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EDITOR'S PICK

Playoff race reaches boiling point as Hamlin, Logano fight on pit road

By PARKER COTTON parker.cotton@martinsvillebulletin.com

Oct 27, 2019



Denny Hamlin (front) races ahead of Joey Logano (back right) during Sunday's First Data 500 at Martinsville Speedway

Once it became clear that Martin Truex Jr. would not be caught, the rest of his playoff competition got a little desperate for positioning.

Maybe too desperate.

As Truex Jr. racked up 464 laps led at the NASCAR Cup Series First Data 500 on Sunday at Martinsville Speedway, his Joe Gibbs Racing teammate Denny Hamlin drew the ire of Team Penske's Joey Logano on Lap 460. Hamlin's No. 11 Toyota made brief contact with Logano's No. 22 Ford while jockeying for space in the top five, but Logano ended up hitting the wall at Turn 4 and blowing his left rear tire.

Logano confronted Hamlin on pit road immediately after the race's finish—lightly jabbing him in the shoulder and retreating once he had made his point. Hamlin, upset at the gesture, briefly gave chase but had to be restrained by members of his crew and NASCAR officials.

The play-by-play of the altercation varies depending on the source.

“I was frustrated by the situation, obviously. I really wanted to go over there to talk to him and get his side of the story on what happened,” Logano said. “He wasn't as apologetic as I was looking for, and that probably escalated the situation too much. I shouldn't have shoved him. ... But I was frustrated, tempers are high and it's the playoffs.”

Hamlin believed that the conversation was civil before Logano pushed his right shoulder and turned away.

“It was a discussion. I understand coming over and talking, and I was there having a discussion with him and everything was fine,” Hamlin said. “I think he didn’t get me agitated enough so he says something then pokes a little bit and runs away so he can hide behind his guys. He’s just not that tough. He won’t see you face-to-face.”

Logano, running fourth at the time of the contact, dropped out of the top 10 but eventually recovered to place eighth. Hamlin, meanwhile, placed fourth.

Given the juncture of the race, Logano was displeased with Hamlin’s tactic to get ahead.

“I don’t think it was necessary. There were plenty of laps to go,” Logano said. “If you’re racing for the win and come off the last corner, all right, I get it, but I just don’t understand the situation (there).”

Hamlin, predictably, defended the contact as nothing out of the ordinary.

“The feeling was we got together and he cut a tire, which is very unfortunate for him, but it was not malicious by any means,” Hamlin said. “It just happened. I tried to get tight, I got tight off the corner, we made contact. It was unfortunate, but when you’re in tight confines, there’s going to be some contact here and there.”

When the dust settled, Hamlin finished the evening sitting second in the playoff points race—20 points behind Truex Jr., seven ahead of Kyle Busch and 10 ahead of Logano.

While Truex Jr. celebrated his seventh win of the season, team owner Joe Gibbs was peppered with questions about Hamlin’s actions.

“There’s always so much at stake here,” Gibbs said. “I’m not sure of everything that happened. I’ll leave that up to the drivers. Martinsville tends to bring that out—two guys going after it and had a lot of passion. One of those things that can happen in our sport.”

Much earlier in the day, Hamlin benefited from his pole position and led the race’s first 30 laps. Truex Jr. overtook him on Lap 31 en route to a Stage 1 victory.

Elsewhere in the playoff chase, Ryan Blaney took fifth, Kevin Harvick seventh, Kyle Larson ninth and Busch 14th.

Chase Elliott, though, had the most disappointing weekend.

He first suffered a blown engine during Saturday's practice round, which required a replacement and a subsequent penalty to start at the back of the field on Sunday. Then, on Lap 183, he broke an axle during a pit stop and he never recovered.

"Just disappointing for a day like that," he said. "We know better, and we can do better that that."

Elliott had methodically worked his way up through the race, reaching 19th by the 25th lap and ending the first stage in eighth place. He was running fifth at the time of the axle trouble.

Once it was repaired, he rejoined the race more than 50 laps behind the leaders. With Sunday's result, he now faces must-win situations at Texas and Phoenix in order to be part of the final four at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

"That is certainly the case now," he said. "We do have to win."

He sits eighth in the playoff points, 44 points behind Logano in fourth.

Busch started 13th and eventually made his way as high as fifth. His race was derailed, however, when he got turned around after taking a nudge from Aric Almirola on Lap 363. Busch ended up back in the mid-teens, while Almirola's day was done after sustaining heavy damage.

The wreck also dinged up Jimmie Johnson, Ryan Preece and Matt DiBenedetto's vehicles, but only Johnson was forced to exit. Busch ended up taking 14th.

