

# NASCAR 2017



## ***INSIDE THIS YEAR'S EDITION:***

- ELLIOT WINS 2ND STRAIGHT DAYTONA POLE
- FORD LOOKING FOR CHAMPIONSHIPS
- HAMLIN AIMS FOR DAYTONA REPEAT
- EARNHARDT RETURNS TO TRACK

***Full Season  
Schedule!***

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# NASCAR 2017 Monster Energy Series Schedule

<b>Date</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Track</b>	<b>Network</b>	<b>Start</b>
Feb. 26	Daytona 500	Daytona International Speedway	FOX	2 p.m.
March 5	Folds of Honor Quiktrip 500	Atlanta Motor Speedway	FOX	2:30 p.m.
March 12	Kobalt 400	Las Vegas Motor Speedway	FOX	3:30 p.m.
March 19	Camping World 500	Phoenix International Speedway	FOX	3:30 p.m.
March 26	Auto Club 400	Auto Club Speedway	FOX	3:30 p.m.
April 2	STP 500	Martinsville Speedway	FS1	2 p.m.
April 9	O'Reilly Auto Parts 500	Texas Motor Speedway	FOX	1:30 p.m.
April 23	Food City 500	Bristol Motor Speedway	FOX	2 p.m.
April 30	Toyota Owners 400	Richmond International Speedway	FOX	2 p.m.
May 7	Geico 500	Talladega Superspeedway	FOX	2 p.m.
May 13	Go Bowling 400	Kansas Speedway	FS1	7:30 p.m.
May 19	All-Star Showdown	Charlotte Motor Speedway	FS1	6 p.m.
May 20	All-Star Race	Charlotte Motor Speedway	FS1	6 p.m.
May 28	Coca-Cola 600	Charlotte Motor Speedway	FOX	6 p.m.
June 4	AAA 400 Drive for Autism	Dover International Speedway	FS1	1 p.m.
June 11	Pocono 400	Pocono Raceway	FS1	3 p.m.
June 18	Firekeepers Casino 400	Michigan International Speedway	FS1	3 p.m.
June 25	Toyota Save Mart 350	Sonoma Raceway	FS1	3 p.m.
July 1	Coke Zero 400	Daytona International Speedway	NBC	7:30 p.m.
July 8	Powered by Coca-Cola Quaker State 400	Kentucky Speedway	NBCSN	7:30 p.m.
July 16	Presented by Advance Auto Parts New Hampshire 301	New Hampshire Motor Speedway	NBCSN	3 p.m.
July 23	Brickyard 400	Indianapolis Motor Speedway	NBC	3 p.m.
July 30	Pennsylvania 400	Pocono Raceway	NBCSN	3 p.m.
Aug. 6	Watkins Glen 355	Watkins Glen International	NBCSN	3 p.m.
Aug. 13	Pure Michigan 400	Michigan International Speedway	NBCSN	3 p.m.
Aug. 19	Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race	Bristol Motor Speedway	NBC	7:30 p.m.
Sept. 3	Bojangles Southern 500	Darlington Raceway	NBCSN	6 p.m.
Sept. 9	Federated Auto Parts 400	Richmond International Raceway	NBCSN	7:30 p.m.
Sept. 17	Chicagoland 400	Chicagoland Speedway	NBCSN	3 p.m.
Sept. 24	New Hampshire 300	New Hampshire Motor Speedway	NBCSN	2 p.m.
Oct. 1	Dover Fall Race	Dover International Speedway	NBCSN	2 p.m.
Oct. 7	Bank of America 500	Charlotte Motor Speedway	NBCSN	7 p.m.
Oct. 15	Alabama 500	Talladega Superspeedway	NBC	2 p.m.
Oct. 22	Hollywood Casino 400	Kansas Speedway	NBCSN	3 p.m.
Oct. 29	Martinsville Fall Race	Martinsville Speedway	NBCSN	1 p.m.
Nov. 5	AAA Texas 500	Texas Motor Speedway	NBC	2 p.m.
Nov. 12	Can-Am 500	Phoenix International Raceway	NBC	2:30 p.m.
Nov. 19	Ford EcoBoost 400	Homestead-Miami Speedway	NBC	2:30 p.m.



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# NASCAR hopes for boost after big swings at spicing it up

By **JENNA FRYER**  
AP Auto Racing Writer

**DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. (AP)** » NASCAR has a new sponsor, a new format and welcomes back its most popular driver, all providing optimism for a series eager to halt a steady decline in attendance, ratings and sponsorship.

Money is down across the board and everyone is doing more with less to try to save a buck.

The on-track product for the stock car series officially reported for work last week at Daytona International Speedway, which hosts Sunday's season-opening "Great American Race." It will kick off a season of hold-your-breath, we-really-hope-this-works efforts by NASCAR, the networks, tracks, teams and drivers to turn things around.

This season begins with Monster Energy roaring into its debut year as title sponsor amid promised marketing to millennials and the opportunity to lure new eyeballs to a sport with an aging audience. Part of the new razzle-dazzle approach is a wholesale redesign of the definition of a NASCAR race.

