

Clint Bowyer breaks 190-race drought with Martinsville win

Story: Reid Spencer, NASCAR Newswire

Photos: David Griffin for MSA

MARTINSVILLE, Va. – Clint Bowyer was so excited he started his celebratory burnout at the entrance to Turn 3 at Martinsville Speedway, flirting perilously with the outside wall.

Bowyer had ample reason to start the party early, before he got to the frontstretch for a traditional smoke show. With his victory in Monday's snow-delayed STP 500, he had just ended a winless streak in the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series that had reached 190 races, dating to the fall race at Charlotte in 2012.

The victory did more than end a drought. It validated the decision of Stewart-Haas Racing to put him behind the wheel of the No. 14 Ford last year, after team co-owner Tony Stewart retired from NASCAR competition. With his ninth career victory and his first at the .526-mile short track, Bowyer paid off SHR's investment in his future.

With Kevin Harvick stringing together victories at Atlanta, Las Vegas, and ISM Raceway at Phoenix, Stewart-Haas has won four of the first six races of 2018.

"We learned last year," said Bowyer, who finished 1.146 seconds ahead of runner-up

Kyle Busch in a race that was delayed from Sunday to Monday when an unexpectedly severe snowstorm hit southern Virginia on Saturday afternoon. "Obviously, Harvick came on strong at the end of last year, but it was a learning year for our team and the 14 bunch.

"It was just time."

Bowyer had a strong feeling before Monday's race, and he told his young son Cash as much.

"For whatever reason, it felt right driving up here," said Bowyer, who led 215 laps, all but one (under caution) after taking the lead from third-place finisher Ryan Blaney on Lap 285. "Such a cool place, to be able to drive up through the countryside on a two-lane road and think about the race.

"I told him (Cash) this morning, I was like, 'Dammit, we've got to get a picture in Victory Lane.'"

That's exactly what Bowyer did, avoiding any misstep over the final 200 laps that would have allowed Busch to close in. Busch finished second for the third time in four races and took over the series lead from Martin Truex Jr., who started from the pole and came home fourth.

"We just tried to maintain and keep ourselves in the right position, in the right spots all day long on the long runs and save our stuff as much as we could to see if we couldn't mount a charge late in the going," Busch said.

"For us, saving our stuff, the 14 was able to save his stuff, and he was a little bit better than we were. He was able to kind of edge out there through the early laps of firing off each and every time, first 10 or 15 (laps), and kind of get that gap, and then he'd kind of just hold that. He was probably saving just as much as I was trying to save to make sure he had something to go at the end."

The victory was Bowyer's sixth top five in 25 starts at the paper-clip-shaped speedway.

"This place is an acquired taste," Bowyer said. "When I first got here I was a duck out of water, just like everybody else that starts



LOTS OF DRYING NEEDED!

here at first. I learned from Jimmie Johnson and learned from Jeff Gordon, sometimes the hard way, but nonetheless I learned over the years and finally put it to good use.

"To keep Kyle Busch, one of the best in the business, behind you in those closing laps, the nerves were through the roof. It's unbelievable how it all came true."

Harvick ran fifth after a run-in with 12th-place finisher Denny Hamlin near the midpoint of the event. Joey Logano, Alex Bowman, AJ Allmendinger, Chase Elliott and Brad Keselowski completed the top 10. For Elliott, the top 10 was a significant accomplishment, given that he twice went a lap down to the leader, only to regain the lost circuits as the beneficiary under caution.

Johnson, who leads active drivers with

nine victories at Martinsville, finished 15th, a lap down. Blaney led 145 laps, second only to Bowyer, and won the second 130-lap stage of the race. Hamlin led 111 laps early, claimed the first stage victory and, like Blaney, collected a playoff point.



BLANEY LED 145 LAPS, FINISHED 3RD



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