Larson led laps 254-259 before ceding the lead back to Truex Jr. right before Stage 2 ended. Truex Jr. led the rest of the way with little trouble.

"This is my second-best finish at Martinsville, so I'm happy with that," Larson said. "We were able to steal some stage points as well, so we probably over-achieved for how we usually run at Martinsville."

At the finish line, though, it was Truex Jr. smiling the most.

"We adjusted early on and it came to life, and that was a lot of fun," Truex Jr. said. "I'm just proud of everybody giving me a race car like that and being able to put it all together today when it counted."

Parker Cotton is a sports reporter at the Martinsville Bulletin and Danville Register & Bee. You can reach him at (276) 638-8801 ext. 215. Follow @ByParkerCotton.

Relive the First Data 500 at Martinsville in words and images



Parker Cotton

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EDITOR'S PICK

NASCAR's busiest man: Chastain proving himself on every Series

By Parker Cotton parker.cotton@martinsvillebulletin.com
Oct 26, 2019



Ross Chastain of Niece Motorsports signs autographs for fans on Friday at Martinsville Speedway.

Photos by Mike Paris/martinsville bulletin

Somewhere deep down in the NASCAR rule book is the clause that turned Ross Chastain's season around.

Colloquially, Chastain is referred to as "The Busiest Driver in NASCAR," and for good reason.

In 2019, he committed to running full seasons across each of NASCAR's three tiers—the Monster Energy Cup Series, Xfinity Series and Gander Outdoors Truck Series—all for the sake of improving as a driver.

"I just want to get better. That's the honest truth," he said Friday in anticipation of the NASCAR Hall of Fame 200 and First Data 500 at Martinsville Speedway this weekend. "Laps on these race tracks, on the weekend that you're racing in real race cars, it's the absolute best thing you can do."

Chastain started this season earning points in the Xfinity Series, but midway through the year he learned that sponsorship was running thin for his cars in that tier—the No. 4 for Johnny Davis Motorsports and the No. 10 for Kaulig Racing.

He was faced with a decision: Finish what he started in Xfinity and run those races, or forgo those points and declare instead for points in the truck series with Niece Motorsports, where he could be more competitive.

"It gives you a shot with a company that can go win a championship," he said. "I've got to take it."

Chastain received mixed reviews about his decision, but from a racing standpoint, it appears as though he's made a smart move.

Entering Saturday's race, Chastain had posted eight finishes in the top 10 since declaring points in the truck series. He's also won twice — at Gateway and Pocono Raceways — not including a win he had rescinded at Iowa because of a technical penalty.

Overall this year, in his No. 45 Chevy Silverado, Chastain has three wins and 16 top-10 finishes, making him not only the busiest driver, but also one of the most consistent.

He came into Saturday's NASCAR Hall of Fame 200 as one of the final six members of the Gander Outdoors Truck Series playoffs and with his eyes set on hopefully being in the last four at Homestead on Nov. 15.

Of course, Chastain also plans on racing in the Cup Series at Texas and Phoenix before then.

In order to keep his body in racing shape, Chastain keeps a fairly rigorous but regular workout schedule.

“I do things that are specific to the race cars—a lot of heat training, a lot of cardio,” he said. “I just try to adapt to what I need to be the best at. It's not big muscles, it's not strength. It's key items and key muscles.”

In addition to a lot of time on a road bike to fulfill his cardio requirements, Chastain said he works to strengthen his right leg and left shoulder. Because the brakes in his vehicles require so much more force, his left braking leg is much stronger. And because he makes almost exclusively left turns, his right turning shoulder is taxed much more frequently.

“A lot of what I do is to even things out,” he said.

On weekends with multiple races, Chastain relies on watermelon to stay hydrated—a trick he undoubtedly picked up as a kid growing up in a family of watermelon growers in Alva, Fla. The rotund fruits are 92 percent water, helping him replenish what his body loses through sweat.

“I eat at least one a week,” he said. “I genuinely do believe in it.”

On a farm that produced 400 acres of watermelon, Chastain and his family got to know people in all corners of the watermelon industry. They became some of his earliest sponsors, and the watermelon growers of a handful of states remain as backers today.

“The industry as a whole kind of supported me,” he said.

His agricultural background doesn't end there, though. After Martinsville, Chastain isn't traveling with his team to Texas for the next race. He'll instead fly to Indianapolis for the yearly Future Farmers of America convention.

“I'm just getting into it. This will be my first trip to their annual conference,” he said. “They didn't have it in our area when I was growing up. I did 4-H and showed cows, but I'm going to learn a lot about it on Wednesday.”

