

Season Openers Prove Successful

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NASCAR

Camry drivers had a strong showing in Daytona 500 Qualifying Sunday when Denny Hamlin, Kyle Busch, Erik Jones and Daniel Suárez all placed in the top seven in the session. Only Hamlin's position will stand as his final

starting spot for the Daytona 500 as the remaining Camrys will battle it out in the Can-Am Duels on Thursday, Feb. 15 starting at 7 p.m.

“I literally am so ecstatic,” Hamlin said, who is locked into the front row of the Daytona 500. “It’s just so out of the blue because obviously I thought that today was going to be a tough day qualifying. We focused so much on race trim yesterday. This Camry is ready to race. It’s handling well and we’re looking forward to Thursday. Now, obviously to the 500 being on the front row. I’m so proud of FedEx and TRD (Toyota Racing Development). I couldn’t be prouder to represent them and hopefully we’ll get us another Daytona 500 Sunday.”

Following Daytona 500 Qualifying, four Camry drivers including Hamlin, Busch, Jones and Martin Truex Jr. participated in The Clash at Daytona, a non-points event to kick off the season. Hamlin, Busch and Jones placed in spots sixth to eighth, respectively, while Truex was involved in a wreck late and finished 14th.

Busch, who finished seventh in the Clash at Daytona, expanded on what he’ll take from this first few days on-track at Daytona heading into this weekend’s action at the superspeedway.

“The race was kind of backwards, early on we were getting kind of dicey and more things happening then instead of later in the race,” Busch said. “The second half was kind of single file. Normally it’s the other way around. Overall our M&M’s Camry was pretty good. I thought we were out-handling a couple guys we were watching in front of us, we just never got the opportunity to get up front or have the field separate a little bit more. Overall, take this as a learning experience with this new package and head into the 500.”

NASCAR K&N PRO SERIES EAST

Toyota drivers Todd Gilliland and Harrison Burton put on a two-lap shootout that had fans on their feet at the finish and social media buzzing long after the checkered flag flew. Gilliland emerged with the victory in Florida’s New Smyrna 175 Sunday night, diving under Burton for the lead on the white flag lap and winning the drag race down the backstretch.

“Luckily we put this Toyota Camry in Victory Lane,” Gilliland said, who will be running a split schedule between the K&N Pro Series and Camping World Truck Series after winning the last two K&N Pro Series West titles. “I can’t thank everyone on my team enough. It’s a dream come true to be back here.”

The victory was his sixth career in East Series competition, and was his 19th victory combined in the K&N Pro Series.

Camry driver Hallie Deegan ran into an electrical issue early on and was not able to continue.

The New Smyrna 175 will air on NBCSN on Tuesday Feb. 27 at 6 p.m. ET.

NHRA

Toyota Top Fuel driver Doug Kalitta defeated Tony Schumacher with a 3.779-second pass in the final round to win the 58th annual Lucas Oil Winternationals in the NHRA season-opener at California’s Auto Club Raceway at Pomona, Sunday. It’s the second Winternationals title for Kalitta, who also captured the top spot in 2009.

“To get the first win of the season and get that monkey off your back is huge,” said Kalitta, who advanced to his third consecutive Winternationals final round today. “It was kind of a lucky day. Our Mac Tools Toyota dragster coasted across the finish line twice, but we were still getting the win light. It was one of those crazy days and we went through a lot of parts, but we got it done. We don’t care how we win, as soon as the win light comes on, we’re moving on to the next round. It was a great victory for us. I can’t give enough credit to the entire team.

Not only my guys, but the Kalitta Air guys all pitched in and we needed them. It was a thrash to make to at least three of the four rounds. It was just a great team effort. Fortunately, we have the team and the people to get it done.”

Antron Brown reached the semi-finals in Top Fuel, while both J.R. Todd and Cruz Pedregon advanced to the second round in Funny Car.

POWRi

Kevin Thomas Jr. drove his Petry Excavating Toyota to a pair of dominating victories to sweep the POWRi Lucas Oil National Midget League’s season-opening Sunshine State Midget Challenge weekend double-header at Bubba Raceway Park, in Ocala, Florida.

Toyota drivers captured five of the six podium finishes on the weekend. Overall, Toyota-powered entries have now won six of the seven national midget feature races run in 2018.

ARCA

Venturini Motorsports led the way early and often in the ARCA Racing Series at Daytona International Speedway. Toyota driver Natalie Decker started fast, capturing the pole in her No. 25 Camry Friday night. In the Menards Lucas Oil 200 Driven by General Tire, it was Michael Self who would go on to win the race in the No. 15 Camry and earn Venturini Motorsports its first win of 2018.

What’s Next:

In NASCAR, the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series is in action Thursday for the Can-Am Duels. Duel 1 begins at 7 p.m. ET, while Duel 2 starts at 8:45 p.m. ET.

The NASCAR Camping World Truck Series kicks its season off at Daytona Friday at 7:30 p.m. ET.

On Saturday, the NASCAR XFINITY Series takes the stage for its season opener at Daytona at 2:30 p.m.

On Sunday, we’re set for the 60th running of the Daytona 500 at 2:30 p.m. ET on FOX.