

Jones having his usual butterflies as Giants look to opener vs. Titans

By **TOM CANAVAN**
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EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — At age 25 and entering his fourth NFL season, Daniel Jones isn't feeling any different in the stretch run to the season opener against the Tennessee Titans.

His excitement level was up and the butterflies were floating in his stomach Tuesday as the Giants began work on the game plan for Sunday's opener in Nashville. It also will be Brian Daboll's debut as a head coach.

"It's all a good thing and it helps you know that you're getting ready to go," Jones said after practicing in light rain. "Once we get out there and the ball gets snapped, that normally calms down a little bit and you get into the flow of the game. I'm excited to get going."

This is a major year for

Jones, the No. 6 overall pick in the 2019 draft. His first three seasons have been marked by inconsistency, losing and injuries. He missed the last six games of last season as New York went 4-13 and fired Joe Judge after two years as coach.

Daboll, the former Bills offensive coordinator, will be Jones' third head coach in his four years. He started with Pat Shurmur. Mike Kafka is his fourth offensive coordinator. They'll be running the offense Daboll brought from Buffalo.

Even co-owner John Mara admitted after last season the Giants, who have had five straight losing seasons, have seemingly done everything they can to mess up their quarterback.

The pressure on Jones increased earlier this year when new general manager Joe Schoen

and the organization opted not to pick up the fifth-year option on his rookie contract. It's made this season: either produce or pack up.

Jones knows the stakes, but he has repeatedly said he is focused on this week and getting better.

"It's been fun this week," Jones said. "You kind of switch into game-plan mode, you're preparing for certain looks, scheming up our offense to put us in the best position to make plays and succeed. It's about us. It's about us executing our plays and doing what we need to do as a unit and an offense."

Daboll likes Jones' work ethic, his knowledge of the game and his leadership abilities.

"You want to have the quarterback feel as comfortable as he can, and you also want to tell him some of the reasons why you're doing things

you want to try to do against the opponent you're going against," Daboll said. "But he's had really good dialogue with us; I think he's in a good spot."

Jones should benefit from an improved offensive line which added center Jon Feliciano and right guard Mark Glowinski in free agency. Right tackle Evan Neal was drafted No. 7 overall and left tackle Andrew Thomas has developed into an elite player.

Almost two years after an ACL injury, running back Saquon Barkley is looking very much like the back who was the 2018 NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year.

The concern is the receivers. Kenny Golladay is coming back from a bad season (no TDs). Kadarius Toney needs to show he can stay on the field, but he missed all the preseason games with nagging injuries.

It's unknown how much veteran Sterling Shepard can contribute after missing most of camp rehabbing an Achilles injury. Rookie tight end Daniel Bellinger is unproven.

Jones likes the offense, which employs a lot of movement. He also likes that Daboll is constantly finding new ways to run a play.

"I think it allows the quarterback to do a lot in the pocket, outside the pocket, in the run game," Jones said. "It allows us to get into advantageous looks depending on what the defense does, easily getting in and out of plays. I think from all those perspectives, it's very quarterback friendly for any quarterback."

Notes

Starting outside linebackers Kayvon Thibodeaux (knee) and Azeem Ojulari (leg) remain day to day. ... Daboll will

not say who will start at left guard for the injured Shane Lemieux. Ben Bredeson was listed as the starter on the depth chart backed up by rookie Josh Ezeudu.

... There were a couple of numbers changes. Veteran punter Jamie Gillan is wearing No. 6. He wore No. 17 in camp along with receiver Wan'Dale Robinson, the second-round pick. Robinson said the organization made the decision on the number. Rookie LB Micah McFadden switched from No. 43 to 41, a number he wore as a freshman in high school. Fellow rookie LB Darrian Beavers wore No. 41 in training camp, but he will miss the season with a torn ACL. ... Rookie TE Daniel Bellinger is now wearing No. 82 instead of No. 45. ... Marcus Johnson was signed to the practice squad and fellow veteran WR C.J. Board was released.

Titans

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ranked 10th in the NFL with his 12 sacks. He has a team-high 31 sacks over the past four seasons. Landry's total is the second most for this franchise over his first four seasons since 1982 when individual sacks became an official NFL statistic.

Giants first-year coach Brian Daboll sent his sympathies to Landry, someone he called a fantastic and dynamic player.

"We don't exactly know what's going to happen, whether (Denico) Autry is going to move over there, whatever it may be," Daboll said. "You know, the first game, you have to rely on your rules and things that you did for training camp. And that's where our focus will be."

Landry would have faced Giants rookie right tackle Evan Neal, the seventh overall pick out of Alabama, before tearing an ACL in practice Aug. 31. The Titans now could start second-year linebacker Rashad Weaver in Landry's spot. Weaver broke a leg in his third game in ending his rookie season.