Then he'll fly to Texas on Thursday, down some watermelon and race in the AAA Texas 500 on Saturday.

The title of The Busiest Driver in NASCAR is safe for another day.

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EDITOR'S PICK

Win on Sunday, buy on Monday: Sponsorship plays increasingly vital role at all levels of racing

From the Everything you need to know about the next 2 days of racing at Martinsville Speedway series

By Parker Cotton parker.cotton

[@martinsvillebulletin.com](https://twitter.com/martinsvillebulletin)

Oct 23, 2019



Austin Hill is scheduled to appear in the Gander Outdoors Truck Series NASCAR Hall of Fame 200 on Saturday at Mar

At every race track in the country, the Stars and Stripes of the United States fly among flags pledging allegiance to Ford, Mobil 1 and Budweiser, among many others.

Along with the waving banners, corporate names are proudly displayed on T-shirts, toolboxes, hats and trailers—to say nothing of the vehicles that make their way around the track.

The prominence of such advertising and sponsorship can be overwhelming to the casual viewer, but for diehard racing fans, these decals and emblems represent the livelihood of their favorite sport.

Like every other professional sport, racing is a performance-based industry. Unlike every other pro sport, the winnings from performing well commonly go back into the operating budget.

“The purse money in any form of motorsport will never be enough to cover the bill to go racing every weekend,” said Kate Fegley, who runs K1 Marketing in Mooresville, N.C., and counts NASCAR Cup and Xfinity Series team Rick Ware Racing as her primary client this year.

Racing teams need sponsorship agreements to function. Without them, it becomes far more difficult to improve and climb the ranks of an expensive sport. In drastic cases, racing teams can fold entirely if they don't acquire enough financial backing.

But sponsorships are becoming increasingly difficult to come by at every level of racing, and drivers everywhere are feeling the purse strings tighten.

Not only are drivers competing against fellow racers on the track, they are competing against their peers for sponsors off the track. With so many drivers at so many levels, there is only so much money to go around.

“Trying to find sponsorship is the toughest thing in racing,” said Austin Hill, a driver currently in the NASCAR Gander Outdoors Truck Series playoffs. “The actual racing part—you being behind the wheel and driving—is so much easier than it is to talk a big sponsor into sponsoring you and getting behind your brand and backing you, especially when there's so many racers trying to make it in the series.”

Building a planA seemingly obvious part of looking for sponsorships is knowing where to look and approaching the right companies.

But not all businesses are well suited to be racing partners for reasons ranging from lack of available funds to a lack of understanding their own target audience.

Some, on the other hand, fit perfectly.

“When you think about motorsports sponsors, you think about beer, cigarettes and auto parts, so we fell into one of those categories,” said Mike Paris, the motorsports marketing manager at Advance Auto Parts from 1992-2017.

Paris said that drivers and teams who could prove a partnership would enhance Advance's visibility, produce positive feedback or boost product sales had the best shot at earning the company's backing.

To succeed today, Paris believes drivers need to be respectful and grounded in reality when asking for support.

“They’ve got to look at a sponsor as a partner and not a bank,” he said.

It also helps if drivers are uncontroversial racers who have good relationships with the media and racing’s governing bodies so that they can make appearances on radio shows and at track events.

“They need to be everywhere and accessible,” Paris said. “A lot of guys will think, ‘I’ve got to race, I don’t have time for that.’ Well, that’s part of it. ... You have to build it into your plan.”

At some of racing’s lower levels, drivers often partner with companies they already do business with—auto parts dealers and the like. Paris added that sometimes the best situation, however, is just to find a businessperson who enjoys racing. But in those cases, they may not have a way to precisely determine their return on investment.

“The guy who’s got his own little backhoe service or small company of some type, he’s got to feel good about it,” said Peyton Sellers, a Danville-based late model racer. “He’s got to understand it may not be a direct return on it, but you’re helping somebody that needs some help, and you enjoy going to watch these cars go around in circles.”

Getting socialThe rise of social media has allowed racing fans to keep up with a driver’s life, travels, family and races without having to leave their homes.

NASCAR, as one example, has seen attendance and television ratings dip over the past decade, but social media impressions have soared, according to Forbes. The way fans enjoy racing now is vastly different from just a few years ago.

In addition to showing his vehicle at dealerships and signing autographs, ARCA racer Andy Seuss said he now finds himself hosting Facebook Live events to interact with fans and show off his sponsors.

“Growing up, if you wanted a T-shirt of your favorite driver, you had to go to the track. You couldn’t just go to Walmart or order it online,” Seuss said. “If you wanted to talk racing, you went to the track. I don’t know that popularity is down as much as the way we used to view it is down. You don’t have to go to the race track (anymore).”

