

Race: Kobalt 400
Where: Las Vegas Motor Speedway
When: Sunday, 3 p.m. (ET)
TV: FOX
2013 Winner: Matt Kenseth (right)



Race: Boyd Gaming 300
Where: Las Vegas Motor Speedway
When: Saturday, 4:15 p.m. (ET)
TV: ESPN2
2013 Winner: Sam Hornish Jr.

Race: Kroger 250
Where: Martinsville Speedway
When: March 29, 2:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: FOX Sports 1
2013 Winner: Johnny Sauter

NASCAR INSIDER

by RICK MINTER / Universal Uclick

Harvick burns up the track again at Phoenix

Kevin Harvick is usually looked at as “The Closer” — a driver who doesn’t rise to the front of the pack until the closing laps of a race. But this past weekend at Phoenix International Raceway, Harvick was the class of the field from the first practice to the final checkered flag. He led 224 of 312 laps in winning for the fifth time at Phoenix, a Cup record, and for the third time in the past four races.

This victory came in just his second start in the No. 4 Chevrolet at Stewart-Haas Racing, the team he joined in the offseason after spending the rest of his career at Richard Childress Racing.

Finishing second was Daytona 500 winner Dale Earnhardt Jr., who appears to have regained the swagger he enjoyed earlier in his career. Even Earnhardt, and those finishing immediately behind him, had to admit that Harvick and crew chief Rodney Childers were best in class all weekend.

“They were just phenomenal,” Earnhardt said. “To be able to run with them as we did all day was a big confidence builder for us.”

Fourth-finishing Joey Logano was able to knock on Harvick’s bumper a time or two



Harvick performs a burnout in his “Freaky Fast” No. 4 Chevrolet after winning at Phoenix on Sunday, March 2, 2014.



Kevin Harvick celebrates Sunday’s victory in The Profit on CNBC 500 at Phoenix International Speedway.

on late-race restarts, but his No. 22 Ford was no match for the winning No. 4.

“I was joking on the radio that on the back bumper of that [Harvick] car, it says ‘Freaky Fast,’ and they weren’t lying when they put that on there,” Logano said. “We had a really good car, just not as good as his.”

Third-finishing Brad Keselowski was similarly impressed.

“[Harvick’s team] beat everybody before they came to the track,” Keselowski said, adding that Harvick’s new crew chief, Childers, reminds him of his own, Paul Wolfe. “He’s a great crew chief. It was just a matter of time before he got the great combination he excelled with. ...

“I would look for big things out of that team. They looked a lot like [Matt

Kenseth’s No. 20 team] did last year at this time. They have that honeymoon syndrome going on and are taking full advantage of it.”

For Harvick and Childers, a victory in the second race of the season all but assures them of a berth in the Chase for the Sprint Cup, and it validates their decisions to leave stable employment to form a new team at Stewart-Haas.

Harvick gave most of the credit for the win to the people who prepare his car, even though he’s not even sure of all their names at this point.

“It’s just a huge credit to the team really, the organization and everybody who has been a part of this process as we’ve gone through the winter and over the last couple months of last year,” he said. “To see the amount of change within Stewart-Haas Racing with the car, the haulers, the pit boxes, everything that has come with putting all these pieces together is just a huge credit to really these guys and all the guys that work in the shop.”

“I’m just the lucky guy that gets to drive the car around the race track when they’re dialed in like they were today. Luckily, we were able to put it all together.”

For Earnhardt, starting the season with a win and a runner-up finish in the first two races can only signal more of the same going forward, which is welcome news for his large, re-energized fan base.

“Our team is performing so well, got a lot of great chemistry and good communication going back and forth,” he said. “Everybody’s confidence is very high. Everybody’s mood and morale is really high.”

“Hopefully, we can maintain that and not have any bad luck or make any mistakes and continue to keep working towards winning more races. ... I feel really good. I feel like we’re coming around the corner, peaking at the right time this season to try to run for the championship.”

NOTEBOOK

Kyle Busch notches another Nationwide victory Saturday

In capturing his 64th career Nationwide Series triumph at Phoenix International Raceway on Saturday, Kyle Busch did something he’d never done before: He won a rain-shortened race.

He also did something he’s done regularly in the past. He dominated the race from start to finish, leading 155 of 168 laps to win for the third straight time and seventh overall at Phoenix. It was the fourth straight for his crew chief, Adam Stevens, who also won with Joey Logano in the fall of 2012.

Kevin Harvick finished second ahead of Brad Keselowski, Kyle Larson and Matt Kenseth, as Cup drivers dominated the top of the finishing order.

“This is my first time winning a rain-shortened one,” Busch said after a two-hour wait before officials called the race. “Welcome to the tent. I don’t know that it really made a whole lot of difference. We were really good. I would have loved to gone back out there after, but the weather wasn’t on our side.”

Harvick wants more safety features added at Daytona

After wrecking into a section of the wall at Daytona International Speedway during the last lap of the Daytona 500, Kevin Harvick, in his pre-race press session at Phoenix, called on the Daytona track to add SAFER barrier extensions to its \$400 million grandstand overhaul now underway.

But he didn’t sound like he thought it would happen.

