

SPRINT CUP SERIES

Race: Good Sam 500
Where: Phoenix International Raceway
When: Sunday, 3:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: FOX
2015 Winner: Kevin Harvick (right)



XFINITY SERIES

Race: Axalta 200
Where: Phoenix International Raceway
When: Saturday, 2:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: FOX
2015 Winner: Joey Logano

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

Team Penske turns it around at Las Vegas; finishes first and second

With the introduction of a new lower-downforce aero package for Sprint Cup cars, many in the sport looked to the races at Atlanta Motor Speedway and Las Vegas Motor Speedway — the first two tracks to use the aerodynamic specifications this year — to see which teams had the upper hand.

After the two races, the jury's still out, so to speak. At Atlanta, Hendrick Motorsports drivers Jimmie Johnson and Dale Earnhardt Jr. swept the top two spots, while another Chevy, the No. 4 of Kevin Harvick, led the most laps with 131 circuits out front.

At Vegas, Brad Keselowski and his Team Penske teammate Joey Logano took the top two spots in their Fords, with Johnson in his Chevy leading the most laps, at 76. Logano was a close second in laps led at Las Vegas, with 70.

And a third Ford, the No. 21 of rookie Ryan Blaney, finished sixth in a car that uses Penske technology and equipment.

It was a remarkable turnaround for Team Penske, which was off its usual pace at Atlanta, where Keselowski finished ninth and Logano 12th and neither led a lap.

So how does a team reverse its fortunes in seven days — a stretch that includes a long haul for the race cars from the East Coast to Nevada?

According to Team Penske, it takes hard work and long hours, a lot of them put in by employees at team headquarters, many of whom rarely see the races in person.

The improvement in performance started with a meeting of key leaders, among them Keselowski's crew chief, Paul Wolfe, Logano's crew chief, Todd Gordon and Team Penske vice chair-

man Walt Czarnnecki. "We had a team debrief meeting on Tuesday that went for an hour and a half that was thorough and candid," Czarnnecki said. "So Paul and Todd Gordon were pretty confident they were going to come to Las Vegas with two good cars."

Then the ideas from the meeting had to be applied to the cars that would be on the track at Las Vegas two days later.

"There were a few late nights back at Team Penske where guys worked really hard," Wolfe said. "We felt like we needed more potential out of our cars. We worked very hard on some aero pieces, some different things."

When the Team Penske cars were unloaded at Las Vegas on Thursday, the fruits of their labor were apparent in the form of more speed — from the first lap of practice all the way through Sunday's race.

"Really, all I can say is hats off for all the hard work back at the shop," Wolfe said. "There was a lot put in." This West Coast swing (races in Las Vegas, Phoenix and Fontana, California) is very hard on the teams early in the season.

The victory wasn't due only to pure speed — it took some bold strategy as well.

Both Keselowski and Logano made their final pit stops during a caution period at Lap 199, which meant they'd have to run the final 68 laps on a single tank of fuel. That would be impossible without a large number of caution laps, which take about half the fuel of a green-flag lap.

When the caution flag flew again 12 laps later, most of the leaders stopped for fuel, with Keselowski, Logano and Austin

Dillon staying on the track. When racing resumed, Kyle Busch took the lead with a bold move from sixth place to first on the initial lap, and held it until six laps remained.

At that point, Busch was fading with a vibration in his car and Keselowski was coming on strong. Keselowski crossed the finish line .675 seconds ahead of Logano, with Jimmie Johnson edging Busch for third and Dillon taking fifth.

It was Keselowski's 18th career win and Penske's 97th in Cup competition.



Brad Keselowski won the Kobalt 400 at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, while his teammate, Joey Logano, finished second.

Kurt wins the pole; Kyle leads laps in Busch brothers' Sprint Cup Las Vegas homecoming

The Busch brothers, Kyle and Kurt, were both poised at times to make triumphant returns to their home track, Las Vegas Motor Speedway, after neither competed there last year.



Kurt Busch won the pole in the Kobalt 400, but finished the race in ninth place.

Kurt missed the 2015 Vegas weekend because he was suspended from NASCAR due to allegations related to a domestic violence incident. Kyle was recuperating from injuries suffered in a wreck at Daytona.

Back at Las Vegas this year, Kurt won the pole for the Kobalt 400 and led 31 laps, but faded to ninth at the finish.

Kyle started 23rd, worked his way to the front and led 38 laps before problems with his No. 18 Toyota caused him to lose the race lead with just six laps remaining.

"I had a vibration when they put the (right-side tires) on, and then it just kept getting worse and worse, and there at the end I didn't know if the tire was coming apart or what the deal was," Kyle said. "I was trying to give it everything I had, and it just would not turn."

He said he and his Joe Gibbs Racing teammates still have some work to do adapting to the new lower-downforce aero package, although they're still capable of running in the top 10.

"If I were to grade our weekend, for progress it's an A-plus," he said. "But for being as bad as we were and ending up right there, it would probably be a B or B-minus."

Kurt said his own mistakes hurt his No. 41 team. "Driver made a couple of mistakes on a restart and speed-

ing on pit road," he said. "We just had to battle, battle, battle and just never got into a good rhythm."



Kyle Busch led 38 laps, but had trouble with the tires on his No. 18 Toyota, which caused him to finish fourth.

Against doctors' orders, Stewart travels to Las Vegas; shows funny videos

Tony Stewart, who injured his back in a sand buggy incident back in January, met with the media at Las Vegas Motor Speedway last Friday. It was his first appearance before the NASCAR media corps since the accident that has put him on the sidelines for the first three races of his final Sprint Cup season.

