

NASCAR THIS WEEK

SPEED FREAKS

A couple questions we had to ask — ourselves

Danica Patrick's newest

GODSPEAK: Third crew chief in four years. Crew chief No. 1, Tony Gibson, took Kurt Busch to the Chase this year.

KEN'S CALL: It's starting to take on the feel of a dial-a-date, isn't it? I'm saying nothing much changes.

Same question for Tony Stewart.

GODSPEAK: The 2015 season for Stewart was an anomaly. New crew chief and new energy will revive the old version of Tony.

KEN'S CALL: I'm beginning to think Godwin has a secret No. 14 tattoo somewhere. Ain't looking. And don't expect Tony to suddenly find the old magic.

If there was a Most Popular Driver alternative to Junior, who would it be?

GODSPEAK: Surprised Jeff Gordon didn't get it. My runner-up choice would be Clint Bowyer.

KEN'S CALL: This past year, Jeff Gordon. Otherwise, like it or not, it's Danica.

If you're Kyle Busch, do you save the rod they'll pull from your leg?

GODSPEAK: Most drivers keep the hardware doctors pull out of their bodies. Probably headed to Busch's trophy case.

KEN'S CALL: If big enough, it becomes a fire poker.

Mission accomplished Busch's battle ends in glory



NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion Kyle Busch poses in front of the iconic "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign during NASCAR Champion's Week. NASCAR VIA GETTY IMAGES/STREETER LECKA

Busch battles back from leg injuries to be crowned NASCAR Cup champion

By Godwin Kelly
godwin.kelly@news-jrnl.com

It is an improbable storyline: Driver seriously injured, misses 11 Cup races, then roars back to win the coveted NASCAR championship. Kyle Busch lived it and made it happen.

At the start of the season, nobody gave Kyle Busch a chance to win the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series championship, given the fact he watched the Daytona 500 from a Daytona Beach hospital bed.

Busch overcame his injuries, then overcame a stellar group of stock-car competitors to reach the championship table at Friday's Cup Series Awards Ceremonies.

"It's been truly remarkable," Busch said.

The 30-year-old driver broke his left foot and right leg after his car smashed into an inside retaining wall at Daytona International Speedway 10 laps from the finish of the Speedweeks Xfinity race on the day before the 500.

Busch missed the first 11 Cup Series races of the season, returning May 24 for the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Soon after, NASCAR Chairman and CEO Brian France ruled that if Busch won a race and was among the top 30 in points by the end of the regular season, he could participate in the Chase playoffs.

The order seemed daunting, if not impossible.

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



In his fifth start of the season at Sonoma Raceway on June 28, Busch got that win; then for good measure, he scored three more in his next four Cup starts.

He made it through to the Championship Round at Homestead-Miami Speedway with consistent finishes, then earned the crown by winning the Ford EcoBoost 400, just one position in front of 2014 champion Kevin Harvick.

It's the stuff of fairy tales.

Busch, who drives the No. 18 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota, became the first driver in NASCAR's modern history (since 1972) to win the championship without starting every race on the schedule.

Not only that, but he nabbed Toyota's first championship since the car maker joined the series in 2007. Toyota has poured millions and millions of dollars into this effort and only found success after partnering with Gibbs.

Fittingly, it was Busch who scored Toyota's first Cup Series victory in 2008 at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

The championship put Busch in elite company. Busch and his brother Kurt join Terry and Bobby Labonte as the only brothers to earn Cup Series titles. Kurt won his in 2004, the first year the Chase playoffs were introduced.

It's been a whirlwind experience

for Kyle Busch, who has been a Cup regular since 2005, when he joined up with Hendrick Motorsports, where he would get the boot two years later to make room for Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Everybody knows Busch can drive a race car. But nobody expected to see him at the champion's table in Las Vegas.

"I don't know that anybody could have ever dreamt of this year especially, but to have dreamt of my career path the way it's kind of gone, it's certainly amazing to have the opportunity right now to be in this position with Joe Gibbs," Busch said.

Gibbs boasts four Cup championships with three drivers.

"It's a thrill," Gibbs said. "It's been 10 years since we won one."

Now that the 2015 season is officially over, Busch is scheduled to head back into the operating room on Dec. 17 to have the metal hardware extracted from his foot and leg.

The leg surgery will be the most dramatic.

"Just having to re-go through the knee and to cut the knee open again in order to pull the rod out, that's going to be the most traumatic part," he said.

He will be in rehab right up to the start of 2016 Daytona Speedweeks.

Before heading back to the hospital, Busch plans to just enjoy the moment and soak in his accomplishments.

"It's definitely caught up with everyone saying 'champion' or calling me 'champ' or introducing me as the 2015 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion," Busch said. "I've heard it a lot this week, and it's really, really awesome to hear that. I'm pumped and couldn't be more elated."

