



2024



# BRISTOL RACE WEEKEND GUIDE

SEPTEMBER 19-21

## INSIDE

Pettys have been with NASCAR since its beginning  
Preview of this weekend's racing action at BMS  
BMS to host Reds-Braves game in 2025





# Pettys have been with NASCAR since the beginning

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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It's a year of recognition for the Petty family which celebrates 75 years in racing in 2024.

Over a half-dozen members have driven races in one of three NASCAR national series. Others like Hall of Fame crew chief Dale Inman, a Petty cousin, and Timmy Petty, a respected crew member for the family team, have made a huge impact in the pits.

Obviously, the most successful drivers in the group are the father-son combination of Lee and Richard Petty who accounted for 254 Cup Series wins and 10 championships.

## LEE PETTY

The most successful stock car driver of his generation, Lee Petty set the early standards with then-records of 54 wins and three championships. He raced in the first NASCAR Cup Series race at Charlotte in 1949 where he famously crashed the No. 38 Buick and had to find a ride home.

He won the inaugural Daytona 500 in 1959. Ironically, Lee and Johnny Beauchamp, whom he beat in a photo finish in 1959, had the famous crash two years later where they flew outside Daytona Speedway in a wreck that sidelined Lee for months. He only raced six more times after that before retiring in 1964. Petty won at Jacksonville in the previous race he entered before Daytona.

Lee Petty was inducted into the second class of the NASCAR Hall of Fame in 2011.

## JULIAN PETTY

The other half of the first set of Petty Brothers in racing, Julian served as Lee's crew chief in the early years. He drove in three Cup Series races and



Richard Petty recorded his 200th, and final, NASCAR Cup Series win at the Firecracker 400 on July 4, 1984 at Daytona International Speedway.

one Convertible Series race. His best effort was his debut race at Martinsville in 1952 when he finished seventh in the No. 43 Plymouth.

He was a successful car owner with 13 wins, 69 top-five and 114 top-10 finishes in 181 races. Bob Welborn finished fourth in the points in his cars in 1955 and won five out of 17 races entered in 1958. David Pearson also drove his No. 44 Pontiac for one race at North Wilkesboro in 1962.

## RICHARD PETTY

NASCAR's most accomplished driver with 200 Cup Series wins, 123 pole positions, seven Daytona 500 victories and seven championships. All of these are NASCAR records as he shares the latter record with Dale Earnhardt and Jimmie Johnson.

The driver nicknamed

"The King" began his career in 1958 at 20 years old. He rewrote the NASCAR record books with most career starts (1,184), most top-five finishes (555) and most top-10s (712).

A member of the inaugural NASCAR Hall of Fame class, Petty set the standard for the sport in many ways. It has been estimated he's signed more autographs than anyone in history. Petty's first NASCAR Cup start was in the No. 142 Oldsmobile at Toronto, Canada.

Petty actually drove a No. 24 car the first race of the 1959 season before moving to the familiar No. 43 his next start in the Daytona 500.

## MAURICE PETTY

Best known for his Hall of Fame career as a crew member and mechanic, Maurice competed in 26



Lee Petty, center, 50-year-old head of the most successful family in stock car racing, and his sons look into empty engine well of a new race car on July 15, 1964. In the shop with Petty at Level Cross, NC are Maurice, left, 25, an occasional driver whose main job is building engines and helping pit crews, and Richard, 26, the family's no. 1 driver since 1961 when Lee was crippled in an accident at the Daytona International Speedway. (AP Photo)

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Cup Series races with seven top-five and 16 top-10 finishes. He drove Plymouths with numbers 41, 42, 43 and 44.

His best finish was third at Spartanburg where he finished behind winner Jim Paschal in his uncle Julian's No. 14 Pontiac, and Cotton Owens. Johnson City's Herman Beam was fourth in the race.

#### KYLE PETTY

Petty entered the sport with a bang, winning the first time he was on the track in a 200-mile ARCA race at Daytona in 1979.

He forgo the traditional short-track route and after his early success was labeled the "Crown Prince" of NASCAR. He made his Cup Series debut later that season at Talladega and finished ninth.

Success didn't come as quick as most had predicted with Petty's first Cup Series win in 1986 at Richmond, where Dale Earnhardt wrecked Darrell Waltrip and himself battling for the lead on the final lap. It collected two other cars, allowing fifth-place Petty to win. He won eight races in 829 starts.

His best seasons were 1992 and '93 when he finished fifth in the points driving the No. 42 Pontiacs for car owner Felix Sabates.

#### RITCHIE PETTY

Maurice Petty's eldest son made 13 starts in the ARCA Series with three top-10 finishes from 1989-92. He competed in four NASCAR Cup Series races in the No. 53 Ford on the restrictor-plate tracks the next two seasons with a best finish of 25th at Talladega.

His last national series race was in the Truck Series at Homestead in 1996 with a 17th place finish.

#### MARK PETTY

The middle son of Maurice Petty had a limited driving career with nine starts in the



ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Three-time NASCAR champion Lee Petty poses next to his car at an unknown location circa 1960. (AP Photo)**

Craftsman Truck Series between 2000-01. Seven starts were in his father's No. 44 Dodge with a best finish of 10th at Texas. He raced at Daytona and Homestead in the No. 10 Dodge for car owner Tex Powell in 2001 with a pair of 32nd place finishes.

#### ADAM PETTY

The driver expected to carry on the family legacy was tragically killed in a practice crash at New Hampshire in 2000. He was just 19 years old.

Like his father, Adam won in his ARCA Series debut. It was at Charlotte in 1998 with both his father and grandfather present. He also won on the ASA national series at I-70 Speedway in Missouri where the race runner-up was Jimmie Johnson.

Adam competed in one Cup Series race at Texas where he finished 40th in the No. 45 Chevrolet with engine failure. He made 43

Xfinity Series starts with three top-five finishes. He was particularly strong at Memphis where he sat on the outside pole and ran in the top five all day. He struggled in three Bristol races with a best finish of 18th.

#### THAD MOFFITT

Richard Petty's grandson and the son of his youngest daughter, Rebecca, is the current driver active at the major levels.

The 24-year-old racer made 45 starts in the ARCA Series from 2017-22 with nine top-five and 26 top-10 finishes. Despite missing four races, he ranked fourth in the 2021 point standings.

He competed in four Truck Series races in 2022 and then the 2024 season in the No. 46 Chevrolet. His best finish in the Truck Series was 18th through the first 15 races of the '24 season.

# Racing is in the air!



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# Richard Petty had his ups and downs at Bristol Motor Speedway

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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Richard Petty was a master at short tracks over his NASCAR career with 128 of his record 200 Cup Series wins coming on tracks shorter than a mile in length.

The record number included 15 wins at both Martinsville and North Wilkesboro, 11 wins at Richmond and nine at the Nashville Fairgrounds. He even won two of the three Cup Series races held at Kingsport Speedway.

However, Petty had his struggles at Bristol Motor Speedway with three wins in 60 starts. There was also the race that Petty seemed have in hand before losing at the very end.

Petty had a three-lap lead at the 1964 Volunteer 500 over second-place Fred Lorenzen with four laps to go. He blew an engine on lap 496 and made it to lap 499, but ended up losing the race to Lorenzen by a lap.

It was Lorenzen's first competitive start since a wreck at Daytona earlier in the month left him with broken vertebra and bruised ribs. Ned Jarrett served as Lorenzen's relief driver in the middle part of the race, run during a 95-degree day in July.

Petty's first Bristol win was the 1967 Volunteer 500. It was a part of his 10-race winning streak as he won 27 times in 48 starts, 56.3 percent of the races that season. Petty set a then-track record with an average of 78.7 mph for



BMS ARCHIVES

Richard Petty's pit crew services the No. 43 Dodge Charger during a 1970s race at Bristol Motor Speedway.

the 500-lap race.

Petty helped his chief competitor, David Pearson, win at Bristol on July 20, 1969. Although the two were battling for the season championship, Petty served in a relief role, driving the No. 17 Holman-Moody Ford for 155 laps before turning the ride back over to Pearson. The date is significant because it's the same day that man landed on the moon.

