

Johnson holds off Dale Jr. for Daytona 500 win

Jimmie Johnson, sidelined almost before the race began here a year ago, made sure he was around for the finish at this year's Daytona 500.

Not only was the five-time NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion around, he and his Hendrick Motorsports team were celebrating in Victory Lane.

Johnson, 37, pulled away from Brad Keselowski on a final restart with six laps remaining in the 55th running of the Daytona 500, then staved off the late charges of runner-up Dale Earnhardt Jr. and third-place Mark Martin to win the Great American Race for the second time.

It was the 400th career Cup start for Johnson and his 61st victory in the series. It was also his second Daytona 500 victory, making him one of just 10 drivers to win the series-opening event on multiple occasions.

Keselowski, the defending series champion, was fourth and Ryan Newman fifth.

Danica Patrick became the first woman to lead a lap in the 500, taking the point at lap 90 of the 200-lap event. Patrick, competing full time in Cup for the first time, finished eighth.

"It is just awesome, there's no other way to describe it," Johnson said. "Four hundred starts, every one of those starts with (primary sponsor) Lowe's and Hendrick Motorsports. To be the first to win in a Gen-6 car ... I'm just very proud of the moment."

Johnson completed just one lap in this race last season before becoming involved in a crash. This time, he was steady if not stellar from the outset. In a race that saw Toyota entries dominate only to fall by the wayside due to mechanical issues, Johnson bided his time. Then, second on a restart following the day's fifth caution, he showed the speed and handling that his Chevrolet had at its disposal.

Seemingly stuck on the bottom of the track, he watched as the front-runners began to pull away before drawing alongside teammate Jeff Gordon in a battle for fourth on lap 182.

Three laps later, he was door to door with Keselowski and fighting for the lead. The two champions traded the top spot four times before Johnson finally gained the upper hand on lap 191.

"It was just so hard to make up time on the bottom because there were fewer cars (there)," Johnson said. "I was hanging on, side-drafting, doing all I could do to hang onto the 2 (of Keselowski) when I was close to him The caution truthfully fell at a good time for us. Right when we surged ahead, that allowed me to get ahead for (lane choice on the restart)."

A caution for debris bunched the field for the final restart, but when the green flag appeared, Johnson set sail.

"For me the defining moment in the race was the caution coming out and the 48 being ahead of the 2," he said. "That gave me lane choice and really control of the race in the closing laps."

Lane choice no doubt helped, but in the end the difference was the guy behind the wheel, crew chief Chad Knaus said.

"I think it was Jimmie Johnson, quite honestly," said Knaus, who earned his first Daytona 500 win. "We work really hard ... to prepare for the superspeedway races. We put a great product out there. ... I think what we have above and beyond everybody else is the desire to go out and win races."

"We've got 500-plus employees at Hendrick Motorsports. When they all want to go out and win races (and) you put guys like this behind the seat, you're going to see magic happen."

Knaus was fined and suspended by NASCAR in 2006 before the 500 for an



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unapproved template modification. Darian Grubb served as interim crew chief for the team during Knaus' absence.

Earnhardt Jr., second-best for the third time in four years, credited Martin with helping him get a run on the race leader down the stretch.

"I was hoping (Martin) was thinking what I was thinking as we came off of Turn 2 on that last lap," Earnhardt Jr. said. "I felt like we needed to make the move a little earlier than off of (Turn) 4."

"... Once we come off of (Turn) 2, mashed the gas, got a run on Danica, side-drafted her a little bit. I don't know why (those) guys didn't pull down in front of me ... but we got through (turns) 3 and 4 with a pretty good run."

"Once we come to Turn 4, we kind of ran out of steam, didn't have enough to get a run on Jimmie."

While he said it was difficult to pass -- the majority of the race saw long lines of cars running single-file -- Earnhardt Jr. said on the occasions when he was able to

"see what my car could do, it was plenty capable of winning the race."

Joe Gibbs Racing's Matt Kenseth led four times for a race-high 86 laps. But problems under the hood struck Kenseth and teammate Kyle Busch only moments apart, leaving the defending Daytona 500 winner 37th and Busch 34th.

Less than a quarter of the way into the event, several race favorites fell by the wayside when a nine-car incident unfolded just past the start/finish line.

Kevin Harvick, winner of this year's Sprint Unlimited and one of the two Budweiser Duel qualifying races, was caught up in the crash that began when Kasey Kahne's Chevrolet turned hard to the left after contact from behind. Tony Stewart, bidding for his first Daytona 500 win, was also among those involved.

"It looked like the No. 18 (Kyle Busch) hooked the No. 5 (Kahne) and that kind of just started a chain reaction," Harvick said. "I don't know who was behind me; just one of those deals."



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