

The Racing Reporter

By Gerald Hodges

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Third race is a charmer for Sterling Marlin

LAS VEGAS, Nev.—Twice this season, it appeared Sterling Marlin was headed to Victory Lane, but each time something happened to keep him from taking the checkered flag.

But that was before Sunday's UAW-Daimler Chrysler 500 at Las Vegas.

First, at Daytona, when he was leading the race, NASCAR put out the red flag. During the race, Marlin got out of his No. 40 Coors Dodge and pulled on the right front fender. NASCAR immediately sent him to the rear of the field for working on his car.

Last week at Rockingham, he was leading the race when there was a wreck with seven laps to go. Instead of putting out another red flag, NASCAR used a yellow instead. Matt Kenseth beat Marlin back to the finish line, and after the race finished under yellow, Marlin came in second. But in a strange turnaround, NASCAR officials blew a call that favored Marlin this past Sunday at Las Vegas.

Marlin was bumped from behind by Jerry Nadeau as he prepared to enter pit road for a regular green flag pit stop. He slipped and spun, but was able to gain control. Since he was near the entrance to pit road, he shoved it into a lower gear and sped towards his pit.

Too fast, said NASCAR.

Even though NASCAR was aware that Marlin exceeded the pit road speed, they did nothing. Officials later announced that the word to penalize Marlin by holding him in his pit area was not relayed from NASCAR officials in the tower to those near Marlin's pit again in time.

NASCAR's explanation was if a driver isn't penalized for speeding on pit road while stopped in his pit, then he is home free. NASCAR decisions regarding red flags worked against Marlin at Daytona and Rockingham, but this time the decision to wave off the pit road penalty helped preserve his win.

Marlin's team took on four tires on his final pit stop, passed Jeremy Mayfield for the lead on Lap 251 and held on after a restart with eight laps to go to get his first victory of the 2002 season after two frustrating weeks to open the year.

Finishing order: 1. Sterling Marlin, 2. Jeremy Mayfield, 3. Mark

Martin, 4. Ryan Newman, 5. Tony Stewart, 6. Jimmie Johnson, 7. Dale Jarrett, 8. Bill Elliott, 9. Jeff Burton, 10. Jimmy Spencer, 11. Rusty Wallace, 12. Bobby Labonte, 13. Ricky Rudd, 14. Matt Kenseth, 15. Jerry Nadeau, 16. Dale Earnhardt Jr., 17. Jeff Gordon, 18. Dave Blaney, 19. Joe Nemechek, 20. Clint Bunch, 21. Ward Burton, 22. Michael Waltrip, 23. Buckshot Jones, 24. Hut Stricklin, 25. Kevin Harvick, 26. Ken Schrader, 27. Kenny Wallace, 28. Eddie Sadler, 29. Todd Bodine, 30. Kyle Petty, 31. Ricky Craven, 32. Johnny Benson, 33. Jeff Green, 34. Mike Skinner, 35. Brett Bodine, 36. John Andretti, 37. Robby Gordon, 38. Terry Labonte, 39. Stacy Compton, 40. Rick Mast, 41. Casey Atwood, 42. Shawna Robinson, 43. Bobby Hamilton.

Marlin leads Winston Cup Points

Top-10 points leaders after 3 of 36 events: 1. Marlin-507, 2. Newman-432, 3. J. Burton-420, 4. Martin-415, 5. W. Burton-414, 6. Elliott-407, 7. J. Gordon-401, 8. Bush-400, 9. Wallace-381, 10. Kenseth-375.