"The only reason I remember it is that I was reading about it recently," Petty said before the 2024 Food City 500. "It said that I got in David's car, but I didn't even remember it. Back in the day, the times were different. Today if you're driving a Chevrolet, you can't get in a Ford."

"We don't have the relief drivers like we had then. Back then, you just tried to help out your fellow competitor whether you were battling him for points or whatever. You still did the best of your ability trying to get the best out of the car."

Petty's other two Bristol wins

were in 1975 driving the famed No. 43 Dodge Charger. He led 243 laps in the Southeastern 500 and won by six laps over runner-up Benny Parsons and seven laps over third-place Buddy Baker.

He followed it up with a one-lap win over second-place Lennie Pond in the Volunteer 500. Darrell Waltrip, who would go on to win a record 12 Bristol Cup races, finished third, two laps down.

Petty's overall record at Bristol shows 26 top-five and 37 top-10 finishes. It includes nine second-place finishes. In fact, the final runner-up finish of Petty's career was the 1987 Valleydale



BMS ARCHIVES

Richard Petty accepts the winners trophy and congratulations from track owner Larry Carrier after winning the 1975 Southeastern 500.



BMS ARCHIVES

Richard Petty drives the No. 43 STP Oldsmobile around Bristol Motor Speedway during the 1979 Southeastern 500. Petty finished 13th in the race, which was the first win for Dale Earnhardt.

Meats 500 where he finished less than a second behind Dale Earnhardt.

Petty told "The Intimidator" afterwards that he'd been a little closer that he had planned to use some of Earnhardt's own tactics against him.

"At the end of the race, I was catching up with him a little bit," Petty said. "We were talking when it was over and I said, 'I had picked me out a place on that left rear corner where I was going to get into you and get by you.' But, I never got close enough to pass him."

While he's been more successful at other short tracks, Petty said there has always something special about the "Last Great Colosseum."

"It's always been a big deal, even when it first opened, it was a little bit different," Petty said. "Then, they started making a colosseum out of the thing and had 150,000 people show up. It's exciting for the fans and it's challenging for the drivers."

It has been estimated that Petty, 79, has signed more autographs than anyone in human history. It's a safe bet he's signed more than double of anyone at BMS.

"Without the fans, there wouldn't be any sponsors," Petty said. "They're the ones who buy the products. You have to be good to the fans because they're the ones paying us. Every time I sign an autograph, it's like, 'Thank you for being a race fan because you're helping me make a living.'"



AP / WADE PAYNE

Richard Petty stands in the media center before practice for the Irwin Tools Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway on Friday, Aug. 22, 2014.



# Kyle Petty Charity Ride benefits kids with serious medical issues

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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The Kyle Petty Charity Ride Across America serves as the main fundraiser for the Victory Junction Gang Camp.

The 2024 version included 150 motorcycles and 250 people who traveled 2,100 miles over seven days from South Dakota to North Carolina.

They raised \$1.8 million dollars on the 28th annual ride as thousands of fans came out to show their support.

One of the days, the group rode from Bowling Green, Kentucky to the Delta Hotel in Bristol, Virginia. It's for a good cause as it supports the camp for children with serious medical issues.

The ride featured plenty of celebrities like Petty's father Richard, NASCAR's all-time winningest driver, former Heisman Trophy winner Herschel Walker, and other NASCAR and sports figures.

The camp was the vision of Kyle's son, Adam, who was tragically killed in a practice accident at New Hampshire in 2000. Kyle talked about the beauty seen across the country, but also that one must always remember who the camp is for.

We have thoughts of three of this year's riders about the journey and what it means.

Kenny Wallace, a driver with nearly 800 NASCAR national series starts, is one of racing's most popular racing figures. During the stop in Bristol, he talked about the overall experience.

"It was the time of my life. It's so hard to believe. My nephew Steven Wallace said 'I can't believe you rode that motorcycle from Mount Rushmore to Bristol, Tennessee.' It feels really good. I see 'The King' Richard Petty every day. It is hard to believe Richard Petty is still riding



VICTORY JUNCTION GANG CAMP

**Richard and Kyle Petty lead a group of riders around Pocono Raceway during the 2018 Kyle Petty Charity Ride.**

that bike like he is. I watch him and he inspires me.

"I am learning so much and Kyle Petty said it right, that he used to think this was about motorcycles, but it is about friends. Kyle says we are a family and I agree with him."

One member of Wallace's immediate family, his brother Mike, another NASCAR veteran, was on the ride. This came months after losing his wife to cancer. Kenny said the ride was therapeutic for his older brother and talked about the time they got to spend together.

"Mike was a last-minute edition. It's all good. This is more than riding motorcycles, these are times together," Wallace said. "There are a lot of hard working people on this ride who took off work. They have spent a lot of money on this ride and the proceeds go to Victory Junction Gang Camp."

Wallace was reminded of why they were doing the ride in the first place. Over the years, so many NASCAR drivers have either supported or participated in the ride. They've included Tony Stewart.



JEFF BIRCHFIELD / SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Former Heisman Trophy winner Herschel Walker poses with fans at a stop for the 2024 Kyle Petty Charity Ride in Bristol, Virginia.**

Ken Schrader and Harry Gant. Jeff Gordon met the riders for a surprise dinner when they stopped at the Corvette Museum in Bowling Green.

Wallace said so many of his friends in the NASCAR community see the great work Petty and his family have done with the camp.

"It's for children who are not doing good. It's for seven days where there is happiness for them," Wallace said. "Camp is expensive, but these chil-

dren either get to enjoy the last days of their lives or it helps with the healing process. This is all good as 100 percent of the proceeds go to the camp."

Herschel Walker, the former Heisman Trophy winner at the University of Georgia, was later a standout in the USFL and NFL. This was his 18th year on the ride, but a big reason for his return are the words of his former Dallas Cowboys coach, Tom Landry.



AP / CHARLES DHARAPAK

**President Bush, right, fishes with Hank Grissom, 10, second right, who has Spina Bifida, and Madison Lee, 12, who has Spastic Diplegia, as NASCAR driver Kyle Petty, second left, looks on during a visit to Victory Junction Gang Camp, a center for children with chronic medical conditions or serious illnesses, in Randleman, N.C., Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2006.**



AP / CHARLES DHARAPAK

**President Bush stands with Paul 'Pauly' Rader, 9, right, who suffers from a brain tumor, and Will 'Cheese' Kwapil, 12, second from left, who has a congenital heart defect, during a visit to Victory Junction Gang Camp, a center for children with chronic medical conditions or serious illnesses, in Randleman, N.C., Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2006.**

"When I first started I thought it was crazy riding across America, but this is a great cause," Walker said. "Coach (Tom) Landry said one time if you get something out of society, you can put something back in. If we can ride motorcycles to give back, I think it is a great deal."

"I didn't know what to expect when they first mentioned this to me, but I had the opportunity to go to Victory Junction and

everyone needs to go. These kids get to go for free and when you see the smile on the kids' faces, it means a big deal."

Kyle Petty, the namesake of the ride, said there's a special bond that occurs once someone participates on the trip. His father was one of the riders, while his wife Morgan and sister Sharon were among those who rode in the support vehicles.



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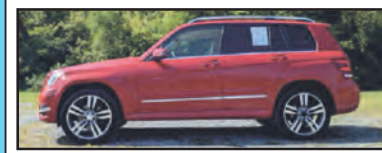
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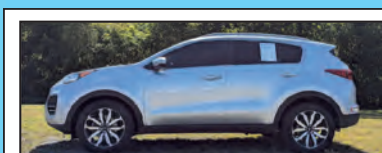
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# Moffitt latest to carry on Petty racing legacy

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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Thad Moffitt is carrying on the Petty family tradition in this milestone season.

The 24-year-old son of Richard Petty's youngest daughter, Rebecca, is driving the No. 46 Chevrolet in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series. He's glad to be a part of a year-long celebration about the 75th anniversary of Petty racing.

"It's a really important year for my family," Moffitt said. "It's just cool to celebrate. It's like Christmas every day this year. To have 75 years in a sport that's only 76 years old, that's cool to be a part of."

Moffitt got a unique tie-in to the family racing history at the Food City 500 Race Day Party back in March. There he met Brownie King, a Johnson City resident who raced in both the last race on the beach at Daytona and in the first Daytona 500. It was the first time Moffitt met a racer who competed against his great grandfather, Lee Petty.

