

# Lapbylap

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## In the final stretch

NASCAR team members have 11 more races before the grueling season comes to an end



Ricky Jones, a tire changer for Todd Bodine's Winston Cup team, takes a rest.

By Rea McLeroy  
LapbyLap

Since the mid-1990s, the Winston Cup schedule slowly has been growing. In the past five years, six races were added to the schedule, and several off weekends were taken away.

This year, the weekends without a race are almost nonexistent. Easter and Mother's Day are traditional holidays in the racing world, but nothing else appears sacred. Teams started practicing for the Daytona 500 on Feb. 9. Nine weeks later came the break for Easter. Three races after that was Mother's Day. Teams had only one other weekend off, in late June, and after this weekend's Richmond race NASCAR teams will be midway through a final stretch of 20 consecutive races.

"The main thing is you stay busy and try to stay two or three races ahead and hope that you don't tear anything up that'll get you in a bind," said Wayne Jenks, a jackman on Todd Bodine's team. "Other than that, you try to stay mentally prepared because it's going to be a long stretch. I mean very long."

Team members work to balance family life with the stress of seemingly constant work and travel. These men have families. They are fathers and husbands and sons. They work to be good at it, to steal moments at home. They chose this life, but this life has always been this way. With each schedule increase or change, NASCAR has added more hours to the job. The move will shorten careers and test stamina, making the championship run a survival race.

"If you're behind come Charlotte [in May], it's going to be an awful long year," said Shane Parsnow, engine builder and tire changer for Hendrick Motorsports.

Michael Ehret, Penske Racing's jackman, loves working on the cars. But he also loves his new wife and home and has decided to curtail his schedule a bit.

"I'm not at the point where I'm going home and not recognizing things," Ehret said. "Before, I'd come home, and I didn't even recognize the house because the grass was so long. You were just home long enough to catch up."

Ehret still works in the shop and travels with the

team. But he waits until the weekend to leave for the race. "People can only take so much," he said. "You get to the point where it'll burn you out a little quicker."

Teams have tried to build in off days during this final stretch, but a couple of wrecks can change those plans.

Mark Armstrong understands that. He works for Jeff Burton, whose car was a magnet for crashes in the early season. The team worked extra days, then found a way to take time off later. Armstrong works in the shop and as a member of the pit crew. He wearily returns home on Sunday nights, checking on his 2-year-old son before crawling into bed. On a good night, his son wakes up. "We'll put him in the bed with us," Armstrong said. "He'll wake up [Monday] and see a stranger lying next to him that he hasn't seen in a few days, and he'll just look. Then he'll see it's me and crawl over and kiss me and hug me."

Although leaving his family to go on the road is an almost weekly process, it doesn't get easier. Not for any of the guys.

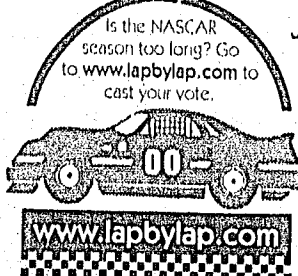
"It'd be different if you could take your family to the racetrack," said Parsnow, who has a 3-year-old. "But you just can't do that." Starting July 5, teams began racing every weekend until Nov. 18. These are not all local events. The circuit has already hit Joliet, Ill., and still has stops in Phoenix; Homestead, Fla.; and Kansas City, Kansas.

Teams are pushing themselves, trying to keep cars and tracks straight. There are midweek trips to the wind tunnel or tracks for testing. There's a championship to chase. Nothing is easy.

Most of these men wouldn't do anything else. They accept the difficult schedule and try to be in the best shape possible for the long stretch. Heading into Daytona in February, most knew what they faced. They are making the most of it.

"You always wonder, could you be doing something else?" Jenks said. "My grandmother worked at a cotton mill all her life for probably a dollar an hour, and some of these other people are in lots worse shape. We're really lucky to have a job that pays good even if it takes a lot of work. We've got it a lot better than a lot of people across the country."

Rea McLeroy covers NASCAR for the Richmond Times-Dispatch.



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## NASCAR NOTES

### Good New Days: Woods brothers get back on track

Dale Earnhardt Jr. was warned not to make contact with any other cars after being involved in incidents with Hut Stricklin and Stacy Compton in the Southern 500. "They said if we ran into anybody else we were going to get parked," he said. "But that's normal, that's nothing out of the blue."

