

## Picking up the pieces

# Stewart, Johnson face long rebounds from Daytona

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DAYTONA BEACH, Fla -- As the NASCAR world wakes up on Monday and begins to put the Daytona 500 behind them, there's just one man -- **Kevin Harvick** -- who will get to experience the pleasant hangover of winning the sport's biggest event for the next six days. On the other end of the spectrum, **Jimmie Johnson** and **Tony Stewart** are busy experiencing a different kind of hangover -- the highest point deficits they've ever faced leaving the first race of the season.

It was that kind of wild and wacky race at Daytona, the type of event that left several of the sport's biggest stars forcing themselves to look toward the future after digging themselves serious holes in the standings. A preseason title favorite, Stewart joined defending champ Johnson and four more of last year's Chase drivers in a group that finished 24th or worse Sunday. **Denny Hamlin, Kyle Busch, Matt Kenseth** and **Dale Earnhardt, Jr.** were among those who also struggled.



*Speeding down the track sideways was not the way Jimmie Johnson envisioned his defense of the Daytona 500 title would go.*  
AP

But Stewart was dealt the worst hand, it appears, finishing last after falling prey to a gentle tap from **Kurt Busch's** front bumper while leading. Johnson joined him in the garage shortly thereafter, losing control of his car and slapping the wall off of turn two to incite a multi-car wreck; he wound up 39th. Just like that, two men who pride themselves on being perennial title contenders found themselves 80 points behind in the race for the Chase, and the series hasn't even made it out of February yet.

While that's something no one would have expected, least of all the drivers themselves, the key to watch over the next few weeks is how quickly they're able to pick up the pieces. Yes, the Daytona 500 is only one race, but as NASCAR's Super Bowl, it has the potential to set momentum for the entire season. Just as Harvick's win will be a huge boost to **Richard Childress** Racing, one bad finish is all it takes from some of these other men to cripple their run for the title. Just ask **Carl Edwards** about his season last year. He began 2006 riding **Kyle Petty's** hood on the way to finishing 43rd in the 500, and that led to a season-long slump from which he never recovered; missing the Chase, Edwards went winless en route to finishing 12th in the final standings.

Luckily for Stewart, he has the experience of getting over this type of hump quickly and effectively. Back in '02, his Daytona 500 lasted just two laps before his engine blew, relegating him to last place. By the time the season was over, Stewart was holding his first Nextel Cup championship trophy, and the problems from Daytona became distant memories. That has him optimistic for the future, despite stretching his Daytona 500 winless drought to nine years.

"I'm excited about our season," said Stewart after the race. "Anytime you can win two out of three events, you've got a lot to smile about," claimed an upbeat Stewart, referring to his wins in the exhibition Budweiser Shootout and Thursday's Gatorade Duel.

As for Johnson, failing in his bid to become just the fourth back-to-back Daytona 500 winner might have been a little harder to swallow. Not only does he pride himself on being a perennial championship contender, but his poor performance at this year's race ended a streak of 106 straight races being in the Top 10 in Nextel Cup points. Still, Johnson is also taking the right attitude towards getting back in the title fight.

"This is one race of many," he said after climbing from his race car Sunday. "This race is so different than what the bulk of the season is. We certainly wanted to get off to a good start and not have a DNF coming out of the gate, but there is still a lot of racing left, and we have a very strong race team."

Not everyone was able to take a sunny view of Sunday's numerous mishaps. Dale Earnhardt, Jr. was ... well, let's say he wasn't quite happy-go-lucky to start the year on the wrong foot.

"We didn't bring a good bullet to the fight," he exclaimed in frustration about his race car after wrecking late in the race. "We didn't have everything we needed to have."

Heading to California, a track where Junior has historically struggled, that's a dangerous attitude to bring out West. These three drivers have all already used their mulligans; they'd best make sure all their ducks are in a row, because with a 26-race regular season, chances will come fewer and farther between to get back in the hunt.