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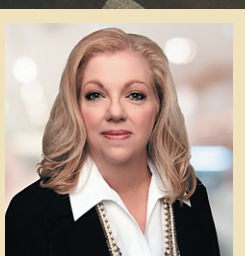
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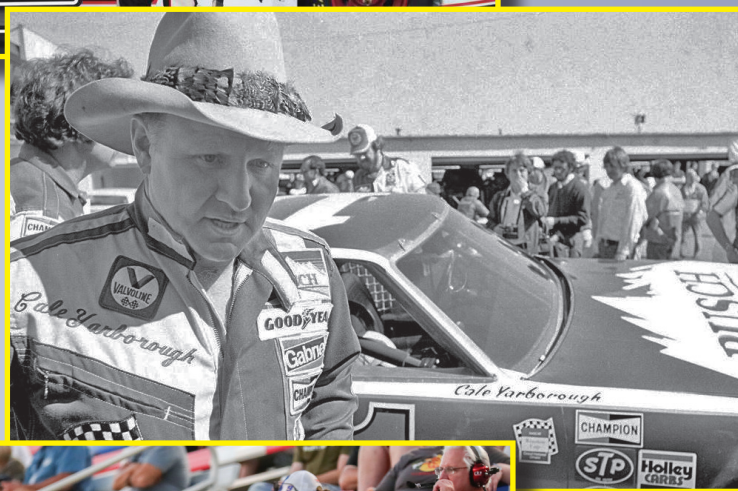
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CONTENTS

- **5** Concrete is back!
Will it rekindle interest in spring race at BMS?
- **6** Qualifying spots set tone for
BMS success
- **9** Busch: 'Unless it's on concrete, it's
not a real race'
- **10** BMS welcomes fans to
'Throwback Weekend'
- **14** Bowman sees the concrete as an
'icon' at BMS
- **15** Keselowski adjusting to role as
car owner and driver
- **18** Cup Series champ Blaney looks
to make more history at BMS
- **22** Gragson wants another victory
burnout at Bristol
- **26** Racing cars just part of
Yarborough's full life
- **28** Full Speed docuseries meant to
attract younger fans
- **30** Bell mastered BMS dirt in '23
spring race
- **32** Food City 500 lands on St.
Patrick's Day for fourth time



CONCRETE IS BACK!

Will it rekindle interest in spring race at BMS?

For years, there has been one primary talking point in the vast campgrounds surrounding Bristol Motor Speedway.

Fans want their old track back.

The growth of BMS was built around a chaotic style of racing that featured all sorts of bumping, crashing and fussing.

While team owners and purists didn't approve of the carnage, fans couldn't get enough of the show.

Remember that 55-race sellout streak for the BMS Night Race that began in 1982.

The facility was expanded into a 160,000-seat spaceship tucked into the green mountains of Northeast Tennessee.

The future seemed limitless. Then came a game-changing move in 2007.

A repave of the track surface that aimed to give drivers more options to maneuver and execute passes backfired.

With the new variable or progressive banking system, the racing surface was widened from 40 to 43 feet.

As the number of crashes decreased, attendance for the spring race steadily declined.

The application of the sticky

PJ1 substance to the bottom lane in the turns has produced some excitement, but old-school fans want more for their beloved Bristol.

That's why the track officials decided to stage the first NASCAR Cup race on dirt

since 1970.

While the Bristol Dirt Race experiment certainly sparked interest, the novelty wore off after three years and the number of critics grew.

The advertising campaigns for Sunday's Food City 500

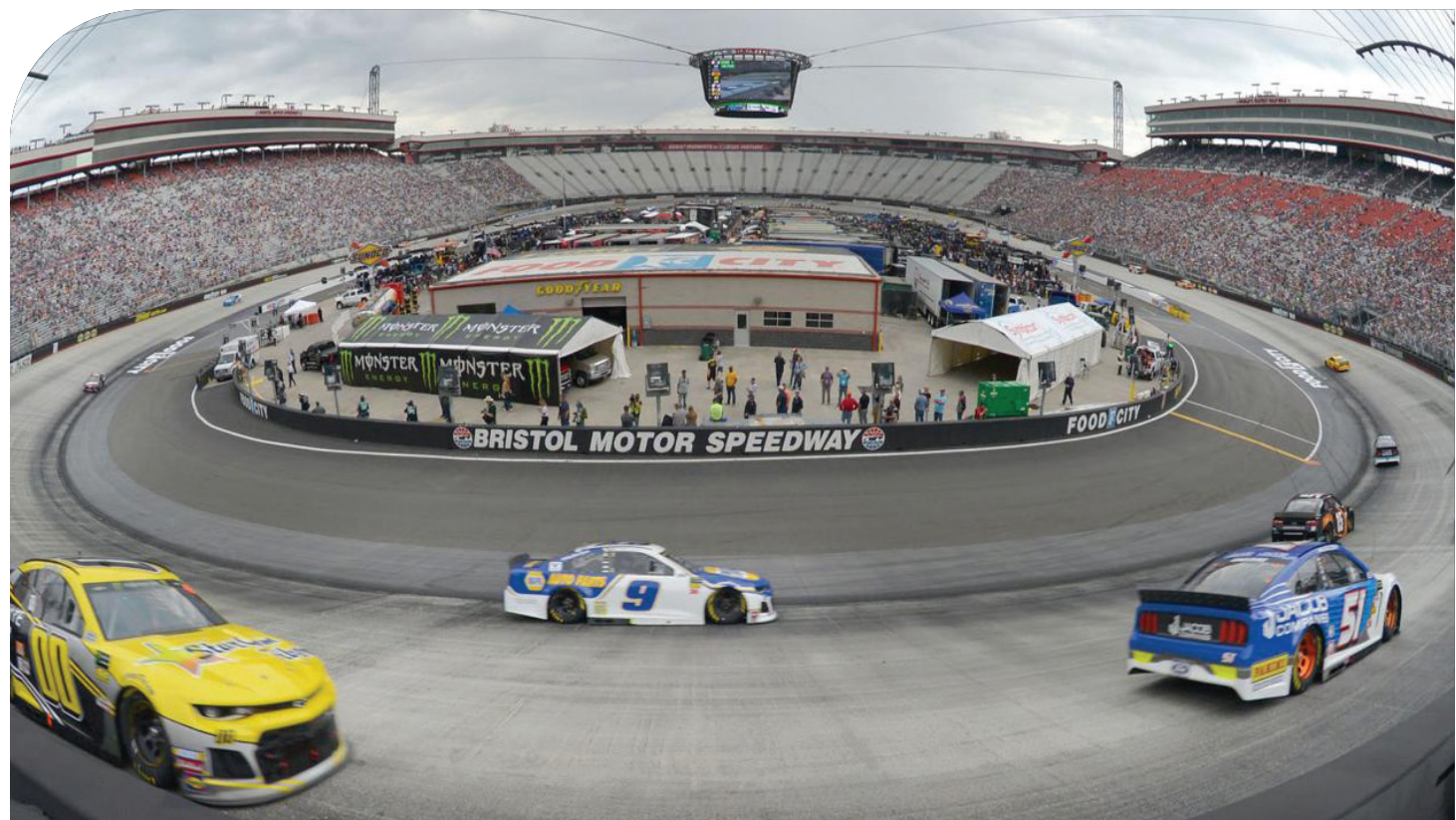
have featured a "Throwback" theme that includes painting the track walls with a traditional red and white stripe design.

Television commercials have stressed the old fender-banging and finger-pointing days of

BMS.

But marketing experts can only do so much to change this narrative.

It's up to the drivers to bring back the old Bristol. 



BRISTOL HERALD COURIER FILE PHOTO

After three years of running the NASCAR spring race on dirt at Bristol Motor Speedway, it will return to concrete next weekend, which will be highlighted by the Food City 500 on Sunday. It is the fourth time the Cup Series race has been held on St. Patrick's Day.

QUALIFYING SPOTS

*set tone for BMS success;
something about 16*

DAVID MCGEE
Bristol Herald Courier

Success in auto racing can be directly reliant on where one starts. Teams qualify at every stop on the NASCAR circuit to determine who starts first, who starts last and who fills every spot in between. Qualifying is a sacred part of the racing ritual and, quite often indicates ones chances of winning.

