



RACING

THIS WEEK



PHOTO OF THE YEAR: Ryan Preece flips after an on-track incident during the Cup Series Daytona 500. **James Gilbert/Getty**



CUP SEASON IN REVIEW

Kyle Larson,
No. 5 Hendrick
Motorsports
Chevrolet



Crew chief:
Cliff Daniels

Final 2025 ranking: 1st

Key stats: 3 wins, 15 top fives, 22 top 10s, 1,106 laps led

How 2025 ended: In the best possible way, hoisting the Bill France Cup at season's end. Larson entered the ranks of multi-time Cup Series champions with his second title, vaulting past Denny Hamlin on the final round of pit stops in the Phoenix Raceway finale and holding on in overtime for a third-place result — best among the Championship 4 field. He became the 18th driver in NASCAR history with more than one Cup Series championship, and the third to score more than one for Hendrick Motorsports, joining seven-time champ Jimmie Johnson and four-time title winner Jeff Gordon.

Best race: Two max-points days stand out, but Larson's springtime victory at Bristol Motor Speedway was a masterclass performance that provided the No. 5 team with a needed lift. Larson led 411 of the 500 laps, sweeping both stages along the way. The triumph followed another Bristol romp a day earlier in the Xfinity Series, where he led 276 of the 300 laps from the pole, but it also prompted a heartfelt dedication just days after the loss of longtime Hendrick Motorsports PR representative Jon Edwards.

Other season highlights: Larson had similar strength on display at Kansas Speedway in May, when he logged a stage-sweeping victory to repeat in the Advent Health 400. He started from the pole position and led 221 of the 267 laps, vaulting into the Cup Series points lead for the first time in 2025. Larson's day marked another historic distinction — the most laps led by any driver in a 400-mile race on a 1.5-mile track in series history.

Stat to know: Larson added to Hendrick Motorsports' history, securing its record 15th Cup Series championship one year after the organization celebrated its 40th anniversary season. He also became the third driver to win multiple titles in the elimination-style Playoffs, joining three-time champ Joey Logano and twice-champ Kyle Busch.

Quotable: "I don't think any of us foresaw us getting a second championship in the fashion that we did. That probably makes it seem even different. Nonetheless, we're on the list two times. That's something to be proud of. As far as legacy, I really don't put a whole lot of thought into that yet. Like I've mentioned before, I think it's really hard to think about that sort of thing right now as you're still competing and plan to compete for quite a while. We're still going to try and go out there and win more races. The legacy will kind of take care of itself as we approach that." — Larson, after clinching the championship in Phoenix

Looking ahead: Expect few changes to the core of the No. 5 team, led by Cliff Daniels atop the pit box. The 33-year-old driver's contract with Hendrick Motorsports is up after the 2026 season, so locking up his services will likely be a priority.

CUP SERIES 2026 STORYLINES



News to know as the 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. From the first points-paying race at North Wilkesboro Speedway since 1996 to 19-year-old phenom Connor Zilisch entering the premier level and an increase of horsepower on the way for various tracks, here's some info before the 2026 Daytona 500 on February 15.

2026 schedule notable changes

The 2026 Cup Series schedule looks different compared to last season, with two new tracks added to the lineup and several tracks receiving new dates.

While the Chicago Street Race is not on the docket, the Cup Series will stay in the Windy City market by returning to **Chicagoland Speedway** for the first time since 2019 on July 5. The annual street course race will shift from Chicago to San Diego on June 21, with a trip to Naval Base Coronado in Southern California.

North Wilkesboro will host its first points-paying Cup Series race since September 1996 in a 450-lapper under the lights on July 19. The track previously hosted the All-Star Race, but the \$1 million exhibition event shifts to Dover Motor Speedway on May 17.

After hosting Championship Weekend for six years, Phoenix Raceway's reign as the title decider comes to an end, but it will maintain a playoff race with an Oct. 18 date.

The season finale will return to **Homestead-Miami Speedway** on Nov. 8. The 1.5-mile Florida track previously hosted Championship Weekend from 2002-2019.

Additionally, **Watkins Glen International** shifts from its typical August date to May 10, the earliest the Central New York facility has hosted the Cup Series.

More horsepower

Oval tracks under 1.5 miles in length and road courses will see a target horsepower increase from 670 to 750.

The goal is to bring a greater emphasis to off-throttle time, creating more passing opportunities and adding to the importance of tire management. After Goodyear produced different tire compounds to generate a more compelling on-track product last season, more horsepower is the next step to continue forward progress.

With extra horsepower on the table, it could favor certain drivers. Given their experience with higher horsepower in sprint cars, the likes of Kyle Larson and Christopher Bell could excel and increase their chances of winning at these tracks.

Young phenom ready

After a dominant, historic year in the O'Reilly Auto Parts Series last season, 19-year-old **Connor Zilisch** is stepping

up to a full-time Cup Series ride, driving the No. 88 Trackhouse Racing Chevrolet. Zilisch is arguably one of the most talented young drivers to enter the premier level of NASCAR competition in recent history, and will face lofty expectations in 2026 and beyond.

