

BYRON SCORES VICTORY ON REVAMPED ATLANTA LAYOUT

BY BRANDON REED – MARCH 20, 2022

Image: courtesy of WilliamByron.com

William Byron was right where he wanted to be at the end of Sunday's NASCAR Cup Series race at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Byron took the lead on the final restart with 14 laps to go, and went on to hold off final lap challenges from Ross Chastain and Christopher Bell to score the victory on the newly renovated 1.5-mile track.

"It's so cool," said Byron as he stood on the front stretch in front of the main grandstands. "I think these fans saw one heck of a race. It was certainly long from my seat. It was mentally taxing. Just thanks to all the fans for coming out."

Byron held the point over the closing laps, with Bubba Wallace and Ryan Blaney breathing down his neck. On a racing surface that had been renovated to create superspeedway-like pack racing, it looked like he might be a sitting duck for a last-lap pass.

But with the white flag in the air, Ross Chastain made a move from fourth place, spoiling any hopes that Wallace and Blaney had for last lap heroics.

Meanwhile, Byron went on the defensive, moving down the track to hold off Chastain and Bell as the field thundered down the backstretch for the final time. With any hopes for a momentum pass dashed, Byron protected his spot and crossed the finish line for this third career victory.

"You know honestly the last few laps there, just trying to manage the gap to Bubba (Wallace) and trying to not get too far out front," said Byron, who won the first segment of the race, and led six times for 111 laps. "My spotter Brandon (Lines), it's his first win so congrats to him and just thanks to this whole team. They've done a great job this year. There's a lot of changes with the Next Gen car."

Behind him, three cars tangled and crashed coming under the checkered flag, with Wallace, Justin Haley and Chris Buescher all involved.

Bell crossed the finish line in second, but NASCAR officials determined he had crossed under the double yellow line – a superspeedway out of bounds rule – on the final laps and moved him to 23rd, the last car on the lead lap.

Chastain was moved to second, a strong result after spinning into the wall after cutting a tire while leading on lap 95.

Chastain made up lost ground to move back into contention by the end.

"Just cruising, blow a right rear, slam the wall, I thought our day was over," said Chastain. "Our guys went underneath the car, got the tow closer and we got the balance back where I could drive it and this Advent Health Chevy was fast. It was so fast. I mean we were fighting with William (Byron) there at the beginning. So cool to race with buddies again. I only have a few, but the last two weeks I've been able to race with buddies."

It was a similar story for third place finisher Kurt Busch. After leading early, Busch was gathered up in a multi-car crash on lap 147. He would move back into contention over the closing laps.

"We were on a different planet today with the draft and the way the cars raced," said Busch. "Wow. I was catching air off of turn two. I had to lift to not hit the rev chip. I just had a little too much damage to not be on offense, and then we were just trying to ride around and pick our poison so to speak with the Monster Energy Toyota."

Daniel Suarez finished in fourth, with Corey LaJoie in fifth.

Chase Elliott, Buescher, Martin Truex, Jr., Joey Logano, and Alex Bowman rounded out the top 10.

With the goal for the revamped Atlanta Motor Speedway being to create superspeedway type pack racing, there was a lot of close competition on the day, with a record 46 lead changes among 20 drivers.

But along with that came the inevitable "big one", a multi-car crash that left several cars damaged.

That came on lap 147, when a cut tire sent the car of Tyler Reddick spinning, gathering up 12 other cars in the process, including Kurt Busch, Kyle Larson, Denny Hamlin and Alex Bowman.

The pack racing also led to incidents caused as drivers tried to help push each other forward. That took out two pre-race favorites in Larson and Hamlin, who had recovered from the earlier crash. Hamlin was trying to push Larson past Chase Elliott on lap 210 when Larson's Chevy spun off turn four and into Elliott's door, then back up in front of Hamlin.

While Elliott escaped with minimal damage, Larson and Hamlin were both eliminated.

"He (Hamlin) was just trying to help me get a run down the front stretch," said



Larson. "He just got to me in the corner and got me loose. I hate that happened, but it's a product of this racing and product of pushing, trying to draft and get your lane going. Nothing is intentional."

"I was just trying to help Kyle there and I just needed to let him go off turn four," Hamlin said. "The track gets light there, the car starts to lift up and that's where I needed to back off of him and I just didn't and spun him out. It is a shame. Our car was really fast."

Another costly caution flew on lap 202, when then leader Ricky Stenhouse, Jr. spun after cutting a tire, gathering up Austin Cindric, Kevin Harvick and Erik Jones.

It ended a promising day for Stenhouse, Jr., who had led 22 laps to that point.

Stenhouse, Jr. said he had no indication that the tire was going flat.

"No, I was just riding around and I felt really good with our No. 47. Kroger / SweetLeaf Camaro," he said. "It was really, really fast. We drove right up to the front from the back there at the start of the race. You saw a few tires let go with people leading, running in the front. I don't know if with all the speed we have here, if the right rear can't hang on or what."

In all, the race was slowed 11 times by caution flags, with 25 of the 37 starters still left running at the end.

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