

PIR FALL RACE WEEKEND

MONSTER ENERGY NASCAR CUP SERIES SEMIFINAL / PHOTOS BY RANDALL BOHL

Phoenix Raceway once again hosted three NASCAR races in November, with practices, qualifying and one major race per day for three days. The Can-Am 500 was again the semifinal race in the 2017 Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series season—the last of the Playoffs, determining the final four contenders for the season championship race to be held the following weekend at Homestead-Miami.

FRIDAY NOV 10: LUCAS OIL 150 JOHNNY SAUTER TOPS WILD RACE

2016 NASCAR Camping World Truck Series defending champion Johnny Sauter set the stage at Phoenix for the championship finale at Homestead-Miami. Sauter, driver of the No.21 ISM Connect Chevrolet Silverado for GMS Racing, didn't need to win at Phoenix to advance to the championship finale, but he still made a statement to his fellow Championship 4 competitors by taking home the victory in the Lucas Oil 150 (150 laps, 150 miles). This was Sauter's first career victory at Phoenix in nine starts. He had five top fives and seven top 10s, but his previous best finish was second in the prior year's Lucas Oil 150.

The championship picture was drastically changed on lap 129, when contact between the No.19 Ford of Austin Cindric and No.27 Toyota of Ben Rhodes sent Rhodes and his ThorSport teammate, Matt Crafton, to the garage. Crafton had already clinched his spot in the Championship 4 on points, but Rhodes was unable to advance after the incident. Cindric claimed the final Championship 4 slot by 12 points.

The race had appeared to be a two-man battle between Kyle Busch Motorsports teammates No.4 Christopher Bell and No.18 Noah Gragson. The pair led a dominant 145 of 150 laps, and were battling side-by-side for the lead in the closing laps. But on lap 142, Gragson got loose under Bell and spun out, collecting Justin Haley. Gragson and Haley did not finish the race, and Bell had to pit due to damage, taking both trucks out of contention. While the 22-year-old Bell did miss out on the win, he had already locked himself into the Championship 4 by the end of Stage 1 by points, the second driver to clinch. Crafton guaranteed his place by the end of Stage 2, and Cindric earned the final spot. John Hunter Nemechek, needing a win to advance to the Championship 4, finished second.

Rounding out the top five were Cody Coughlin, Chase Briscoe and Kaz Grala.

The first two stages were relatively calm, with only one non-stage-end caution on lap 76, when Grant Enfinger lost a tire and hit the wall in Turn 1. But the last 30 laps featured four cautions and three red flags.

SATURDAY NOV 11: TICKET GALAXY 200 BYRON WINS WITH SUBSTITUTE CREW

Phoenix has not been kind to William Byron, driver of the No.9 Liberty University Chevrolet for JR Motorsports, but he conquered the one-mile oval by winning Saturday's Ticket Galaxy 200 (200 laps, 200 miles), despite having a substitute pit crew.

Byron and his JR Motorsports teammates, No.7 Justin Allgaier and No.1 Elliott Sadler, maintained a comfortable points cushion over fifth place to advance to the Championship 4 at Homestead, despite all three pit crews not making it to Phoenix in time for the race, due to a flight delay.

The closest battle all race was between Daniel Hemric's No.21 Smokey Mountain Snuff Chevrolet and the No.00 Ford of Cole Custer for the final Championship 4 spot. There were only five points separating the two coming into Phoenix. They ran near each other for most of the race; in the closing laps, they battled side-by-side and made contact. Hemric prevailed, taking fifth, while Custer fin-

ished seventh, missing the finals by four points.

At the start of Saturday, the No.48 DC Solar Chevrolet of Brennan Poole was in the Championship 4 with a five-point lead. But his hopes were dashed on lap 22, when contact with the lapped car of Caesar Bacarella cut a right front tire, sending Poole into the outside wall. The team tried to repair the damage, but he was unable to continue. Poole finished 38th, out of points contention.

Blaney was dominant for a race-high 147 laps, but a caution on lap 180 led to a round of pit stops, and he came out in fourth when the top three cars took two tires. He battled back to second, but was unable to catch Byron. Erik Jones finished third, followed by Christopher Bell and Hemric.

Byron had finished fourth in a NASCAR XFINITY Series start at Phoenix, but had had heartbreak here in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series. In his first start, he exited after a wreck on lap 7. In 2016, he had the dominant truck, leading for 112 laps, but a blown engine with eight laps to go took him out of contention for the win or championship. 2017 was his first career NASCAR win here.

SUNDAY NOV 12: CAN-AM 500 KENSETH CLOSES CAREER WITH BIG WIN

In what could be his final Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series race at Phoenix Raceway, Matt Kenseth, driver of the No.20 Circle K Toyota for Joe Gibbs Racing, passed a desperate Chase Elliott in the closing laps to win Sunday's Can-Am 500 (500 km, 312 laps, 312 miles) in front of a sellout crowd.

This was Kenseth's second Monster Energy Series win at Phoenix; his first was in 2002. In 30 starts, he has seven top fives and 12 top 10s. He also has one NASCAR XFINITY Series win in the Valley of the Sun in 2006.

Elliott was also a part of the reason for a caution on lap 281, as contact with No.11 Denny Hamlin led to Hamlin losing a tire and hitting the wall (the two drivers had a run-in two weeks prior in Martinsville). After a lap-283 restart, it looked

as though the win would be by Chase Elliott for about 20 laps, as he passed Kenseth, but his car faded as the laps went on. Kenseth caught up and quickly passed him with 10 laps remaining. Elliott finished second, but came up short in advancing to Homestead-Miami Speedway.

Brad Keselowski, who started 16th in the No.2 Miller Lite Ford, struggled from the beginning of the race. After Hamlin's wreck, he had a comfortable points cushion, though contact on the last restart made the situation a little more worrisome. Keselowski finished 16th and did earn the last Championship 4 slot.

Coming into Phoenix, three of the four spots had already been clinched by Kyle Busch (won at Martinsville), Kevin Harvick (won at Texas) and Martin Truex Jr. (clinched on points). Truex and Harvick finished third and fifth at Phoenix, respectively, while Busch finished seventh.

HOMESTEAD-MIAMI CHAMPIONSHIP

Martin Truex Jr. was third in the CanAm 500 at Phoenix, but had already clinched on points—all he needed to go on to win the Ford EcoBoost 400 Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series at Homestead-Miami Speedway on November 19, after taking the lead in lap 216 out of 267, also scoring his first overall points Championship. Kyle Busch was second by just .681 seconds in a real nail-biter, and Kyle Larson took third. For Truex, it capped a season with seven prior wins backed by a large number of stage win bonus points. ■



LAST RACE AT "PHOENIX RACEWAY"

Since 1964, Phoenix Raceway has been the Southwest's premier motorsports venue—the only track in the West to feature two Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series weekends a year: Spring Race Weekend in March and the NASCAR Playoffs semifinal Can-Am 500 Race Weekend in November.

Founded as an open-wheel venue, Phoenix Raceway is proud to also host the Phoenix Grand Prix Verizon IndyCar Series race under the lights in April.

November 2017 was Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s last race at Phoenix Raceway. It was also Can-Am 500 winner Matt Kenseth's last race at PIR. In fact, as the track noted on Twitter that afternoon:

"FUN FACT: This is EVERYONE'S last race at Phoenix International Raceway." As part of its \$178 million redevelopment, the modernized facility has become ISM Raceway in 2018. ■



Can-Am 500 winner
Matt Kenseth

