

NASCAR THIS WEEK

The Daytona Beach News-Journal's Godwin Kelly & Ken Willis have covered NASCAR for nearly 60 years combined. godwin.kelly@news-jrnl.com ken.willis@news-jrnl.com

SPEED FREAKS

A couple questions we had to ask — ourselves

In perfect world, who would be your pick to replace Junior in the No. 88?

GODSPEAK: There's no really replacing Junior, so I will go with Alex Bowman, who did a nice job driving the car in 2016.

KEN'S CALL: Assuming Ricky Bobby is just a fictional character, I'd say Erik Jones because he's a star in waiting.

Feel bad for Kyle Busch's penalty at Richmond?

GODSPEAK: This guy can't catch a break, huh? Every time victory is in sight, defeat steps on his toes.

KEN'S CALL: Are you kidding? NASCAR is always a better place when Kyle is ticked about something.

Best pick for surprise winner at Talladega?

GODSPEAK: My surprise winner is actually no surprise at all: Jamie McMurray, a good little plate racer.

KEN'S CALL: Kasey Kahne. That would be a surprise at this point, right?

CUP STANDINGS

1. Kyle Larson	398
2. Martin Truex Jr.	358
3. Chase Elliott	346
4. Joey Logano	333
5. Brad Keselowski	327
6. Kevin Harvick	286
7. Jamie McMurray	282
8. Jimmie Johnson	270
9. Clint Bowyer	266
10. Kyle Busch	235
11. Denny Hamlin	231
12. Ryan Blaney	229
13. Ryan Newman	225
14. Trevor Bayne	216
15. Ricky Stenhouse Jr.	201
16. Erik Jones	193
17. Kurt Busch	192
18. Matt Kenseth	192
19. Aric Almirola	189
20. Kasey Kahne	179

WHAT'S ON TAP

CUP SERIES: GEICO 500
SITE: Talladega Superspeedway (2.66-mile tri-oval)
TV SCHEDULE: Friday, practice (Fox Sports 1, 2:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.). Saturday, qualifying (Fox, 4 p.m.). Sunday, race (coverage begins on Fox Sports 1, 11:30 a.m.; green flag, Fox, 1:30 p.m.)

XFINITY: Sparks Energy 300
SITE: Talladega Superspeedway
TV SCHEDULE: Friday, practice (Fox Sports 1, 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.). Saturday, qualifying (Fox Sports 1, 10:30 a.m.), race (Fox, 1 p.m.)

2017 SCHEDULE AND RESULTS

Feb. 18: The Clash at Daytona (Joey Logano)
Feb. 23: Can-Am Duels at Daytona (Chase Elliott and Denny Hamlin)
Feb. 26: Daytona 500 (Kurt Busch)
March 5: Folds of Honor Quick Trip 500 at Atlanta (Brad Keselowski)
March 12: Kobalt 400 at Las Vegas (Martin Truex Jr.)
March 19: Good Sam 500k at Phoenix (Ryan Newman)
March 26: Auto Club 400 at Fontana (Kyle Larson)
April 2: STP 500 at Martinsville (Brad Keselowski)
April 9: O'Reilly Auto Parts 500 at Texas (Jimmie Johnson)
April 23: Food City 500 at Bristol (Jimmie Johnson)
April 30: Toyota Owners 400 at Richmond (Joey Logano)

May 7: Geico 500 at Talladega
May 13: GoBowling.com 400 at Kansas
May 20: All-Star Race at Charlotte
May 28: Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte
June 4: AAA 400 Drive for Autism at Dover
June 11: Axalta "We Paint Winners" 400 at Pocono
June 18: FireKeepers Casino 400 at Michigan
June 25: Toyota/Save Mart 350 at Sonoma
July 1: Coke Zero 400 at Daytona
July 8: Quaker State 400 at Kentucky
July 16: New Hampshire 301 at Loudon
July 23: Crown Royal 400 at Indianapolis
July 30: Pennsylvania 400 at Pocono
Aug. 6: TBA at Watkins Glen

Aug. 13: Pure Michigan 400 at Michigan
Aug. 19: Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race at Bristol
Sept. 3: Southern 500 at Darlington
Sept. 9: Federated Auto Parts 400 at Richmond
Sept. 17: Chicagoland 400
Sept. 24: New England 300 at New Hampshire
Oct. 1: Delaware 400 at Dover
Oct. 7: Bank of America 500 at Charlotte
Oct. 15: Alabama 500 at Talladega
Oct. 22: Hollywood Casino 400 at Kansas
Oct. 29: Goody's Fast Relief 500 at Martinsville
Nov. 5: AAA Texas 500 at Texas
Nov. 12: Can-Am 500k at Phoenix
Nov. 19: Ford EcoBoost 400 at Homestead

RICHMOND



Erik Jones likely had a similar look on his face after his four-lap run at Richmond on Sunday. [PHOTO/DAYTONA INTERNATIONAL SPEEDWAY]

THREE THINGS WE LEARNED

1. Four laps

The Cup Series race at Richmond was scheduled for 400 laps over the .75-mile oval. Erik Jones ran four of those laps after an early tangle with Kasey Kahne. "Just got ran into the fence right on Lap 1," Jones said. "That's unfortunate. It's frustrating."

