

NASCAR THIS WEEK

SPEED FREAKS

A couple questions we had to ask — ourselves

Who would like to see the 2016 season continue forever?

GODSPEAK: Chase Elliott, because he got better and better as the season progressed.

KEN'S CALL: Kyle Larson, probably. He ended strong, then won a midget race last Thursday. Keep rolling, he's thinking.

Who's glad 2016 is over?

GODSPEAK: Clint Bowyer was in NASCAR purgatory all season. Next year he could win the Cup Series title.

KEN'S CALL: Easy, Tony Stewart. His only stock-car pit stops will now involve the White Castle drive-thru.

Did Greg Biffle underachieve or overachieve at Roush Racing?

GODSPEAK: We all love "The Biff," but he never posted the Cup Series numbers we expected (not all his fault).

KEN'S CALL: I'll go with a simple "achieved." Championships in Busch and Trucks, 19 Cup wins. Solid career, but never a star.

ONLINE EXTRAS

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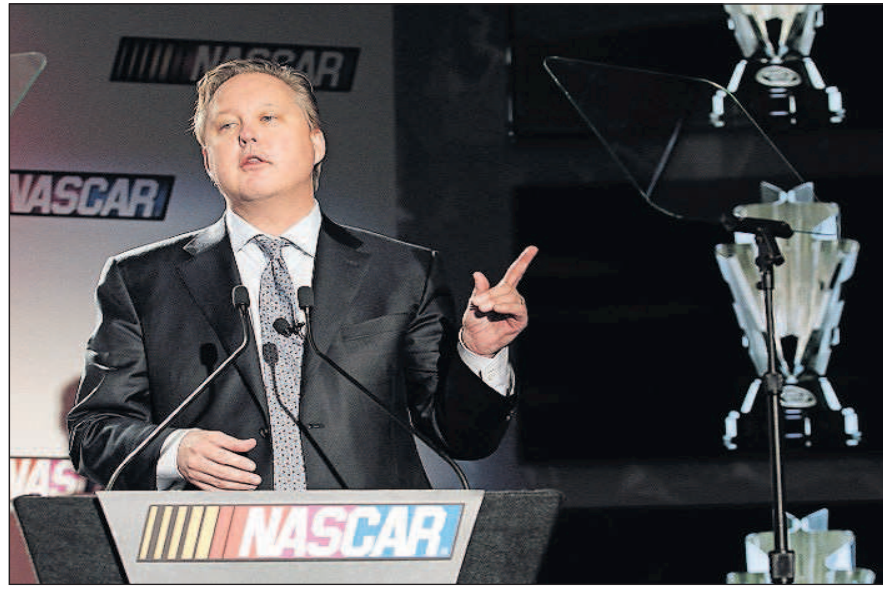
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Questions? Contact Godwin Kelly at godwin.kelly@news-jrnl.com or Ken Willis at ken.willis@news-jrnl.com

SPRINT CUP POINTS

1. Jimmie Johnson	5040
2. Joey Logano	5037
3. Kyle Busch	5035
4. Carl Edwards	5007
5. Matt Kenseth	2330
6. Denny Hamlin	2320
7. Kurt Busch	2296
8. Kevin Harvick	2289
9. Kyle Larson	2288
10. Chase Elliott	2285
11. Martin Truex Jr.	2271
12. Brad Keselowski	2267
13. Jamie McMurray	2231
14. Austin Dillon	2223
15. Tony Stewart	2211
16. Chris Buescher	2169
17. Kasey Kahne	898
18. Ryan Newman	895
19. AJ Allmendinger	830
20. Ryan Blaney	812
21. Ricky Stenhouse Jr.	772
22. Trevor Bayne	762
23. Greg Biffle	691
24. Danica Patrick	689
25. Paul Menard	678
26. Aric Almirola	638
27. Clint Bowyer	628
28. Casey Mears	556
29. Landon Cassill	530
30. Michael McDowell	500

3 THINGS WE LEARNED FROM 2016



NASCAR Chairman and CEO Brian France says big-time stock-car racing is holding its audience. GETTY IMAGES/BOB LEVERONE

1. Sport down?

The numbers are down for NASCAR, from TV ratings to attendance figures. No worries. "We are still very pleased with our position in sports," NASCAR CEO Brian France said. "The audience isn't going away at all. It's sliding to different places, consuming in different ways."

2. Toyota's year

Chevy's Jimmie Johnson won the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series title, but Toyota ruled the season. Toyota drivers won 16-of-36 races, including all the majors, to take the series manufacturer's championship in the season finale. Chevy scored a dozen wins, leaving Ford with eight.

3. Hendrick dynasty

No other major American professional sports team has earned more championships (12) than Hendrick Motorsports since 1984. The L.A. Lakers have eight NBA championships, and the Chicago Bulls have six. The Cubs won their first World Series title after a 108-year wait.