"Most people will tell me that I raced with your granddad or your uncle Kyle," he said. "There's not many people around who were there with my great granddad. We wish great grandpa was still here with us, but you think about what he started in 1949. It has come a long ways."



AP / CHRIS O'MEARA

Thad Moffitt leans against his truck before a NASCAR trucks practice run Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla. Moffitt is the grandson of racing great Richard Petty.

It certainly has.

With practice and testing limited by NASCAR, the driver talked about what all he does to help prepare for a race. He does a lot of online practice, but it works better at some tracks than others. He talked about the experience at Bristol being hard to duplicate.

"I try to spend as much time as Chevy will allow me at the simulator," he said. "I also have an iRacing set-up at my house. It's hard to get what Bristol is exactly like and Daytona in the draft, you can't sim-

ulate that. Still, it's really good for visuals, hand-and-eye coordination, what you do with your feet. But, the G-forces can't be simulated."

Moffitt has struggled the first part of the season with an 18th-place his best finish in 15 Truck Series starts. He had more success in the ARCA Menards Series where he posted 26 top-10 finishes in 45 starts from 2017-22.

"We want to carry on a winning tradition, but it's been a tough start to the year," Moffitt said. "I keep getting gut-checked and I

have to remind myself this is a new team, a new deal. There are going to be speed bumps. It's not going straight to the winner's circle although we'd like for it too. We've stepped back and set realistic goals. I think as long as we improve every day, it will be a good year."

Being a member of the Petty family, he's reminded of his responsibilities beyond the race car. His grandfather still lends his time to multiple charitable organizations and uncle Kyle has a charity ride every year to support the



AP / CHRIS O'MEARA

Thad Moffitt's helmet celebrates the family racing legacy with paintings of his great grandfather, Lee Petty, and grandfather, Richard Petty.



AP / PHELAN M. EBENHACK

Thad Moffitt drives down pit road during a NASCAR truck series auto race practice at Daytona International Speedway, Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022.

Victory Junction Gang Camp. Others including his aunt Sharon play a big role behind the scenes.

"One of the biggest things my granddad instilled in me outside of driving is without the fans we don't have anything," he said. "It's important for us to take care of our fan-base because that's our

lifeline. For me, it's really cool to see what they've done with the Petty family foundation.

"They support the Paralyzed Veterans of America, Make-A-Wish and it's cool for me with Victory Junction Gang and to do a little part in the kids' lives and hopefully change for the better."

## MEDICAL

From Page E5

"I tell people all the time once you come on this ride you are a part of our family," he said. "The kids that go to Victory Junction are part of the family. It has been a good trip. It is good to have my dad riding. It's always good to be back at Bristol.

"To go back we are going to go across the mountain (Shady Valley) on 321. That is the only way I have ever come to BMS. I have been coming up here for 40 or 50 years it seems like. Most of the time when I leave Bristol, I stop in Boone at the Daniel Boone Inn and get me something to eat."

Traveling the different routes across America has given Petty an appreciation of how spectac-

ular the scenery can be in different parts of the country.

"Anytime you get here in this part of the state, it is beautiful. It was cloudy today and the sun was peeking through," he said. "I know people don't believe Nebraska can be beautiful, but it is a different kind of beautiful. It's rolling hills, grain, corn and thousands of freaking cows. It is not something you see every day.

"It's funny driving in Bristol and there are trees beside your head, in Nebraska there is one tree way over there. The sky goes all the way across. We went to the Mississippi River, Indianapolis, Churchill Downs and then we went to our last icon, the greatest short track in the world in Bristol."

As beautiful as the scenery is, it's the camaraderie of all involved and the reason for the

ride that makes it most special.

"The two things you always remember about the ride are the campers and the kids," Petty said. "It's the people no matter where you are at. Mom always said you could put me in a cardboard box and I could make my own fun. It's just to be able to meet people and talk to people wearing Kyle Petty Mello Yello stuff, all of that is what I love so much."



# Larson proves he's one of most versatile drivers on the planet

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**

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Now Indy Cars, what next Top Fuel dragsters?

Kyle Larson continues to prove he's the most versatile race car driver of the current generation with his participation in this year's Indianapolis 500. Only his racing hero, Tony Stewart, who began drag racing last season has been competitive in as many types of race cars as Larson.

Larson, winner of the 2021 Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway, has long been known for his versatility behind the wheel. But, it was his year being suspended from NASCAR when his talent shown the brightest and his popularity grew leaps and bounds.

During the 2020 racing season, the California native had what many called the best season ever in dirt racing. That year, he won 46 times in four different types of race cars — winged sprint cars, midgets, Silver Crown and Late Models.

The list of major accomplishments include two times winning the biggest race of the year for midgets, Chili Bowl Nationals, and three times winning the biggest race of the year for sprint cars, the Knoxville Nationals. He's won the 4-Crown Nationals in both Silver Crown and midgets and several other big races including the Prairie Dirt Nationals for late models.

Larson had a stretch in early August when he won five races in nine days including his third Knoxville Nationals title. He led flag-to-flag over the 50-lap feature for a second straight year.

It's far more than dirt as his sports car success includes being a part of the winning team at the 24 Hours of Daytona in 2015.

Since then, he's con-



AP / DARRON CUMMINGS

Kyle Larson drives out of a turn on his way to winning the Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Sunday, July 21, 2024.



AP / DARRON CUMMINGS

From left to right, Jeff Gordon, Cliff Daniels, Kyle Larson and Rick Hendrick celebrate after Larson won the Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Sunday, July 21, 2024.

tinued to build his resume' both on the NASCAR circuit and away from it. In 2023, he won races in all three NASCAR national series — Cup, Xfinity and Trucks — and continued his domination on dirt.

With his day job, the 2021 NASCAR Cup Series champion had piled up 27 wins by the end of August, putting him one ahead of Dale Earnhardt Jr. on the all-time win list. He also has posted three wins in the

NASCAR All-Star Race.

He was disappointed in trying to race the Indianapolis 500 and Coca-Cola 600 on the same day, made impossible by weather delays. He had visions of a better finish than 18th in the Indianapolis 500 as Larson served a penalty for speeding on pit road. Still, he led laps toward the end of the race and ultimately was the Indy 500 Rookie of the Year.

He quickly bounced back from the disappointment of Memorial Day weekend

by winning a winged sprint car race at Lawrenceburg, Indiana five days later.

Wins on the NASCAR circuit include short tracks, big tracks and road courses. That includes wins in both the Cup Series and Xfinity Series at Bristol Motor Speedway.

His record in the Cup Series at BMS includes six top-five and 11 top-10 finishes. Besides the win, Larson has three runner-up finishes including last year to rival Denny Hamlin in the Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

He's also the only driver to compete at BMS in the top-two NASCAR series as well as both the World of Outlaws Sprint Cars and Late Models. He's more than a participant, but one who is truly a threat to win every time he's on the track.

Who knows? Maybe, we will see Larson be like Stewart and rocketing down Bristol Dragway one day.

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# Keselowski brings Roush-Fenway back as contender

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD  
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Brad Keselowski is a NASCAR champion. Jack Roush is a multi-time champion car owner.

However, Roush-Fenway Racing wasn't the organization it once was when Keselowski decided to join the team as a co-owner after the 2021 season.

Back in the early 2000s, Roush Racing was arguably the top team in NASCAR. Matt Kenseth and Kurt Busch won back-to-back Cup Series championships in 2003-04 and then won 13 of 36 races in 2005.

Mark Martin, Carl Edwards, Greg Biffle and Jeff Burton were also frequent winners in Roush cars. However, Roush only won two races from 2014-21, both by Ricky Stenhouse Jr. on the superspeedways of Talladega and Daytona.



Brad Keselowski, driver of the #6 Castrol Ford, celebrates in victory lane after winning the NASCAR Cup Series Goodyear 400 at Darlington Raceway on May 12, 2024.

Enter 2012 Cup Series champion Keselowski, who in one of his first acts as team co-owner started painting the shop to serve as a symbol of a new era.

