

NASCAR driver Parker Kligerman comes full circle with eSports team ownership

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Parker Kligerman began the 2019 NASCAR Cup Series finishing fifteenth at the Daytona 500. Kligerman, a twenty-eight-year-old driver for Gaunt Brothers racing, balances a hectic schedule while competing part-time in NASCAR's elite racing series. Kligerman also competes in NASCAR's Truck Series, is an analyst and reporter on NBC Sports' NASCAR America and hosts NBC's "Proving Grounds," an auto racing and testing based reality series. Kligerman's latest venture is his entry into sports team ownership in the world of motorsports eSports.

Kligerman and former driver and fellow NBC Sports analyst, Jeff Burton, own Burton Kligerman Esports, an eSports team that competes in the eNASCAR PEAK Antifreeze iRacing Series, the eSport world championship series of NASCAR. The PEAK Series consists of 12 teams, each of which draft two drivers from a pool of 40 eligible drivers who qualified by finishing top-20 in either the 2018 PEAK Series standings or the iRacing Pro qualifier standings. In the PEAK Series, drivers compete in simulated racing versions of real-world NASCAR tracks and cars, created by iRacing, a premier motorsports racing simulation company. The PEAK Series is in its tenth season and, in 2019, includes team owners familiar to NASCAR fans, like JR Motorsports, Wood Brothers Racing, Joe Gibbs Racing, JTG Daugherty Racing, and Roush Fenway Racing. Chicago Bears offensive guard, Kyle Long, and Golden State Warriors power forward, Jonas Jerebko also own teams.

Kligerman is no stranger to simulated racing or "sim racing." As a young driver, Kligerman faced the same barriers to entry, like cost and accessibility, that all young drivers face. As a result, Kligerman turned to sim racing, including early versions of iRacing to refine his skills. "Sim racing was the only way I could stay current and keep racing," says Kligerman. "At my first Xfinity Series [race] I sat on the poll, and I think in my whole career I had less than 60 races, but I had done thousands of sim races."

Kligerman's progression from sim racing to NASCAR was not common among his peers. "I've always felt like the bridge between the real racing world and the sim world," Kligerman says. However, iRacing's technology has made significant advancements, which helped sim racing become more popular among young drivers. "You're starting to see young drivers like William Byron and other young drivers that are getting into the Cup Series, and they are attributing a lot of their success or how they got started to sim racing," says Kligerman. The current version of iRacing is extremely sophisticated. iRacing uses a proprietary three-dimensional laser scanning technology to capture the precise features of a track, including its width, length, turns, radius, cracks, and bumps. The technology is so realistic that NASCAR America often features an iRacing simulator to give fans a driver-seat view of a particular NASCAR Cup race.

Sim racing has a unique place in the eSports world. It is the only eSport that has a direct correlation to the necessary skills of actual motor racing. It is also relatively inexpensive, which is one reason young drivers use it. "In real racing, we have a massive barrier of entry," says Kligerman. "It takes sponsors and family backing to get there." With sim racing, those traditional barriers are lowered to the cost of an iRacing subscription, a steering wheel, and pedals.

The PEAK Series brings Kligerman full circle. He's invested in an eSport built upon the technology that contributed to his success as a driver. Kligerman sees enormous potential for the eSport. In 2018, the Peak Series reportedly garnered over 12 million impressions. In 2019, the PEAK Series increased its prize pool to \$100,000, the highest in series history and a reported 500% increase from the previous year. Team owners can leverage traditional assets like race-car sponsorships and new assets like live-streamed races on Twitch, YouTube, Facebook, and NASCAR.com. NASCAR is also reaching a talented pool of new and diverse young drivers. NASCAR has identified young drivers from its iRacing youth series, the eNASCAR Ignite Series, for its Drive for Diversity Youth Driver Development Program, which seeks to develop elite candidates from diverse backgrounds into successful NASCAR drivers.

The 2019 PEAK Series season kicked off on February 12th at Daytona and runs through October. Races are broadcasted live every other Tuesday

at 9 pm ET on Twitch and YouTube. Kligerman's schedule is less predictable but chances are he'll tune in on Tuesday nights to watch the Burton Kligerman Esports drivers compete.

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