

# Trip to Talladega comes at a bad time for NASCAR

After two bizarre Cup Series races at Bristol and Texas, a couple of NASCAR's more problematic tracks, this coming Sunday will be a good time for drivers to settle down and race hard in a more sensible event, right?

Wait, what? They're going where? Talladega!

Yep, that's right. After weeks of tire failures, fires erupting in the pits and on the track, officiating that forced NASCAR to catch up with post-race penalties announced Tuesday, collisions that had drivers issuing thinly veiled threats (if they were veiled at all) — after all that, America's top professional stock car racing series heads to a track famous for its “big one” crashes that wad up cars by the gaggle.

This comes in the midst of the series playoff format that will have 12 playoff drivers with one priority — preserving their best opportunity to advance to the next round — while another 25 gun for victory with little if any care about how the championship-eligible dozen fare.

For the record, let's look at the playoff circumstances, with the upcoming races at Talladega Superspeedway and then at Charlotte Motor Speedway's twisting “Roval” course to finish the round that cuts the title-eligible field from 12 to eight.

The Texas race — an event with 16 caution periods that consumed 91 of the 334 laps — left Joey Logano atop the points, (You can see the full order in the column's accompanying statistics).

None of the 12 playoff drivers has an iron grip on a top-eight position. Things really get touchy from about fifth on back.

Denny Hamlin, who seems to have become racing's perpetually angry man, sits in fifth spot, 15 points clear of ninth. Then come regular-season champion Chase Elliott and Daniel Suarez, each with an 11-point margin. Chase Briscoe has a seven-point gap.

Trying to break back into the top eight are Austin Cindric, William Byron (after a points penalty for roughing up Hamlin under caution at Texas), Christopher Bell and Alex Bowman. In NASCAR's format, a race victory locks a playoff driver into the next round. Bell and Bowman are far enough behind that either will likely have to win at Talladega or Charlotte to survive the next elimination.

And there's the rub. Can any of the 12 championship-eligible drivers get to victory lane?

All four playoff events so far have been won by the championship-ineligible. It's been an unpredictable season — 19 winners in the 30 events to date, with another half dozen or so drivers sniffing around for a victory.

At this juncture, Elliott is the playoff driver with the best prospects for a win — not at Talladega, but on the Roval, where he has won two of the four Cup races on the twisting 2.28-mile course.

Least predictable of the tracks is Talladega. Cars dance around each other, often three wide, bound together in high-speed packs created by their aerodynamic draft.

A race there in April saw contenders eliminated in a mid-race, nine-car crash. Ross Chastain did not lead until the final lap. As cars wrecked around him, he won by a tenth of a second.

That kind of mayhem — typical at the 2.66-mile Talladega track since it opened for business in 1969 — has drawn increased concern this year. The new-in-2022 Next Gen car is more rigid than past NASCAR racers, they all say. When there's a crash, the impact on the driver is worse.

Tire failures triggered several unavoidable crashes at Texas. Goodyear's Greg Stucker, looking weary, told reporters some teams ignore the tire company's air-pressure recommendations, asking more of the tire than it's designed to deliver.

Tires are, of course, a crucial part of racing's speed-safety balance. Fans and teams don't want tires to fail, but clamor for them to “degrade,” which means wearing down and delivering diminishing traction — calling for more driver skill and putting a premium on tire-change timing.

Goodyear wants to show up with the perfect tire. The company could bring a harder compound to the track, virtually eliminating blowouts, but teams and fans would grumble that such a tire had nowhere near the longed-for degradation.

Speaking of cars crashing and drivers getting hurt, a couple of Texas examples.

Kevin Harvick, a 46-year-old former champion, has been among the most critical of the Next Gen car. He hit the wall hard after a tire failure. His team patched the damage and he soldiered on to a top-10 finish. Monday, he tweeted that he was undergoing therapy for “an extremely sore back,” pointing out once again that “the car has issues that need to be addressed.”

Cody Ware, 26 and in his first full-time Cup season, smacked the outside wall hard, slid across the track and into the pits, where his car barely missed a pit wall opening that would have hard-stopped the car to potentially disastrous effect. Instead, he slammed the wall and slid along a stretch of it. Bad, but could've been much worse.

Ware tweeted Tuesday afternoon that he was getting treated for ligament damage “and a few other things.” He may be on crutches at Talladega, he said, but he plans to race there.

An older driver with an aching back. A younger one willing to hobble to his car on crutches and climb in to race at a track famous for spectacular crashes.