Remember how NASCAR just ran in circles for 500 miles nearly every Sunday for hours on end? Well, this year it's about "enhanced competition" in segments broken up over three periods. Think of it like innings in baseball or quarters in football or basketball. More accurately, the quick first two segments are now the appetizer to the longer main event. In the meantime, you get to go grab a beer as the television networks promise to use the breaks between segments to dump all the

commercials.

Even better, you won't have to wait for Nationwide's beloved "Water Cooler Dale" commercial to see NASCAR's most popular driver. Dale Earnhardt Jr. is cleared for competition after missing the second half of last season with a concussion. Earnhardt's sidelining absolutely cut into the audience, and had to send shivers down NASCAR's spine over its dwindling cast of superstars.

Jeff Gordon is in the TV booth now, Tony Stewart is retired. They had seven championships between them and NASCAR is counting on Earnhardt to bring his fan base back to the track with him. How important is Earnhardt? Chicagoland Speedway, site of the Sept. 17 opening playoff race, has promised a full refund to anyone who buys a single-day ticket to



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

on this Sept. 4, 2016, file photo, Kurt Busch races into Turn 1 during a NASCAR Sprint Cup Series auto race at Darlington Raceway, in Darlington, S.C. NASCAR has a new sponsor and a new format this year in its bid to rebound from declining ratings and attendance. The next 11 months will show if Monster Energy and different rules can provide the needed jolt.

that event between now and the Daytona 500 if Earnhardt wins for a third time.

But be prepared, Dale is different! He's married, head-over-heels in love and you can double-click his Instagram account if you like photos of a man who has finally, in his 18th season, settled into his skin and found a peace that he is

sharing with the entire world.

"Getting married has been incredible. I wish I would have figured this all out sooner," he said. "I'm frustrated with myself that I took so long to grow up because I have an amazing wife and she's changed my life. She's really helped me as a person to become better on all fronts —

personally, and all my friendships with people and how I react to people and treat people. And, obviously, in my professional life, she's helped me as a driver."

He wants a family, wants to be himself and wants to be in that race car.

"I got real close to not being able to compete and it being someone

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else's decision whether I competed or not," Earnhardt said of the long medical process to restore his health. "I don't know when I'm going to stop racing, but I want to be able to make that choice and not have it made for me."

NASCAR, though, must prepare for life after Junior, because Jimmie Johnson — who just won his record-tying seventh championship then had Snoop Dogg play at his party — and champions Matt Kenseth, Kevin Harvick and Kurt Busch aren't getting any younger.

NASCAR hopes it's off to a good start with Daniel Suarez, the only non-American in the Monster Energy Cup Series who has become a sensation in his native Mexico. Only he didn't get a promotion for becoming the first foreign-born series champion with an Xfinity Series title last November. No, the 25-year-old Suarez was promoted when Carl Edwards abruptly walked away.

That's right, the guy who came 10 laps away from winning his first championship last November gave up his

seat at Joe Gibbs Racing. The 37-year-old Edwards gave no clear explanation on what he plans to do now, but his refusal to use the word "retire" seemingly left open a return in some form.

But none of this matters unless the racing is good, the characters come out and somebody provides drama. There was some last Thursday, the day the garage opened to Cup teams, as the nasty fight between Danica Patrick's old sponsor and her race team. Stewart-Haas Racing has sued Nature's Bakery for \$31 million for dumping the final two years of its three-year contract. Nature's Bakery said Thursday it will fight and won't allow the team to "bully us."

NASCAR, meanwhile, introduced a new penalty structure and the rules for the upcoming season — on Thursday. That's right, the details surrounding the 36 championship races were locked down the day before the buildup officially began to NASCAR's version of the "Super Bowl."

So we wait to see what this season brings, while NASCAR holds its breath.

# NASCAR will cut its races into three parts beginning with the Daytona 500

By **JENNA FRYER**  
AP Auto Racing Writer

**CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) »** NASCAR is taking a progressive approach to modernizing its series with a radical new format.

It's complicated and confusing to explain.

But the panel that spent the seven months on this overhaul promised it's going to be the best thing to happen in NASCAR in a very long time.

"Wait until you see it on the racetrack," said 2012 champion Brad Keselowski. "If you are watching right now, please trust us. When you see this on the racetrack, this is going to be the best racing you've ever seen."

The overhaul announced Monday assigns three stages to every race. The top 10 drivers at the end of Stage 1 and Stage 2 will be awarded points on a 10-through-1 scale. The third portion of the race will be for the overall victory, and although traditional point scoring will be applied for that stage, the win will be worth 40 points. The rest of the field will be scored on a 35 to 2 scale, and positions 36th to 40 will only receive 1 point.

All bonus points accumulated through the 26-race regular sea-

son can be used in the 10-race playoff, which will no longer be called "The Chase."

"You still have the start of the race, you still have the end of the race, and in between, there's going to be a lot of moments," said Denny Hamlin, leader of the driver council.

