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RACE WEEKEND GUIDE

In hindsight...

2020 Bristol night race was a showdown between two of NASCAR's all-time greats, with Harvick holding off Kyle Busch for win

By Jeff Birchfield
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BRISTOL — Kevin Harvick outdueled Kyle Busch in a battle of NASCAR's all-time greats to win the 2020 Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Harvick, driving the No. 14 Stewart-Haas Racing Ford, used the car of Joey Logano as a pick to get by Busch for the winning pass with 32 laps to go. It came just 10 laps after Busch had taken the lead in similar fashion using the slower car of Reed Sorenson.

"To beat Kyle Busch at Bristol, I kind of got myself in a little bit of a wringer there," said Harvick, who led a race-high 226 laps. "I hit a lapped car and got a hole in the right-front nose, but just kept fighting. We don't have anything else to lose. We were here to try to win a race."

It was a career-best ninth win of the season for Harvick, who captured his 58th career NASCAR Cup Series victory. Showing the strength he did throughout the 2020 season, Harvick won two of the first three races in the first round of the NASCAR playoffs.

It was his third win at Bristol and his second in the Night Race. Harvick said he fed off the energy at the track with the race held in front of a limited capacity of 30,000 fans.

"We had such a great Ford Mustang," Harvick said. "When you have a car like that, you have to try to capitalize. We were able to capitalize on that. I haven't felt such energy in a while. Bristol is always so enthusiastic, but tonight these people were

so wound up and it was so great to win in front of the fans."

Busch, looking for his first win of the season, had to start from the back of the field after his No. 18 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota failed pre-race inspection. Determined to make up ground, Busch charged from 37th to second at the end of Stage 1. He dominated Stage 2 as Harvick got around Chase Elliott for second.

Early in Stage 3, Harvick showed he had the car to beat, passing Busch for the lead and racing out to a five-second lead.

Still, Busch wasn't about to give up.

After a caution bunched the field back up, Busch kept the pressure on Harvick and took advantage when the No. 4 car had trouble getting around Sorenson. He couldn't pull away from Harvick enough to keep him behind.

He made one final charge, but his No. 18 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota couldn't quite get to Harvick's bumper on the final lap.

"I just didn't have enough at the end," said Busch, who leads all active drivers with eight Bristol wins. "Lapped cars were definitely a problem. There just wasn't enough for me to have the opportunity to get around him. He obviously had a faster car than us tonight — but (crew chief) Adam (Stevens) made good ... adjustments where we could contend with him."

Asked about his trouble getting around Logano while racing for the lead, Busch responded, "There's a reason he's nobody's friend."

Erik Jones finished third in the No. 20 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota. Rookie



STEVE HELBER/AP FILE

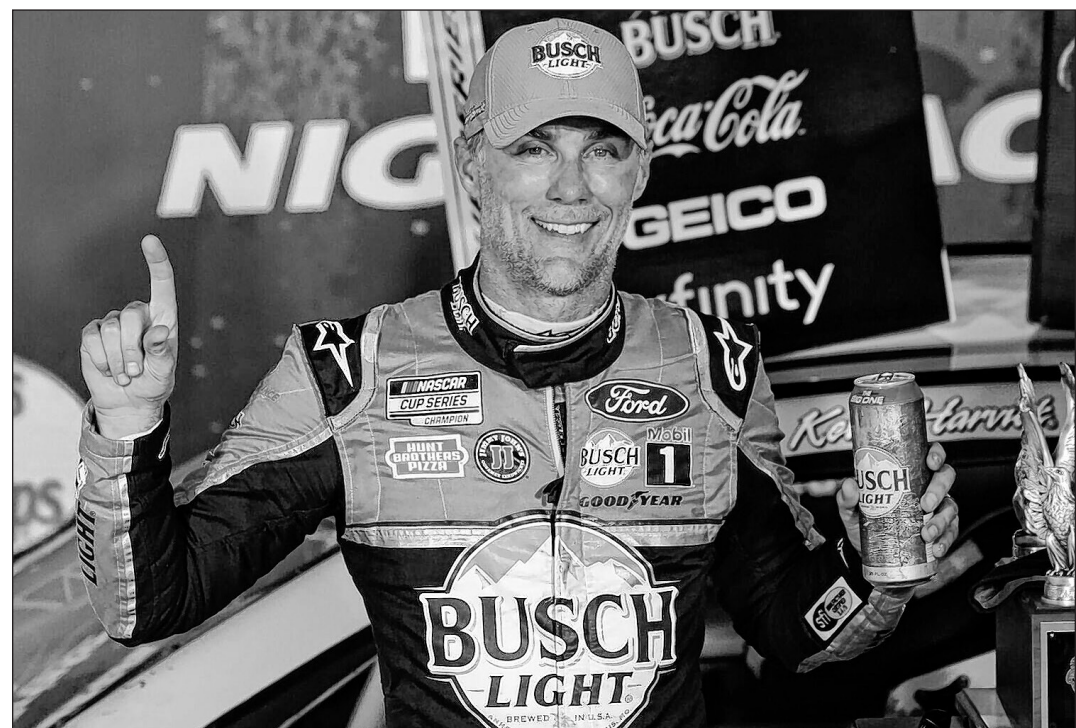
Kevin Harvick (4) battles Kyle Busch for the lead at the 2020 Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race at Bristol.

Tyler Reddick finished fourth in a Chevrolet while Harvick's Stewart-Haas Racing teammates Aric Almirola and Clint Bowyer were fifth and sixth, respectively.

Elliott, who won Stage 1 of the race, finished a lap behind in seventh. He had just made a pit stop in the No. 9 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet when the caution came out for James Davison's spin, trapping him in the pits.

Chris Buescher in a Ford, Ryan Preece in a Chevrolet and Michael McDowell in a Ford rounded out the top 10.

Seven-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson, in his last full-time season, ran in the top 10 most of the night before fading late to finish 17th.



STEVE HELBER/AP FILE

Kevin Harvick poses in victory lane after his win last season.



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How haven't they won at Bristol?

A look at 3 former stars who never got their breakthrough ... and 3 current drivers who still have a chance

Bristol Motor Speedway

As revered Bristol Motor Speedway celebrates its milestone 60th anniversary in 2021, everyone is well-versed about the conquests of the NASCAR legends who have scored victories at the World's Fastest Half-Mile. Pictures of the most successful drivers hang around The Last Great Colosseum as a tribute to their brilliance on the .533-mile all-concrete half-mile bullring.

A stout challenge is required in stock car racing to tame revered Thunder Valley. A lot can happen in 500 laps around the high-speed track that's been christened "The Holy Grail of Short Tracks."

Many great drivers over the years have found out just how difficult it is to win at Bristol when their quest ends in heart-break in the closing laps. The tall BMS trophy sparkles and shines just out of their reach.

The few who have unlocked its secret, like Darrell Waltrip, Dale Earnhardt, Rusty Wallace and Kyle Busch, to name a few, often continued to find their way back to Bristol glory year after year after year.

While those drivers who take the checkered flags at BMS are immortalized in legendary status, those who have given Bristol all they've got and still come up a bit short are usually forgotten in the aftermath. However, there are a few of those hard luck stories at Bristol over the years that defy the famous quote by golf pro Walter Hagen, "No one ever remembers who finished second."

At Bristol, there are a few second-place finishers whose efforts are epic. That continue to be talked about whenever the track is mentioned. Those second-place drivers' stories are just as captivating and dramatic as many who've smiled for the cameras and posed with the trophy queens.

As the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race prepares to unleash more NASCAR Cup Series chaos on Saturday, when the green flag drops, there's a large contingent of drivers in the field who have come oh so close on these fabled high banks before and are thinking maybe it's finally my time at Bristol.

Following are the compelling stories of six drivers, in alphabetical order, who nearly won Bristol. Three of the six are still trying to get the job done and are among those entered in Saturday night's race.



MARK HUMPHREY/AP FILE

Ryan Preece, bottom, spins past Clint Bowyer after a cash during the NASCAR All-Star Open race at Bristol Motor Speedway last year.

CLINT BOWYER

If there ever was a driver in the NASCAR Cup Series whose passion for a race track just came oozing out all over the place it was Bowyer with his beloved Bristol. Bowyer's love affair with the challenging short track started early on as he posted back-to-back third-place finishes in the 2007 Night Race and 2008 Food City 500 just a couple years into his Cup Series career. From there he went on to post six more top-five finishes and a respectable 17 top-10 finishes. Two of his top-fives included a pair of heart-breaking second-place finishes where he literally was chasing down the leader but ran out of laps: in 2017 to Jimmie Johnson and in 2020 to Brad Keselowski. The one that probably stings him the most, however, was his sixth-place finish in the 2018 race won by Kurt Busch that racing historians have tagged as an "Instant Classic." Bowyer led 120 laps of that race and appeared to be in the driver's seat as he pulled away from the pack in the late stages of the race. A late caution flew, however, for a single car spin on lap 473 and bunched the field back up for a restart. Bowyer had led the last 34 laps and appeared to be on his way to a win, but Kurt Busch took over after that restart on lap 477 and held on to take the checkered flag. The energetic Bowyer is now an analyst in the booth for FOX's coverage of the Cup Series.

MATT DIBENEDETTO

There aren't many drivers in NASCAR Cup Series history who are serenaded by the fans in the grandstands, especially not a second-place finisher. Well, on a magical night at Bristol in August 2019, DiBenedetto had fans singing to him as he licked his wounds on pit road after coming up a few inches short of victory in the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race. DiBenedetto nearly had a breakthrough Cup Series victory at Bristol that night as he was in front for a race-leading 93 laps in his white No. 95 Leavine Family Racing machine. DiBenedetto led the race from lap 396 until lap 488 and the Cinderella story appeared for a moment to be ready to take flight. However, Denny Hamlin had other plans as the No. 11 car took the lead with 12 laps to go, turning DiBenedetto's chariot back into a pumpkin. Dejected and holding back tears as he did post-race interviews, DiBenedetto cracked a slight smile when he heard the loudest roars from the fans in the grandstands as he was being interviewed.



WADE PAYNE/AP FILE

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5R

Matt DiBenedetto races down the back stretch during the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race in 2019.

KYLE LARSON

His quest to earn a Cup Series victory at Bristol continues next month in the NASCAR Playoff cut-off race, but in his brief NASCAR Cup Series career Larson has proven that he enjoys the challenge that Bristol presents and has a knack for running up front on the speedy half-mile as he has led 641 laps in 13 starts. Following one of his two back-to-back hard-fought second-place finishes in 2018, he showed his love for the unique .533-mile oval by saying, "Let's build more Bristols." Many thought as a dirt racing specialist he would get his Bristol breakthrough win earlier this year when the track converted to a dirt surface for the historic Food City Dirt Race. However, after getting collected in a pair of crashes on lap 54 and lap 154 Larson finished a disappointing 29th. This will be his first start on the BMS concrete surface at the controls of the No. 5 Chevy with his new team, Hendrick Motorsports. Larson has won a series-best five races this year and he comes to BMS this time around with a ton of confidence and momentum.



MARK HUMPHREY/AP FILE

Kyle Larson, right, pushes Christopher Bell in the dirt race at Bristol in March.

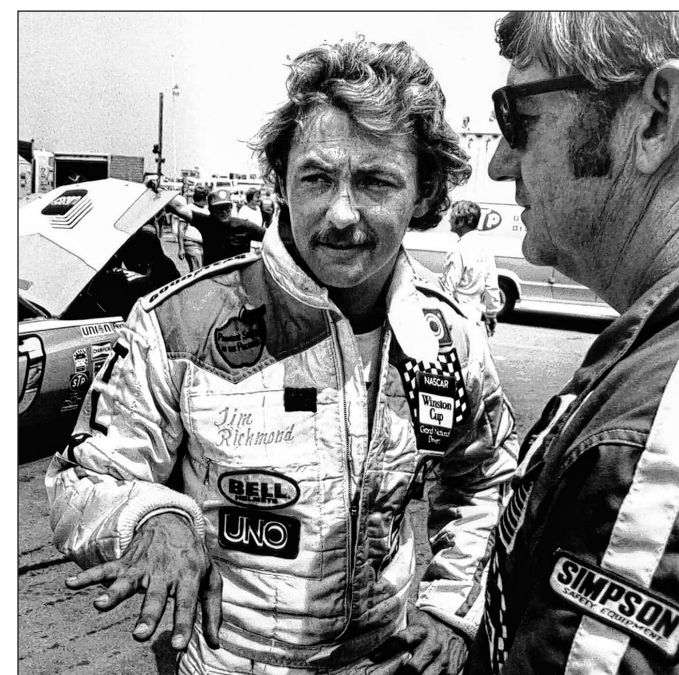


CAROLYN KASTER/AP FILE

Ricky Rudd had four second-place and six third-place finishes at Bristol.