Robert Pressley crashed, climbed out of his car, then collapsed at the inner retaining wall during the Southern 500. He was transported to Carolinas Hospital System in Florence, S.C., for X-rays and a CT scan. Both were negative, and Pressley was released the same night.

Steve Park was hospitalized after suffering a concussion in the Busch Grand National race at Darlington Raceway. Crew chiefs said it appeared Park's steering wheel came off the column, causing his car to veer to the left during a caution into Terry Foyt's, accelerating lapped car. Park had to be cut from his car.

Darlington Raceway once belonged to David Pearson and the Wood brothers, back to those glory years now recalled on those TV telecasts of the classics. But things change, fortunes rise and fall, and fortunes rise again, perhaps. For more than 50 years, the Woods have watched NASCAR change. From those first races by Hall of Famers Glen and Leonard Wood — in that '37 Ford, bought for \$50 — right up through today, with the legendary Appalachian operation now a multi-million-dollar business run by Len and Eddie Wood, Glen's sons.

"They talk about the good old days," Eddie said, reflecting on his own 30-plus years in the sport. "But I kinda think we're in the good old days. I don't miss driving across the United States in a truck. I don't miss going to Michigan in a van and turning around after the race and driving all night to get back home and then go somewhere else."

"I like the airplanes. We were there during all the Pearson days, and that was great. It has all changed. But I like it better now."

"Back then you had Junior Johnson and the Pettys and Harry Hyde and Bud Moore to beat, maybe eight or 10 cars each weekend. Now you've got 35 or 40 cars competitive every

week. I feel like if you win one now, you've probably gone through more than you did back then."

And the Woods certainly went through enough between their last two tour wins. Elliott Sadler's win at Bristol in the spring didn't quite spark a renaissance. The team has still been too hit-and-miss. But a third at Daytona, with a shot to win, and some decent races recently have put a smile on Sadler's face, and he has always been a moody kind of driver who plays his best when brimming with confidence.

"He's gained quite a bit of confidence. You can see it in his face," Len said of Sadler. "He took it hard the first year, and actually the second year, too, when we thought we'd do a lot better but got in a bunch of wrecks and buried ourselves in the points. You could read his face then and tell he wasn't pumped up."

"But after winning Bristol he looked like he was two inches taller. Hopefully now he realizes he can win anywhere."

So the Woods' Elliott Sadler Project, now more than two years running, seems finally to be paying off.

Now the Woods have a new project — Jon Wood. That's Eddie's 19-year-old son, and Jack Roush's newest Truck tour driver, picked up just this summer. With that move up to the Trucks, the Woods have reached another milestone, one perhaps a bit frightening.

Now Jon Wood is a full-time on-the-road stocker, heading this week to Richmond for his 10th Truck race of the season, commuting

between Stuart, Va., and Detroit weekly, and planning to move to Greensboro, N.C. What has been a fun-and-games hobby is now suddenly a job. And maybe a career.

It's all been quite a rush for Eddie, who has had a father's natural reluctance to push too hard, but who has found himself being pulled along this career train by his rambunctious, fast-driving son. What has been a sideline project for father and son has suddenly become a major career project, with all the trepidations that are to be expected in this business.

"I'm the dad, so I've been trying to move slower in all this," Eddie said.

But Jon just won't let him. And now this racing thing is no longer just a relaxing diversion for the family from the deadly earnest Sunday job on the Winston Cup tour.

"It's already there," Eddie Wood said with a nervous laugh. "We were doing the Winston West stuff and had some small sponsorship to cover it, but we just weren't equipped to do a second deal, a Truck or a Cup car. The Late Model thing we could handle, but when you get up to the next level, that's the real deal."

"I was hoping something would work out so he could race somewhere. Didn't really matter where, but I did want it with Jack. Because Jack is big on young kids and he's proven it works — look at Kurt Busch. One year in Trucks and here he is on the pole for the Southern 500."

"We just got lucky, and it worked out at the right place and the right time."

Mike Mulhern has covered NASCAR for 27 years for the Winston-Salem Journal.

## Pit Stop

This driver has won more races at Richmond International Raceway than any other driver. Can you name him?

For the answer, see next week's page or go to lapbylap.com.

