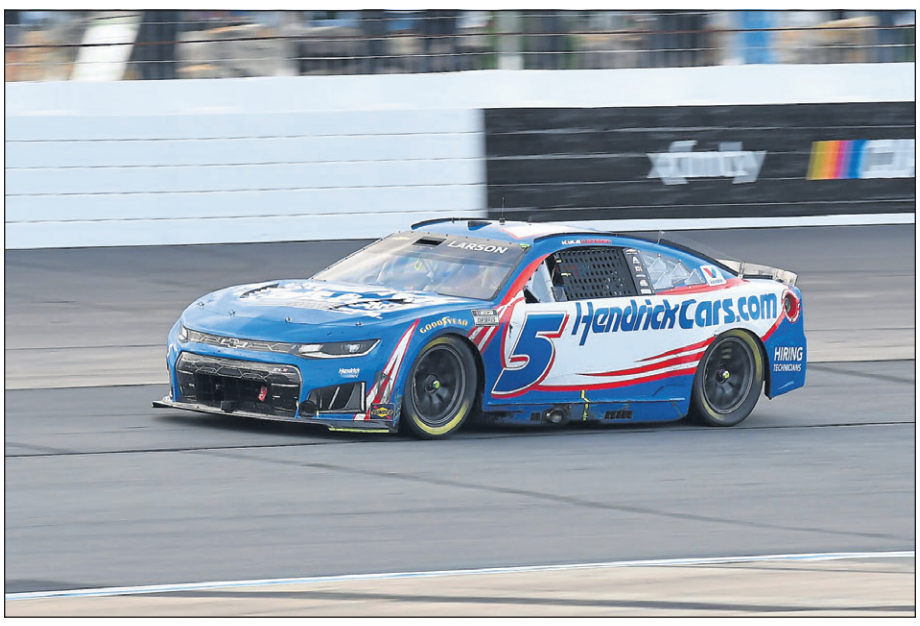
Robert Simmons | Associated Press

Joe Gibbs Racing driver Denny Hamlin (11) pit crew goes over the wall during Cook Out 400 at Richmond Raceway on Aug. 15 in Richmond Va.



Steven Senne | Associated Press

Kyle Larson steers his car out of Turn 4 during a NASCAR Cup Series auto race on Aug. 23 at New Hampshire Motor Speedway in Loudon, N.H.

NASCAR drivers favor return to Chase format

BY STEVE REED
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Denny Hamlin has never won a Cup Series championship.

This may be the 45-year-old's best chance based on his overall body of work this season.

Hamlin enters NASCAR's modified 10-race playoff format known as "The Chase" with a 25-point cushion over second-place Ryan Blaney and an even bigger advantage over the rest of the 16-driver field after finishing the regular season with the most driver points.

The new format — which was last used in 2013 — is designed to reward performance throughout the entire season and provide a larger sample size to determine a champion. Fans have been clamoring for its return because of its simplicity.

And the drivers love it.

Hamlin, speaking at Wednesday's playoff media day in Charlotte, called it a "giant leap forward in crowning a champion."

"I think all of the drivers would tell you it's a more fair way to do it," Hamlin added.

Chase Briscoe agreed.

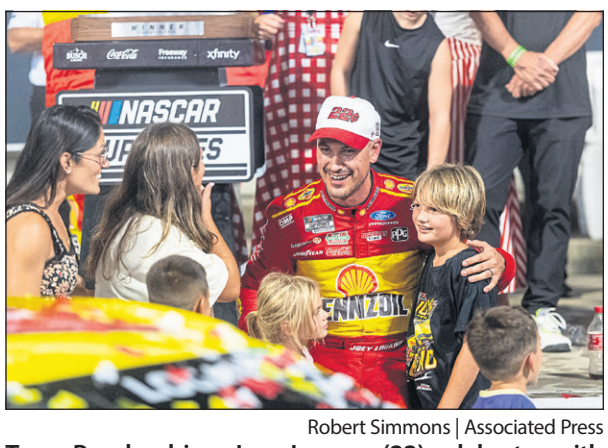
He said the format feels like it will produce a more "legitimate" champion.

"I'm not saying the past champions weren't legit, but before, you could win the first 35 races and go to Phoenix (for the season championship) and blow up and finish fourth in points," Briscoe said. "It's not going to be like that anymore. I think this says so much more about your body of work."

Unlike previous years, there will be no elimination rounds. That means no points "reset" midway through the playoffs.