RICKY RUDD

This one is a total shocker. A real head-scratcher. If it was a trivia question, just about everyone would miss it. How in the world did Rudd, a 23-time Cup Series winner, never win a race at Bristol? The Virginia native was a proven short track stud winning multiple times at both Martinsville and Richmond and also a demonstrated master of the half-mile high-banked track in Bristol, posting an incredible 16 top-five finishes and 31 top-10s in his 58 career starts at the Tennessee bullring. He led an impressive 605 laps there during his career, just never the final one. His four second-place finishes and six third-place finishes rank up near the top of all-time greats at the track. In four of his best chances to win he was denied each time by a BMS legend, including twice by Darrell Waltrip and once each by Dale Earnhardt and Rusty Wallace. In perhaps his best opportunity to win at BMS, the 1985 spring race, he led late in the race. However his arch-rival Earnhardt wasn't going to be denied and reportedly manhandled his car, which had lost its power steering 100 laps into the race, to get the win that day. Rudd led 163 laps of the race and was leading inside of 20 to go, but was ultimately passed by Earnhardt on lap 483.



RUSSELL HAMILTON/AP FILE

Tim Richmond, left, talks with Bobby Allison before his Cup Series debut at Pocono in this 1980 file photo.

RICKY STENHOUSE JR.

This self-proclaimed Bristol lover has posted three second-place finishes at Bristol, including a second at the historic Food City Dirt Race this past March. Like Bowyer, Stenhouse loves racing at BMS and was in the mix to win on the high-banked short track early in his career. He has also posted second place finishes in the 2014 Food City 500 and the 2016 Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race. The odd stat regarding Stenhouse and Bristol is despite all of his great BMS finishes and being in contention with top-fives and top-10s, he has never led a lap around The Last Great Colosseum in the Cup Series. He will try to change that as he continues his effort to claim a breakthrough victory at Thunder Valley.



STEVE HELBER/AP FILE

Ricky Stenhouse Jr.'s car is towed to the garage after a wreck during last year's night race at Bristol.

TIM RICHMOND

One of NASCAR's greatest drivers who was taken from us way too soon, Richmond proved that he had what it took to tame Bristol by racing to seven top-10s and two top-fives in his 11 career starts. While driving the No. 27 Pontiac for legendary drag racer Raymond Beadle, Richmond posted a pair of top fives at BMS, including his best effort, a second-place finish to Dale Earnhardt in the historic 1985 night race, the Busch 500. With a national ESPN television audience watching from home for the first time ever in primetime, Richmond and Earnhardt gave the fans their money's worth, in an intense door-handle to door-handle battle for the victory. Richmond moved into the lead on lap 447 and stayed there until The Intimidator came knocking. After holding off the blue and yellow No. 3 Wrangler Chevy on several pass attempts, Richmond was nudged out of the way by Earnhardt with 18 laps to go. After the race a frustrated Richmond called the move Earnhardt's "typical tactics." Richmond posted top-10 finishes in his last two Bristol starts but tragically his racing career was cut short after he succumbed to serious health issues a couple of years later.



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Concrete plans: Bristol back to normal after dalliance with dirt

Three-month process involves power washing and cleaning every nook and cranny around iconic track

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Once the checkered flag waved following the conclusion of the World of Outlaws first visit to Bristol Motor Speedway in two decades, Speedway Motorsports Senior Vice President of Operations and Development Steve Swift was already putting his crew into position to begin the all-important dirt removal process from around The World's Fastest Half-Mile.

With only a 20-week time period until The Last Great Colosseum was scheduled to be back in the NASCAR Playoff spotlight serving as host of the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race, Swift knew time was of the essence.

Along with the two World of Outlaws races in April, BMS proved to be one of the busiest dirt tracks on the East Coast. In March, the track hosted the historic Food City Dirt Race, the first time a NASCAR Cup Series race was held on a dirt surface in more than 50 years. Veteran driver Joey Logano claimed the signature BMS trophy and famed gladiator sword at that hotly contested race. Prior to that landmark event, BMS also crowned a bunch of winners in eight different classes during a week of grass-roots dirt racing at the Bristol Dirt Nationals in early March.

No doubt, Bristol Motor Speedway made great use of the estimated 23,000 cubic yards of red Tennessee clay that was spread around the high-banked short track's legendary racing surface.

With the clock ticking at a rapid pace, the dirt removal process began almost immediately after the last Victory Lane photo was taken following David Gravel's thrilling back-to-back victories in the World of Outlaws Sprint Car Series in late April.

Swift says the facility will be as shiny as new when the green flag drops for a Thursday night doubleheader featuring the ARCA Menards Series Bush's Beans 200

and the Camping World Truck Series UNOH 200 presented by Ohio Logistics to kick off America's Night Race weekend. The Food City 300 Xfinity Series race will follow on Friday night and the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race for the NASCAR Cup Series will be the weekend's grand finale on Saturday.

Swift says relocating the dirt out of the facility wasn't the hard part. The real challenge, he said, has been power washing and cleaning the facility from all of the dirt and dust that flies around as a by-product of the exciting racing action constantly churning on the clay surface.

"Taking 2,386 truckloads of dirt out of the oval was actually the quickest part of the process," Swift says. "Once we were given the green light to start taking out the dirt and loading trucks and getting it out of there, that part of the job went fairly quick. Within two weeks we had the mass dirt out of here minus the backstretch because we were using that dirt for the Dude Perfect event. However, we are still in the process of the actual cleaning side of things, which is really the harder part after you hold dirt events."

Following the 2000 and 2001 BMS dirt events, operations team members said they were still finding bits of dirt hidden in the most remote corners of the stadium several years after those races were over. Swift says he is well aware of all the stories from the past and is determined to get the grandstands and concourse areas as clean as possible for the Night Race.

Swift estimates that the dirt was off the track and out of the facility in about 10 days. He said there were multiple excavating machines moving the dirt around and pushing it down off the high-banks to a flat loading zone where it was then loaded into a rotating fleet of about seven dirt trucks making round-trips to the drop and storage location.

"To get the race team trucks in and out of the track easier we had to build a temporary ramp



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

with the dirt," Swift explained. "One of the smartest things we did after the racing was over was leave that ramp in place to help us get the dirt out. It was really an efficient way to get the dirt out because the dump trucks had a lesser grade to climb. That ramp stayed put until the very last truck load went out."

Swift says once the dirt was removed it was hauled a short distance from inside the oval across the BMS campus to a flat lower lot near the Bristol Dragway entrance off Highway 394. He said that site made the most sense because it is level for the dump trucks to move in and out. The dirt will sit there until January when Swift and his team will start the process all over again as they begin putting the dirt back on the track for the 2022 Food City Dirt Race.

"When the fans come in for the Night Race in September they are going to see two big lovely piles of red dirt over by the dragway entrance and that was the dirt track," Swift says. "We stored it like we did for a reason to keep the life into the dirt and keep it as native as possible and to make sure less surface area is visible

for the sun to hit. When we excavated it we made sure that we stored the very surface stuff on the bottom of the pile. What you see on top is the base layer."

With the dirt gone, Swift says the concrete looks better than ever. He noted that the layer of sawdust product that his team put down between the concrete and the dirt did its job remarkably well.

"The track is as clean as it has been since we placed the track around 2007-'08," Swift said. "It's back to that initial state with just a little bit more rubber on it now. It's amazing to look at the track pre-dirt pictures compared to what it is now and just what the cleaning process has done to bring it back to life."

Swift says he learned a lot from the past year about "dirt magic" and as a result expects to add additional surface layer dirt for the 2022 races and says the process will begin as soon as the annual Pinnacle Speedway in Lights show is completed in early January.

"We have started sourcing some new surface dirt with the goal being to have the best product on the surface to help

keep the dust down as much as possible," Swift says. "To use a majority of what we've got and also bring in some new surface dirt to mix in with it is the plan."

Swift says there's as much or more buzz going on now for the 2022 Food City Dirt Race as there was last year. He says it's the topic he is most asked about as he travels around for his duties at every Speedway Motorsports facility.

"We received a lot of great feedback from fans on the '21 race and I think we got to see a glimpse of what it really could be," Swift said. "With it being held on a Monday because of weather and having all the laps that it had, the track wasn't at its peak performance so to speak. There's still a lot of anticipation going into '22 in having that one day that the Cup cars get on it and run the amount of laps that the track is able to withstand. Even with the bad elements we were dealing with, it was still a great competitive show. I think everyone is looking forward to having a good weekend, with the right start time and having Mother Nature work with us. I think we can improve on what we had the first time around."

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At Bristol, 'You can find somebody's bumper real quick'

Playoff drivers weigh in on returning to BMS, site of the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race

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The Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race is one of the biggest races of the year on the NASCAR circuit. For the second year in a row, it will be a cut-off race in the NASCAR Cup Series playoffs.

The playoff field will be cut from 16 to 12 drivers, ramping up the intensity even more Saturday night. Several of the playoff drivers commented on what they expect in the action-filled 500 laps, where cars can be crashed and championship dreams crushed in an instant.

Kyle Larson, the regular-season champion, is looking for his first win at the .533-mile oval.

"I mean, Bristol's Bristol. It's always really aggressive," Larson said. "Hopefully I'm not anywhere near the cutoff or whatever in points. You can use the bumper there a little bit in traffic and things. That track is just so difficult anyways, it's a lot of fun."

"I'm so looking forward to getting to Bristol. I love that place. I've been close to winning some races there. I've led a bunch of laps there. Would love to get my first win at Bristol."

Usually, the drivers have a feel for Bristol after racing there in the spring. With this year's Food City Dirt Race, it leaves more questions, according to defending series champion Chase Elliott, who won the NASCAR All-Star Race at Bristol in 2020.

"Kind of odd to be going there (on the concrete) for the first time this year," Elliott said. "The Bristol Night race is always one of my favorite events. It's an

event that I will tell a close friend to go see, like 'you have to go see this race before I don't have a chance to be there anymore or whatever. Even if I'm not there, go, enjoy a race.'

"But just a great event. A lot of energy. I'm glad it's in the playoffs. I'm glad it's a cutoff race. Just glad to go to East Tennessee and enjoy hopefully a dry Saturday night in Bristol."

Joey Logano, winner of the Food City Dirt Race, is amazed that crews were able to clean the 23,000 tons of dirt off the concrete surface and have it ready to race just three months later.

"I just don't understand how they cleaned it up," he said. "That's incredible that they can do that. I'm looking forward to seeing the track. The concrete is what we're used to. The dirt was a whole new game, so it'll be interesting to see how they've cleaned it up, but also how they've reapplied the PJ1, and what the effect of that is going to be."

"You're resetting the race track quite a bit after you threw all that dirt on it. We'll be interested to see how that plays out."

Fellow Ford driver, Aric Almirola, also has questions about the racing surface now that the dirt has been removed. He doesn't see anything from the spring that can help drivers with their set-ups for the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race.

"Bristol on dirt does not correlate at all to Bristol when it's concrete," he said. "The fact they completely had to wash the racetrack and I've heard they had to spray like a solution on there to get all of the clay and stuff off



WADE PAYNE/AP FILE

Kyle Busch (18) drives next to his brother Kurt Busch (1) on a restart during the 2019 Food City 500 NASCAR Cup Series race at Bristol Motor Speedway. The pair are once again part of the series' championship playoff field.

and pressure wash the race track. So it'll be interesting to see how different the track maybe is without the rubber that's laid down in the pores of the concrete and if that changes anything, and then how they apply the PJ1 to the bottom groove.

"That's always a moving target for us on whether they apply it in a small strip or if they widen it out and make it to where it's a whole car width wide. It's always changing the dynamic of how the cars run around the race track."

However, it's the normal challenges associated at a Bristol race which have drivers like William Byron more concerned than anything. Much like the series' biggest tracks, there is always the chance of the "big one," a multi-car crash.

"It's easy to get caught up in someone else's



MARK HUMPHREY/AP FILE

Hendrick Motorsports driver Kyle Larson celebrates with the winner's guitar and trophy after winning the NASCAR Cup Series race at Nashville Superspeedway in Lebanon, Tenn., earlier this year. Larson is one of 10 playoff drivers yet to win at Bristol.

wreck, especially with lapped cars," Byron said, "I feel like the pace of the lapped cars is so different than the pace of the leaders. At times, it can be 10 to 15 mph different. So, just try to avoid them and make efficient work of some of those lapped cars

is really important.

