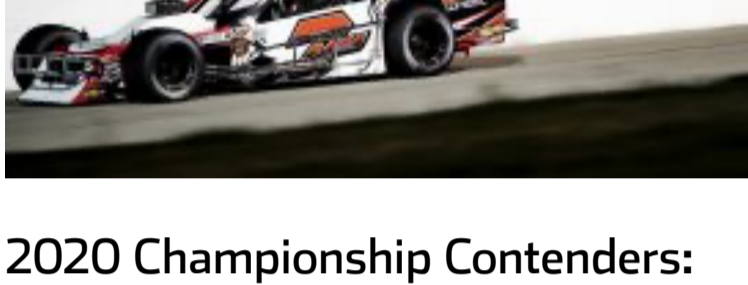
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Best of 2020: Whelen Modified Tour

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