

SPRINT CUP SERIES

Race: Auto Club 400
Where: Auto Club Speedway
When: Sunday, 3:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: FOX
2015 Winner: Brad Keselowski (right)



XFINITY SERIES

Race: TreatMyClot.com 300
Where: Auto Club Speedway
When: Saturday, 4 p.m. (ET)
TV: FS1
2015 Winner: Kevin Harvick

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

Harvick bests Edwards in closest finish ever at Phoenix

One of the best things that ever happened to Kevin Harvick's career statistics is Phoenix International Raceway.

Harvick won there again this past Sunday, edging Carl Edwards at the finish line by about a foot. NASCAR's electronic scoring recorded the winning margin at .01 seconds — the closest ever at Phoenix and the seventh-closest anywhere since NASCAR started using electronic scoring.

It was Harvick's eighth career Sprint Cup win at Phoenix, his fifth win in the past six races there and his sixth victory in the past eight. He leads all drivers in wins at Phoenix, with four of those coming while he was driving for Richard Childress Racing, and the other four with his current Stewart-Haas Racing team.

The victory pushed his career win total to 32, which means a quarter of those came at Phoenix.

Although Harvick dominated the second half of the race, leading a race-high 139 laps overall, he didn't cruise to victory.

A caution for a crash by Kasey Kahne with six laps remaining set up an overtime finish, which amounted to a two-lap shootout.

When the final caution flag flew, Harvick, Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Austin Dillon opted to stay on the track on old tires and keep their positions at the front, while the rest of the lead-lap drivers made pit stops for fresh right-side rubber.

Carl Edwards restarted at the head of the group with fresher tires and immediately began to close on Harvick once the green flag dropped. On the final lap, he nudged Harvick up the track and began to move alongside. Harvick bumped him back, and as the duo headed out of Turn Four toward the finish line, Edwards, riding on the inside groove, gave Harvick a body slam, but it didn't slow Harvick as much as it did Edwards — which allowed Harvick to cross the finish line inches ahead of Edwards.

"I knew I was going to have to be on defense because [Edwards] beat me through the center of [Turns] Three and Four all day," Harvick said in his winner's interview. "I was fully expecting everything that I got, but I just needed to be able to get knocked up the track far enough to be able to put the throttle back down."

"I felt like I got back to the throttle even soon enough to be able to hold him off, but I was kind of a couple feet behind and was able to kind of scrub against his door a little bit to slow him back down, and by the time he'd realized that he was going to be behind, we had carried the momentum by him and we were at the start-finish line."

Edwards, who was smiling afterward, said he wanted to bump Harvick just enough to pass him, but not enough to wreck him.

"I thought I moved him enough to get by, but that's just racing," Edwards said.

Harvick said the exciting finish was due in part to the new lower-

downforce aero package mandated by NASCAR this year.

"I think as drivers and as a sport, that's really the benefit — one of the benefits — of the low-downforce package and the tire situation," he said, adding that when tires wear significantly but don't wear completely out, it allows teams that take on new tires to catch up to those ahead of them on older rubber.

As Harvick pointed out, when a driver has a car as fast as his has been at Phoenix in recent years, a strategy gamble is the only way an opponent can have much of a chance to wrestle a win away from him.

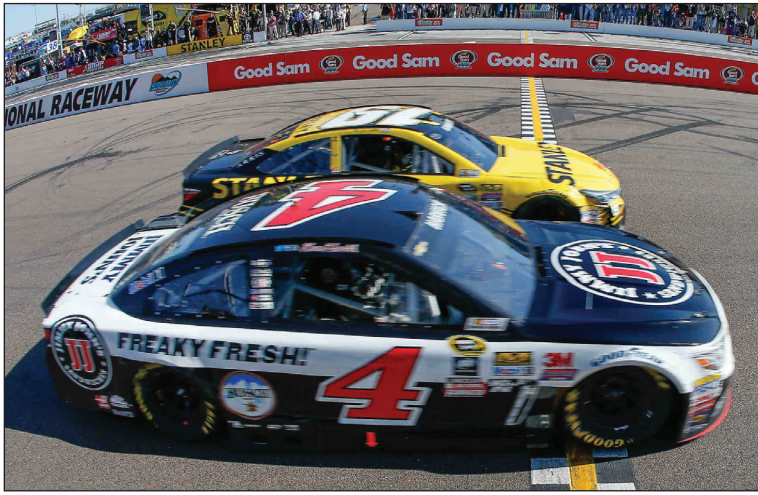
"I'm glad we're in that position because our cars are fast, and that's the only way they're going to beat us on days when it's all going well," he said.

