

Playoff PUSH



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Hamlin

has become the newest 'bad boy' of Bristol



Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier



Once upon a time, Kyle Busch was the most hated driver at Bristol Motor Speedway. Busch was serenaded by boos before, during and after races.

Instead of sulking, Busch turned those negative reactions into motivational rocket fuel.

With a mix of aggression and intelligence, Busch earned a total of nine Cup wins at BMS.

To make matters worse, Busch often antagonized his haters in snarky post-race interviews. Now consider the case of Denny Hamlin.

For various reasons, Hamlin has emerged as the resident bad boy of Bristol.

From the start to the finish of BMS events, fans boo and jeer Hamlin.

And just like Busch, Hamlin has channeled that negativity into motivation. Hamlin has earned two straight Cup wins at Bristol, including the 2023 Night Race. The vitriol increased when Hamlin teased his detractors in his Victory Lane interview.

"Hey, I beat your favorite driver – all of them," Hamlin said.

Earlier this spring at BMS,

Hamlin relied on tire management and patience to claim the Food City 500.

The 2024 season for Hamlin has been anything but easy for Hamlin – on and off track.

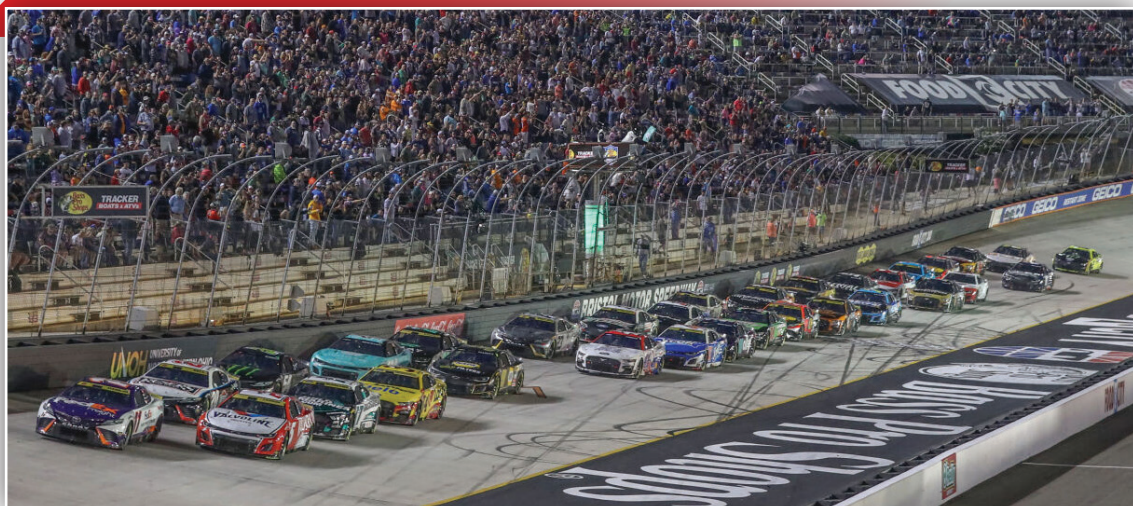
But the most hated men in Bristol will still be a factor in Saturday's Night Race.

Hamlin developed his race craft competing on short tracks across the Mid-Atlantic region. He simply knows when and where to push his car.

As for his detractors, Hamlin has come to accept it.

"At some point I've got to realize that I'm probably not going to win the most popular driver award. I've come to the conclusion of that and I understand it," Hamlin said last year at BMS.

"They think they bother me. But clearly, it's having an opposite effect. I welcome any fan to want to come to the dark side. All five of my fans are still out there chanting my name."



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Denny Hamlin, front row, left, led the pack at the Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway last September. Hamlin, who also won at BMS in March, will be looking for his third straight win at the "World's Fastest Half-Mile."



Contributed photo by Jared C. Tilton, BMS

Denny Hamlin celebrates in victory lane after winning the NASCAR Cup Series Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway last September.

Third Straight

Bristol win could add much to Hamlin's legacy

David McGee
Bristol Herald Courier

If Denny Hamlin wins Saturday's Bass Pro Shops Night Race, he would etch his name alongside some legendary racers at Bristol Motor Speedway.

The Chesterfield Virginia native enters Saturday sporting a two-race BMS win streak. While a win assures Hamlin would advance to the next round of the NASCAR playoffs in the quest for his first series championship, a third straight victory on the high-banked 0.533-mile oval would add his name to two incredibly short lists.

Only four drivers have captured three or more consecutive victories in Bristol history since the track opened in July 1961, track records show.

Fred Lorenzen was the first, wheeling the Holman-Moody Ford to two and then three straight wins in 1963-64. Cale Yarborough did Lorenzen one better, winning all four races here during the 1976 and 1977 seasons.

Darrell Waltrip began a remarkable seven-consecutive race winning streak with wins in 1981-82. Nobody else was able to join that club until Kurt Busch broke through, winning

three straight in 2003 and 2004, over the 127 NASCAR Cup Series races contested here.

Bristol master Waltrip's remarkable seven in a row spanned from March 1981 through May of 1984 – prompting vendors to sell "Anybody but Waltrip" T-shirts. A streak that appears all but unapproachable in today's ultra-competitive climate.

Yarborough's success like Waltrip's, came while driving cars fielded by Junior Johnson.

It would also be Hamlin's fifth Bristol victory, tying him for seventh all-time among BMS winner with Hall of Famers Jeff Gordon and David Pearson. Hamlin's four victories currently has him tied for ninth all-time with Bobby Allison and Carl Edwards.

Lest anyone think Hamlin is a heavy favorite to claim that third straight Bristol trophy, consider the list of drivers who won two straight here but fell short of claiming three in a row over the past 64 seasons. That list includes the aforementioned Pearson, Bobby Allison, Richard Petty, Dale Earnhardt, Alan Kulwicki, Rusty Wallace, Kyle Busch (twice) and Brad Keselowski.



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Denny Hamlin celebrates his win in the Food City 500 with a burnout in March at Bristol Motor Speedway... Hamlin is looking to become the fifth driver to win a third straight race at Bristol Motor Speedway on Saturday at the Bass Pro Shops Night Race.



BHC file photo

Darrell Waltrip began a remarkable seven-consecutive race winning streak in Bristol with wins in 1981-82.



AP file photo

Fred Lorenzen admires the trophy he won in 1962 for finishing ahead of the field in the Atlanta 500 Stock Car at the Atlanta International Raceway. Lorenzen wheeled the Holman-Moody Ford to two and then three straight wins in 1963-64 in Bristol.

Between Kyle Busch's victory in the 2018 Food City 500 and Hamlin's current success, Bristol fans witnessed ten consecutive Cup races without a repeating winner.

Also, should Hamlin sweep both 2024 races, it would be just the second time this century and the first time in two decades, flashing back to young Kurt Busch's Bristol prowess while driving for car owner Jack Roush.

A Bristol single season sweep has been accomplished 14 times by nine drivers – seven of whom are enshrined in the NASCAR Hall of Fame – and the Busch brothers who are almost certainly bound for that honor.

Drivers who swept two wins in one season at BMS include Fred Lorenzen (1964), Bobby Allison (1972), Cale Yarborough (1974, 1976, 1977),

Richard Petty (1975), Darrell Waltrip (1981, 1982, 1983), Dale Earnhardt (1985, 1987), Rusty Wallace (2000), Kurt Busch (2003) and Kyle Busch (2009).

Consider also that Hamlin's most recent success came during wildly different circumstances in the last two BMS races.

Last fall saw a number of early lead changes but once Hamlin took control of the race, he led the final 135 laps which were run caution free. He won the Bass Pro Shops Night Race by 2.4 seconds over Kyle Larson.

