

NEXT UP...

MONSTER ENERGY NASCAR CUP SERIES

Race: Brickyard 400
Where: Indianapolis Motor Speedway
When: Sunday, 2:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: NBC
2016 Winner: Kyle Busch (right)



XFINITY SERIES

Race: Lilly Diabetes 250
Where: Indianapolis Motor Speedway
When: Saturday, 3:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: NBC Sports Network
2016 Winner: Kyle Busch

CAMPING WORLD TRUCK SERIES

Race: Eldora Dirt Derby
Where: Eldora Speedway
When: July 19, 9:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: Fox Business
2016 Winner: Kyle Larson

NASCAR INSIDER

by RICK MINTER / Andrews McMeel Syndication

Denny Hamlin's return to Victory Lane ends drought for JGR

A season-long losing streak for Joe Gibbs Racing finally came to an end on Sunday at New Hampshire Motor Speedway as Denny Hamlin took the lead from teammate Matt Kenseth with 34 laps remaining and sped away from Kyle Larson and Martin Truex Jr. to win the Overton's 301.

It was Hamlin's first win in NASCAR's elite Monster Energy Cup Series since last September at Richmond and JGR's first since Carl Edwards won at Texas last November.

Hamlin said Sunday's win came on a day in which his No. 11 Toyota wasn't as fast as the No. 78 Toyota of Truex or the No. 42 Chevrolet driven by Larson. Hamlin was in a backup car Sunday after crashing his primary in practice on Friday, but there were no such errors on Sunday.

"We executed nicely, made no mistakes and capitalized when other guys faltered a little bit, and just [did] everything right to win the race," Hamlin said in his winner's interview.

Hamlin now has 30 career Cup wins, three of them at New Hampshire. He said his latest win came after a surge in performance in recent weeks. He finished fourth in three of the four races leading into New Hampshire.

"We've been treating every week as if it's a playoff race and giving it all we've got," he said. "We've been steadily getting better as the summer has gone on, and we need to continue to stay on that trend of getting better."

Hamlin said the victory is a big relief because it all but assures him of one of the 16 playoff berths. But there's also more speed to be found before the final 10 races that will decide the championship.

"I'm not going to think that [Sunday's win] fixed everything," he said. "I still think that we have some work to do to be guys that contend for a win every single week."

"We're getting there. We really, really are getting there. But we still have some work to do."

"Today was just a bonus. We got some bonus points. It was a good points day overall, and we got another victory. All good things, but really when it comes to Monday, we'll go to work on our next race track."

Overall, it was a good day for the Gibbs team. Matt Kenseth, who is leaving the team's No. 20 at season's end, finished fourth, despite getting just two fresh tires on his final pit stop while most of his challengers got four.

Rookie Daniel Suarez finished sixth, and Kyle Busch appeared to have a car capable of winning, but after leading 95 laps he was nabbed twice for speeding on pit road and finished 12th.

Team owner Joe Gibbs said he was proud of his entire organization for turning its fortunes around.

"We got off to a slow start this year, and I think the thing I'd like to say most about our entire group there, nobody ever would point fingers or anything," he said. "Everybody would just say: 'We've got to go to work.'"

"I think our guys back home working on the cars took it the same way, and I think everybody has been working extremely hard, and I'm hoping what's happening now is we're starting to hit our stride and get better and better down the stretch."

"That would be a big deal for us."

Larson, the runner-up, had a strong performance after having to start the race from the rear of the pack. He was the fastest qualifier on Friday, but his time was disallowed for an unapproved modification to the rear spoiler on his car.

It was his seventh second-place finish of the season and the second time in a row that he finished second after starting in the rear.

Larson said the intense focus on his car by series officials is a sign that his car is a fast one.

"It means everybody is paying attention to us," he said. "This is my fourth year, and I've never been in the position to where NASCAR and other teams are paying so much attention to our race car."

"That's a compliment to everybody at our race shop."



Denny Hamlin celebrates his first win of the 2017 season with members of his No. 11 Toyota crew from Joe Gibbs Racing, and hoists his lobster trophy in Victory Lane.

Track work draws mixed reviews from drivers

New Hampshire Motor Speedway officials joined a growing list of track operators that applied an adhesive substance to the racing surface in an effort to provide multiple grooves.

Products such as PJ1 and VHT are commonly used in drag racing to improve traction. The use of the products at New Hampshire drew mostly positive comments from drivers.

"I was surprised at how well it worked," Kyle Larson said. "I liked the element of it changing quickly and wearing out and then wearing out in different spots and stuff. It just adds an element [for] us that we have to adapt to."

He said he thinks the treatments will work best at tracks where corner speeds are slower.

"It's hard to get the courage up to enter in that stuff at those fast tracks because you don't really know how it's going to react," Larson said. "But [at New Hampshire] you're going so slow in the corners ... you're not going to crash if you go in it."

Danica Patrick, who finished 13th, said the substance wore off early and didn't have a whole lot of effect on the racing.

"It was still basically the same and still hard to pass," she said. "I feel like you still had the normal short track, bump 'em out of the way a little bit. That is what people come for right?"

Patrick's New Hampshire finish was her second best of the season behind a 10th-place at Dover.



Workers patch an area of track pavement at New Hampshire Motor Speedway during a break in the action Sunday.

