

No Shortage Of Title Contenders



Krista Voda hosts the popular SPEED prerace show "NCWTS Setup," leading into each NASCAR Camping World Truck Series race. Voda is also a regular host on "The SPEED Report" and serves as a pit reporter for NASCAR on FOX coverage of the Sprint Cup Series.

“THE QUESTION IS: WHO WILL BE HOISTING THE SPRINT CUP TROPHY THIS TIME AROUND?”

Coming off the closest finish in Sprint Cup Series history, NASCAR will be hard-pressed to duplicate the dynamic events that took place last year.

That said, we carry the momentum of a remarkable 2011 campaign into the new season.

For the first time in six years, Jimmie Johnson goes from being the hunted to the hunter. Tony Stewart looks to defend the Sprint Cup championship and Carl Edwards tries to take care of some unfinished business.

The 2012 Sprint Cup Series season features plenty of storylines and the promise of another tantalizing finish at Homestead-Miami Speedway come November.

Before we forecast that far out, let's look at some of the key changes in NASCAR's top series as a new season dawns at Daytona International Speedway.

Former Red Bull Racing driver Kasey Kahne heads the list as he takes over driving duties in the No. 5 Chevrolet at Hendrick Motorsports. Crew chief Kenny Francis joins Kahne and the duo will try to pick up where it left off after a strong finish to 2011 — including a victory at Phoenix.

Mark Martin, NASCAR's elder statesman, will run 25 races for Michael Waltrip Racing. MWR also welcomes former Richard Childress Racing driver Clint Bowyer into the fold. Bowyer will drive the No. 15 Toyota with sponsorship from 5-hour Energy in a majority of the races. Former IndyCar star Danica Patrick will drive a 10-race schedule for Stewart-Haas Racing

and attempt to make her Sprint Cup debut in the Daytona 500.

Unfortunately, some familiar names likely will be missing from the Cup garage. Brian Vickers and David Ragan joined David Reutimann as notable drivers without full-time rides as of press time.

Kurt Busch — one of the sport's most talented and at times troubled drivers — landed at Phoenix Racing after he and Penske Racing parted ways following the 2011 season. AJ Allmendinger will replace Busch in the No. 22 Dodge.

There are other changes besides personnel in store this year. Electronic fuel injection makes its debut and the official start to the season comes a week later with the Feb. 26 running of the Daytona 500.

NASCAR and its fans enjoyed the tightest finish in Cup Series history last year when Stewart captured his third title in a tiebreaker over Edwards. Expect both drivers to be in the championship mix again along with Johnson. Richard Childress Racing's Kevin Harvick has threatened to break through with his first championship the past two years and bears watching again in 2012.

Harvick, who shuttered Kevin Harvick Inc. after 10 years of competition in the Nationwide and Truck Series, now will hone in on the biggest prize that's eluded him since taking over for the late Dale Earnhardt in 2001. Excluding Stewart's remarkable five-win binge in the Chase For The Sprint Cup, Harvick and Kyle Busch won with more regularity than anyone

in 2011. Both drivers finished the season with four victories.

Kyle will need to rein in his emotions if he is to win the Sprint Cup that has evaded him thus far.

Denny Hamlin, Busch's teammate at Joe Gibbs Racing, will look to overcome last year's disappointing campaign and return to the near-championship form he displayed in 2010.

The offseason acquisition of Darian Grubb as crew chief for the No. 11 JGR team was a huge boon for Hamlin. Grubb carries the confidence of winning last year's Sprint Cup with him from Stewart-Haas Racing and he could help Hamlin get over the championship hump.

No stranger to the championship conversation is four-time champion Jeff Gordon, who broke through last season to claim three victories but finished eighth in points. Gordon still has that "fire in his belly" and you can bet he will be one to watch in his quest to match his teammate, Johnson, in the "five-time" category.

Another competitor to keep your eye on is Brad Keselowski, who went from being a midpack driver during his sophomore season into a Chase contender with three victories at Penske Racing. Keselowski, who inked a multiyear extension with team owner Roger Penske, will be the organization's flagship driver in the wake of Kurt Busch's exit.

While much has changed to start the 2012 season, we know it will end in a familiar place at Homestead. The question is: Who will be hoisting the Sprint Cup trophy this time around? **Ni**