This spring's Food City 500 saw a track record 54 lead changes in a wild race marked by unexpected tire wear, frequent green flag pit stops to change tires, and 98 laps run under caution. Hamlin's decisive pass for the lead of teammate Martin Truex, Jr.,

occurred with just 17 laps remaining.

Odds makers will doubtless list Hamlin as one of the pre-race favorites. However, history and the precarious nature of Bristol racing – where calamity seemingly awaits in every corner – suggest his task will be far from easy.



John Beach / BHC file photo

Car owner Junior Johnson (left) and driver Cale Yarborough share victory lane after winning the 1973 Southeastern 500 at Bristol, a race where Yarborough led all 500 laps around Bristol. Cale won all four races in Bristol during the 1976-77 seasons.



BHC file photo

Kurt Busch, celebrating his win in the Bass Pro Shops NRA 500 in 2018, was the last driver win three straight Cup Series races at Bristol Motor Speedway, completing the feat in 2003-04.

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Regular Season

champ Reddick wants so much more

Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier

Tyler Reddick entered the 2024 NASCAR Playoffs as the regular season champion.

How much does 23XI Racing driver want to follow up that achievement with the overall title?

"It is the whole reason I'm doing this, so pretty bad," Reddick said.

The next step on that championship hunt comes in Saturday's Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

In nine career Cup starts on the concrete version of BMS, Reddick has recorded an average finish of 20.3. But he has a good feeling about this week.

"I think Bristol could be a really good race for us," Reddick said.

The last run for Reddick at BMS turned into an endurance test.

"We got in a wreck on lap 40 when we stayed out and had a bunch of damage," Reddick said. "I was kind of stuck behind cars running a pace, multiple laps down at the tail of the field, but I was able to drive my way up to the No. 15 spot."

Considering the chaos all around him, Reddick came

away pleased with his salvage job in the No. 45 Toyota.

"I was kind of doing it every stage with a destroyed race car," Reddick said. "At the very end, I got kind of hung up behind cars with completely corded tires. Next next thing I knew, Martin (Truex) and Denny (Hamlin) were right there with me.

"End even with a wrecked race car, I felt like we were pretty good. We weren't racing for much of anything that Bristol race, but I was really pleased with how fast our car was with how much damage we had."

The 2024 regular season offered a much smoother ride for Reddick. He recorded 11 top five finishes, including wins at Talladega and Michigan.

"That's just a testament to all the hard work that everyone at 23XI puts into this," Reddick said. "We're on Year 4 of their goals, right?"

"It's just been really fun the last two years to be a part of this process of building up to where we want to be."

Reddick finished a career-best sixth in the 2023 Cup standings.

"I think with the way this



Tyler Reddick is greeted by Denny Hamlin after winning the NASCAR Cup Series race at Michigan International Speedway on Aug. 19 in Brooklyn, Mich. Reddick has an average finish of just 20.3 in nine starts at Bristol Motor Speedway but has a good feeling about Saturday.

format is, even last year, (the championship) was within our reach," Reddick said. We had two great opportunities at mile-and-a-halfes to lock ourselves in and avoid having to race in at Martinsville.

"Just the way this format is, you could be having an off year or just an okay year, and still have a really good shot at it."

According to Reddick, his team led by crew chief Billy Scott has the right mindset to make a deeper run in 2024.

"I don't think we are carrying ourselves around like we are the baddest group around. I think we just do a

good job of each individual on the team doing their part throughout the week," Reddick said.

"We just show up to the race track and we have a good amount of focus and we do a really good job of getting the results that we need, even on the days that we have issues. That has been a nice thing about this year. A number



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Tyler Reddick finished second in the Food City Dirt Race at Bristol Motor Speedway for two years in a row before struggling to 30th in the return to concrete in the spring. He entered the NASCAR Cup Series playoffs as the regular season champion.

of times, countless times it feels like, we have things not go our way and we have been able to fight through it and still get the results."

Bristol Race Week

Schedule

Bristol Motor Speedway Race Schedule

Thursday, Sept. 19

- 1 p.m. – Bush's Beans 200 Practice, ARCA Menards Series
- 2 p.m. – Bush's Beans 200 Qualifying, ARCA Menards Series
- 3 p.m. – UNOH 200 by Ohio Logistics Practice, NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series
- 3:35 p.m. – UNOH 200 by Ohio Logistics Qualifying, NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series
- 4:45 p.m. – Bush's Beans 200 Driver Introductions, ARCA Menards Series
- 5 p.m. – Bush's Beans 200 Race (200 laps, 106.6 miles), ARCA Menards Series
- 7:30 p.m. – UNOH 200 by Ohio Logistics Driver Introductions, NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series
- 8 p.m. – UNOH 200 by Ohio Logistics Race (55/110/200 laps, 100.6 miles), Craftsman Truck Series
- 11:30 p.m. – DJ Sterl the Pearl's Foam Party (Food City Fan Zone Stage)

Friday, Sept. 20

- 2:35 p.m. – Food City 300 Practice, NASCAR Xfinity Series
- 3:10 p.m. – Food City 300 Qualifying, NASCAR Xfinity Series
- 4:35 p.m. – Bass Pro Shops Night Race Practice, NASCAR Cup Series
- 5:20 p.m. – Bass Pro Shops Night Race Qualifying, NASCAR Cup Series
- 7 p.m. – Food City 300 Driver Introductions, NASCAR Xfinity Series
- 7:30 p.m. – Food City 300 Race (85/170/300, 159.9 miles), NASCAR Xfinity Series
- 10:30 p.m. – Tim Dugger post-race concert (Food City Fan Zone Stage)

Saturday, Sept. 21

- 3 p.m. – BMS Fan Track Walk
- 4 p.m. – Trackside Live with Kenny Wallace and John Roberts (Food City Fan Zone Stage)
- 5 p.m. – Pre-Race Infield Experience
- 5:30 p.m. – Pre-Race Concert
- 7 p.m. – Bass Pro Shops Night Race Driver Introductions, NASCAR Cup Series
- 7:30 p.m. – Bass Pro Shops Night Race (125/250/500, 266.5 miles)



BMS photo

The 16 drivers that qualified for the NASCAR Cup Series playoffs will conclude the Round of 16 on Saturday at the Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway. Four drivers will be eliminated from the postseason chase.

Bowman Focused

on advancing through Round of 16

Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier

Entering the 2024 NASCAR Playoffs, Alex Bowman was forced to deal with rumors surrounding his future at Hendrick Motorsports.

Bowman hopes to steer the attention back to his on-track performance this weekend at Bristol Motor Speedway.

"I don't think you can change much now," Bowman said. "I've been working super hard and trying to do everything that I possibly can. I just have to go do my thing and go from there."

Bowman began his Playoff

push in style with a fifth-place finish at Atlanta Motor Speedway. He hopes to build off that effort in the Bristol Night Race.

In 14 Cup starts at Bristol Motor Speedway, the 31-year-old Bowman has crafted an average finish of 19.6 with three top-fives.

The big question entering Saturday is whether drivers will have to contend with a repeat of the tire management battle of attrition that unfolded in the Food City 500 in March.

"We just need to buy in and execute at a high level over 10

weeks."

That top-five effort at Atlanta came after a month that Bowman described as "miserable."

"We had the crash at Indy. We crashed at Daytona. And obviously we had some issues at Darlington," Bowman said. "It was frustrating, but we've had some fast race cars sprinkled in there."

Don't expect this calm native of Tucson, Arizona, to get caught looking ahead.