That is ever so evident at Bristol Motor Speedway, site of this weekend's Food City 500, the fifth stop in the 2024 NASCAR Cup Series.

This will mark the 127th time NASCAR's top series has competed at Bristol - twice annually since the track opened in 1961 - and one of the most hallowed tracks on the schedule. One trend has persevered throughout seven decades of BMS history. The driver who started first has won 28 times, or over a fifth of those races. Combine that with 14 wins by the second-place starter and 42 BMS races - one-third of those 126 - have been won from the front row.

Want more?

Second row starters, positions three and four, have gone on to victory lane 20



Brad Keselowski was the last pole-sitter to win the NASCAR spring Cup Series race at Bristol Motor Speedway in 2020. He celebrated winning the Food City Supermarket Heroes 500 while wearing a mask in front of nearly 160,000 empty seats due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

AP FILE PHOTO

times while starting anywhere among the top six spots - the first three rows - has translated into victory in 82 of 126 races, or 65% of the time. A top-ten Bristol starter has won 99 of the track's 126 races, which equates to 78.5% of the time.

Here's an anomaly. The seventh starting position has only produced one Bristol

win in 126 races. You have to go all the way back to Darrell Waltrip's victory in the 1978 Southeastern 500 - the first of his 12 Cup Bristol wins - to find it.

The last driver to win after starting outside the top ten was Chris Buescher in the 2022 Bass Pro Shops Night race. He started 20th in the 36-car field.

Seven of the last ten Bristol Cup races have been won by a driver who started in the top ten, including three who started on the pole. The most recent was Kyle Larson, who won the 2021 Bass Pro Night Race, but he didn't qualify there since qualifying wasn't held during the COVID pandemic and the field was set

by the rule book.

Twelve more Bristol victories were earned by drivers starting from positions 11-15. The most recent was Kyle Busch, who scored his ninth Bristol win from an 11th starting spot in the 2022 Food City Dirt Race. Busch was solidly in third when second-place Chase Briscoe attempted a slide job

on leader Tyler Reddick as they raced through the last corner of the last lap. Briscoe missed and the resulting spin opened the door for Busch to win with Reddick - who started third - recovering to finish second.

Something about 16
Here's another anomaly. The only starting spot among the top 20 that has never produced a Bristol winner is 16th. Positions 17-20 have a combined eight winners but nobody has ever won BMS after starting 16th.

In other words, if you draw the 16th starter in your race pool, might as well throw it away.

One has to travel back to Bristol's very first Cup race, the 1961 Volunteer 500, to find the best Bristol finish by a 16th-

place starter and the closest one ever came to winning. That day Fireball Roberts guided his lavender Holman-Moody Ford to a runner-up finish behind race winner Jack Smith, who got some relief help from Johnny Allen. Roberts finished two laps behind Smith in second.

Here is another wild stat - the 16th place starter has only captured a top-five finish thirteen times in 126 Bristol races - that's 13 times out of 630 combined positions or .02% of the time. Good luck 16!

After Roberts, Richard Petty finished third here in July 1962. It then took 19 years before Terry Labonte started 16th but finished third in August 1981. A few years later, Rusty Wallace finished fourth in April 1988,

Terry Labonte scored back-to-back with top-five finishes of fifth and fourth after starting 16tyh in both the 1989 and 1990 August night races.

Darrell Waltrip started 16th and finished fourth in August 1994, while Dale Jarrett started 16th and finished third twice, August 1995 and in the 1999 Food City 500. From there it was another long drought before Clint Bowyer started 16th and finished fourth in the 2012 Food City 500. Juan Pablo Montoya went from 16th to third in August 2013 and Matt Kenseth replicated that feat the following year.

The most recent top-five finish by a 16th place starter was by William Byron, who ran third in the 2022 Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

On two occasions the 16th place starter finished dead last.

That happened to Dave Marcis, who suffered mechanical trouble after just 60 laps in the 1981 Valleydale 500 - predecessor to the Food City 500 -- and Rick Wilson, who fell out with overheating problems after 78 laps of the 1991 Valleydale Meats 500.

Here's another numerological nugget regarding 16 at BMS. A car numbered 16 has never won a Cup Series race at Bristol. Races here have been won by the 6 and 26 but not 16.

This only applies to the Cup Series, however. On three occasions, the 16th-place starter has gone to victory lane in the NASCAR Xfinity Series, starting with Darrell Waltrip in April 1985. Others include

Jimmy Spencer in the 1997 Food City 250 and Sterling Marlin in March 2000.

Additionally, A.J. Allmendinger wheeled the Kaulig Racing No. 16 Chevrolet to the 2021 regular season championship with a photo-finish victory over Austin Cindric here.

While no Truck Series driver has ever won Bristol from the 16th starting position, trucks numbered 16 have gone to victory lane three times here - twice driven by Hall of Famer Ron Hornaday, Jr., and by Travis Kvapil. 



BRISTOL WINS BY STARTING POSITION

Starting Position	Wins	Starting Position	Wins	Starting Position	Wins
1	28	16	0	31	0
2	14	17	1	32	0
3	9	18	2	33	0
4	11	19	3	34	0
5	11	20	2	35	0
6	9	21	0	36	0
7	1	22	0	37	0
8	7	23	0	38	1
9	6	24	2	39	0
10	3	25	0	40	0
11	2	26	1	41	0
12	5	27	1	42	0
13	3	28	1	43	0
14	1	29	1	44	0
15	1	30	1		

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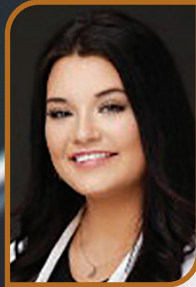
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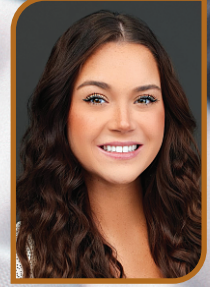
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BUSCH:

*'Unless it's on concrete,
it's not a real race'*

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

Count Kyle Busch as a fan of the Bristol Motor Speedway throwback weekend.

Consider the recent comments of the two-time NASCAR Cup champion regarding the three-year experiment with a dirt surface for the Bristol spring race.

"Unless it's on concrete, it's not a real race," Busch said.

"Bristol is a great race track and the fans love it.

"They come out in droves for the August race, and we hope that they show their support for the March race and everything that we're going to have going on there."

The 2024 Bristol experience will include the NASCAR Weather Guard Truck race on March 16 and the Food City 500 on March 17. The Truck event will start at 8 p.m., with Sunday's Cup race scheduled for a 3:30 p.m. green flag.

According to an informal poll of drivers in recent weeks, the majority are in favor of the concrete version of BMS.

If you watch and listen to the advertising campaigns, the 2004 Food City 500 will feature a return to the glory days of Bristol with rubbing, fussing and finger pointing.

Busch is taking a wait and see approach.

"We've gone through so many different iterations of

race track at Bristol, whether it's been the old concrete, the new concrete, the ground concrete, the spray down on the bottom, and then the dirt," Busch said.

"There's just been so many different ways that that they've tried to have races there. But when it comes down towards the end and there's somebody in the way, you've got to make it happen."

When it comes to mastering the high speeds and high banks of BMS, Busch is a master.

Along with nine Cup victories at Bristol, Busch has recorded two sweeps of the Truck, Xfinity and Cup races.

"That's pretty awesome," Busch said. "I've been close to doing that probably eight other times in my career, so I'm so glad to have done it twice at Bristol. That place has always been one of my favorites. Bristol is just really special."

So far, Busch seems headed to another special season with his Richard Childress Racing team.

Of course, Busch had a starring role earlier this season in the captivating three-wide final act at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

Daniel Suarez emerged from the pack to claim his second career Cup win, and Busch was forced to settle for third.



BRISTOL HERALD COURIER FILE PHOTO

Kyle Busch celebrates his ninth Cup Series victory at Bristol Motor Speedway after capturing the Food City Dirt Race in April of 2022. Even though Busch won that race on dirt, he is a proponent of returning to concrete, which will occur next week.

While fans and journalists are still raving about one of the closest finishes in NASCAR history, Busch prefers to look at the big picture.

"It wasn't too big of a deal," Busch said. "We're running as hard as we could and things got crowded a bit off Turn 4, but we kept it clean and

everything was fine. It was just hard racing."