The victory not only allowed Harvick to pad his stats, it gives his No. 4 team a berth in the Chase for the Sprint Cup and allows the team to begin experimenting with setups that will help as they try to defend their championship. That's especially important this year because of the lower-downforce aero package.

"Winning this race is going to allow us to really start to hone in on characteristics ... because it's going to be different," Harvick said.

Edwards finished second, ahead of Denny Hamlin, Kyle Busch and Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Harvick and Kyle Busch are tied atop the points standings, but Harvick gets top billing because the tie-breaker is a driver's best finish, and Busch has yet to win this season, although he has not finished worse than fourth in the first four races.



Kevin Harvick edged Carl Edwards to the finish line by .01 seconds in the Good Sam 500 at Phoenix International Raceway.

Newman's blown tire relegates him to last place at Phoenix

Ryan Newman and his Richard Childress Racing teammate Paul Menard had disappointing runs last Sunday in the Good Sam 500 at Phoenix International Raceway.

Newman blew a tire on his No. 31 Chevrolet on Lap 51, relegating him to a last-place finish — 39th.

"We just blew a right-front tire," Newman told reporters at the track, adding that he had no warning before the tire popped. "It must have melted the bead or something. I don't know if something failed in the cooling department, or what the deal was."

"I didn't do anything any different than I've ever done here before. Just definitely blew a right-front tire out and that was the end of our day."

Racing tires often generate the most heat around the "bead," which is the portion of the tire that makes contact with the wheel. The wheel transmits a lot of heat from the brakes, especially on shorter tracks like Phoenix, where drivers do a lot of braking.

Menard had a similar problem on Lap 104, although he wasn't sure whether his crash was due to a blown tire or the failure of a suspension component.

"To me, it didn't feel like what happened to us was a tire failure," he said. "It felt like something broke. As soon as it happened, I had no brakes, either. I don't really know. We are going to go find out." Menard finished 38th.

The two drivers both dropped eight spots in the points standings, with Newman now in 25th and Menard in 26th.

Both made the Chase for the Sprint Cup last year based on their positions in the standings.

A third RCR driver, Austin Dillon, finished ninth at Phoenix and moved up two spots in the standings, to eighth.



Ryan Newman's (right) right front tire blew out on Lap 51 of the Good Sam 500 at Phoenix, where a lot of braking generates heat that is transferred to tires.

JGR dominates again in Xfinity Series; Kyle Busch gets the victory

In the recent Xfinity Series races at Atlanta and Las Vegas, Kyle Busch was able to cross two items off his bucket list by winning races at those tracks for the first time.

At Phoenix, he again dominated the race, but this time the storyline was that he added another victory at the track, where he now has nine Xfinity wins in 20 starts.

That's the all-time series high for a driver at one of the tracks now on the schedule. The retired Mark Martin holds the overall record with 11 victories at the shuttered North Carolina Speedway in Rockingham.

Busch's latest win was like a lot of his other wins at Phoenix and



Kyle Busch claimed victory in the Axalta 200, his ninth Xfinity Series victory at Phoenix International Raceway.

like the earlier two at Atlanta and Las Vegas this year.

He led 175 of 200 laps at Phoenix, which means he's led all but 50 laps of the past three races this season.

The Axalta 200 was also another showcase of the dominance of the Xfinity cars from Busch's team, Joe Gibbs Racing.

Busch was followed in the finishing order by teammates Erik Jones and Daniel Suarez.

The trio finished in the top 3 at Las Vegas as well, but with Suarez taking second over Jones. Justin Allgaier was a distant fourth at Phoenix, ahead of Chase Elliott.