NASCAR worked with a wide range of industry stakeholders to come up with the changes. Heavily involved were the television networks, retired drivers Jeff Gordon and Jeff Burton, current drivers from the driver council and team and track executives. Monster Energy, which signed last month as the title sponsor for NASCAR's top series, was only informed of the changes in the last few weeks.

The new format begins with Sunday's season-opening Daytona 500.

NASCAR was energized by the changes, particularly the stages that will allow for a commercial break that doesn't occur during green-flag racing. Segment winners will be interviewed during the breaks, and NASCAR likes that it creates a pause that gives fans a chance to reset. It comes as the series is desperately trying to improve both attendance and television ratings, and Fox Sports estimated it will air 20 percent more of actual racing action

because of the commercial breaks.

Race distances will not change under the format, which will apply to all three national series. Had NASCAR run the system this past season, Jimmie Johnson still would have won the title, but Martin Truex Jr. would have advanced one more round through the playoffs based on his two victories in the first round.

Among other changes:

- There will be no bonus points for leading a lap or for leading the most laps.

- The number of laps in each of the first two segments will be the same in a race, and the end of the second stage will be approximately at the halfway point of the race.

- Drivers will now earn bonus points that will be called playoff points and carry with them through the 10-race playoffs. Drivers will earn five playoff points for every race win and one playoff point for every segment win.

- The playoffs will remain divided into three three-race rounds with four drivers eliminated after each round to set up four finalists for the season finale, where the four finalists will not be eligible to earn segment victories.

- The exhibition duels during Speedweeks at Daytona will now be worth 10 points to the two race winners.

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# Earnhardt makes NASCAR return in Daytona 500 practice

By **MARK LONG**

AP Sports Writer

**DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP)** » Dale Earnhardt Jr. took another step toward making last year a “distant memory.”

NASCAR's most popular driver made his official return to racing Saturday by taking part in the first Daytona 500 practice of Speedweeks.

Earnhardt turned nine laps at Daytona International Speedway during a four-hour session and ranked 11th on the speed chart. He averaged 192.670 mph during his fastest lap in the No. 88 Chevrolet for Hendrick Motorsports.

“Just trying to put as many laps as I can behind me and get further and further into this deal to where the events from last year become more of a distant memory and don't define me as who I am so much anymore,”

Earnhardt said. “It will be good to get in the car and get some good wins and good finishes under our belt this season. That is our plan.”

The practice was Earnhardt's first stint in the car since a test in Phoenix last month. Earnhardt missed the final 18 races of last season because of a concussion, fueling speculation about his future. But he's back and eager to move past his medical history.

“To be successful, particularly at Daytona, you have to drive with zero fear and put your car in places on instinct without wondering and guessing about the repercussions,” he said. “I have watched a lot of races, replays and stuff, where we have had success and I remember that feeling of being invincible. Not even thinking about the dangers or the risks that you are taking, you are



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

Dale Earnhardt Jr., left, and Ricky Stenhouse Jr. talk on their way to the garages during NASCAR auto racing practice at Daytona International Speedway

just doing. That is when you are at your best.

“You have to get into that frame of mind for the race, and I hope to kind of still be that driver that I need to be.”

Team Penske's Joey Logano was fastest in practice, helping Ford land seven of the top

10 spots in the practice session. Logano's fast lap was 193.116 mph, just ahead of Aric Almirola and teammate Brad Keselowski.

“So far, it's been a couple good practices for Penske and Ford, and now we'll see how the races go,” Logano said,

referring to the exhibition Clash scheduled for Saturday night.

The Daytona 500 is scheduled for Feb. 26.

“In all honesty, I've never been that fast in qualifying here in Daytona in my whole career,” Logano said. “I feel like I've never had a shot at it, but now I feel like I'm closer than ever. I feel like I'm kind of in new territory, plus I think some of these other guys sandbag a lot, so tomorrow will be the telltale sign.”

Kyle Larson in a Chevrolet was third fastest in practice, followed by Ford driver Ryan Blaney, rookie Daniel Suarez in a Toyota, Kasey Kahne, Ricky Stenhouse Jr., Trevor Bayne and Clint Bowyer, who is making his debut as the replacement for retired champion Tony Stewart.

Defending series champion Jimmie Johnson was 15th. Defending

Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin was 17th. And Danica Patrick was 25th.

But most eyes were on the 42-year-old Earnhardt, who got married in the offseason and is hoping to return to form at Daytona.

“I've been learning so much, trying to be observant and learn and be open-minded to improving,” he said. “Getting better as a person, as a driver, as a professional, never assuming you've got it all figured out and understanding your mistakes and correcting them. Just getting smarter and older and ready to grow-up.”

“I always thought I was kind of mature, but there is always some room to improve. Certainly, made a lot of changes in my life in the last year that has made some big differences on me personally and I've enjoyed it and look forward to the future.”



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# Retired NASCAR star Tony Stewart returns to sprint cars

By **MARK LONG**  
AP Sports Writer

**OCALA, Fla. (AP) »** Tony Stewart has returned to sprint car racing, though his first race back provided him more frustration than frivolity.