Burton dominates Las Vegas Busch race

LAS VEGAS, Nev.—Winston Cup driver Jeff Burton dominated Saturday's Sam's Town 300 in the No. 9 Gain Force at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. Burton led 149 of the 200 laps. Finishing order: 1. Jeff Burton, 2. Michael Waltrip, 3. Johnny Sauter, 4. Kevin LePage, 5. Jeff Green, 6. Jack Sprague, 7. Randy LaJoie, 8. Kenny Wallace, 9. Greg Biffle, 10. Stacy Compton, 11. Bobby Hamilton Jr., 12. Mike McLaughlin, 13. Scott Wimmer, 14. Joe Nemechek, 15. Ashton Lewis, 16. Jimmy Spencer, 17. Tim Sauter, 18. Casey Mears, 19. Kerry Earnhardt, 20. Brian Vickers, 21. Chad Little, 22. Jason Keller, 23. Jeff Purvis, 24. Andy Houston, 25. Mike Wallace, 26. Frank Parker, Jr., 27. Larry Fort, 28. Andy Kirby, 29. Jamie McMurray, 30. Lyndon Amick, 31. Derrick Cole, 32. Craig Raudman, 33. Dan Pandos, 34. Scott Riggs, 35. Ken Alexander, 36. Tony Raines, 37. Ricky Hendrick, 38. Christine Elder, 39. Ken Schrader, 40. Chad Huffel, 41. Kevin Grubb, 42. Shane Hmiel, 43. Matt Kenseth.

Sprague leads Busch points

Top-10 Busch Series points leaders after 3 of 34 events: 1. Sprague-446, 2. LaJoie-435, 3. Keller-437, 4. Wallace-435, 5. Biffle-415, 6. J. Sauter-406, 7. K. Wallace-403, 8. J. Green-383, 9. Riggs-376, 10. Wimmer-354.

NASCAR is keeping word on safety. NASCAR president, Mike Helton said during the off-season, that NASCAR would be focusing more on driver safety. Because of the tragic death of Adam Petty, Kenny Irwin, Tony Roper and Dale Earnhardt, the safety issues have generated lots of attention over the past two years.

"We're capitalizing on all of the energies that have gone into safety and taking advantage of those, taking a lead on bringing them all together and using the technology that is out there," Helton said. "We need to make a concerted effort to make sure all of those energies stay together and stay focused on that as a major topic. No one wants anybody else to get hurt."

The vehicles used in NASCAR's three major series this year all have crash data recorders, so-called "black boxes," inside of them. Drivers in each series are required to wear head-and-neck restraint devices.

Over-the-wall pit crewmembers and NASCAR officials now must wear fire-protective clothing and helmets as they do their jobs.

New seats are being developed. New types of supports and restraining nets are being incorporated into the driver's compartment and studies continue on how to better integrate all of the equipment in that cockpit area into the most effective overall system possible.

Research also continues into energy-absorbing barriers; the "soft walls" that comedy may more effectively cushion the impact when a race car crashes. NASCAR has instituted its own program to look into the basic construction of a race car, hoping to find better ways to build cars so that the energy generated in a crash is more effectively moved away from the driver.

"It's important to keep the energy flowing because that's where the next level of development will come from," Helton says. "We are the best we've ever been today at collecting information. That will continue to get better. Using that information and making things happen with everybody else's input will create the results, and that's what we're after."

"All drivers we talked with seem to be very satisfied with NASCAR's efforts."

"Yes, I think it was something they needed to improve on," said Sterling Marlin, driver of the No. 40 Coors Dodge. "But they've done what

they said. I know some of the drivers didn't like the (driver) harnesses at first, but after they realized it was for their protection, they changed their mind."

Weekend Racing: On Saturday, March 9, the ARCA ReMax Series, Pork the Other White Meat 400 will be broadcast live on PRN Radio from Atlanta, beginning at 12 noon (EST). This race will be televised Monday night at 8 pm (EST) on Speed Channel.

There will be no NASCAR Busch or Craftsman Truck Series racing. Both series have an off weekend.

Sunday, April 10: Winston Cup Atlanta 500, event 4 of 36 events. Starting time: 12:30 pm (EST); TV: Fox; Distance: 500 miles/325 laps; Defending champion: Kevin Harvick, Chevrolet.

Atlanta Motor Speedway track information: Size: 1.54 mile oval; Banking in turns: 24 degrees; Banking on straights: 5 degrees; Length of frontstretch: 1,415 feet; backstretch: 1,320 feet; Grandstand capacity: 125,000.

Racing Trivia Question: Darrell Waltrip broke into Winston Cup racing in 1972. What year did he hang up his driving helmet?

Answer: To Last Week's Question: Winston Cup driver Buckshot Jones is from Georgia.

Fan Comments from Sunday's Race: Mrs. B. S. Dalton, Ga.: "If NASCAR is in Dodge's pockets as some of us believe, we should petition."