"Honestly, I'm so week-to-week that I don't even know what the next tracks are after



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Alex Bowman drives up high to avoid contact with Kyle Larson during the NASCAR Cup Series race in Richmond, Va. in March. Bowman's future with Hendrick Motorsports has been the subject of speculation, but he is focused on advancing in the playoffs.

the first round," Bowman said. "We're super focused on the Round of 16. And obviously with Atlanta, Watkins Glen and Bristol, there's so many things that could happen.

"It's pretty easy to have someone else ruin your day at two of those three. Yeah, we just need to go execute at a high level, and go week-to-week from there."

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

Truex

has one final chance to conquer Cup Series at Bristol

Bristol Motor Speedway

When you ask Martin Truex Jr. how his relationship is going with Bristol Motor Speedway, you get an odd look, a smile and finally a chuckle.

Admittedly, the relationship needs a little work.

In 34 Cup Series starts at Bristol, Truex has managed to salvage just three top five finishes, and only five top 10s.

When you look at his performance at other tracks it is well above average. For some reason he and Bristol just don't get along.

"It's never been my best track," Truex Jr. said. "I don't go there beaming with confidence, but over the years I've had a few opportunities."

The driver of the No. 19 Bass Pro Shops machine will head to the .533-mile all-concrete, high-banked bullring for the final time as a full-time Cup competitor on Sept. 19 for the crown jewel Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

Truex would like nothing more than to grab a Playoff victory in front of his sponsor Bass Pro Shops at their title race in pursuit of his second NASCAR Cup championship at the ultra-challenging Bristol Motor Speedway, and finally conquer The World's Fastest Half-Mile.

When you say it like that it sounds like the ending to a fairy tale.

Truex has seen BMS's unique Victory Lane high atop the Ballad Health Care Center, just not from inside a Cup car.

He won a Xfinity Series race at Bristol in 2004 and also claimed a Craftsman Truck Series victory on the Bristol dirt in 2021. And he nearly grabbed that first Cup victory this past March, on St. Patrick's Day, but Denny Hamlin got in the way

at the end.

"We were so close there in the spring, I feel like, and I could taste it," Truex said.

"... Yeah, I guess this tire management thing fit into my wheelhouse.

"Man, the difference was just coming out of the pits so far behind Denny. I had to use mine up more on the last run. The last four, five laps of the race, were cord. (But) I gave it a hell of an effort."

Should Truex get that Cup

win this week he would join an elite list of drivers who have conquered Bristol in all three of NASCAR's top touring circuits. Those drivers include Mark Martin, Carl Edwards, Kyle Busch, Joey Logano, Brad Keselowski and Kevin Harvick.

"Man, it would be so awesome," Truex said. "It would be incredible. Yeah, we've not had much luck there, but we've been getting better at it, I feel like, and in the spring, we ran really strong. It's going

to be a whole new tire situation and everything. Hopefully, we can go there and have a chance. It would be a cool race to win."

Win or not, after this season Truex plans to set sail in a large body of water somewhere on the planet and throw out his fishing rod. That's his ultimate happy place.

"Enjoy life, race a little for fun—I'm not sure exactly yet," Truex said. "I'm still trying to figure things out."



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Denny Hamlin (11) and Martin Truex Jr. (19) battle for first place in the final stage of the Food City 500 at Bristol Motor Speedway. Hamlin finished on top, while Truex Jr. was second. Truex Jr., who is retiring after this season, needs a victory on Saturday to join an elite list of drivers who have conquered Bristol in all three of NASCAR's top touring circuits.

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Wagering isn't just for stick and ball sports - NASCAR bets also popular

David McGee
Bristol Herald Courier

A race fan wanting to place a wager on their favorite driver to win Bristol's Bass Pro Shops Night Race, the NASCAR Cup championship or any combination of "prop" bets today has nearly limitless gambling choices.

Online sports wagering is legal in Tennessee, so fans can log on with their phone and spontaneously bet from their seat through any of a dozen or so licensed vendors.

Or they could spend hours analyzing trends and probabilities before plunking down hard-earned cash.

Can't go to the race? Tennessee and Virginia residents have the same opportunity with mobile or online betting or by venturing out to the Bristol Casino's sportsbook.

NASCAR.com and most of the nation's top sportsbooks provide updated odds and background information on every driver in the field.

Sharp-eyed readers may already know that Mike Szvetitz of FrontPageBets provides weekly analysis and odds before each NASCAR Cup Series race on the Herald Courier's website.

For the recent playoff opener at Atlanta Motor Speedway two weeks ago, his picks were

Ryan Blaney - who lost there in February in the closest three-wide photo finish in NASCAR history - and Penske Racing teammate Joey Logano. Both were at plus 1,000 or 10-1 odds of winning.

Brad Keselowski, Denny Hamlin and Kyle Busch were next in line of favorites, followed by Kyle Larson, Chase Elliott, William Byron at 14-1 and previous Atlanta winner Daniel Suarez at 18-1.

Regular season champion Tyler Reddick was his "long shot" pick based on a best finish of fifth in 2023 in his eight career starts there.

Szvetitz picks obviously fared well, with Logano taking the win over Suarez and locking himself into the second round of the playoffs. Blaney finished third, while Larson and Hamlin saw their days ruined by crashes.

NASCAR.com listed odds prior to qualifying, with Blaney, Logano and Busch all at 10-1.

Clearly, the oddsmakers did their homework.

Such predictions typically look first at a driver's performance at a given track. Ryan Blaney, for example had 12 starts at Atlanta with a

driver rating of 99.1. He'd run 81% of his laps there in the top 15 with an average finish of 10.6.

In addition to past performances, oddsmakers also consider how a driver and team are performing leading up to the race.

That's a bit tougher this year because the regular season ended with a flurry of surprise winners as Austin Dillon, Harrison Burton and Chase Briscoe each emerged from far left field to land in victory lane in three of the final four regular season races.

Nine different drivers visited

victory lane in the regular season's final nine races.

Michigan winner Tyler Reddick claimed the regular season driver's title over Kyle Larson by a single point.

Let's consider the performance of six drivers - Kyle Larson and Chase Elliott from Chevrolet, Blaney and Logano from Ford along with Reddick and Hamlin from Toyota.

Over the final six races of the regular season, Larson had the best average starting position at 8.1, narrowly better than Hamlin's 8.3 and Elliott's 9.0. Blaney had a starting average



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

The Hard Rock Sportsbook at Bristol Casino presents a race fan wanting to place a wager on their favorite driver to win Bristol's Bass Pro Shops Night Race, the NASCAR Cup championship or any combination of "prop" bets with nearly limitless gambling choices.

NASCAR bets

of 9.1, Reddick was at 9.3 and Logano 11.8.

That didn't hold true at Atlanta with Hamlin having issues and starting 38th, Reddick 23rd and Elliott 16th. However Logano, Blaney and Larson all qualified in the top 10.

followed by Larson (13.3), Elliott and Hamlin at 15.0 each, Blaney (16.5) and Logano (21.6). All except Reddick had at least one finish outside the top 30, with Hamlin suffering two and Logano three finishes in the 30s.

At the playoff opener, Logano, Blaney,

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Reddick sported the best six-race finishing average at 10.0 to close out the regular season, including one win,

Reddick and Elliott each scored above

Continued on page 28

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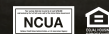
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Tire Test

at BMS in July revealed "heavy" tire falloff

David McGee
Bristol Herald Courier



Concerns about tire falloff remain following a day-long Goodyear tire test Tuesday at Bristol Motor Speedway, according to a group of NASCAR Cup Series drivers who spent the day speeding around the high-banked half-mile concrete oval.

The tire manufacturer and NASCAR returned to a Bristol track that refused to take rubber during the spring Food City 500, prompting unusually high tire wear, a wild day of drivers attempting to conserve their tires in a memorable contest won by Denny Hamlin, who secured his fourth Bristol victory.