## Just the Stats

NASCAR POINTS LEADERS	
Winston Cup	Busch Series
1. Jeff Gordon 3,708	1. Kevin Harvick 3,934
2. Ricky Rudd 3,366	2. Jason Keller 3,533
3. Sterling Marlin 3,220	3. Greg Biffle 3,471
4. Dale Jarrett 3,215	4. Jeff Green 3,452
5. Tony Stewart 3,210	5. Clint Stover 3,121
6. Bobby Labonte 3,117	6. Mike McLaughlin 3,084
7. Dale Earnhardt Jr. 3,079	7. Tony Roper 3,067
8. Jay Wallace 3,060	8. Jimmie Johnson 3,027
9. Jeff Burton 3,055	9. Chad Little 2,921
10. Johnny Benson 2,964	10. Kenny Wallace 2,878
11. Steve Park 2,837	11. Scott Wimmer 2,722
12. Mark Martin 2,842	12. Randy Layne 2,708
13. Jeff Burton 2,842	13. Kevin Goss 2,628
14. Bill Elliott 2,805	14. David Green 2,623
15. Matt Kenseth 2,771	15. Jay Sauter 2,567
16. Jimmy Spencer 2,696	16. Jamie McMurray 2,553
17. Wade Martin 2,505	17. Bobby Hamilton Jr. 2,538
18. Elliott Sadler 2,559	18. Jeff Puns 2,475
19. Ken Schrader 2,503	19. Rusty Wallace 2,307
20. Bobby Hamilton Jr. 2,484	20. Hank Parker Jr. 2,340

For complete points standings and additional statistics, go to www.lapbylap.com.

## RACING THIS WEEK

**Chevrolet Monte Carlo 400**  
Where: Richmond International Raceway (Richmond, Va.)  
When: Sept. 8, 7:30 p.m.  
On the air: TNT  
Distance: Sept. 7, 3:05 p.m.  
Qualifying: 400 laps, 300 miles  
Track qualifying record: Jeff Gordon, 1:26.499, May 15, 1999

Track race record: Dale Jarrett, 1:08.707, Sept. 6, 1997  
2000 winner: Jeff Gordon

**Richmond International Raceway**

Track: .75-mile oval  
Banking: 14 degrees

**Busch Grand Nat'l**  
Race: Autolite 500  
Where: Richmond International Raceway  
When: Sept. 7, 8 p.m.  
On the air: TNT

Visit www.lapbylap.com for qualifying results and race-day coverage.

**Who's Hot:** Ward Burton. He has a chance to win \$1 million at Richmond if he can continue the dominance he showed last weekend at Darlington.

**Who's Not:** Dale Jarrett. He surrendered more ground in the points race, falling to fourth after losing 12 laps at Darlington with a mechanical problem.

**On the Record**  
"All my heroes, particularly Bobby Allison, made the Southern 500 a tradition, and I'm just happy to be a part of it."  
— Ward Burton

Last week's Pit Stop answer: Bill Elliott

## Fish finally returning to the banks at Lake Norman

By DON C. MONTEZ

Sometimes there's no rhyme or reason to what goes on in the world of fishing. This week the water is falling and the temperatures have been hot, but for some reason the fish seem to be returning to the banks to feed.

I can't explain it, but it seems to be the best bite going this week. The bass have found something to eat up shallow this week, and they are moving up to take advantage of it. It could be a new hatch of crayfish or shad, or some kind of insects along the bank. Whatever it is, it's going to give all of us the chance to finally catch a few bass.

The largemouth are coming into the shallows to feed late in the evening and early in the morning. I suspect you could catch them there all night if you had the urge. Once the sun gets up the fish are moving out into the deeper water and suspending until it cools off again.

When they are up they are still fairly inactive and you need to fish slow to catch them. Worms and jigs seem to be the best baits, and you need to use dark colors like black and or blue. The trick

## The Fishin' Hole

is to be thorough, try to flip up in the rocks every couple of feet. The fish are looking for some kind of meal in the crevices between the riprap rocks. You have to be patient; the good fish are mixed up with a ton of bream and smaller bass. Just work your way down the largest stretches of deep riprap bank you can find, you'll get lots of bites but some of them are bream.

You have to stay on your toes because you never know when you are going to jerk on a big fish. There are some fish over 7 lbs caught in September each year. The trick is to keep on weeding through the small fish. If you are getting bites this time of year you are doing the right thing. When the sun is low in the sky, you can try top water baits, trouble is you need to keep an open mind because it seems like the fish are biting different things each week. Try several different baits each time you go, it's a whole new ballgame each trip.