Bristol Motor Speedway fans hope to see more of the same action this weekend. 



Bristol
Motor Speedway

welcomes fans to 'Throwback Weekend'



Bristol Motor Speedway officials are planning to transport fans back to the future so to speak during the Food City 500 weekend.

And the track is bringing along some of its longtime friends to help run the time portal machine, including pro wrestler Bill Goldberg, legendary pit reporter Dr. Jerry Punch and the Trackside Live duo of Kenny Wallace and John Roberts, just to name a few.

After three years of racing on the dirt to honor NASCAR's roots and pay tribute to the origins of the Cup Series, the hallowed high banks at Bristol have been scrubbed off, both literally and figuratively, and are now ready to do business as usual, on the speedy all-concrete surface. NASCAR Cup Series teams are primed and ready to get back to "Racin' the way it ought'a be!"

The weekend will feature the Food City 500 in its longtime traditional Sunday afternoon spot, taking the green flag at 3:30 p.m.

On Saturday afternoon Bush's Beans Practice and Bush's Beans Qualifying will take place for both the NASCAR Cup Series and the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series to set the starting lineups.

On Saturday evening, the

hungry rising stars in the Craftsman Trucks will take center stage for the WEATHER GUARD Truck Race at 8 p.m.

The last time the track hosted a Food City 500 on concrete under normal conditions in front of fans in the grandstands was back in April 2019. At that memorable race, Kyle Busch held off his older brother Kurt for victory that Sunday afternoon. After the race, Kurt playfully joked that he would've wrecked his brother to grab the win for himself if he could've gotten closer to his rear bumper as the laps wound down.

To elevate the fan-experience for our guests this March, Team BMS has put together plenty of fun throwback touches during the weekend to remind fans of the great history that the World's Fastest Half-Mile possesses, and the focus is especially centered on the early 1990s. Specifically 1992.

There's even going to be a shiny silver DMC DeLorean straight from the set of Back to the Future on display in the reimagined BMS Fan FUNZONE. We wouldn't recommend trying to take that little baby for a spin. Especially if you see a mad scientist type



EMILY BALL | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

NASCAR Cup Series drivers Zane Smith, along with Erik Jones and Brad Keselowski, add white paint to the wall inside Bristol Motor Speedway as the track prepares to go retro for the spring race this week.

running around in a long white coat. One wrong button and you just might end up directly in the middle of Alan Kulwicki's memorable Victory Lane celebration on Sunday afternoon, April 5, 1992. If you crashed the team photo, you

would be the only one holding a cell phone by the way.

Another retro auto on display in the Fan FUNZONE will be one of the chase vehicles from the 1990 bestseller, Jurassic Park. We can't confirm if there will

be actual dinosaurs walking around it. The BMS Fan FUNZONE, by the way, is going to have a ton of interactive elements this year, with RC cars that you can race, several fun inflatables, the euro bungee, axe throwing and

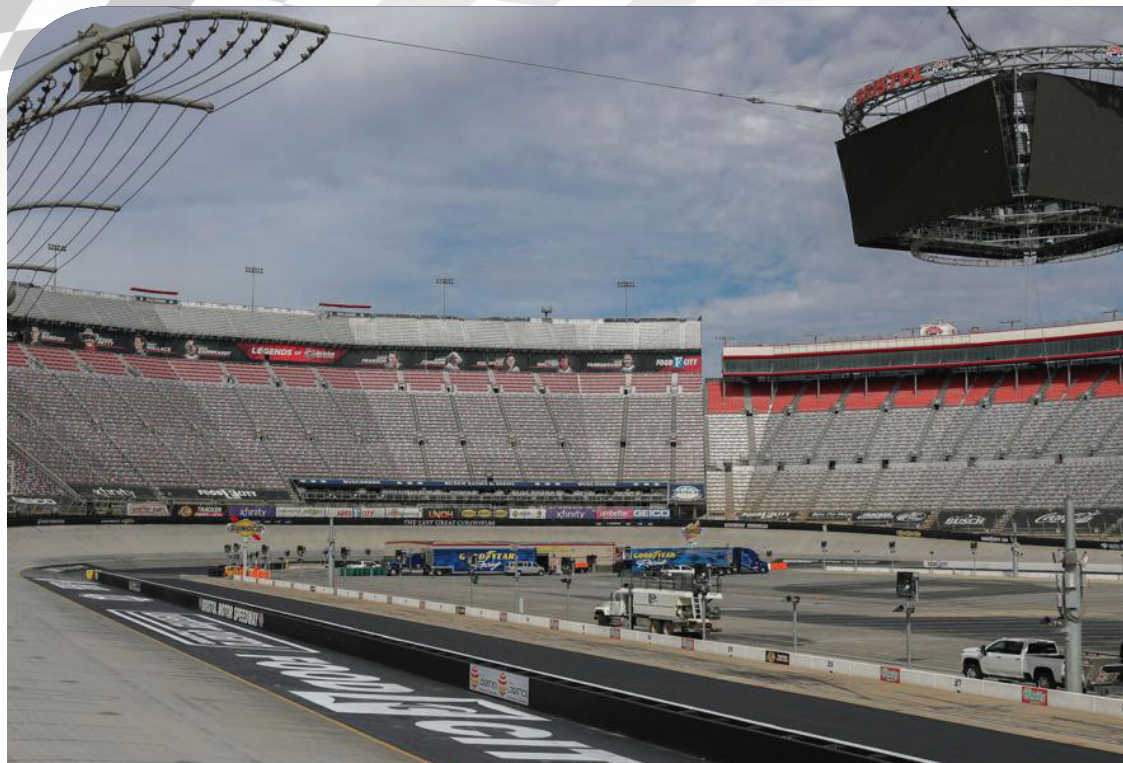
much more. You will certainly want to make a pit stop there before you head to your grandstand seats.

Fans who join us for the weekend will also notice the throwback walls inside the track. They've been painted retro red and white just like they were in 1992. A trio of Cup drivers - Brad Keselowski, Erik Jones and rookie Zane Smith - helped get the painting started several weeks ago when they were here for a top-secret test session. Those walls have seen a lot of action over the years and have gained much notoriety for being the only black walls on the circuit for a long time. Don't worry, the retro red and white is only going on for this throwback Food City 500 weekend. After the race is over, the BMS Ops team will return them back to their new traditional black

color for September's Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

Perhaps the best visual element of the overall throwback theme is the vintage race logo. When Food City came on board as the entitlement sponsor of the Bristol spring Cup race, the logo that you see right now was the very first Food City 500 logo in NASCAR history. It's snazzy appearance with bold colors and lines has been a longtime fan favorite.

By the way, for those keeping score that's 33 consecutive years as the entitlement sponsor of the Food City 500 for the popular regional grocery chain. That ranks second all-time for event sponsors in NASCAR history and gives a glimpse of the commitment and dedication that Food



EMILY BALL | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

After three years of hosting a dirt race in the spring, Bristol Motor Speedway has returned to concrete for this week's festivities on the 'World's Fastest Half-Mile.'

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Closed, Larry Proffitt says, "On The Lord's Day."

City has to Bristol Motor Speedway and the sport of NASCAR Cup Series racing.

On the entertainment side, BMS is planning to go vintage as well with longtime headliners Kenny Wallace and John Roberts once again doing what they do best on Sunday afternoon (noon -1 p.m.) on the Food City Fan Zone Stage before the start of the Food City 500. The pair will interview drivers, talk about the race and definitely work in some antics and high jinks. You can look forward to a fast 60 minutes of fun, so you better arrive to the stage early.

Inside the oval, longtime ESPN pit reporter Dr. Jerry Punch, who worked the race here in 1992 for ESPN, and his daughter, rising NASCAR pit reporter Jessie Punch, will give us all the scoop during the weekend on Colossus TV.

Another entertainer who will be making a popular return to resume his duties as Bristol event dignitary and ambassador will be professional wrestler Bill Goldberg. This will be Goldberg's fourth appearance at Bristol Motor Speedway since he nearly broke the Internet when he picked up and carried Chase Elliott across the stage during driver intro ceremonies in 2019.

Finally, the popular '80s band Spank! will crank out their popular 1980s music following Saturday night's WEATHER GUARD Truck Race. Spank! is scheduled to perform after the checkered flag falls on the Food City Fan Zone Stage. Stay tuned to the track's website and social media channels to find out more details about upcoming music and parties that are planned for the

weekend.