The test was held in advance of the September Bass Pro Shops Night Race, the first cutoff race in the NASCAR Cup Series playoffs.

Tuesday began with cars, equipped with a tire compound like what ran here in the spring, spreading out and running laps in all three grooves. But virtually no rubber adhered to the racing surface and teams reported visible cording of the tires after a modest number of laps, Cup Series driver Chase Briscoe said following the test.

"It's hard to say how much you can really take away from the test but, for us, we still had some tire issues – cording

and things like that. There's no rubber really laid down so I'd say it was an improvement from what we had last time," said the driver of the No. 14 Ford for Stewart-Haas Racing.

"It's weird. I don't quite understand how the spring race played out like it did. It would be different if it was the first Next-Gen race we ever had here but we ran other races and never had that problem. Even today we were replicating it to a certain extent," he said.

By late afternoon, black tire rubber was plainly visible in the bottom groove of turns 1-2 and turns 3-4. Other segments of the track – the middle and up near the wall -- showed little to no trace of rubber, which typically adheres to the track and fosters an opportunity for two and three-wide racing.

Briscoe said tire wear "got better" throughout the day but drivers "committed" the bottom groove during the afternoon portion of the test after speedway officials applied a coat of PJ1 traction compound.

"Early, we could run 25 or 30 laps. There at the end I ran 40 laps and, at the end of 40, the tires were shot. They didn't have much left," Briscoe said. "If there were more cars here then who knows what it



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

A member from NASCAR Cup series driver Justin Haley's team holds onto a tire as several drivers participated in a tire test at Bristol Motor Speedway on July 16.

would look like. It creates a unique challenge and it puts a lot in the driver's hands and the team's hands to figure that out."

Briscoe said his final 40-lap run was flat out versus a race environment where he could have paced himself and preserved the tires.

"We felt like there was still some heavy wear, so they put the PJ1 down here about halfway through the day. I vote for the PJ1 and I'm a fan of it as long as it stays on the narrow side," said Chris Buescher, driver of the No. 17 Ford for Roush-Fenway-Keselowski Racing. "PJ1 seems to wear out a little bit more throughout a race; throughout a weekend. My hope is, if it wears down, it

would start moving the groove around,"

Buescher said Tuesday's 95-degree temperatures were beneficial.

"We needed a hotter day on track to be able to compare data. It was cold last time and there were theories around that being some of the issues. We needed some more heat in the racetrack," Buescher said. "We were hoping we would come in and a little bit of temperature would be able to make it that 40 to 60-lap window and control your own destiny a little if you could save some. Ultimately there was still pretty heavy wear."

Austin Dillon, driver of the No. 3 Chevrolet for Richard Childress Racing, was also a

fan of the PJ1.

"Goodyear realized the PJ1 was very helpful for the tire and made it live a lot longer. The resin that they ran last time doesn't seem to let the rubber lay down and it just dusts up," Dillon said. "Laying rubber down, you can run longer runs. The tire felt fine and we had good lap times. The tire did fall off quite a bit. Over 30 laps it was almost a second; pretty good falloff."

John Hunter Nemechek, driver of the No. 42 Toyota for Legacy Motor Club, said he enjoyed the tire conservation required in the spring race.

"I know I am probably one of the few, but I really enjoyed

Continued on page 26

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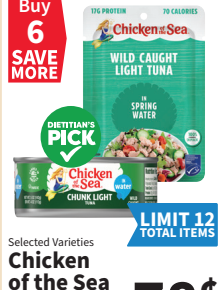


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Dale Jr.

in Xfinity race at BMS for second straight year

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It's hard to believe that more than two decades ago three simple words were said in Bristol Motor Speedway's Victory Lane that would catch fire and ignite a proud mantra.

It's. Bristol. Baby.

The buzz from that statement continues to connect with NASCAR Nation. Many of them flock to BMS's North Lot at Entrance No. 1 and take social media selfies with the large historic monument dedicated to that

singular moment that proudly welcomes visitors to the venue.

It was a wild scene in that victory lane.

As Dale Earnhardt Jr. emerged from his red No. 8 Chevy one hot night in August 2004 he was asked by television reporter Bill Weber why winning the crown jewel Night Race was so special.

The third-generation driver didn't hesitate. He quickly uttered the memorable phrase like it was on a script.

"It's Bristol, baby!" a jubilant

Earnhardt said.

Since then that phrase has taken on a life of its own. Today it remains as meaningful and powerful as it was that night. It has become synonymous with Bristol Motor Speedway and the amazing experience it offers to fans.

"I'm just really, really, really, glad that I won tonight, because this is like the Daytona 500," Earnhardt Jr. said at the time. "This is like winning at Charlotte, or like winning in

Atlanta. These are the tracks, the historic tracks that have been around for years that are at the top of my list (of places) I want to win."

As BMS celebrates the 20th anniversary of that momentous occasion, the legend himself is returning to suit up and compete on the storied high banks once again.

Earnhardt Jr. is entered in the Food City 300 NASCAR Xfinity Series Race on Friday night, Sept. 20.

It is the second consecutive year that he will race in that event, which is also the Xfinity Series regular season finale.

Last year Earnhardt Jr. had fans on the edges of their seats as he was in contention for most of the night.

He led 47 laps and appeared to be heading to Victory Lane. A faulty wire ultimately ended his night and he finished 30th overall.

"Somehow the shift control caught on fire," Earnhardt Jr. told the media following the race. "Saw some smoke in the car. I smelt it, and I said, 'I hope that's not me,' but that last lap, I saw a big fire ball down in the tunnel, in the car. I felt it, obviously.

"My uniform was burning up. I was like, I can't keep going. I've got to stop. Usually

when you stop, the fires get bigger. So I pulled over by the pit stall, and some of those guys are pretty alert, and they helped me out.

"I hate it. We were going to finish in the top 10, maybe top-five. Had a shot at winning it, if the car was going to run good at the end. But trying not to mess nobody's night up at the same time, it was hard. But I had fun."

After the dejected Earnhardt pulled off his racing helmet last year, he was able to immediately put on his team owner hat from JR Motorsports and with a big smile go celebrate in Bristol's victory lane anyway.

One of his team drivers, Justin Allgaier, ultimately won the race in the No. 7 JRM Chevy.

"I was happy about our car winning," Earnhardt continued during his post-race interview in the BMS Media Center. "I couldn't wait to see Justin. Couldn't wait to tell him how proud and happy I was."

Earnhardt Jr. will once again be at the controls of his popular blue and yellow No. 88 Hellmann's Mayonnaise Chevy Camaro as he puts his focus on grabbing another Bristol Motor Speedway victory.



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Dale Earnhardt Jr. will return to Bristol Motor Speedway for a second straight year to compete in the Food City 300 Xfinity Series race on Sept. 20.

Elliott Expects

'wild' Night Race at BMS

Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier

Chase Elliott knows all about consistency and the pressure of NASCAR Cup Series Playoff racing.

Since his first full-time season in 2016, NASCAR's most popular driver has only finished outside the top 10 in points once.

Does Elliott have a formula for the Playoffs?

"I can't really say that I have changed my process. But I have certainly had a lot of fun in the last 10 weeks just because there is something on the line," Elliott said in a recent press conference.

"I enjoy that aspect of being a competitor and showing up each week because it could be a make-or-break weekend for

you. I think that is fun, you know."

Elliott figures to have more fun in Saturday's Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

NASCAR fans are also an expecting different degree of Bristol fun, especially considering the bizarre nature of the 2024 Food City 500 where tire management became the storyline.