Stewart finished a disappointing 17th in the 26-car main event last week at Bubba Raceway Park, and he ended the night arguing with a fellow driver and complaining with officials.

Stewart was driving a sprint car for the first time since he accidentally struck and killed Kevin Ward Jr. during a race in Canandaigua in 2014. Stewart is still facing a wrongful death lawsuit filed by the fellow driver's family.

The three-time NASCAR champion, who retired after last season, declined comment after the dirt-track event out of respect for the Ward family and later told The Associated Press he didn't want his racing to even appear like he's "rubbing it in the Wards' faces."

Sprint car racing is

Stewart's passion and how he plans to spend much of his retirement. He owns the Arctic Cat All Star Circuit of Champions series, which opened its season last week in Ocala. Given his status and star power, Stewart had the best spot in the pits, just a few steps from the track.

There were barricades alongside his stall, a little something extra to keep the near-capacity crowd a few feet away. Stewart declined photo and autograph requests between breaks, telling those who asked that he would do it all after the finale.

He eventually did, well after he climbed out of his car, walked to the scoring trailer and complained that fellow driver Chad Kamenah blocked him at the start of the 30-lap race. Stewart then hopped on a four-wheeler and drove through the pits to confront Kamenah. Stewart shook his head and waved his hand at Kamenah during their exchange.

It capped what surely had been a long day for Stewart, who arrived in Ocala early in the week

and then flew up and back to Detroit early Thursday to join Stewart-Haas Racing drivers Clint Bowyer, Kurt Busch, Kevin Harvick and Danica Patrick for a Ford event that included a tour of the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation.

Stewart's crew in Ocala included his dad, his girlfriend and his dog. They had little to celebrate outside Stewart's return to winged sprint cars.

Although he started his heat race from the pole, he faded to sixth, failed to qualify for the A Main and then slammed his helmet on a table in his hauler. He eventually managed to race his way into the main event by finishing second in the B Main. He was a non-factor in the finale, won by which Tony Stewart Racing teammate Donny Schatz.

For the last two years, it was unclear when, or if, Stewart would get back in a sprint car after Ward's death. Stewart, who broke his right leg in a 2013 sprint car crash, was emotionally devas-

tated and the incident was made worse by the accusation that he had intentionally targeted Ward, who had climbed out onto the track to confront the NASCAR veteran. A grand jury declined to indict Stewart.

Ward's mother, Pamela, told the AP last week that the family could not comment on Stewart until the civil suit they've filed is over. She said a date for the trial, which will be held this year in Utica, has not yet been set. The Wards are seeking unspecified damages.

Ward also said she was unaware Stewart was returning to sprint car racing.



(AP PHOTO/ALAN DIAZ, FILE)

In this Nov. 19, 2016, file photo, Tony Stewart heads to the hauler after the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series Auto Racing practice in Homestead, Fla.



(MARY WILLIE/THE DES MOINES REGISTER VIA AP, FILE)

In this Aug. 5, 2014, file photo, three-time NASCAR champion Tony Stewart races a sprint car at Southern Iowa Speedway in Oskaloosa, Iowa. Stewart's return to sprint car racing provided him more frustration than frivolity. Stewart finished a disappointing 17th in the main event late Thursday night at Bubba Raceway Park, and he ended the night arguing with a fellow driver and complaining with officials.



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# Ford looking for championships with upgraded NASCAR lineup

By **JENNA FRYER**  
AP Auto Racing Writer

**DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. (AP)** » Ford's courtship of Stewart-Haas Racing was nothing short of clandestine.

No matter how Ford crunched the numbers, it was at a significant deficit in car count. It hindered the manufacturer's ability to win a championship — Ford last won a Cup title in 2004 — and new leadership recognized an immediate need to add a top-tier team.

With sights set on SHR, the Ford brass quietly went to work on luring a lifetime Chevrolet team to a rival manufacturer. It was never going to be that easy, but the Ford duo of chief technical officer Raj Nair and global director Dave Pericak didn't know the lengths they'd have to take to court the team.

"The first time we visited, we had to stop in some lady's front yard and change our clothes," Nair told The Associated Press. "She's looking out the window like she's going to call the police."

SHR held the meetings in its Formula One shop, which is detached from its NASCAR building. SHR officials made it clear early how serious they were about secrecy.

"When we would go in, they said, 'Look guys, don't be driving a Ford. Don't be wearing branded stuff,'" Pericak recalled. "But we're wearing branded stuff because we're meeting with other teams, as well. So we are literally changing shirts in this lady's yard just to get into the building."

Ford pulled off a deal, luring stalwart Chevy guy Tony Stewart into the blue oval brand and significantly upgrading its existing lineup.