In the three seasons since, Keselowski's influence has grown and so has the team's performance. Chris Buescher won the first race under the new

RFK Racing banner in 2022 at the Bristol Night Race. It was a race which Keselowski led 109 laps and seemed to have in control before a flat tire.

Buescher ended up 21st in the points, while Keselowski finished 24th overall. Still, there was promise with the late-season surge.

Keselowski, driver of the No. 6 Ford, put up numbers more like he was accustomed in 2023. He went from one top-five and six top-10 finishes in 2022 to seven top-five and 16 top-10 finishes last season. He's on pace to easily beat those numbers this season. His win in Darlington at May was his first since April 2021 when he was driving the No. 2 Ford for Team Penske.

Overall, it was the 36th of his career, and obviously his first for the Michigan native since becoming a team owner. He entered the top 10 in points at Charlotte, a race in the middle of three straight top-three finishes.

Buescher, driving the No.

17 Ford, has continued to add to reputation. Perhaps the most underrated driver in the sport, the native Texan set plenty of career bests in 2023. They included three wins at Richmond, Michigan and Daytona, as well as nine top-five and 17 top-10 finishes. He finished seventh in the series point standings.

Both have to be considered drivers to watch at Bristol Motor Speedway. Buescher has top-five finishes in two of the last three races on the Bristol concrete. Keselowski has three Bristol wins, including the Night Race in 2011, and the Food City 500 in 2012 and 2020.

More than the past performance, it's how Keselowski has elevated the whole program in the present that has them contenders in Saturday night's race.

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# BMS to host Braves and Reds in Major League Baseball game

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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BRISTOL, Tenn. — Baseball is coming to the “Last Great Colosseum.”

Bristol Motor Speedway and Major League Baseball recently announced plans for Speedway Classic '25, a regular-season game between the Atlanta Braves and the Cincinnati Reds.

The game is scheduled for August 2, 2025 at 7 p.m. with FOX Sports to provide exclusive national coverage of the event. An outline of the basic field was detailed on the BMS infield between turns 1 and 2 with the game expected to set a MLB attendance record.

It will be the first ever Major League game played in Tennessee and the first at a NASCAR track. BMS President Jerry Caldwell said the game has been years in the making as the venue came into play after hosting the world's most attended football game, the Battle at Bristol between Tennessee and Virginia Tech in 2016.

“I don't remember the specific date, but it's been years,” Caldwell said. “We learned early on that the way we put on the football game, that was the same time they started to look at some unique venues for baseball. The stars aligned and the conversations started a few years later.”

Details are still being worked out with how much of the 147,000-capacity stadium will be used for the baseball game.

The artist renderings show plans to sell seats on the frontstretch, backstretch and the areas between the first two turns. Caldwell said temporary seating close to the playing field will give the game a special feel much like the Waste Management Open golf tournament in Phoenix.

Caldwell also talked about the importance of non-NASCAR events such



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

An artist rendering of the overhead view of the BMS baseball field to host the Atlanta Braves and Cincinnati Reds.

as the “Country Thunder” music festival.

“We're still early in the details, but it's similar to the Waste Management Open where those holes have the wraparound grandstands,” Caldwell said. “We are blessed with an amazing venue. If you go back to the Carrier family and then Bruton Smith, what they built here. The resources and opportunity that (Speedway Motorsports CEO) Marcus Smith gives us the freedom to give it a shot. It's important to have those other events.”

Major League Baseball held games at the “Field of Dreams” movie site in Iowa back-to-back years in 2021-22. Rickwood Field in Alabama hosted a game to celebrate the Negro Leagues in June, while BMS will be a unique venue as MLB Vice President of Global Events Jeremiah Yolcut pointed out.

It will be a part of a Reds'



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

An artist rendering of a view behind home plate of the BMS baseball field for the Speedway Classic.

home series with a rain date for the following day. The other two games are scheduled to place in Cincinnati.

“When we look for places across the globe, we look for places that can bring

create special moments for our players, fans and teams,” Yolcut said. “Bristol kept coming up as a possibility. You walk into the venue and you know it's incredibly special. The energy here is different

than any of the places we've recently been.”

Yolcut commented that Bristol Motor Speedway, “shines under the lights at night.” Studies have been done to ensure that sight lines and the fan experi-

ence are good with a seating bowl created. Geography was another factor with the Reds' Great American Ballpark 305 miles and the Braves' Truist Park 309 miles from BMS.

“Geography plays a big part. We wanted to bring it to the fans in Tennessee who have to drive up to Cincinnati, over to St. Louis or down to Atlanta or the other awesome ballparks,” Yolcut said. “Right here, it's in the heart of where they live. We're cognizant of what teams are playing where and giving them the best offering.”

It's the latest huge undertaking at BMS which has included the 2016 football game with an NCAA record crowd of 156,990. There were three years of putting 23,000 cubic yards of dirt on the speedway surface for the Food City Dirt Race and then removing it for the Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

Speedway Motorsports Senior Vice President of Operations and Development Steve Swift is embracing this latest challenge. There will be some work done at the infield walls near turn 2. The Goodyear building will be torn down and a playing surface with a turf field will be installed.

Officials pointed out a field was installed at London's Olympic Park in 18 days, while the biggest challenge for Swift's team will be getting the track ready for the Bass Pro Shops Night Race a month later.

“To give us the opportunities to do things that aren't the norm every day, it's always fun,” Swift said. “There are some things that have to take place for the field to be to MLB standards so we have a good game, but it's all doable. We have to turn it around for a NASCAR race a month later, but we embrace those challenges.”



# Earnhardt brings extra excitement to Food City 300

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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Dale Earnhardt Jr. remains the biggest draw in stock car racing some seven years after he retired from full-time competition.

The NASCAR Hall of Famer will compete in Friday's Food City 300 for the Xfinity Series at Bristol Motor Speedway. It's the second straight year that Earnhardt is scheduled to be in the race and also the 20th anniversary of his historic sweep of Cup and Xfinity Series races when he exclaimed, "It's Bristol Baby!" in victory lane.

That was the first time that a driver won both the Cup and Xfinity races in the same weekend on the .533-mile, high-banked short track.

Earnhardt, 49, will again be driving the No. 88 JR Motorsports Chevrolet in the regular season finale for the Xfinity Series. He led 47 laps in last season's Food City 300 and was in the top five most of the race before an electrical fire



NASCAR MEDIA

**Dale Earnhardt Jr. gets ready to get in his race car to practice before the 2023 Food City 300 at Bristol Motor Speedway.**

inside the car forced him to exit car. He ended 30th-place, but was happy with the overall performance.

"We had a positive wire short up in the top of the dash, and the casing on the wire melted down onto the leg brace and caught the foam in the leg brace and the cloth cover of the leg brace on fire, so it burnt the leg off my

uniform," Earnhardt Jr. said. "It was like another lap, and I was probably going to be blistered up. But, no burns on my leg. Just barely escaped. I was disappointed to have to get out. We were going to run fourth or better."

It was a treat for the fans to see the Cup Series 15-time Most Popular Driver. Earnhardt is a

26-time Cup Series winner, including a two-time winner of the Daytona 500. The 2004 victories were his only ones in either top-two series at Bristol, but he's always considered the "World's Fastest Half-Mile" one of his favorite tracks.

He has two poles, one runner-up finish, seven top-five and nine top-10 starts in 13 Xfinity races at BMS. He's also been a winner as a team owner at BMS. Martin Truex Jr. scored his first-ever win, driving the No. 8 for Dale Jr. in 2004. Noah Gragson has two wins in Earnhardt-owned cars, while Brad Keselowski and Justin Allgaier have also driven his cars to victories.

Besides his own car, his JR Motorsports team will field cars for defending race champion Allgaier, Sam Mayer, Sammy Smith and Brandon Jones.

Earnhardt made his first Bristol start in 1997, driving the No. 7 Chevrolet for Bristol car owner Ed Whitaker. He qualified on the outside pole, but finished

22nd, one spot behind Johnson City racer Brad Teague in the final rundown.

Many of today's fans are more accustomed to seeing Earnhardt as the host of his popular "Dale Jr. Download" podcast. But, he still has a competitive fire, occasionally driving his Late Model and making at least one start in the Xfinity Series every season since his retirement from Cup.

