

NASCAR 2018



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**Full Season
Schedule!**

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NASCAR 2018 Monster Energy Series Schedule

| Date | Race | Track | Network | Start |
|-------------|--|--------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Feb. 18 | Daytona 500 | Daytona International Speedway | FOX | 2:30 p.m. |
| Feb. 25 | Folds of Honor QuikTrip 500 | Atlanta Motor Speedway | FOX | 2 p.m. |
| March 4 | Pennzoil 400 presented by Jiffy Lube | Las Vegas Motor Speedway | FOX | 3:30 p.m. |
| March 11 | Ticket Guardian 500 | ISM Raceway (Phoenix) | FOX | 3:30 p.m. |
| March 18 | Auto Club 400 | Auto Club Speedway | FOX | 3:30 p.m. |
| March 25 | STP 500 | Martinsville Speedway | FS1 | 2 p.m. |
| April 8 | O'Reilly Auto Parts 500 | Texas Motor Speedway | FS1 | 2 p.m. |
| April 15 | Food City 500 | Bristol Motor Speedway | FOX | 2 p.m. |
| April 21 | Toyota Owners 400 | Richmond Raceway | FOX | 6:30 p.m. |
| April 29 | GEICO 500 | Talladega Superspeedway | FOX | 2 p.m. |
| May 6 | AAA 400 Drive for Autism | Dover International Speedway | FS1 | 2 p.m. |
| May 12 | Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series Race | Kansas Speedway | FS1 | 8 p.m. |
| May 19 | NASCAR All-Star Open | Charlotte Motor Speedway | FS1 | 6 p.m. |
| May 19 | NASCAR All-Star Race | Charlotte Motor Speedway | FS1 | 8 p.m. |
| May 27 | Coca-Cola 600 | Charlotte Motor Speedway | FOX | 6 p.m. |
| June 3 | Pocono 400 | Pocono Raceway | FS1 | 2 p.m. |
| June 10 | FireKeepers Casino 400 | Michigan International Speedway | FOX | 2 p.m. |
| June 24 | Toyota I Save Mart 350 | Sonoma Raceway | FS1 | 3 p.m. |
| July 1 | Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series Race | Chicagoland Speedway | NBCSN | 2:30 p.m. |
| July 7 | Coke Zero 400 | Daytona International Speedway | NBC | 7 p.m. |
| July 14 | Quaker State 400 pres. by Advance Auto Parts | Kentucky Speedway | NBCSN | 7:30 p.m. |
| July 22 | New Hampshire 301 | New Hampshire Motor Speedway | NBCSN | 2 p.m. |
| July 29 | Gander Outdoors 400 | Pocono Raceway | NBCSN | 2:30 p.m. |
| Aug. 5 | GoBowling at The Glen | Watkins Glen International | NBC | 2:30 p.m. |
| Aug. 12 | Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series Race | Michigan International Speedway | NBCSN | 2:30 p.m. |
| Aug. 18 | Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race | Bristol Motor Speedway | NBCSN | 7:30 p.m. |
| Sept. 2 | Bojangles' Southern 500 | Darlington Raceway | NBCSN | 6 p.m. |
| Sept. 9 | Big Machine Brickyard 400 | Indianapolis Motor Speedway | NBCSN | 2 p.m. |
| Sept. 16 | South Point 400 | Las Vegas Motor Speedway | NBCSN | 3 p.m. |
| Sept. 22 | Federated Auto Parts 400 | Richmond Raceway | NBCSN | 7:30 p.m. |
| Sept. 30 | Bank of America 500 | Charlotte Motor Speedway Road Course | NBC | 2 p.m. |
| Oct. 7 | Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series | Dover International Speedway | NBCSN | 2 p.m. |
| Oct. 14 | Alabama 500 | Talladega Superspeedway | NBC | 2 p.m. |
| Oct. 21 | Hollywood Casino 400 | Kansas Speedway | NBC | 2 p.m. |
| Oct. 28 | First Data 500 | Martinsville Speedway | NBCSN | 2:30 p.m. |
| Nov. 4 | AAA Texas 500 | Texas Motor Speedway | NBCSN | 3 p.m. |
| Nov. 11 | Can-Am 500 | ISM Raceway | NBC | 2:30 p.m. |
| Nov. 18 | Ford EcoBoost 400 | Homestead-Miami Speedway | NBC | 3 p.m. |



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'Grandpa' Johnson determined to win 8th NASCAR championship

By Dan Gelston,
The Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA.