"The Bristol thing in the spring was just such a weird deal, and it sounds like they really want to recreate that from everything that I have heard," Elliott said. "I don't know that we knew why that happened in the spring.

"But if they successfully fabricate craziness, then yeah, it's going to be wild. I don't

know that you are really going to know that until you get there, and you are kind of in the moment.

For now, Elliott is taking a wait and see approach.

"You just have to get in there and try to figure it out. Because some of those things are going to be hard to plan for."

For Elliott, the appeal of the postseason comes down to big stages and high drama.

"You go to a race and your back is against the wall and you have to perform," Elliott said. "You either show up and get it done. Of if you didn't, you get your report card that day and you didn't do a good enough job.

"I like that aspect of that there are intense moments over the course of that stuff.

Am I a fan of all the aspects of it. Maybe not necessarily, but I do enjoy the fun meter of being a competitor in the last 10 weeks."

Elliott has recorded three top-five finishes in points. He failed to make the Playoffs in 2023 but emerged with his only championship in 2020.

"I think our odds are good," Elliott said. "I don't really take

a look at a particular round being a problem any more than any other. I think that if we can just get the things that we need to do, going right, I think we can be good all the way through it.

"It's just about being there on a weekly basis. You do that, and you will get your chances."



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Chase Elliott crosses the final line to win the NASCAR All-Star at Bristol Motor Speedway in 2020. The Cup Series champion in 2020, Elliott expects Saturday's Night Race to be as "wild" as the Food City 500 at BMS in the spring.

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Continued from page 18

the spring race. It made the driver have to save tires instead of going all out every lap and try to predict where the falloff was going to be and there were crew chiefs making strategy calls, like whether to pit under green," Nemechek said.

The pit areas of Nemechek and Buescher featured long tables filled with engineers poring over data on laptop computers.

"Some people say it's chaos I guess, but overall, I thought

it was a great race," Nemechek said. "From a spectator standpoint I went back and watched the race (on TV). I thought it was great."

Briscoe said he was glad not to have to make decisions about tires but expects the product this fall will be just fine.

"I think you'll see the same Bristol race where the bottom is really, really good and by the end it will be top and bottom," Briscoe said.



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Several NASCAR Cup Series drivers participated in the Goodyear tire test at Bristol Motor Speedway in July in anticipation of the Bass Pro Shops Night Race coming in September.

Plenty of Work

left as Suarez reaches playoffs for second time

Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier

Daniel Suarez earned his second berth into the NASCAR Cup Series playoffs in 2024 after winning the second race of the season at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

Now comes the hard part for the pilot of the No. 99 Trackhouse Racing Camaro.

"I feel like as a driver I'm much better than two years ago," said Suarez in a recent interview. "The team is better than two years ago. We're smarter and we're faster. But we still have a lot of work to do."

The next work project for Suarez and his team comes in Saturday's Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

According to Suarez, his team has already solved some

major clues.

"We found some stuff in the last couple months and definitely got in the right direction," Suarez said. "With that being said, we are not winning races yet."

"We can compete consistently in the top 10. But we know that to make it to a championship that's not going to be enough. We have to continue to push and continue to learn."

Compared to mega teams like Hendrick Motorsports and Joe Gibbs Racing, the Trackhouse operation is an underdog. Trackhouse driver Ross Chastain failed to make the 2024 Playoffs.

"In 2022, Trackhouse was actually one of the best teams. This year hasn't been the same," Suarez said. "We've been working extremely hard, but the results have been

slower than we thought they were going to be.

"I wouldn't consider myself one of the favorites for the championship but that's not going to change my mentality of who am I as a racecar driver and the potential of the 99 team and Trackhouse."

The mentality of all drivers and crew chiefs changes as the stakes increase and the spotlight intensifies during the Playoffs.

Suarez knows the game.

"Drivers are very greedy, and I believe we've been given pretty much everything we got at least for the last couple months," Suarez said. "Maybe there is a little bit more risk that we can take at times in the playoffs."

"But every round is going to be different, every race is going to be different and every driver is going to be in a

different position so it's pretty important to be aware of the whole situation and just do your thing."

Does Suarez feel any more pressure to make a Playoff run compared to the 2022 season?

"The pressure is the same," Suarez said. I feel fortunate that I have great people around me that have helped me a lot with the mental aspect. I love pressure."



AP File Photo

Daniel Suarez qualified for the NASCAR Cup Series playoffs by winning at Atlanta Motor Speedway on Feb. 25 in Hampton, Ga.

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Continued from page 15

their season average finish. Larson and Hamlin, not so much.

During the regular season, Hamlin led laps in 19 of 25 races. Larson led in 18 races and Reddick 15 races, while Blaney, Elliott and Logano each led in 13 regular season races.

Larson and Hamlin find themselves near the bottom of the standings after miserable days in Atlanta.

What about Bristol?

In short track races, Hamlin and Larson have each scored 200 points with Hamlin taking two victories – including the Food City 500 – while Larson is winless on short tracks this year. Chase Elliott, Joey Logano and Bubba Wallace round out the top five of drivers who've scored the most short track points thus far.

Hamlin is riding a two-race win streak at Bristol, the first driver to win back-to-back here since Kyle Busch in 2017-2018. Hamlin's four victories – including three in the Bass Pro Shops Night Race -- rank him second among active drivers at Bristol, trailing only Kyle Busch.

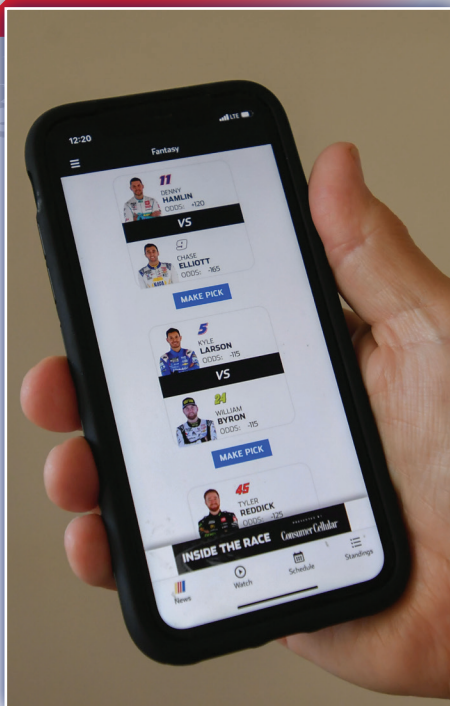
Speaking of Busch, while the two-time series champion failed to make the playoffs, his Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet has figured in the outcome of several races. He finished a close second to Chase Briscoe at Darlington and second to Harrison Burton at Daytona. Busch ran with the leaders much of the day at Atlanta before finishing seventh.

Busch returns to Bristol where he is the all-time winner among NASCAR's top three series. He has amassed nine total Cup wins plus nine in the Xfinity Series and five in the Craftsman Truck Series. That is a remarkable 10% of his total 231 NASCAR victories.

Larson scored one Cup victory here in the 2021 Night Race, with some help from teammate Chase Elliott who hounded leader Kevin Harvick after those two made contact on the race track, allowing Larson to slip past.

Larson posted top-five finishes in four of the last five Bristol races and scored an Xfinity Series victory.

Logano is already locked into the next round, but his three Bristol victories – including two in the Night Race – define him as a favorite. He is also one of just



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Gamblers can use their phones to place bets on any number of sporting activities, including NASCAR races like this weekend at Bristol Motor Speedway.

six drivers to win Bristol in all three of NASCAR's top divisions.

In the five BMS races contested during the Gen 7 car era, Toyota driver Christopher Bell has one victory, one second- and one third-place showing.

In search of a darkhorse? Consider Chris Buescher who captured the 2022 Bass Pro Shops Night Race and led 169 laps. He finished fourth in this race last year but has struggled to win in 2024.