"It's also an opportunity to pass.

"I try to just stay heads-up, and my spotter spots a little bit more out of the front than normal, just to make sure I'm heads-up with what's going on."

Brad Keselowski, a three-time Bristol winner, said he found the 2020 Night Race pretty compelling after watching a replay.

Kurt Busch, a six-time Bristol winner, believes a driver could definitely bump a fellow competitor out of the way if it meant advancing to the next round.

"I think if you find yourself on the bubble and you need a spot or two, yeah things could get big," Busch said.

"And that is for that 11th or 12th place guy in points. Most of the guys will be locked in and some will know they just don't have a chance at it, and so it just comes down to that bubble opportunity.

"Bristol is one of those short tracks where you can find somebody's bumper real quick."

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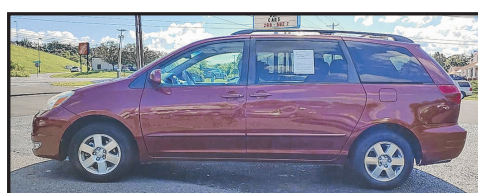
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And NASCAR's greatest driver of all time is ...

Richard Petty? • Dale Earnhardt? • Jimmie Johnson?

By Jeff Birchfield
SPORTS WRITER
jbirchfield@johnsoncitypress.com

Jimmie Johnson retired from full-time NASCAR competition in 2020, leaving the question if he is stock car racing's greatest driver unanswered.

He is one of only three drivers, along with Richard Petty and the late Dale Earnhardt, to earn seven Cup Series championships. Others may argue for three-time champion David Pearson, who had a better head-to-head win percentage than Petty, or four-time champion Jeff Gordon, as NASCAR's greatest driver.

However, there have been only three men to win seven titles and here are the cases why each should or should not be considered the greatest champion.

RICHARD PETTY WHY THE KING IS THE GREATEST 7-TIME CHAMPION

- The record book: Petty holds most of the major records in the NASCAR record book, including 200 wins — which nearly doubles the 105 by second-place Pearson. Petty also has the most pole positions (123), most runner-up finishes (157), most series runner-up finishes (6), most wins in a season (27), most consecutive

wins (10), most top-five finishes (555), most top-10 finishes (712) and most career starts (1,184).

- Those Daytona 500 victories: No one comes close to matching Petty's record of seven wins in NASCAR's biggest race, nicknamed "The Great American Race" or the "Super Bowl of Stock Car Racing."

Cale Yarborough comes next with four Daytona 500 wins, followed by Bobby Allison, Jeff Gordon, Dale Jarrett and Denny Hamlin all with three. Johnson won the 500 twice in 2006 and 2013, while Earnhardt captured his lone 500 win in 1998.

- Won on all surfaces, different kinds of cars: While all three won on superspeedways, intermediate tracks, one-milers and short tracks, Petty also won NASCAR's last race on dirt in Sept. 1970 — before this year's Food City Dirt Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

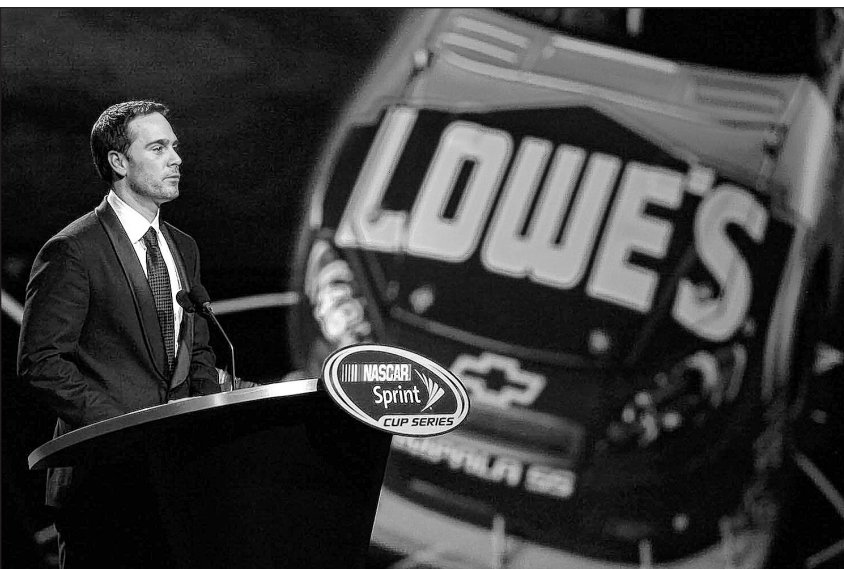
Of course, neither Earnhardt nor Johnson had the opportunity to race in the Cup Series on dirt, which will return at Bristol in March.

Petty was much more accomplished on road courses with five wins at Riverside (California) and one at Bridgehampton (New York). Earnhardt scored his only road course victory by beating



NASCAR MEDIA

Seven-time NASCAR Winston Cup champion Richard Petty congratulates Dale Earnhardt on his seventh title during the annual awards banquet on Dec. 2, 1994, in New York City.



NASCAR MEDIA

Jimmie Johnson gives his champions acceptance speech at the 2009 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series banquet.

Mark Martin at Sonoma in 1995. Johnson won at Sonoma 15 years later with Robby Gordon finishing second.

WHY PETTY ISN'T THE GREATEST 7-TIME CHAMPION

- Superior equipment, lack of competition: It's always the biggest criticism of Petty. He won so many races in an era when Petty Enterprises was one of the few teams with factory support and when there were 4-5 cars capable of winning most races instead of 12-15 cars. For example, in the 1975 season — when Petty swept Bristol races — only 23 drivers started in the Southeastern 500, where he finished six laps ahead of second-place Benny Parsons.

DALE EARNHARDT WHY THE INTIMIDATOR IS THE GREATEST 7-TIME CHAMPION

- Championships with different teams, crew chiefs: Earnhardt won his first series championship with car owner Rod Osterlund and crew chief Doug Richert in 1980. His other six championships came with Richard Childress Racing, which had won races with Ricky Rudd in 1983-84 — but hadn't been a championship contender.

Earnhardt won four championships with crew chief Kirk Shelmerdine, two with Andy Petree and his lone Daytona 500 with Larry McReynolds. By comparison, Petty Enterprises and

Hendrick Motorsports were well-established championship teams when Petty and Johnson started driving their cars.

- Competitive until end of career: Earnhardt won three races in 1999 and two more in 2000, his last full season in the Cup Series. In addition, Earnhardt finished as series runner-up to Bobby Labonte that final season.

In an interview before his fatal crash in the 2001 Daytona 500, Earnhardt said he felt he was ready to contend for a record eighth title after healing from a bothersome neck injury. On the

GREATEST

From Page 12R

other hand, Petty went winless from his 200th career victory at the 1984 Firecracker 400 at Daytona until his last race in 1992. Johnson didn't win for the final 3½ years of his career after winning at Dover in 2017.

• IROC, Busch Series victories: Almost all of Petty's and Johnson's stock car success came in the Cup Series, while Earnhardt won four championships and 11 races in 59 International Race of Champions (IROC) starts. In the series that pitted drivers of different disciplines in equally matched cars, Petty never won in 21 starts. Johnson had one win in eight IROC starts.

Earnhardt was also a 21-time race winner in the Busch Series (now Xfinity Series), while Johnson won a single race in 93 starts.

Petty never raced in the Busch Series and made limited appearances in the old Late Model Sportsman series. He did race in NASCAR's convertible series in 1959, winning a race and finishing fourth in point standings, one position ahead of Johnson City driver Brownie King.

WHY EARNHARDT ISN'T THE GREATEST 7-TIME CHAMPION

• Race wins, poles (or lack of): Earnhardt is known for his spectacular wins like "rattling Terry Labonte's cage" at Bristol, but his 76 career victories rank eighth on the all-time win list. Earnhardt led the series in wins on just two occasions (1987, 1990), while Petty accomplished the feat during seven separate seasons and Johnson did it five times.

Earnhardt won only 21 pole positions, far behind Petty's record number of 123 and Johnson's 36 poles.

JIMMIE JOHNSON

WHY SEVEN-TIME IS THE GREATEST 7-TIME CHAMPION

• Stiffest competition: Johnson has raced in an



NASCAR MEDIA

Hendrick Motorsports driver Jimmie Johnson celebrates after winning the 2012 Bojangle's Southern 500 at Darlington Raceway. In addition to his seven championships, Johnson scored 83 career premier series victories, tied for sixth overall in series history.



NASCAR MEDIA

Dale Earnhardt holds up the trophy after winning the 1995 Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

era of the deepest talent in the sport, most impressively outrunning his teammate Jeff Gordon in Hendrick Motorsports equipment. Other champions Johnson outperformed throughout his career included Tony Stewart, Kyle Busch, Kevin

Harvick, Kurt Busch, Matt Kenseth and Joey Logano.

Petty had the all-time greatest rivals in David Pearson, Bobby Allison, Cale Yarborough and Darrell Waltrip, while Earnhardt's toughest rivals included Waltrip, Bill Elliott, Rusty Wallace

and Gordon. Still, take a closer look and names like Denny Hamlin, Carl Edwards and Mark Martin show how deep the talent pool was during Johnson's era.

• Five championships in a row: Once Johnson knocked down the door

with a first championship in 2006, it set off an incredible run not seen before. He won five straight NASCAR titles, breaking Cale Yarborough's record of three straight from 1976-78.

Petty won four of five championships from 1971-75 with Benny Parsons winning the 1973 title. Earnhardt won four of five from 1990-94.

• AP Male Athlete of the Year: Truly the Associated Press Athlete of the Year in 2009 fits with Johnson, who has competed in tri-

athlons and run the Boston Marathon. While physical training was something that some drivers did in earlier eras, Johnson certainly took it to another level. It helped him stay a step ahead, or in his case, car lengths ahead of his competitors.

WHY JOHNSON ISN'T THE GREATEST 7-TIME CHAMPION

• Rules violations:

Johnson's crew chief Chad Knaus was penalized eight times for major violations during their time together and his actions even forced NASCAR to pass a rule about shock absorbers in 2005.

Knaus was suspended six races in 2006 — Darian Grubb served as crew chief for Johnson during his first Daytona 500 win. It has drawn comparisons with Tom Brady and Bill Belichick having incredible success with the Patriots, but their achievements often discounted because of pushing the limits of the rules.

That's not to say Petty and Earnhardt didn't have their own rules issues. Petty's engine for his 198th career win at Charlotte was found to be 381 cubic inches, well over the 358 allowed in the NASCAR rulebook. Earnhardt was known for lobbying NASCAR for rules changes if he thought another team or manufacturer had an advantage.



NASCAR MEDIA

Richard Petty won his fourth Daytona 500 in 1973 behind the wheel of the Petty Enterprises Dodge Charger. Petty won a NASCAR record seven Daytona 500 titles.



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1 KURT BUSCH

Chip Ganassi Racing Chevrolet

Hometown: Las Vegas

Crew Chief: Matt McCall

Best Bristol Finish: Win (6 times)

Notable: Busch won the first Cup Series championship under a playoff format in 2004. He has been named to drive a second car for 23XI Racing in 2022.



2 BRAD KESELOWSKI

Team Penske Ford

Hometown: Rochester Hills, Mich.

Crew Chief: Jeremy Bullins

Best Bristol Finish: Win (3 times)

Notable: Keselowski delivered longtime car owner Roger Penske his first NASCAR Cup Series championship in 2012. He will become a part-owner with Roush-Fenway Racing in 2022.



3 AUSTIN DILLON

Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet

Hometown: Welcome, N.C.

Crew Chief: Justin Alexander

Best Bristol Finish: Fourth

Notable: Dillon won the 2013 NASCAR Xfinity Series title despite not winning a race that season. He was the highest ranking driver outside the playoff 16 in 2021.



4 KEVIN HARVICK

Stewart-Haas Racing Ford

Hometown: Bakersfield, Calif.

Crew Chief: Rodney Childers

Best Bristol Finish: Win (3 times)

Notable: After a career-best nine wins in 2021, Harvick has gone winless this season. His 58 career wins rank 10th on NASCAR's all-time list.



5 KYLE LARSON

Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet

Hometown: Elk Grove, Calif.

Crew Chief: Cliff Daniels

Best Bristol Finish: Second (twice)

Notable: Larson continues to star on the dirt tracks, capturing such events as the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals, the Knoxville Nationals, the BC 39 and wins in both the World of Outlaws Sprint Cars and Late Models.



6 RYAN NEWMAN

Roush Fenway Ford

Hometown: South Bend, Ind.