(AP) » Jimmie Johnson has never hitched a ride for an afternoon on a champion's float that snakes down closed city streets.

The professional sports teams bask in the celebration of hundreds of thousands of fans screaming in adulation and spraying beer from sidewalks in a frenzy as confetti flies from the sky.

Johnson's top reward for winning it all, a rally once at one of his sponsor's stores a few miles away from his California hometown.

The NASCAR champion traditionally gets a party in victory lane at the season finale and throws a bash at the postseason banquet.

It's all good fun, but

even a seven-time champion wouldn't mind a parade.

"I have to admit, that would be a nice add to the NASCAR champions schedule," Johnson said. "It would be really cool."

Johnson, a regular visitor to the White House when he reigned as NASCAR's champ, had already initiated his own champion's tradition a few years back.

Inspired by a chat with NASCAR official Mike Helton and the presidential tradition of leaving a handwritten letter to the successor, Johnson started a champion's journal.

His first entry was a December 2011 letter to series champion Tony Stewart. Johnson followed championship seasons with notes for Kevin Harvick and 2017 champ Martin Truex Jr., and the keepsake is handed off at the banquet.

"There seems to be a

thread when it comes back to me about me having more entries than anyone else," Johnson said with a laugh outside his motorhome. "That kind of finds its way in each time I get it back."

The journal is thick enough for quite a few more lines of teasing, well wishes and advice left to be composed. But the question looms for the 42-year-old Johnson, can he still fill the blank

pages left as he comes off the worst season of his career?

Or, is the handwriting on the wall that a new crop of stars is ready to deny Johnson another title for as many years as he has left?

Believe that at your own risk.

"I signed up for three more years and I feel like I have the team and the ability to win all three of them," Johnson said.

"We won five in a row and I want to believe in three in a row."

Johnson was never really a serious contender in 2017 to push past Dale Earnhardt and Richard Petty and win his record eighth NASCAR crown. He won three races (but none after June), had a career-worst four top-fives and finished 10th in the standings.

There are about 30 other drivers in the

Daytona 500 field who would love to craft that kind of season. At Hendrick Motorsports, long the class organization of NASCAR, Johnson and crew chief Chad Knaus were considered under-achievers with the No. 48 Chevrolet.

The Chevy ran slower in the second half of the season, and the team could never click and go on their traditional late-season surge; consider he won three of the final seven races in '16 to clinch his seventh championship.

"That was the first time at Hendrick that I've had that happen," Johnson said. "I couldn't have asked anything more from anybody on the team. Everybody was all in. That's where the frustration comes from."

The struggles did nothing to deter the Hendrick lifer from signing a three-year contract extension that should



(AP PHOTO/JOHN RAOUX)

Jimmie Johnson (48) drives laps during a NASCAR auto racing practice session at Daytona International Speedway, Saturday, Feb. 10, 2018, in Daytona Beach, Fla.



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keep him with the team through 2020. Johnson, whose 83 wins are tied for sixth on the NASCAR career Cup series list, was already the top dog at Hendrick.

Now, he's the oldest dog on the Hendrick block, trying to teach his three 20-something teammates new tricks.

Daytona 500 pole-sitter Alex Bowman is 24. Cup rookie William Byron is 20. Chase Elliott is 22.

The trio's combined Cup wins: 0.

But the nicknames for the two-time Daytona 500 winner are adding up.

"We call him Grandpa every now and then," Bowman said.

"I would say Uncle Jimmie," Elliott said.

For a stately veteran, Johnson can still show the young'uns a good time. Johnson, a ski junkie in Aspen, Colorado, hit the slopes with Elliott before they hit the town for a couple of nights.

"I even heard him say, 'Wow this is what 40 looks like. Not bad,'" Johnson said. "I guess we can still have enough fun for a 22-year-old and make it cool."

