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Stewart Wins Gatorade Duel at Daytona

Office Depot/Mobil 1 Driver Will Start Third in Sunday's 54th Daytona 500

Date: Feb. 23, 2012
Event: Race No. 1 of the Gatorade Duel at Daytona (non-point qualifying races for the 54th Daytona 500)
Series: NASCAR Sprint Cup Series
Location: Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway (2.5-mile oval)
Start/Finish: 6th/1st (Running, completed 60 of 60 laps)
Winners: **Gatorade Duel No. 1 – Tony Stewart of Stewart-Haas Racing (Chevrolet)**
Gatorade Duel No. 2 – Matt Kenseth of Roush Fenway Racing (Ford)

After a strong second-place showing last Saturday night in the non-points Budweiser Shootout at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway, Tony Stewart continued to flex his muscles in Thursday's Gatorade Duel, twin qualifying races that set the 43-car field for the season-opening Daytona 500.

Stewart improved his finishing position by one, winning his Gatorade Duel race in convincing fashion by leading three times for a race-high 21 laps, including the final 18 around the 2.5-mile oval. The win places the three-time and reigning NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion third in the starting lineup for Sunday's 54th Daytona 500.

"This Office Depot/Mobil 1 Chevy has been awesome all weekend," Stewart said. "This thing has been fast, so we're hoping to be there at the end on Sunday."

The win was Stewart's 17th overall triumph at Daytona, including previous 17th Gatorade Duel victories in 2005 and 2007. Stewart now stands alone at second on Daytona's all-time win list, surpassing 2011 NASCAR Hall of Fame inductee Bobby Allison and trailing only the legendary Dale Earnhardt, who has 34 victories at Daytona and was a part of the inaugural NASCAR Hall of Fame induction class of 2010.

Despite all of that success, Stewart remains winless in the Daytona 500 as he heads into his 14th career start in the Great American Race.

"To be able to come out and have two really good strong and solid races, back-to-back, is an awesome start for us," Stewart said. "It's good momentum for the crew – everybody at Stewart-Haas Racing – to carry that momentum from last year. It gives you confidence going into Sunday."

Forty-nine drivers were split among the two Duels, putting 25 drivers in the first 150-mile race and 24 drivers in the second 150-mile race.

"We only raced against half the field in this qualifier," Stewart said. "It's a long race on Sunday, and a lot can happen. Even though we had success today, it's no guarantee that can happen Sunday."

"I think we showed the rest of the field that we have a car that has good speed. That's a really strong point, just like Trevor Bayne (defending Daytona 500 winner) showed last year that he had a strong car, so people wanted to go with him. Hopefully that will work for us on Sunday, too."

Stewart's SHR teammate Ryan Newman, driver of the No. 39 U.S. Army/Quicken Loans Chevrolet Impala, finished ninth in the second Gatorade Duel. Newman will start 18th in the Daytona 500.

SHR driver Danica Patrick finished 16th in the first Gatorade Duel, driving the No. 10 GoDaddy.com Chevrolet Impala for Tommy Baldwin Racing via a collaborative agreement with SHR.

Patrick endured a hard crash into the infield SAFER Barrier off turn two after an inadvertent nudge from another competitor on the final lap. The wall and the car did their jobs, and Patrick walked away from the accident unhurt.

With her primary racecar destroyed, Patrick will use her backup GoDaddy.com Chevrolet in the Daytona 500. While she'll be credited with a 29th-place starting spot for her Sprint Cup debut, Patrick will drop to the rear of the field prior to the start of the race per the NASCAR rulebook.

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Patrick's accident happened after the white flag had waved, signifying the final lap. Stewart led when the white flag was displayed, and despite the caution coming out for Patrick's accident, the race ended under caution per the NASCAR rulebook.

Stewart crossed the stripe ahead of Dale Earnhardt Jr., to take the win as the checkered and caution flags waved simultaneously.

Marcos Ambrose finished third, while Jeff Burton and Carl Edwards rounded out the top-five. The rest of the top-10 consisted of Michael McDowell, Kevin Harvick, A.J. Allmendinger, Robby Gordon and Jamie McMurray.

Matt Kenseth won the second Gatorade Duel by .209 of a second over Regan Smith. Jimmie Johnson, Elliott Sadler and Greg Biffle took spots three through five. The rest of the top-10 consisted of Joey Logano, Kyle Busch, Jeff Gordon, Newman and Kasey Kahne.

With the Gatorade Duel now complete, the field for the Daytona 500 is set. On the pole is Carl Edwards, and alongside him is Biffle, his Roush Fenway Racing teammate. By notching the two quickest times during last Sunday's time trials, both drivers were able to lock themselves into the front row for the Daytona 500.

Failing to qualify today for the Daytona 500 were Bill Elliott, Robert Richardson Jr., J.J. Yeley, Kenny Wallace, Mike Wallace and Michael Waltrip.

The Daytona 500 gets underway at 1 p.m. EST Sunday, Feb. 26 with live coverage provided by FOX beginning with its pre-race show at noon.

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