

# RACING THIS WEEK

**2025 PHOTO OF THE YEAR:** HoFer and JR Motorsports owner Dale Earnhardt Jr. (L) celebrates with Justin Allgaier after qualifying for Daytona 500. **C. Graythen/Getty**



## Horsepower at select tracks to increase

NASCAR competition officials announced that the target horsepower for Cup Series events at road courses and oval tracks less than 1.5 miles in length will increase to 750 in the 2026 season.

NASCAR president Steve O'Donnell revealed the news on the Dale Jr. Download podcast. The horsepower figure will be an increase from the baseline 670 in the current rules configuration for NASCAR's top division.

The move comes amid growing demand from drivers, the industry and fans for a power boost to the Next Gen race car platform, which debuted in the Cup Series in 2022. The increase is expected to place a greater premium on drivers' throttle control, while also incentivizing tire management and creating more passing opportunities with varying on- and off-throttle times.

"I would say, like any other change that we are considering to the cars, we listen to the fans a lot," said John Probst, NASCAR executive vice president and chief racing development officer. "We listen to the drivers. We have stakeholders in the broadcast, OEM (manufacturers) and team competition and team business folks, so there's always no shortage of feedback that we get. Our fans are very passionate, they provide very candid feedback, so that all is very important to us."

### Tracks with 750 horsepower in 2026

Road courses: Circuit of The Americas, Watkins Glen, San Diego, Sonoma, Charlotte Roval.

Ovals: Bowman Gray Stadium, Phoenix, Darlington, Martinsville, Bristol, Dover, Nashville, North Wilkesboro, Iowa, Richmond, New Hampshire, World Wide Technology Raceway at Gateway.

In the last two seasons, NASCAR officials have worked with Goodyear officials to improve the racing, producing softer tires that promote wear and creating more chances for pit-strategy options, tire management and passing opportunities to come into play. This announcement promises to add a new wrinkle to that trend, with more power also contributing to advanced tire falloff.

"I am definitely Team Horsepower," said RFK Racing driver/co-owner Brad Keselowski, hinting two weeks ago about the increase in an appearance on the Stacking Pennies podcast.

Introducing that higher horsepower number has prompted close communication among NASCAR officials, engine builders and manufacturers in a series of weekly meetings this year. Five of the first eight races on the 2026 Cup Series schedule will use the new 750-horsepower package, providing an early test for its performance and perhaps a glimpse at expanding to larger ovals — superspeedway-style tracks excluded.

"That gives us an opportunity to sample some of the short tracks, road courses early in the season, get a look at the engines after we've raced them at the new power level," Probst said. "If that all looks good, I would not rule out looking at increasing that horsepower at the mile and a halfs and above."

## CUP SERIES 2026 STORYLINES



## More news to know as Cup Series season nears

With the 2026 NASCAR Cup Series season around the corner, there are several key stories to follow before another exciting year of stock car racing gets underway. Here's more info before the Daytona 500 on February 15.

### Breakout for Spire Motorsports?

Given how much Spire Motorsports has invested in becoming a more competitive organization in the Cup Series, 2026 could be a breakout year for the Jeff Dickerson-led company. There will be continuity with the Nos. 71 and 77 teams, as Michael McDowell returns with crew chief Travis Peterson and Carson Hocevar is back with Luke Lambert atop the box for another season.

Meanwhile, newcomer Daniel Suárez will be getting up to speed with crew chief Ryan Sparks leading the No. 7 team. In 2025, Spire showed some bright spots that could lead to greater things this year. Hocevar won the pole at Texas and had two runner-up finishes at EchoPark Speedway and Nashville Superspeedway, but he also had several races get away from him, either due to mechanical failures or other circumstances.

Hocevar could have potentially won the Coca-Cola 600 if his No. 77 Chevrolet had not suffered an engine failure with less than 100 laps to go in the crown-jewel race at Charlotte Motor Speedway. The 22-year-old also had a chance to compete for the win in his home race at Michigan International Speedway, but had a tire issue late in the event.

