

**SPRINT CUP SERIES**

**Race:** Kobalt 400  
**Where:** Las Vegas Motor Speedway  
**When:** Sunday, 3:30 p.m. (ET)  
**TV:** FOX  
**2015 Winner:** Kevin Harvick (right)



**XFINITY SERIES**

**Race:** Boyd Gaming 300  
**Where:** Las Vegas Motor Speedway  
**When:** Saturday, 4 p.m. (ET)  
**TV:** FS1  
**2015 Winner:** Austin Dillon

**CAMPING WORLD TRUCK SERIES**

**Race:** Alpha Energy Solutions 250  
**Where:** Martinsville Speedway  
**When:** April 2, 2:30 p.m. (ET)  
**TV:** FS1  
**2015 Winner:** Joey Logano

# NASCAR INSIDER

by RICK MINTER / Universal Uclick

## Johnson ties Earnhardt Sr. on Sprint Cup all-time win list

Jimmie Johnson never got to race against the late Dale Earnhardt, but after Johnson won last Sunday's Folds of Honor QuikTrip 500 at Atlanta Motor Speedway, they have plenty in common. Johnson is now tied with Earnhardt on the Sprint Cup career win list, with 76 victories — seventh all-time in career victories.

Johnson, who leads all active drivers in wins at AMS with five, said tying Earnhardt, who tops the all-time AMS list with nine victories, is an accomplishment that has special meaning to him.

"I entered the sport just hoping I could win a race and keep a job for a few years, and to have 76 and tie Dale Earnhardt Sr. is something I'm very, very proud of," Johnson said.

"There's been a big void in my mind about not having that chance to race against him, and it was literally a handful of months away from having that opportunity. So to tie him ... it's a little bit of attachment to the great Dale Earnhardt and something I'm very proud of."

The finish of the race also made the moment more special, as Dale Earnhardt Jr., the son of the late Intimidator and a teammate of Johnson's, surged from fifth place on the final restart to finish second in a milestone event he said was overdue.

"I'm glad if [Johnson's] going to win and tie that record, I'm certainly glad that I got to run second," said Junior, who said before the start of the season that he was surprised it hadn't come sooner, given Johnson's abilities.

Earnhardt Jr. said that his dad and Johnson had their own driving styles, and although they're not similar, they both produce big results.

"Dad was real rough and pushing people around," Earnhardt Jr. said, adding that from Johnson's earliest days driving off-road trucks, he's won races by having tremendous car control. "[Johnson] drives that style that you see those guys run those trucks out West. You never hear Jimmie complaining about his car not turning. They always have that thing loose, and he just hangs on and makes it work."

Rick Hendrick, Johnson's car owner, agreed that Earnhardt Sr. and Johnson had greatly different styles.

"Dale was more aggressive," Hendrick said. "He didn't get that Intimidator title by being nice to everybody. Jimmie doesn't put a fender on anybody. He races them clean."

Sunday's win at AMS was typical of many of Johnson's victories over the years. His No. 48 team, led by crew chief Chad Knaus, worked on his car all day and put him in position to outrun Kevin Harvick, who led the most laps and appeared to have the fastest car.

As the laps wound down, Knaus called Johnson to pit road earlier than usual — he made his stop seven laps sooner than Harvick and the rest of the leaders. As a result, when that round of green-

flag stops was over, Johnson had cycled into a lead of more than 13 seconds over Harvick.

It appeared that he would be able to maintain that lead to the finish in a race that had seen just one caution flag up to that point. But a blown tire and a spin by Ryan Newman with three scheduled laps remaining set up an overtime finish.

All of the eight drivers on the lead lap stopped for four fresh tires, and Johnson left pit road with the lead.

He held the lead for the final lap, while Earnhardt Jr. earned the runner-up spot over pole-sitter Kyle Busch, Kurt Busch and Carl Edwards.

For drivers in the race, the new lower-downforce aero package that will be used at most tracks this season was a welcome change.

"It was kind of like old-school racing," Earnhardt said. "You had to take care of your tires and be smart about how you drove the car and driving the car straight, not really swinging the car around or getting sideways. And when you get around another car or a lapped car, you had to be careful to drive the car straight when you got around them."

"Then on old tires, if you got lucky to race somebody, it was a blast. Everybody just wasn't hooked up and hauling tail. You had to drive the cars. The cars were a real challenge."