Crew Chief: Scott Graves

Best Bristol Finish: Second

Notable: While there is no qualifying for the

Bass Pro Shops Night Race, Newman leads all active drivers with 51 poles. He has two BMS wins in the NASCAR Modified Series.

7 COREY LAJOIE

Spire Motorsports Chevrolet

Hometown: Concord, N.C.

Crew Chief: Ryan Sparks

Best Bristol Finish: 24th (twice)

Notable: The son of two-time NASCAR Busch Series champion Randy LaJoie is enjoying his best overall season in the Cup Series, leading 12 laps at Phoenix.

8 TYLER REDDICK

Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet

Hometown: Corning, Calif.

Crew Chief: Randall Burnett

Best Bristol Finish: Fourth

Notable: Reddick, another driver with extensive dirt-track experience, is a two-time NASCAR Xfinity Series champion. He was the final driver to qualify on points for the 2022 playoffs.



9 CHASE ELLIOTT

Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet

Hometown: Dawsonville, Ga.

Crew Chief: Alan Gustafson

Best Bristol Finish: Third

Notable: Elliott became part of the third father-son combination to win NASCAR Cup Series championships in 2021. The others are Richard and Lee Petty and Ned and Dale Jarrett.



10 ARIC ALMIROLA

Stewart-Haas Racing Ford

Hometown: Tampa, Fla.

Crew Chief: Mike Bugarewicz

Best Bristol Finish: Third

Notable: One of the first racers to participate in NASCAR's "Drive for Diversity" program, Almirola is in his 10th full-time Cup Series season.



11 DENNY HAMLIN

Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota

Hometown: Chesterfield, Va.

Crew Chief: Chris Gabehart

Best Bristol Finish: Win (twice)

Notable: Hamlin ranks second only to Hall of Famer Junior Johnson as the driver with the most wins (45) without winning a championship.



12 RYAN BLANEY

Team Penske Ford

Hometown: High Point, N.C.

Crew Chief: Todd Gordon

Best Bristol Finish: Fourth

Notable: Blaney, who comes



from a line of sprint car drivers including his grandfather Lou, father Dave and uncle Dale, has won multiple races for the first time in his career this season.

14 CHASE BRISCOE

Stewart-Haas Racing Ford

Hometown: Mitchell, Ind.

Crew Chief: John Klausmeier

Best Bristol Finish: 20th

Notable: Briscoe won the 2020 Food City 300 for the NASCAR Xfinity Series. He and fellow driver Christopher Bell became friends through their interest in iRacing.

17 CHRIS BUESCHER

Roush Fenway Ford

Hometown: Prosper, Texas

Crew Chief: Luke Lambert

Best Bristol Finish: Fifth

Notable: Buescher showed incredible dedication to his dream of becoming a NASCAR driver, moving away from his family to North Carolina as a teenager.

18 KYLE BUSCH

Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota

Hometown: Las Vegas, Nev.

Crew Chief: Ben Beshore

Best Bristol Finish: Win (8 times)

Notable: Busch leads all active NASCAR drivers with his eight Cup Series wins at Bristol and 59 wins overall. He's the track's all-time winner with 22 victories.



19 MARTIN TRUEX JR.

Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota

Hometown: Mayetta, N.J.

Crew Chief: James Small

Best Bristol Finish: Second

Notable: Truex is still looking for his first Bristol Cup Series win. He won his first ever Xfinity Series race at BMS in 2004 and his first Truck Series race at the Pinty's Dirt Race in March.



20 CHRISTOPHER BELL

Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota

Hometown: Norman, Okla.

Crew Chief: Adam Stevens

Best Bristol Finish: Ninth

Notable: Considered Larson's biggest rival when the two race midget cars on dirt, Bell is a three-time winner of the Chili Bowl Nationals.



21 MATT DIBENEDETTO

Wood Brothers Racing Ford

Hometown: Grass Valley, Calif.

Crew Chief: Jonathan Hassler

Best Bristol Finish: Second

Notable: DiBenedetto became a huge fan favorite when he nearly pulled off an upset at the 2019 Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race,

driving for Leavine Family Racing.

22 JOEY LOGANO

Team Penske Ford

Hometown: Middletown, Conn.

Crew Chief: Paul Wolfe

Best Bristol Finish: Win (3 times)

Notable: The 2018 NASCAR champion made history at Bristol in March, becoming the first driver to win a Cup Series race on dirt since 1970.



23 BUBBA WALLACE

23XI Racing Toyota

Hometown: Mobile, Ala.

Crew Chief: Michael Wheeler

Best Bristol Finish: 10th

Notable: Wallace is a former Bristol winner, taking the title at the inaugural Short Track U.S. Nationals for paved late models in 2017.

24 WILLIAM BYRON

Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet

Hometown: Charlotte, N.C.

Crew Chief: Rudy Fugle

Best Bristol Finish: Sixth

Notable: Byron forgo the traditional route of go karts to start in the sport. Instead, he became a sensation through iRacing before racing Legends cars.



34 MICHAEL MCDOWELL

Front Row Motorsports Ford

Hometown: Glendale, Ariz.

Crew Chief: Drew Blickensderfer

Best Bristol Finish: 10th

Notable: McDowell scored his first win in over 350 starts with his victory in the season-opening Daytona 500.



37 RYAN PREECE

JTG Daugherty Racing Chevrolet

Hometown: Berlin, Conn.

Crew Chief: Trent Owens

Best Bristol Finish: Ninth

Notable: Preece has wins at Bristol in both the NASCAR Xfinity and NASCAR Modified Series.

38 ANTHONY ALFREDO

Front Row Motorsports Ford

Hometown: Ridgefield, Conn.

Crew Chief: Seth Barbour

Best Bristol Finish: 39th

Notable: Alfredo is a teammate of McDowell for car owner Bob Jenkins, who lives an hour away from BMS in Dandridge.

41 COLE CUSTER

Stewart-Haas Racing Ford

Hometown: Ladera Ranch, Calif.

Crew Chief: Mike Shiplett

Best Bristol Finish: 23rd

Notable: Custer became the youngest winner of a NASCAR national series race at age 16 in 2014. He also won during his rookie Cup season in 2020.

42 ROSS CHASTAIN

Chip Ganassi Racing Chevrolet

Hometown: Alva, Fla.

Crew Chief: Phil Surgen

Best Bristol Finish: 26th (twice)

Notable: Chastain is an eighth-generation watermelon farmer with his smashing of the fruit a favorite celebration of NASCAR fans.

43 ERIK JONES

Richard Petty Motorsports Chevrolet

Hometown: Byron, Mich.

Crew Chief: Jerry Baxter

Best Bristol Finish: Second

Notable: Jones got his first big break in the sport after beating NASCAR champion Kyle Busch in the famed Snowball Derby race in Pensacola, Florida.

47 RICKY STENHOUSE JR.

JTG Daugherty Racing Chevrolet

Hometown: Olive Branch, Miss.

Crew Chief: Brian Pattie

Best Bristol Finish: Second (3 times)

Notable: Although a two-time winner on the restrictor plate speedways, BMS is Stenhouse's best track overall with his third runner-up finish at the Food City Dirt Race.

48 ALEX BOWMAN

Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet

Hometown: Tuscon, Ariz.

Crew Chief: Greg Ives

Best Bristol Finish: Fifth

Notable: Bowman already has three wins this season, his first behind the wheel of the No. 48 made famous by seven-time champion Jimmie Johnson.



78 BJ MCLEOD

Live Fast Motorsports Ford

Hometown: Wauchula, Fla.

Crew Chief: Frank Kerr

Best Bristol Finish: 28th

Notable: Besides an accomplished racer with over 100 Super Late Model wins, McLeod is a dedicated weightlifter with his wife Jessica a noted fitness model.

99 DANIEL SUAREZ

TrackHouse Racing Chevrolet

Hometown: Monterrey, Mexico

Crew Chief: Travis Mack

Best Bristol Finish: Fourth

Notable: Suarez became the first foreign-born driver to win a NASCAR national series championship when he captured the Xfinity Series crown in 2016.

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60 YEARS OF SPEED: BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY THROUGH THE YEARS

Bristol Motor Speedway

As Bristol Motor Speedway celebrates its 60th anniversary, there are so many significant milestones that have happened throughout the years that have turned this once vast Eastern Tennessee dairy farm into a mega showplace for auto racing, sports and entertainment.

In three weeks, NASCAR will return to the iconic all-concrete high-banked oval nestled in the mountains of the Appalachian Highlands Region where it will challenge its drivers during all-important NASCAR Playoff races for the Cup Series and Camping World Truck Series as well as set the Playoff field during the regular season finale for its Xfinity Series.

It's been called The Last Great Colosseum, The World's Fastest Half-Mile, Thunder Valley, The Holy Grail of Short Tracks and most recently, The Home to Big Events, but no matter what you call it, revered Bristol Motor

Speedway has always found a way to deliver drama, excitement, thrilling finishes and "Wow" moments to its legion of fans in NASCAR Nation.

As we all prepare for the upcoming racing, and in honor of Bristol Motor Speedway's 60th Anniversary, below are 60 significant moments that have put the versatile multi-purpose venue on the map.

1961: After attending a NASCAR race in Charlotte and wanting to bring that type of entertainment to their region, partners Carl Moore, Larry Carrier and R.G. Pope built what was then called Bristol International Raceway. The current location, a former dairy farm sitting on 100 acres, was selected after their first pick, in nearby Piney Flats, was politely rejected by local residents.

1961: Jack Smith with help from relief driver Johnny Allen scored the first BMS Cup Series victory, held on July 30. Popular singer Brenda Lee performed the first National Anthem at BMS.

1961: The first of three football



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

The Bristol Motor Speedway property was farmland before the construction of the race track.

games hosted by BMS took place in September during an NFL exhibition game where the Washington Redskins played the Philadelphia Eagles. The Eagles won, 17-10.

1965: Track owners installed a state-of-the-art dragstrip and it opened under National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) sanction. Bristol Dragway sits adjacent to Bristol Motor Speedway

on the facility campus. The facility was the first in drag racing to house offices, luxury suites, race control room and a press box in a four-story tower built directly behind the quarter-mile track.

1969: After resurfacing the oval track multiple times the track banking changed from 22 to 36 degrees.

1973: Cale Yarborough led all 500 laps of the BMS spring race to earn the victory; it is one of only three times that the feat has been accomplished in NASCAR history.

1976: Lanny Hester and Gary Baker purchase the Speedway.

1978: Large stadium lights are installed around the oval track and the first BMS Night Race is held in August. Cale Yarborough scored the victory.

1979: Cup Series rookie Dale Earnhardt earned his first career victory in April at BMS. He remains the only rookie driver to ever win a Cup race at Bristol.

1982: Phil Parsons won the first NASCAR Xfinity Series race to be held at BMS.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18R



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60 YEARS OF SPEED: BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY THROUGH THE YEARS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17R

1983: California businessman Warner Hodgdon purchases the Speedway.

1983: The large signature BMS Cup Series Trophy is debuted during the August Night Race and first presented to race winner Darrell Waltrip.

1984: Darrell Waltrip earned his seventh consecutive BMS Cup Series victory in April, a streak that started back in 1981. The track record for consecutive victories still stands today. Waltrip also holds the record for most BMS Cup Series victories at 12.

1985: Larry Carrier once again becomes the Speedway's owner.

1985: Dale Earnhardt outduels Tim Richmond in an historic Night Race, the first NASCAR race to be televised live to a primetime audience, which aired on ESPN.

1992: BMS holds the first NASCAR Cup Series race on a concrete surface.

1992: Food City, a regional grocery store based in nearby Abingdon, Virginia, becomes the entitlement sponsor for the NASCAR Cup Series spring race and the NASCAR Xfinity Series fall race.

1995: Joe Ruttman won the first NASCAR Camping World Truck Series race to be held at BMS.

1995: One of the most talked about finishes in NASCAR history took place in the August Night Race when Dale Earnhardt bumped Terry Labonte in turn four on the final lap of the race, sending Labonte's Chevy sliding across the finish line. Labonte won the race but tempers were still flaring in the pits when Rusty Wallace confronted Earnhardt for an early race altercation. Words were exchanged and Wallace famously threw a water bottle at The Intimidator to show his frustration. The two drivers ultimately had to be separated by teammates and race officials.

1996: O. Bruton Smith and Speedway Motorsports purchased BMS from Larry Carrier.

1997: BMS introduces the innovative Pinnacle Speedway in Lights holiday light spectacular which invites visitors to tour a five-mile route through the facility campus that is decked with amazing holiday lights and displays that runs from November through January. The tour takes guests onto the actual BMS track and the oval's infield serves as a festive Christmas Village. Proceeds from the event go to the track's chapter of Speedway Children's Charities.