J. V. W. Camden, N.Y.: "Two weeks ago, I listened to Marlin cry. Now NASCAR let him get away with murder."

D. R. Charlotte, MI: "I'm glad they didn't get the word to penalize Marlin. It was NASCAR's fault. I'm sure there will be a big controversy about this."

J. C. Eaton, OH: "After three races, this season looks like it's going to be the biggest circus I've ever seen. NASCAR has blown several calls already."

Sound Off: If you have an opinion about NASCAR or Sunday's Winston Cup racing and want to be heard, call us within one hour after the end of the race at 1-800-726-7022. The call is free, and if we use your comments in our next column, we will send you a photo of your favorite driver.

Gerald Hodges/The Racing Reporter is a syndicated NASCAR col-

umnist. If you have a racing question that you would like answered send it to The Racing Reporter, P.O. Box 160711, Mobile, AL 36616 or e-mail it to: 110335.405@compuserve.com

Ryan Newman a Top Rookie contender

LAS VEGAS, Nev.—There appears to be only two legitimate drivers to claim this year's Winston Cup Raybestos Rookie of the Year title: Ryan Newman and Jimmie Johnson. Each has the backing of a powerful racing organization.

Newman was the highest qualifying rookie contender in Sunday's race at Las Vegas. Starting second, he missed the pole by just two one-thousandths of a second.

"It was definitely close," said Newman. "It was a great run for the Alltel-car. We came out and tested really good, in race and qualifying trim. We got a good starting spot for the race and a good spot on pit road."

"It's about having a good race car and being able to put it where you want it when the time comes. You've got perfect conditions out there qualifying: the tire pressures are built up and you've got all the downforce on the car. It's just you and the race track. Nobody is in front of you and you've got clean air. It's fun to be able to go out there and run those two laps but it's more fun to be able to go out and race those 400-500 miles and win a race."

Newman, 24, who became a teammate to veteran Rusty Wallace at Rusty Wallace Racing, ran a mixed schedule in 2001 in the Grand National, Winston Cup and ARCA ReMax series to prepare for his full-time move to Cup this year.

He had two wins: one in Grand National and one in ARCA—and was a strong qualifier, winning six poles in 15 starts in the Grand National series.

Newman believes having a veteran and talented teammate will help him avoid the typical reactions from other drivers, who shy away from rookies on the track.

"When you work with someone like a Rusty Wallace, you get the experience and trust of a veteran driver on the track, someone who knows you and what you're capable of," Newman said. "A lot of rookies probably don't get the benefit of the doubt from anyone."

Newman said he's tried to focus on his racing as his job—one he en-

joys tremendously.

"I try not to put pressure on myself and I look at this as something I enjoy. This is what I've chosen as a career and it's something I am looking forward to, not be nervous about."

"I think if we finish on the lead lap, that will satisfy a lot of our goals. If you can finish on the lead lap at the end of 500 miles, you're running pretty good."

"As soon as we do that on a regular basis, I think we can look at top 10s. Once we're finishing in the top 10 on a regular basis, we can look at top fives. Anytime you put yourself in the top five, you have shot at winning the race."

Newman wants to see his team develop into one that is capable of winning races and poles. "It's not going to be easy, but I think these are things we can accomplish," he said. "We have the team to make success possible and with Rusty Wallace as a teammate, I don't think I could ask for a better situation."

"I think the best thing I can do is to expect the unexpected and not try to think we have every situation covered," Newman said. "These are long races with a lot of different circumstances. You can't prepare for everything you will see."

Reality Store

The Reality Store is gaining popularity as an introductory exercise in helping youth understand some of the realities involved in preparing for an employable future. Hopefully, the exercise can be a tool to get the attention of young people so they will choose to involve themselves in a more substantial curriculum oriented program of work force preparation. The RCMS eighth-grade classes will be involved in the Reality Store on Tuesday, March 12 from 8 to 10 in the RCMS gymnasium. We look forward to helping our youth become more aware of the work force and what is available in the real world when they finish their education.

Hunter Education course

There will be a Hunter Education course offered March 28, 29 and 30 at the Rockcastle County Middle School. This program will be sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service, the Fish and Game Department and the 21st Century Learning of RCMS. The course hours will be 9:00-1:00 pm on Thursday, Friday, and 9:00 am-1:00 pm on Saturday. Please take advantage of this spring course.

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