Just for fun, let's hop aboard our Bristol Motor Speedway Time Portal and give it a whirl to take us all back in time and find out what has changed, what remains the same and if there are any real comparisons for 1992 to 2024. OK, better buckle-up before we smash the big red button. Hang on!

Time Portal Topic; Back in 1992?; How About Now?

BMS Spring Cup race sponsor; Food City; Food City Reigning Cup Series Champion; Dale Earnhardt Sr.; Ryan Blaney

Cup Rookie of the Year; Jimmy Hensley; Ty Gibbs Bristol Cup track record speed ; 122.474 mph; 132.075 mph. Previous season winner; Rusty Wallace; Christopher Bell

Event dignitary; TN Senator Jim Holcomb; Bill Goldberg,

pro wrestler.

Track walls color; Red and white; Red and white again Track slogan; Racin' the way it ought'a be!; It's Bristol, Baby!

Souvenir Program;

Traditional glossy booklet, \$5; Playbill booklet or digital file, free. Bristol Cup ticket price; \$50; \$50

Food City 500 logo; Cool colorful design; Same cool colorful design. Top drivers; Earnhardt, Wallace, Kulwicki; Blaney, Logano, Elliott, Bell

Track owner; Larry Carrier; Speedway Motorsports.

Large shopping center; Mall of America; Mall of America

Mega social influencers; Paula Abdul / Cindy Crawford; Cristiano Ronaldo / Selena Gomez

U.S. President; George H. W. Bush; Joe Biden

Avg. auto price; \$16,950; \$38,450 Website; GoRacing.com; Bristol Motor Speedway.com. Telephone; Single home phone; Personal cell phone.

Space exploration; Space Shuttle Endeavour; Space X Avg. gallon of gas; \$1.05;

\$3.34 Notebook; Mead Trapper-Keeper; Apple iPad Musicians; U2, REM, Garth Brooks, Creed, Metallica; Taylor Swift, Morgan Wallen, Drake, Luke Combs

Best song; End of the Road by Boyz II Men; Flowers by Miley Cyrus

Track TV announcers; Bob Jenkins, Ned Jarrett, Benny Parsons; Mike Joy, Clint Bowyer, Kevin Harvick

TV pit reporters; Dr. Jerry Punch, Vince Welch, John Kernan; Jamie Little, Regan Smith, Josh Sims

TV network; ESPN; FOX Weekday racing news; RPM 2Night on ESPN2; FOX RaceHub on FS1

Cup car brands; Chevy, Ford, Oldsmobile, Pontiac; Chevy, Ford, Toyota

The Bristol race weekend will feature action in the NASCAR Cup Series with the tradition-rich Food City 500 on Sunday afternoon, March 17 (3:30 p.m., FOX and PRN Radio) with current champ Ryan Blaney, Chase Elliott, Kyle Larson, Joey Logano, Kyle Busch and Denny Hamlin leading the way.

Saturday afternoon's Bush's Beans Practice and Bush's Beans Qualifying for both the NASCAR Cup Series and the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series will set the starting lineups for each race and precede Saturday night's WEATHER GUARD® Truck Race. NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series stars Ben Rhodes, Grant Enfinger, Nick Sanchez, Corey Heim, Ty Dillon and Christian Eckes, among others, are scheduled to take the green flag at 8 p.m. ET for the 250-lap thriller (FS1, MRN Radio). ▶▶▶▶▶

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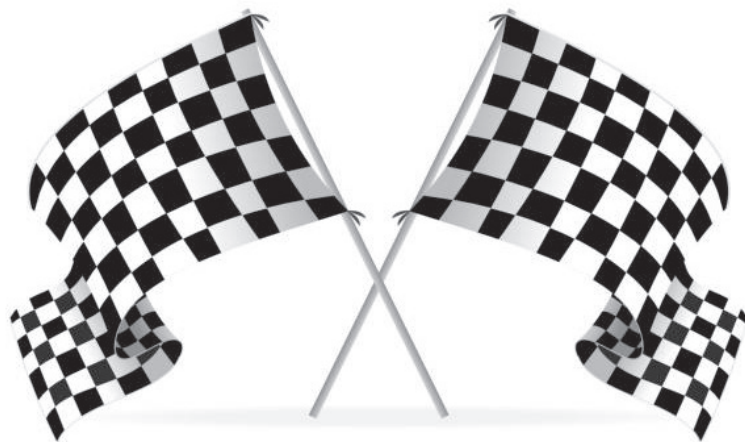
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KYLE PETTY

MUSIC FROM:
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8:00 PM



MARK & DIGGER
11:00-1:00 PM

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BOWMAN

sees the concrete as an 'icon' at BMS

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

It's one of the great debates in NASCAR.

In one corner, we have fans longing for the old bump and grind days of Bristol Motor Speedway.

The other corner prefers the more nuanced style of racing where drivers search for and stick to the fastest groove.

Hendrick Motorsports driver Alex Bowman has listened to both sides.

"It's interesting," said Bowman in a recent Zoom conference. "The groove kind of moves to the top and it's too fast up there to just run into somebody. You can kind of get to a guy on the bottom, but the race car is just so different.

"Back in the day, you could literally pick up the rear tires of the car in front of you and have them lose a ton of grip. Now, the bumper lines are up so you can push a driver forward or take air off the back off his car and get him loose."

Bowman continues to work on his Bristol dance moves entering the Food City 500.

In 13 Cup starts at BMS, he has recorded two three top-10 runs with an average finish of 20.8.

"We've been decent at Bristol," Bowman said. "We've just had a lot of small issues take us out of our best races. Bristol is a place where you

have to be perfect, especially with the Next Generation car.

"It's become more difficult to pass. In the fall race last year, it was really difficult to make up positions on the track. It's a long day and it's hard to be perfect."

Is Bowman happy that the Food City 500 will be run on concrete following a three-year experiment with a dirt surface?

"I think we're all excited about that," Bowman said. "Bristol is such a great race track, and it puts on such a good show. With the fans and atmosphere, everything is so cool about the experience.

"The dirt thing kind of ran its course. The concrete track at Bristol is an icon, so I'm excited to get back there."

Bowman knows the secret to success on short tracks. Along with two-top five finishes as Bristol, he has wins at Martinsville and Richmond.

As for those bump and grind traditionalists at Bristol, Bowman thinks they should stay tuned.

"I feel like it can always come back," Bowman said. "You never know what rules packages are going to change year by year. So, we'll just have to wait and see." 



Alex Bowman, who called the concrete at Bristol an 'icon' in racing circles, hopes to have success at Bristol Motor Speedway. In 13 career Cup Series starts at BMS, he has three 3-top 10 finishes.

AP FILE PHOTO

KESELOWSKI

adjusting to role as car owner and driver

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

It was a race like none other in Bristol Motor Speedway history.

The date was May 31, 2020, and the action was compelling.

Following contact between the lead cars of Chase Elliott and Joey Logano with under two laps remaining, Brad Keselowski navigated past to grab the Food City 500 win.

"I felt like I was in Las Vegas," Keselowski said. "I went from having a bad hand to a full house real quick."

It was a memorable finish, but no one was there to see it. In fact, numerous fans parked outside the massive track just to get a taste of the Bristol

experience.

Keselowski celebrated his victory while wearing a protective face mask. Welcome to the COVID-19 world.

"It was surreal," said Keselowski during a recent press conference at BMS.

Much has changed since that sunny May afternoon in 2020.

Keselowski has moved on from his ride with Team Penske to an ownership role at RFK Racing.

After a three-year experiment with a dirt surface generated mixed reviews, BMS officials have launched a throwback theme featuring traditional red and white striped track walls and the return of concrete around the famed high banks.

"I was really proud to get that win in 2020, but it's good to be back on concrete," Keselowski said.

Entering this season, the biggest storyline for the 2012 Cup champion involves a 92-race winless streak dating back to the April event at Talladega in 2021.

"We don't need any good luck. We just need to avoid bad luck," Keselowski said.

Keselowski, 39, did record seven top-five and 16 top-10 finishes last season en route to an eighth-place finish in points.

"We are right there,"

Keselowski said. "At Daytona, we led the most laps but there was a bunch of wrecks at the end.