ANTHONY VESTAL/FILE

Dale Earnhardt and Bruton Smith announce plans to increase grandstand capacity after Smith purchased Bristol Motor Speedway from Larry Carrier in 1996.

1998: BMS renovates its grandstands and doubles its seating capacity to more than 135,000 seats.

1998: Smith purchases Bristol Dragway from brothers Duane and Rick Ruth and totally renovated the property and constructed a brand-new tower with an awning-covered observation deck on its roof and installed a new track surface with new retaining walls alongside it. More than 15,000 cubic yards of dirt was moved in the transformation.

1999: Bristol Dragway hosts a unique NHRA race called the Winston Showdown that pits Top Fuel dragsters vs. Funny Cars. NHRA legend John Force won the first Showdown race. The format was also held the next year before the NHRA national event returned to Bristol Dragway in 2001. This October the track will host the 20th annual NHRA Thunder Valley Nationals as part of the NHRA Countdown to the Championship playoffs.

1999: One of the most iconic Cup Series races in history took place at BMS in August when Dale Earnhardt bumped Terry Labonte out of the way on the final lap en route to his ninth track victory. With some fans booing Earnhardt while he celebrated in Victory Lane he famously said, "I didn't mean to wreck him, I just meant to rattle his cage."

2000: BMS transformed its concrete racing surface to dirt to hold a special

World of Outlaws race in the summer. The event was such a hit that BMS did it again in 2001 and brought the Outlaws back along with Super Late Models. Sammy Swindell won the main Spring Car features both years.

2002: BMS completed its first pedestrian tunnel into the infield in Turn 3. The second tunnel in Turn 4 was added in 2007.

2002: BMS Victory Lane was relocated to the roof top of the Ballad Health Infield Care Center.

2004: The three-story Bristol Motor Speedway administration building, known as The Bruton Smith Building, opened its doors to employees and guests.

2004: Dale Earnhardt Jr. scored his first BMS victory during the August Night Race and in his Victory Lane interview shouted "It's Bristol, Baby!" which ignited a frenzy among fans and gave the speedway a brand-new slogan that carries on to this day. Today that phrase remains as meaningful and powerful as it was that night. It has become synonymous with Bristol Motor Speedway and the experience it offers.

2007: BMS installs a new concrete race surface with variable banking of 24 to 28 degrees, and a new state-of-the-art Media Center was constructed.

2010: At BMS in August, Kyle Busch becomes the first driver to win all three



ANTHONY VESTAL/FILE

The Battle at Bristol in 2016 was played in front of the largest crowd ever (156,990) to see a college football game. Tennessee beat Virginia Tech 45-24.

major NASCAR Series races in a single weekend.

2012: BMS has been known to make drivers' tempers flare, and one of the most talked about incidents in BMS history took place at the Night Race when Tony Stewart threw his helmet at rival Matt Kenseth's car on pit road after the two had tangled in an earlier on-track incident.

2013: Country music legend Charlie Daniels performed at BMS during the Food City 500 pre-race show. Honoring the Birthplace of Country Music, several country artists in addition to Daniels have performed during BMS pre-race ceremonies over the years including Joe Nichols, Randy Houser, Cody Jinx, Pryor & Lee, Kellie Pickler, A Thousand Horses, Clare Dunn, Dierks Bentley, Travis Denning, Old Crow Medicine Show, Colt Ford and the Doobie Brothers.

2014: BMS officially christens the stadium as The Last Great Colosseum and awards its first BMS Gladiator Sword to Carl Edwards at the Food City 500.

2015: Survey data reveals that BMS ticket holders come from all 50 states and 20 different countries.

2016: In April, an engineering team installed Colossus TV, the world's largest outdoor permanent center-hung television. The four-sided screen requires 117 tons of thick steel cabling

to hoist the massive 700-ton structure.

2016: In September, the track hosted the Battle at Bristol college football game between Tennessee and Virginia Tech. The Vols defeated the Hokies 45-24 and the game, which was televised on ESPN, set an NCAA-record for attendance at 156,990.

2016: A week after the Battle at Bristol, BMS hosted another college football game, the Bucs at Bristol presented by Food City. The game featured East Tennessee State taking on Western Carolina. The Bucs pulled off a late rally to win the game 34-31. The game also set an ETSU home game attendance record at more than 14,000.

2017: Longtime BMS partner Food City, which has been the title sponsor for the Food City 500 since 1992, celebrated its 25th anniversary as sponsor of the NASCAR Cup Series event. Their entitlement sponsorship is the second-longest for a race in NASCAR history behind the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

2017: BMS creates the Dale Earnhardt Jr. Scholarship in honor of the legendary second-generation driver who retired from full-time Cup Series racing at the end of the season. The annual award of \$2,088 is presented to a student who is pursuing an education in automotive technology or hospitality and tourism.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 19R

60 YEARS OF SPEED: BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY THROUGH THE YEARS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18R

2017: In April, Kyle Larson set the BMS Xfinity Series track performance record at 127.988 mph (14.992 seconds) in a Chevy.

2017: Kyle Busch duplicates his amazing feat of winning all three major NASCAR Series races in a single weekend for a second time at BMS. He remains the only driver to ever accomplish the impressive feat.

2017: In May BMS hosts the U.S. Short Track Nationals for Super Late Model and Pro Late Model racers from across the country. Bubba Wallace is among the winners of the inaugural event.

2017: Bristol Dragway hosted the popular Street Outlaws series from the Discovery Channel for their first event on a major drag racing facility. Fans from nearly every state on the East Coast came in droves to attend

the event that offered \$100,000 to win that was ultimately claimed by Justin "Big Chief" Shearer.

2019: Ryan Blaney set the NASCAR Cup Series track record at BMS in April with a fast lap of 132.075 mph (14.528 seconds) in a Ford.

2020: In April, William Bryon raced to victory in the first iRacing Pro Invitational event called the Food City Showdown at virtual Bristol Motor Speedway.

2020: BMS hosts the prestigious NASCAR All-Star Race on July 15. At the time, BMS is only the third track in NASCAR history to host the event that pays the winner \$1 million. Chase Elliott took the checkered flag in the BMS All-Star Race, his first victory in the marquee special event.

2020: BMS hosts a round of the NASCAR Playoffs for the first time in history, during the September running of the Bass Pro



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

Denny Hamlin and Kyle Larson look to take the green flag at the Food City Dirt Race in March. It was the first Cup Series race on dirt since 1970.

Shops NRA Night Race. Veteran driver Kevin Harvick raced to the victory and secured his spot in the Round of 12. It was Harvick's third career BMS victory.

2021: For the second time in its history, BMS transformed its racing surface to dirt to host a variety of races, including the inaugural Karl Kustoms Bristol

Dirt Nationals, which featured eight different classes and more than 1,200 racers.

2021: In March, BMS and Speedway Motorsports officials and the Mayor of Nashville entered into a letter of intent to allow BMS to operate the historic Nashville Fairgrounds Speedway with the potential return of NASCAR to the facility.

2021: BMS hosts the Food City Dirt Race in March, the first NASCAR Cup Series race to be held on a dirt surface in more than 50 years; The Camping World Truck Series also competed during the weekend.

2021: In April, BMS closed out its dirt racing activities for the year by hosting the World of Outlaws Sprint Cars and Super Late Models in two weekends of high-horsepower action. David Gravel won both WoO Sprint Car feature races in the Bristol Throwdown and the Super Late

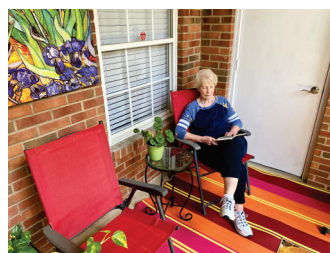
Model races in the Bristol Bash were won by Josh Richards and Devin Moran.

2021: BMS welcomed YouTube sensation Dude Perfect in June and hosted their Chaos at the Colosseum "bucket list" event which culminated with the Dudes competing in a demolition derby event on the dirt-covered BMS backstretch.

2021: In August NASCAR officials conducted an official test at BMS with its Next Gen car, driven by Christopher Bell. The Next Gen is scheduled to debut in official Cup Series competition in the 2022 season.

2021: The Thunder Valley Amphitheatre, a new music venue constructed on Bristol Dragway property, hosted its first major event in August with country music powerhouse Alabama and famed 1970s rock band America performing for a large contingent of fans.

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The Last Great Colosseum

Massive trophy and razor-sharp sword set the tone for BMS victory celebrations

Bristol Motor Speedway

Among the most coveted hardware on the NASCAR circuit, the iconic Bristol Motor Speedway Cup Series trophy and gladiator sword combine to make drivers' dreams come true if they are lucky enough to survive 500 laps of mayhem on the high-banks and finish first at "The Last Great Colosseum."

When those items are presented to the winner in one of the most unique Victory Lane settings at any of the sport's venues — on the rooftop of one of the infield buildings — the scene can get downright crazy at times. It's a ritual that continues to make revered Bristol Motor Speedway one of the most magical places in the world of auto racing.

As BMS celebrates its 60th Anniversary this year, the gigantic 4-foot tall Cup Series winner's Trophy and razor-sharp Gladiator Sword have become an integral part of BMS's identity and a pair of highly sought-after awards that every Cup Series driver wants desperately to add to his or her trophy case.

"In my opinion the combination of the classic trophy with the gladius is hard to beat," said noted journalist and BMS historian David McGee. "Race fans everywhere recognize the massive Bristol trophy — it was in the movie Talladega Nights for goodness sake — and the gladiator sword is unmistakable because there is only one Colosseum."

The elusive items will be up for grabs once again under the lights on Saturday, Sept. 18 when the NASCAR Cup Series Playoffs come to Bristol Motor Speedway during the running of the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race. The event is a high-stakes cut-off race in the Round of 16 in the NASCAR Playoffs, where four drivers will be eliminated from championship contention.

In the early days, BMS officials gave out a variety of different styles of trophies to its winning drivers. It wasn't until 1983 that then owner Warner Hodgdon, a California native, decided to establish a signature trophy for the Cup Series races at BMS that would be large, memorable and permanent.

He had his GM at the time work with the local Bristol trophy shop, Eddie's Trophies, to come up with the perfect prize that checked all of the necessary boxes.

"Hodgdon did things with a certain style and Bristol was his baby," McGee said.



Carl Edwards has fun celebrating his 2014 Food City 500 victory at Bristol Motor Speedway. The 30-inch gladius and the accompanying 4-foot-tall trophy are two of the most sought-after items in the sport.

"He wanted the winner to take home a memorable trophy — something that would dominate a trophy case and be something they would keep forever to remind them of the accomplishment of winning Bristol. The track GM contacted Eddie Allison at Eddie's Trophies with Hodgdon's directive. Allison had seen the massive four-foot-tall wood and brass trophy and knew it was a perfect fit."

The new BMS Cup trophy made its

debut at the Night Race in August 1983 and fittingly the first winner was Darrell Waltrip. Of Waltrip's track record 12 Cup Series victories — five came with the behemoth bronze trophy.

"If you look at victory lane celebrations down through the years, many times you will see a trophy that's a custom one-off to meet the needs of a specific sponsor," McGee said. "Some trophies are unmistakable in their style and design — the

Harley J. Earl trophy at Daytona and the Bristol trophy come immediately to mind. The BMS Cup trophy is just a classic design that represents a huge accomplishment at the sport's most popular track. Then you think about who all has won one or more of those trophies and that list represents a who's who of the modern era in NASCAR history."

TROPHY

From Page 20R

The BMS Cup Trophy is constructed with a solid wooden base with a stylish bronze cup at the top and four bronze eagles mounted around the bottom base of the trophy. A beautiful angel holding a flame high above her head sits at the very top of the trophy. There are several plates attached to the wooden base that have the event name, year and other race information included. Down the middle of the trophy is a plate that says W-I-N-N-E-R. At just over four-foot tall the trophy weighs more than 50 pounds.

"Besides being large, the Bristol Cup trophy is heavy," McGee says. "I can think of several drivers who, in a moment of jubilation, grabbed the trophy and began lifting it over their heads only to realize it weighs 50 pounds and at four-feet-tall is rather unwieldy — not an easy feat after wheeling a stock car around Bristol for three hours. That's why in most of the trophy presentation photos, the trophy is sitting safely on the ground because nobody wants to drop it."

Meanwhile, the BMS Gladiator Sword made its debut in The Colosseum in 2014 and Carl Edwards was the first driver to be presented with one in Victory



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

The combination of car owner Junior Johnson and Darrell Waltrip proved hard to beat at Bristol. Johnson holds the record with 21 wins for an owner. Waltrip leads all drivers with 12 Cup Series wins at the track.