All of that means absolutely nothing when the field takes the green flag on Sept. 21 and spends the next three hours slicing and dicing around the world's fastest half-mile oval.

And if the last month of the season has taught race fans nothing else, it's that anyone can win on a given day – with the right mix of circumstances and a dose of racing luck.



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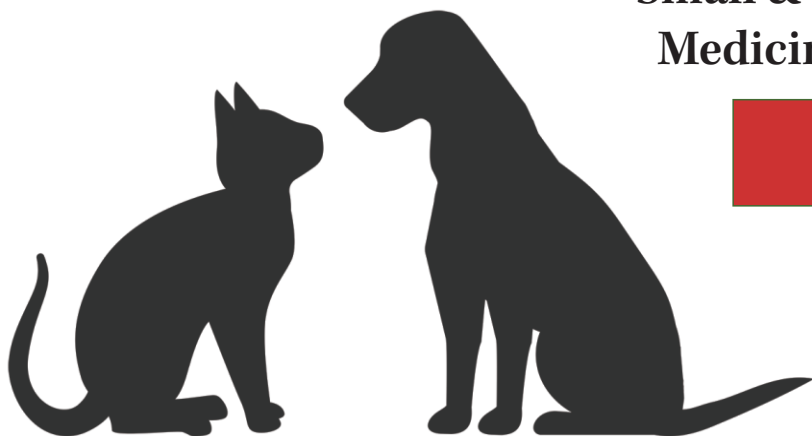
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Playoff PUSH

Briscoe anxious for the BMS challenge

Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier

The NASCAR Cup Series Playoffs began in nightmarish fashion for Chase Briscoe at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

Just before the conclusion of the race's first stage, Briscoe's car slammed into the rear end of the Kyle Larson machine.

Both drivers escaped serious injury, but Briscoe's hopes for a championship run dimmed.

Just one week before Atlanta, Briscoe earned his Playoff bid by winning the regular season finale at Darlington Raceway.

"That's NASCAR," Briscoe said. "You can be on top one week and you can be at the very bottom of the mountain the next week."

Briscoe hopes to resume his

climb in Saturday's Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

"I think we're gonna be really good," Briscoe said. "We've started in the top three or four there the last three times we went to Bristol. We've obviously had really good speed and we tested there about a month-and-a-half ago."

What did Briscoe learn from that Goodyear tire test at Bristol on July 16?

"I think you will see the same typical Bristol racing where we start at the bottom early and then by the end you can run the top and bottom," Briscoe said.

Of course, the tire issues in the Food City 500 this spring

stumped drivers and crew chiefs.

"I don't quite understand how that race played out like it did," Briscoe said. "It would be different if that was the first Next Gen race we ever had here, but we've ran other races and never had that problem. Now it's like a thing to figure out. It's definitely interesting, but also a lot of fun."

Briscoe was among a group of six drivers during the July test at BMS that was held in muggy weather.

"Early in the day we could run 25 to 30 laps and there at the end I ran 40 laps," Briscoe said. "If there were more cars there, we would've had more

rubber. It does create a unique challenge and it puts a lot in the driver's hands."

In four Cup starts on the concrete version of BMS since 2021, Briscoe has recorded an average finish of 16.8.

"The slick and wore out tracks, where we're slipping and sliding around is typically when we're our strongest, so I feel like we can win any of the

two," Briscoe said.

"I'm excited for the challenge, truthfully. I think we all knew when the Playoffs started that (Atlanta) was gonna be the one race where you could really dig yourself a big hole."



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

NASCAR Cup Series driver Chase Briscoe participated in the Goodyear tire test in July at Bristol Motor Speedway in preparation for the Bass Pro Shops Night Race slated for Saturday.

Byron expects the unexpected in Night Race

The 2024 Food City 500 at Bristol Motor Speedway was a treat for fans and a puzzle for teams.

Due to tire attrition, the drama featured 54 lead changes and ever-changing storylines.

Drivers, crew chiefs and engineers have spent the past few weeks trying to figure out a plan for Saturday's Night Race at BMS.

What sort of show does Hendrick Motorsports driver William Byron and his veteran crew chief Rudy Fugle anticipate?

"I don't know what to expect yet," said Byron in a recent press conference. "I think we have some things to dissect

and learn.

"It really depends on how the resin interacts with the track and how the tires wear, or if they rubber in the track and it's like how it's been in the past. I'm not sure really. We'll see."

Since every Hendrick driver qualified for the Playoffs, Byron will not be lacking for race notes at Bristol and beyond.

"Obviously, everyone is out for themselves. It's how the format is and the way the racing is, but you have to share notes and learn from each other to have the best possible result," Byron said.

"I feel like we do that really well. Nothing really changes

in the Playoffs, but it's nice to have everyone pulling the rope in the same direction."

Byron finished a career-best third in the NASCAR standings in 2023.

Evers since opening the 2024 season with a victory in the Daytona 500, Byron has been considered a strong bet for the championship.

"We've been waiting for this for a while," Byron said. "As soon as you win early in the season, your goals shift to what can we do to get bonus points and what can we do to get ready for the fall."

"That's really what has been it's about. Now we get to put that to the test and take it one race at a time."

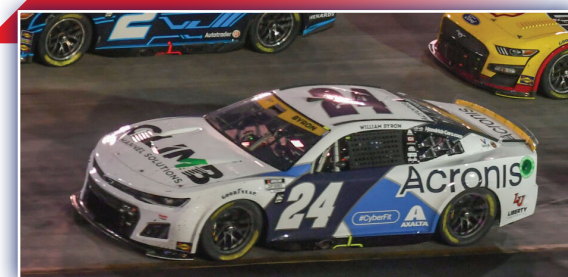
The latest Playoff hunt for Byron began with a ninth-place effort at Atlanta Motor Speedway. That positioned him in the No. 4 position in the standings.

Byron has won a total of 13 Cup events during his seven-year run with the Hendrick empire. The next step is a title.

"I think we have prepared a lot for the Playoffs and I feel

we're in a decent spot. I feel good," Byron said.

In 10 starts on the BMS concrete, Byron has crafted an average finish of 17.4 with four top top-10 runs.



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

William Byron (24) drives next to Austin Cindric (2) and Joey Logano (22) at the 2022 Bass Pro Shops Night Race. Byron isn't sure what to expect in the 2024 race slated for Saturday at Bristol Motor Speedway.

