

RACING THE RAIN CLOUDS INTO THE NIGHT

AT PHOENIX INTERNATIONAL RACEWAY • NOVEMBER 15 2015 • PHOTOS BY RANDALL BOHL

All race weekend at PIR would again include the final race in the Eliminator round and the semi-final race in the Chase for the NASCAR Sprint Cup. It was going to be a memorable weekend, and especially a memorable big Sunday.

This was Jeff Gordon's last season and it was also his last NASCAR Sprint Cup Series race at PIR as a full-time competitor. Gordon held four career wins at PIR, three in NASCAR races, and each win represented a significant moment in PIR's history. So, PIR was officially renamed Jeff Gordon Raceway for a day that Sunday, the first such honor at any track. There were Jeff Gordon trading cards, a *24 Moments of Greatness* special on social media, and a special Jeff Gordon Raceway logo was used throughout the facility for the day.

Then Mother Nature joined the event. It looked a bit like it could rain. Then it sprinkled. And then it poured. And poured. For hours. "It never rains in Arizona," but this day it would.

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 12

Casino Arizona 100, NASCAR K&N Pro Series—West race

The NASCAR K&N Pro Series is often a chance for young drivers to prove themselves. Todd Gilliland did just that in his first start, taking home the win in the Casino Arizona 100 on Thursday. At 15, he's the youngest winner of a pro race in PIR's history—even though he doesn't have a driver's license and couldn't drive himself back to his hotel.

Son of NASCAR Sprint Cup Series driver David Gilliland, Todd took the lead after a blown right front tire ended JJ Haley's dominating run—he had led every lap till then—with six laps to go.

There were five teens in the top 10. Pro Series East champion 17-year-old William Byron finished second. 26-year-old Chris Eggleston finished in 10th, but by finishing ahead of Noah Gragson and Ryan Partridge, Eggleston earned the NASCAR K&N Pro Series West championship—his first.

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 13

Lucas Oil 150, NASCAR Camping World Truck Series race

For the first 80 percent of Friday's race, Timothy Peters seemed to have no chance to win. But on Lap 120, leaders Erik Jones and Matt Crafton collided during a restart and took themselves out of contention. With 30 laps to go, Jones held the lead, but Crafton tried to grab the advantage with a daring shortcut in the dogleg, his tail slid out and hit Jones, who hit the outside wall. Crafton spun and collided with teammate Johnny Sauter, before both trucks hit the inside wall.

Peters took the lead during the caution period, as Jones pitted for repairs and battled off a last lap attack from John Hunter Nemecheck, but prevailed for his second win of the season and his first at PIR in eight career tries. Nemecheck finished just 0.310 of a second behind Peters. Jones did finish, but struggled to make ninth place.

SATURDAY NOVEMBER 14

DAV 200—Honoring America's Veterans, NASCAR XFINITY Series race

Much like last year, Kyle Busch put on a dominating performance on Saturday. Unlike last year, he made it to Victory Lane this year. The Las Vegas driver led all but 10 laps in Saturday's 200 en route to his eighth victory in the XFINITY Series at PIR, the most of any driver in any pro series in track history. His victories have usually come in dominant fashion—he has scored four wins in his last five series starts here, leading 155, 169, 142 laps, respectively, to go along with this year's 190.

In November 2014, he had led for 187 laps, only to get passed by Brad Keselowski on a late-race restart, Kyle Busch finishing second.

This year, there was no late caution period, no restart and no chance for Keselowski to steal a win. Keselowski, driver of the No. 22 Ford, finished second and led seven laps.

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 15

Quicken Loans Race for Heroes 500, NASCAR Sprint Cup Series race

Dale Earnhardt Jr. in the No. 88 Nationwide Chevrolet, benefitted from smart pit stop strategy and the return of rain to win a delayed and abbreviated Quicken Loans Race for Heroes 500 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series race at PIR on Sunday night.

Eight drivers entered the race with a chance to make it to the final round of NASCAR's Chase for the Sprint Cup Championship the next Sunday.

Rain had delayed the race start by more than six hours. Kevin Harvick took the lead in the early stages and gradually pulled away from all pursuers, leading for a race-high 143 laps. Harvick was aiming for a record fifth-consecutive win and a record eight wins overall at PIR, but slipped behind during a pit stop shuffle.

Another downpour on lap 219 called the race. Earnhardt had worked his way to the front of the grid and earned the win, with Harvick in second.

"A lot of guys would have liked this race to continue," said Earnhardt Jr, as he claimed his third career Sprint Cup victory in Phoenix. "You like to win them at the checkered flag," Earnhardt said. "A win's a win, though."

Joey Logano finished third, Kyle Busch fourth, and pole winner Jimmie Johnson, who had set a new track record in time trials, finished fifth. Four drivers who advanced to the Championship Round were Jeff Gordon, Kevin Harvick, Kyle Busch and Martin Truex Jr.

MARCH 2016 GOOD SAM WEEKEND

2016 at PIR kicks off with the Good Sam 500 Race Weekend on March 11-13. See info on the next page, or visit www.phoenixraceway.com

