

NASCAR INSIDER

by RICK MINTER / Andrews McMeel Syndication

Martin Truex Jr. claims his first Cup championship

NASCAR's Monster Energy Cup Series ended its 2017 season in grand fashion with the circuit's biggest winner of the season, Martin Truex Jr., fighting off former champions Kyle Busch and Kevin Harvick to get his first Cup title.



Martin Truex Jr. looks at the Monster Energy Cup trophy following his victory in Sunday's Ford EcoBoost 400 to secure his first-ever championship in NASCAR's top division.

Dale Earnhardt Jr., the sport's most popular driver and an early backer of Truex, ended his Cup career with great fanfare, while another popular veteran, Matt Kenseth, likely ended his with far less ado.

Danica Patrick, with just the 2018 Daytona 500 left in her NASCAR plans, went out in a blaze, not necessarily of glory, as her No. 10 Ford erupted in

flames after she blew a tire and slammed into the wall.

Most drivers — and fans — seemed to realize the significance of what they were witnessing and cheered Truex, Earnhardt, Kenseth and Patrick.

Earnhardt, who finished 25th, made a trip to Victory Lane to congratulate Truex, who drove cars owned by Earnhardt early in a NASCAR career that has seen him enjoy both success and bitter disappointment.

"It's so good to see him win this title," Earnhardt said of Truex, the 37-year-old New Jersey native who paid for his first race car with money earned working on a clam boat. "He is a professional and a gentleman and just a perfect friend."

"We've been pals a long, long time. ... I am so proud of him."

Earnhardt said that NASCAR, facing a major changing of the guard, needs drivers like Truex, who is an everyman kind of person.

"He's just a really good guy, very easy to relate to, easy to talk to,"

Earnhardt said.

Earnhardt said Truex's crew chief, Cole Pearn, is an interesting character himself, as well as being a talented crew chief who led Truex to a series-leading eight wins this season.

Sunday's victory wasn't as dominant as many of Truex's others this season. At times he trailed all three of the other championship contenders — Brad Keselowski, Kevin Harvick and Kyle Busch.

But as the laps wound down and early leader Kyle Larson began to falter, Truex took command and led the final 51 laps to get the race win and the championship. Busch finished second, Harvick fourth and Keselowski seventh.

Finally, Truex has done what he knew all along he could do.

"There were years where ... as a driver, I was struggling, and you watch other guys dominate, and you're like, 'Man, I know I can do that. I know I can. Give me a chance,'" he said. "That's the coolest part of it — it's just showing people that you've got it, that you can do it."

Matt Kenseth, another driver who has demonstrated this season that he is still capable of competing for championships, finished eighth in what likely is his last ride as a full-time Cup driver.

He said he'll miss the fans' support as much as anything.

"All the respect that they've shown me the last couple weeks has been really really, humbling," he said. "I'll miss that the most."



Matt Kenseth (20) and Dale Earnhardt Jr. (88) pose prior to their final full-time starts at Homestead-Miami this past weekend.

Christopher Bell takes trucks title; William Byron on top in Xfinity Series

NASCAR's Xfinity and Camping World Truck series ended their 2017 seasons in remarkably similar fashions.

In each circuit's season-ending race at Homestead-Miami Speedway, a newcomer made it to Victory Lane, while the series champion won the title with a top-three finish.

And both young champions were driving for teams owned by Monster Energy Cup drivers.

In the Truck Series, Chase Briscoe led 81 laps, including the final 39, to get his first victory in the series, while Christopher Bell, who drives for Kyle Busch Motorsports, won the championship with a runner-up finish.

In Xfinity, it was Cole Custer dominating the race, leading 182 laps, including the final 139, to get his first series victory by a whopping 15.405-second margin over runner-up Sam Hornish Jr.

Behind the lead duo, 19-year-old William Byron finished third and took the championship in a Chevy from JR Motorsports, which is co-owned by retiring Cup driver Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Bell and Byron won their titles, the first in a major NASCAR division for either driver, by being the highest finisher among the four championship contenders.