2024 NASCAR Schedule

Cup Series

Feb. 3 — x-Busch Light Clash at The Coliseum (Denny Hamlin)
 Feb. 15 — x-Bluegreen Vacations Duel 1 at DAYTONA (Tyler Reddick)
 Feb. 15 — x-Bluegreen Vacations Duel 2 at DAYTONA (Christopher Bell)
 Feb. 19 — DAYTONA 500 (William Byron)
 Feb. 25 — Ambetter Health 400 (Daniel Suárez)
 March 3 — Pennzoil 400 presented by Jiffy Lube (Kyle Larson)
 March 10 — Shriners Children's 500 (Christopher Bell)
March 17 — Food City 500 (Denny Hamlin)
 March 24 — EchoPark Automotive Grand Prix (William Byron)
 March 31 — Toyota Owners 400 (Denny Hamlin)
 April 7 — Cook Out 400 (William Byron)
 April 14 — AutoTrader EchoPark Automotive 400 (Chase Elliott)
 April 21 — GEICO 500 (Tyler Reddick)
 April 28 — Würth 400 (Denny Hamlin)
 May 5 — AdventHealth 400 (Kyle Larson)
 May 12 — Goodyear 400 (Brad Keselowski)
 May 19 — x-NASCAR All-Star Open (Ty Gibbs)
 May 19 — NASCAR All-Star Race (Joey Logano)
 May 26 — Coca-Cola 600 (Christopher Bell)
 June 2 — Enjoy Illinois 300 (Austin Cindric)
 June 9 — Toyota / Save Mart 350 (Kyle Larson)
 June 16 — Iowa Corn 350 Powered by Ethanol (Ryan Blaney)
 June 23 — USA TODAY 301 (Christopher Bell)
 June 30 — Ally 400 (Joey Logano)
 July 7 — Grant Park 165 (Alex Bowman)
 July 14 — The Great American Getaway 400 Presented by VisitPA.com (Ryan Blaney)
 July 21 — Brickyard 400 Presented by PPG (Kyle Larson)
 Aug. 11 — Cook Out 400 (Austin Dillon)
 Aug. 18 — FireKeepers Casino 400 (Tyler Reddick)
 Aug. 24 — Coke Zero Sugar 400 (Harrison Burton)
 Sept. 1 — Cook Out Southern 500 (Chase Briscoe)
 Sept. 8 — Quaker State 400 available at Walmart, Hampton, Ga. (Joey Logano)
 Sept. 15 — Go Bowling at The Glen, Watkins Glen, N.Y.
Sept. 21 — Bass Pro Shops Night Race, Bristol, Tenn.
 Sept. 29 — Hollywood Casino 400, Kansas City, Kan.
 Oct. 6 — YellaWood 500, Talladega, Ala.
 Oct. 13 — Bank of America ROVAL 400, Concord, N.C.
 Oct. 20 — South Point 400, Las Vegas
 Oct. 27 — NASCAR Cup Series Race at Homestead-Miami, Homestead, Fla.
 Nov. 3 — XFINITY 500, Ridgeway, Va.
 Nov. 10 — NASCAR Cup Series Championship, Avondale, Ariz.
 x-non-points race

Xfinity Series

Feb. 19 — United Rentals 300 (Austin Hill)
 Feb. 24 — RAPTOR King of Tough 250 (Austin Hill)
 March 2 — The LiUNA! (John H. Nemechek)
 March 9 — Call811.com Every Dig. Every Time. 200 (Chandler Smith)
 March 23 — Focused Health 250 (Kyle Larson)
 March 30 — ToyotaCare 250 (Chandler Smith)
 April 6 — DUDE Wipes 250 (Aric Almirola)

April 13 — Andy's Frozen Custard 300 (Sam Mayer)
 April 20 — Ag-Pro 300 (Jesse Love)
 April 27 — BeRivers 200 (Ryan Truex)
 May 11 — Crown Royal Purple Bag Project 200 (Justin Allgaier)
 May 25 — BeMGM 300 (Chase Elliott)
 June 1 — Pacific Office Automation 147 (Shane Van Gisbergen)
 June 8 — Zip Buy Now, Pay Later 250 (Shane Van Gisbergen)
 June 15 — HyVee Perks 250 (Sam Mayer)
 June 22 — Sci Aps 200 (Christopher Bell)
 June 29 — Tennessee Lottery 250 (John H. Nemechek)
 July 6 — The Loop 110 (Shane Van Gisbergen)
 July 13 — Explore The Pocono Mountains 225 (Cole Custer)
 July 20 — Pennzoil 250 Presented by Advance Auto Parts (Riley Herbst)
 Aug. 17 — Cabo Wabo 250 (Justin Allgaier)
 Aug. 23 — Wawa 250 Powered by Coca-Cola (Ryan Truex)
 Aug. 31 — Sport Clips Haircuts VFW Help A Hero 200 (Christopher Bell)
 Sept. 7 — Focused Health 250, Hampton, Ga. (Austin Hill)
 Sept. 14 — Mission 200 at the Glen, Watkins Glen, N.Y.

Sept. 20 — Food City 300, Bristol, Tenn.

Sept. 28 — Kansas Lottery 300, Kansas City, Kan.
 Oct. 5 — United Rentals 250, Talladega, Ala.
 Oct. 12 — Drive for the Cure 250 Presented by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, Concord, N.C.
 Oct. 19 — Ambetter Health 302, Las Vegas
 Oct. 26 — NASCAR Xfinity Series Race at Homestead-Miami, Homestead, Fla.
 Nov. 2 — NASCAR Xfinity Series Race at Martinsville, Ridgeway, Va.
 Nov. 9 — NASCAR Xfinity Series Championship, Avondale, Ariz.

Craftsman's Truck Series

Feb. 16 — Fresh From Florida 250 (Nicholas Sanchez)
 Feb. 24 — Fr8 208 (Kyle Busch)
 March 1 — Victoria's Voice Foundation 200 presented by Westgate Resorts (Rajah Caruth)
March 16 — Weather Guard Truck Race (Christian Eckes)
 March 23 — XPEL 225 (Corey Heim)
 April 5 — Long John Silver's 200 (Christian Eckes)
 April 12 — SpeedyCash.com 250 (Kyle Busch)
 May 4 — Heart Of America 200 (Corey Heim)
 May 10 — Buckle Up South Carolina 200 (Ross Chastain)
 May 18 — Wright Brand 250 (Corey Heim)
 May 24 — North Carolina Education Lottery 200 (Nicholas Sanchez)
 June 1 — Toyota 200 (Corey Heim)
 June 28 — Rackley Roofing 200 (Christian Eckes)
 July 12 — CRC Brakleen 175 (Corey Heim)
 July 19 — TSport 200 (Ty Majeski)
 Aug. 10 — Clean Harbors 250 (Ty Majeski)
 Aug. 25 — LiUNA! 175 (Layne Riggs)

Sept. 19 — UNOH 200 presented by Ohio Logistics, Bristol, Tenn.

Sept. 27 — Kubota Tractor 200, Kansas City, Kan.
 Oct. 4 — Love's RV Stop 250, Talladega, Ala.
 Oct. 26 — NASCAR Craftsman Series Race at Homestead-Miami, Homestead, Fla.
 Nov. 1 — NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series Playoff Race at Martinsville, Ridgeway, Va.
 Nov. 8 — CRAFTSMAN 150, Avondale, Ariz.

Bristol Turned 'wild'

again at unpredictable Food City 500

Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier

It was a Sunday to remember at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Before the start of the NASCAR Cup Series race, motorsports and baseball fans were buzzing over a comment from FOX Sports studio host Chris Myers that BMS could "soon host a Major League Baseball game."

Then, things really got wild. In one of the strangest events in track history, the Food City 500 morphed into a small-town Late Model or Street Stock showcase.

Due to severe tire wear, drivers and crews had to scrap their original race strategy and revert to Plan B or even Plan C.

Less than halfway through the event, drivers were reducing speed to prevent blowouts.

How crazy was this melodrama?

There were a record 54 lead changes, and only five cars finished on the lead lap. That was the fewest since a 2004 event at Dover.

It was no surprise that

veteran drivers with short track backgrounds adapted to the challenge.

Race winner Denny Hamlin spent a couple decades competing on abrasive surfaces at Virginia tracks such as Langley, South Boston and Martinsville.

While other drivers panicked on Sunday, Hamlin simply adapted and thrived.

"I know that I had a huge role in the result," Hamlin said.

For the most part, drivers seemed to appreciate the rare chance to determine the outcome instead of relying on crew chiefs, engineers and pit crews.

Sunday's show drew universal praise among print and electronic media outlets across the nation.

There was one major exception to the rave reviews.

Consider the comments of NASCAR's resident golden boy Kyle Larson.

"I've never run a race like that, and I hope I never have to run one like that again," Larson said. "It's honestly probably a black eye to Goodyear just with

all that rubber that couldn't get laid down and just wearing through tires and all that."

