

NEXT UP:

SPRINT CUP

Race: Auto Club 500
Where: Auto Club Speedway; Fontana, Calif.
When: Sunday, 5 p.m. (ET)
TV: Fox
2008 winner: Carl Edwards (right)



NATIONWIDE SERIES

Race: Stater Bros. 300
Where: Auto Club Speedway; Fontana, Calif.
When: Saturday, 7 p.m. (ET)
TV: ESPN2
2008 winner: Tony Stewart

CAMPING WORLD TRUCKS

Race: San Bernardino County 200
Where: Auto Club Speedway; Fontana, Calif.
When: Saturday, 3 p.m. (ET)
TV: Fox
2008 winner: Kyle Busch

NASCAR INSIDER

By RICK MINTER / Cox News Service

*Tears of joy
 fall like rain*



Tony Stewart drove his No. 80 Chevy to victory Saturday at Daytona.

Stewart, Hendrick finally make magic

Multi-car team owner Rick Hendrick tried to get Tony Stewart to drive for him years ago. Finally it happened in Saturday's Nationwide Series race at Daytona.

The pairing produced a win the first time out as Stewart survived a last-lap challenge from Kyle Busch to win the Camping World 300. Busch tried to root Stewart out of the lead, but Stewart somehow held on while Busch dropped to fourth behind runner-up Carl Edwards and Clint Bowyer.

"It was a real special, special win," said Hendrick, who is providing engines and chassis for Stewart's new Sprint Cup team. "We've talked about doing things. I guess in '96 I called him. He said he wasn't ready yet."

But he was on Saturday, and the effort paid off as Hendrick used the blue No. 80 car to promote his 80 automotive franchises.

"It was a great race," Hendrick said. "I didn't have any idea we were going to win it there at the end. I thought we might get wrecked. But it was a good one."

Winless in '08, Kenseth claims Daytona victory

The 2009 Daytona 500 likely will be remembered as a race where a lot of drivers and race teams bounced back from an off year in 2008 as well as a turbulent off-season.

Matt Kenseth, winless in all of 2008, led only one green-flag lap of "The Great American Race," but it was the one that counted. It started raining the next lap and the race was called after 152 of the scheduled 200 laps. It was his first win on a restrictor-plate track, and the first Daytona 500 victory for his car owner Jack Roush. It also was the first victory of any kind in Cup for crew chief Drew Blickensderfer, a Nationwide Series veteran who was calling the shots in NASCAR's elite division for the first time.

Rickard Petty Motorsport, formed in mid-winter from the pieces of Petty Enterprises and Gillett Evernham Motorsports, showed surprising strength late in the 500 as Elliott Sadler, who was fired from his driving job but reinstated to the Petty team after challenging his dismissal in court, came within a half-lap of winning.

Rookie A.J. Allmendinger, bounced about from team to team last year and with only partial sponsorship this time around, raced his Petty entry to a starting spot in the 500, then ran with the leaders all afternoon and finished third, while the team's third driver, Reed Sorenson, was ninth.

Even the pole-sitter, Martin Truex Jr., suffered through an unstable off-season as his old Dale Earnhardt Inc. team merged with Chip Ganassi's team, which led to a move and a large layoff of employees.

'Crying like a baby'

For all the major players, Sunday was an emotional day.

Kenseth, normally one of the most reserved and publicity-dodging drivers in the garage, teared up on national television when the race was called and his biggest career victory sealed.

"It's going to be really wet out here because I'm crying like a baby," he said upon climbing from his car. "I've just got to thank my team and thank the Lord for giving me this opportunity, first of all. ..."

"Just to win a race after our year last year, I didn't know if I was ever going to do that again and then to pull off the Daytona 500, it's just unbelievable. I'm just un-



Matt Kenseth (17) heads into Turn 4 en route to victory (right) in the rain-shortened Daytona 500.

believably thankful and humbled right now for all the opportunities I've had, really."

Likewise, Sadler made no effort to hide his feelings as he discussed with reporters what almost was.

"To be a half a lap short from being the champion of the Daytona 500 is very emotional to me," he said. "Had a chance to win it. Just made one mistake off of Turn 4. I didn't drag the brake enough ... really wanted to go to Victory Lane with my guys. I needed this after the off-season that I've had."

Kenseth, who started the race from 39th place in a back-up car, got the winning push from Kevin Harvick, the same driver he pushed to victory at Daytona in 2007.

A well-deserved victory

Harvick said Kenseth's win will be a popular one among his peers.

"I think Matt's obviously a pretty stand-up person and a great race-car driver, accomplished a lot in this sport," he said. "I think a lot of us can relate to Matt for kind of going out of the spotlight."

"I think he's one of those guys that he can win seven or eight races in a year and never receive any credit. ... He's a champion, Daytona 500 champion. I think a lot of times, some of those things are overlooked."

out several drivers including Kyle Busch, who had the dominant car up to that point.

"I beat him to the yellow line and then he just turned us," Vickers said. "He hit me the first time on the way down, which is fine, we all do that. Then when he came back up he just hooked me in the left rear."

Vickers said that sort of move typically draws a penalty from NASCAR.