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

Kyle Busch leads all active drivers with eight Bristol Cup Series wins.

Lane. The Sword was an integral part of the innovative marketing campaign establishing Bristol as "The Last Great Colosseum," and using the spelling that pays homage to the historic Roman Colosseum in the center of Rome, Italy. The Sword is commonly known as a "gladius" and is something that would certainly be carried by gladiators who were frequently in battle inside the Roman Colosseum. It has proved to be the perfect fit as a symbol of earning a victory at Bristol's Colosseum.

"Carl Edwards, being the first to receive and let alone see the sword, was very careful removing it from the scabbard," McGee recalls. "It has some heft too, and I think he quickly realized it was very sharp. Once he got comfortable, he hammed it up quite a bit for the photographers."

The BMS Gladiator Sword is 30

inches long with an imposing 19-inch hand-forged stainless-steel blade. It has a black leather scabbard and brass-plated sheath and handle. The official race name and date are engraved on the blade to connect each sword to its specific Bristol event.

In addition to race winners, the BMS Gladiator Sword has also been given on very special occasions to honored dignitaries, distinguished celebrities and many of the legends of the sport.

"We had launched the Last Great Colosseum marketing campaign and the Sword came out of a team brainstorm session about how could we expand on the Roman Colosseum theme and take it a little deeper," said Drew Bedard, BMS vice president of marketing. "We had received some inspiration from different tracks and some of the things they were doing in their winner's circles and we knew we wanted

something in Victory Lane that the winning driver could raise in the air. Our traditional trophy has quite a bit of heft to it so the Gladiator Sword was the perfect item that fit our mission and objectives and it has taken off remarkably well, even more so than we could have ever imagined."

Bedard says the BMS Gladiator Sword was an instant hit, given the immediate stamp of approval from a worldwide social media audience.

"When Carl Edwards won the first race where we presented the Sword and made such a big deal about it, Twitter just went crazy with that photo," Bedard said. "That photo was everywhere. When we saw that, we immediately knew we were onto something. It's really cool now to hear drivers and team members talk about it and how much

See **TROPHY**, Page 22R

TROPHY

From Page 21R

they all want one. You always hope that your ideas can take off like that and we have been fortunate that this one did. It's been a lot of fun."

Since 2002, BMS winners have been celebrating in one of the sport's most unique Victory Lanes. Set high atop the infield on the roof of the building that houses the Ballad Health Infield Care Center and The Apex, an exclusive luxury trackside sports bar, the BMS Victory Lane provides fans in the grandstands with an amazing view of the post-race celebrations.

McGee says the new concept for BMS Victory Lane came about due to a reconfiguration of the infield to accommodate additional NASCAR haulers and its relocation position was all

about the fans.

"The old victory lane was virtually invisible from the grandstands — a bit further inside the track and facing toward turns one and two," McGee says. "So, the only time fans at the track got to really see the celebration was after the center jumbotron was added in the infield. The old victory lane was sufficient in the early days but as media coverage, TV coverage and sponsor demands grew, it quickly became outdated. It was also in the path of where NASCAR haulers were to park. Credit longtime track president Jeff Byrd with putting it on the rooftop so the fans in turns 3 and 4 could see more of the celebrations."

Kurt Busch was the first NASCAR Cup Series driver to wheel his winning ride up the ramp onto the BMS Victory Lane after winning the 2002 Food City 500.

Today there are plenty of black tire marks up the ramp that lead to the checkerboard floor where a huge metal backdrop with sponsor and track logos frames the winning car and driver for each winner's ceremony.

"The emotion you see from the drivers and family members when they visit BMS Victory Lane is truly special," Bedard said. "When you win a race at Bristol you know that you are going to this elevated area and it just has this larger than life feeling about it. It's become a very special place, a true destination for all race car drivers. The one's who haven't been there dream about getting there one day. You always hear young drivers talk about 'getting to the roof at Bristol one day' and that just puts the whole special experience into perspective."



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Iconic NASCAR moments? Bristol's had more than its share

By Jeff Birchfield

SPORTS WRITER

jbirchfield@johnsoncitypress.com

Rattling his cage, the bump-and-run and the weekend sweep — it's all part of the history of the Bristol Night Race. The Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race, dubbed "America's Night Race" under the most recent Bristol Motor Speedway marketing campaign, has produced some of the most memorable moments in NASCAR history.

Originally named the Volunteer 500, the race was first moved to Saturday night under the lights in 1978. Lennie Pond started on the pole for the race and led 30 laps, but it was Cale Yarborough, in the midst of winning three straight NASCAR championships, who dominated the race.

Driving the No. 11 Holly Farms Oldsmobile for Junior Johnson, Yarborough led 327 laps. He and Benny Parsons were the only drivers on the lead lap at the end.

WALTRIP'S RUN

Darrell Waltrip won three straight Night Races from 1981-83, part of a longer streak of seven straight Bristol wins.

Waltrip passed rival Bobby Allison on lap 481 and held him off to win in 1982.

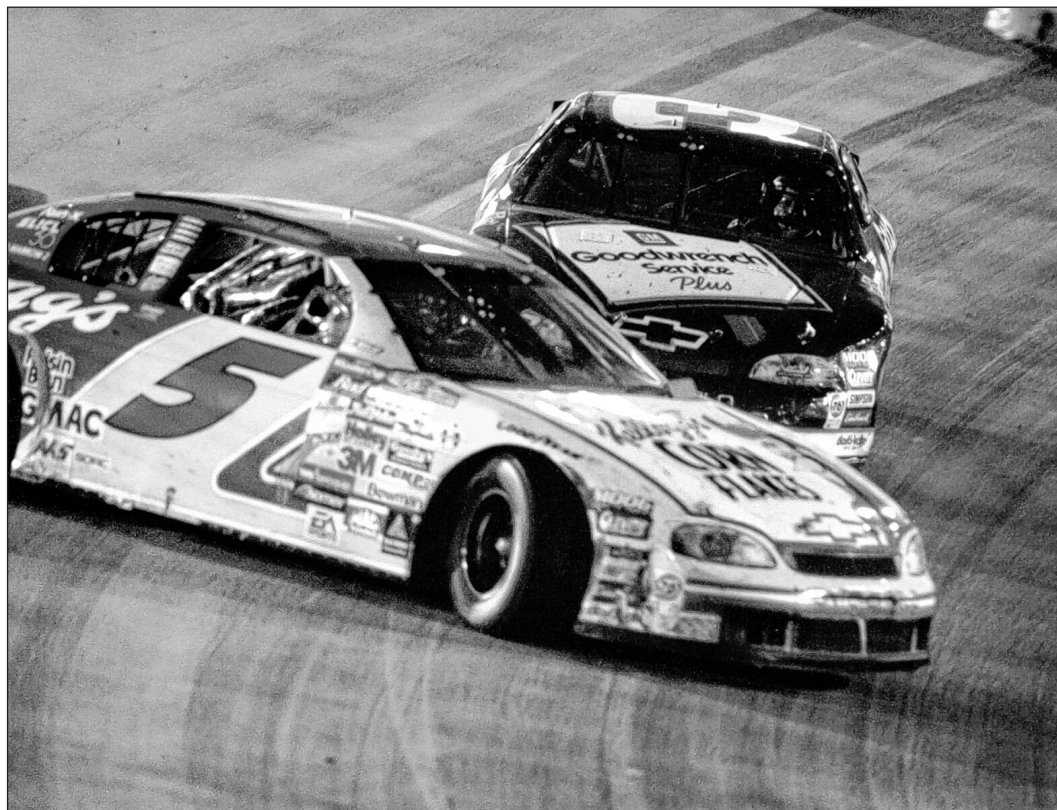
Waltrip captured a rain-shortened race in 1983 when his Junior Johnson crew got the No. 11 out of the pits ahead of Bobby Allison and Dale Earnhardt.

Terry Labonte ended the streak in 1984. Labonte took over the points lead that night on his way to his first NASCAR title.

LOCAL HEROES

Ernie Irvan, driving the bright yellow No. 4

Chevrolet for Morgan-McClure Motorsports team, held off defending NASCAR champion Rusty



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

Terry Labonte (5) spins after contact from Dale Earnhardt (3) at the end of the 1999 Bristol Night Race.

Wallace to win the 1990 Night Race.

Wallace, a nine-time Bristol winner, hounded Irvan the last 50 laps, but came up a half-car length short. It was the first-ever win for the Abingdon-based team with Kodak Film serving as sponsor and Kingsport's Tony Glover the crew chief.

EARNHARDT-LABONTE, PART I

In one of the most dramatic finishes in NASCAR history, Dale Earnhardt's black No. 3 Chevrolet hit the back of Terry Labonte's No. 5 Chevrolet coming to the finish line at the 1995 Night Race. Labonte crashed into the outside wall, but slid across the line ahead of Earnhardt.

The photo of Labonte's wrecked race car in victory lane with smoke pouring out of it ranks as one of the most famous celebration shots in the sport's history. Those are often compared with David Pearson's wrecked car



FILE PHOTO

Kyle Busch celebrates his win in the 2017 Food City 300 for the NASCAR Xfinity Series. He would go on to win the following night's Cup race to sweep all three national series races, having also won the Truck Series race to kick off the weekend.

after winning the 1976 Daytona 500.

EARNHARDT-LABONTE, PART II
It's the most famous

finish in Bristol history, the 1999 Night Race when Earnhardt wrecked Labonte coming off Turn 2 and went on to score his ninth and final Bristol victory. Labonte wound up eighth after the multi-car wreck trigged by the spin.

The post-race atmosphere made it all the more exciting with veteran broadcaster Dr. Jerry Punch saying it was the loudest crowd he's ever heard at a sporting event. Fans booed mercilessly as Earnhardt delivered the famous lines, "I didn't mean to wreck him. I just meant to rattle his cage," in victory lane. Years later, Labonte recalled, "It made for some exciting highlights and one of the best finishes of all time. I'm glad to be a part of it."

BUMP-AND-RUN

Jeff Gordon dominated the Cup Series from 1995-2001, winning 56 races and four championships. Yet, he came into the 2002 Night Race in the midst of a 31-race winless streak. Not accustomed to such struggles, Gordon was desperate to win when the circuit visited Bristol in August.

He used the bump-and-run to move leader Rusty Wallace out of the way and race to the win. It was the second time Gordon had done the move on Wallace at Bristol, winning the 1997 Food City 500 in similar fashion.

BACK-TO-BACK

Ford drivers Matt Kenseth, Carl Edwards and Joey Logano all scored back-to-back Night Race wins over a decade. Kenseth won in 2005-06, Edwards in 2007-08 and Logano in 2014-15. None of the wins were as heated as Edwards using the bump-and-run to get by Kyle Busch and win the 2008 Sharpie 500.

Busch showed his frustration after the race, run-

ning into Edwards' car after the race. Edwards retaliated by spinning Busch out. NASCAR officials intervened before it further escalated.

While not a win, Kenseth was involved in his own Bristol highlight when he and Tony Stewart wrecked while racing for the lead in the 2012 Night Race. Stewart bounced his helmet off Kenseth's car, leading to one of the most replayed highlights of the last decade.

WEEKEND SWEEP

Kyle Busch became the first driver to sweep NASCAR Truck Series, Xfinity Series and Cup Series races at one track in the same weekend in 2010. He repeated the feat again at BMS in 2017, still the only driver to ever do it at any track.

Busch has a record 22 wins at the high-banked short track, eight (most among active drivers) in the Cup Series, nine in the Xfinity Series and five in the Truck Series. In addition to his eight Cup wins, he has four runner-up finishes at Bristol.

OTHER RACES

There are plenty of other great moments like Mark Martin taking an emotional win in 1998 after the death of his father, step-mom and sister in an airplane crash. His victory also ended a four-race win streak by Jeff Gordon.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. had arguably his best driving display ever at the 2004 Night Race, racing to the win despite his legs still blistered from a fiery sports car accident weeks earlier. Kurt Busch held off Kyle Larson in a 2018 Night Race that was action packed from start to finish and voted by the fans as one of the best NASCAR races in recent years.

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A helping hand for the region

Speedway Children's Charities has distributed more than \$14 million to groups in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia

By Jeff Birchfield
SPORTS WRITER
jbirchfield@johnsoncitypress.com

For a quarter century, Speedway Children's Charities has given back to the local community.

Since its inception in 1996, the Bristol Chapter of Speedway Children's Charities has distributed over \$14 million to local organizations in 18 counties in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia.