Stewart helped introduce four videos that take a humorous look at what life after Cup racing might be like for him.

The videos will be available for viewing on Stewart-Haas and Mobil 1's websites, Twitter accounts and Facebook accounts, and Mobil 1's YouTube channel.

Stewart said the videos are far from Hollywood's production standards.

"We did all four spots in one day," he said. "I think everybody in racing has realized us drivers are not very good actors."

"If you just make it funny, it goes off really well."

On a more serious note, Stewart said he will find out more this week about how his back is healing since surgery for a burst fracture of vertebrae.

"For a month now, I haven't done anything but just kind of chill out," he said. "The doctors want me lying in bed and walking. They don't want me sitting and standing."

By being in Las Vegas, and at Atlanta the week before, Stewart obviously isn't following doctors' orders.

"I can't lay in bed any longer," he said. "It's about to kill me."

He said he and his assistants tried to do as much as possible of what the doctors want while still traveling to races.

"We did everything short of bubble wrap me to ride out here on the

plane," he said, adding that he is listening to what his body tells him. "Your body tells you when it's had enough, when it's sore," he said.

"We try not to sit any longer than we have to, try not to stand very long. Even if I'm around a small group, if I take three or four steps back, stay in the group, it almost looks like you're eager to go to the bathroom, but you have to move around a little bit to keep the weight from hanging there and being hard on the rods on my back."

Stewart said there's no rush to get back in his No. 14 Chevrolet, which has been driven by both Brian Vickers and Ty Dillon in his absence.

"If we do anything too soon, we could mess it up for the rest of my life," he said. "It's more important to let this thing heal right. We're not rushing to get back in the car."

"Like I said, the No. 1 priority is to give it the opportunity to heal right the first time."



Tony Stewart used humorous videos to show the media what his life might be like after his Sprint Cup career ends after this season.

Kyle Busch wins Boyd Gaming 300 — his second Xfinity race in a row

For the second week in a row, Kyle Busch won the Xfinity Series race and crossed another accomplishment off a rapidly shrinking bucket list. Behind Busch, a relatively new name in NASCAR, Daniel Suarez, had one of his best showings yet.

In Saturday's Boyd's Gaming 300 at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, Busch led 199 of 200 laps to win for the first time at his home track.

It was also the first Xfinity win at the track for Joe Gibbs Racing and the first for Toyota, and it was the second straight week that the trio had accomplished that at a track where they'd been winless before — it happened last week at Atlanta Motor Speedway as well.

The latest win gives Toyota victories at every track on the circuit.

At Vegas, Busch led a Joe Gibbs Racing sweep as his teammates Suarez and Erik Jones finished second and third, respectively. Suarez also took the series points lead.

Busch, who now has 78 career Xfinity wins — an all-time record — and a record 16,084 laps led, led all but one lap at Vegas. But there was some drama at the end as he was stretching his fuel and both Suarez and Jones were running faster lap times in the closing laps.

"We were worried about fuel, but more so we ... worried about (Daniel) Suarez," Busch said. "He was on me there at the end, he was really, really fast."

"If roles were reversed, he would have been pulling away from me, and I wasn't going to be able to catch him. All in all, just a great day for us in one-two-three and for me to get a victory here in my home town, check one off the list — that's pretty awesome."

Next up on the bucket list for Busch is an Xfinity win on the road course at Watkins Glen, but in the meantime, there are other trophies to be collected.

"One last [thing] that is on the list is Watkins Glen and before that we have many more," he said. "Next week is another one we want to go out there and try to score a victory."

One of the drivers who could stand in his way is Suarez, who moved from his native Mexico to North Carolina to pursue a career in NASCAR.

"Daniel (Suarez) is one of the guys that probably calls me, talks to me more than any of the other drivers I've helped come up through the

ranks," Busch said. "He always wants to learn, always wants to get better and know what he's missing in order to be better."

"I give him an 'A' for effort; he certainly does everything he's supposed to do to try to get better."

For his part, Suarez said he was a little slow in picking up on what he needed to do to negotiate traffic at Las Vegas.

"Honestly, I just felt like it took me too much time to figure out how to be fast with a loose race car in traffic," he said. "I think at the end we would have been able to figure it out, but it took me 10 laps and I lost two seconds there, and it was too difficult to catch those seconds back."

And he pointed out that even though he has the series points lead, it's a long season and not the same as previous seasons now that the Xfinity Series has adopted the Chase format.

"With the new Chase format, anything can happen," he said. "You need to win a race to be safe and lock yourself into the Chase. At the same time, we can win the race and if we don't have the shot to win the race, we need to keep working with the consistency."



Kyle Busch won the Boyd Gaming 300 at his home track, Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

SPRINT CUP STANDINGS

1. Kyle Busch, 116
2. Jimmie Johnson, 110
3. Kevin Harvick, 109
4. Joey Logano, 104
5. Kurt Busch, 102
6. Brad Keselowski, 98
7. Carl Edwards, 96
8. Denny Hamlin, 93
9. Martin Truex Jr., 90
10. Austin Dillon, 90

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

7 Sprint Cup victories at Phoenix International Raceway by Kevin Harvick — tops among all drivers.

15 Top-5 finishes at Phoenix by Jimmie Johnson — the most of any driver.

1 Lap led this season by Carl Edwards — the fewest of any driver in the top 10 in the Sprint Cup standings.

731 Laps run among the top 15 in Sprint Cup races this year by Jimmie Johnson and Martin Truex Jr. — more than any other drivers.