Johnson tweeted a

photo of himself from behind the wheel of his family car with Bowman and Byron tagging along in car seats.

Johnson, though, is steadfast that he will do his part to shape the next generation of Hendrick stars into regular challengers for checkered flags. He invites teammates into the hauler for chats,

talks game plans with the other crew chiefs, and the fitness freak has even suggested healthy diet tips.

"Jimmie loves that role, and I think these guys will tell you he's there," team owner Rick Hendrick said.

Bowman must be listening: He won the Daytona 500 pole.

Retired four-time

champion Jeff Gordon is still a trusted adviser at HMS and Hendrick said he was having as much fun as he had in years with an injection of youth into the organization.

If 2017's transition season led to stagnation across the lineup, Hendrick's focus this season on returning the team to championship form has

Johnson fired up.

"I've never seen him more committed than he is right now," Hendrick said.

Johnson's outside interests — including an ownership stake in a taco shop and a speakeasy; bike rides and marathons; and a blossoming interest in the NFL's Carolina Panthers ("I'd love to have a shot at it.

But I don't think I can stretch the capital they need.") — have never affected his race preparation each weekend.

Johnson's championship crew chief Chad Knaus' deal is up at the end of the season, though Hendrick said he would work on an extension. Knaus is connected with Johnson in much the same way as Pat Riley and Magic Johnson or Joe Torre and Derek Jeter. One calls the shots and the other leads them to glory — and Johnson wants to keep the tag team intact.

"I know the dog years he lives in and I've anticipated at some point there might be a separation," he said. "I can't see it in the near future, so I hope to stay together. I've told him that we started this thing together, let's end this thing together."

Johnson, who wrecked in Speedweeks exhibition Clash at Daytona, is determined to end it alone atop the championship count.

"He wants No. 8," Hendrick said.

The one that would wipe away the doubt and stamp him as NASCAR's greatest champion.

More AP Auto Racing: <https://racing.ap.org>



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

Crew chief Chad Knaus, left, and Jimmie Johnson watch the leaderboard during qualifying for the NASCAR Daytona 500 auto race at Daytona International Speedway, Sunday, Feb. 11, 2018, in Daytona Beach, Fla.



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Kurt Busch sets aim on becoming fourth repeat Daytona 500 champ

By Dan Gelston,
AP Sports Writer
The Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA.

(AP) » Kurt Busch is ready for his close-up outside the car. Busch signed with an entertainment agency in the off-season and may soon make the leap from stock cars to the silver screen.

Busch could beef up his IMDb page instead of racing for NASCAR titles.

Always one of sports' more fiery personalities, performing comes naturally to Busch.

"I've been acting for 18 years in the garage area," Busch said.

Busch already had several starring roles in some of NASCAR's top dramas over the course of his career. He's been the bad

boy. He's been rebooted as a family man. Through 18 seasons and five teams, Busch's top starring role has always come behind the wheel.

The 39-year-old Busch is racing toward a Daytona 500 championship sequel.

Busch could 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 (1994-95).

"I feel the pressure. I like it," Busch said Saturday at Daytona International Speedway.

Busch was a bit of a sur-



(AP PHOTO/JOHN RAOUX)

Kurt Busch waits in his car while crew members make adjustments in his garage during a NASCAR auto racing practice session at Daytona International Speedway, Saturday, Feb. 10, 2018, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

prise winner last season in the first race for Ford as part of Stewart-Haas Racing's lineup. Busch, who had been suspended by NASCAR for two days before the 2015 Daytona

500 for off-track behavior, used a last-lap pass to win a race that was otherwise marred by a series of wrecks. He survived the crashes and gave SHR its first Daytona 500 victory.

"Winning Daytona is like winning a championship," Busch said. "It's one of the coolest things in stock car racing is to win Daytona. To hoist up a trophy and to have that

with us at Stewart-Haas, it's equivalent to winning a championship."

Busch has a trophy, just not the winning No. 41 Ford.

The car has been on display for the last year at Daytona International Speedway's Daytona 500 Experience Museum.

Busch wanted the car — he had a failed negotiation at keeping the Ford in his recent contract talks — but it's headed to the Stewart-Haas Racing shop where it goes on display with Kevin Harvick's 2014 Cup series title winner and team co-owner Tony Stewart's 2010 championship car.

