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Stewart Takes Care of Business at Fontana

Office Depot/Mobil 1 Driver Leads Twice for 42 Laps En Route to Rain-Shortened Victory

Date: March 25, 2012
Event: Auto Club 400 (Round 5 of 36)
Series: NASCAR Sprint Cup Series
Location: Auto Club Speedway in Fontana, Calif. (2-mile oval)
Start/Finish: 9th/1st (Running, completed 129 of 129 laps in a rain-shortened finish)
Points: 4th (18 points out of first)
Winner: Tony Stewart of Stewart-Haas Racing (Chevrolet)

Just as the weather has turned unseasonably warm across the United States months before the start of summer, Tony Stewart has also found the hot hand earlier than anytime during his 13 previous years in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series.

The driver of the No. 14 Office Depot/Mobil 1 Chevrolet for Stewart-Haas Racing (SHR) has always been known as someone who starts to run better as the temperature climbs upward, and in the rain-shortened Auto Club 400 on Sunday at Auto Club Speedway in Fontana, Calif., Stewart locked down his second win before the end of March, a scant five races into the 36-race schedule.

“It’s been nice to get off to a good start this year the way we have,” said Stewart, who prior to this season had only one, point-paying Sprint Cup victory before April (Atlanta on March 10, 2002). “The history shows in the last 13 years we’ve not had the strongest starts the first third of the year. I’m really, really excited about the start that we’ve got going. We’ve had top-10 cars and top-five cars every race this year, so I’m really, really proud of what Steve (Addington, crew chief) and all of our guys at Stewart-Haas Racing have done. I’m really proud of the Hendrick engine department. They’ve worked hard and are doing a good job with the EFI system. Proud of that, and real appreciative of Gene (Haas, co-owner) giving us the confidence to do what we do each week.”

Stewart led twice for a total of 42 laps en route to his 46th career Sprint Cup win, tying him with 1956 and 1957 Sprint Cup champion Buck Baker for 14th on the all-time series win list.

“As we’ve scored victories and tied or passed guys on that list, it’s been pretty incredible to see the names we’ve been mentioned with,” Stewart said. “Buck Baker is a legend in the sport and one of the pioneers of NASCAR. It’s very humbling to be mentioned in the same sentence with him.”

Stewart started ninth in the 43-car field and quickly carved his way to the front, moving past Kyle Busch to take the lead on lap 85. From there, Stewart led until lap 104, when he gave up the lead to make what would be his final pit stop. After the entire field completed their stops, Stewart once again grabbed the lead on lap 108 and stayed there for the duration.

On lap 125, the first and only caution of the day came out for rain in turn three, and soon the entire 2-mile track was soaked from a heavy rainstorm.

NASCAR officials displayed the red flag after 129 laps, and Stewart and Addington retreated to the No. 14 transporter. Less than an hour later with rain still pelting the racetrack, they were informed the race was called 71 laps short of its scheduled 200-lap distance, and Stewart was declared the winner.

“Even if we went back to green, I still feel like we had a little ways to go to get it perfect, but I was confident Steve was going in the right direction, no doubt,” Stewart said. “I felt like we still had more we could gain on it and would gain on it as the day went. Either way, whether it rained or didn’t rain, I felt confident we had a car that was capable of, for sure, running in the top-three and definitely had a great shot at winning.

“I mean, you hate to have them end with rain like that. But I’ve lost some that way. The good thing is we didn’t back into the lead because we stayed out and the leaders came in. I mean, we were leading the thing and had earned that spot. I’m proud of that. The guys gave me a great Office Depot/Mobil 1 Chevy, and Steve (Addington) and the guys made great calls.”

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Dating back to September of last season, Stewart has won seven of the last 15 Sprint Cup races, with victories at Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet, Ill. (September 2011), New Hampshire Motor Speedway in Loudon (September 2011), Martinsville (Va.) Speedway (October 2011), Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth (November 2011), Homestead-Miami Speedway (November 2011), Las Vegas Motor Speedway (March 2012) and now Fontana.

“It was nice to end the year on a high note like we did,” said Stewart, referring to the third Sprint Cup title he won in 2011, but first as a driver/owner with SHR. “To be able to come out of the box and carry that momentum, I think it shows the depth of our program.”

This was the 15th point-paying Sprint Cup win for SHR since its inception in 2009. Making the victory extra sweet was that it came at the home track of Oxnard, Calif.-based Haas Automation, the largest CNC machine tool builder in the western world, which was founded by SHR co-owner Gene Haas.

“Gene has always given us the flexibility and the tools to do what we think needs to be done at our shop,” Stewart said. “Not once have we asked for anything and Gene said no. We don’t take advantage of that. We don’t look at it as an empty checkbook, by any means. We definitely run it like a business and do the best we can to watch our budgets. But Gene has been awesome of letting us make changes when we felt like we needed to. There’s been some key pieces that we’ve needed in the shop, and he’s been behind it a hundred percent. That gives all of our guys the confidence that we’re doing everything that we can to give ourselves the best opportunity to be successful.”

Ryan Newman, driver of the No. 39 U.S. Army ROTC Chevrolet for SHR, finished seventh to score his second top-10 finish of 2012 and his seventh top-10 in 18 career Sprint Cup starts at Fontana.

The last time both SHR cars finished in the top-10 was two races ago at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, where Stewart won and Newman was fourth.

Finishing behind Stewart in the runner-up spot was Kyle Busch, who led twice for a race-high 80 laps. Dale Earnhardt Jr., was third, with Kevin Harvick and Carl Edwards rounding out the top-five. Sprint Cup point leader Greg Biffle, Newman, Martin Truex Jr., Kurt Busch and Jimmie Johnson comprised the remainder of the top-10. Seven drivers failed to finish.

With round five of 36 complete, Stewart leads the SHR contingent in the championship point standings. He is fourth with 177 points, 18 behind series leader Biffle. Newman is 10th with 155 points, 40 out of first.

The next event on the Sprint Cup schedule is the Goody’s Fast Relief 500 on Sunday, April 1 at Martinsville Speedway. The race starts at 1 p.m. EDT, with live coverage provided by FOX beginning with its pre-race show at 12:30 p.m.

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