Bristol Motor Speedway President Jerry Caldwell is certainly glad that Earnhardt chose Bristol as the place he wanted to race again in 2024.

"There was a tremendous atmosphere and buzz about Bristol Motor Speedway when Dale Jr. was leading the Food City 300 last fall," Caldwell said. "We are thrilled that he is returning to take care of some unfinished business this September. He's such a legend in the sport and has meant so much to fans in our region. We can't wait to see him back in action on the high banks in his No. 88 Hellmann's Chevy."

## Welcome Race Fans! Ty & Tucker say "It's Bristol Baby!!"



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# Stewart-Haas Racing getting ready for Bristol farewell

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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Stewart-Haas Racing has won 70 races and a NASCAR Cup Series championship with Kevin Harvick since Tony Stewart joined the organization as a co-owner in 2009.

Stewart announced earlier this year that he's leaving the series as an owner at the end of the 2024 season. Saturday's Bass Pro Shops Night Race will mark the final race for the organization at Bristol Motor Speedway.

There have been 96 different Stewart-Haas Cup entries at the "Last Great Colosseum" with three wins, 14 top-five and 36 top-10 finishes. There have been 18 different drivers in the SHR machines starting with the namesake and Ryan Newman the first five seasons.

Danica Patrick joined the team in 2013, and Cup Series champions Kevin Harvick and Kurt Busch joined the organization over the next few years. Other SHR racers have included Clint Bowyer, Aric Almirola, Daniel Suarez, Cole Custer, and current drivers Chase Briscoe, Josh Berry, Ryan

Preece and Noah Gragson.

Mark Martin, Jeff Burton and Ty Dillon have driven for the team in substitute roles.

Harvick was the most successful of the group with two of his five Bristol Cup Series wins coming in the No. 4 Stewart-Haas car. Harvick talked about BMS reminding him of Mesa Marin Raceway, a high-banked short track in his hometown of Bakersfield, California, where he grew up racing.

"I grew up on a half-mile, high-banked racetrack. I know Bristol is a lot more banked, but it's kind of the same mindset for me driving around the race-track," Harvick said. "It's very fast, high-banked concrete. It's short-track beating and banging ... a lot of fun. I seem to have a lot of success every time I go, so I'm always excited to go back."

The Bristol night race is one of the most prestigious events on the NASCAR calendar and a race that Harvick's longtime crew chief, Rodney Childers, put at the very top of his list.

"Everybody knows this is my favorite place. We put a lot of work into coming here," Childers said after crewing Harvick to a win



RANDALL PERRY

Kevin Harvick (4) and Kyle Busch (18) battle for the lead at the 2019 Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

in the 2020 Bass Pro Shops Night Race. "I feel like we should have won so many races here and have been so fast every time."

Harvick drove the No. 4 Chevrolet to victory in the 2016 Bass Pro Shops Night Race, winning by nearly two seconds over run-

ner-up Ricky Stenhouse Jr. His 2020 victory — in which he outdueled nine-time Bristol winner Kyle Busch — capped a nine-win season.

Kurt Busch scored the other win for the team at Bristol, driving the No. 41 Ford in 2018. He took the

lead from Bowyer on a restart with 23 laps to go and then held off Kyle Larson on another late restart. It was his sixth career win at Bristol, but the first in 12 years.

It was the 2004 Cup Series champion's first win of the season, his first since winning the 2017 Daytona 500 and the 30th of his career. It was also the first Cup Series win for his crew chief Billy Scott.

"It's awesome to do it at Bristol. To get to victory lane at my favorite track and do it the hard way, going inside, outside, all this damage, I'm just so proud," Busch said after his victory. "We had good restarts when we had to, and then you've got to get clever and throw everything at it. This is one of the sweetest wins ever."

Stewart only had one Bristol win in 33 starts, that was when he drove the

No. 20 Pontiac for Joe Gibbs Racing in 2001. The three-time NASCAR champion led 1,355 laps at the high-banked short track. His best finish in a SHR car was second to Jimmie Johnson at the 2010 Food City 500.

"There were a couple that got away from us that I would love to go back and re-do," he said. "I think the night we won here was a special deal. You're winning at the 'Last Great Colosseum.' There isn't a better feeling than that."

Stewart had another meaningful moment when Harvick won in 2016. Harvick got Stewart to join in the post-race celebration where they smoked the tires in front of the fans.

"That was Kevin. The spotters got together and said Kevin wants to do the burnout," Stewart said. "I thought it was fun to be able to do that."



RANDALL PERRY

Kevin Harvick celebrates his win in the 2019 Bass Pro Shops Night Race.



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Kevin Harvick does a burnout after winning the 2019 Bass Pro Shops Night Race.





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# Bass Pro Shops Night Race 2024 Driver Capsules

BY JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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NASCAR MEDIA

## 1 ROSS CHASTAIN

Trackhouse Racing  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Alva, Fla.  
Crew chief: Phil Surgen.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 6th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 2 AUSTIN CINDRIC

Team Penske Ford  
Hometown: Columbus,  
Ohio.  
Crew chief: Brian  
Wilson.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 20th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 3 AUSTIN DILLON

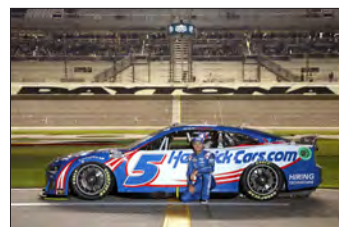
Richard Childress  
Racing Chevrolet  
Hometown: Lewisville,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Justin  
Alexander  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 4th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 4 JOSH BERRY

Stewart-Haas Racing  
Ford  
Hometown:  
Hendersonville, Tenn.  
Crew chief: Rodney  
Childers.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 12th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 5 KYLE LARSON

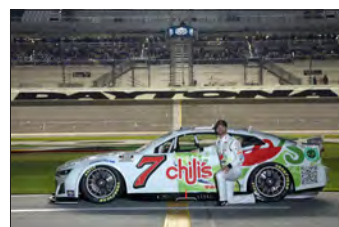
Hendrick Motorsports  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Elk Grove,  
Calif.  
Crew chief: Cliff Daniels.  
Best Bristol finish: Win  
(2021)



NASCAR MEDIA

## 6 BRAD KESELOWSKI

RFK Racing Ford  
Hometown: Rochester  
Hills, Mich.  
Crew chief: Matt McCall.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: Win (3 times)



NASCAR MEDIA

## 7 COREY LAJOIE

Spire Motorsports  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Kannapolis,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Ryan Sparks.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 15th



## 8 KYLE BUSCH

Richard Childress  
Racing Chevrolet  
Hometown: Las Vegas



NASCAR MEDIA

Crew chief: Randall  
Burdett.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: Win (8 times)



NASCAR MEDIA

## 9 CHASE ELLIOTT

Hendrick Motorsports  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Dawsonville,  
Ga.  
Crew chief: Alan  
Gustafson.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 2nd



NASCAR MEDIA

## 10 NOAH GRAGSON

Stewart-Haas Racing  
Ford  
Hometown: Las Vegas,  
Nev.  
Crew Chief: Drew  
Blickensderfer.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 34th

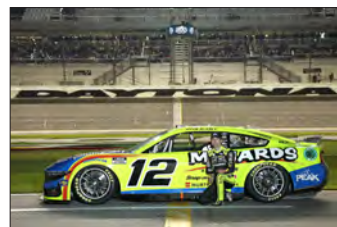


NASCAR MEDIA

## 11 DENNY HAMLIN

Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota  
Hometown: Chesterfield,  
Va.  
Crew chief: Chris  
Gabehart.