"The 38 (Jason Leffler) was penalized five laps [in



Photos by NASCAR

Rookie turns heads

Truck Series

rookie J.R. Fitzpatrick (right) wound up being one of the pleasant surprises of Speedweeks. The former NASCAR Canada Tire Series competitor led 17 laps of Friday's truck race, raced with veterans like Kyle Busch and finished fourth, tops among rookies, after charging through the pack after a late-race tire change.

"It's just unbelievable," Fitzpatrick told reporters afterward. "It's like racer's heaven right here. It's a lot of fun. I still got lots to learn ... I'm going to talk to who I can and learn what I can and go from there."

"He did a fine job," Busch said. "He did exactly what he was supposed to do."



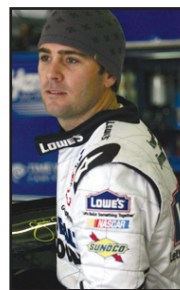
BY THE NUMBERS

17 Career victories for Matt Kenseth, who drives the No. 17 Ford Fusion.

57 Laps led at Auto Club Speedway by David Starr, tops among all Camping World Truck Series drivers.

423

Laps led at Auto Club Speedway by Jimmie Johnson (right), the most of any Sprint Cup driver.



705

Green-flag passes by Robby Gordon at Auto Club Speedway, tops among Cup drivers.

Not a real good way to make friends ...

Dale Earnhardt Jr. is by far the most popular driver on the outside of the catchfence, but those on the inside during the Daytona 500 weren't so happy with him.

Earnhardt Jr., who lost a lap mid-race because of his second miscue on pit road, was racing Brian Vickers to be the first car one lap down and therefore eligible to get back on the lead lap at the next caution. On Lap 125, Vickers moved low to block Earnhardt Jr., and Junior veered below the yellow line and back into the left rear of Vickers' car, setting off a chain-reaction wreck that took

out several drivers including Kyle Busch, who had the dominant car up to that point.

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DALE EARNHARDT JR.

SPRINT CUP STANDINGS

1. Matt Kenseth 190; leader
2. Kevin Harvick 170; behind: -20
3. A.J. Allmendinger 165; behind: -25
4. Clint Bowyer 160; behind: -30
5. Elliott Sadler 160; behind: -30
6. David Ragan 150; behind: -40
7. Tony Stewart 147; behind: -43
8. Michael Waltrip 146; behind: -44
9. Reed Sorenson 138; behind: -52
10. Martin Truex Jr. 135; behind: -55
11. Kurt Busch 134; behind: -56
12. Jeff Gordon 129; behind: -61

Daytona feel-good story: Little guys stand tall amid Goliaths

Jeremy Mayfield and Scott Riggs didn't win the Daytona 500, but just by being in the race, they showed that the old-fashioned entrepreneurial spirit that helped build the sport of NASCAR is alive and well — even in these difficult economic times.

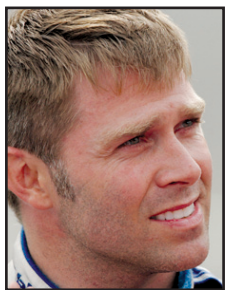
Both drivers overcame the odds that came with driving for under-funded and under-staffed teams and raced their way into "The Great American Race." Riggs finished 25th, while Mayfield lost several laps in the pits and finished 40th.

For both drivers, just making it through Speedweeks was a victory in itself. That was evident in Mayfield's teary eyes as he walked into the media room after win-

ning his 500 starting spot in Thursday's second Gatorade Duel. He drove a Toyota prepared by his own team, an outfit that has been in business just a little over three weeks.

"Nobody realizes how hard this stuff is," said Mayfield, who made the Chase for the Sprint Cup in 2004 and 2005 before seeing his career fortunes spiral downward to the point where he ran just eight races last year. "You just can't imagine the pressure that's on a driver and a team to do what we did today."

He said the setbacks of recent seasons, including being fired by Ray Evernham from the car he put in the Chase two years running, have been a huge motivator for him.



SCOTT RIGGS

"If I ever want to retire as a driver, I want to retire on my own, not be pushed to the wayside."

JEREMY MAYFIELD
 NASCAR driver



"That's what motivates me," he said. "If I ever want to retire as a driver, I want to retire on my own, not be pushed to the wayside. I wanted to come back. I love NASCAR racing more than anything. It's what I know. It's what I've always done." Riggs lost his job when Tony Stewart bought into his old team at the end of last year and brought along Ryan Newman to be the second driver. Riggs then teamed up with crew chief Tommy Baldwin, who lost his job when Bill Davis' old team shut down. Like Mayfield's car, much of the

preparation was done by mechanics let go from other teams with just a few weeks notice.

"We're down here doing back-to-the-roots racing," Riggs said. "We don't have big corporations behind us or teammates or sponsors. We're just working on the cars, doing what we can to get the cars as fast as we can on our own."

"Nobody has a specific job. We're just working together, doing what we can to make it happen."

"We're taking things one day at a time, and one week at a time. Our motto is we

want to under-promise and over-deliver."

Baldwin said he's hoping that sponsors see that he can give them good return on their money, something that should be a good selling point in today's business world.

"I would think in the position we're in — not a lot of overhead, don't owe anybody any money — we're sitting in a good spot," he said. "The door is open for us to capitalize on some partners that want to grow along with us and have a marketing and advertising plan. We're excited about it," he said.