

NASCAR THIS WEEK

TOP-FIVE CUP RACES OF 2016

No. 5: Cheez-It 355 at The Glen



Denny Hamlin celebrates his first career road-course win at Watkins Glen International on Aug. 7. GETTY IMAGES/JOSH HEDGES

By Godwin Kelly
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For the next five weeks, NASCAR This Week will review the top-five races of the 2016 Cup Series based on the race as a whole and not the finish. This is the first of that five-part series.

NASCAR Cup Series drivers used to dread racing at Watkins Glen International or Sonoma Raceway. Now some of those same drivers see an opportunity for victory and a position in the NASCAR Chase playoffs.

The Cheez-It 355 at The Glen is a 90-lap romp over The Glen's "short course," which snakes 2.45 miles in the vineyard country of upstate New York.

This race was a dogfight from the first green flag to the final checkered flag, filled with spills, chills and a wild finish, which produced a multilap pileup in the last turn on the last lap.

Before Denny Hamlin flashed under the checkered flag to score the victory, there were nine lead changes among eight drivers and eight yellow flags, plus two red flags (complete stop of racing) to clean up numerous messes.

Along the way, Danica Patrick led 11 consecutive laps in her No. 10 Stewart-Haas Racing Chevrolet before order could be restored. For the record, Patrick led 30 laps in all of the 2016 season. She finished 21st in this race.

There was pushing and shoving

among race cars all afternoon. The first big casualty was Jimmie Johnson, who got knocked out of the race after Austin Dillon, Ricky Stenhouse Jr. and Greg Biffle pinballed each other in Turn 5.

Johnson's No. 48 Chevy slammed into Stenhouse's disabled No. 17 Ford, causing a debris field big enough to warrant a red flag. Johnson finished last among the 40-car field.

"We got some on-camera exposure, but not the kind we wanted," said Johnson, who months later would capture his seventh Cup Series championship.

There were hard feelings all around as the event progressed and racing intensified.

Hamlin got the jump on Brad Keselowski on a Lap 81 restart and never looked back at the destruction that was happening behind his No. 11 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota.

On Lap 85, just five laps from the finish, mayhem took hold as seven stock cars crashed out in the Inner Loop area at The Glen, forcing NASCAR to throw a second red flag.

"We had it where we needed to be," said Kevin Harvick, who was in the middle of the crash and finished 32nd. "We just got back there and we got tore up."

Once the race resumed, so did the elbow throwing on the narrow road course.

Martin Truex Jr. and Keselowski were chasing Hamlin, while AJ Allmendinger and Kyle Larson were battling for

fourth-place honors.

Truex was turned by Keselowski, and Allmendinger got into Larson, allowing Joey Logano to finish second.

Larson was not happy with Allmendinger, saying "pretty dumb move right there" and AJ "was flat-out stupid." Allmendinger apologized after exiting his car.

Truex could not contain his anger. His No. 78 bumped and banged Keselowski's No. 2 Ford all the way around the cool-down lap.

It was Hamlin's first win at a road course and second of three wins for the season. He opened the year by powering to victory in the Daytona 500.

He had led the last lap at Sonoma, but overshot the last turn, giving Tony Stewart the opening he needed to make the pass and score the victory.

"I was probably driving a little bit more conservative there after my last-lap shenanigans at Sonoma," Hamlin said. "I thought 'Look, don't overshoot the corner,' and it probably lent itself for them getting closer than they probably should've."

Keselowski finished third, followed by Allmendinger and Stewart.

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QUESTIONS & ATTITUDE

Compelling questions... and maybe a few actual answers

By Ken Willis
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Smart move in Kentucky?

Maybe, maybe not, but definitely a bit of a gamble. The 16-year-old Kentucky Speedway will go totally smoke-free in all seating areas next year. That includes e-cigs and vapor. "We are committed to having the very best customer experience in sports," was the lofty boast of Speedway general manager Mark Simendinger. Unfortunately, we're guessing a lot of race fans still smoke, including many of those old-time fans who are tired of finding reasons to be mad at the modern product. For some, this will likely be just another reason.

What would you do?

Pretty simple: Offer smoking sections in the grandstands. This isn't a Boy Scout gathering, it's an automobile race, and for generations those things have been a tad gritty. A section of grandstands that allows ticket-buying fans to smoke 'em if they got 'em doesn't seem like a hard call. But what do I know?

Speaking of potentially silly thinking, what's wrong with Indy?

