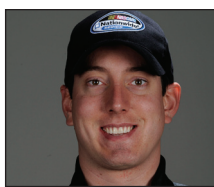


NEXT UP...

SPRINT CUP
Race: Irwin Tools Night Race
Where: Bristol Motor Speedway
When: Saturday, 7:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: ABC
2009 winner: Kyle Busch (right)



NATIONWIDE SERIES
Race: Food City 250
Where: Bristol Motor Speedway
When: Friday, 7 p.m. (ET)
TV: ESPN
2009 winner: David Ragan

CAMPING WORLD TRUCKS
Race: O'Reilly 200
Where: Bristol Motor Speedway
When: Wednesday, 7:30 p.m. (ET)
TV: SPEED
2009 winner: Kyle Busch

NASCAR INSIDER

By RICK MINTER / Cox Newspapers



Kevin Harvick's No. 29 Shell/Pennzoil Chevrolet leading the pack during the Carfax 400 at Michigan Intl. Speedway. (NASCAR photo)

Cut to the Chase

As final 10 approach, is Harvick the new pre-Chase favorite?

NASCAR's Race to the Chase, the final regular season races that determine which 12 drivers will compete for the championship over the final 10 races, is down to three races – at Bristol Motor Speedway, Atlanta Motor Speedway and Richmond International Raceway. And the big question now is whether points leader and Michigan winner Kevin Harvick has replaced four-time and defending champion Jimmie Johnson as the pre-Chase favorite.

After his dominating win at Michigan on Sunday – his third triumph of the season – Harvick clinched his spot in the 10-race run to the title. Now he has the luxury of using the next three races to prepare for the Chase and to try to add to his bonus point total. Each regular season win is worth 10 points when the Chase starts, and at this point both Denny Hamlin and Jimmie Johnson have 50 apiece.

Harvick said he plans to enjoy the upcoming stretch of the schedule.

"Right now we're in a fortunate position to be doing what we're doing," he said. "I've been in that 12th-, 13th-place battle ... You can't sleep at night, you can't do anything to get your mind off of that."

"We're going to enjoy it. We're going to go and race hard. We're going to try to gain 30 more bonus points. Hopefully we can have a couple things that we can try ... whether it's engines,

parts, pieces, over the next three weeks [we'll] try to get a little bit better.

"We're going to enjoy it and we're going to hopefully be ready for the last 10 weeks."

For Johnson and the No. 48 team, a mid-season swoon is nothing new, but the timing this year isn't the best for the team. After scoring back-to-back wins at Infineon Raceway and New Hampshire Motor Speedway, Johnson has run six races with just one top-10 finish, a 10th at Pocono.

At Michigan, he finished 13th after leading early on. It was a repeat in many ways of his recent runs.

"We started the race good and faded a little bit in the middle of the race when things started to slip from us," he said in his post-race interview. "We did a good job of keeping our heads in the game and not letting it beat us down, start making bad decisions. It's definitely not the finish we wanted, but I think it was a big victory in a lot of other areas."

"At a few races this year we've had some struggles, and you can all get frustrated and start making mistakes, but we kept our head in the game."

Despite Johnson's recent struggles and Harvick's rock-solid performance all season, Harvick wasn't quite ready to declare himself the new Chase favorite.

"I think over the last four years, you can look at the 48



Kevin Harvick, after winning Sunday's race at Michigan Intl. (NASCAR photo)

and they've done the same thing and won the championship," he said. "We're fast enough to beat 'em, but the circumstances and all the things have to go your way over the last 10 weeks ... it's not about a whole season anymore, it's about 10 weeks."

"They're going to start pretty much dead even or a little bit ahead of us. Hopefully we can keep doing the same thing that we're doing. It's like saying you're going to beat somebody that's won the last four Super Bowls. Until you beat that guy, there's no reason to put that pressure on ourselves, I don't think."

There's still plenty of pressure to go around among the top 12, although some, like Tony Stewart and Carl Edwards, have been plenty solid. Stewart is winless, but he's only had one finish outside the top 10 since back in May, at Charlotte. Along

the way, he's posted five top-five and nine top-10 finishes.

Edwards also is winless, but he hasn't finished worse than seventh in the past six races.

Jeff Gordon, also winless, has been consistently fast, too. He struggled to a 27th-place finish at Michigan after blowing a tire, but he has six top-six finishes in the past nine races.

Denny Hamlin, who has cooled off some after winning five races, has two top-five finishes in the past three races.

But other Chase contenders have struggled, most notably Mark Martin, who has posted just one top-10 finish, a seventh at Pocono, since May.

He's dropped to 13th in the standings, 35 points out of the elite group after a 28th-place run at Michigan.

Afterward, he didn't sound too optimistic about his chances of competing for the title.

"I don't know what they are," he said. "We'll keep digging. I don't know. Every race is a new race."

The Busch brothers, Kurt and Kyle, also seem to be fading down the homestretch.

Kurt Busch has run well, but has run into misfortune not of his own making. He wrecked at Pocono, then finished second at Watkins Glen, then blew an engine at Michigan.

Kyle Busch has posted just two top-10 finishes in the past nine races, and both of those were eighth-place efforts – at Watkins Glen and Indianapolis.

NOTEBOOK

Roush: "I feel very lucky"

Team owner Jack Roush made his first return to the race track since a July 27 airplane crash that left him with numerous injuries, including the loss of sight in his left eye.

He told reporters at Michigan that he felt fortunate to have survived his second plane crash, the first coming in 2002 when his plane plummeted into an Alabama lake.