"And in 2002 at Bristol, I was leading the Night Race with just 50 laps to go before blowing a tire. When you put yourself into position, good things will happen."

Chris Buescher was the breakout star for the RFK operation last season with a career-best three wins and nine top-fives. Buescher is expected

to perform even better during his fifth season at RFK.

What are the future plans at RFK?

"We certainly have an eye on growth," Keselowski said. "We did a third car at Daytona. If we get more sponsors, we will run some more races.

"With race cars, kids and my other business, there is no shortage of things to do. I'm just trying to keep it all going the right way." 

Brad Keselowski isn't just a driver any longer. The former Penske driver is also a car owner now with RFK Racing. Keselowski, being introduced here prior to a race at Richmond Raceway in Richmond in 2022, won the spring race in Bristol in 2020 that was ran in front of no fans due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



AP FILE PHOTO

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CUP SERIES

champ Blaney looks to make more history at BMS

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

Ryan Blaney conquered the NASCAR Cup Series last season.

This Sunday at Bristol Motor Speedway, the third-generation racer from Trumbull County, Ohio, can earn another piece of NASCAR history.

With a victory in the Food City 500, Blaney would become just the sixth driver to win a race at BMS in each of NASCAR's top three series.

"Hopefully, we can add our name to the list with a win on the Cup side and be part of that small group," said Blaney in a recent Zoom conference.

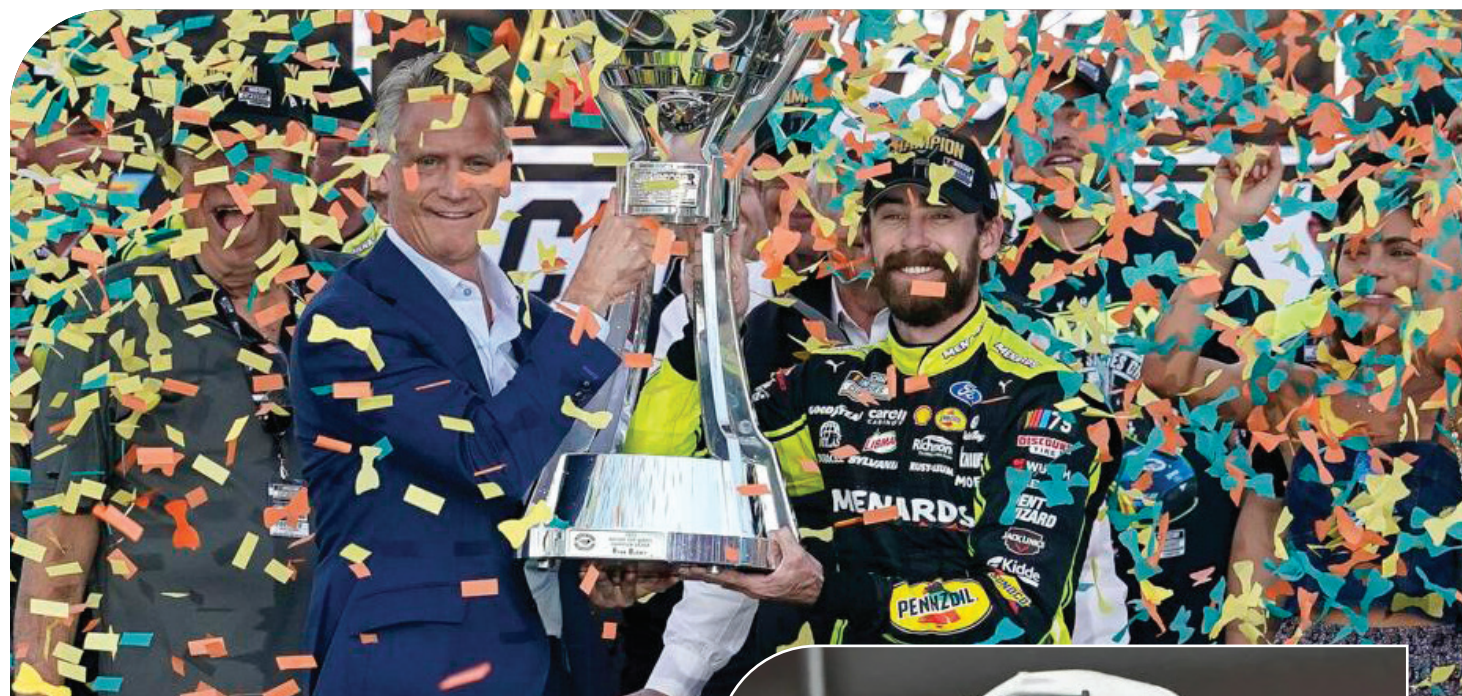
In 14 career Cup starts at BMS, Blaney has an average finish of 19.7 with five top-10s.

"We struggled pretty bad at Bristol last fall," Blaney said. "We need to figure out a different way to go about that race and be more competitive as the night goes on."

"We have been able to put together a strong run around there for 300 laps, but the track changes over the last 200 laps. So, it's just a matter of figuring out we need to do different and then kind of go from there."

While Blaney has been unable to master the Bristol challenge in a Cup car, he embraces the high-speed chess match that every BMS race presents.

"It's a long night, but I do enjoy it," Blaney said. "I feel



Ryan Blaney, center right, received the NASCAR Cup Series Championship Cup from NASCAR president Steve Phelps after winning it at Phoenix Raceway on Nov. 5 in Avondale, Ariz.

like the challenge is about keeping up with the way the track changes, from the bottom of the track to the top. You have to pay attention and make adjustments."

Blaney said BMS has become a guessing game for drivers and crew chiefs.

"When I came into the sport, Bristol was the top dominant," Blaney said. "Now, you have to pay attention to both the top and the bottom as the race goes on. It's pretty tricky. The change of speed on the lanes is really something that makes

the place difficult."

"I enjoyed the dirt races at Bristol, but I'm looking forward to two concrete races this year. That will give us some notes for the fall, and it's always nice to have a notebook for Bristol." ■■■▶

Ryan Blaney could become just the sixth driver to win a race at Bristol Motor Speedway in each of NASCAR's top three series with a win in the Food City 500 on Sunday.



AP FILE PHOTOS

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GRAGSON

wants another victory burnout at Bristol

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

The night of June 1, 2020, represents a signature moment in the career of Noah Gragson.

That's when the Las Vegas native earned his first NASCAR Xfinity Series win at Bristol Motor Speedway after emerging from a three-wide battle in overtime with Brandon Jones and Chase Briscoe.

How happy was Gragson with his triumph?

Consider his post-race comments.

"It's Bristol, baby. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity," Gragson said. "I suck here and I was terrible here in Trucks and Xfinity last year, but my crew chief believed in me and wanted me to run with him."

That crew chief was Dave Elenz from the powerful JR Motorsports team.

In 2022, Gragson added to his BMS resume by winning the Food City 300 Xfinity race in his No. 9 JR Motorsports Chevrolet. That victory marked Gragson's third straight win in the series along with his sixth of the season and 11th career win.

"We won at Bristol in 2020

and there were no fans there," said Gragson, referring to the restricted days of COVID 19. "What a great opportunity it was to race at Bristol in front of fans in 2022 and have the opportunity to win the race."

Flash forward to this weekend at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Following his 2023 suspension for his actions on social media and subsequent departure from the Legacy Motor Club operation, Gragson now competes for the Stewart-Haas Racing Cup in the Cup Series and is coming off a sixth-place finish last week at Las Vegas.

During a Zoom conference last week, Gragson was asked about his transition to the high-profile SHR team.

"We have a great group working on our No. 10 car and everybody else in the shop has been awesome as well," Gragson said.

"I'm proud to be a part of this team. We're going to push harder than we've ever pushed before."

The other Cup drivers for the Stewart-Haas Racing operation are Josh Berry, Chase Briscoe and Ryan Preece.

"I've tried to lean on everyone around me to just get

their thought process on things and be able to think outside the box more, which is always good," Gragson said. "I don't know if there's one specific person or not, but everyone's pretty good to talk to."

The subject of Bristol Motor Speedway figures to be a popular topic of discussion for Gragson and his SHR buddies next week.

"I don't know why but we still suck (at Bristol), and my attitude is that we've got to figure this out," Gragson said. "We had a really fast car there in 2020 and the win in 2022 was special because we were terrible in practice."