Bell bested defending series champion Johnny Sauter, who finished one spot behind him in third, as well as fifth-finishing Austin Cindric and Matt Crafton, who was sixth.

Byron prevailed in a long, late-race, back-and-forth duel with his JR Motorsports teammate Elliott Sadler, who appeared to be in position to take the driving title before being involved in a couple of incidents with Ryan Preece, who was driving the No. 18 Toyota of Joe Gibbs Racing and trying to win an owner's championship for his team.

Contact with Preece with four laps remaining damaged Sadler's right-front tire and he faded to eighth place, which meant he now has four runner-up finishes in the points standings and no titles.

Sadler confronted Preece on pit road afterward, blaming him for a lost driving title. Preece responded that he too had a championship on his mind.

"To be honest with you, if there's a person you don't want to cost a championship, it's Elliott Sadler," Preece said in a televised interview. "I'm just trying to do team orders here. I was racing for an owner championship. Yeah, we weren't racing for the win right

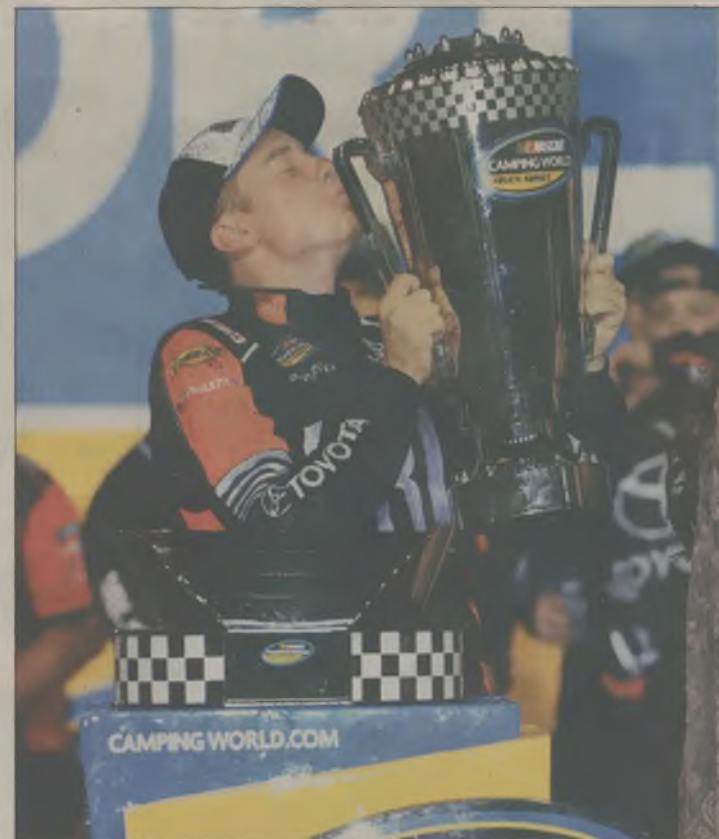
there, but we were still racing the 9 (Byron).

"It's not where I want to be right there. Obviously, I hate it, but I can't take it back."

Justin Allgaier finished 12th in the race to take third in the final standings. The fourth championship contender, Daniel Hemric, finished 34th.

Byron, who is moving to the Cup circuit to drive the No. 24 Chevrolet for Hendrick Motorsports, said he was exhausted after the duel with Sadler.

"I don't know that I took a breath the last 20 laps," he said.



Christopher Bell celebrates his first Truck Series championship.

Danica Patrick plans 2018 goodbyes at Daytona, Indy

Danica Patrick's announcement at Homestead-Miami Speedway that the 2017 season would be her final one as a driver wasn't a huge surprise given the fact that she had not been able to put together a deal for the 2018 season.

"This will be my last season as a full-time driver," Patrick said before being overcome with emotion at a news conference at Homestead with family and friends in the room with her. "My sister said I wasn't supposed to get emotional. I said I wouldn't."

After composing herself, Patrick said she's OK with her decision and believes it was meant to be.

