

# Building on Success

## Kyle Larson Leads the Pack Again

**T**he most-storied race in NASCAR returns with story lines both old and new. Racing's Next Gen era begins Sunday at the Daytona 500, as drivers go 200 laps around the 2.5 mile-long oval in vehicles that have been redesigned to more closely resemble their street-car counterparts. At the same time, however, reigning Cup Series champ Kyle Larson begins 2022 precisely where he ended the 2021 season: out front.

Larson ran a scorcher in qualifying, hitting 181.159 in the No. 5 Chevrolet at Daytona International Speedway to secure pole position. He's now the fifth NASCAR driver to win the Cup title and then claim the season-opening Daytona 500 pole, following Jimmie Johnson (2008), Dale Jarrett (2000), Jeff Gordon (1999) and Cale Yarborough (1978).

Alex Bowman, Larson's Hendrick Motorsports teammate, also earned a fifth-straight front-row spot at Daytona, setting a record. He'll start second in the No. 48 Chevy. This is the eighth-consecutive pole for Hendrick, who's also had nine of the last 10.

Still, there will be a few intriguing wrinkles, beginning with the updated cars themselves. All of the Cup Series vehicles now boast a standardized coupe style, and are up to 6 inches shorter than last season. There have been lots of aerodynamic changes, too.

Then there are the underdog stories: Remember a Hendrick driver hasn't actually won the Daytona 500 since Dale Earnhardt Jr. did it way back in 2014.

Denny Hamlin is trying to tie Yarborough for the second-most wins in the Daytona 500, a year after finishing in fifth place. (Richard Petty is the race's all-time leader with seven victories.) Hamlin was a 17-2 favorite to win, according to Caesars Sportsbook's post-qualifying odds. Larson and Chase Elliott were 10-1 favorites, while Ryan Blaney and Joey Logano (2015's winner at Daytona) rounded out the Top 5 contenders with 12-1 odds.

Late arrivals included Jacques Villeneuve from Team Hezeberg and Noah Gragson from Beard Motorsports, who zoomed ahead of everybody else in the first day of qualifying to secure their initial



CHRIS GRANTHEV/GETTY IMAGES

**WHAT:** 2022 Daytona 500

**WHEN:** 2:30 p.m. ET start time

**COVERAGE:** TV — FOX and FOX Deportes  
Streaming — FOX Sports App

appearances at the Daytona 500. Villeneuve's decorated career includes a win at 1995's Indianapolis 500 and the Formula 1 world title in 1997, while Gragson has spent several years on the NASCAR Xfinity circuit.

Michael McDowell took the Front Row Motorsports Ford to first-place at the 2021 Daytona 500, taking his first checkered flag in a career amassing 358 series starts.

Position	Driver	Car
1	Kyle Larson	5
2	Alex Bowman	48
3	Brad Keselowski	6
4	Chris Buescher	17
5	Austin Cindric	2
6	Michael McDowell	34
7	Ryan Blaney	12
8	Harrison Burton	21
9	Chase Briscoe	14
10	Kyle Busch	18
11	Chase Elliott	9
12	Christopher Bell	20

## Racing Back to Normalcy

Last year, pandemic restrictions limited the crowd at Florida's sprawling Daytona International Speedway to just 30,000. Crowd numbers typically swell to some 200,000 fans when you count both the grandstands and the infield.



Luke Combs

Barriers that were erected to encourage social-distance guidelines and direct crowd flow have been removed. (Denny Hamlin actually got lost among them while making his way to Victory Lane to commemorate his 2020 win.) Raceway staff spent weeks installing temperature-gauge stations and countless places for hand sanitation.

The 2022 season begins quite differently, with a sold-out Daytona 500. NASCAR is celebrating with a pre-game schedule topped by a performance by Luke Combs. Fellow country star Trace Adkins will sing the national anthem, and Pro Football Hall of Fame Charles Woodson will tell the drivers to start their engines.

That's not the only star power on hand, as several racing teams have celebrity connections.

Basketball great Michael Jordan is a co-owner at 23XI Racing (No. 23 Bubba Wallace and 45. Kurt Busch), while football coaching legend Joe Gibbs has his own self-titled racing team (No. 11 Denny Hamlin, No. 18 Kyle Busch, No. 19 Martin Truex Jr. and No. 20 Christopher Bell).

Rapper Pitbull co-owns Trackhouse Racing (No. 1 Ross Chastain and No. 99 Daniel Suarez), and boxer Floyd Mayweather is also trying to break into the sport as co-owner of Money Team Racing (No. 50 Kaz Grala).