The strippers are moving around this week. They have been right up next to the dam, but now it looks like they are moving back upriver. The last reports I heard had the best schools of fish moving back up towards Marker 6.

Trotting seems to be the only way to locate any big fish this week. There are lots of small fish around Little Creek and the mouth of Mountain Creek. Bait fishing will produce fish, but there are lots of little strippers and white bass out there, and it can be hard to weed through all the small fish. Trolling will let you cover more water in search of the better-sized fish. Lead core line and large buck tails are the best bet, but trolling deep diving plugs will sometimes produce a trophy.

Use your electronics and work your way up and down the river channel, and watch for large schools of fish on your graph. If you want to use live bait your best bet this week is to fish around the islands in the river between Marker 19 and Marker 22. The fish are scattered out right now and you just have to keep trying different places until you find an active school. Once you find some fish that will cooperate, don't leave until you

aren't getting any bites at all. The crappie are starting to get hungry, they will gradually begin to move into the shallow brush piles over the next month. You have to fish deep, with live bait as this transition begins. As the fish come up you can start to use jigs and fish a little faster. You need to approach each trip with a clear mind. The fish can move up a day or two and then jump back down into the depths before you know they're gone. You just have to keep moving and trying different holes until you get a reading

on the best depth on that day. This week you need to start deep and move up a little at a time, until you find a good depth. Once you locate the right zone, you can lock in on the fish and work on catching a good mess of fish to eat.

The fish are starting to feed and you can expect the fishing to gradually improve over the next couple of weeks. Just keep moving and work on finding some good areas to fish once the bite really turns on this fall. Things are finally getting better; so get out there if you can.

## Top drivers featured on new LMS tickets

For the first time since introducing its series of commemorative Pole Night tickets almost 10 years ago, Lowe's Motor Speedway is offering race fans the opportunity to purchase a ticket for Winston Pole Night in early October featuring their favorite NASCAR Winston Cup driver.

Known as the NASCAR Winston Cup Warrior Series, these limited-edition Winston Pole Night tickets feature eight of the series' top drivers.

The list includes Mooreville-based Dale Earnhardt Inc. teammates Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Steve Park. Also, local-based Robert Yates Racing driver Ricky Rudd is also among those featured.

Others include Dale Jarrett, Jeff Gordon, Bobby Labonte, Bill Elliott and Mark Martin.

"Race fans are extremely passionate about the drivers they support," assured H.A. "Humpy" Wheeler, president and general manager of LMS. "This Warrior Series of tickets gives them a choice. It's

going to be interesting to monitor ticket sales and see which of the eight drivers is most popular among the fans attending qualifying for the UAW-GM Quality 500."

Featuring four-color printing on quality stock, production of each ticket in the Warrior Series was limited to 3,500. Each ticket will be sold for \$20 each day of the event. Collectors can purchase the entire eight-ticket set in advance for \$96, a \$24 savings.

Time trial runs during the Oct. 4 qualifying will determine the starting field for the main event three days later. Also in action will be the ARCA RE/MAX Series, featuring such rising stars as Mooreville's Kerry Earnhardt.

The limited-edition Warrior Series tickets, along with tickets to all the October events at LMS, can be obtained by calling 1-800-455-FANS, or ordered online at www.lowesmotorspeedway.com.

## Earnhardt

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sports giants A.J. Foyt, Glen Wood, Bill France Jr., and Earnhardt were enshrined. NASCAR President Mike Helton read a letter from Earnhardt's widow, Teresa, and then his sister came on stage to accept the presentation.

"Watching Dale's life through the media is like taking a lap around Bristol and then Talladega," she noted. "Fast, furious, scary,

passionate, gratifying, challenging, sometimes disappointing but always exciting."

"We did not always like what we read or heard," she continued, "but that's the way Dale's life was. We watched him perform as a champion and accept defeat with humility. The honor of his induction into this Hall of Fame will keep Dale forever a champion, young, healthy and his legacy alive forever."

The Blue Devils put their fast start, made possible on the strength of a 30-point spurt during the second and third quarters that offset a 14-0 deficit in the opening period, and state ranking on the line when debuting at home tonight against 4A class member Alexander Central.

Game time in the Mooreville Stadium is set for 7:30 p.m.

Behind Mooreville is Bertie, the state's reigning 3A class champion, with High Point Central ninth, followed by Kannapolis.

Mike Mulhern has covered NASCAR for 27 years for the Winston-Salem Journal.

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