Best Bristol concrete  
finish: Win (4 times)



NASCAR MEDIA

## 12 RYAN BLANEY

Team Penske Ford  
Hometown: High Point,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Jonathan  
Hassler.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 4th



JARED C TILTON

## 14 CHASE BRISCOE

Stewart-Haas Racing  
Ford  
Hometown: Mitchell,  
Ind.  
Crew chief: John  
Klausmeier.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 13th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 17 CHRIS BUESCHER

RFK Racing Ford  
Hometown: Prosper,  
Texas  
Crew chief: Scott Graves.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: Win (2022)



NASCAR MEDIA

## 19 MARTIN TRUAX JR.

Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota  
Hometown: Mayetta, N.J.  
Crew chief: James Small.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 2nd



NASCAR MEDIA

## 20 CHRISTOPHER BELL

Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota  
Hometown: Norman,  
Okla.  
Crew chief: Adam  
Stevens.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 3rd



NASCAR MEDIA

## 21 HARRISON BURTON

Wood Brothers Racing  
Ford  
Hometown: Huntersville,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Jeremy  
Bullins.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 16th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 22 JOEY LOGANO

Team Penske Ford  
Hometown: Middletown,  
Conn.  
Crew chief: Paul Wolfe.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: Win (2 times)

## 23 BUBBA WALLACE

23XI Racing Toyota  
Hometown: Mobile, Ala.



NASCAR MEDIA

Crew chief: Bootie  
Barker.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 10th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 24 WILLIAM BYRON

Hendrick Motorsports  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Charlotte,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Rudy Fugle.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 3rd



NASCAR MEDIA

## 31 DANIEL HEMRIC

Kaulig Racing Chevrolet  
Hometown: Kannapolis,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Trent Owens.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 12th



NASCAR MEDIA

## 34 MICHAEL MCDOWELL

Front Row Motorsports  
Ford  
Hometown: Glendale,  
Ariz.  
Crew chief: Travis  
Peterson.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 6th





NASCAR MEDIA

**38 TODD GILLILAND**

Front Row Motorsports  
Ford  
Hometown: Sherrills  
Ford, N.C.  
Crew chief: Ryan  
Bergenty.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 16th



NASCAR MEDIA

**41 RYAN PREECE**

Stewart-Haas Racing  
Ford  
Hometown: Berlin, Conn.  
Crew chief: Chad  
Johnston.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 9th



NASCAR MEDIA

**42 JOHN HUNTER NEMECEK**

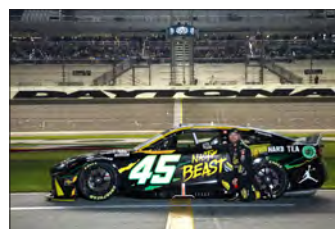
Legacy Motor Club  
Toyota  
Hometown: Mooresville,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Ben Beshore.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 13th



NASCAR MEDIA

**43 ERIK JONES**

Legacy Motor Club  
Toyota  
Hometown: Byron, Mich.  
Crew chief: Dave Elenz.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 2nd



NASCAR MEDIA

**45 TYLER REDDICK**

23XI Racing Toyota  
Hometown: Corning,  
Calif.  
Crew chief: Billy Scott.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 4th



NASCAR MEDIA

**47 RICKY STENHOUSE JR.**

JTG Daugherty Racing  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Olive  
Branch, Ms.  
Crew chief: Mike Kelley.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 2nd



NASCAR MEDIA

**48 ALEX BOWMAN**

Hendrick Motorsports  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Tuscon,  
Ariz.  
Crew chief: Blake Harris.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 4th



NASCAR MEDIA

**51 JUSTIN HALEY**

Rick Ware Racing Ford  
Hometown: Winamac,  
Ind.  
Crew chief: Chris  
Lawson.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 12th



NASCAR MEDIA

**54 TY GIBBS**

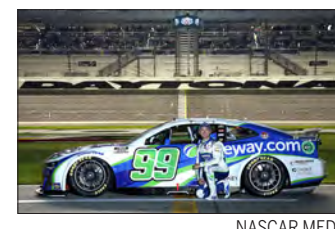
Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota  
Hometown: Charlotte,  
N.C.  
Crew chief: Chris Gayle.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 5th



NASCAR MEDIA

**71 ZANE SMITH**

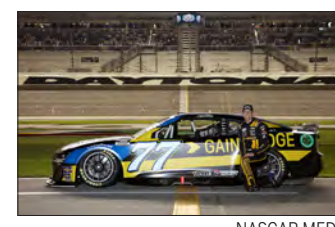
Spire Motorsports  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Huntington  
Beach, Calif.  
Crew chief: Stephen  
Doran.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 36th



NASCAR MEDIA

**77 CARSON HOCEVAR**

Spire Motorsports  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Portage,  
Mich.  
Crew chief: Luke  
Lambert.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 11th



NASCAR MEDIA

**99 DANIEL SUAREZ**

Trackhouse Racing  
Chevrolet  
Hometown: Monterrey,  
Mexico.  
Crew chief: Matt  
Swiderski.  
Best Bristol concrete  
finish: 8th

# Hamlin looking for third straight Bristol victory



RANDALL PERRY

Denny Hamlin celebrates in victory lane with BMS President Jerry Caldwell after winning the 2023 Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

**By JEFF BIRCHFIELD**

jbirchfield@sixriversmedia.com

Denny Hamlin had his struggles over the summer months. But, the driver of the No. 11 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota feels great about his chances in Saturday's Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway and ultimately contending for the NASCAR Cup Series championship.

"I feel like our chances are as good as anyone," Hamlin said. "Ultimately, we're one of the very few cars that can win any given week. So no matter what points position we might find ourselves in, and we will be in a precarious points position at some point of the playoffs. We

always feel like we can go to the next track and win. That's something that only a few cars can do."

Hamlin has good reason to feel confident at Bristol. He's the winner of the last two races at the "World's Fastest Half-Mile." He led 142 laps to beat runner-up Kyle Larson at the 2023 Bass Pro Shops Night Race and then held off teammate Martin Truex Jr. to win the Food City 500 back in March.

One of the best short-track racers in the series, Hamlin has four wins, 11 top-five and 18 top-10 finishes in 34 starts on the Bristol concrete.

His win in March ended up being controversial as his winning engine was shipped back to Toyota's

facility in California instead of being sent to the NASCAR Research and Development Center first.

The result was a 75-point penalty assessed to Hamlin's team. While it was quite a setback, Hamlin feels the team still has a good chance of racing for the championship.

"I think it will have a positive outcome. I really can't honestly say that it was something that we rallied around," he said. "It took away 15 points every round that we lost. That's something that's really hard to overcome, but we can. If we are able to find ourselves making it through these first two, three





RANDALL PERRY

**Denny Hamlin (11) battles Ty Gibbs (54) for the lead at the 2023 Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway.**

## HAMLIN

From Page E17

ounds and have a shot at it – at Phoenix I should say, then that’s going to be a very rewarding feeling.”

Heading into the play-offs, Hamlin had three wins on the season and 54 for his career, second only to 63 for Kyle Busch among active drivers. He’s also co-owner with Basketball Hall of Famer Michael Jordan on the No. 45 Toyota of regular-season champion Tyler Reddick and the No. 23 of Bubba Wallace.

Hamlin has been vocal in his stance on controversial issues through his podcast. The latest has been the ongoing saga between NASCAR and its team owners over future revenue sharing.

“People see me gripe, but they have to realize I made a good living in this as a NASCAR driver and I chose to invest back in the France family and NASCAR,” Hamlin said. “They are yet to show me an opportunity where I’m going to get that back.”

There have been some tense moments when meeting with NASCAR officials, but Hamlin insists he’s most interested in making the sport and his organization grow.

The 43-year-old still has some goals to accomplish behind the wheel. He’s certainly had a Hall of Fame career with three wins in the Daytona 500 and three in the Bristol Night Race. For those who discount his Food City 500 win in the spring due to extreme tire issues, Hamlin looks back at last year’s Night Race.

“We won it in the non-gimmicky way. This

race last year we won it in the playoffs and it didn’t have any of those variables,” he said. “We can win in multiple different ways and fashions. What I love about our team — I feel like I’ve got one of the best crew chiefs and the best teams in the garage. There’s only two to three of us that knows that they can win every single week that they hit the track and we’re one of them.”

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# Blaney not sure what to expect at Saturday's Night Race

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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Ryan Blaney is the reigning NASCAR Cup Series champion, but he has little idea how this Saturday's Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway will play out.

The driver of the No. 12 Team Penske Ford was caught off guard like everyone else when extreme tire issues came up during the Food City 500 back in March. Since then, Goodyear conducted a tire test at Bristol.

Blaney, a 12-time winner in the Cup Series, doesn't know exactly what to expect for Saturday night's race.

