

# RACING THIS WEEK

## XFINITY RECAP

• **Saturday's** FOCUSED HEALTH 250, Circuits of the Americas



**WINNER: CONNOR ZILISCH**

AUSTIN, Tex.—It's hard to put Connor Zilisch off his game, as the 18-year-old road course prodigy proved once again in winning Saturday's Focused Health 250 at Circuit of the Americas.

A commitment line violation couldn't do it. Sent to the rear for pitting too when pit road closed suddenly for the race's second caution, Zilisch restarted 32nd after the first stage break and drove though the field, taking the lead from Carson Kvapil on Lap 56 of 65 at the 2.4-mile, 17-turn circuit.

Hard contact with the Toyota of Corey Heim couldn't do it. Fighting for position in the final stage, Zilisch slammed into Heim, knocking him off course. The wheel-to-wheel contact damaged the right front fender of Zilisch's No. 88 JR Motorsports Chevrolet and caused a serious tire rub under hard braking.

Hot pursuit from Carson Kvapil couldn't do it. After making what proved to be the winning pass, Zilisch had to fend off his teammate until Kvapil's right front tire went flat on Lap 60. That gave Zilisch all the breathing room he needed as he nursed his car to the finish line.

Runner-up William Byron trimmed a four-second lead to 1.639 seconds at the finish but couldn't mount a challenge over the closing laps.

As a result, the pole winner had his second Xfinity Series victory, adding to his maiden win in his first start in the series last summer at Watkins Glen.

"That was way harder than I wanted it to be," said Zilisch, who scored the much-needed victory after respective finishes of 27th and 34th in the first two races of the season at Daytona and Atlanta. "I did not drive a clean race at all ... I was kind of mentally fogged halfway through that race.

"I made way too many mistakes ... I was glad we were able to fight back."

Byron was driving the No. 17 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet that won last year's Xfinity race at COTA with Kyle Larson behind the wheel.

"My car was just kind of floppy in the short run, and I had to try to take care of it," said Byron, who will defend his win in the NASCAR Cup Series race on Sunday. "I just tried to stay with it there in the long run ... I had fun. It was a good workout."

Sam Mayer ran third on Saturday, with Austin Hill, last week's Atlanta winner coming home fourth. Hill charged from fourth to first after a Lap 46 restart when Zilisch and Kvapil ran wide into Turn 1.

But Hill's lead was short-lived. When he over-drove Turn 6a on Lap 52, Kvapil shot past him into the lead, and Zilisch followed into second.

Four laps later, Zilisch had the lead for good, though Kvapil made it a contest until his tire deflated.

Christian Eckes finished fifth. Jesse Love, Taylor Gray, Ross Chastain, William Sawalich and Blaine Perkins completed the top 10.

## ECHOPARK AUTOMOTIVE

### GRAND PRIX

After passing Kyle Busch for the lead and staving off defending race winner William Byron over the last five laps, Christopher Bell was a back-to-back winner in the Cup Series for the first time in his career.



**Christopher Bell, driver of the #20 DEWALT Toyota, crosses the finish line for his second consecutive Cup Series victory in Sunday's EchoPark Automotive Grand Prix in Austin, Texas.** (Meg Oliphant/Getty Images)

## At COTA, Bell 'the prophet' rings up another victory

AUSTIN, Tex.—Christopher Bell was prophetic.

After winning at Atlanta Motor Speedway on Feb. 23, Bell said 2.4-mile, 17-turn Circuit of Americas was a track he had circled for another potential victory.

Sure enough, after passing Kyle Busch for the lead and staving off defending race winner William Byron over the last five laps at COTA, Bell was a back-to-back winner in the Cup Series for the first time in his career, having claimed victory in Sunday's EchoPark Automotive Grand Prix.

Bell beat Byron to the finish line by 0.433 seconds, as the reigning Daytona 500 winner raced Bell cleanly over the closing laps. Pole winner Tyler Reddick was third, followed by Chase Elliott, who made a miraculous recovery from a Lap 1 spin in Turn 1 resulting in a broken toe link.

Busch fell to fifth on the final lap after side-to-side contact with Bell's No. 20 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota during the battle for the lead which took all the juice out of Busch's No. 8 Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet.

The victory was Bell's first at the Texas road course and the 11th of his career.

"Whenever Kyle was leading, I was just trying to be so cautious," said Bell, who spun Busch's car in Turn 1 in the 2024 race. "Obviously, we know what happened last year. I didn't want that to happen. I wanted to pass him clean. He was just doing such a good job at running his race, and he could get off the corners just good enough that I couldn't get inside of him.

"But there I started peeking a nose, and he bobbed and allowed me to get out front. Whenever I did, I'm, like, 'Okay, just don't beat yourself.' Those were about the five or six sloppiest laps I've ever run."

Having pitted two laps earlier than Bell during the final cycle of green-flag stops, Busch, who led a race-high 42 laps, held a 2.6-second margin over Byron and a 4.0-second advantage over Bell on Lap 78 when Denny Hamlin locked his brakes into Turn 6a and knocked Austin Dillon's Chevrolet into a gravel trap to cause the third and final caution.