Earnhardt Jr. went on to say that he's excited about the rest of the year, as the package is run at other tracks.

"It was fun for the drivers. We're just going to keep learning and trying to improve our setups and what works with this package, but should see some great racing on in the rest of the year," he said.



Jimmie Johnson and his No. 48 Chevrolet cross the finish line at Atlanta Motor Speedway in the Folds of Honor QuikTrip 500. It was his fifth victory at AMS.

## Kyle Busch checks Xfinity Series victory at AMS off his bucket list

Kyle Busch ran away from the field in Saturday's Heads Up Georgia 250 Xfinity Series race at Atlanta Motor Speedway, leading 119 of 163 laps, including the final 91, to take the victory. In so doing, he extended his all-time Xfinity win record total to 77.

The different aspect of this victory was that it was his first at AMS in the Xfinity Series and the first in the division at AMS for Busch's Joe Gibbs Racing team.

"Glad to check it off the list," Busch said. Before Saturday, Busch had five runner-up finishes at AMS in his 11 previous starts, the first of which was a heartbreaker back in the fall of 2004.

At that time, he was driving for Hendrick Motorsports, and it was the first weekend after 10 team members were killed in a plane crash near Martinsville, Virginia.

"I was pretty devastated that day," Busch said. "We had [images of] our teammates on the hood, and my good ol' [current] teammate Matt Kenseth beat me that day."

It's not that he couldn't win at AMS before — he has four Truck Series wins there, along with two in Sprint Cup.

Kyle Larson finished second, ahead of Erik Jones, who started on the outside pole but was penalized for jumping the start. Busch, Jones' JGR teammate and the pole-sitter for the race, took the blame for Jones' penalty.

"I spun my tires on the start," he said. "I'm sorry Erik got busted for beating me to the line."

Jones said he did make a rookie mistake on the start in addition to the slip-up by Busch. On the initial start of a race, the second-place driver cannot cross the starting line before the leader. On restarts, if another driver does pass the leader, he or she can avoid a penalty by giving the position back on the restart lap.

"I forgot about that rule, honestly," Jones said. "But it was a nice comeback for the team."

Paul Menard finished fourth, with Ty Dillon fifth. Busch will get another chance this weekend to cross a goal off his NASCAR bucket list. He's winless in the Xfinity Series at his home track, Las Vegas Motor Speedway, which will be hosting the Boyd Gaming 300 on Saturday.

"That's certainly one that can be checked off the list," Busch said. "It's kind of odd that I haven't won there, being that it's my hometown."



Kyle Busch ran away with his 77th Xfinity Series victory in the Heads Up Georgia 250 at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

## Small single-car teams find their moments in the spotlight

In today's NASCAR world, particularly in the Sprint Cup Series, there are few crew members who would be considered general mechanics. Everyone has a specialty, from the driver on down to the mechanics whose lone responsibility is for a specific portion of the car. Multi-car Cup teams have from 200 to 500 employees and annual budgets in the tens of millions per car.

But in the lower divisions, there are still a few small teams working with skeleton staffs and on shoestring budgets that are able to find an occasional moment in the spotlight.

Last Saturday morning at Atlanta Motor Speedway, local driver Ryan Sieg had one of those moments.

In qualifying for the Heads Up Georgia 250 Xfinity Series race, Sieg, driving the No. 39 Chevrolet, posted the eighth-fastest time. For a team with just three full-time employees — including the driver — it was like winning the pole.

In fact, it wasn't the first time that morning that Sieg, a 28-year-old resident of nearby Tucker, Georgia, had posted a fast time.

He was stopped for speeding en route to the track, but avoided a ticket by convincing the officer he was late for qualifying at the track.

Sieg, whose team is owned by his father, Rod, operates out of a shop in their hometown, far away from the Charlotte area where most teams are located. Team members include crew chief Kevin Starland and Mark Gibson, a longtime driver/owner in the ARCA series and the brother of Sprint Cup crew chief Tony Gibson.

Last year, Sieg finished 11th in the final Xfinity Series standings, with an average finish of 19.1 and a best finish of eighth, at Kansas.

"It takes a lot of hard work and long hours for everybody," Sieg said, adding that his work schedule makes it tough to go out and find more financial backing for his team.