"That doesn't change anything," said Neal, who said he's been watching film on all the Titans. "They're going to have a guy that's in his place that I am going to have to block. So, I mean, that doesn't change anything for me at all."

One advantage for the Titans is Bud Dupree, their big free agent signee of 2021, finally feels like himself after spending last season recovering from the ACL he tore in December 2020 playing with Pittsburgh. Dupree started six of 11 games, letting his pride push him harder than he was ready. He finished with three sacks.

Dupree said he didn't feel like himself until this summer. The Titans signed linebacker Derrek Tuszka to the roster.

"It's unfortunate. It's disappointing." Titans coach Mike Vrabel said. "Feel terrible, obviously, for Harold and the work that he's put in and his value to our football team. But we have to move on and get everybody ready to go in."



Erik Jones competes in the NASCAR Southern 500 at Darlington. He held on to take the checkered flag.

Photo by Jared C. Tilton/Getty Images

NASCAR's wild regular season rolls over into playoffs

By **PETE IACOBELLI**
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DARLINGTON, S.C. — Buckle up your five-point harness. Looks like NASCAR's playoffs will be just as wild and unpredictable as its regular season.

That came into sharp focus at Darlington Raceway where Erik Jones became the first-ever non-playoff racer to take the postseason opener in the Southern 500 on Sunday night — one week after the cutoff for playoff qualifying.

Jones' crew chief, Dave Elenz, was gratified his team finally broke through at one of the most difficult tracks in NASCAR. "But I think the first thing Erik said to me is, 'Don't you wish we won Daytona'" in the regular-season finale, Elenz said.

At the end, Jones outlasted all three of his old Joe Gibbs Racing teammates — Martin Truex Jr., Kyle Busch and Denny Hamlin. Truex lost a late lead with power steering problems, Busch's engine blew up with Jones in second. Hamlin reached Jones' back bumper on the last lap but couldn't pass him.

"It was crazy. I've never had anything like that happen," Jones said.

Truex, like Jones, didn't qualify for the playoff. Busch and Hamlin are vying for the title.

Earlier in the night, playoff favorites Chase Elliott and Kyle Larson of powerhouse Hendrick Motorsports struggled.

Elliott bounced off the wall as he spun by himself in the first 100 laps, damaging his suspension, which his team could not repair. Top-seeded coming in, Elliott was out of the race and fell to ninth in playoff points.

Larson, the defending NASCAR Cup Series champion who is seeded fourth this year, had early engine problems and fell four laps off the pace. Larson steadily rebounded to get back on the lead lap and end 12th — not what was expected out of the 2021's most dominant driver.

"So, pretty bummed about it, but also happy at the same time because I thought we were going to have another DNF," said Larson, who fell to seventh in the point standings with two more races at Kansas and Bristol before four of the 16 playoff teams are eliminated.

Busch, faced with questions about his racing future much of the summer, looked he'd

have a moment of celebration as he led the race with less than 40 laps remaining. Then his failing engine sent him to the garage.

The race's least surprising result? Continued driver anger over what they see as an unreliable, unsafe Next Gen car. The loudest voice Sunday came from Kevin Harvick, the 2014 series champ whose car caught fire and had flames coming through the dashboard.

Harvick parked the car on the grass and scrambled away to safety. He did not return. Moments later, J.J. Yeley's machine caught fire under the hood and he, too, had to get out quick.

Drivers have said the hits this year feel harder, something NASCAR's analytics back up. Kurt Busch gave up his playoff spot due to his continuing recovery from a concussion suffered in a crash at Pocono.

"I'm sure it's just crappy parts on the race car like we've seen so many times," Harvick said. "They haven't fixed anything. It's kind of like the safety stuff. We just let it keep going and keep going."

Harvick fell from ninth in the playoffs coming in to 16th and is on the brink of elimi-

nation if things don't improve the next two weeks.

Darlington brought a quick and surprising shuffle to the playoffs, which are unique among sports because those who aren't racing for a title still get to race for victories. Imagine if the NL's top-seeded Los Angeles Dodgers lost to the Florida Marlins, who didn't make the playoffs. That's what happened at Darlington as Jones won his third NASCAR race and second Southern 500.

Jones, who drives for Petty GMS, was the 17th racer to win in 27 races this season, closing in on the most ever in NASCAR, which was 19 different winners in 2001.

Jones also gave the history-filled No. 43 car, made famous by NASCAR Hall of Famer Richard Petty, its 200th win.

Joey Logano, fourth at Darlington, moved into the points lead with William Byron second, Hamlin third and Christopher Bell fourth. Joining Harvick on the bubble as the first four out were first-time playoff participants in Austin Cindric and Chase Briscoe, and Austin Dillon, who pulled off a win-and-in at Daytona a week earlier just to make playoff field.