The champion will be determined by which driver amasses the most points over the final 10 races.

Hamlin begins with 2,100 points, 25 more than Blaney and 35 better than third-place Tyler Reddick based on the new format.



Robert Simmons | Associated Press

Team Penske driver Joey Logano (22) celebrates with family in victory lane after winning the Cook Out 400 at Richmond Raceway on Aug. 15 in Richmond Va.

Fourth place starts 40 points behind Hamlin, fifth is 45 points back and so on in descending 5-point increments down to 16th-place Ryan Preece, who starts 100 points behind.

Kyle Larson, who starts in seventh place, won last year's Cup championship. But even he is good with the change.

"For the sport, I'm happy with the change for sure, and I think this format has proven to be very exciting," Larson said referring to Preece's dramatic win last weekend at Daytona, which allowed him to qualify for The Chase.

Larson is more concerned with catching up to the speed of the Toyota cars, which have been running faster all season than the Fords and Chevrolets. Of the top six cars entering the playoffs, five are Toyotas.

One notable change to this year's format is that wins are weighted heavier.

Drivers get 55 points for a race win, a substantial increase from the previous structure of 40 points.

The remaining positions pay the same points as the regular season (35 for second, 34 for third, 33 for fourth, etc.) and stage points also are the same (10 points for first, nine points for second, eight points for third, etc.).

While wins are rewarded, consistency is the key to winning a championship, Christopher Bell believes.

"The previous format and system, it was just three races at a time," Bell said. "And if you had a bad race, it's like just survive. Just gotta get above the cut line. Once you get above the cut line, you're like, 'OK, we're in great shape now.' Whereas now, there are no freebies. You can't have a bad race and get a reset in three weeks. So, you're going to have to perform every week."

The Chase begins Saturday at Darlington.

Hamlin and Joey Logano are the only drivers still on the Cup Series circuit who were around the last time NASCAR used this playoff format 13 years ago.

Logano said there isn't much he can take overall from the experience. But he said it harkens back to something seven-time Cup Series champion Jimmie Johnson once told him.

"Jimmie would say, 'It's 10 weeks of hell,'" said Logano, who is going for his fourth Cup title after a late-season push to make the playoffs. "And it's pretty true. It's a grueling 10 weeks. But hey, there is a pretty cool trophy at the end of it.

Tony Wagner | Associated Press

Cincinnati Reds second baseman Juan Brito (46) hits a thee-run home run in the second inning of a baseball game against the San Diego Padres on Wednesday in Cincinnati.

Reds score 7 unanswered runs to beat Padres 7-3

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CINCINNATI — Rookie Juan Brito hit his first home run, JJ Bleday and Héctor Rodríguez also went deep and the Cincinnati Reds scored seven unanswered runs to beat the San Diego Padres 7-3 on Wednesday.

Cincinnati (67-73) sat six games back of Arizona and San Diego for the third and final NL wild-card spot after the win. The Diamondbacks host the Phillies, the top wild card, later Wednesday.

Brito had a game-tying, three-run shot into the right-field seats in the third inning. Two batters later, Rodríguez tacked on a solo shot to give Cincinnati the lead. Rodríguez has five homers in his last 10 games.

Bleday capped the scoring in the seventh with his 22nd homer of the season, a two-run, 416-foot hit to help the Reds clinch the three-game series. Matt McLain added an RBI sacrifice fly in the sixth.

Brandon Williamson (3-3) pitched a season-best 5 1/3 innings for Cincinnati, striking out five and allowing three runs on seven hits. Pierce Johnson, Tejay Antone, Tony Santillan and Emilio Pagán went hitless out of the bullpen to seal the win.

Ty France gave San Diego a 2-0 lead in the first inning with his 20th home run of the season, and Fernando Tatis Jr. plated the Padres' final run in the second with an RBI single.

Casey Mize (5-9) threw four innings for the Padres and surrendered four runs on five hits with four strikeouts. Since being traded on Aug. 3 from the Detroit Tigers, Mize has 20 earned runs and 15 strikeouts in 27 innings pitched for San Diego.

UP NEXT

Padres: RHP Walker Buehler (8-6, 4.66 ERA) starts Game 1 of a three-game series against the New York Yankees on Friday.

Reds: RHP Rhett Lowder (6-8, 5.14) takes the mound Friday for the opener of a three-game series against the Milwaukee Brewers.