SCC is a non-profit 501(c) organization that provides funding for hundreds of non-profit organizations throughout the nation that meets the direct needs of children. In 2020, Speedway Children's Charities distributed more than \$1 million in grants to 170 charitable organizations across the country.

The total funds distributed since 1982 are close to \$60 million. The Bristol chapter alone presented \$453,100 in cash gifts to 73 Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia child service agencies in 2020.

Before the pandemic, over \$1 million was raised in some years.

"We haven't raised the amount we raised in the past several years. The

need is great. And it breaks our hearts we can not give as much," SCC Executive Director Claudia Byrd said during November's Night of Smiles. "But with \$453,100 to give to 73 agencies serving more than 75,270 children in our region, we still have a whole lot to celebrate."

Boys and Girls Clubs, foster care, after-school programs, food distribution and local children's homes are some of the recipients of the SCC's fundraisers.

There are a variety of ways the funds are raised. During the NASCAR weekend, it includes

the Red Bucket Brigade and 50/50 raffles.

The largest fundraiser is The Pinnacle Speedway in Lights, a spectacular holiday display stretching over five miles with more than 2 million lights. The route takes you on both Bristol Motor Speedway and Bristol Dragway.

It is a holiday tradition in the Tri-Cities and has been copied in recent years at other Speedway Motorsports facilities.

There's also the Ice Rink presented by HVAC where people enjoy ice skating in the early winter months. Other fundraisers include the Baker's Construction Services Golf Tournament, the NRA Celebrity Shooting Tournament and 5K running events.

A recent Speedway Children's Charities 5K run and the offer to drive around the track raised over \$12,500.

Other events in 2019 included Johnsonville Sausage bringing its



Bristol Motor Speedway is lit up during the annual Speedway in Lights celebration. The annual holiday event features more 2 million lights displayed over more than five miles; it encompasses both the speedway as well as Bristol Dragway. It is the largest single fundraiser for Speedway Children's Charities.

65-foot Big Taste Grill to Food City Family Race Night and Meade Tractor sponsoring a cornhole tournament. Racing memorabilia auctions and dinners with NASCAR Hall of Fame members as the guest speakers have also served as fundraisers.

Speedway Children's Charities is always looking for volunteers and donations. If you have an interest in getting involved or learning more about SCC, contact Betsy Holleman at 423-989-6975 or email betsy@bristolmotor Speedway.com.



One of Speedway Children's Charities fundraisers held during race week, the Red Bucket Brigade, allows race fans to contribute to the worthy cause.

Determining a champion: NASCAR playoffs have evolved over the years

Points still matter, but wins carry more weight in deciding championship

By Jeff Birchfield

SPORTS WRITER

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It's the third iteration of the NASCAR playoffs which debuted as the "Chase for the Championship."

Starting in 2014, the current system places an emphasis on winning. Full-time drivers who win during the regular-season earn an automatic playoff bid. The regular-season champion, regardless if he has won, qualifies for the playoffs.

The final spots are based on points — Denny Hamlin, Kevin Harvick and Tyler Reddick earned bids in the 2021 playoff field. That field will be condensed from 16 to 12 drivers after Saturday's Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Again, a playoff win such as Hamlin's at Darlington advances a driver to the next round, while the remainder of the eligible field will advance on points. The field shrinks from 12 to eight after the next three races with the Charlotte Roval serving as the cut-off race.

The final four will be determined after the next three-race stretch ending at Martinsville. It sets up a four-driver shootout for the championship at Phoenix.

An addition in recent years is the introduction of stage points, with drivers earning points for finishing inside the top 10 in the first two stages of a race. They also earn bonus points for winning a stage.

Chase era champions

NASCAR Cup Series championship-winning drivers since the advent of the Chase playoff format:

2004 — Kurt Busch
2005 — Tony Stewart
2006 — Jimmie Johnson
2007 — Jimmie Johnson
2008 — Jimmie Johnson
2009 — Jimmie Johnson
2010 — Jimmie Johnson
2011 — Tony Stewart
2012 — Brad Keselowski
2013 — Jimmie Johnson
2014 — Kevin Harvick
2015 — Kyle Busch
2016 — Jimmie Johnson
2017 — Martin Truex Jr.
2018 — Joey Logano
2019 — Kyle Busch
2020 — Chase Elliott

We've seen in recent years the importance of these. They propelled Martin Truex Jr. into the championship four and series title in 2017. Harvick, a nine-time race winner in 2020, didn't get the stage points needed to advance to last season's championship four.

BEFORE THE PLAYOFFS

NASCAR historian Bob Latford famously developed the point system used from 1975-2003. Starting at 175 points, drivers who finished between first and sixth had five-point intervals, with four-point intervals back to 11th place and three-point intervals throughout the rest of the field.

Points were the same for each race throughout the season. The criticism was it didn't place enough emphasis on winning. In 1985 Darrell Waltrip won just three times while Bill Elliott won 11 yet Waltrip won the title. The final straw was '03 when champion Matt Kenseth won only one race, while Ryan Newman won eight and finished sixth in points.

THE CHASE ERA

The "Chase for the Cup" began in 2004 with the top 10 in points advancing to a 10-race playoff. Despite the change, Kurt Busch won the championship with



Chase Elliott holds up the season championship trophy as he celebrates with his race crew in Victory Lane after winning the NASCAR Cup Series auto race at Phoenix Raceway in Avondale, Ariz., last November.

AP PHOTO/RALPH FRESO

three wins, while Jimmie Johnson raced to eight.

Don't feel bad for Johnson as he won five straight points championships from 2006-10.

After fan favorites like Tony Stewart and Carl Edwards missed the 2006

playoffs, the field was expanded to the top 12 in points from 2007-09.

Placing an emphasis on winning, the playoff changed from 2010-13 with the top 10 in points and two wild-cards based on points or wins.

In 2013, Jeff Gordon was added as a 13th playoff entry after Michael Waltrip Racing manipulated the finish of the regular-season finale at Richmond.

SATURDAY NIGHT

With the top 16 drivers

in the playoff having the opportunity to advance to the next round with a victory at the unpredictable Bristol Motor Speedway, it makes Saturday's Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race a must see for NASCAR fans.



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Celebrity sightings

Plenty of star power has been spotted at Bristol Motor Speedway over the years

By Jeff Birchfield
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Want to spot a celebrity in the Tri-Cities? Then Bristol Motor Speedway is your place to be.

From sports legends to the top-selling musicians and popular actors, some of the biggest names in the sports and entertainment industries have come to the “Last Great Colosseum.”

Besides being home to the “World’s Fastest Half-Mile,” Bristol is also “The Birthplace of Country Music.” Several of the top stars like Charlie Daniels, Hank Williams Jr. and Old Crow Medicine Show have been part of the pre-race entertainment at the speedway.

Kenny Chesney, The Band Perry and Old Dominion performed in the largest concert in Tri-Cities history before the “Battle at Bristol” football game in 2016.

Marty Robbins, famous for being both a country music star and race car driver, finished 20th in a 1968 NASCAR Grand Touring Series race, won by legendary driver Donnie Allison, at Bristol.

It’s not limited to country music as the fast cars, loud engines and high energy also appeal to rock stars.

Aerosmith frontman Steven Tyler was another musician to play in the pre-race concert. Pitbull, nicknamed “Mr. Worldwide,” is part owner of the No. 99 Trackhouse Racing Chevrolet driven by Daniel Suarez. Others have simply shown up as fans.

There was quite the buzz when legendary guitarist Eric Clapton was in Todd Bodine’s pit for a NASCAR Truck Series race, while Kid Rock and his then-girlfriend, actress Pamela Anderson, spent an entire weekend attending both the Xfinity and Cup Series races at Bristol.

Burt Reynolds, arguably the biggest movie star of the 1970s, was co-owner of the Skoal Bandit Race Team with stuntman Hal Needham. The familiar green and white No. 33 was driven by the NASCAR veteran Harry Gant. Another stuntman, Stuntman Stanton Barrett, known for his work on movies like the Spiderman and the Jurassic Park series, competed in three Cup Series at BMS.



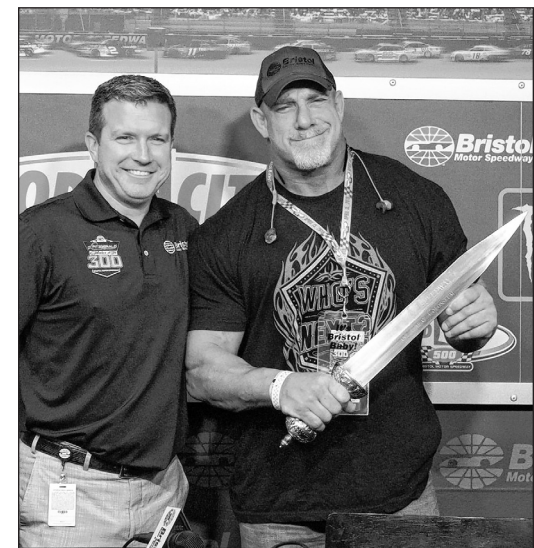
WADE PAYNE/AP FILE

Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning, left, and driver Dale Earnhardt Jr., right, wave to fans before a Cup Series race at Bristol in 2016.



WADE PAYNE/AP FILE

Aerosmith frontman Steven Tyler performs before the Cup Series race at Bristol in 2015.



JEFF BIRCHFIELD/JOHNSON CITY PRESS

Bristol Motor Speedway Executive Vice President/General Manager Jerry Caldwell and WWE Hall of Fame wrestler Bill Goldberg pose in the BMS Media Center.

CELEBRITIES

From Page 28R

John Schneider, star of the television show the “Dukes of Hazzard,” made an appearance at BMS on behalf of Team Penske sponsor Autotrader. Not leaving all the fun to the NASCAR drivers, Schneider now races an orange No. 01 Open Wheel Modified car painted like the TV show’s “General Lee.” He recently raced at nearby Volunteer Speedway.

Other celebrity endorsers include cooking show star Paula Deen and four-time NBA champion LeBron James, who did a basketball shooting exhibition for sponsor Powerade.

Michael Jordan, considered by many as the game’s greatest player, is more involved as the co-owner of 23XI Racing with Denny Hamlin. Besides the No. 23 car driven by Bubba Wallace, plans are to add the No. 45 with former NASCAR champion Kurt Busch in 2022.

Former NBA all-star Brad Daugherty, a former teammate to Jordan at the University of North Carolina, has been a long-time car owner, now with drivers Ryan Preece and Ricky



Country music superstar Kenny Chesney performed at Bristol Motor Speedway in 2016.

Stenhouse Jr. He’s also a television analyst and even competed in a celebrity race at the speedway.

Will Perdue, an NBA champion

with Jordan on the Chicago Bulls, was a guest of seven-time champion Jimmie Johnson.

The most popular celebrity spokesperson in these parts is



Legendary Tennessee Lady Vols coach Pat Summitt greets driver Danica Patrick before the Food City 250 at Bristol in 2012. Summitt was the grand marshal of the race.



Celebrity cook Paula Deen made an appearance at BMS on behalf of Smithfield Foods.

Trevor Bayne piloting the “We Back Pat” No. 60 Ford in the Food City 250 in 2012 — when the coach was in the early stages of dementia.

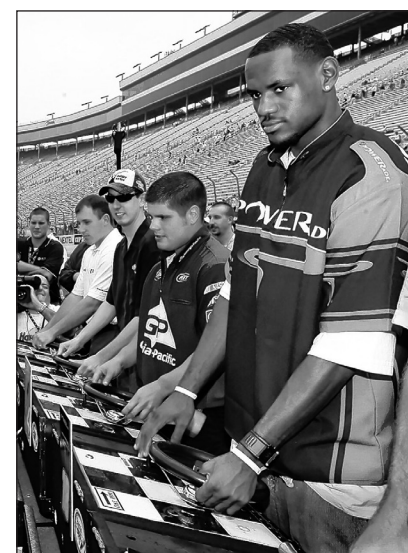
Plenty of NFL players have been involved in NASCAR ownership, including quarterbacks Terry Bradshaw, Brett Favre, Roger Staubach, Troy Aikman and Dan Marino. Reggie White, the greatest defensive player in University of Tennessee football history, was key in the development of NASCAR’s “Drive for Diversity” program.

Jason Witten, a future NFL Hall of Famer from nearby Elizabethton, served as honorary starter for the 2010 Food City 500. Kingsport native Daniel Kilgore, who played in two Super Bowls, has done the whole Bristol experience, camping out with friends.

Of all the sports connections, Joe Gibbs is a NFL Hall of Fame coach with three Super Bowl wins and a NASCAR Hall of Fame owner with four Daytona 500 wins.