To that end, Fegley said companies prioritize a strong social media presence for their sponsored drivers. This also helps showcase their own brands and keep the sport relevant with a younger audience.

Although social media could be blamed for putting a dent in racing's attendance, those same digital channels can also be used as a means to secure sponsorship.

Paris said it's not uncommon for racers to tag brands and businesses they do business with in social content in hopes of catching their eye.

"It is a great and inexpensive way to be noticed by some of these larger companies and start a conversation," Paris said. "Probably better than a cold call."

'Start with a large fortune'The joke runs through all levels of racing, but there is a painful twinge of truth to it.

"How do you make a small fortune in racing?" Paris asks. "Start with a large fortune."

Racing has never been mistaken as a get-rich-quick sport. In fact, it helps if you're already rich.

These partnerships are more vital at the lower levels of racing, where a lack of sponsorship can mean the difference between winning and not racing at all.

“The local guy is the most thankful (for sponsors) because that \$2,000 somebody gave him would have been straight out of his pocket or he doesn’t race,” said David Jessey, former vice president of sales and marketing for Evernham Motorsports.

The money earned from sponsorship helps ensure that drivers have top-notch cars and access to equipment that can improve performance—like a pull-down rig, chassis dyno or wind tunnel.

“The more sponsorship you have, the more attention to detail you can have—whether it’s another person on the crew or another part,” Seuss said. “It exponentially gets you better as you have a little bit more money to try to focus on that weekend.”

Added Sellers: “With more sponsorship, with more dollars, your cars go faster. You can get better motors, you can get better chassis, you can get better people.”

Sponsorship money also goes toward paying for the logistics of operating a racing team.

“Tires are number one, engines are number two, travel is number three, probably,” said Sellers, listing his team’s biggest expenses. “We don’t think about it, but you pay insurance and tags, truck and trailer wear and tear, hotel rooms. Our travel is a very big part of the budget.”

The funds earned from sponsorship is not fun money. Almost every dollar has a purpose, and there are only so many viable sources of that cash.

“If an owner likes you, sometimes ... they’re fine with pitching in a little bit,” said Hill, the Gander Outdoors Truck Series driver, “but they’re also not going to go broke doing it.”

Words to live byAt the crux of motorsports sponsorship is the premise of brand loyalty on the part of the fans.

Racing fans are historically fiercely loyal to their favorite drivers and the brands they represent, which has spawned a saying in the racing community: “Win on Sunday, buy on Monday.”

The saying suggests that if a driver performs well on race day, his fans will support the brands that support him the next day.

“That’s why Ford, Chevy and Toyota have invested millions and millions of dollars into our sport,” Fegley said.

All other sorts of businesses have benefited from the same mantra. If they can see the return on their investment, they are more likely to continue sponsoring drivers.

Ultimately, sponsors keep drivers on the track, fans become loyal to drivers and sponsors find new customers in fans.

If one segment falls out of line, the whole industry will suffer in one way or another.

“It’s twofold: Without sponsors, you wouldn’t be able to race, and without the fans we wouldn’t be able to get the sponsors,” Fegley said. “Without them, we literally would not exist as a sport.”

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Austin Hill during the Buckle Up In Your Truck 225 at Kentucky Motor Speedway on July 11 in Sparta, Kentucky.

HRE / Daylon Barr Photography

Turn on the television and there's Peyton Sellers setting up a tent in the Danville Toyota parking lot a week in advance of a Black Friday sale.

Next, he's reading to elementary school children about an optional moonroof on a new Corolla model.

Then he's in a deer blind, scaring away the targets while explaining how a powertrain warranty works.

Sellers doesn't fancy himself as much of an actor, but he estimates that he's made 20-25 of these charming and funny 30-second TV commercials as part of his sponsorship agreement with Danville Toyota.

As a late model race car driver, partnerships like these are crucial for Sellers to continue to race his orange and white 2019 Toyota Camry.

"It takes a lot of money to make these cars go around," said Sellers, who placed sixth at the ValleyStar Credit Union 300 at Martinsville Speedway earlier this month. "We rely on a lot of volunteer labor and guys working hard, but at the end of the day, it takes a lot of money to buy motors and parts and pieces."

In addition to Danville Toyota, Sellers also has a long-running relationship with Clarence's Steakhouse in Ridgeway.

“Racing is a big part of our community,” said Allen Pickural, son of Clarence Pickural, the restaurant’s owner. “It’s a conversation piece. Everybody always wants to know how we did or how we’re doing. Bottom line, it’s the advertisement and the publicity, and (Sellers is) an excellent PR guy.”

