

Season For The Ages



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With this being *NASCAR Illustrated's* "Best of" issue, it's the perfect time to take one last look back at an incredible season. And, wow, what a year to reflect on.

While NASCAR's 2011 season will be remembered for the closest championship finish in Sprint Cup Series history, it will also go down as the year Jimmie Johnson was finally dethroned.

Johnson was on his way to finishing a career-worst sixth in points — how many drivers would love to say that? — as Tony Stewart and Carl Edwards waged an epic battle that wasn't decided until the final lap of the season at Homestead.

Stewart captured both the race and the championship courtesy of a tiebreaker that he owned after winning an unprecedented five races in the Chase. In doing so, "Smoke" became the first driver to win the Winston Cup (2002), Nextel Cup (2005) and Sprint Cup (2011).

Stewart, who won titles on both ends of Johnson's championship reign, joined legends such as Cale Yarborough, Darrell Waltrip and David Pearson among those in the elite group of three-time Cup champions.

Stewart also became the first driver to use a victory in the final race to come from behind and win the title, but this was not a case of Edwards losing anything. The Roush Fenway Racing driver did all he could down the stretch and held his head high after coming up just short of his first championship.

Edwards, who carried a three-point lead into the final race at Homestead, won only

once and early in the year at Las Vegas but was a model of consistency. Running second to Stewart at Homestead and in the final standings despite both having 2,403 points, his average finish of 4.9 in the Chase was an unprecedented feat.

While sitting in a Las Vegas ballroom watching Stewart be revered and celebrated couldn't have been easy, Edwards rose above it all. Perhaps his nickname should be changed from "Cousin Carl" to "Classy Carl" because Edwards was such a class act all the way through.

Winning had not been rewarded as much as I thought it should be in past years, and it seemed fitting that Stewart's title was ultimately achieved by the number of times he visited victory lane. The fact that his handful of victories all came in the Chase just made it more remarkable.

The surprise story of 2011 had to be Penske Racing's Brad Keselowski. It's still hard to believe the run he put together after breaking his left ankle in a test session at Road Atlanta last summer. All he did was win at Pocono, finish second at Watkins Glen, third at Michigan and win again at Bristol to close out the most productive stretch of his career.

Talk about playing hurt! Before the injury, Keselowski was 21st in points and an afterthought when it came to the Chase but he ended up fifth in the championship.

It was that kind of year when the unexpected became the norm and it all started in the season-opening Daytona 500. Trevor Bayne shocked the stock-

car racing world by winning NASCAR's biggest race in only his second career Cup start.

Bayne's victory was the feel-good story of the season — especially when you consider how much his Wood Brothers Racing team has meant to NASCAR over the years. He may only be 20, but Trevor taught me a valuable lesson that day. I am indebted to him.

First-time winners continued to be a dominant storyline throughout the 2011 season. Regan Smith outdueled Edwards to give tiny Furniture Row Racing an improbable Southern 500 victory at Darlington.

David Ragan scored his maiden victory last summer at Daytona and Paul Menard did likewise at his family's "home track" in Indianapolis. Finally, Marcos Ambrose broke through at Watkins Glen to win for the first time and gain a measure of redemption for his near-miss at Sonoma the year before.

In all, 18 different drivers won a Sprint Cup race last year, threatening the single-season record of 19 set in 1956 and matched in 2001. Kasey Kahne became No. 18 when he gave Red Bull Racing an emotional victory at Phoenix in November. While Kahne and crew chief Kenny Francis knew they were headed to Hendrick Motorsports this year, their team members faced an uncertain future but never stopped working hard.

Let's not forget how special 2011 was for NASCAR's Sprint Cup Series as we move into the new year. It was truly a season for the ages. **Ni**