Each time Busch wins an Xfinity race — he now has 79 victories — there are complaints in social media and elsewhere that an accomplished Cup driver like Busch doesn't need to be competing in the No. 2 division. Even some of his own fans said so last year when his injuries in the season-opening Xfinity race at Daytona caused him to miss 11 races in Sprint Cup, where he makes the bulk of his income.

Busch addressed the issue in his post-race comments at Phoenix. "Some people say I'm a failure for even joining in this field, so I get plenty of criticism," he said. "It doesn't matter how it comes — whether I'm winning or losing or whether I'm participating. I don't really pay attention to any of it. I do what I need to do to help support my team, the guys at Joe Gibbs Racing, my crew chief, Chris Gayle."

Busch said that he won't always be winning the races, because some up-and-coming driver will eventually begin to dethrone him, much like he did to Mark Martin and others back in the day.

"We work as hard as we can to be successful, and whether we are or aren't, if we got beat by Erik Jones, then I'd go up to him and shake his hand and tell him 'way to go,'" Busch said. "I'm sure I'm going to get beat, and whether it's by Erik Jones or Ty Dillon, a couple of years ago at the Brickyard or Daniel Suarez, it's certainly going to be a big day for those guys."

Johnson takes the blame for crash during Good Sam 500 qualifying

Jimmie Johnson is one of the most skilled drivers in all of motor racing, as evidenced by his six Sprint Cup championships and 76 career victories.

But he's not immune from making a mistake behind the wheel.

Johnson made a big one last Friday during Sprint Cup qualifying at Phoenix International Raceway. He didn't secure the steering wheel of his No. 48 Chevrolet to the steering shaft, and the wheel came off in his hands as he sped into Turn One.

Johnson's car slammed into the outside wall, but he was uninjured. At first, he was evasive in interviews about the incident, then went on Twitter Friday night and owned up to his mistake.

He also came into the media center at Phoenix on Saturday morning to discuss the incident.

"As I came into Turn One, just working my way through the center of the corner, and jumped in the gas," he said. "As I jumped in the gas — I guess I pull on the wheel when I do that — it just came off in my hands."

"So, I was just sitting there with no steering and holding the steering wheel staring at the blue wall. I was along for the ride at that point."

Johnson said he slammed on the brakes, but there was little else he could do.

"I remember looking down at the steering shaft and seeing it spinning, and I knew there was no way I could get the wheel back on. It was all happening so quick."

Most race cars today have steering wheels with a coupler that allows the wheel to be removed to allow the driver more room to enter the car. The coupler snaps into place, holding the wheel secure until the driver presses the release to unlatch it. Johnson said he simply didn't get the coupler locked into place.

He said that after the incident, his former teammate Jeff Gordon suggested he place marks on the steering shaft so he will know for sure that the wheel has been pushed forward enough to be locked in place.

"I'm going to put that into effect right away," he said.

Johnson said he's seen other drivers have similar incidents, but just figured it wouldn't happen to him. He also said it brought to mind an incident early in his career when he lost the brakes in his Xfinity Series car and slammed into a tire barrier.

"There are only very few moments in my racing career I have had that moment where you are just totally helpless and along for the ride," he said. "It's not a fun position to be in."

He said he was evasive about the situation Friday night because he wasn't sure why the wheel came off and didn't want to say something publicly that would falsely blame a crew member.

Then he said Saturday morning: "The picture is crystal clear what happened. I just didn't get the wheel locked on."

Johnson finished 11th on Sunday.



Jimmie Johnson's failure to secure the steering wheel of his No. 48 Chevrolet during qualifying at Phoenix caused him to crash. He finished the Good Sam 500 in 11th place.

SPRINT CUP STANDINGS

1. Kevin Harvick, 154
2. Kyle Busch, 154
3. Jimmie Johnson, 140
4. Kurt Busch, 137
5. Carl Edwards, 136
6. Denny Hamlin, 131
7. Joey Logano, 127
8. Austin Dillon, 122
9. Martin Truex Jr., 117
10. Dale Earnhardt Jr., 115

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

2 Drivers who have attempted but failed to qualify for a Sprint Cup race this season: David Gilliland and Reed Sorenson.

18 Sprint Cup drivers who have scored at least one top-10 finish this season.

44 Drivers who have started at least one Sprint Cup race this season.

35 Drivers who have started all four Sprint Cup races this season.