

Throwback Southern Sweep for Hamlin, Toyota Wins in NKNPSE, NHRA, USAC and TORC

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NASCAR

Camry driver Denny Hamlin completed a Southern 500 weekend sweep at South Carolina's Darlington Raceway when he passed his Toyota teammate Martin Truex Jr. with two laps remaining and cruised to take the checkered flag.

While Hamlin tied for the most laps led in the event with 124 circuits paced, Truex was in the catbird seat late after Hamlin missed pit road earlier in the race. However, with just two laps remaining, Truex had a tire go down, resulting in the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series (MENCs) points leader hitting the wall and finishing eighth. Hamlin then passed Truex to take first and go on to win.

"I tried to get all I could [entering pit road] and just flat out overshot it," Hamlin said from victory lane. "I looked at my dash and I gave up about 10 to 12 seconds and I was like, 'I don't know if I can. Were we going to win this race by 10 or 12 seconds? I doubt it,' and so we just had to put on a heck of a drive. My crew chief, Wheels (Mike Wheeler), was motivating me every lap to push, push, push and that's all I had."

"I was trying to catch him," Hamlin further explained. "[Lapped cars] kept slowing my momentum and really those three laps I was all over the track. I was laying on the wall every single lap trying to do everything I could and I think we had them pretty good there. It looked like he cut a tire entering Turn 3, but we were right there ready to pounce."

Hamlin captured the victory running a throwback paint scheme in homage to 'Mr. Modified,' Ray Hendrick, with a 'Flying 11' look that mirrored Hendrick's modified stock car from the 1960s and 1970s. Hamlin grew up watching Ray's son, Roy Hendrick, race at Southside Speedway in Virginia in the 1980s.

Despite the tire costing Truex a chance at the win, the eighth-place finish clinched the regular season championship for the Camry driver – with one race remaining in the regular season. By virtue of winning the regular season title, Truex gained an additional 15 bonus points to carry into the Playoffs.

"It was definitely a bittersweet night for us to come up just two laps short there, blow a tire at the end after having no issues with tires all night and having such a good race car," Truex said. "I was out there driving my guts out at the end trying to hang on. It's unfortunate we blew the tire, but really proud of everybody on this team for an amazing season so far and to lock up the regular season points is a huge accomplishment for us."

In total, five Camry drivers tallied top-10 results in the MENCs at Darlington, with Kyle Busch taking second, Erik Jones in fifth and Matt Kenseth sixth. Cup rookie Jones' result marked his fifth-straight top-10 finish and third-consecutive top-five result.

Prior to claiming the Cup win, Hamlin captured his second NASCAR XFINITY Series (NXS) victory this season at Darlington when he used a crossover move to retake the lead in the race's closing moments on Friday afternoon.

Hamlin, who led the field four times for 33 laps (of 148), reclaimed first coming out of the race's final restart, but former Camry driver Joey Logano passed the Joe Gibbs Racing driver to the inside for the lead. However, Hamlin judged Logano's move, backed up the corner and used an old school inside crossover move to jump back into first and capture the win.

"I didn't anticipate the 22 (Joey Logano) getting back to us like that, but he did," Hamlin said from the victory lane. "I knew going down the backstretch that he was going to have inside position. It was up to me then to back up the corner, let him slide up the race track and slide back around him on the exit, so it takes a lot of patience,

but glad it all worked out for us and this whole Sport Clips team.”

The victory was Hamlin’s fifth NXS triumph at the track with all five coming from the pole position. Hamlin now has the second-most NXS victories in track history and trails Mark Martin’s eight wins for the record.

As part of Darlington’s throwback-themed weekend, Hamlin also sported a ‘Mr. Modified’ Throwback paint scheme for the NXS race on his No. 18 Camry.

In Canada, Tundra driver Noah Gragson recorded a career-best finish of second and had the top-Toyota entry in the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series (NCWTS) race at Canadian Tire Motorsports Park on Sunday afternoon.

Gragson was running second when he was passed by eventual-winner Austin Cindric. Gragson later reclaimed second when he passed Kaz Grala after contact with Cindric sent Grala off-track.

“It’s just hard racing,” Gragson said in regards to contact between him and Cindric. “I used my truck up there – just a bummer. I really wanted to win this race and I gave it all I could. I was in the position where I had to win and I didn’t get the job done. My guys they put a really good Toyota Tundra under me and just really bummed out.”