His special 2025 season with JR Motorsports in the O'Reilly Auto Parts Series consisted of 10 wins, 20 top fives, 23 top 10s and eight poles. He also had an impressive streak of 18 consecutive top-five finishes, breaking Sam Ard's series record. Despite those impressive numbers, he finished runner-up in the final standings as close friend Jesse Love took home the championship. Although the disappointment on Zilisch's face was apparent in the Phoenix post-race scenes, this might be the type of character-building moment the young driver needed before moving to Sunday racing.

Based on what we have seen from rookie drivers in the Cup Series during the Next Gen era, Zilisch could face a learning curve to master racing at NASCAR's top series and learn the car. However, with teammates Ross Chastain and Shane van Gisbergen helping him along, and veteran crew chief Randall Burnett atop the box calling the shots, Trackhouse team owner Justin Marks is putting the young phenom in the best position to succeed early in his Cup Series career.

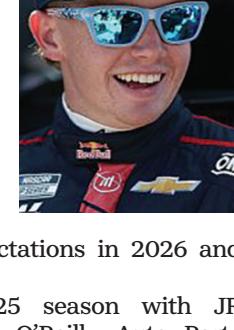
A fresh start

Daniel Suárez is moving on from Trackhouse Racing after five seasons and will take over the No. 7 Chevrolet at Spire Motorsports. It

will be a fresh start for the Monterrey, Mexico native, who endured a challenging 2025 season, finishing 29th in the final standings.

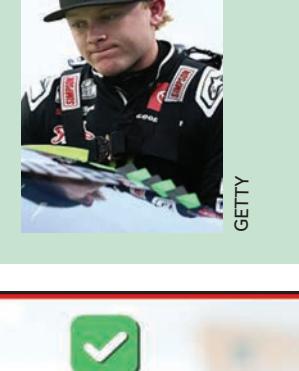
With Trackhouse and Suárez parting ways, the move to Spire will allow him to work alongside fellow Cup Series veteran Michael McDowell and rising star Carson Hocevar. On Dec. 12, Spire announced that Ryan Sparks will be Suárez's crew chief as the new pairing will try to get the best out of the No. 7 team.

Entering a new season, many will be watching Suárez to see how quickly he can establish chemistry with his new team. If all goes well, Spire could turn into his new long-term home.



CUP SERIES 2026 STORYLINE

When **Ty Gibbs** won the 2022 O'Reilly Auto Parts (Xfinity) Series title and stepped up to the Cup Series full-time with Joe Gibbs Racing in 2023, many expected to see him immediately grow into one of the top drivers at the organization and win races. However, after three full years at NASCAR's premier level, Gibbs still has not found Victory Lane through 123 career starts. In 2025, JGR paired Gibbs up with crew chief Tyler Allen, hoping the duo would thrive together. Although they did not win a race, the No. 54 team earned five top fives, 10 top 10s and led 304 laps, also winning the inaugural In-Season Challenge. So, there is plenty for the duo to build on entering Year 2. Pressure will start to mount on the 23-year-old to visit Victory Lane, especially while JGR's teammates Denny Hamlin, Christopher Bell and Chase Briscoe combined for 13 wins in 2025.



CUP SEASON IN REVIEW

Chase Briscoe, No. 19 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota



Crew chief: James Small

Final 2025 ranking: 3rd

Key stats: 3 wins, 15 top fives, 19 top 10s, 884 laps led

How 2025 ended: Briscoe's fifth Cup Series campaign was the breakout year that was projected as the highly touted driver made the leap to Joe Gibbs Racing after the closing of Stewart-Haas Racing. Piloting the No. 19, replacing Martin Truex Jr., Briscoe surged to three victories to stamp his name as a championship contender. He made the playoffs for the third time and punched his first ticket to the Championship 4 after winning the Round of 8 midpoint at Talladega. Briscoe had a fast car to be in the mix for the title at Phoenix, but ultimately suffered two flat tires that led to an 18th-place result and third in the final standings.

Best race: Having won the 2024 Southern 500 to make the playoffs last year, Briscoe followed up with a masterclass to defend his victory in the Labor Day crown-jewel event. After starting on the front row, Briscoe went on to lead 309 laps and swept the stages en route to his second straight Southern 500 win, cementing his status as a 2025 title favorite.

Other season highlights: Briscoe had a Cup Series-best seven poles in 2025, including three consecutive at the Coca-Cola 600, Nashville and Michigan. Briscoe picked up a career-high three victories, with his first coming at Pocono Raceway after some fuel-saving wizardry. Briscoe's 884 laps led and 12.7 average finish also walloped his previous career bests in those categories.

Stat to know: A great season isn't without a bit of irony. Briscoe failed to win in any of his seven starts from pole position and he didn't lead the most laps in any of those events, either. His most laps led from pole was 81 at Iowa Speedway.

Quotable: "I've always just loved high-pressure situations. I feel like I just perform better for whatever reason. I feel like my whole career has always been a high-pressure situation, right? Like, there was no backup plan. You might only get one race you had to go perform and show your worth. I've always felt like I mean every week, I feel like I'm still auditioning to prove that I belong here. Certainly, the higher the pressure, the better I feel like I do." — Briscoe on competing in the brightest lights after his August Southern 500 win

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 Kvapil #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 Salawich #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, CW

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 La #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

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