These local partnerships are vital for drivers at all levels to keep their racing dreams alive. They are also necessary for the future of their sport as a whole.

“It’s a domino effect. If we can’t be there, there’s no show for the fans to come watch,” said Mark Wertz, a late model racer based in Hampton. “Then there’s no reason for a race track, and then you slowly kill the whole sport.”

Wertz, an accomplished racer with more than 30 years of experience, has seen the landscape of sponsorship shift over time.

“The local, small-town companies that used to get into advertising for that local short track have pretty much been choked out of existence,” Wertz said, “and now the big companies are in, so we’ve had to change our approach to how we go after sponsorships.”

Wertz races throughout Virginia and the Carolinas and receives a portion of the advertising budget set aside by local Dunkin Donuts franchisees in those locations. In exchange, he puts the company’s logo on his No. 55 Chevrolet and he makes sure that his fans interact with the Dunkin brand through social media.

“You have to become an ambassador for that company,” he said. “It has to become a partnership. It can’t just be one-sided.”

When driving in the lower levels and as a teenager, NASCAR Whelen Southern Modified Tour driver Andy Seuss agreed to show his car and sign autographs at amusement parks across his home state of New Hampshire—anything to help drum up more interest in sponsorship.

Back then and still true today, Seuss said not all sponsors request to have their name on the car. Rather, they ask for help entertaining guests.

“For people that have never been to a race track, simply listening to the headset is a big deal,” he said. “Same for standing on top of the trailer or being inside the trailer. It’s all important and about keeping people interested in our sport.”

Seuss started in go-karts, but he now also runs and races for an ARCA team for Our Motorsports. For Seuss, finding and appealing sponsors has become something of a family affair.

Bobbi Seuss, Andy’s mother, sometimes spends at least a month nurturing sponsorship leads for her son. She once landed a sponsorship with a Manchester, N.H., urologist office that paid to have a sticker on the back of the car that read: “Protect Your Family Jewels.”

“And I got \$10,000 out of that, and thought I hit the jackpot,” she said. “You do have to get creative.”

Shelly Seuss, Andy’s younger sister, estimates that she spends at least 20 hours every non-race week managing Andy’s social media accounts and merchandise orders on top of running her own hair salon in the Mooresville, N.C., area. Andy and his sponsors prioritize fan engagement, so Shelly strives to ensure her brother has a strong social media presence.

“I don’t think anybody ever doesn’t need (the help), to be honest, especially in today’s world,” Shelly said of her role in her brother’s racing career. “You have all these series, and right now everybody is fighting for sponsorships because at the end of the day, that sponsorship is what continues the sport. Everybody could take all the help they could get.”

Austin Hill, who will be in Saturday’s Gander Outdoors Truck Series NASCAR Hall of Fame 200 at Martinsville Speedway, knows better than most how crucial sponsorships can be to advancing a racing career.

Bryan Hill helped his son secure a sponsorship with United Rentals because he worked with the company so often with his welding and steel construction businesses.

Early in his career, Austin used that money to run about 10 races a year. He usually placed in the mid-teens—a result of equipment he couldn't really afford to improve.

In 2018 with Young's Motorsports, Hill had a little more sponsorship money and saw his performance improve slightly with marginally better equipment.

This year, Hill has signed on to drive the No. 16 Toyota Tundra for Hattori Racing Enterprises. With an upgraded sponsorship situation, he has enjoyed the best season of his career.

He's had three wins and six top-five finishes this year, and he's currently in the final six spots of the GOTS playoffs.

“The sponsorship fell in line perfectly for us this year,” Hill said. “Moving over to HRE, I've done nothing different as a driver. I'm just in that much better of equipment, and I'm able to go show what I can do with this good of equipment.”

Raw talent won't lead Hill to where he really wants to be, though. He would love to be in the NASCAR Cup Series or Xfinity level. But he may never move up without proper financial backing.

“Some people are just stuck where they're at,” he said.

A common thread among all racers, regardless of sponsorship status, is that they all approach the process of searching the same way. One must be able to create personal relationships with those from whom they ask for money. And a driver must have realistic expectations when pursuing new backers.

Some sponsors could be good for a few thousand dollars a race or only a few hundred.

“You’ve got to do research going into it and know what the limits are,” Sellers said. “In (some cases), you’re a lot better off getting 10 \$200 sponsors than you are (with) one \$2,000 sponsor because that way you’re more diverse. It’s a little bit more of a headache to make sure the car looks good and prepared and having to answer to different sponsors, but by the same token, if you lose one, it’s not as detrimental.”

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