"Hopefully, we'll push one in next week and then I'll have that car the year after," Busch said.

Again, Busch will be a



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longshot.

There have been repeat NASCAR champions and drivers who swept multiple races on the same track in the same season, but none who could solve Daytona two straight years in the 23 seasons since Marlin went back-to-back at "The Great American Race."

Just what makes the Daytona defense so tricky?

"You can't go back to the same pattern from a year ago," Busch said. "Everything changes so quick. If you think you have mastered the track, you can never do that. This place, you have to respect the track. You have to respect the race itself and have to find new things each and every year."

There was some doubt Busch would even get the chance to repeat with SHR.

Busch, who signed with Stewart's team in 2014, had his contract option declined last year by the team before the two sides in December agreed on



(AP PHOTO/JOHN RAOUX)

Kurt Busch walks to his garage during a NASCAR auto racing practice session at Daytona International Speedway, Saturday, Feb. 10, 2018, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

a one-year deal for 2018. Crew chief Tony Gibson retired from his position at the end of last season, and Busch has a new chief in Billy Scott. Scott was crew chief for former SHR driver Danica Patrick the last two seasons.

The Daytona 500 did nothing to serve as a catalyst for Busch's season. He failed to win another race, led only 16 laps all season and quickly flamed out in NASCAR's playoffs.

There's another repeat in doubt: New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski could make another cameo in the pits as both athletes are sponsored by Monster Energy. Gronkowski celebrated with Busch and the Monster girls in victory lane a year ago.

Busch, the 2014 Cup champion with 29 wins in 612 career starts, hadn't heard much about other stars in the pits.

"Every race there's somebody cool, somebody different," Busch said.

Busch found his own cool factor in front of the

camera, filming spots for Discovery's "Fast N' Loud" and he worked as a guest commentator at a Supercross event. He'd like to work more behind the mic.

"It's fun to learn more about the TV side of things," he said. "If I'm able to do anything in TV, it would be car related."

Former champions Stewart, Jeff Gordon and Matt Kenseth have all retired over the last three years, making Busch's '04 crown the oldest of any active driver. But he's in no rush to join his contemporaries and call it quits. Busch would like to keep racing beyond this season and said his personal life is finally as settled as it's been over his career. He recently celebrated his first anniversary with his wife, Ashley, a competitive polo player.

"It's really been a wonderful time in my life," Busch said.



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NASCAR season begins with Truex reigning, series rebuilding

By **JENNA FRYER**
AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP)» Martin Truex Jr. has been all over the country during his brief reign as NASCAR's newest champion.

Since winning his first Cup title in November, Truex has celebrated in Las Vegas, New York, Denver, Charlotte, Toronto and last week, Minneapolis, where he watched his beloved Philadelphia Eagles win the Super Bowl.

It was the final party for Truex, who goes back to work this week along with the rest of NASCAR to get ready for the 2018 season. The season-opening Daytona 500 is Feb. 18, and qualifying for "The Great American Race" is Sunday.

Truex will get back behind the wheel of his No. 78 Toyota at Daytona International Speedway

and race in an exhibition all-star event Sunday. It will be the first look at the Colorado-based Furniture Row Racing team since it manhandled the competition most of last year.

Truex led nearly every statistical category in 2017, including notching a series-leading eight victories.

"I feel zero pressure about starting the new season," Truex said. "We're comfortable in what we are doing and having a lot of fun at the same time."

Truex doesn't have a teammate this year as Furniture Row moves back to a one-car operation. The change is one of the small ripples in a major wave that affected the NASCAR landscape.

Erik Jones, who had been on loan to Furniture Row, moved to Joe Gibbs Racing. To make room for Jones, JGR had



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)

Martin Truex Jr. waves to fans during driver introductions for the NASCAR Clash auto race at Daytona International Speedway, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

to bounce Matt Kenseth from his ride even though the two-time Daytona 500 winner didn't really want to

retire.

