

Hamlin and Gibbs group go to Martinsville as title favorites

By JENNA FRYER
AP Auto Racing Writer

RIDGEWAY, Va. — All the momentum is with Denny Hamlin headed to Martinsville Speedway for the opening race of the third round of NASCAR's playoffs.

Hamlin, a five-time winner at the Virginia short track, need not look far for worthy challengers, including two of his Joe Gibbs Racing teammates.

JGR moved into the round of eight with three of its four drivers still racing for the Cup Series title and a reasonable shot at advancing the trio into the season finale shootout next month. Kyle Busch was the regular-season champion and holds a four-point lead over teammate Martin Truex Jr. in the standings before Sunday's race. Truex leads the series with six wins, including two in the first round of the playoffs.

Hamlin is third in points and coming off his fifth win of the season, giving Gibbs and Toyota a tremendous 1-2-3 attack for the title. It's



AP Photo/John Locher, File

In this March 1, 2019, file photo, drivers Denny Hamlin, left, and Kyle Busch talk in pit lane before qualifying for the NASCAR Cup Series auto race at Las Vegas Motor Speedway in Las Vegas.

only fitting the Gibbs group is in this position — the team has won 16 of the 32 races so far this season — but snagging three of the final four spots in the Homestead-Miami Speedway title-deciding race will be a tricky navigation inside the organization.

"Right now, we have very good chemistry," Gibbs said after Hamlin won at Kan-

sas Speedway last Sunday. "It's not going to buy us anything next week. I get so nervous. I was all excited about (Hamlin), then somebody mentioned next week, and I almost threw up. I said 'You mean this doesn't get us to Homestead?'"

No, the road to Homestead begins at the shortest track on the circuit, a tricky

paper clip-shaped 0.526-mile oval. The middle round is at Texas Motor Speedway and then the championship field of four is decided at ISM Raceway outside Phoenix.

Busch, a four-time winner this season but mired in a stretch of 18 races without one, is ready for this nail-biting round. He has just two top-five finishes through the

first six playoff races and is eager to get back up front.

"I feel like it's our best round. We run well at all three of those places and we've won a few at Texas, we won Martinsville twice and Phoenix has been getting better for us, too," Busch said. "We just need to continue to execute and do a good job and make sure that we mind our Ps and Qs."

Truex has never won at Martinsville but his performance has picked up the last several years. He has finished eighth or better the last four races, was runner-up to Busch in 2017 and third last October.

"We know what we need to do," Truex said. "Now it's just a matter of going out and doing it. We have been fast, ran up front and led laps at all of these tracks in this round."

A win at Martinsville gives any team breathing room to focus on the Nov. 17 finale and not worry about earning a slot in the final four. Joey Logano was a longshot to win the title last year but won at Martinsville, then upset regular-season heavy-

weights Busch, Truex and Kevin Harvick three weeks later to claim his first title.

Logano was nearly eliminated from title contention a week ago when he went to Kansas on the bubble, didn't have a remarkable race and then was involved in a late accident that put him head-to-head with Team Penske teammate Brad Keselowski for the final spot in the round of eight. Keselowski was eliminated, Logano kept his title defense rolling and now hopes Martinsville punches his ticket to Homestead.

The competition will be fierce from Chase Elliott, who has been in the mix at Martinsville but still seeking his first win on the track.

Harvick has had a quiet run so far through the playoffs. He's had three top-five finishes, but hasn't led laps in the last three races and felt his entire weekend at Kansas was the worst of the year for his Stewart-Haas Racing team. Even if the organization gets it corrected, Harvick noted: "Obviously we still have to beat the Gibbs cars."

Hamilton and drivers say F1 should be more eco-friendly

By JIM VERTUNO
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — Formula One is a global series with a large carbon footprint.

Teams, drivers and fans fly to 21 races around the world, hauling tons of equipment. The cars use up and discard hundreds of tires during the season. And despite using hybrid engines, the series this year increased the allowable fuel consumption per race.

Yet that won't stop defending champion Lewis Hamilton from using his social media platforms to call for an awareness of global warming, calling for changes in farming, diet and a reduction in polluting materials.

The drivers' news conference Thursday at the Mexican Grand Prix, a race in a city of 22 million people choked with smog, was dom-

inated by questions on Hamilton's recent public admonishments on global warming, his support from other drivers, and whether it is hypocritical considering the arena in which they compete.

Hamilton sparked the issue with a recent Instagram post venting to millions of followers his frustrations about large commercial farming and deforestation, global travel and consumer diets. He urged others to go vegan like him.

"It's my platform and we all have a voice," Hamilton said. "It's not the easiest, because yes, we are traveling around the world and racing cars. It doesn't mean we should be afraid to speak up for positive change. I'm always looking at things I can improve the effect."

Hamilton said he drives an electric car at home, and

has sold off his plane and some of his fleet of automobiles. He said he has also cut back on travel and restricts what products can be brought into his office and home. He said he has pushed fashion designer Tommy Hilfger, a friend and business partner, to design clothes with sustainable fabric.

"I don't allow anyone in my office or my household to buy any plastics. I want everything recyclable down to deodorant, down to a toothbrush, all these kind of things. I'm trying to make as much change as I can in my personal space," said Hamilton, who is British. "I try to make sure that by the end of the year I'm carbon neutral. I'm trying to make as much change as I can in my personal space."

Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel said he supports Hamilton's

effort to take a public stand, while acknowledging that F1 drivers may not be taken seriously on the issue.

"You would be ignorant if you didn't look at it," Vettel said. "It's very difficult for us to get acceptance from the outside. We don't have the smallest footprint. The races happen around the world. Formula One, I feel, should do more. It's a worldwide platform. We should send a much stronger message on the subject."

The series could wield influence with its corporate sponsors, Vettel said.

Formula One officials said Friday the series owner will soon unveil a detailed plan to make the sport more environmentally friendly. F1 provided no specifics, but said the plan has been in development for a year and "will not only tackle the carbon foot-

print of our cars but the wider footprint we leave as a sport."

The series shifted its engine technology to a more environmentally friendly hybrid engine in 2014. But F1 also this year increased allowable fuel consumption for the cars from 27 gallons (105 kilograms) to 29 (110 kilograms) per race in order to boost power.

Speaking at a German auto show in September, F1 CEO and President Chase Carey lauded the hybrid engine as a model for reducing carbon emissions.

"The Formula 1 hybrid engine is the most efficient in the world and has a critical role to play to address the wider global environmental issue," Carey said. "I think the solution to the environmental situation is going to be many and not just one and while I appreciate electric has

got the attention and has hit a sweet spot at the moment, I think electric will be part of the solution but has issues such as battery disposal that still need to be addressed."

An alternate series, Formula E, uses only electric cars. Initiated by Jean Todt, head of the FIA governing body of world motorsport, Formula E launched in 2014. That series also races in cities around the world, including Mexico City, Beijing, Berlin and New York.

Mercedes, which has won six consecutive F1 constructor's titles, is entering Formula E next season.

Hamilton, who is chasing a sixth F1 championship this weekend, said he won't be making a switch after his F1 career.

"I have no interest whatsoever in Formula E," Hamilton said.

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