



MEDIA INFORMATION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, October 20, 2016

SURVIVAL NOT THE ONLY NAME OF THE GAME IN INAUGURAL NCWTS CHASE RACE AT TALLADEGA

Sport Psychologist and Two-Time Series Champ Weigh in on Drivers' Mentalities and Approaches Headed into Pressure-Packed Talladega Elimination Race

Survival historically has been the collective goal of drivers at Talladega Superspeedway, site of Saturday's NASCAR CAMPING WORLD TRUCK SERIES race (1:00 PM ET live on FOX with pre-race coverage beginning at 12:30 PM ET).

But this year, the most mentally draining and intense race on the schedule has morphed into something much more nail-biting, as it marks the first-ever elimination race in the series' inaugural Chase. Suddenly, survival might not suffice for some drivers hoping to advance to the Round of 6. They need more than sheer talent, a strong truck and good fortune to avoid the "Big One." Mental survival now is paramount, particularly for the younger drivers vying for the championship.

Of the eight Chasers, one has never competed at Talladega (Chase leader William Byron), three have only one start (Christopher Bell, Daniel Hemric and John Hunter Nemechek) and one has a mere pair of trips (Ben Kennedy). These five also are the youngest Chasers in the field, several years junior to veteran drivers Matt Crafton, Timothy Peters and Johnny Sauter.

Therefore, the majority of the championship contenders roll into the circuit's biggest track not only needing a strong finish, or perhaps a win, to advance, but also a quick primer in how to best negotiate the 2.66-mile behemoth.

"Whoever coined the phrase 'high-speed chess match' for Talladega hit the nail on the head," said two-time NASCAR CAMPING WORLD TRUCK SERIES champion and FOX NASCAR analyst Todd Bodine. "It's not as physically demanding as it is mentally, and it's every corner, straightaway and lap the entire day. Then you add in the fact this is an elimination round, and there's so much on the line. Other than William Byron, who locked in with a win, if any of the others don't finish, they're eliminated. I cannot imagine what these drivers are feeling with the pressure not only of Talladega itself but of the Chase."

Dr. Mark Tobin, a sport and performance psychologist, says adding the element of elimination and the necessity of a strong finish to an already stressful race certainly will have an effect on drivers' mindsets this weekend.

“It definitely changes the mentality of the driver at all different levels,” Tobin said. “Let’s start with the drivers who have to win to stay in the Chase. They have to take chances. They’ve made it this far and they don’t want to go home in terms of the Chase. The challenge for those drivers is to resist the urge to take that risk early in the race ... and not to panic and to wait until the end.”

According to Tobin, drivers resting fairly comfortably in the Chase standings likely have a different mindset than those whose championship hopes hinge on a strong finish on Saturday.

“They know who the drivers are who have to win in order to stay in (the Chase),” Tobin said. “When those who are a little more veteran see drivers getting close to them that they know have to do something special to stay in, they’re worried that they’re going to make a risky move and take them out of the race. So, they have to worry about losing their focus as one of those other drivers gets closer, because if they start concentrating too much on what that other driver’s going to do, then they might miss something in front of them or might wreck themselves or miss an opportunity to gain some spots in the race.”

Two of the younger, less-experienced drivers at Talladega occupy the final two spots in the Chase standings – Hemric in seventh and Nemechek in eighth. They’re mathematically alive if someone ahead of them in the standings has a poor finish, but they must first finish the race in order to capitalize.

“The veterans are nervous and anxious, so I can’t imagine what these kids are feeling who don’t have experience at Talladega and all they’ve ever seen is the ‘Big One,’ said Bodine, who holds the Truck Series record for most wins, top-five and top-10 finishes at a superspeedway. “The last chance to advance is an incredible amount of pressure. It’s possibly even more than what the Cup guys are under going to Talladega because these kids are new to this concept and stress.”

For the junior competitors, practice could make perfect, not only on the race track but also between the ears.

“There’s absolutely no substitute for being in the heat of the moment,” Tobin stated. “No matter how prepared you are, you have to go through a hurdle, such as Talladega, several times before you get comfortable enough and experienced enough that you can allow it to become just another race. If you look at sports like basketball or baseball, there’s oftentimes a nemesis, a team that another team just can’t beat to get to the next level or win a championship. It’s because that other team has been there before. In all sports, no matter how much you prepare, there’s just no substitute for being in the arena, under the hot lights, under the high stress for the first time. The veterans still have an edge.”

Bodine also gives the advantage to the senior members of the Truck Series Chase, but he applauds the wise-beyond-their-years persona the younger competitors exude this season.

“The older drivers are definitely better equipped to handle this pressure, and not just because they’ve raced more than the young guys,” Bodine explained. “With maturity comes the ability to better handle pressure. But the younger drivers are remarkably cool, and I don’t expect them to get jacked out of shape under pressure. Several are very mature with good heads on their shoulders, and hopefully they’ll keep them screwed on straight and stay out of trouble.”

While the stress facing all eight Chase drivers is immeasurable and likely higher for the younger ones, Bodine says it comes with the territory.

“Pressure is just part of the job now,” Bodine said. “You look at players getting ready to go to the World Series or the Super Bowl. They accept pressure as part of the job. Is it harder for an 18-year-old? They’ve never been in a situation with this kind of pressure riding on just one race. So, yes, it’s harder on them. With maturity, though, you understand how to handle it a little better. But even with maturity, it’s a hard road to hoe.”

With so much riding on one race, Tobin offers a piece of wisdom to all eight Chase drivers.

“The biggest piece of advice I’d give them is probably the hardest thing to do -- and that’s to treat it like any other race,” Tobin offered. “There is a key to doing that, however, and that’s the sport psychology skill we call ‘competition preparation.’ The idea is to script your activities -- in racing I’d say days before the event. You have a consistent routine and a consistent set of practices and a consistent way that you approach the weeks and hours leading up to an event. If you go to a big event, if you practice that same routine, there is a sense of déjà vu – ‘Hey, I’ve done this before, this is the same routine, it’s a race, just like any other race.’ But if you haven’t developed that skill and you don’t understand it, then your emotions likely will get the better of you when more is on the line because consistency breeds comfort. Without consistency before the competition, you certainly can’t expect consistency during the game.”

Editor’s Note: The NASCAR Camping World Truck Series on FS1 continues a positive trend in 2016. Through 18 of 23 races, the NCWTS on FS1 is up 4% among total viewers versus the same point last year (750,000 vs. 719,000) headed into this weekend’s race at Talladega.

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