Kenseth wasn't alone: Danica Patrick lost her ride, making the Daytona 500 her final

NASCAR race, and Kasey Kahne was forced out at Hendrick Motorsports and took a lesser job with Leavine Family

Racing that created decent upheaval among the mid-pack racers.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. retired at the end of last



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Byron balancing Cup career, college classwork at Daytona

By Mark Long, The Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. (AP) » NASCAR Cup Series rookie William Byron has some work to do next week, and not all on the racetrack.

After posting the fifth-fastest lap for Daytona 500 pole qualifying Sunday, Byron said he will have to catch up on his college class work.

The 20-year-old Byron, one of four Cup drivers at Hendrick Motorsports, takes online classes at Liberty University. The Christian college based in Lynchburg, Virginia, has sponsored Byron since he started his racing career in the NASCAR K&N Pro Series East Series at age 16.

"I can do it pretty much

when I want," Byron said. "It's really flexible as far as my schedule goes. I do it basically before I get to the racetrack, and it's fun. It's cool. It kind of gives me a chance to get away from everything for a little bit. I enjoy that part of it."

Byron spent one semester on Liberty's campus in 2016 before deciding to pursue a business communications degree online.

"I just kind of manage it whenever I can, so it's not too bad," Byron said. "They work with me."

Byron's college work is due every Monday. He got his assignments turned in early before traveling to Daytona International Speedway for pole qualifying.

He handled his busi-

ness on the track Sunday with an equal amount of ease.

Byron is beginning his first full season driving the famed No. 24 Chevrolet for Hendrick. He won the Xfinity Series championship last year for JR Motorsports. He won a series-high seven races in the Trucks Series in 2016, but got knocked out of the title chase and finished fifth. He also won the K&N Pro Series East championship in 2015.

Before that, Byron won 33 of 69 races to become the Legend Car Young Lions Division champion at the age of 15 in 2013. He also dual-enrolled in Liberty's Online Academy to get a jump-start on his college education.

"I would say that the hard part was getting to

this point, being in this car," said Byron, whose Hendrick teammates are seven-time Cup champion Jimmie Johnson, Chase Elliott and Daytona 500 pole-sitter Alex Bowman.

"The hard part was getting that opportunity, and now ... everyone that's pitching in to make this happen, that part is fun, and it's exciting. And it's a chance to go out there and make a name for yourself.

"So I don't feel like it's that difficult. I feel like I can do what I need to do in the race car, and that's going to take care of itself. I think the hard part was getting to that point."

Byron will return to Daytona on Wednesday and then get back in the car for more practice Thursday. His starting spot for "The Great



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA) William Byron adjusts his ear plugs before getting in his car during NASCAR auto racing practice at Daytona International Speedway

American Race" will be determined in the twin qualifying races Thursday night.

"Reasonable expectation would be just to finish first, but that's going to take a lot," he said. "I've got to be aggressive. I've got to be smart.

... You can't really hide at these kinds of race-tracks. I think the best thing for me to do is kind of do what I did here in the Xfinity car and keep in mind what the Cup car does differently, and hopefully combine all that together."

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Alex Bowman puts No. 88 on the pole at Daytona

By **JENNA FRYER**
AP Auto Racing Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. (AP) » Alex Bowman put a familiar car atop the Daytona 500 leaderboard.

Bowman won the pole for "The Great American Race" in his debut as the driver of the No. 88 Chevrolet, piloted until last season by NASCAR rock star Dale Earnhardt Jr. Six of Earnhardt's 17 career victories at Daytona International Speedway came in that car, including one of his Daytona 500 victories.

Earnhardt was a seven-time pole winner at Daytona, too.

Now retired, the empty seat in the No. 88 went to Bowman, and he wasted

little time making the Camaro his own. Bowman turned a lap at 195.644 mph Sunday to earn the top starting spot for the Daytona 500.

"I think it's still a little surreal," said Bowman, who will race in his second Daytona 500.

"It's a dream come true just to drive for Hendrick Motorsports," Bowman said. "I never would have thought it would happen after the path my career took."