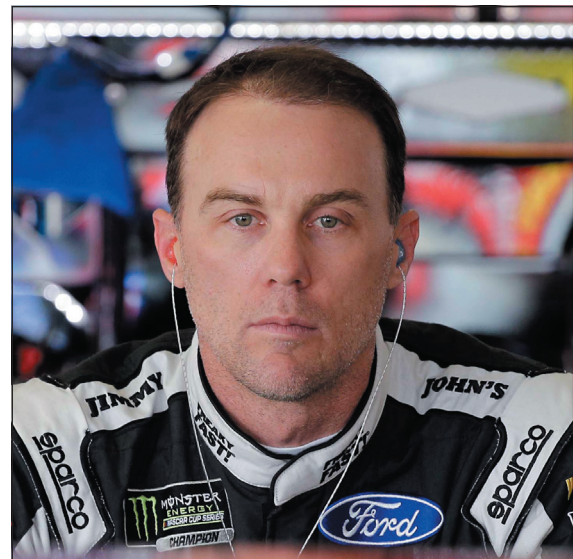
(AP PHOTO/JOHN RAOUX)

### Clint Bowyer

The team gained 2004 champion Kurt Busch, the last driver to win a Cup title for Ford, 2014 champion Kevin Harvick, along with Danica Patrick and Clint Bowyer, the replacement for retired driver Stewart.

The new partnership puts Ford at 13 entries

in a 40-car field, and a fighting chance against Chevrolet and Toyota. Ford had just eight wins last season — seven came from the Team Penske duo of Brad Keselowski and Joey Logano — and only three drivers in the 16-driver playoff field.



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

### Kevin Harvick

In Chevys a year ago, SHR drivers combined for six wins and three spots in the playoffs. Toyota, meanwhile, had 15 wins and five slots in the playoffs.

Confident its roster is now on par with its rivals, Ford Performance has lofty goals for its

NASCAR program. So far, everything has gone to plan on the list of goals set by Nair. He wanted new production cars, and succeeded with the GT350, the Raptor, the Focus RS and the Ford GT. He wanted his sports car program to win the 24 Hours of

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Le Mans last year to celebrate Ford's 50th anniversary victory, and Ford made it happen.

"But we've not achieved that goal of a manufacturer's championship. We've not achieved that goal of the driver's championship," Nair said. "I would say both are important. For us as a manufacturer, obviously, the fight with Chevy and Toyota is really important, but the driver's championship is equally as important."

Ford has improved its lineup over the years by adding Team Penske to stalwart Roush-Fenway Racing, and the Penske group has accounted for most of Ford's success the last few years. Richard Petty Motorsports, Front Row Motorsports, Go Fas Racing and Tri-Star Motorsports also field Fords.

"We brought Penske on board and that's been very successful for us, and now getting Stewart-Haas, the caliber of the organization and the caliber of those drivers, I think we've got a lot better chance to achieve that end goal," Nair said.

The switch isn't simply changing brands for Stewart-Haas. The team had been aligned with



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

**Kurt Busch**

Hendrick Motorsports and got its chassis and engines from the Hendrick group. There also was engineering support and, at times, shared information by the organizations.

The move means SHR is now building its own cars and getting its horsepower from Roush Yates Engines, which Stewart labeled "a totally different package."

"I feel like it's an appropriate time for us to get out on our own and cut the cord," Stewart said. "I feel like we're

ready for that as an organization."

The transition has been aided by Ford personnel.

"They are really focused on winning races and championships," Stewart said. "When we first started meeting with Ford, it was very apparent that there were a lot of things they had to offer that we hadn't seen before and were huge assets for us. That's why we made a serious look at it and ultimately made the decision to switch over."



(AP PHOTO/JOHN RAOUX)

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# Hamlin could become 4th repeat Daytona 500 champion

By **DAN GELSTON**  
AP Sports Writer

**DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP)** » Denny Hamlin rode the escalator to a stadium concourse and spotted his Daytona 500 championship show car on display and wrapped to resemble its appearance moments after the race.

Confetti stuck to the window. The No. 11 Toyota was scuffed up on the sides, a mark of 200 laps of rugged racing.

Not far from away at the Toyota foyer, there hung a banner of Hamlin with his arms raised toward the sky in celebration of his first Daytona

500 victory.

Hamlin took in the festive scenery and had just one thought: Let's do it again.

"Some of NASCAR's greatest drivers haven't won two of them," Hamlin said, "much less two in a row."

Hamlin is trying to become just the fourth driver to go back-to-back and win consecutive Daytona 500s. Richard Petty (1973-1974) and Cale Yarborough (1983-1984) both won consecutive Daytona 500s, and no driver had his name etched on the Harley J. Earl Trophy two straight years since Sterling Marlin in 1994 and 1995.

Hamlin might soon

learn successfully defending a Daytona 500 championship is a tougher challenge than even winning the first one. If confidence played as much of a role as the engine, Hamlin just might have the best shot of extending his Daytona dominance.

"If anyone can go back-to-back, this is the year for us," Hamlin said.

But could the finish be as thrilling?

Hamlin stayed in the gas for a door-to-door dash to the checkered flag that ended in a photo finish with Martin Truex Jr. He beat Truex by 0.010 seconds, the closest finish in the history of the race.