"It's a great feeling to do a burnout at Bristol and drive up to Victory Lane. I want to experience that again." 



BRISTOL HERALD COURIER FILE PHOTO

Crew members push Noah Gragson's car to the inspection area prior to qualifying for the Food City 500 in 2022 at Bristol Motor Speedway. Gragson has switched team, driving now for Stewart-Haas Racing.

IN THE PINES

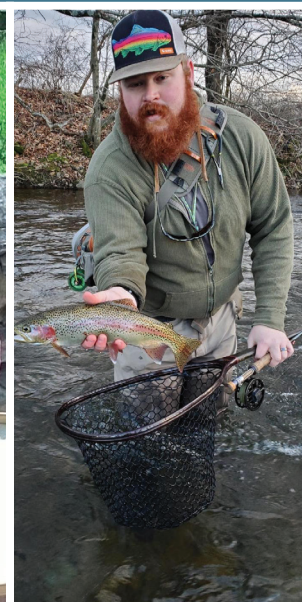
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RACING

cars just part of Yarborough's full life

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

Once upon a time, NASCAR was ruled by a gang of larger-than-life ruffians.

From Dale Earnhardt and Buck Baker to Curtis Turner and Junior Johnson, these men were fearless and earned their legendary status the hard way.

Cale Yarborough, who died in December at age 84 from a genetic disorder, was a leader in that select group.

The heroic feats of the 5-foot-7 Yarborough on and off the track are motion picture worthy.

A native of rural Sardis, South Carolina, Yarborough was an all-state fullback in high school and a two-time Golden Gloves state champion boxer.

Cale even earned a scholarship to play football at

Clemson. All this after losing his father in a private plane crash at age 11.

There was nothing timid about Cale. At age 20, he lied about his age to enter the Southern 500 at fearsome Darlington Raceway before NASCAR officials caught on.

With his powerful build and confident nature, Yarborough manhandled his car to 83 career NASCAR Cup wins and three championships.

To a kid growing up in far Southwest Virginia, Cale represented a gunslinger figure from the glory days of Hollywood westerns. He simply pushed his car to the front and asked questions later.

Unlike many of the current NASCAR drivers who learn the sport on fancy racing simulators, we could relate to a guy who paid his dues in



JOHN BEACH | BHC FILE PHOTOS

Cale Yarborough, considered one of NASCAR's all-time greatest drivers and the first to win three consecutive Cup titles, died on Dec. 31. He was 84.

sticky tobacco fields and short tracks.

It was fitting that Cale mastered the most brutal challenges. Consider that he earned nine wins at Bristol

Motor Speedway, leading every lap in the 1973 Southeastern 500.

Of course, Cale was also involved in an incident that helped elevate NASCAR onto the national stage. Flash back to the final stages of the 1979 Daytona 500 where the cars driven by Yarborough and Donnie Allison bumped several times.

After exiting his car, Yarborough engaged in a wild brawl with both Donnie and his brother Bobby.

From the Deep South to the Midwest, the network television audience was captivated by this unscripted drama.

Yarborough had a couple ties to the Mountain Empire. He began his career driving

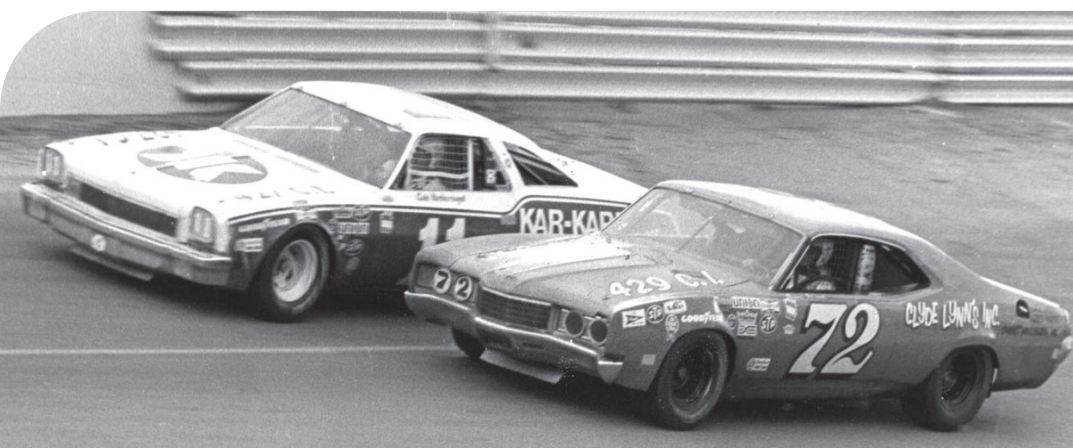
for Johnson City car owner Herman Beam in 1963 and was sponsored by Ron's Ford of Bristol when he drove for the Wood Brothers team in the 1960s.

This is the same Cale who wrestled alligators, snakes and bears, was struck by lightning twice, survived two airplane crashes and drove in the famed 24 Hours of Le Mans Road race along with the Indianapolis 500.

How is that for a full life?

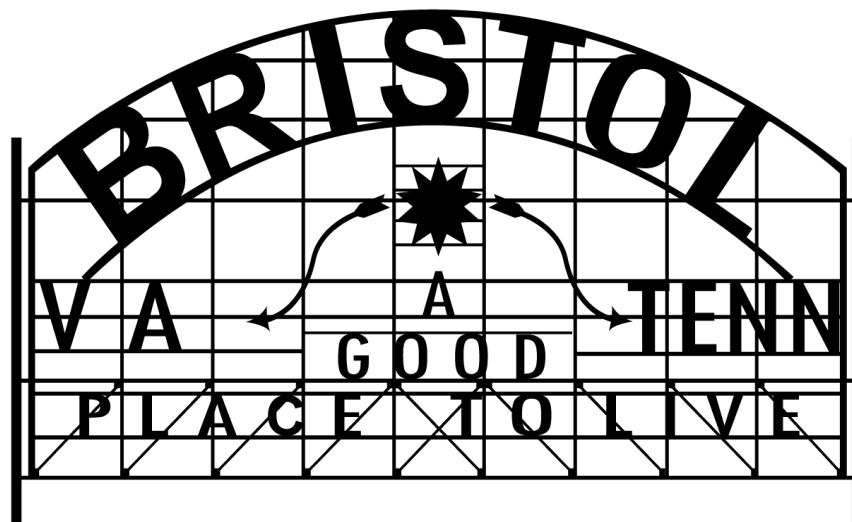
Yarborough, who was inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame in 2012, became involved in several business ventures such as ranching in his later years.

More respect is due for NASCAR's last blue-collar hero. 



Cale Yarborough (11) passes Benny Parsons (72) on the outside during the 1973 Southeastern 500 NASCAR Cup Series race at Bristol. Yarborough led all 500 laps that day, the only time a Bristol Cup race has been won leading flag to flag.

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FULL SPEED

docuseries meant to attract younger fans

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

The NASCAR world is long overdue for an image makeover.

From pit road and the press box to the grandstands and sponsor suites, new faces and a wider range of voices should be welcome in a sport that has grown old, bland and predictable.

Consider the new Netflix five-part docuseries NASCAR: Full Speed.

Following a long wait and considerable hype, the production has received positive reviews from all angles.

The goal here is to attract a younger and hipper audience that prefers to stream entertainment and information over their fancy phones instead of actually reading a newspaper or watching network news.

Rather than crashes and worn-out stereotypes, the Full Speed producers have found an interesting mix of intrigue on and off the track.

The Netflix magic has generated big dividends for the Formula One world, which has seen increased interest from fans in the United States from its "Drive to Survive" docuseries.

Formula One has exotic venues, flashy drivers and breathtaking speeds, but there is one big problem with the



EMILY BALL | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

It is vital to the future of racing at Bristol Motor Speedway that young fans are included in the mix. The Full Speed docuseries was developed as a method to meant to attract a 'younger and hipper' audience to the sport.

picture.

The same driver and team dominate every race. Of course, we're talking about three-time defending world champion Max Verstappen and the Red Bull Racing juggernaut.

There is much more action in the boardrooms of Formula One than on the track.

Full Speed offers highlights of tight competition along with revealing interviews and introductions to family members.

Episode one focused on Cup superstar Denny Hamlin.