Gragson currently ranks ninth in the NCWTS point standings, but 11th in the playoff standings – currently three positions below the eighth-place cutoff to make the postseason. Gragson needs a win in the NCWTS regular-season finale at Chicagoland Speedway on Friday, Sept. 15 to qualify for the playoffs.

Tundra driver Ryan Truex finished fifth after leading five laps (of 64) and won the race’s second stage.

Parker Kligerman finished eighth after leading two circuits in his Tundra, while Toyota’s Ben Rhodes finished 10th and led one lap.

The MENCS and NXS next compete at Richmond Raceway this upcoming weekend on Friday and Saturday night, Sept. 9-10.

In the NASCAR K&N Pro Series East (NKNPSE), Toyota driver Todd Gilliland captured his fourth win of the season at Virginia’s Langley Speedway on Monday. With the victory, Gilliland took the NKNPSE championship points lead from fellow Toyota driver Harrison Burton.

With his victory, the NASCAR Next driver took over the points lead in the K&N Pro Series East championship standings with just two races remaining.

“This is a crucial part of the season overall,” Gilliland explained. “With there only being 14 races, all of them are very important. This one is huge for us, taking the lead. We had some bad luck to start the year off but, man, we’ve come on strong in these summer months. We’ve just got two more races to go get it.”

In addition to the NKNPSE championship lead, Gilliland also owns the NASCAR K&N Pro Series West points lead. He next competes in the NKNPSE race at New Jersey Motorsports Park on Saturday, Sept. 16.

NHRA

Camry driver J.R. Todd had the advantage at the light and never trailed to defeat Ron Capps in the NHRA Funny Car finale at Lucas Oil Raceway Park in Indianapolis on Monday.

Todd, an Indiana native, defeated Brian Stewart, Cruz Pedregon and Tim Wilkerson to advance to the finals against point leader Ron Capps. In the final, Todd cut a .054 light and led the entire way to earn his first U.S. Nationals title. The win was Todd's second of the season.

"I've been coming here since I was a kid watching all these guys," Todd said of the home state win. "This is where it all started for me. I grew up racing here. We got a junior dragster at the end of 1992. In 1993, it was my first season and we would pit right behind the Top Eliminators Club. I grew up racing here weekly and almost won the track championship. I remember coming here as a kid and watching Ron Capps and to be racing him in the final round at Indy – it's too surreal. This is the one you always dream of winning. I've been coming here since 2006 and to finally win in Funny Car, which I think is the toughest of all the Mello Yello Series classes, is just unreal."

The win was the third in the last four races for a Kalitta Motorsports Toyota Camry Funny Car.

The NHRA next competes at Charlotte's zMAX Dragway from Friday to Sunday, Sept. 15-17, for the first race of the series' postseason, the Countdown to the Championship.

In total, five Toyota drivers qualified for the Countdown to the Championship. Antron Brown earned the number two seed in Top Fuel, followed by Doug Kalitta in fifth and Shawn Langdon in tenth. In Funny Car, J.R. Todd closed out the regular season in eighth on the strength of a strong late-season push. Cruz Pedregon secured the final Countdown berth with a first-round win in Indianapolis.

TORC

Toyota driver CJ Greaves made a dramatic, last-lap pass on his father Johnny to win Saturday's TORC: The Off-Road Championship race at Wisconsin's Crandon International Off-Road Raceway on Saturday.

Heading into the final lap, CJ had closed to within 1.1 seconds of the lead and finally made his move with just four turns remaining to take the lead for the Round 11 win.

"I wasn't giving an inch and he wasn't giving me an inch," CJ said after the win. "I got caught up with Chad Hord early and came to the caution in fourth. I knew I was going to have my work cut out for me. Coming into that last lap, I was thinking about spring Crandon going 'Hmm, I remember this happening once, just the other way around.' I was underneath him in the gravel pit and we collided and we both started to spin and he got way out in the mud. It was a great race. We kept charging until the end. I couldn't do it without all the guys from Toyota. They put phenomenal engines in both of these Tundras."

With his victory, CJ now holds a two-point championship lead over Johnny with just one doubleheader weekend remaining on the 2017 schedule.

TORC closes its season racing at ERX Motor Park in Minnesota from Friday through Sunday, Sept. 22-24.

USAC

Toyota-powered drivers won a pair of USAC Western States Midget Series events this weekend at the California's Calistoga Speedway.

Tanner Thorson captured Saturday night's feature win, while Rico Abreu came out on top on Sunday.