Despite the heavy workload, the Siegs are working toward adding a second team, hoping the financials will work better with bringing home a second paycheck on race weekends.

Following the same formula that has worked so far for Sieg, another Georgia driver, Austin Hill, is trying to break into the Truck Series with his family-owned team.

Unlike the Siegs, the Hills have moved their team from their home in Winston, Georgia, to Mooresville, North Carolina, but still get by with just four full-time crew members, including the driver. He said he plans to run about 13 races, mainly on intermediate tracks like AMS, but a few on shorter tracks like Dover International Speedway, where he won in NASCAR's K&N Pro Series.

Hill said moving up from the K&N developmental series to the Truck circuit is a big step.

"It's definitely going to be a challenge," he said. "As long as I can adapt to these mile-and-a-half tracks, I think we will be good. We're definitely racing on a budget."

Sieg finished 16th at Atlanta, one lap off the pace, while Hill was 12th in the Truck race.



Ryan Sieg and his single-car team posted the eighth-fastest qualifying time in the Heads Up Georgia 250, and finished the race in 16th position.

**NOTEBOOK**

### Only 39 Sprint Cup teams show up to race at AMS

One of the effects of NASCAR's new charter system came to pass at Atlanta Motor Speedway, when only 39 teams showed up. Under the new rules, there are 36 guaranteed starting spots for "chartered" teams, with four more available to unchartered teams, although they compete for significantly less money than the chartered teams. The maximum field has been reduced from 43 to 40, although that's still higher than it was back in 1996, when the field was limited to 37 starters at short tracks, even though as many as 43 teams were entering races.

While some argue that reducing the starting field increases the quality of competition, there are others who say it hurts the sport to make it more difficult for a start-up team to gain a foothold.

Driver Brad Keselowski said he'd rather see full fields.

"I guess I feel like NASCAR is going through its own process, much like the rest of the country is, of trying to decide whether we want to be capitalists or socialists," he said. "Some days each one sounds good."

### SPRINT CUP STANDINGS

1. Kyle Busch, 78
2. Martin Truex Jr., 75
3. Kevin Harvick, 74
4. Carl Edwards, 73
5. Denny Hamlin, 70
6. Jimmie Johnson, 70
7. Kurt Busch, 69
8. Joey Logano, 64
9. Austin Dillon, 63
10. Aric Almirola, 55

## NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

**4** Toyota drivers in the top 5 in Sprint Cup points: Kyle Busch, first; Martin Truex Jr., second; Carl Edwards, fourth; and Denny Hamlin, fifth.

**28** Lead changes in the Folds of Honor QuikTrip 500 at Atlanta Motor Speedway — among eight drivers.

**5** Sprint Cup races at Las Vegas Motor Speedway won from a top-5 starting spot — in 18 races.

**8** Sprint Cup victories by Ford at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, topping all manufacturers. Chevrolet has seven; Toyota, two; and Dodge, one.

## Nemechek becomes youngest NASCAR national series winner at AMS

The old saying in racing that "cautions breed cautions" came true in last Saturday's Great Clips 200 Truck Series race at AMS, but this time it was a relatively new twist on the old saw. Rookie Christopher Bell and veteran Matt Crafton had pulled away from the field late in the race when the caution clock — instituted this year for the Truck Series — brought out the yellow flag after 20 minutes of flag racing.

On the restart, Bell, who had dropped from the lead to fifth after running through his pit stall and having to back up, made contact with his Kyle Busch Motorsports teammate Daniel Suarez, who was running second. That sent Suarez sliding into leader Crafton, with both slamming into the wall.

When they restarted, Bell quickly took control with a daring pass of John Hunter Nemechek, but blew a tire and slammed the wall with eight laps remaining.

On that restart, Nemechek sped away from fellow front-row starter John Wes Townley, and motored away to his second career Truck Series victory. Cameron Hayley finished a career-best second over Timothy Peters, Daniel Hemric and Grant Enfinger.

Nemechek, who at age 18 becomes the youngest NASCAR national series winner at AMS, drives for his family-owned No. 8 team, and his truck was unsponsored for Saturday's race.

"We put a lot of hard work in this, and a little bit of funding," said Nemechek, whose truck is owned by his father, former Cup driver Joe Nemechek.