"They did the tire test a couple of months ago and said it was the same tire (used in the spring) with no issues," he said. "I think all the teams are nervous and are probably coming with way less camber, more aggressive on tow. It's trying to make the tire last. You have no idea of what the tire is going to be or how they're going to prep the track whether it's PJ1 or resin."



TODD BRASE

Ryan Blaney (12) dives inside of Corey LaJoie (7) during the 2022 Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

Blaney has a win at Bristol in the Xfinity Series. He has the Cup Series qualifying record at 132.075 set in 2019 and also started on the pole for the Food City 500 in March. Yet, he is still looking for a first Cup win at the "Last Great Colosseum" with just two top-five and five top-10 finishes at in 15 Bristol Series starts.

Regardless, he feels there's a good chance he will improve on

last season's 22nd-place finish in the Night Race.

"This time last year, we were scrounging to figure out how we were going to perform," Blaney said. "We were off a little bit. This year, we're in a much better spot. Hopefully, we will continue to learn on the pace we've been bringing the last few months. Team Penske as a whole, we're in a much better spot as well."

Team Penske includes two-time series champion Joey Logano and Austin Cindric, both who qualified for the 2024 playoffs. When it comes to racing for a title, Blaney and his No. 12 group focus on their own goals. Blaney has the utmost confidence in the team led by crew chief Jonathan Hassler.

"Last year, we hadn't won a championship, but now we 1,000 percent believe we can do it

again," he said. "We look at what we did well from a mentality standpoint, just worrying about ourselves, trusting and believing in each other. I've always told my guys they're the best of the best and if they bring 100 percent effort, we're going to have a great shot to win."

Out of his control, Blaney was crashed four times during the regular-season. He doesn't think it's intentional, although it sometimes feels that way. Still, the team uses it as motivation.

"I don't think there's a bulls-eye on my back, but we've taken it as we're in title defense," he said. "It motivates you when everyone is gunning for you."

Blaney wants to be the driver everyone dreads seeing at every race whether it's the drafting tracks of Daytona and Talladega, the mile-and-a-half tracks like Charlotte and Texas or the high-banked short track at Bristol.

"I want to scare every other team," Blaney said. "You want everyone worrying about you because you're that dangerous."



FILE PHOTO

Martin Truex Jr. is an avid fisherman, but has more business to take care of at the race track.

## Truex wanting to go out a winner at Bristol

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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Martin Truex Jr. hopes his last season racing full-time will result in his first NASCAR Cup Series visit to Bristol Motor Speedway victory lane.

Truex has experienced plenty of success at the Cup level, a 34-time race winner and the 2017 series champion to virtually assure him of making the Hall of Fame one day.

Ironically, his first NASCAR national series win was at Bristol in 2004 in the Xfinity Series and he even won in the Truck Series when the track was covered in dirt in 2021.

However, the New Jersey native is 0-for-34 in Cup races on the Bristol concrete heading into Saturday's Bass Pro Shops Night Race.

Maybe, the driver of the No. 19 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota will break the winless streak Saturday. After all, he finished second to teammate Denny Hamlin at the Food City 500, the second time he's been runner-up at Bristol in a Cup car. That particular race was noted for the extreme tire wear with 54 lead changes among 16 drivers.

"Apparently, this is what I needed to happen at Bristol to have a shot at winning," Truex said. "This tire-management thing fit into my wheelhouse. The difference was I came out the pits so far behind Denny (on the final pit stop), and I had to use my car up more. The last five laps of the race, the right rear (tire) was cords. But we gave a heck of an effort and did a great job."

Overall, it's been a frus-

trating place with just three top-five and five top-10 finishes. His only other second-place finish was back in 2011, although he managed to hold off five-time Bristol winner Jeff Gordon to keep the spot.

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

Another reason that Truex wants to win is Bass Pro Shops being both the event sponsor and a long-time sponsor of his race cars. He's much more than a celebrity spokesperson, someone passionate about fishing and hunting.

He and former Cup driver Ryan Newman are longtime fishing buddies, but it's more than just getting on the water and having fun.

"I take it pretty serious when I'm out there," Truex said. "I don't do it to completely relax. It's more like I put my focus on something else and change my mindset from the hustle and bustle of racing."

Before he takes to the lake, there is unfinished business on the high-banked short track. The Bristol Night Race is considered one of the most prestigious victories a driver can have.

"Man, it would be so awesome," Truex said. "It would be incredible. Yeah, we've not had much luck there, but we've been getting better at it, and in the spring, we ran really strong. It's going to be a whole new tire situation and everything. Hopefully, we can go there and have a chance. It would be a cool race to win."



# Waltrip living out dreams with brewery, television work

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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BRISTOL, Va. — Two-time Daytona 500 winner Michael Waltrip continues to live out his dreams.

The retired NASCAR driver opened his new brewery in Bristol in September 2021.

Located on Moore Street, the brewery is an old fire museum and was opened as Studio Brew in 2016. Now as Michael Waltrip Brewing, it has a large mural of the race car driver celebrating in victory lane on the side of the building.

Inside, there is a good selection of beer and tasty food items. The brewery also has a small outdoor patio. It was a natural partnership for Waltrip, who started the brewing company with friends in Arizona and looked to expand east.

Located a couple of blocks off State Street, the brewery is still close enough to add to the overall atmosphere of downtown. That's important to Waltrip, who has visited Bristol multiple times in recent weeks, walking around the downtown area and mingling with folks. He understands the town more than just from a racing standpoint.

"I hope we are adding to the vibe. I've been coming to town and walking around to see what's going on," Waltrip said. "There are a lot of smiles, a lot of people happy that we're here with our brewery."

"There are a lot of great shows on State Street to watch live music. It's starting to feel like normal again and that's a great feeling. Our beer is cold. Our food is good and I'm happy to add to the energy around Bristol."

## WALTRIP AT BMS

Waltrip is the younger brother of Darrell Waltrip, who holds the all-time



JEFF BIRCHFIELD / SIX RIVERS MEDIA

A mural of Michael Waltrip is outside the two-time Daytona 500 winner's brewery in Bristol, Virginia.

record with 12 NASCAR Cup Series wins at Bristol. Michael, now 58, has his own rich history at the "Last Great Colosseum" with eight top-10 finishes in 48 starts.

Waltrip's greatest success came in the NASCAR Busch (now Xfinity) Series, where he scored two wins. He still gets sentimental about the first victory. After crossing the finish line, he paid tribute to 1992 NASCAR champion Alan Kulwicki, who died in a plane crash less than 48 hours earlier in Blountville.

"Bristol, there are so many emotions when I come here, the wins and losses," he said. "Arriving here that Thursday evening and hearing on the news that Alan had died in a plane crash made it a difficult weekend."

"Being able to win the race and celebrate his life by doing the 'Polish Victory Lap' in his honor, I had raced against him as a rookie in '86. He was a great competitor, and to honor his life, it's still really special to me. Same thinking about Dale (Earnhardt) in that 3 car and all that he accomplished here."



MICHAEL WALTRIP BREWING

Michael Waltrip Brewing is a popular place during Bristol race weeks.

Waltrip's second win came a decade later. He was driving a No. 99 Chevrolet that Waltrip and friends built in a shop behind his house in North Carolina.

"We had like eight guys working on it," he said. "When we got the checkered flag in that night race, it couldn't have gotten any better than winning at Bristol in a car we all pitched in on behind the house."

The fact he was racing at all was a true miracle.

He survived one of the worst crashes in NASCAR history in a 1990 Busch Series race at Bristol. His car hit a metal gate at the

end of turn two, and plowed head-on into the concrete wall.

Parts of his car disintegrated in the violent impact. Afterward, Waltrip was sitting in the middle of the wreckage on the backstretch with his feet literally touching the pavement.

"I had been in a few bad crashes and usually when you're in those, you're knocked out," Waltrip said. "Usually when you come to, you don't know where you're at or what's going on. In this case, it knocked the breath out of me. A couple of minutes later, people are staring at me funny."



JEFF BIRCHFIELD / SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Stephen Harvie, a seventh-grader from Johnson City, proudly shows off his car that Michael Waltrip signed at the Food City store in Blountville.



JEFF BIRCHFIELD / SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Michael Waltrip poses with his trophy from winning the 1996 NASCAR All-Star Race.