Spectacular — sure, but just because the Cup Series has gone almost 22 seasons since a driver was killed in one of those crashes, the sport is not all fun and games.

Talladega on Sunday and five more races after that this season. Be careful, drivers. The rest of us will keep our fingers crossed.

# NASCAR shows a willingness to evolve by scheduling street race in Chicago

NASCAR's era of change continued this week with the announcement that, as expected, the 2023 schedule will include a race on a street course in Chicago.

With city officials and assorted luminaries on hand, the stock car racing series confirmed what had been perhaps its worst-kept secret in decades.

Talked about for months as a likelihood, the race was reported as a go by *The Athletic*, reliable as usual, earlier this month. A comment from driver Bubba Wallace extolling the event had been posted online, then taken down.

By the time official word came that the sanctioning body would hold a presser in Chicago Tuesday, most of those who follow the series closely were drumming their fingers.

The Cup Series race, first ever on a street course for NASCAR's top tour, is set for July 2 next year. It will share the weekend with the IMSA, a road-racing sanctioning body also owned and operated by NASCAR.

The proposed 2.2-mile course is a skewed figure eight with 12 turns, seven of them right angles. It runs through well-known parts of the city — along Lake Michigan, around Grant Park, swinging by Soldier Field, where the Chicago Bears play.

Besides the most obvious break from past practice — the willingness to venture onto a street course — this race is emblematic of a whole new approach that NASCAR takes toward its schedule.

Once just short of death and taxes in terms of predictability, the NASCAR schedule is now downright mercurial.

Races that have been decades-long Cup-schedule fixtures get plopped into different slots. Daytona Speedway's second race has been moved from Independence Day weekend to late August. Richmond Raceway this year relinquishes its weekend-after-Labor-Day slot, a tradition dating back to the 1960s, for a mid-August race.

More road courses have appeared on the schedule, and NASCAR has reached deep into its past for events — a dirt-surface points race on the Bristol half mile, an exhibition event on a quarter-mile stadium track built inside the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

Meanwhile, some tracks disappear from the Cup Series itinerary. Old familiar faces like the tracks in Rockingham and Wilkesboro, N.C., are long gone.

Likewise, NASCAR's previous effort to charm the Chicago sporting populace — Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet, Ill., about 45 miles to the southwest from the downtown street course — has been abandoned by the Cup Series after once-a-year stops from 2001 through 2019.

Wallace, the Cup Series' only Black full-time driver, was on hand as part of the presenting panel at Tuesday's Chicago media event. He reckoned the in-city venue will help the sport continue to broaden its appeal.

The next Bubba Wallace, he said, could be "sitting in the stands, just like I was, and say, 'Hey, I want to do this someday. And I want to be better.'"

"And I'm going to tell 'em, 'Good luck.'"

Speaking of Wallace, he had perhaps his best all-around race of the year last Sunday on the one-mile New Hampshire Motor Speedway, finishing third behind Christopher Bell and Chase Elliott.

Bell's victory made him the 14th different Cup Series winning driver this season and added fuel to the notion that 2022 could produce more than 16 regular-season winners.

If that happens, at least one winner will be crowded out of the 16-driver playoffs.

The New Hampshire race was the 20th of the season, leaving six more events before the 10-race playoff run begins.

Among those yet to make it to victory lane but showing potential to do so are Wallace, Ryan Blaney, Martin Truex Jr., Kevin Harvick, Aric Almirola, Austin Dillon, Michael McDowell, Ricky Stenhouse Jr., Brad Keselowski.

In some seasons, a potential-winners list like that might have seemed too generous, but not in 2022. NASCAR's Next Gen car, introduced this year, has given some teams a better footing, thanks to rules designed to blunt the advantages that accrue to big-budget teams.

So it is that upcoming races could be the place to win for a driver who likes the track rather than a team that can outspend the others.

For instance, at Pocono Raceway, the one-of-a-kind triangular track where the Cup cars race this coming Sunday, Harvick's 15 top-five finishes put him at the top of that category. He has won there in the past, as have Blaney, Keselowski and Truex.

When the tour comes to Richmond Raceway for its Aug. 14 race, Truex has to be among the favorites, having won three of the last six Cup races there. Harvick has three wins and 16 top-five finishes, Keselowski two wins and six top-five finishes.

Those are the drivers most likely to shoulder their way into the playoffs with a win — and shoulder somebody else out.

In a year marked by all manner of change, that list of potential winners-still-to-come could be far too limited.