On the other hand, McDowell won poles at Las Vegas and Talladega and had a notable Stage 1 victory on the streets of Chicago before a mechanical issue took him out of contention. Before the mechanical woes, McDowell seemed like one of the few drivers who had the raw speed to challenge road-course ace Shane van Gisbergen on the Windy City streets.

After finishes of 22nd, 23rd and 31st in the final standings last year amongst its three drivers, 2026 feels like a possible breakout year for Spire to make the playoffs and win races.

### Playoffs return for RFK Racing?

RFK Racing entirely missed out on the Cup Series Playoffs as an organization in 2025. The team expanded to three full-time entries, bringing Ryan Preece on board to pilot the No. 60 Ford as the newest teammate of co-owner Brad Keselowski and Chris Buescher.

Although RFK was not a part of last year's 16-driver playoff grid, they were the

"best of the rest," with Buescher and Preece finishing 17th and 18th, respectively, in the final standings. Keselowski ended the year in 20th in points, recovering down the stretch after a slow start to the campaign.

Late in the 2025 season, RFK came close to victory twice. In the final laps of the Talladega Superspeedway fall race, Buescher was leading until he spun off the front bumper of William Byron and crashed hard into the inside wall down the backstretch. A few weeks later, Keselowski seemingly had the season finale race at Phoenix Raceway won until Ryan Blaney slipped by underneath in Turn 4 to take the checkered flag in overtime.

In the last 10 races of 2025, each RFK driver had just two finishes of 20th or worse. If the team can get back to the level that they were at in 2023, when both Buescher and Keselowski finished eighth or better in the final standings, RFK could win multiple races across the board and return to title-contention status in 2026.

### SVG overall contender?

Two-time Cup Series champion Kyle Larson once said if **Shane van Gisbergen** figured out oval racing, the field would be in trouble. Given how dominant the three-time Australian Supercars champion was on road courses throughout the 2025 Cup Series season, imagine the New Zealand native excelling like that on ovals.

Last year, van Gisbergen won five of six road-course races, earning a playoff berth and Sunoco Rookie of the Year honors after concluding his first season in the premier series 12th in the final standings. However, after smashing the Cup Series competition on left-and-right turns last year, maybe the arrival of rookie teammate and fellow star road-course racer Connor Zilisch will give van Gisbergen a run for his money at those tracks in 2026. Without a doubt, SVG's rookie year with Trackhouse Racing got off to a rocky start on the ovals as it proved to be an expected learning curve. As the year went on, his oval performances began trending in the right direction, scoring his first career oval top 10 in the Kansas Speedway fall race.

With Trackhouse running van Gisbergen's signature No. 97 in 2026, the 36-year-old Kiwi driver hopes to add more consistent oval performances while maintaining his dominance on road courses to prove that he is not a "one-trick pony." If SVG shows even more progress toward becoming an all-around Cup driver, Larson might be right: van Gisbergen's competitors are in trouble.



## Ross readies for Trucks workload

Niece Motorsports announced that Ross Chastain will return to the team for a partial schedule in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series in 2026, with plans to drive the No. 45 Chevrolet in more races this season.

Chastain, a Cup Series regular for Trackhouse Racing, has scored all five of his Truck Series victories with the Niece organization. He competed in five races last season, but new competition guidelines for Cup Series veterans announced last November will permit him to enter as many as eight races in other national series. While his schedule has not been finalized, Chastain indicated that he intends to maximize his opportunities.

"It's great to be back with Niece Motorsports in a larger capacity this year," Chastain said in a team release. "When I heard about the rule change, I knew we had to run more races together. We've got a great core group of people here in Salisbury (N.C.), and I want to bring them all back to Victory Lane. I'm thankful to have the opportunity and appreciate the ownership group and our partners for making it happen, along with everyone at Trackhouse for allowing me to run in the Truck Series."

Veteran Phil Gould will be the No. 45 Chevy team's crew chief. Chastain will split time in the No. 45 seat with 19-year-old newcomer Landen Lewis — the CARs Tour Late Model Stock champion — and a third driver to be named later. The organization also said that primary partners for the No. 45 team will be announced later.