"I'm like, 'I'm fine. What's wrong with you all?' They said, 'Do you see your feet?' I'm like, 'Yeah, they're still on me.' They're like, 'Your feet are on the track and your steering wheel isn't there anymore.' I was like, 'I'm not hurt.' When I got to the hotel that night and watched the replay on the news, I understood what all the fuss was about. It was unbelievable I was able to walk away."

## A BUSY MAN

The veteran of 784 Cup Series races has stayed busy since his retirement from full-time driving. Besides his television work with FOX, he's participated in "Dancing with the Stars" and written a book about his first Daytona 500 win and the death of Earnhardt that was turned into a movie.

In 2001, he raced in the Superstar Racing Experience (SRX) Series, which included a fifth-place finish on the Knoxville (Iowa) dirt track after an extended battle with Helio Castroneves.

"Some of the things I've done since I stopped racing full time has been special," he said. "I wrote a book that was made into a documentary. I'm sorry for the dancing thing. I was uncertain of what I was doing. When they would start the music, I was like, 'Just don't mess up.'"

"SRX was great to walk down memory lane and race against Bill Elliott, Tony Stewart and Bobby Labonte again. Then, I'm with Helio Castroneves, who won his fourth Indianapolis 500. We're tracking paint at a short track in America. I'm certainly blessed."



# Some of the best places to eat while in the Tri-Cities

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**

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Where are some of the best places to eat and experience the Tri-Cities while you're in town for race weekend?

If you're still relatively new to the area or even longtime residents who haven't kept up with all the new businesses, here are some of the places chosen as the best places by the Johnson City Press and Kingsport Times News in the 2023 Readers' Choice Awards.

We begin in Johnson City where Kickback Jacks was voted the best sports bar with Tiebreakers the runner-up. Tiebreakers also ranked second for family entertainment behind Brights Zoo.

When it comes to dining options there are plenty with everything like Southern favorites to international cuisine. Yuimaru



FILE PHOTO

**Ridgewood Barbeque is usually packed during business hours.**

Kitchen was picked as best Asian restaurant, while The Black Olive topped the charts both with Italian and Greek/Mediterranean dishes.

El Charolais was picked the best of many great Mexican restaurants in the city. The best seafood was Bayou Boys Fresh Gulf Shrimp.

Juniper was voted both the best new restaurant, top vegan menu and the best dining experience. The Kitchen at Grace Meadows is both in a

scenic setting and the top choice for country cooking.

If you decide to go out after the races, Mid City Grill is the late night restaurant. If you're an early bird and want fresh produce, the Johnson City Farmers' Market is open Saturday morning.

If you're staying in Kingsport, there are other great options.

Giuseppe's is the choice for both best Italian and Greek/Mediterranean restaurant. Stir Fry Café takes the top spot for Asian restaurant, while Thai Riverside was voted the best new restaurant.

La Caretta is the best Mexican spot according to the readers, while it's hard to beat Riverfront Seafood Company for the best seafood and a great atmosphere beside the Holston River.

The Chop House was picked as best dining experience

and Sister's Cravings was the best vegan restaurant. If you're into country cooking, the folks in the Model City insist you have to try out the fried chicken at Nick's Family Restaurant.

Everywhere in the South claims the best barbeque as the folks in Johnson City are partial to Ridgewood, not far from BMS, while the Kingsport readers picked Phil's Dream Pit, conveniently located off the Eastern Star exit.

Both towns agree that if you're in a hurry, one of the many Pal's Sudden Service locations is the best drive-thru. There are plenty of other great food options, retailers and services in the area.

If you come to town early or decide to visit on a non-race weekend, check out some of these places that the locals enjoy.

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# Bloomquist served as mentor to regular-season champ Reddick

By JEFF BIRCHFIELD

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Tyler Reddick's journey to becoming a NASCAR superstar included a stop living with a dirt-track legend in Northeast Tennessee.

Reddick was in his early teens when he moved to the Mooresburg farm of Scott Bloomquist to learn from the dirt track racing legend. Reddick had raced go-karts and open-wheel cars up to that point, but with the transition to dirt late models, his family talked to Bloomquist about mentoring the young racer.

It was also out of necessity as Reddick's father was running himself ragged trying to keep up with a different type of race car.

"When we first started working together and running his cars, I had to be 13 or 14 years old,"

Reddick said. "My dad was very, very good at working on the go karts. I'd go to school, do this and that, and when I got to about that age, we had two late models. You have all things you have to service on them, it got too much for my dad to handle by himself."

Reddick, being from the West Coast, had an instant connection with Bloomquist who was born in Iowa, but grew up in California.

Bloomquist insisted that Reddick not only drive the race cars, but work on them as well.

"I just started slowly learning more and more about the cars and Scott and all the great people he had down there on Planet Zero, as we like to call it," Reddick said. "He and his friends just taught me so much about the race car. It really helped me take that next step that helped my performance improve."

Reddick was like a lot of younger racers before then. His would just to get behind the wheel of the race car and drive it to the best of his ability.

Bloomquist gave Reddick more of an old-school approach of turning wrenches as well as turning the wheel.

He also learned the tough decisions race car drivers sometimes have to make that doesn't always paint them in the best light to fans.

"For a long time I knew what the car kind of looked like. I get



AP / CARLOS OSORIO

Tyler Reddick and crew stand by the winner's trophy after a NASCAR Cup Series auto race at Michigan International Speedway, Monday, Aug. 19, 2024.



FILE PHOTO

Scott Bloomquist waits in his race car before pulling on the track during practice for the 2021 Bristol Dirt Nationals.

it and drive it, but we kind of got to the point where I was curious to learn," he said. "It's a tough balance where you want to talk to fans and sign stuff in the pits, but it quite literally, it got to the point where I couldn't interact with folks that want to talk in the pits because we'd be thrashing on the car to get something fixed or serviced."



FILE PHOTO

Scott Bloomquist celebrates his legendary win in the 2014 World 100 at Eldora Speedway where he charged from last place to first.

What he learned from Bloomquist has helped Reddick in every machine from the open-wheel cars to his NASCAR Cup Series ride. He considered Bloomquist a genius when it came to race cars.

"I learned a lot about what to look for in a car on the mechanical side to try and keep it running," Reddick said. "And then, Scott was just an incredible mind when it came to getting speed out

of his cars. The way he went about things as a driver, someone that was just so smart that just don't know if we'll ever see someone like that again."

Reddick was devastated when he heard the news of Bloomquist's plane crash. Besides their time talking about the car, the young driver loved to hear the other stories shared. They would often relax fishing on Cherokee Lake which

Bloomquist lived next to.

Besides his brilliant mind, it was the work ethic and passion which Bloomquist had about dirt-track racing and his team which led to 600-plus victories including eight in the prestigious Dirt Late Model Dream and four in the World 100.

"Scott didn't necessarily like to tell everybody, but he cared a lot about his people, and was super passionate about what he did," Reddick said. "I don't know many people on Planet Earth who were as dedicated and worked as hard as he did. It was incredible to watch him. It's just something about it that was truly special."

The dirt late models were the perfect transition for Reddick going from the open-wheel cars he was accustomed to on his way to NASCAR. He was used to no contact and then learned how to rub fenders without wrecking. It's also where he first learned about dirty air.

"When I first got in the late model, it felt miles wide compared to a midget or mini sprint, so it's a big learning curve," Reddick said. "I remember I sat fast time at West Virginia Motor Speedway and in the heat, Dennis Erb threw a slider around me. I lost all the air on my nose and went up and hit the wall. I was like, 'What the heck just happened?' So it taught me a lot about air."

Reddick pointed out that dirty air in all forms of racing has gotten more challenging as crews have gotten smarter and cars have gotten faster. But, his time working with Bloomquist is something that is still beneficial even as the 2024 NASCAR regular-season champion.

"I learned a lot about, you know, what I was feeling within my car during those days, and what I needed to adjust on the car to help it be better later in the night," Reddick said. "Scott and his group really helped me kind of understand and unlock that."

"Up until that point, I'd get in the car and drive it, and kind of know what it was doing. I wouldn't necessarily know what I need to make it go faster, identify what was wrong with it. He really helped me understand a lot about race cars."





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