



## Rookie grabs Shootout from racing's elite

By RICK MINTER  
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.

Denny who did what? Denny Hamlin, a 25-year-old rookie running a restrictor-plate race in Nextel Cup for the first time, drove his No. 11 Chevrolet to the front and held off plate-racing masters Tony Stewart and Dale Earnhardt Jr. to win Sunday's Budweiser Shootout at Daytona International Speedway.



HAMLIN

Hamlin was an unlikely entry in the non-points race for pole winners. Last year in the midst of his first full season in NASCAR's No. 2 circuit — the Busch Series — he was called on to drive Joe Gibbs' No. 11 in the final seven Cup races.

In the next-to-last race at Phoenix, he took the pole and won his Shootout spot.

Hamlin appeared set to cruise to a relatively easy victory in Sunday's rain-delayed 72-lap race with his Gibbs Racing teammate Stewart protecting his back bumper. But a caution flag for debris late in the race set up a two-lap dash for the cash.

Hamlin started the final segment on the front row on the outside of Stewart. Hamlin surged ahead then lost the lead momentarily to Jimmie Johnson but muscled his way back to the front and sped under the checkered flag just ahead of a door-to-door battle for second place between Stewart and Earnhardt.

Earnhardt prevailed, with Stewart, Scott Riggs and Johnson completing the top five.

Hamlin, who two years ago was racing late models in Virginia, said he went into the race figuring he'd get no drafting help. He simply wanted to stay out of trouble and impress the veterans he'll have to rely on for drafting help in Sunday's Daytona 500.

That shouldn't be a problem. "He did a great job," Stewart said. "I thought he showed patience. I thought he did everything right."

Said Hamlin: "All I wanted to do was gain respect for the 500. I hope I did that."

After relatively mild preseason test sessions and practice, tempers flared in the Shootout. Kyle Busch and others were criticized for wild driving.

The culprit is the practice of bump drafting, in which one driver rams the guy in front of him to propel both forward. Stewart said that could have tragic consequences.

He said the tributes to Dale Earnhardt on the fifth anniversary of his fatal crash might be repeated soon.

"Five years from now, we're probably going to have to do a tribute to another driver because we're probably going to kill somebody from Wednesday to Sunday," he said. "It could be me. It could be Dale Junior. It could be anybody."

His suggestion: Take the bracing out of the front bumpers of the cars so a bump drafter will damage his own car's aerodynamics if he rams the driver in front of him.

"If we don't, we're going to hurt somebody," he said. "This isn't a performance issue. It's a safety issue."

Earnhardt said changes to the cars won't work.

"There ain't no way you can do that," he said. "They'll find a way around it."

"The drivers are the biggest part of it. We'll find something else to run into each other with."

# Jeffs out front

Burton grabs Daytona pole; Gordon in No. 2 spot



Pole position

Jeff Burton  
189.151 mph



Outside pole

Jeff Gordon  
188.877 mph

Photos by NASCAR

## Johnson, Labonte fail post-qualifying auto inspections

By RICK MINTER  
Cox News Service

Daytona Beach, Fla.

The rebuilding process seems to be working for some NASCAR teams that haven't performed up to their expected levels recently.

On Sunday, Jeff Burton put Richard Childress' No. 31 Chevrolet on the pole for Sunday's Daytona 500.

Another team on the rebound, Jeff Gordon's No. 24 squad, took the outside pole. The rest of the starting field will be set by a combination of the results of Thursday's 150-mile qualifying races, owner points and qualifying times.

Nearly five hours after qualifying ended, NASCAR officials sprung a surprise by tossing out the times posted by

Jimmie Johnson and Terry Labonte after their cars failed a post-qualifying inspection.

The rear window of Johnson's No. 48 Chevrolet, which had the fifth-fastest time in Sunday's time trials, was found to be changed between the pre-qualifying inspection and after his qualifying run.

NASCAR spokesman Jim Hunter said Johnson's car has been impounded and could be taken from the team if other violations are discovered.

The carburetor on Labonte's No. 96 Chevrolet, which was 28th fastest, failed a post-qualifying inspection, Hunter said.

He said both drivers will have to start from the rear of the pack in Thursday's 150-mile qualifying races, and further penalties could be forthcoming.

Both drivers still will be allowed to race in Sunday's Daytona 500, Hunter said.