2. Cone head

Most Cup tracks have a "commitment cone" at the pit road entrance. Hit the cone and get penalized. Since Richmond is short, there's a "commitment box" painted on the asphalt. Kyle Busch, who had a chance to win, ran over the box and got penalized. "Balls and strikes," he said.

3. The win-in guys

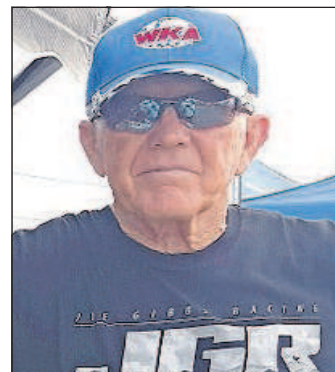
For those not paying attention to the "win and you're in" drivers, the ranks swelled to seven with Joey Logano taking the checkered flag Sunday. A win almost guarantees a driver will make NASCAR's 10-race, 16-driver playoff. "To break through with a win, that's nice," Logano said.

— Godwin Kelly, godwin.kelly@news-jrnl.com

THREE THINGS TO WATCH

1. Where is Gibbs?

At this point of the 2016 season, Joe Gibbs Racing had won five of the first nine Cup Series races. The four-car Toyota team has yet to produce a victory for "Coach." Gibbs can take some solace in the fact that it has been more circumstance than performance. For instance, at Richmond three of his drivers led the race six times for a combined 224 laps. Denny Hamlin was best in class, finishing third.



Team owner Joe Gibbs is all business when it comes to winning NASCAR races. [NEWS-JOURNAL/GODWIN KELLY]

won 10 Cup Series races at the scary 2.66-mile tri-oval. Dale Earnhardt Jr., who announced his retirement at the end of this season, is second on the Cup list with six wins. Junior needs a good finish after running 30th at Richmond. "Just terrible

luck," he said. "I don't know what to do." The "Nation" does.

3. Speaking of 88

Now that Dale Jr. has announced his retirement, the internet channels are crammed full of speculation about who will take the wheel of the No. 88 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet in 2018. Rick Hendrick said the selection process will be a slow and deliberate one. Hendrick's phone has likely been ringing nonstop since Earnhardt's announcement. Take one name off the list: Kyle Larson said he won't consider the ride.

— Godwin Kelly, godwin.kelly@news-jrnl.com

QUESTIONS & ATTITUDE

Compelling questions ... and maybe a few actual answers

Isn't Alex Bowman the obvious pick for Junior's replacement?

You're following normal progression patterns. But this is auto racing, where you have a small Rubik's Cube of interests that need aligning. You need a driver who's a good fit for the owner, for the team, for the manufacturer and, most of all, for the corporate benefactors who sponsor the team. If the No. 88 car can't attract a dominant sponsor and goes the piecemeal route, it might free the team to make the pick based on talent alone. Imagine that.

Get-well cards ...

It was a tough off-track week in NASCAR. Longtime NASCAR-themed artist Sam Bass went public with major health issues related to his Type 1 diabetes, as well as business woes that took his company first to Chapter 11 bankruptcy and now to an auction. Then word came of former IndyCar/NASCAR racer John Andretti's current fight with Stage 4 colon cancer. There will no shortage of good wishes aimed at both men, whose permanently sunny dispositions always make the garage a nicer place.

FEUD OF THE WEEK



Earnhardt



Johnson

DALE EARNHARDT JR. VS. JIMMIE JOHNSON: In the late laps of the race, Johnson's No. 48 Chevy body-slammed his teammate's No. 88 Chevy into the outside wall. "He said he didn't see us," Earnhardt said.
GODWIN KELLY'S TAKE: Bad timing on Johnson's part, just days after NASCAR's most popular driver announced his retirement; every lap of 2017 is precious to the mighty "Earnhardt Nation."

GODWIN'S PICKS FOR TALLADEGA

WINNER: Dale Earnhardt Jr.
REST OF TOP 5: Brad Keselowski, Denny Hamlin, Joey Logano, Kurt Busch
FIRST ONE OUT: Erik Jones
DARK HORSE: Jamie McMurray
DON'T BE SURPRISED IF: Earnhardt roars to his seventh career victory at the "World's Fastest Superspeedway."

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