Nothing that a little tempering of pride wouldn't help. You can probably say the same for the NASCAR folks, by the way. This past week, Team Penske President Tim Cindric suggested that Indy should go back to an 11 a.m. local start to the Indianapolis 500, a move that would facilitate a "double" for NASCAR stars who might be interested in running the 500 and that night's Coca-Cola 600 on the same day. "We are always open to see what can be done to help make it easier. ... But we're not thinking about revisiting the time for the 500," IndyCar boss Mark Miles told USA Today last week. Those two sentences don't exactly match up, do they?

What to do?

Forget bumping the Indy 500 an hour or even bumping the Coke 600 back an hour. Get them off the same day entirely. Several years ago, this would've probably benefited Indy more than NASCAR, given the opposite directions the two entities were moving in terms of popularity. But now, they both need a jolt, and this is one way to make it happen.

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



NASCAR LOOP STATS

The following are NASCAR Loop Statistics for the Cup Series based on computer data collected at races during the 2016 season. The driver ratings are based on the following formula: wins, finishes, Top-15 finishes, average running position while on lead lap, average speed under green, fastest lap, led most laps, lead-lap finish.

Driver ratings: 1. Kevin Harvick 106.5; 2. Kyle Busch 104.9; 3. Martin Truex Jr. 103.8; 4. Joey Logano 101.2; 5. Matt Kenseth 99.7; 6. Brad Keselowski 99.1; 7. Carl Edwards 98.0; 8. Denny Hamlin 96.7; 9. Jimmie Johnson 96.1; 10. Chase Elliott 91.9

Laps led: 1. Martin Truex Jr. 1,809; 2. Kevin Harvick 1,384; 3. Kyle Busch 1,379; 4. Matt Kenseth 948; 5. Carl Edwards 918; 6. Jimmie Johnson 737; 7. Joey Logano 703; 8. Brad Keselowski 549; 9. Denny Hamlin 524; 10. Kyle Larson 379

Miles leaders: 1. Martin Truex Jr. 2,230.76; 2. Kevin Harvick 1,783.71; 3. Kyle Busch 1,477.03; 4. Joey Logano 1,159.24; 5. Brad Keselowski 1,118.74; 6. Matt Kenseth 1,073.92; 7. Jimmie Johnson 982.03; 8. Carl Edwards 956.89; 9. Denny Hamlin 713.31; 10. Chase Elliott 652.28

Laps in top 15: 1. Brad Keselowski 8,841; 2. Kyle Busch 8,746; 3. Matt Kenseth 8,696; 4. Martin Truex Jr. 8,693; 5. Kevin Harvick 8,547; 6. Joey Logano 8,389; 7. Carl Edwards 8,260; 8. Denny Hamlin 8,217; 9. Jimmie Johnson 8,004; 10. Kurt Busch 7,855

Fastest laps run: 1. Martin Truex Jr. 988; 2. Kevin Harvick 985; 3. Kyle Busch 743; 4. Carl Edwards 651; 5. Jimmie Johnson 601; 6. Matt Kenseth 543; 7. Brad Keselowski 451; 8. Chase Elliott 438; 9. Joey Logano 395; 10. Denny Hamlin 357

SPEED FREAKS A couple questions we had to ask — ourselves

Junior said he's "good to go" for Daytona in February. Ever any doubt?

GODSPEAK: Again, it will be Mr. AND Mrs. Dale Earnhardt Jr. this time around. Uncharted waters for America's former most eligible bachelor.

KEN'S CALL: I had a little doubt, and still might. Remember, he has to survive a honeymoon.

Smoke-free at Kentucky Speedway. Smart move?

GODSPEAK: Obviously, that does not include tire smoke. It's good

to see Kentucky falling in line behind Daytona International Speedway, which banned grandstand smoking a few years ago. **KEN'S CALL:** Not to stereotype, of course, but I could see it at Sonoma and maybe even Watkins Glen, but Kentucky? My guess is, for every fence-sitting fan they attract, they'll drive off a few longtime ticket holders. But I'm also guessing they did some research before this decision.

With two openings at BK Racing,

who's getting the call?

GODSPEAK: They say they will use a "variety of drivers" in the car, so it will be a variety show, and you know how popular those are these days. Maybe we will get to see "Mad" Max Papis behind the wheel for a road race. That would be fun.

KEN'S CALL: I have to assume Casey Mears is an obvious choice. I'll personally accept the other phone call, assuming they're still not expecting much more than the occasional top-30.

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