There were no questions about Burton's car. His lap at 189.151 mph gave him his first Daytona pole and his first anywhere in 190 Cup races since Richmond in September 2000.

It was Childress' fourth Daytona pole as a car owner and his first since 2003.

His rookie driver Clint Bowyer topped the other newcomers, posting the seventh-fastest time in his No. 07 Chevrolet. The other Childress entry, the No. 29 of Kevin Harvick, was 13th.

But Burton pointed out that winning the pole, albeit a big one, won't carry a team for an entire season. In fact, it might not even carry

Jeff Burton's pole was the fourth Daytona 500 pole for Richard Childress, left. Dale Earnhardt (1996), Jeff Green (2003) and Mike Skinner (1997) also won Daytona 500 poles for Childress.

them for the rest of the week.

"It's not over yet," Burton said. "This is just one qualifying run out of a long year."

He still has to run a 150-mile qualifier Thursday and the Daytona 500 on Sunday, but no matter how he and Gordon finish on Thursday, they'll still be on the front row Sunday.

## Daytona 500

• When: 1:30 p.m. Sunday

• Where: Daytona International Speedway, Daytona Beach, Fla.

• TV: WTHR-Channel 13

Childress seemed pleased with his team's progress but pointed out that his cars have run well at times at Daytona in the past few seasons.

"We've been up front, led some laps, but we've just got to put it all together, and we've got to win," he said.

But Burton cautioned that all the talk and effort won't mean much if the drivers can't deliver victories and top-five finishes throughout the season.

"This is a 'no excuse' year," he said.

Gordon, who missed the Chase for the Nextel Cup last year, said he's ready to get to the 500 and see if he can become a back-to-back winner.

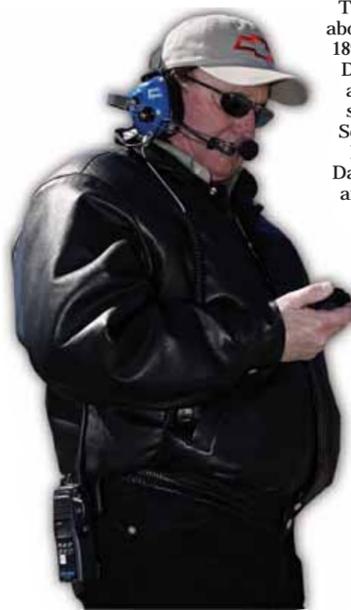
"We obviously have to be careful during the 150 to make sure we keep this car in one piece," he said. "We want to take this front-row start and make the best of it as well."

Bobby Labonte, who left Joe Gibbs Racing last year to drive the No. 43 for Petty Enterprises, rewarded the team's offseason efforts by posting the sixth-fastest time, the team's best effort in nearly a year.

His teammate and car owner Kyle Petty had a fast car, too, but he broke something in the drivetrain and never got up to speed.

Still, he was encouraged.

"Bobby's lap was really good," he said. "That excites our crowd."



## Widow's lawsuit over plane crash has Hendricks defending pilot brother, company's actions

By RICK MINTER  
Cox News Service

NASCAR team owner Rick Hendrick reacted angrily to a lawsuit filed last week in which the wife of a former Hendrick employee alleged that the company showed "conscious and intentional dis-

regard" for her husband's safety just before the fatal crash of a company plane in 2004.

The Hendrick plane crashed en route to a race at Martinsville Speedway, killing 10 people including Hendrick's son, Ricky; his brother, John; and two nieces.

Among the crash victims was Randy Dorton, the team's engine builder. His wife, Dianne, filed the suit.

Hendrick, speaking Saturday at Daytona International Speedway, said he was most upset that Dorton's suit claimed that John Hendrick

told the company pilots to push ahead with the flight despite poor weather conditions.

"It's just disappointing that somebody takes things out of context, and the facts aren't accurate," Hendrick said. "And I know that my brother was a white-knuckle flier, and he had

his two daughters on that plane, and they waited an hour for the weather to clear.

"For somebody to take a shot at him is totally disappointing and hurtful to my family, my mother; his wife and child."

He also disputed Mrs. Dorton's claims in an interview

with The Charlotte Observer that he hadn't taken care of her financially since the crash.

"She's got a BMW; I paid her insurance. We had somebody there helping her night and day and available. I met with her any time she wanted to," he said.

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