“The tracks, for the most part, don’t listen to really anything unless it’s profitable for their shareholders,” Harvick said. “So, when you see somebody spending \$400 million dollars on their track and they don’t have soft walls around the inside, maybe they could spend \$403 million to go ahead and finish the inside of the superspeedway there at Daytona.”

He said he’d been sore during the days after the 500.

“It was a hard shot,” he said. “It’s a little bit frustrating because it really shouldn’t even be a debate. I know they have data that shows where the most frequently hit spots are, but we wear all this safety equipment and do all the things that we do to these race tracks for that one freak incident to keep things from happening like happened back in 2001 [Dale Earnhardt’s fatal crash].

“So, it shouldn’t even be a debate. It’s just one of those things, I guess, that you just wait around for something else to happen and then they’ll fix it.”

Slow cars irk some drivers in new qualifying format

NASCAR’s new knockout style of qualifying for Sprint Cup drivers got its first test at Phoenix International Raceway on Friday, and while it was much better received by most than the one-car-at-a-time sessions of the past, it did draw some complaints.

Chief among them was the griping about cars slowly circling the track to cool their engines after making a qualifying run. The complaint was that those slow cars could pose a hazard to others running at top speed.

Teams typically tape off the radiator opening for qualifying. That adds speed aerodynamically, but it also blocks off air to the radiator, causing the engine to quickly overheat, and thus the need to make slow laps to cool the engine.

Drivers and teams are asking NASCAR to allow them to bring cooling machines, which circulate ice water through the engine, to pit road and hook them up during the qualifying sessions.

“I think NASCAR needs to look at letting us cool the engines down on pit road so we can run full tape the full time,” said Jamie McMurray, who qualified third fastest. “The whole running around — and everyone is going to do it — with that much difference in speed is hard to see into Turn 1. You don’t know if someone is coming. The excitement for me was good. But we need to be able to work on cooling the cars down.”

The cooling issue also meant that drivers



Drivers maneuver their cars on pit road during Friday qualifying at Phoenix International Raceway in Avondale, Ariz.

made qualifying runs early in the two sessions, and then sat on pit road until nearly the end of the session waiting on the engine to cool off.

Brad Keselowski won the pole at Phoenix, setting a track record of 139.384 miles per hour, in the second of two qualifying rounds.

SPRINT CUP STANDINGS

1. Dale Earnhardt Jr., 90
2. Brad Keselowski, 84
3. Jeff Gordon, 80
4. Kevin Harvick, 79
5. Jimmie Johnson, 78
6. Joey Logano, 75
7. Matt Kenseth, 70
8. Denny Hamlin, 68
9. Carl Edwards, 65
10. Three tied with 64

Bill Elliott’s success built on family’s hard work, perseverance

Bill Elliott’s NASCAR career, which recently landed him a nomination to the NASCAR Hall of Fame, illustrates the devotion it takes to make it in the nation’s most competitive form of motorsports.

Back in the 1970s, when most of their racing peers in north Georgia were making good livings racing on the short tracks of the Southeast, Elliott, his father, George, and brothers, Dan and Ernie, turned their focus to NASCAR. It was a most humble beginning.

They started in a hand-me-down car prepared in an old schoolhouse near Dawsonville that was part car dealership, part junkyard and part speed shop.

In his first start in NASCAR’s elite division, at Rockingham in 1976, then-20-year-old Elliott started 34th and ran just 32 laps before his engine blew. He finished 33rd, winning \$640, about half of what a 100-lap Saturday night feature paid to win at that time. And those Saturday night features were far less expensive to run.

There were many similar disappointments early on, but the Elliotts persevered, making do with friends and family for crew members, and Dan and Ernie working other tasks to earn income while Bill was the only full-time crew member.

By the 1980s, the Elliotts had built a promising but still underfunded team, which was sold to Michigan businessman Harry Melling. And they had a driver that dominated the superspeedways, earning the “Awesome Bill” nickname that still sticks today.

Many in NASCAR are predicting that Elliott will be elected to the Hall on the first ballot, given his performance in the 1980s, when he led the way for Ford Motor Co.’s NASCAR efforts en route to the 1988 championship and an eventual 44 career victories and 55 poles.

“If that happens, it happens,” Elliott said of his first-ballot



Bill Elliott poses next to his family-owned, powder blue No. 9 Ford Torino at Charlotte Motor Speedway in 1976.

chances. “The important thing is it’s an honor just to be associated with the Hall of Fame.”

For Elliott, making it to the Hall from such an unlikely beginning would make enshrinement all the more sweet.

As he once said in an interview, his family’s achievements in NASCAR would be like Orville and Wilbur Wright taking their airplane and flying to the moon.

“I just wish some of the people that helped make it happen, like Mother and Daddy and Harry Melling, were here to be a part of it,” Elliott said. “That part is kind of sad.”

The Hall’s selection committee is set to vote in five new inductees on May 21.

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

14 Lead changes in The Profit 500 on CNBC at Phoenix International Raceway, among eight drivers

1 Rookies in the top 16 in Sprint Cup points (Austin Dillon)

408 Laps led by Jimmie Johnson in the past nine Sprint Cup races at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, tops among all drivers

3 Laps led by Denny Hamlin in eight career Sprint Cup starts at Las Vegas