QUESTIONS & ATTITUDE

Compelling questions... and maybe a few actual answers

What will I do for NASCAR news?

It's as close as we get to NASCAR hanging a "Gone fishing" sign on the door.

Now what?

After 36 races, a goodbye to Jeff Gordon and congratulations to Kyle Busch, and with only about two months until the engines crank at Daytona, you need more right now? These days, this is the closest thing NASCAR has to a dark season. But there'll be news.

What sort of news?

NASCAR's corner-office suits are huddling with the boys in legal to find a feasible way to turn its race teams into something resembling franchises, which would break from the independent contractor system that served the purposes since the late-'40s. Well, it served NASCAR's purposes, along with owners and drivers who ran fast enough to escape creditors. But times have changed; you'll soon be reading a lot about men named Rob Kauffman and Brent Dewar and something called the Race Team Alliance.

Will it affect the race fans and the racing?

Nope. So maybe you shouldn't pay attention. Unless you like watching the Ralph Lauren crowd sending their lawyers into battle fully armed with briefcases full of "whereas" and "therefore."

Any good news?

There was some griping about Kyle Busch winning the championship even though he missed 11 races. But there didn't seem to be much resentment to Toyota winning its first Cup Series title. Oh wait, is that really progress? Maybe it infers that all of the old-school NASCAR lifers have quit caring about such things. If they no longer have enough emotion to get worked up over Toyota, that's worrisome. Maybe this stirred them up.

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



NASCAR CHAMPION

NASCAR Stats: Cup Series all-time statistical updates

Another NASCAR season means updates to the record book. Jeff Gordon, who retired as a full-time Cup Series driver after competing this year, topped two all-time records. Here are a few select categories that changed after the 2015 season:

Consecutive Cup starts (active drivers)
Jeff Gordon 797 **Jimmie Johnson** 504
Ryan Newman 504 **Kevin Harvick** 496
Jamie McMurray 472 **Greg Biffle** 465
Kasey Kahne 432

All-time consecutive years with a pole
Jeff Gordon, 23 seasons, 1993-2015
David Pearson, 20, 1963-1982
Richard Petty, 18, 1960-1977
Darrell Waltrip, 13, 1974-1986
Bill Elliott, 12, 1984-1995

All-time race winners
Richard Petty 200, **David Pearson** 105,
Jeff Gordon 93, **Bobby Allison** 84,
Darrell Waltrip 84 **Cale Yarborough** 83
Dale Earnhardt 76, **Jimmie Johnson** 75,
Rusty Wallace 55, **Lee Petty** 54,
Ned Jarrett 50, **Junior Johnson** 50,
Tony Stewart 48, **Herb Thomas** 48
Buck Baker 46 **Bill Elliott** 44,
Mark Martin 40, **Tim Flock** 39,
Bobby Isaac 37, **Matt Kenseth** 36,
Kyle Busch 34, **Fireball Roberts** 33,
Dale Jarrett 32, **Kevin Harvick** 31,
Rex White 28

Other active drivers:
Dale Earnhardt Jr. 26 **Denny Hamlin** 26,
Carl Edwards 25

Combined NASCAR wins from different series
Richard Petty 200 (Cup Series)
Kyle Busch 154 (34 Cup, 76 Xfinity, 44 truck)
David Pearson 106 (105 Cup, 1 Xfinity)
Jeff Gordon 98 (93 Cup, 5 Xfinity)
Dale Earnhardt 97 (76 Cup, 21 Xfinity)

Consecutive lead-lap finishes (active drivers)
Joey Logano, 24 finishes, 7/27/2014 to 4/4/2015
Logano, 22, 5/9/2015 to 10/25/2015
Dale Earnhardt Jr., 21, 1½/2011 to 7/29/2012
Jeff Gordon, 21, 6/14/1998 to 2/14/1999
Jimmie Johnson, 20, 4/2/2006 to 9/3/2006
Clint Bowyer, 19, 4/7/2013 to 8/24/2013
Carl Edwards, 19, 7/1 ½ 015 to 1 ½ 2/2015
Edwards, 19, 3/24/2013 to 8/18/2013
Matt Kenseth, 19, 10/22/2006 to 6/10/2007
Jeff Burton, 18, 10/13/2007 to 5/25/2008
Tony Stewart, 18, 3/29/2009 to 8/16/2009

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

THE YEAR-END BLOCKBUSTER

Chrysler Jeep Ram Dodge

HUMES

year end holiday sales challenge

our goal is to be at last years sales!

THE YEAR-END BLOCKBUSTER

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Pick out a Garmin from under the tree with new car purchase

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