Denny Hamlin, the 2016 winner, qualified second in a Toyota for Joe Gibbs Racing with a lap at 195.092. Only the top two cars locked in spots for next Sunday's season-opening race in this round of qualifying. The remainder of the field will



(AP PHOTO/TERRY RENNA)
NASCAR Daytona 500 auto race pole sitter, Alex Bowman takes a selfie photo in Victory Lane after his qualifying run at Daytona International Speedway, Sunday, Feb. 11, 2018, in Daytona Beach, Fla.

be set by a pair of qualifying races Thursday.

Bowman was a driver struggling to piece together a schedule when Earnhardt was injured in 2016. Earnhardt missed the second half of that season with a concussion, and Bowman was tabbed to fill in for 10 of those races.

The 24-year-old Arizona native impressed Rick Hendrick enough that when Earnhardt said he would retire at the end of 2017, Bowman got the job.

He made his boss proud, too, with the pole-winning run. Hendrick is now tied with Harry Rancier for the record of most consecutive Daytona 500 poles at four. Jeff Gordon won the pole in 2015,

Chase Elliott won it the past two seasons and now Bowman has the honor.

Bowman downplayed his role.

"I just held the steering wheel. It's Daytona," he said.

Indeed, pole qualifying is a display of horsepower and there's no doubt that Hendrick Motorsports has it for "The Great American Race." Hendrick put Chevrolet on the pole for the sixth consecutive year.

Seven-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson was third fastest, rookie William Byron was fifth and Elliott was 10th in Hendrick engines. The driver simply turns the laps on qualifying day, and the fastest cars climb to the top.

"We knew we were going for the pole, that's what we're here to do," Bowman said. "I was a little nervous for that second round, but we took off well on pit road and did everything I could do. This really come down to the crew, everybody

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works so hard.”

Earnhardt tweeted congratulations to his replacement, who also won a Cup pole while filling in for Earnhardt in 2016. Bowman raced just three times on the national level last season, two Xfinity Series races and one in the Truck Series, and filled his time using a simulator as he waited for Earnhardt to retire.

Hamlin was thrilled to have earned such a strong starting spot at second.

“I realistically set my expectations and would have been happy with 18th,” Hamlin said. “This came out of the blue for me and is a great opportunity for me to win a second Daytona 500.”

The Toyotas were fast, though, and all four JGR entries were in the top seven Sunday. Kyle Busch was fourth, Erik Jones sixth and Daniel Suarez seventh.

Defending NASCAR champion Martin Truex Jr., also a Toyota driver, was 26th and searching for the same speed the Gibbs cars displayed.



Alex Bowman claimed the pole in his first race as the full-time replacement for Dale Earnhardt Jr.

(AP PHOTO)

“Speed-wise we’ve been off a bit here,” Truex said. “I don’t know, new rules package and all, we’re just trying to figure that out. There’s not a whole lot you can do when you get down here. You kind of got what you got. We’re going to hope

that our car handles really good and we can out drive them in race trim.” Kurt Busch, winner of the Daytona 500 last year, was 17th fastest. His Stewart-Haas Racing teammate Kevin Harvick had the fastest Ford at eighth and was

followed by Roush Fenway Racing driver Ricky Stenhouse Jr., who won two plate races last season. Ford drivers won all four of last season’s restrictor plate races, where the strength of an engine is one of the most important tools.

“I didn’t think we would run that fast,” Harvick admitted. “The speed is better than we expected.” Danica Patrick was 28th in her final NASCAR single-car qualifying session. She’s racing in only the Daytona 500

and then the Indianapolis 500 in May before she retires as a race car driver. “Everything is the same as it was before as far as showing up to Daytona without having driven since Homestead, so that is no different,” she said.

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Patrick arrives in Daytona for 1st stop of 'Danica Double'

By **JENNA FRYER**
AP Auto Racing Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. (AP) » Danica Patrick watched drivers turn laps out of the corner of her eye. In her whirlwind preparation for the "Danica Double," getting a car ready for the first event of the NASCAR season had not been a priority.

But with practice running for Sunday's exhibition race at Daytona International Speedway — an event Patrick would have been eligible to enter if she had a car — the highest-finishing woman in Daytona 500 history could only follow along on a TV monitor.

"It all came together too late," she said Saturday. "A couple of days

ago I was thinking to myself that we should have run the backup car in the (exhibition). ... I was like, 'Man, where was I on that one?' I didn't think of it soon enough. It would have been good practice."