Bristol Motor Speedway is known for its beating, banging and torn-up sheet metal. It’s a place where heavyweight boxing champions Rocky Marciano and Evander “The Real Deal” Holyfield have attended races. Ditto for pro wrestling superstars like “Stone Cold” Steve Austin and Ricky Morton, one half of the legendary Rock and Roll Express.

Wrestling icon Bill Goldberg is arguably the speedway’s biggest celebrity fan, attending multiple races. If you want to see a famous face in the Tri-Cities area, Bristol Motor Speedway is the best place to do so.



NBA superstar LeBron James, Kurt Busch, Ryan Newman, Kyle Busch appeared together at Bristol Motor Speedway in 2005.

Peyton Manning, former University of Tennessee quarterback and a two-time Super Bowl champion. Manning was a special guest of fellow Nationwide Insurance spokesperson Dale Earnhardt Jr. at the 2016 Food City 500, a race in which Earnhardt finished second.

Legendary University of Tennessee women’s basketball coach Pat Summitt was honored at BMS with Knoxville driver

MARK HUMPHREY/AP FILE

FILE

WADE PAYNE/AP FILE

Bristol race week schedule of events

By Jeff Birchfield

SPORTS WRITER

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BRISTOL, Tenn. — From the stars of tomorrow to the superstars of today, there's plenty of great stock car racing this week at Bristol Motor Speedway.

It starts with a double-header for the ARCA Menards and NASCAR Camping World Truck Series, on Thursday, one of the most prestigious Xfinity Series races of the year on Friday and the biggest short track race in the world for the NASCAR Cup Series on Saturday.

One change from year's past is no practice or qualifying for the Xfinity or Cup Series. The field will be set by a mathematical formula which includes the finish in the previous race, the

driver's fastest lap in the previous race and car owner's rank in the standings.

THURSDAY

The Bush's Beans 200 features some of the up-and-coming stars in the ARCA Menards Series. No star has shown brighter this season than Ty Gibbs, the grandson of NASCAR Hall of Fame owner and NFL Hall of Fame coach Joe Gibbs. The driver of the No. 18 Toyota has won nine of the first 16 races of the season.

Corey Heim, a 19-year-old from Georgia in the No. 20 Toyota, won six of the other races. Daniel Dye, a 17-year-old from Florida in the No. 21 Chevrolet, won a race on the Berlin, Michigan short track. Thad Moffitt, grandson of NASCAR icon Richard Petty, is in the No.

46 Ford owned by drag racing legend Johnny Gray.

The UNOH 200 presented by Ohio Logistics is a cut-off race for the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series. John Hunter Nemechek was the fastest driver in the regular season with five victories.

Other favorites include defending Truck Series champion Sheldon Creed, who opened the playoffs with back-to-back wins, and three-time champion Matt Crafton. Sam Mayer, the teenage phenom who swept Thursday races in 2020, is trying to sweep Truck and Xfinity Series races in 2021.

FRIDAY

The Food City 300 is the final race of the regular season for the NASCAR Xfinity Series. A.J.

Thursday's schedule

2 p.m. — Spectator gates open; ARCA Menards Series practice

4 p.m. — ARCA Menards Series qualifying

6:15 p.m. — ARCA Menards Series driver introductions

6:30 p.m. — ARCA Menards Series Bush's Beans 200 race

8:30 p.m. — NASCAR Truck Series driver introductions

9 p.m. — UNOH 200 NASCAR Truck Series race

Friday's schedule

3 p.m. — Spectator gates open; Fan Track Walk

7 p.m. — NASCAR Xfinity Series driver introductions

7:30 p.m. — Food City 300 NASCAR Xfinity Series race

Saturday's schedule

3 p.m. — Spectator gates open; Fan Track Walk

7 p.m. — NASCAR Cup Series driver introductions

7:30 p.m. — Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race NASCAR Cup Series

straight top-two finishes including his third win of the season at Michigan. That doesn't include a Cup Series victory at the Indianapolis road course.

Austin Cindric's No. 22 Team Penske Ford has been the fastest car much of the season. He scored five wins over the first 24 races. Veteran Justin Allgaier is traditionally fast at Bristol, while drivers like Daniel Hemric, Harrison Burton, Justin Haley and Noah Gragson are other contenders.

SATURDAY

It's the main event, the Bass Pro Shops NRA Night Race, featuring 500 laps with a chance for the playoff drivers to advance to the round of 12.

Kyle Larson has been the dominant driver most of the season. He's won on speedways, road courses, captured the All-Star Race and crushed the competi-

tion on dirt tracks outside of NASCAR. He has been runner-up to each of the Busch brothers at Bristol. Will this be the time he puts the No. 5 Chevrolet in victory lane?

Chase Elliott, the defending NASCAR Cup Series champion and a teammate to Larson, won the 2020 All-Star Race on the high banks. He's also looking for a first Bristol Cup win. The aforementioned Busch brothers have combined for 14 Bristol victories. Other previous winners include Joey Logano, who won on the Bristol dirt in March, Kevin Harvick, Brad Keselowski and Denny Hamlin.

With the battle for playoff points and others simply wanting to win the prestigious Bristol Night Race to make their season, it's a fitting end to a great three days of racing.

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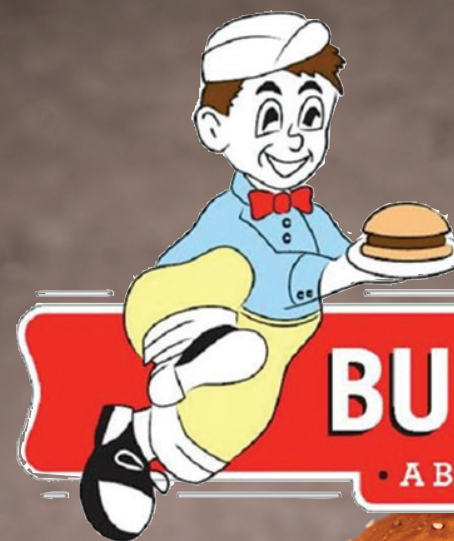
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It's all in the numbers, and the winner's circle, at BMS

Drivers of the No. 11 have had the most success at Bristol, with 20 victories through the years

Bristol Motor Speedway

What number did legendary slugger Babe Ruth wear? Or what was the number on high-soaring Michael Jordan's jersey? How about hockey phenom Wayne Gretzky? Or pro football's Tom Brady?

Numbers and the athletes they represent are forever linked. Especially when the sports figure also happens to be highly successful, or in some cases the greatest to ever play a particular sport.

Ruth wore the 3 proudly on his New York Yankees' uniform and any self-respecting fan of the NFL knows that the No. 12 jersey belongs to the gunslinging, Super Bowl-winning Brady. The 23 will forever be red and black for Jordan's Chicago Bulls and in the NHL, the 99 is sacred for "The Great One," Gretzky.

The numbers game is the same in NASCAR. Drivers are associated with their car numbers more often than they are with sponsors, car owners, car manufacturers or heck, even their own last names sometimes. Fans don't need to even say Kyle Busch, they will just refer to him as the 18. Kevin Harvick is the 4, Chase Elliott is the 9 and Joey Logano is the 22.

So, as Bristol Motor Speedway is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2021 at the World's Fastest Half-Mile, one may wonder ... what car number is associated with the most wins at NASCAR's most iconic track?

Some might immediately guess the No. 3 because



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

Dale Earnhardt collected seven of his nine Bristol wins in the No. 3 car. The seven-time series champion also parked in victory lane on a pair of occasions while piloting the No. 2 entry.

Dale Earnhardt, who won nine races at BMS, always seemed to be in contention for a victory. Others might think it is either the No. 17 or No. 88 because Darrell Waltrip, who was identified with those numbers for a good part of his career, earned a track record total of 12 victories on the challenging high-banked oval. Or, could it be the No. 18, which has been on the roof and door panel of Busch, the track's most recent dominator.

All strong guesses for sure, but none of those numbers have garnered the most trips to Victory Lane over the first 121 races at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Drum roll please ... that honor goes to the No. 11, which has visited Victory Lane most often thanks to the success of four drivers — Waltrip, Cale Yarborough, Ned Jarrett and most recently Denny Hamlin. Of those drivers, three are NASCAR Cup Series champions and reg-

ularly piloted their No. 11 rides to wins at Bristol Motor Speedway. The No. 11's BMS win total is an impressive 20, with Yarborough's nine leading the way, followed by Waltrip with eight in the 11, Hamlin's two and Jarrett's one.

Waltrip also won at Bristol in car Nos. 17 and 88, and remains one of only two Cup Series drivers in Bristol history to visit its Victory Lane in three different car numbers (also Kurt Busch, who won in the 2, 41 and 97).

Next on the list is the No. 2 with 13 victory lane appearances. Rusty Wallace has seven, Brad Keselowski has three, Dale Earnhardt two and Kurt Busch has one for the beloved No. 2 car.

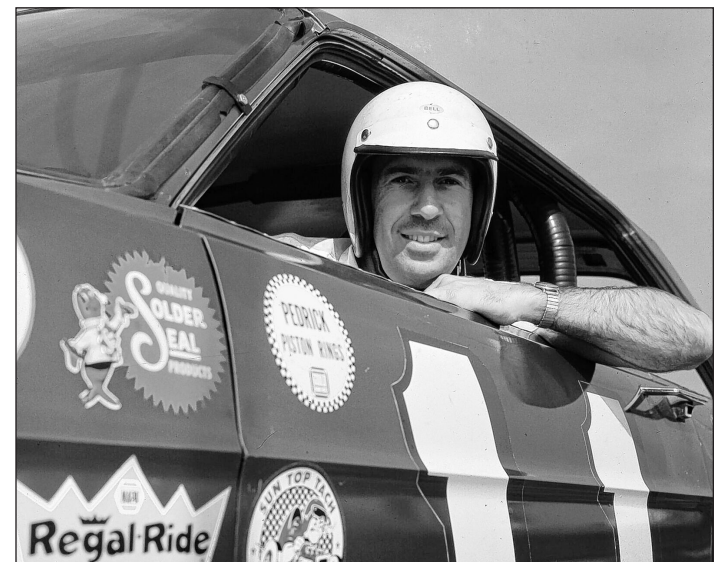
Thirty-two different car numbers have found success at BMS.

The following is a breakdown of all of the winning Cup Series car numbers in BMS history.

Most NASCAR Cup Series victories by car number at BMS

Car No. (Wins) — Driver, Wins

11 (20) — N. Jarrett 1, Cale Yarborough 9, Darrell Waltrip 8, Denny Hamlin 2
 2 (13) — Dale Earnhardt 2, Rusty Wallace 7, Kyle Busch 1, Brad Keselowski 3
 3 (8) — Charlie Glotzbach 1, Dale Earnhardt 7
 17 (8) — David Pearson 4, Darrell Waltrip 2, Matt Kenseth 2
 18 (7) — Kyle Busch 7
 22 (6) — Fireball Roberts 1, Bobby Allison 2, Joey Logano 3
 24 (5) — Jeff Gordon 5
 28 (4) — Fred Lorenzen 3, Davey Allison 1
 97 (4) — Kurt Busch 4
 6 (3) — David Pearson 1, Mark Martin 2
 27 (3) — Donnie Allison 1, Rusty Wallace 2
 43 (3) — Richard Petty 3
 88 (3) — Darrell Waltrip 2, Dale Jarrett 1
 99 (3) — Paul Goldsmith 1, Carl Edwards 2
 4 (3) — Ernie Irvan 1, Kevin Harvick 2
 20 (3) — Tony Stewart 1, Matt Kenseth 2
 5 (3) — Kyle Busch 1, Terry



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Ned Jarrett won at Bristol in 1965 in the No. 11 Ford.



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All nine of Cale Yarborough's Bristol wins came behind the wheel of Junior Johnson's No. 11 cars.

Labonte 1, Kasey Kahne 1
 7 (2) — Alan Kulwicki 2
 8 (2) — Joe Weatherly 1, Dale Earnhardt Jr. 1
 12 (2) — Bobby Allison 2
 29 (2) — Dick Hutcherson 1, Kevin Harvick 1
 72 (2) — Bobby Johns 1, Benny Parsons 1
 48 (2) — Jimmie Johnson 2

19 (2) — Carl Edwards 2
 9 (1) — Bill Elliott 1
 21 (1) — Elliott Sadler 1
 26 (1) — Junior Johnson 1
 31 (1) — Jeff Burton 1
 42 (1) — Jim Paschal 1
 44 (1) — Terry Labonte 1
 46 (1) — Jack Smith 1
 41 (1) — Kurt Busch 1

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