Kyle Busch gets Xfinity Series win, but Ryan Preece steals the show

Saturday's Xfinity Series race at New Hampshire Motor Speedway likely will be remembered by local fans for the uplifting performance by local driver Ryan Preece, who finished a Xfinity-career-best second.

Out front, the race for the win was among Monster Energy Cup regulars Kyle Busch and Brad Keselowski.

Keselowski appeared to have the best car, leading 102 laps. But on the race's final pit stop, with 30 laps remaining, Keselowski's gas man was unable to get the can detached from the car and it didn't come loose from the car until he was in the next pit box.



Kyle Busch won his 89th career Xfinity Series race Saturday at New Hampshire, and is now just 11 shy of his stated goal of 100 victories in the series.

A penalty from NASCAR required him to return to pit road, which handed the lead to Busch, who led the rest of the way to get his third Xfinity win of the season and the 89th of his career.

Preece, driving the potent No. 20 for Joe Gibbs Racing, finished second at his home track.

Preece, who is a standout in Modified racing in the Northeast, said the day was "something I dreamed about."

He added that his second-place finish in one of the circuit's best cars should be a sign of hope for short-track racers everywhere.

"This one is for all the short-track guys out there that might not ever get the opportunity," he said. "It means a lot to do it at this stage, to prove to people that I feel like I belong to be here and I would only get better with more seat time."

Busch, who now has 175 victories across NASCAR's top three series, said in a post-race interview on Sirius radio that he plans to end his Xfinity career once he reached the 100-win mark.

"Retirement is fast approaching; looking forward to that," Busch said, according to a transcript of the interview posted on ESPN.com.



Ryan Preece finished second in the Overton's 200 Saturday at New Hampshire, and is scheduled to make another Xfinity start at Iowa on July 29.

Safety innovator Baird left his mark on motorsports

Norman George "Norrie" Baird, a longtime employee of Charlotte Motor Speedway and a leader in racing safety, died July 6 at age 72.

Baird, who was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, started his work in racing safety on the Formula One circuit and came to Charlotte in 1980.

Many of his practices in dealing with accidents on the track, including the requirement that drivers in crashes must be checked at the track's care center, are now standard procedure at all major NASCAR tracks.

NASCAR recognized Baird in 2010 by presenting him with its Excellence in Track Services Award. He retired in 2012.

He is survived by his wife Wanda Goddard Baird, longtime executive assistant to former Charlotte track president Humpy Wheeler, and his daughters Honor, Stella, Beth and Myra.

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

106 Laps led at Eldora Speedway by Christopher Bell to top all Camping World Truck Series drivers

569 Laps run among the top 15 in truck races at Eldora by Matt Crafton — the most of any driver

302 Laps led in Cup races at Indianapolis Motor Speedway by Jimmie Johnson to top all active drivers

16 Cup wins at Indianapolis Motor Speedway by Chevrolet to lead all manufacturers (Ford is second with three)

Truck Series drivers gear up for dirt racing at Eldora

On Wednesday night, NASCAR's Camping World Truck Series drivers will be at Eldora Speedway in Ohio making their annual once-a-season run on a dirt track.

For the past four years, the race has been one of the most anticipated Truck Series races, even for those drivers who have little dirt-racing experience.

Defending series champion and current points leader Johnny Sauter is among those who don't have a dirt-racing background to fall back on at Eldora. He has one top-10 finish at Eldora and an average finish there of 18th.

"Obviously, Eldora is a little bit different situation, especially for a guy like me that's raced asphalt his whole life," Sauter said on a teleconference last week. "So, I have fun at Eldora. ... But for me, it's just a place where I just haven't figured it out quite yet."

Since NASCAR has banned testing other than at approved sessions, drivers like Sauter have to be creative in getting experience for a dirt track. He planned to run some test laps in a street stock car at a dirt track in his native Wisconsin.

"I think it's a feel thing," Sauter said of racing on dirt. "If you only do it once a year, it's hard to grasp that concept."

Sauter's fellow truck series driver John Hunter Nemechek likewise has little dirt experience. Still, he thinks the Xfinity and Cup drivers need to run a dirt race, too.

"I definitely think other series should try racing in the dirt just to get a feel of what we're doing, how we're racing," he said. "It puts on one of the

best shows each year and [it's] kind of a standout race throughout the year — something different than our normal asphalt everyday routine."

Most drivers look at Christopher Bell as the favorite to win Wednesday's race. He has extensive dirt experience and won the truck race there in 2015.

Last weekend, he finished second in the King's Royal Sprint Car race at Eldora. He had to start 20th after engine troubles in his heat race, but charged to second place behind winner Donny Schatz in a race that ran without a caution period.

"Eldora is my favorite race track in the whole world," Bell said of the track built by the late Earl Baltes, but now owned by Tony Stewart. "I grew up running a lot of laps there. I think over my dirt career here, I've run more laps at Eldora than I have anywhere in the world."

"I think I've got as good a shot as anybody to win the race and it's one of my favorite races of the year, so I'm really looking forward to it."



Trucks make their way around Eldora Speedway amid fireworks in last season's Dirt Derby.

NASCAR CUP DRIVER STANDINGS

1. Martin Truex Jr., 758
2. Kyle Larson, 720
3. Kyle Busch, 650
4. Kevin Harvick, 639
5. Denny Hamlin, 589
6. Chase Elliott, 587
7. Jamie McMurray, 572
8. Brad Keselowski, 564
9. Jimmie Johnson, 552
10. Clint Bowyer, 526