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

Denny Hamlin walks to his garage during a practice session for the Clash NASCAR auto race at Daytona International Speedway, Friday, Feb. 17, 2017, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

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“There’s no Daytona 500 winner that didn’t have the right breaks at the right time,” Hamlin said.

Hamlin and Joe Gibbs Racing teammates Matt Kenseth, Kyle Busch and Carl Edwards stuck close together for most of the race, and they got assistance from Truex, who became a de facto JGR teammate at Furniture Row Racing because of a Toyota affiliation.

Kenseth led Truex until the final lap when Hamlin finally jumped out of line. Starting a second line on the outside, Hamlin got a push from Kevin Harvick that allowed him to catch Kenseth. Kenseth tried to throw a block but Hamlin wedged into the middle between Kenseth and Truex, and Kenseth had to save his car from wrecking.

Reflecting a year later, Hamlin said the strong push from Harvick was the clutch move of the race.

“The biggest break I got was that outside line forming as good as it did,” Hamlin said. “The commitment from the 4 car to push us instead of making a move, that was a key moment for

us. Typically, lines get messed up when someone tries to make a move and do something for themselves. That’s when the line goes nowhere. The outside line was very unselfish and stuck in one line and that was fortunate for me.”

The Toyota pack-and-push to the finish might also be implausible among the Chevrolets and Fords that are sure to run at the front.

“I think it will be difficult to pull off the same plan,” said Busch, the 2015 Cup champion. “I think we have to reengineer a little bit of what we’ve already done and try to make it better.”

Hamlin is clearly feeling bullish about his chances next weekend. He unveiled the custom Jordan Jumpman sneaks he’ll wear in Speedweeks races at Daytona International Speedway. Hamlin, who forged a friendship with Michael Jordan, has black shoes with the date of his first career late model win (Sept. 12, 2002), the motto from his 2013 comeback (“I CAN I WIN”) from a back injury and his autograph on the back.

Hamlin, a Charlotte Hornets season-ticket



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

Denny Hamlin sits in his car as he prepares to go out on the track during a practice session for the Clash NASCAR auto race at Daytona International Speedway, Friday, Feb. 17, 2017, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

holder, had Jordan rooting from atop the pit box in the JGR’s failed bid to win the 2014 NASCAR championship at the season finale in Homestead-Miami Speedway.

His Airness could offer a tip or two about the pressures of a repeat.

Jordan, of course, still leads his buddy 6-0 in season championships.

The Daytona 500 is the biggest of Hamlin’s 29 career victories and he has

at least one win in each of 11 full seasons. He has some added motivation this year to win for ailing car owner J.D. Gibbs.

Hamlin and Gibbs actually share a J.D. in their initials — Hamlin’s given name is James Dennis Hamlin and Gibbs’ stand for James Dean Gibbs. Hamlin unveiled the “J.D.” over the driver’s side window of the No. 11 Toyota.

The 47-year-old Gibbs,

co-owner with his dad at JGR, has been absent from the track as he battles health issues that affect his brain function.

“With the struggles and tough times that family has gone through the last year, it was important for me to kind of pay tribute by putting his name on the roof,” Hamlin said.

Hamlin has felt a kinship with the Gibbs family since he was a kid and met Joe. The 36-year-old

Hamlin is close on a contract extension that could make him a JGR lifer.

Hamlin will forever be known as the 2016 Daytona 500 champion.

“It’s a very proud moment when you get announced somewhere publicly as the Daytona 500 champion,” he said. “It’s great to have that label stamped on your resume for as long as you’re around, maybe even after.”

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# Bowyer out to revive NASCAR career as Stewart's replacement

By **JENNA FRYER**  
AP Auto Racing Writer

**DAYTONA BEACH, Fla.** (AP) » Clint Bowyer hasn't won a race since 2012, hasn't made the playoffs in three years and is coming off an embarrassingly bad season.

The worst of his career. It was so bad the one-time championship contender was a backmarker in nearly every event.

But there was never reason to panic for Bowyer, who was long-slotted to replace three-time NASCAR champion Tony Stewart when Stewart retired at the end of last year. It meant a happy ending for Bowyer. He'd get to move to Stewart-Haas Racing, his one-year banishment to HScott Motorsports — where he was stashed for a year to wait for Stewart's finale — finally over. Bowyer would get his reprieve. He got his first ride in

a brand new shiny Ford Fusion, one adorned with Stewart's beloved No. 14 on the side, when practice for the Daytona 500 began on Saturday.

It's fair to ask Bowyer, after failing to run well for such a long stretch, if he still knows his way to victory lane.

"Hey, that's a real legitimate question," Bowyer said. "You just don't know. I think the last time I was in a good car, I was good. I think that I'm a smarter driver than I was three years ago. I think I'm plenty capable of winning races. I love what I see at Stewart-Haas, I really do believe if I'm going to win a race this is the exact team I'm going to win with."

"Wouldn't it be awesome if it was the Daytona 500? So I can stop answering that damn question?"

Bowyer is one of the skilled plate racers in NASCAR and he can typi-

cally rise to the challenge of a tight pack and split-second decision making. He's a two-time winner at Talladega and has three top-five finishes at Daytona. It makes Daytona International Speedway probably the best place for him to debut with a new team because he's so comfortable at the track.

