

NHRA Finals, NASCAR Title Fields to be Set

November 09, 2017

Image not found or type unknown



NASCAR

NASCAR's three national series will set their title-contending fields during the sport's penultimate race weekend of 2017 as a handful of Championship 4 berths remain on the line at Phoenix Raceway.

With two Camry drivers already in and three spots locked down, only one berth remains available for the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series' Championship 4 at Phoenix on Sunday. Toyota's Denny Hamlin ranks fifth in points entering this weekend's race and a solid points finish might vault the Camry driver into the Championship 4, but a win would guarantee it.

"We just need to keep digging to give ourselves a shot at a win this weekend," Hamlin said. "That's the way we're going to pull this thing off – we've been up front to contend for a win at the end of these past two races and that's our plan again at Phoenix."

Hamlin has one prior win on the one-mile, tri-oval speedway in 2012.

Should Hamlin qualify for the Championship 4, he would join Toyota title contenders Martin Truex Jr. and Kyle Busch, the 2015 NASCAR Cup Series driver's champion, in competing for this year's ultimate prize in the season finale at Homestead-Miami Speedway on Nov. 19.

The NASCAR Cup Series competes at Phoenix on Sunday, Nov. 12 with the racing broadcast live on NBC at 2:30 p.m. ET.

With wins by a pair of moonlighting Toyota drivers in the last two NASCAR XFINITY Series events – triumphs by Christopher Bell and Erik Jones – all four Championship 4 berths will be set for the XFINITY Series in Phoenix on Saturday.

Camry driver Matt Tifft currently ranks fifth in the point standings and sits just five points behind fourth-place Brennan Poole entering Phoenix, where one solid finish will propel Tifft into the championship discussion.

"This weekend is a do or die situation for our No. 19 Camry team as we head to Phoenix," Tifft said.

One year after the 21-year-old driver overcame brain surgery and in his first, full-time season, Tifft has elevated his performance in the Playoffs by recording six-consecutive top-10 results, including all five postseason races, after tallying seven in the regular season.

The Camry title hopeful will be joined on-track at Phoenix by Bell and Jones, who will complete the Joe Gibbs Racing stable after winning the most-recent XFINITY Series races at Kansas and Texas, respectively. Bell will make his seventh start in the series as he prepares to race full-time in the XFINITY Series in 2018 after pursuing this year's NASCAR Camping World Truck Series (NCWTS) title.

The XFINITY Series competes at Phoenix on Saturday, Nov. 11 at 3:30 p.m. ET with the action televised live on NBC.

In the Truck Series, three Tundra drivers remain in title contention for three Championship 4 slots that are on the line at Phoenix on Friday.

With second-place Johnny Sauter clinched into the Championship 4 with a win, points leader and Tundra driver Bell has a sizeable margin of 31 points over third-place Tundra driver Matt Crafton, a two-time NCWTS champion. Toyota driver Ben Rhodes sits fifth entering Phoenix – just five points behind fourth. All three Tundra drivers – Bell, Crafton and Rhodes – could advance into the Championship 4 with good fortune in Phoenix.

“I’m really excited for Phoenix – it’s a place that Rudy (Fugle, crew chief) has had a ton of success at and that gives me a lot of confidence,” Bell said. “I’ve noticed that everywhere William (Byron) won or had strong runs at last year that I’ve had a ton of confidence going into those places.”

Perhaps boding in their favor, Tundra drivers have won six-consecutive races at Phoenix and eight total wins by seven different drivers. In 2016, Crafton finished third at Phoenix and Bell seventh, while Rhodes was 14th.

The Truck Series race in Phoenix will be held on Friday, Nov. 10 at 8:30 p.m. ET with the race broadcast live on FS1.

NHRA

Toyota’s Doug Kalitta won in the NHRA Finals a year ago and will need to repeat and along with some help by his competitors to win the NHRA Mello Yello Drag Racing Series Top Fuel championship.

Kalitta ranks third entering the NHRA season finale at California’s Auto Club Raceway, where he needs a win and the two top-ranked competitors to falter early to have a shot at the title. Despite being 84-points back, the Pomona finale is worth one-and-a-half times other races, affording Kalitta the outside chance of the title if everything were to fall just right.

“We still have a shot at the title going into Pomona,” Kalitta said. “We will get everything ready and run hard at the Finals.”

Kalitta, who has one Top Fuel win in 2017, defeated his Toyota teammate J.R. Todd in the NHRA Finals in Pomona, California in 2016. Toyota’s Antron Brown ranks fourth in Top Fuel and is also still mathematically in the championship hunt. Toyota Top Fuel drivers have won the last eight-straight events at Pomona.

In Funny Car, Alexis DeJoria will compete in her final race before retiring. DeJoria has been a part of a number of firsts in her career, including being the first Camry driver to win the U.S. Nationals in 2014 and the first woman to race in 100 Funny Car races, which was accomplished in 2016.

The NHRA Finals will run at Auto Club Raceway in Pomona from Friday through Sunday, Nov. 10-12. Qualifying will air live on FS1 on Friday at 6:30 p.m. ET and on Saturday at 6:00 p.m. Sundays eliminations will air live on FS1 at 4:00 p.m. ET.