Along with gaining insight into Hamlin's emergence as

NASCAR's resident bad guy, viewers were treated to a rare look behind the curtains.

We saw Hamlin's luxurious Lake Norman home, which features a bowling alley, recording studio, gym and a glass-walled garage to display his Daytona 500-winning racecar.

The Hamlin segment included his role as a team owner and quest for an elusive Cup series title.

Drivers such as Bubba Wallace, William Byron, Joey Logano, Tyler Reddick, Ryan Blaney, Christopher Bell, Ross Chastain and Kyle Larson

are also featured among the five episodes.

It was cool to see how Byron progressed from iRacing at his Charlotte home on a high-tech driving simulator to championship contender.

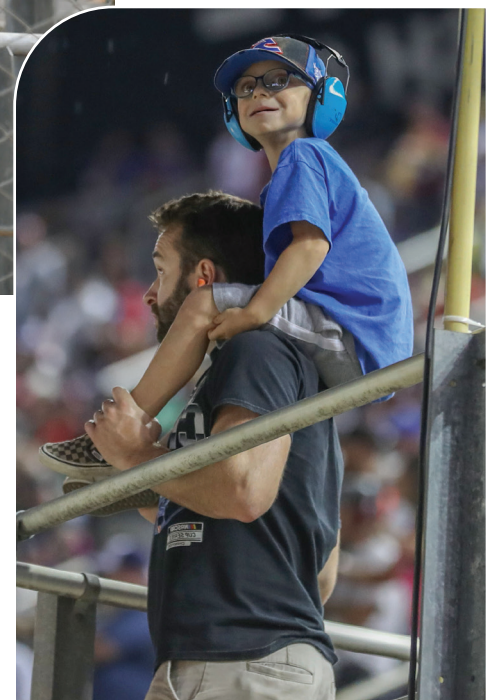
The rollercoaster of emotions as Wallace chased his first playoff bid was compelling.

And the description of Logano as a "insurance salesman" was amusing.

After enduring countless fluff pieces with the same

handful of celebrity drivers on network pre-race shows, it's refreshing to see a different perspective that pulls no punches.

The salty language might turn off some traditional fans, but a dose of Full Speed is welcome, informative and healthy.



The series premiered on Jan. 30, 2024, and each of the five episodes are still available on Netflix.

The episode list is as follows:

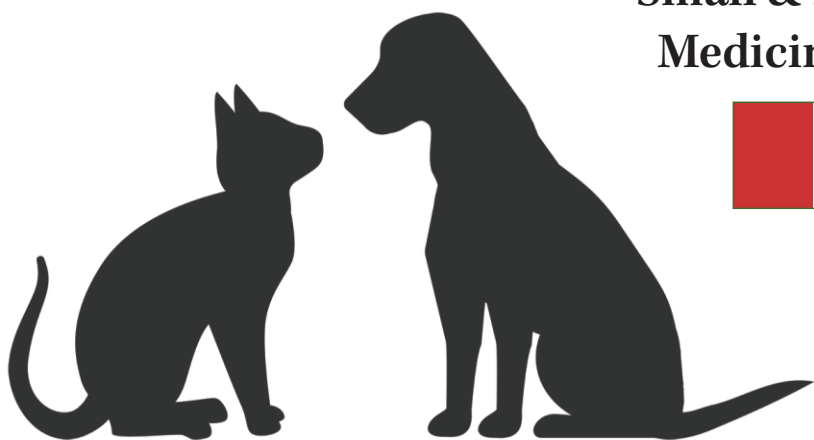
- Episode 1: Playoffs or Bust
- Episode 2: Another Gear
- Episode 3: One Last Push
- Episode 4: Not in the Plan
- Episode 5: Across the Line



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BELL

mastered BMS dirt in '23 spring race

ALLEN GREGORY
Bristol Herald Courier

A dirt expert has finally mastered the dirt version of Bristol Motor Speedway.

Following victories by Joey Logano and Kyle Busch the past two years, Christopher Bell led the final 100 laps late Sunday night en route to winning the Food City Dirt Race.

"Let me tell you, those were some of the longest laps in my entire life," Bell said. "This place is so much fun, whether it's dirt or concrete."

Following a spin by Kyle Busch, the race came down to an eight-lap shootout between Bell and Tyler Reddick.

NASCAR declared Bell the winner when several drivers were involved in a last-lap crash that created a caution.

There was nothing cheap about this victory, as Bell fended off numerous challengers.

"When the cushion (groove) got up there on the top, it was very tough because you couldn't drive it super hard without getting sucked in," Bell said.

"I just can't get over how long those laps felt. We were making 20-second laps while moving the wheel 18 times a corner."

In honor of the 30th anniversary of the death of former racer Alan Kulwicki,

Bell performed a Polish Victory Lap after the race.

"I'm just so grateful to be here," Bell said.

Bell's pit crew only changed tires once during the entire race.

Reddick said he enjoyed the battle despite his runner-up effort.

"That was a lot of fun and really intense towards the end," Reddick said. "I thought I had the edge, but it wasn't quite there."

"I was going to see what I could on that last lap, but we will never know it would have worked."

Austin Dillon took third, followed by Ricky Stenhouse, Jr. and Chase Briscoe. The top five finishers all have extensive dirt racing backgrounds.

"I have to thank (Speedway Motorsports) for all of the hard work they've done with this dirt racing," Dillon said. "I don't care what anybody says, that was an amazing show throughout the field."

Dillon ran second in the first two stages but had no answer for Bell and Reddick.

"I had a lot of fun," Dillon said. "The car just wasn't good enough against the fence when it mattered."

The show began with 62-degree temperatures and sunny skies. Those conditions helped generate a much



EMILY BALL | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Christopher Bell celebrates on the hood of his car after winning the Food City Dirt Race last April at Bristol Motor Speedway. Bell was the first noted "dirt expert" to win the event in the three-year run of dirt races at BMS.

larger audience compared to Saturday's truck race.

Pole-winner and pre-race favorite Kyle Larson captured the first 75-lap stage. Following a compelling four-wide battle punctuated by several slide-job passes, Reddick took the second stage.

Fans rose to their feet on lap 157 of the 250-lap event when

Larson spun after hitting a bump in Turn 3.

Moments later, Larson got together with Ryan Preece for caution number 11. Larson's car suffered suspension damage, ending his night.

Early in the race, Preece openly expressed his frustration with Larson for an incident.

"I'm guessing (Preece) was paying me back for whatever I did earlier," Larson said. "He ran me straight into the fence. We crashed and my car broke."

"It sucks, but I should just be mad at myself for spinning out earlier and putting myself back there."

According to Stenhouse, it was a matter of making the

best of his situation.

"We didn't have to run up front, but we methodically kind of picked and chose lanes," Stenhouse said.

As is common with dirt tracks, the racing surface and operating room for drivers gradually changed throughout the night. Recent work by BMS track officials created progressive banking in the 24-28-degree range with several grooves.

By lap 150, it was common to see drivers opting from four separate lanes.

Dirt Late Model star Jonathan Davenport started in the No. 21 spot and finished 33rd. He spun his car on lap 81 going around the fourth turn.

Davenport said he enjoyed his high-profile debut in the Cup Series.

"The support from everyone has been overwhelming," Davenport said. "I'm grateful

for this opportunity."

The race was slowed by 14 cautions for 71 laps. The first incident unfolded on lap 12 and involved four drivers, including Bubba Wallace, William Byron and Joey Logano.

Michael McDowell authored the most impressive move of the night when he executed a 360 move to avoid contact during a spin early in the second stage.

Wallace, who led 15 laps of his heat race Saturday night, settled for the No. 12 spot.

Joey Logano, who dominated Saturday's Truck race at BMS, was the first driver to exit Sunday's event.

"I think had a pretty good car, but it seemed like I got caught up in every incident out there," said Logano, who finished last in the 37-car field.



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Christopher Bell on his way to victory at Bristol Motor Speedway last April in the third of three straight spring races held at BMS on dirt.