Patrick is retiring after she races in both NASCAR's Feb. 18 season-opening Daytona 500 and the Indianapolis 500 in May.

After a speaking engagement in Grand Cayman, she pulled through the speedway gates for her first stop on a two-race farewell tour. She finally got in her Daytona 500 car Saturday afternoon.

This offseason, Patrick has been the big headline in auto racing, as has often been the case through

the years.

First, she announced her retirement plans, then the end of her five-year relationship with NASCAR driver Ricky Stenhouse Jr. She published a wellness book and revealed she's now dating Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who will be at the Daytona 500.

"He's going to be here to support me and he's excited," Patrick told The Associated Press. "I'm excited to show him what I do."

A week before her final NASCAR race, she isn't sure what her emotions will be when the green flag drops for the 500. She thinks she'll be fine but noted that when she announced her retirement in November she un-

expectedly began to sob.

"Imagine when you leave here on Sunday, you don't have anything to do really for a couple of months. Seems pretty exciting, doesn't it? Right? That's how I feel," she said. "But when I think next Sunday comes, I'm sure I'll be a lot more retrospective or introspective and emotional about the finality of it. And, you know, just have a little bit more perspective. But right now, I'm fine. I'm good. I'm excited about it all.

"I made the decision last year that this is what I was good with. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been doing it. So, I've had a lot of time to mentally transition."

Patrick will drive the

No. 7 Chevrolet for Premium Motorsports in the Daytona 500 with Tony Eury Jr. as her crew chief. Eury was atop Patrick's pit box for her initial entry into NASCAR when she began to dabble in stock cars in 2010. Patrick is the only woman to lead laps in the Daytona 500, win the pole for the Daytona 500, win an IndyCar race, and is also the highest-finishing woman in the Indy 500.

Eury was crew chief for 51 races over three Xfinity Series seasons with Patrick. When rides for the "Daytona Double" did not materialize as predicted, Patrick worked behind the scenes to move the process along.

She asked GoDaddy founder Bob Parsons if he

had interest in sponsoring her again. GoDaddy decided to rejoin Patrick for her final two races, and she reached out to Eury to set up her Daytona ride. It will help bring her NASCAR career full circle before she walks away from driving at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Patrick met with Eury last month in Charlotte, North Carolina, and again when she arrived at Daytona on Friday. She said she had stayed in touch with Eury over the years, and the familiarity will help her get ready for her NASCAR finale.

"That part of it really is what makes me feel comfortable. From a performance standpoint, he's someone who can look after me, but also from a comfort standpoint — I don't have to try to win the Daytona 500 with somebody I never met before," she said.

She found the same comfort in getting back to her motorhome, where she will be joined this weekend by her sister, two

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nieces and the two dogs she shared with Stenhouse. Patrick noted her bus is parked in a different location — she and Stenhouse were always side-by-side in the motorhome lot — but that’s the only difference.

“It always feels good to get back to the bus for the first time. It always has,” Patrick said. “I love coming in the bus because it feels so familiar. I am so quick in the kitchen. I know where everything is, it’s very easy.”

She’s now parked next to Eury and has more than a week to see how she’s received in the Cup community. Few colleagues have seen her since the November season finale weekend, when she announced her retirement plans. She and Stenhouse split shortly after she released her book, began dating Rodgers and is now in Daytona for her NASCAR finale.

“It’s only the normal amount of weird that one can imagine in this situation,” she said.



Danica Patrick gets ready for NASCAR auto racing practice at Daytona International Speedway, Saturday, Feb. 10, 2018, in Daytona Beach, Fla

(AP PHOTO/JOHN RAOUX)

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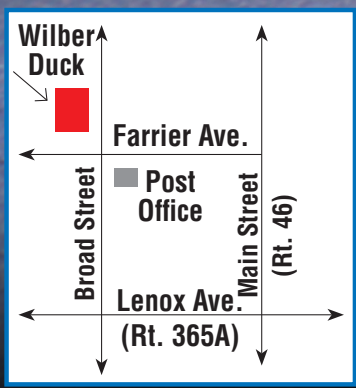
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