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

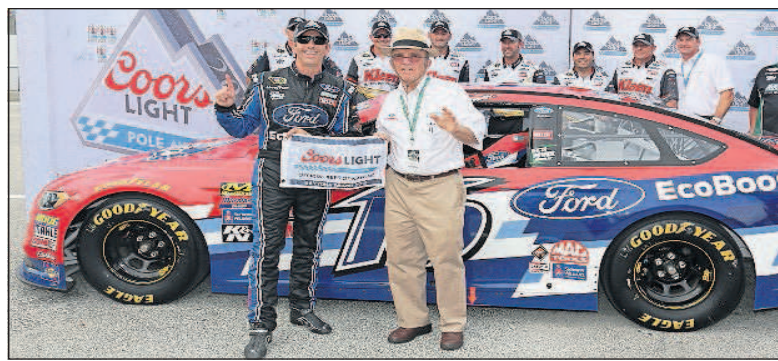
3 THINGS TO WATCH BEFORE 2017

1. Silly Season

The biggest move of NASCAR's annual "Silly Season" wasn't a driver, but a team moving to a new car manufacturer. Stewart-Haas Racing is leaving the Chevy camp to join forces with Ford. SHR will now be receiving cars from Team Penske and motors from Roush Yates Racing. Greg Biffle was released by car owner Jack Roush, and Clint Bowyer will take the wheel of Tony Stewart's No. 14 entry. More to come?

2. Rule changes

NASCAR is constantly tinkering with the rulebook as far as stock-car configurations. The sanctioning body is expected to take more downforce away from the cars in 2017 (the rules won't apply to Daytona and Talladega). With less downforce, the cars are harder to drive, which, in theory,



Greg Biffle's last shining moment of his NASCAR Cup career was winning this year's Coke Zero 400 pole position at Daytona. Biffle, left, shares the moment with car owner Jack Roush. GETTY IMAGES/JERRY MARKLAND

brings out the skills of the race drivers and makes racing better. Again, in theory. This is best described as a fluid situation.

3. Time off

The 2017 Daytona 500 is less than 90 days away, and NASCAR's premier race teams will be in prep mode right up to the start

of Speedweeks. December is historically NASCAR's quiet time, especially as the calendar gets closer to the week of Christmas, but the work never really stops as race teams try to find that one little edge over competitors as they toil in their race shops. The lights are always on in Mooresville, North Carolina.

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

GODWIN'S 2016 SUPERLATIVES

DRIVER OF YEAR: Jimmie Johnson
ROOKIE OF YEAR: Chase Elliott
TEAM OF YEAR: Joe Gibbs Racing
BREAKOUT DRIVER: Martin Truex Jr.

BIGGEST SURPRISE: Tony Stewart missed the first eight Cup races because of a non-racing injury, won at Sonoma and became Chase eligible.



Godwin Kelly is the Daytona Beach News-Journal's motorsports editor and has covered NASCAR for 30 years. Reach him at godwin.kelly@news-jrnl.com

QUESTIONS & ATTITUDE

Compelling questions... and maybe a few actual answers

What about Chad?

Good question. While Jimmie Johnson has obviously hogged the attention, as the confetti is swept away and the champagne is mopped, crew chief Chad Knaus is finally getting some well-deserved pats on the back. Knaus' contributions to the No. 48 team all these years isn't lost on the driver who says it's his goal to get Chad an eight championship, which would tie him with Hall of Fame crew chief Dale Inman.

What? Inman had 8?

That's right, and it might be what truly separates Inman from the other Hall-caliber crew chiefs. He not only had those seven he won with his cousin, King Richard Petty, but it's often overlooked that Inman also won one in 1984 with Terry Labonte. So Chad is still one shy of a tie. And, according to the Racing Reference record book, 93 race wins behind Inman.

Why Kevin Harvick?

You look below and you see my early top-10 projection for the beginning of 2017 with Harvick at No. 1. And assuming you've paid attention the past few years, you really shouldn't have to ask why. Granted with the current Chase system, even a consensus favorite can be kicked to the curb early. So there's no guarantees, except this: Harvick is probably the one driver the others know they have to deal with in order to succeed in 2017. Well, OK, unless that switch to Ford brings problems.

Ken Willis has been covering NASCAR for The Daytona Beach News-Journal for 27 years. Reach him at ken.willis@news-jrnl.com



FEUD OF THE YEAR



Wood **Kauffman**

WOOD BROTHERS VS. RTA: Just before the 2016 season, NASCAR and the Race Team Alliance group, formed by Rob Kauffman, signed a charter deal giving teams tangible value. The Woods didn't get a charter.

GODWIN KELLY'S TAKE: Wood Brothers Racing is NASCAR's oldest active race team. Eddie Wood said they were disappointed, and the team developed an "us against the world" mentality and dropped out of the RTA.

WHAT'S ON TAP?

SPRINT CUP: NASCAR Champion's Week

SITE: Las Vegas, Wynn Hotel

TV SCHEDULE: Friday (NBC Sports Network, 8 p.m.)

HALL OF FAME: NASCAR Hall of Fame induction

SITE: NASCAR Hall of Fame, Charlotte

DATE: Jan. 20

INDUCTEES: Richard Childress, Rick Hendrick, Mark Martin, Raymond Parks and Benny Parsons

TV SCHEDULE: TBA

SPEEDWEEKS: At Daytona International Speedway

DATES: Feb. 18-26

CUP SERIES: Daytona 500 (Race 1 of 36)

TV SCHEDULE: Feb. 26, race (Fox, 2 p.m.)



KEN WILLIS' TOP 10 NASCAR DRIVER RANKINGS

1 KEVIN HARVICK Has a few years left at the top of his game	2 JOEY LOGANO Has to be dealt with for a long time	3 KYLE BUSCH 170 combined wins in top-three-series	4 MATT KENSETH Will contend ... quietly, of course	5 CARL EDWARDS Gonna be a long winter	6 JIMMIE JOHNSON Is seven where it ends?	7 CHASE ELLIOTT The trendy pick for 2017	8 KYLE LARSON The other trendy pick	9 CLINT BOWYER Will reintroduce himself next year	10 MARTIN TRUEX Beginning, or end, of his good run?
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