"I feel very lucky," he said. "I've had several bites at the apple here ..."

"I survived two car wrecks too, both of them in racing. I've been extraordinarily lucky to have been able to survive, and I feel in some ways unworthy. I'm not sure I've done enough yet for the chances that I've had. Maybe that's recognized and they're just giving me more time."

He also said he plans to resume flying. "I think it's very likely that I'll be able to fly," he said. "I've got to get recovered. I have to go through my recovery. Wiley Post was a one-eyed pilot, and there's no restriction."

"Maybe if you're an airline pilot you can't have one eye, but there's not a reason why I can't fly with one eye."

Roush, who also suffered injuries to his left cheek, a broken jaw and compound fractures in his back, briefly explained how the crash occurred.

"The reality of it – on a trip arrival into Oshkosh, Wisconsin, I was put in conflict with the flight plan of another airplane close to the ground, and I was unable to address the conflict and keep the airplane flying," he said.

Keselowski wins Carfax 250

Rivals Brad Keselowski and Carl Edwards raced side-by-side and without incident in Saturday's Nationwide Series race at Michigan International Speedway, with Keselowski eventually motoring away to his fourth victory of the season and pushing his points lead to an almost insurmountable 347 over Edwards. He now has 10 career Nationwide wins.

But Keselowski said in Victory Circle that he doesn't plan to back off just because he has a big points lead.

"I want to win races going for the championship," he said. "We don't want to coast through it. We're pushing as hard as we can for all these people that are working hard at Penske Racing and for those fans that support us."



Brad Keselowski, driver of the No. 22 Discount Tire Dodge, waves an American flag out of his window in celebration of winning the Nationwide Series CARFAX 250 at Michigan Intl Speedway on Saturday. (NASCAR photo)

Adding 4th team, will Childress avoid replay of '09?

ASK RICK!

"Is Paul Menard's decision to become the fourth driver at Richard Childress Racing a good move for all the parties involved?"

A: Based on RCR's performance when it added Casey Mears to the stable in 2009, it's a bad idea for RCR. All four drivers missed the cut for the Chase and the team dropped back to three drivers. And Menard appears to be taking some risk by leaving Richard Petty Motorsports as his on-track results this season are the best of his career. He's 23rd in points, after being in the top 12 for several weeks at the start of the season, and he has one top-five and three top-10 finishes, the most of any season of his Cup career.

But both parties say that the deal will work out well. "We felt that right now is a really good time to [add a fourth team]," said team owner Richard Childress at Michigan. "We had it in 2009, and that wasn't any effect on our performance. We're going to do this team completely different than we did that one."

"I think the key thing is Paul, his driving abilities fit right in with our guys. Jeff [Burton] and all our guys are excited about having him over; he's done such a great job on the race track, just improving. He took off early this year and was in the points a pretty good way up there. We feel that we can take and keep him right up there running for the Chase next year."

Menard, who will bring along sponsorship from his family's home-improvement store chain, agreed that the time

was right for the move, but he also had questions about Childress' failure to perform in 2009, even though it has improved dramatically this year with just three teams.

"That's a question I had for Richard is how is it going to work this time," he said. "The answer I got was that really the fourth team had no bearing on the performance last year. They really upped their engineering game, and got their cars improved over the winter, and there is no reason why a fourth team right now won't work."

One factor that may ease the transition to a new team for Menard is the fact that his current crew chief Slugger Labbe is in position to make the move with him.

"We've had a great relationship this year," Menard said. "I would love to work with him in the future. RPM did pick up his contract option for next year, but if it works out where I can work with Slugger in the future I'd definitely welcome it."

Some in the sport say that the only reason Menard gets the deals he does is because he can bring the sponsorship dollars. But Childress said there's more going on than that.

"I get the same thing with Austin Dillon, my grandson, driving our truck – he's got the break, but the difference is Paul and Austin both are making a difference," he said. "They've got the opportunity, but if you watch them on the race tracks, Paul does the job on the race track. It's something that he loves to do and a passion; it's not just because he's got the sponsor that comes along."

But the money does make a difference, as Kevin Harvick pointed out.

"Our sport runs on cubic dollars," Harvick said. "If you want to go fast, the more cubic dollars you have, the faster you go."

Got a question about NASCAR? Ask Rick! E-mail your question to rminter@gracintoday.com

SPRINT CUP POINTS

1. Kevin Harvick 3,400; Leader
2. Jeff Gordon 3,107; behind -293
3. Denny Hamlin 3,047; behind -353
4. Tony Stewart 3,020; behind -380
5. Jimmie Johnson 3,014; behind -386
6. Carl Edwards 2,986; behind -414
7. Jeff Burton 2,986; behind -414
8. Kyle Busch 2,975; behind -425
9. Matt Kenseth 2,961; behind -439
10. Kurt Busch 2,935; behind -465
11. Greg Biffle 2,913; behind -487
12. Clint Bowyer 2,755; behind -645

NUMERICALLY SPEAKING

30.5 Danica Patrick's average finish in six Nationwide Series starts this season

935 Laps led by Kyle Busch in the past 11 Sprint Cup races at Bristol Motor Speedway, the most of any driver

4,501 Laps run among the top 15 in the past 11 Sprint Cup races at Bristol by Jeff Gordon, tops among all drivers

2,420 Laps run among the top 15 in the past 11 Nationwide Series races at Bristol by Carl Edwards, the most of any driver