

Mid-Race Wreck Ends Strong Run, DNF Streak for Bowyer

Race : Southern 500 presented by GoDaddy.com
Date: May 9, 2009
Location: Darlington (S.C.) Raceway
Start Position: 17th
Finish Position: 37th
Points Position: 13th (Lost five positions)

DARLINGTON, S.C. – Clint Bowyer headed to Darlington Raceway looking to end a four-week slump that dropped him from second to eighth in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series point standings. It appeared the Emporia, Kansas, native was headed in the right direction, but a mid-race accident ended his chances for a strong finish and his modern-era record of 83 consecutive races without a DNF (did not finish).

Bowyer toured the egg-shaped 1.366-mile oval in 27.800 seconds at an average speed of 176.892 mph in Friday evening's qualifying session, placing him 17th in the starting lineup for Saturday evening's race. The two-time NSCS winner struggled with a loose-handling condition in the opening laps of the event and lost several positions as he tried to get acclimated with his BB&T Chevrolet. As the laps clicked off and the handling began to improve, Bowyer climbed his way through the field, running lap times as much as two-tenths of a second faster than the race leaders. By the time the No. 55 car of Michael Waltrip experienced engine failure and brought out a caution at lap 75, Bowyer had improved himself some 12 positions to 15th in the running order.

Crew chief Shane Wilson called Bowyer to pit road during the ensuing caution period to take on four tires, fuel, wedge and track bar adjustments. With several teams opting to take only two tires, the additional time spent on pit road cost the BB&T crew four positions, placing Bowyer 19th for the lap 85 restart.

The fourth-year NSCS driver experienced a loose condition when green flag racing resumed, but as the air pressures began to come up and the handling conditions improved, Bowyer resumed his climb towards the front of the field. Over the course of the next 100 laps, he would methodically work his way around one car at a time, taking care of his equipment to capitalize on others who were not. The strategy paid off as he cracked the top 10 for the first time at lap 189.

When Kurt Busch's No. 2 car spun to bring out a caution flag at lap 214, Wilson and Bowyer discussed strategy that would allow them to set the BB&T Chevrolet up for the finish of the race. The pair agreed to take four tires under the ensuing caution period when most of the field would take just two, hoping they could use the opposite strategy to gain track position on the final round of pit stops. The call resulted in Bowyer dropping three positions for the lap 219 restart, but the pair seemed confident in their plan to gain track position when it would count most.

Bowyer again struggled with a loose-handling condition on the restart and made slight contact with the outside retaining wall at lap 221. As he gathered himself and continued on, the No. 44 of A.J. Allmendinger made contact with the driver's side of the BB&T Chevrolet, sending Bowyer hard into the inside wall. The force of the impact shot Bowyer across the track to the outside wall where he sustained another hard impact before coming to a stop on the backstretch.

Despite the Wilson-led crew's best efforts at repairing their BB&T Chevrolet, the damage sustained was too severe to repair.

The 37th-place finish that Bowyer was credited with marked the first time since Phoenix in November 2006, a streak of 83 races, that he was not listed as running at the conclusion of a Sprint Cup Series race. While he set the record for consecutive starts without a DNF, Bowyer came one race shy of tying the all-time record held by Herman Beam, who did not run his races consecutively, but made 84 starts from 1961-1963 without recording a DNF.

Bowyer's Richard Childress Racing teammates Kevin Harvick, Jeff Burton and Casey Mears finished 11th, 12th and 36th, respectively. Mears was involved in an early incident that required extensive time in the garage area for repairs.

Mark Martin picked up his second win of the 2009 season, beating Jimmie Johnson to the checkered flag by 1.531 seconds. Team Chevy swept the top-five finishing positions with Tony Stewart coming home third, Ryan Newman fourth and Jeff Gordon fifth.

On Thursday, May 14, the Helping Hands Pit Crew will participate in the fifth-annual Pit Crew Challenge at the Time Warner Cable Arena in Charlotte, N.C. The competition is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. local time.

The Sprint Cup Series heads to Lowe's Motor Speedway next weekend for NASCAR's All-Star Challenge. Live coverage of the event will take the green flag Saturday, May 16 beginning at 7 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. The race will be televised live on SPEED and broadcast worldwide on the Motor Racing Network and Sirius XM Satellite Radio. Qualifying for the non-points event will be televised live on SPEED Friday, May 15 beginning at 5 p.m. EDT.