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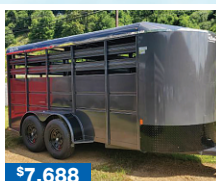
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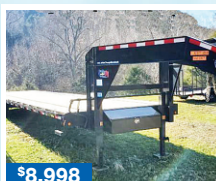
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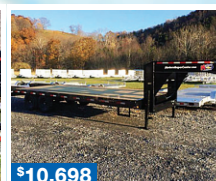
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FOOD CITY 500

*lands on St. Patrick's Day
for fourth time*

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One of the biggest questions surrounding the Food City 500 race weekend at Bristol Motor Speedway is which driver will fill out the blossoming Bristol four-leaf clover?

This spring's Food City 500 on March 17 will be the fourth time that the Cup race day falls on the national holiday.

The drivers who won in those years include David Pearson in 1968, Cale Yarborough in 1974 and Kasey Kahne in 2013. The winner of this year's version of the Food City 500 will join those three to form a complete four-leaf-clover, Bristol style.

The tradition-rich Food City 500 race weekend on March 16-17, which also includes the WEATHER GUARD Truck Race in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series under the lights on Saturday night, March 16, and Bush's Beans Qualifying and Bush's Beans Practice for both the NASCAR Cup Series and NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series on Saturday afternoon, has occupied just about every weekend in March and April over the years.

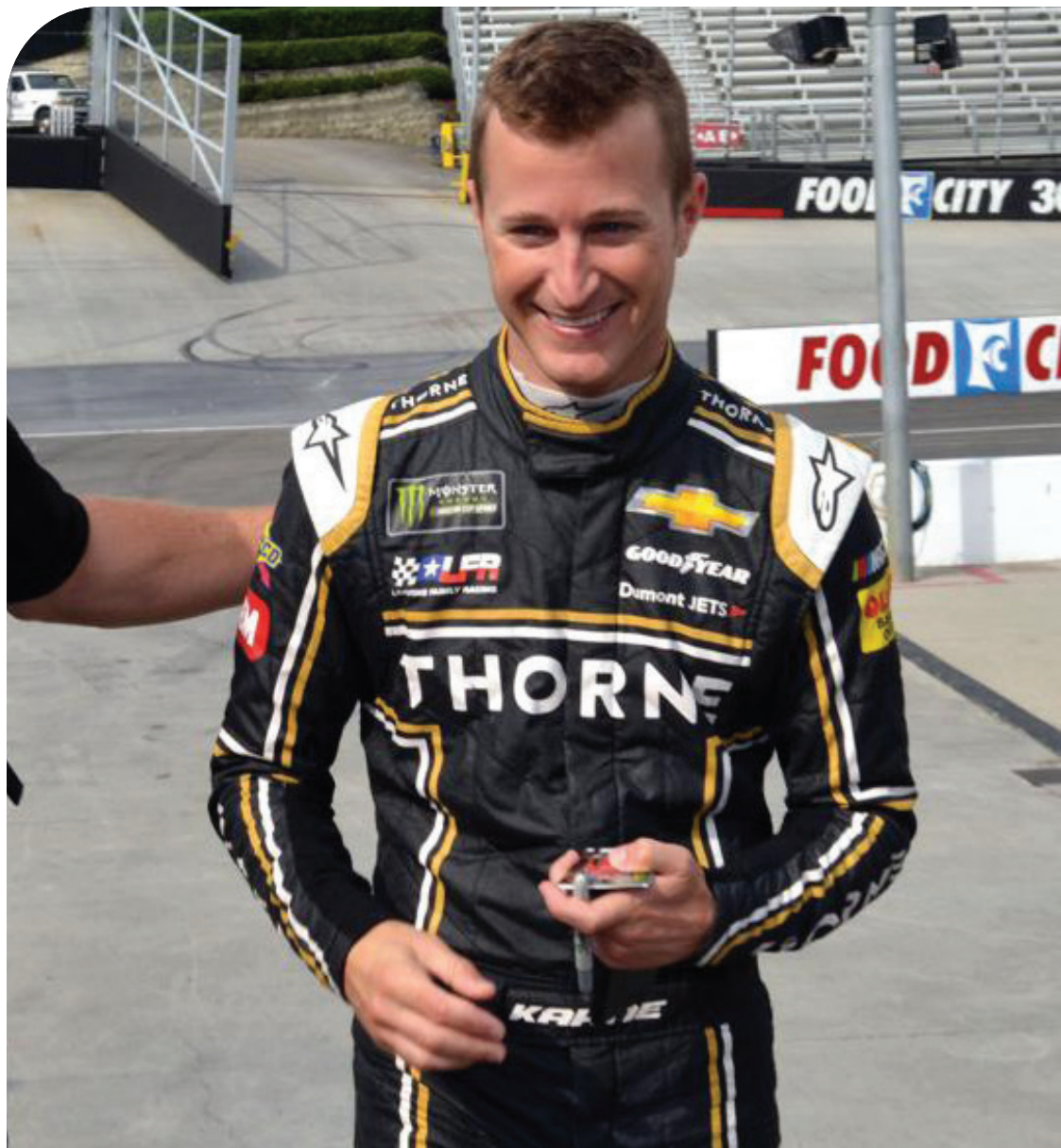
In fact, for those who may have thought the March date assignment was something new, this is actually the 32nd

time that NASCAR's Cup Series will visit the Northeast Tennessee bullring during the month of March for its spring race. There have been 28 April weekends, two in early May and one - the inaugural BMS Cup race - in July.

There has been a total of nine Cup Series winners on St. Patrick's Day in NASCAR history. Those winners include Ralph Moody in 1957 at Wilson (N.C.) Speedway; Jack Smith in 1962 at Savannah (Ga.) Speedway; Fred Lorenzen in 1963 at Atlanta; Pearson at Bristol in 1968; Yarborough at Bristol in 1974; Bill Elliott in 1985 in Atlanta; Sterling Marlin in 2002 in Darlington; Kahne at Bristol in 2013; and Brad Keselowski at Martinsville in 2019.

And while Bristol is focused on taking the fans back in time at this event with some throwback activities surrounding the early 1990s, you can bet that the track will still fully embrace the St. Patrick's Day weekend with all things green and encouraging fans to wear their green and shamrocks in what promises to be a huge party.

"If there's one thing NASCAR Fans love, it's a big party! St. Patrick's Day really



Kasey Kahne was in Bristol in August of 2018 when he announced his retirement that came following that season.

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER FILE PHOTOS



provides a massive platform for those who want to let loose and celebrate their Irish heritage, or simply just have a good time," said Drew Bedard, vice president of marketing for Bristol Motor Speedway. "Our history is connected to this national holiday more than any other track on the circuit, so we are looking forward to providing our guests with an amazing experience."

The most recent Food City 500 on concrete held at Bristol during the month of March was won by Carl Edwards on March 16, 2014. Edwards took over at lap 426 and led the final 78 laps of the race to claim victory. Interestingly, on that day,

Edwards was the first driver in history to be presented the much-coveted BMS Gladiator Sword in Victory Lane by track



Kasey Kahne walks through the infield prior to a Bristol spring race in 2015.

president and general manager Jerry Caldwell.

Matt Kenseth led the most laps of the 2014 Food City

500 with 165, but ultimately finished 13th. The top-five finishers behind Edwards' No. 99 RFK machine was teammate

Kasey Kahne celebrates after winning the Food City 500 at Bristol Motor Speedway in 2013, one of three drivers to win the BMS spring race on St. Patrick's Day.

Ricky Stenhouse Jr., Aric Almirola, Tony Stewart and Australian Marcos Ambrose. Denny Hamlin started on the pole in his No. 11 machine and finished sixth.

The most recent BMS Cup race to be held in March was in 2021, when Joey Logano made history as the first Cup driver to win on a dirt track in more than 50 years when he won the Food City Dirt Race on March 29.

The Bristol race weekend will feature action in the NASCAR Cup Series with the tradition-rich Food City 500 on Sunday afternoon, March 17 (3:30 p.m., FOX and PRN Radio) with current

champ Ryan Blaney, Chase Elliott, Kyle Larson, Joey Logano, Kyle Busch and Denny Hamlin leading the way.

Saturday afternoon's Bush's Beans Practice and Bush's Beans Qualifying for both the NASCAR Cup Series and the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series will precede Saturday night's WEATHER GUARD(r) Truck Race. NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series stars Ben Rhodes, Grant Enfinger, Nick Sanchez, Corey Heim, Ty Dillon and Christian Eckes, among others, are scheduled to take the green flag at 8 p.m. ET for the 250-lap thriller. 



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