

Newgarden Clinches 2011 Indy Lights Championship

Attrition Takes Toll on SSM Team in Kentucky 100

Date: Oct. 2, 2011
Event: Kentucky 100 (Round 13 of 14)
Series: Firestone Indy Lights
Location: Kentucky Speedway in Sparta (1.5-mile oval)
Winner: Stefan Wilson of Andretti Autosport
SSM Team: Josef Newgarden (Started 6th, Finished 2nd/ Running, completed 67 of 67 laps)
Bryan Clauson (Started 11th, Finished 5th/ Running, completed 67 of 67 laps)
Victor Carbone (Started 7th, Finished 7th/ Mechanical, completed 48 or 67 laps)
Esteban Guerrieri (Started 5th, Finished 10th / Crash, completed 0 of 67 laps)

All Josef Newgarden had to do was start Sunday's Kentucky 100 at Kentucky Speedway in Sparta and he would clinch the 2011 Firestone Indy Lights Championship. That simple.

Instead, he showed how he won the title by running wheel-to-wheel at speeds in excess of 180 mph for more than 20 laps around the 1.5-mile oval before finishing second to race-winner Stefan Wilson. It was a championship-caliber performance by Newgarden in No. 11 Copart/Score Big/Robo-Pong Dallara fielded by Sam Schmidt Motorsports (SSM).

After starting sixth, Newgarden quickly moved to the point, taking the lead from polesitter Wilson on lap 16 and holding off the Andretti Autosport driver for 20 laps. Wilson eventually won the battle with Newgarden, retaking the lead on lap 36 and holding it through the end of the 67-lap race.

But it was Newgarden who won the war, taking his first Firestone Indy Lights title and the fifth for SSM.

Newgarden's second-place finish led the four-car SSM team in a race that saw accidents and contact eliminate several drivers.

Bryan Clauson, driver of the No. 77 Mazda Road To Indy/CURB Records car for SSM, recovered from a poor qualifying spot to run a steady race and finish fifth.

SSM's Victor Carbone had a strong race evolving in the No. 3 Nevoni Dallara. He started seventh and methodically moved up to third place where he engaged in a three-car battle for that position. However, contact with Bryan Herta Autosports's Duarte Ferreira broke a wheel bearing and ended Carbone's day. He finished seventh.

Esteban Guerrieri, driving SSM's No. 7 Lucas Oil Dallara, was eliminated in a first-lap crash that also took out four other cars. He was scored in 10th place.

Finishing between Newgarden (second) and Clauson (fifth) to round out the top-five were Jorge Concalvez (third) and Brandon Wagner (fourth).

With his win, Wilson moved around Guerrieri for second place in the championship. Guerrieri trails Wilson by seven points with one race remaining.

The Firestone Indy Lights season finale is Oct. 16 at Las Vegas Motor Speedway as part of the IZOD IndyCar Series World Championship Weekend.

Josef Newgarden (Finished 2nd), Driver of the No. 11 Copart/Score Big/Robo-Pong/Sam Schmidt Motorsports Dallara:

"It's a big day for the Sam Schmidt Motorsports team. It's very bittersweet for us given everything that has happened over the last few weeks. It's going to be difficult to celebrate this without Chris (Griffis). It certainly gave us a lot of motivation to come here and finish it off right for him. I'm elated for all of the guys. The entire team has worked so hard and they really put a lot into this year. It's a big day for all of them and certainly for the whole team."

Bryan Clauson (Finished 5th), Driver of the No. 77 Mazda Road To Indy/CURB Records Sam Schmidt Motorsports Dallara:

“I’m glad we made it to the end of the race with the big wreck at the start, and there were a lot of different things going on out there. The car wasn’t quite as good today as it was yesterday. We were just missing it somewhere, and the car felt loose out there, which made it hard to turn and get through traffic. It was a tough day overall. We finished fifth on paper, which looks good, but it wasn’t what we wanted out of today. We’re getting ready to go to Las Vegas, and we had a good test earlier this spring, so I’m looking forward to that race.”

Victor Carbone (Finished 7th), Driver of the No. 3 Nevon/Sam Schmidt Motorsports Dallara:

“I was putting together a great race. At the beginning, I was actually catching up with the guys in front and started fighting with Duarte (Ferreira), and it was just crazy. He made some moves there and that made INDYCAR stop him because I was surprised I didn’t end up in the wall, to be honest. We touched a few times and that caused damage to my right-front wheel, a bearing I think. I had to stop. It’s a shame because we worked hard and it was a really good comeback from yesterday. But now we go back to Vegas. It’s the same type of oval so hopefully we improve from what we’ve done here.”

Esteban Guerrieri (Finished 10th), Driver of the No.7 Lucas Oil/Sam Schmidt Motorsports Dallara:

“He (Jacob Wilson) was quite shaky in the rear and then lost it coming into turn two, so I had no way to avoid him because he was in the middle of the track. I hit him and we went close to the top of the racetrack and collected the other cars. It’s a shame because there were only 13 cars to start with and to lose five in the first lap is not good. But at least we are in good shape – good physical shape – with no other big problems. So, we’ll get ready for the next one.”

-SSM-