Busch took command on the restart on Lap 83, but Bell had superior tires and an arguably superior car. With a run off Turn 20 on Lap 90, Bell had the lead before the cars reached the start/finish line. At the top of the Hill in Turn 1 on Lap 91, Byron followed into second place, and Reddick soon had third.

"Yeah, it was really close," Byron said of his attempt to challenge Bell in the late going. "I felt like the battle between (Bell)



**Christopher Bell, driver of the #20 DEWALT Toyota, crosses the finish line for his second consecutive Cup Series victory in Sunday's EchoPark Automotive Grand Prix in Austin, Texas.** (Meg Oliphant/Getty Images)

and Kyle was just kind of sitting there waiting for one of them to bobble or slide their tires. Bell got by him. I felt like once he got clear, his car was super loose, and it kind of gave me a couple of shots at him, and I just couldn't ever get beside him.

"We've always raced really well together, so I didn't want to like move him blatantly and all that kind of stuff. Just sliding around a ton at the end... So just sucks to be so damn close, right? You can be on the bumper of the guy coming to the line, and that sucks. A lot of races ahead, and hopefully we can just keep bringing the speed."

Busch rued both the inopportune caution and the effect of the tire disparity after the final restart.

"I wish we could have had a little bit more there at the end," Busch said. "I feel like maybe the two-lap fresher tires the 20 had was the difference... But I also hated to see that yellow that came out.

"I'll give Christopher credit, though, where credit's due. He ran me really hard, and I was a complete butthead. But he did a great job working me over and just doing it the right way and being able to get by."

Elliott fell to the back of the field when contact from Ross Chastain's Chevrolet sent him spinning in the first corner of the first lap. When the majority of the field came to pit road before the end of the first stage, Elliott stayed on track to collect fifth-place stage points.

Shane van Gisbergen, Chris Buescher, Noah Gragson, Alex Bowman and Todd Gilliland completed the top 10.

The Cup debut of 18-year-old road course phenom Connor Zilisch came to an early end in a violent collision with Trackhouse Racing teammate Daniel Suárez on Lap 50.

Both cars were too badly damaged to continue. The wreck ended a valiant rally by Zilisch, who was collateral damage when Chastain dive-bombed into Turn 1 and turned Elliott on the first lap.

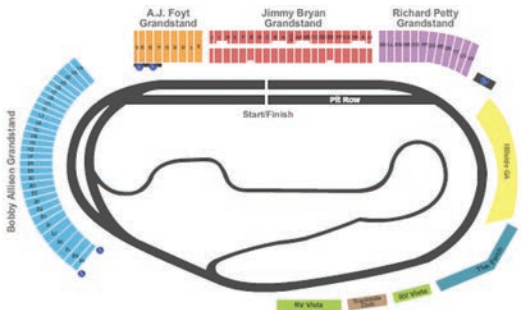
Zilisch pitted with a flat tire and fell back to 33rd, but by the end of the second stage he had worked his way back to 14th, his original starting position. On the restart lap after the second stage break, however, Zilisch's race ended against the fence.

"All I saw was a cloud of smoke, and by the time I saw him (Suárez), it was way too late to do anything," said Zilisch, who won Saturday's Xfinity Series race. "I saw him spinning off to the left and I thought he was going to keep going in that direction or stay there. I guess he flipped back right and he started coming towards me. Really unfortunate way to end my Cup Series debut."

**XFINITY BURNOUT ALERT!**  
Connor Zilisch burns it down after winning Saturday's race for JR Motorsports.  
James Gilbert/Getty



## NEXT RACE: SHRINER'S 500



### Phoenix Raceway

3:30 p.m. ET Sunday, FS1

• 1-mile, low-banked tri-oval race track located in Avondale, Arizona, near Phoenix.

### PHOENIX HISTORY

**JANUARY 1964** - Construction on Phoenix Raceway is completed. Scottsdale, Arizona builder Richard Hogue, an amateur sports car racer, designs the track at the foothills of the Estrella Mountains to be known as the "Indianapolis of the West" as it is the only one of its kind outside of Daytona Beach and the only road racing course between the Mississippi and California. The new track includes a uniquely-shaped one-mile oval, a quarter-mile drag strip and a meandering 2.5-mile road course.

**JANUARY 1968** - Don White wins the first stock car race staged at Phoenix, a 250-mile chase on the road course.

**OCTOBER 1970** - Hollywood giant Steve McQueen wins the 17 lap 'Winter Sprint' sports car race on the track's road course in Porsche 908 from pole position, setting a new lap record of 1:41.09.

**NOV. 27, 1977** - Cale Yarborough drives to Victory Lane in the first NASCAR Winston West Series race at Phoenix.

**OCTOBER 1988** - Construction of a three-story suite building is completed outside Turn 1. Reserved seating capacity is increased to 30,000.