There was only one chance for Bowyer to get in the car before Daytona, but it was a team test at Phoenix in which only one driver could represent the organization. The natural pick was to send Kevin Harvick, who has eight career victories at the Arizona track.

Bowyer didn't challenge the call, and like teammates Kurt Busch and Danica Patrick, he'll utilize all the information Harvick gathered. But until he actually pulled his new car out onto the track Saturday, Bowyer didn't know what to expect. He will be with his



(AP PHOTO/CHUCK BURTON, FILE)

In this Jan. 18, 2017, file photo, team owner Tony Stewart, left, and driver Clint Bowyer pose for a photo during a news conference in Concord, N.C.

third different manufacturer in three years — he drove a Toyota for Michael Waltrip Racing, then a Chevrolet last season — and now he is in a Ford as SHR makes a long-planned switch.

The manufacturer change doesn't bother Bowyer, and neither do his results the past few years. He's a driver with high energy and a short attention span, so the year waiting for his seat

to open was agony.

Without testing, though, he hasn't had a chance to get to know his new crew. He asked for a roster, but crew chief Mike Bugarewicz went further.

"He's such a dedicated person and so prepared that he literally went and took pictures of all the guys and emailed me names of them," Bowyer said. "I was like, 'Man, you didn't have to do that.' I'll still screw it up, but, at

the end of the day, that's the level of dedication you have at Stewart-Haas and it just doesn't end with Mike, it's all across the board."

Stewart jokes he sometimes wonders if he chose the right successor for his car. But he and Bowyer have been friends for many years and share a similar sense of humor. And at their core, they are both true racers.


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# Bowman takes final shot as Earnhardt's super substitute

By Dan Gelston  
AP Sports Writer

**DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. (AP)** » Alex Bowman recently raced 75 laps in the car that belongs to NASCAR's most popular driver, hung up the fire-suit and headed home. When will he return? Bowman has no idea. A year after making a string of solid starts, Bowman is outside the NASCAR picture following Saturday's opening exhibition Clash race at Daytona International Speedway.

The 23-year-old Bowman has no rides lined up in any NASCAR series and knows the Clash may have been the last time he competes for Hendrick Motorsports. Bowman was a stout as a substitute last season for the injured Dale Earnhardt Jr. With Junior sidelined with a concus-

sion, Bowman made ten starts and shared the 88 Chevrolet with four-time Cup champion Jeff Gordon. Bowman won a pole at Phoenix — which earned him a spot in the non-points Clash — and had three top-fives.

Bowman was courted by other teams, and certainly could have landed a ride that would have left him a backmarker. Bowman had been down that road and had no top-10 finishes in 71 starts over the 2014-2015 seasons with BK Racing and Tommy Baldwin Racing.

No deal could pull him away from Hendrick. "I was kind of surprised that a winning Xfinity car or something like that didn't open up," Bowman said. "I feel like I want to be part of a winning organization whether I am driving; just working for the team; doing testing or doing the simulation stuff." Bowman made nine

starts in the second-tier Xfinity Series for Earnhardt's JR Motorsports team and has five top-fives in 50 career starts.

Earnhardt has been cleared to drive, and could have returned to race for the first time since July. Earnhardt graciously declined his spot and let Bowman take the wheel, instead helping call the action in the Fox Sports booth.

"It's owed to Alex," Earnhardt said.

Bowman, who couldn't find the necessary sponsor funds for an Xfinity ride, couldn't wait to hear Earnhardt call his race.

"I feel like we can be up front all night," he said. "But it definitely adds some pressure to have probably the best speedway racer of our time in the booth calling the race."

Earnhardt has missed races because of concussions in two different



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

Alex Bowman smiles to team members in his garage during a practice session for the Clash NASCAR auto race at Daytona International Speedway, Friday, Feb. 17, 2017, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

seasons. Should Earnhardt, or any of the other three Hendrick drivers, be forced to sit out a race for any reason, Bowman is on-deck and ready to ride.

"I think if something did come up, that I would think I would be the one that would get

called for it," he said.

Bowman spends time testing in the Hendrick race simulator and was vague about his future race plans.

"I do have a couple of races, not in the Cup Series, but in some other stuff coming up," he said. "Excited about that. I

can't really talk a whole lot about it, but I will be racing some stuff. Really, I will be hanging out at the shop and coming to the race track when I can, just trying to be a sponge and learn as much as I can." Bowman takes final shot as Earnhardt's super substitute.

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# Elliott nips Earnhardt to win 2nd straight Daytona 500 pole



(AP PHOTO/JOHN RAOUX)

Chase Elliott looks at the leader board after a qualifying run for the NASCAR Daytona 500 auto race at Daytona International Speedway

By Dan Gelston  
AP Sports Writer

**DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP)** » It's impossible to tell the history of NASCAR without mentioning Elliott and Earnhardt.

As the series shifts into a new era, those distinguished names are out front again and will give the start of the Daytona 500 a throwback feel.