# News of Coy Gibbs' death casts a somber shadow on NASCAR finale

On a day that veered away from on-track competition and toward the bonds that unite the NASCAR community, [Joey Logano laid claim to the sport's biggest prize.](#)

Logano drove his Ford to a dominant victory in Sunday's Cup Series season finale, leaving the other three remaining championship contenders behind.

His race was the kind of flawless driver-and-team finale for which NASCAR's playoff format is designed, and his victory will be remembered that way as long as stock car racing championships are won and lost.

On this day, however, the champion's exuberance shared emotional space with sobering news — the death of another champion team's family member.

[Only a few minutes before the start of the race at Phoenix Raceway](#), word came of the [overnight death of 49-year-old Coy Gibbs](#), son of 81-year-old team owner Joe Gibbs and father of four, including Ty Gibbs, the young driver who only the day before won the second-tier Xfinity Series championship.

Tears were shed during the brilliant trumpeting of "The Star-Spangled Banner." NBC's race broadcast team members knew Coy, who was a co-owner of his family's racing organization. They did their best to convey their own shocked grief, as well as the impact felt by the Gibbs family and team — including Christopher Bell, one of the four drivers contending for the title.

Then it was time to race. The four championship-eligible drivers — Bell, Logano, Ross Chastain and Chase Elliott — strapped in along with 32 other drivers and took the green flag for the final time in 2022.

Once the race was underway, Logano was in control. Having qualified fastest, he led the field to the green flag. Overall, he was in front for 187 of the event's 312 laps. The first time he lost the lead was during a caution period when he took four fresh tires on a pit stop while one team took just two and another didn't pit at all.

On the restart, the lead pack fanned out and Logano found space in the center of a five-wide onslaught through the first turn. He had cleared the other four by the time the field straightened out of the backstretch. Point made.

Besides leading the race most of the way, including the final 30 laps, Logano stayed ahead of the other three championship-eligible drivers for all but a single lap.

While Logano cruised, the other three had their problems. Elliot spun and tagged the inside barrier after crossing fenders with Chastain. Bell and Chastain both had slow pit stops when tire changers had trouble.

Maybe one or more of the contending trio could have made a run at Logano if everything had gone well. In the closing laps Chastain's Chevrolet was marginally faster. But Chastain couldn't sustain that advantage enough to threaten. He finished third behind Logano and Logano's teammate, Ryan Blaney.

This was Logano's 31st career win, his fourth this season. The 2022 championship is the second in the 32-year-old's 14 full seasons of Cup Series racing. Both of those titles — this year and 2018 — have come since he signed up to drive for super-owner Roger Penske in 2013.

And, in the way so many NASCAR lives are woven together, Logano's career includes a chapter in the history of the Gibbs racing operation.

Joe Gibbs and his two sons, J.D. and Coy — both of whom have died — latched onto Logano in 2008. Still a teenager, Logano was a New England phenom so successful in lower-ranked racing series that he had been tagged with the nickname "Sliced Bread," as in the best thing since.

The Gibbs-Logano partnership lasted through the 2012 season. It began with the teen superstar setting NASCAR youngest-ever-winner records in multiple series, including the top Cup series.

But that propitious start fizzled. Logano won just two Cup races in four full seasons for Gibbs, and some observers wondered if he was good enough to deserve Penske's decision to pick him up when Gibbs let him go.

Logano has validated Penske's decision spectacularly. He has won in every Cup season with Penske, with as many as six victories in 2015. And now, in a year in which NASCAR introduced a radically different car and rules that made it easier for more teams to contend for victory, Logano mastered the challenge and won four times, including the race that mattered most.

The fresh-faced kid behind the wheel is all grown up now, husband of childhood sweetheart Brittany Baca, father of three. On the track, he's considered an old hand. Of the four drivers who made it through the playoff eliminations, he is the oldest — Larson is 30, Bell 27, Elliott 26.

Logano has learned how hard it is for a driver to do what it takes to have a chance to win a championship — and then to close the deal in the season finale.

His jubilation after the race overflowed. He praised his team profusely. He spoke of how much his family's joy means as he held his oldest child, 4-year-old Hudson, in his arms.

And, too, he interrupted his celebration to reflect momentarily upon the day's deep sadness — the death of Coy Gibbs, who had dabbled as a driver in half a dozen minor series himself, and who had been a crucial figure with the team that first brought Logano to the top of the sport. The new champion's grief showed — not for long, but unmistakably.



That's the NASCAR way. As fierce and sometimes bruising as the on-track rivalries can be, stock car racing's top series is one big traveling family. Its bonds remain unbroken.