**FEB. 5, 1995** - The SuperTruck Series (now Camping World Truck Series) debuts. Mike Skinner is the series' first winner, taking the Skoal Bandit Copper World Classic.

**OCT. 25, 1998** - A race at Phoenix is shortened due to rain for the first time in history, giving Rusty Wallace his first Winston Cup Series win at Phoenix after 10 years of attempts.

**APRIL 20, 2006** - The new Bobby Allison Grandstand debuts, giving fans a sweeping view of the track from outside of Turns 1 and 2. The next day, Phoenix Raceway unveils Octane, the unique and exclusive lounge positioned six stories above Turn 1.

**APRIL 21, 2007** - Jeff Gordon opens the 20th season of Cup action at Phoenix with a victory over Tony Stewart in the SUBWAY Fresh Fit 500. The victory is Gordon's first in 17 tries in the desert and the first by a driver from the pole position. It is Gordon's 76th win, tying him for sixth all-time with Dale Earnhardt on the Cup Series career wins list. Gordon celebrated by holding a "3" flag out of driver's side window to commemorate the late Earnhardt's great career.



**Christopher Bell rang-up the W last year at Phoenix.** (Getty)

### 2025 CUP SERIES STANDINGS

*Top 30 as of March 2*

Rank/Driver	Points	Rank/Driver	Points
1 William Byron #24	116	16 Kyle Larson #5	71
2 Ryan Blaney #12	114	17 Denny Hamlin #11	67
3 Tyler Reddick #45	111	18 Shane v Gisbergen #88	63
4 Christopher Bell #20	95	19 Todd Gilliland #34	63
5 Chase Elliott #9	95	20 Ross Chastain #1	62
6 Bubba Wallace #23	94	21 Riley Herbst #35	60
7 Alex Bowman #48	87	22 Erik Jones #43	56
8 Michael McDowell #71	85	23 Justin Haley #7	52
9 Kyle Busch #8	81	24 Ty Dillon #10	48
10 Ricky Stenhouse Jr #47	80	25 Brad Keselowski #6	43
11 Austin Cindric #2	80	26 Noah Gragson #4	42
12 Chris Buescher #17	77	27 AJ Allmendinger #16	42
13 Joey Logano #22	77	28 Austin Dillon #3	41
14 John H. Nemechek #42	76	29 Daniel Suárez #99	38
15 Carson Hocevar #77	72	30 Ryan Preece #60	38

### 2025 XFINITY SERIES STANDINGS

*Top 20 as of March 1*

Rank/Driver	Points	Rank/Driver	Points
1 Austin Hill #21	122	11 Carson Kvapil #1	68
2 Jesse Love #2	109	12 William Sawalich #18	68
3 Sheldon Creed #00	108	13 Ryan Sieg #39	68
4 Sam Mayer #41	94	14 Jeremy Clements #51	64
5 Justin Allgaier #7	90	15 Josh Williams #11	64
6 Sammy Smith #8	87	16 Connor Zilisch #88	61
7 Jeb Burton #27	85	17 Daniel Dye #10	60
8 Taylor Gray #54	75	18 Dean Thompson #26	59
9 Christian Eckes #16	74	19 Matt DiBenedetto #99	56
10 Harrison Burton #25	73	20 Nicholas Sanchez #48	55

**NEXT RACE:** GOVX 200, Phoenix Raceway, 5 p.m. ET Saturday, CW

### 2025 TRUCK SERIES STANDINGS

*Top 20 as of Feb. 22*

Rank/Driver	Points	Rank/Driver	Points
1 Grant Enfinger #9	85	11 Bayley Currey #44	49
2 Ty Majeski #98	84	12 Tanner Gray #15	43
3 Chandler Smith #38	79	13 Layne Riggs #34	42
4 Corey Heim #11	69	14 Tyler Ankrum #18	41
5 Ben Rhodes #99	66	15 Kaden Honeycutt #45	39
6 Giovanni Ruggiero #17	62	16 Frankie Muniz #33	38
7 Stewart Friesen #52	62	17 Josh Reaume #22	38
8 Daniel Hemric #19	62	18 Spencer Boyd #76	36
9 Jake Garcia #13	53	19 Andres P. De Lara #77	35
10 Jack Wood #91	50	20 Matt Crafton #88	35

**NEXT RACE:** VICTORIA'S VOICE FOUNDATION 200, Las Vegas, 9 p.m. ET Friday, March 14, FS1

## ECHOPARK WINNER QUOTE

"Just super proud for everyone on this DeWalt No. 20 team. We didn't count (on) last week. Last week was a speedway. We didn't have that one circled. We definitely had this one circled. I'm ready to keep adding to it."

- Christopher Bell, who grabbed his second straight Cup win in Sunday's EchoPark Automotive Grand Prix



**Christopher Bell and crew in Victory Lane Sunday at COTA.**

JAMES GILBERT/  
GETTY IMAGES

# SEAS THE DAY

Reel in your hunger with this fresh catch!  
Creamy tuna salad with chopped celery  
piled high on a fresh-baked roll.