The Craftsman Truck Series begins the 2026 campaign on Feb. 13 (7:30 p.m. ET, FS1, NASCAR Racing Network Radio, SiriusXM NASCAR Radio) at Daytona International Speedway.

### 2025 CUP SERIES FINALS STANDINGS

*Champion 1 + 29 as of November 2*

Rank/Driver	Points	Rank/Driver	Points
1 Kyle Larson #5	5034	16 Josh Berry #21	2150
2 Denny Hamlin #11	5031	17 Chris Buescher #17	889
3 Chase Briscoe #19	5019	18 Ryan Preece #60	861
4 William Byron #24	5004	19 Ty Gibbs #54	783
5 Christopher Bell #20	2403	20 Brad Keselowski #6	762
6 Ryan Blaney #12	2373	21 Kyle Busch #8	737
7 Joey Logano #22	2330	22 Michael McDowell #71	734
8 Chase Elliott #9	2310	23 Carson Hocevar #77	702
9 Tyler Reddick #45	2309	24 Erik Jones #43	665
10 Ross Chastain #1	2272	25 J. H. Nemechek #42	664
11 Bubba Wallace #23	2256	26 AJ Allmendinger #16	649
12 S. v. Gisbergen #88	2192	27 Todd Gilliland #34	616
13 Alex Bowman #48	2192	28 Zane Smith #38	615
14 Austin Cindric #2	2156	29 Daniel Suárez #99	611
15 Austin Dillon #3	2152	30 Ricky Stenhouse #47	562

### 2025 XFINITY FINAL STANDINGS

*Champion 1 + 19 as of November 1*

Rank/Driver	Points	Rank/Driver	Points
1 Jesse Love #2	4040	11 Nicholas Sanchez #48	2198
2 Connor Zilisch #88	4034	12 Harrison Burton #25	2163
3 Justin Allgaier #7	4032	13 Christian Eckes #16	784
4 Carson Kvatil #1	4024	14 Jeb Burton #27	719
5 Brandon Jones #20	2240	15 Ryan Sieg #41	691
6 Austin Hill #21	2230	16 Dean Thompson #26	690
7 Taylor Gray #54	2228	17 Aric Almirola #19	652
8 Sammy Smith #8	2222	18 William Sawalich #18	636
9 Sheldon Creed #00	2218	19 Brennan Poole #44	608
10 Sam Mayer #41	2204	20 Daniel Dye #10	604

**NEXT RACE:** UNITED RENTALS 300, Daytona International, Saturday, Feb. 14, 2026, CVW

### 2025 TRUCKS FINAL STANDINGS

*Champion 1 + 19 as of October 1*

Rank/Driver	Points	Rank/Driver	Points
1 Corey Heim #11	4040	11 Gio Ruggiero #17	703
2 Ty Majeski #98	4035	12 Ben Rhodes #99	632
3 Kaden Honeycutt #52	4034	13 Tanner Gray #15	599
4 Tyler Ankrum #18	4023	14 Connor Mosack #81	515
5 Layne Riggs #34	2297	15 Matt Crafton #88	494
6 Rajah Caruth #71	2237	16 A. Perez De Lara #44	472
7 Grant Enfinger #9	2198	17 Matt Mills #42	456
8 Chandler Smith #38	2179	18 Dawson Sutton #26	447
9 Daniel Hemric #19	2177	19 Jack Wood #91	443
10 Jake Garcia #13	2148	20 Stewart Friesen #52	397

**NEXT RACE:** SEASON OPENER, Daytona International Speedway, Friday, Feb. 13, 2026, FS1

### 2025 PHOTO OF THE YEAR

Austin Cindric, driver of the No. 2 Menards/Quaker State Ford, Denny Hamlin, driver of the No. 11 King's Hawaiian Toyota, Josh Berry, driver of the No. 21 DEX Imaging Ford, and Ryan Preece, driver of the No. 60 Solomon Plumbing Ford, spin after an on-track incident during the NASCAR Cup Series Quaker State 400 at EchoPark Speedway (formerly Atlanta Motor Speedway). Timing his pass on the last lap to perfection, Georgia native Chase Elliott charged past Brad Keselowski and held off the driver of the No. 6 Ford to win the race.



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