Remember it was Larson that complained the most about the Dirt Race experiment at Bristol among other events in recent seasons.

Of course, the key question for Bristol Motor Speedway is whether or not the show resonated with spectators.

With all the pit stops and conservation tactics, this four-hour marathon was not an easy follow even for veteran observers.

The attendance, which was not helped by overcast skies, was slightly above the turnouts for the spring races from past years.

One of the key elements of the fan experience at BMS has long been camping.

The decision by NASCAR officials to do away with Friday qualifying sessions in favor of one day shows appears to have greatly reduced the number of BMS campers for the spring



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Drivers rush to their pit stalls for tire changes during the Food City 500 at Bristol Motor Speedway in March. Tires were the story as Denny Hamlin survived a record 54 lead changes to finish on top.

main event and for the support series.

Bristol business and civic leaders could and should do much more to welcome and entertain NASCAR fans each year, but that's also the case for the NHRA events at Bristol Dragway.

Country music is nice, but there is a rich heritage for motorsports across Northeast Tennessee and far Southwest Virginia.

There is one more important point to consider from the latest Bristol experience.

How did Sunday's BMS tire breakdown boogie translate with television viewers.

With NASCAR looking for new and exotic venues to stage events, the backdrop has become almost as important as the number of track spectators.

What was the bottom line for Sunday's Food City 500?

It may not have been an artistic masterpiece, but this race will be talked about for months and even years. And that's a good thing.

Bristol to host Cup races on April 13, Sept. 13



As expected, the date for the 2025 Food City 500 at Bristol Motor Speedway has been shifted to April 13 with the Night Race set for Sept. 13.

Following weeks of speculation, NASCAR released the full 2025 schedule Thursday afternoon.

For the first in track history, both race weekends at BMS will feature

all three of NASCAR's marquee series, as the NASCAR Xfinity Series and NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series will join the Cup Series for three days (April) and three nights (September).

The Food City 500 has been moved four weeks later than last year's event, which was held on St. Patrick's Day weekend in March.

Along with the Cup race, the April race weekend will include the SciAps 300 NASCAR Xfinity Series race on Saturday, April 12, and the WEATHER GUARD Truck Race on

Friday night, April 11.

"We had so much fun with our retro-themed Food City 500 that we are going to do it again and bring in some different elements this time around to add to the experience," said Jerry Caldwell, president and general manager of Bristol Motor Speedway.

The Night Race will once again serve as the cut-off race in Round 16 of the NASCAR Cup Series Playoffs and will move to one week earlier on the calendar from Sept. 11-13.

For the second time in track

history, all three NASCAR races during the weekend will be Playoff events, as the UNOH 200 presented by Ohio Logistics will be race two in the opening round of the

NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series Playoffs and the NASCAR Xfinity Series will open its Playoffs at Bristol with the Food City 300.

2025 Bristol Motor Speedway NASCAR Schedule

April 11; Weather Guard Truck Race (Craftsman Truck Series)

April 12; SciAps 300 (Xfinity Series)

April 13; Food City 500 (Cup Series)

Sept. 11; UNOH 200 presented by Ohio Logistics (Craftsman Truck Series)

Sept. 12; Food City 300 (Xfinity Series)

Sept. 13; Bass Pro Shops Night Race (Cup Series)

2025 Bristol Dragway NHRA Schedule

June 7-9; Super Grip NHRA Thunder Valley Nationals

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Larson Drives

for fourth straight Cup Series final four playoff berth

Allen Gregory
Bristol Herald Courier

Kyle Larson won 10 races en route to the 2021 NASCAR Cup Series championship.

Fans and pundits have been predicting another title from Larson ever since.

Flash forward to 2024.

Behind four wins and 10 stage victories, Larson entered the Playoffs as the top seed.

Does Larson feel another any pressure to claim another trophy and to perform well in Saturday's Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway?

"I think I've always had a good approach to the playoffs - just taking it week-by-week and trying not to put myself in too big of a hole," said Larson in a recent press conference.

"But in 2022, I crashed at the ROVAL towards the tail end of the race and missed out in advancing to the next round in the driver's points.

"We still made it in the owner's points, and then went on to the Championship Four

that year with the owners. I don't really think it's changed much, even after winning the championship."

According to Larson, the strength of his Hendrick Motorsports team is all about speed.

"We're really fast at every race track, including road courses and superspeedways," Larson said. "I know it might not seem like it at times, but I think our execution is great.

"We've also overcome adversity so I think we're well-rounded as a team. We've gone to the final four the last three years, so that gives us a lot of confidence as well."

Of course, the unpredictability of the Next Gen machine is a concern for all drivers and crew chiefs.

"It's NASCAR and Next Gen racing, so it's always crazy," Larson said. "There's always a couple of heavy guys that get knocked out somewhat early that could very well be



Emily Ball / Bristol Herald Courier

Denny Hamlin (11) and Kyle Larson (5) hang in the first and second slot during the third stage of the Bass Pro Shops Night Race last September. Hamlin held off Larson to pick up the win.

deserving champions.

"It's hard to predict who's going to be in the Championship Four. But yeah, there's definitely some good teams. But like I said, a lot of stuff can happen."

Bad stuff happened to Larson in the Sept. 8 Playoff opener at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

In the first stage of the high-speed event, Larson's car shot up the track after the back end became loose.

After slamming the wall with the right front, Larson's car was hit by Chase Briscoe.

"That was a huge hit," Larson said. "I'm not really sure, what caused it. I was actually sort of like tight loaded in the corner. That was pretty far out the corner and stepped out. I don't know. It just all happened really fast.

Entering Atlanta, Larson was 39 points above the cutline.

"I don't love seeing Atlanta in the playoffs at all. And even

Watkins Glen for that matter. I like those tracks, but they're just sketchy places," Larson said. "But if they're going to be in the playoffs, I would rather them be in the first round than the second or third round.

"Having the bonus points and playoff points that we've earned throughout the regular season is nice. It doesn't guarantee anything. You still have to not run into any trouble, especially in back-to-back weeks."



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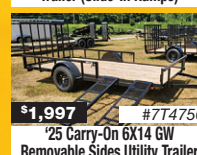
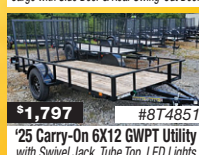
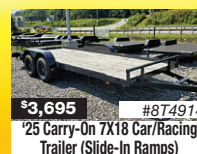
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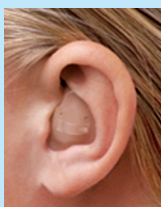
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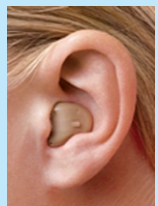
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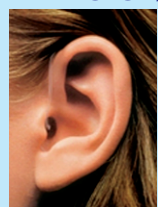
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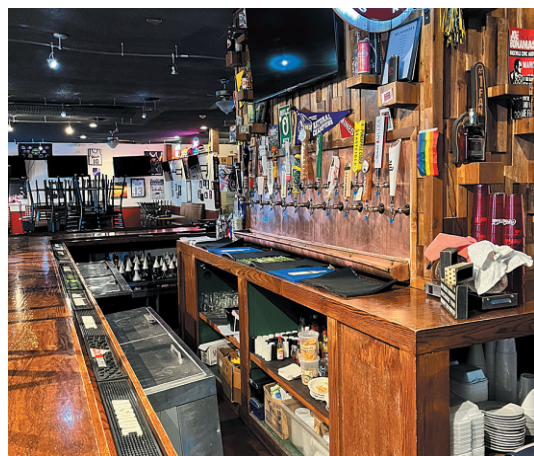
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