Chase Elliott and Dale Earnhardt Jr. — teammates and sons of Hall of Fame drivers — will start 1-2 and should give a sagging series a sorely needed boost this week headed into its marquee event.

Elliott nipped Earnhardt on the final qualifying lap Sunday to win his second straight pole for the Daytona 500. Elliott turned a lap at 192.872 mph to just edge Earnhardt's speed of 192.864 and become the first repeat pole winner in 27 years.

"I don't really care who it is. I'm not going to feel bad about beating somebody," Elliott said. "Dale's a good guy. I'm happy to share the front row with him. Happier to beat him."

Earnhardt, long NASCAR's most popular driver, had the speed to beat in his triumphant return after missing the second half of last season with a concussion. He missed the final 18 races with nausea, vision and balance issues after at least the fifth concussion of his career following a June wreck. He was as sharp as ever in the No. 88 Chevrolet headed into his first race since last July.

"Ain't much to it. The car does all the work," he said.

Elliott and Earnhardt gave Hendrick Motorsports and Chevrolet a 1-2 front row for the fifth time in the Daytona 500.

Elliott, the 21-year-old son of Hall of Fame driver and two-time Daytona

500 champion Bill Elliott, became the youngest Daytona 500 pole winner a year ago and proved in the No. 24 Chevy starting first last season was no fluke.

Elliott also made it three straight years for the No. 24 on the pole. Jeff Gordon won the pole in 2015 in his final season before he retired and turned the car over to Elliott.

The rest of the field will be set today in the two qualifying races.

Elliott will lead the field to green and try and avoid the problems that spoiled his Daytona 500 debut.

Elliott's run at a Daytona 500 victory last season ended in the grass just 19 laps into the race. The front end of his car lifted off the ground, and the rough ride caused enough damage that his car had to be towed to the garage.

Until the wreck, Elliott was the star of Speedweeks. He followed the pole with a win in the

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(AP PHOTO/PHELAN M. EBENHACK)

Chase Elliott (24) drives through Turn 4 during a qualifying run for the NASCAR Daytona 500 auto race at Daytona International Speedway

second-tier Xfinity Series race.

He's back out front again and expecting a better finish.

"I hope we can just try to get to the end of the 500, next," Elliott said. "We've obviously got to get through the Duels, first. But, just making it to the end and having yourself in position, obviously we'd love to have a shot to win this thing. It would be

great and I think we have a car that can do it."

Elliott's speed earned team owner Rick Hendrick his 11th overall pole in the Daytona 500.

"My boss man is happy," Earnhardt said. "I just talked to him on the phone, and he's got to be thrilled with having his cars up front."

The 42-year-old Earnhardt got married in the offseason, wants a family

and said over the weekend that he would like a "couple of months" to see how he feels before deciding to sign a contract extension.

Earnhardt starts second in the first NASCAR race under the Monster Energy sponsorship banner and the Daytona 500 is the first under the new format that divides the race into segments.

NASCAR ditched its

knockout group qualifying format for Daytona for single cars making one qualifying lap.

After 42 drivers had a scheduled turn, the 12 fastest advanced to the second round. The two fastest drivers in the second round set the front row. There were 36 drivers guaranteed a spot because of the charter system.

## Other things to know about qualifying:

### WHO'S IN:

Beard Motorsports driver Brendan Gaughan and Tommy Baldwin Racing's Elliott Sadler secured spots in the Daytona 500 as the two fastest drivers from teams not locked into the 40-car field.

### REPEAT POLES:

Elliott joined Fireball Roberts, Buddy Baker, Bill Elliott and Ken Schrader as drivers with consecutive Daytona 500 poles.

### WALTRIP FINALE:

Michael Waltrip failed to advance to the second round of qualifying in his 30th and final Daytona 500. He said the race will be his last in NASCAR. Waltrip, a two-time Daytona 500 winner, will drive the No. 15 Toyota for Premium Motorsports. Premium bought a team charter from the defunct HScott Motorsports, guaranteeing the 51-year-old Waltrip a spot on the grid.

### SUAREZ STRUGGLE:

Daniel Suarez also did not advance to the second round in his first career Cup event. Suarez, the only non-American in the Monster Energy Cup Series, has become a sensation in his native Mexico. He became NASCAR's first foreign-born series champion with an Xfinity Series title last season and Joe Gibbs Racing promoted him to the No. 19 Toyota when Carl Edwards abruptly retired.

### RIGHT CALLS:

Alan Gustafson because the first crew chief to win three straight poles since Ernie Elliott in 1985-1987.



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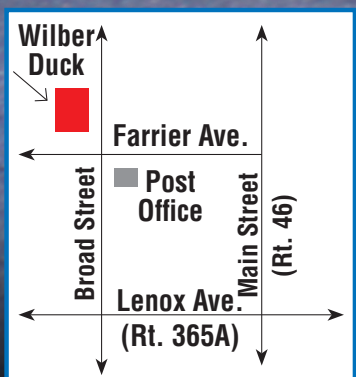
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