"I'm not feeling like I was pushed into this," she said. "I feel like I should be doing this. I feel like this is where my life should be headed. And sometimes we just get kind of nudged there. Sometimes it's big nudges and sometimes it's little."

"I definitely was faced with situations at the beginning of the year that I had never faced before. ... It made me think about things, and so I'm excited about the next phase."

That next phase is an encore performance next season before she finally hangs up her helmet. She plans to run both the Daytona 500 and the Indianapolis 500.

Patrick said she hopes her racing legacy will be more about her career accomplishments than her gender.

"I tried every approach I could to figure it out how to make the car go fast," she said. "Do I push people? Do I let them do their job? Do I question them? Do I ask for other things? I tried every approach. All that ended up happening is that I lost my crew chief ... Tony Gibson, and I didn't end up wanting that to happen. "So I was like, 'Shoot, nothing really works.' So here I am. I tried every different route, and it just didn't go as I hoped. Just a lot of things out of your control as a driver."

But what is within her control is the influence she's had on those who have followed her career, both males and females.

Krissie Newman, wife of Cup driver Ryan Newman and the mother of two girls posted the following on Twitter: "Little girls with dreams, become women with vision. Thank you @DanicaPatrick for paving the way for young girls everywhere and being a fearless strong role model, for not just my girls, but all young women with dreams!"

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

10 Camping World Truck Series manufacturer titles for Toyota

5 Drivers who drove the No. 22 Ford of Roger Penske to the Xfinity Series owners championship (Ryan Blaney, Austin Cindric, Sam Hornish Jr., Brad Keselowski and Joey Logano)

19 Top-five finishes this season for Martin Truex Jr. to top all Cup drivers

10,446 Laps run this year in the Cup Series by Michael McDowell — the most of any driver

Truex & Co. cap off dominating 2017 season with strong final push to outlast Kyle Busch for the win

Points standings and race results from Sunday's Ford EcoBoost 400 at Homestead-Miami Speedway.



Martin Truex Jr., left, and crew chief Cole Pearn celebrate following their victory in the season-ending Ford EcoBoost 400 and a Cup championship.

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1. MARTIN TRUEX JR. (finished first)
At times it looked as if Truex's dominance of the 1.5-mile intermediate tracks had come to an end, but he came through at the end to get the win and the championship. "I can't believe we got the lead," he said. "I can't believe we kept it."
"We weren't the best car all day long. We fought it. Cole (Pearn, crew chief) had some great pit strategy and the caution came at the right time to get us the lead and then they put it in my hands and I had to hang onto it."

2. KYLE BUSCH (finished second)
His crew chief, Adam Stevens, had him on pace to take command of the race via a pit strategy that would have meant his playoff challengers would have to make one more stop than him, but a caution flag spoiled the plan.
Still, he battled back to second place and tracked down Truex, but was unable to pass him. He blamed Joey Logano for racing him too hard at a critical time.
"I knew I overused my stuff when I was running with the 22 [Logano] trying to get by him and just overworked everything," he said.

3. KEVIN HARVICK (finished fourth)
Harvick was strong early and faded late.
"There at the end, we just got a hole in the nose and had a tire equalize, and all kinds of stuff happen right about dark, and we never got it back 100 percent right to really do what we needed to do, really at any point during the run," he said. "We were just kind of treading water there."
But, he said, his team members, in their first year running Fords, did a great job.
"They did a great job getting us to this point and having a chance, and [we] gave it all we had right up until the end," he said.

4. BRAD KESELOWSKI (finished seventh)
Keselowski wasn't one of the favorites coming into Homestead, but ran like one early in the race, staying ahead of his fellow playoff contenders for laps on end.
"We weren't quite best in class, but we ran up front," he said. "We tried everything we could throw at them with strategies and whatnot, and it seemed to work out a little bit, force everybody's hands a couple times and put them in some uncomfortable spots, but in the end, we just didn't have enough speed to really contend with those guys."
"Really nobody did if you look at it. But we put the effort out there, and I'm proud of that."

