

# NASCAR Media Conference

## Press Conference

Monday, January 12, 2026

*An Interview with:*

**Steve O'Donnell**

**Dale Earnhardt Jr.**

**Mark Martin**

**Chase Elliott**

**Ryan Blaney**

**Chase Briscoe**



partners, and a lot of sponsors to talk about what we could do going forward with our championship format.

There were a couple things that were vitally important, I think, to everyone in the group. One was that winning still had to matter. We had to make sure that was a big component of what we were doing. We certainly wanted consistency to matter. Not lost on us that throughout what we've seen with the current format, there were times when a driver could win and maybe take a couple races because he had that win in the bank. That's not something we wanted. We wanted every race to matter. So both of those needed to be front and center.

Then we also wanted our fans to know that we're listening and our industry to know that we're listening. With that, where we've landed is candidly the Chase is back. We are going back to a format where the Cup side, the first 26 races will be based on points system, and the final 10 races will make up the Chase.

If you go into the Chase format, first and foremost, you want to look at how the points will be set. So the points leader will go into the Chase at 2,100 points. It was important for us to have a bonus for that leader. So they'll have a 25-point lead over second place and a 35-point lead over third place. Then the positions beyond that will go down by 5 points.

What also is really important for the group that got together is winning. I talked about that. We're going to take winning from 40 points up to 55 points. I believe that will be a great incentive for the drivers each and every race to have to go out there and perform but also go for wins.

While I have a minute too, I want to take a moment to thank Mark for coming from his vacation. I know it's a long, long trip from out west. Mark Martin was the first guy in the room to stand up and say I want to go back to full season points. There were a lot of folks who wanted to throw Mark out of the room initially, but what Mark did was got us to a position where what's the right balance? And the balance between those who like the playoff and those who like the full season points.

We believe we've struck that balance. We've got the best of both worlds where every race matters. We've talked to a lot of folks in the industry. We've run a lot of different

**THE MODERATOR:** Welcome. I'm Adam Alexander. I watch that video, I think about the fact that the Daytona 500 is just over a month away. When you think about today's announcement and all the energy and excitement that's going to bring, this is no doubt a historic day for NASCAR.

Before I introduce our panel in today's announcement, I want to say a special welcome to all of those watching on YouTube, the NASCAR Channel, and listening on SiriusXM NASCAR Radio.

Let's get to the announcement. Steve O'Donnell, take it away and tell us all about the championship format in 2026.

**STEVE O'DONNELL:** Thank you, Adam. I appreciate everyone being here as well.

I do want to take a minute, this is the first time we've been in front of the media and talking to folks, to let everyone know we're still thinking about Greg Biffle and his family and all of those involved in that tragic plane crash.

Also, Denny Hamlin with the loss of his dad. We're all praying for his mom with a speedy recovery. Denny was a big part of today's announcement, put a lot of work into it. He's been a big part of the formats, and we're thinking about him and really appreciate him as well.

You've got a great group here, some of which who were involved in coming up with this format. Just kind of a quick history of how we got to where we were. Tim Clark headed up a group that included a number of folks from the industry. That was drivers, owners, OEMs, television



models and believe this is the best place to land really to get back to who we are. That's the core of NASCAR and want to launch this, and we're really excited about the 2026 season.

**THE MODERATOR:** Steve O'Donnell giving us the details of what's going to happen with our championship format in 2026. He referenced Hall of Famer Mark Martin, and we're glad that Mark is here and a part of our panel.

The rest of our panel, Dale Earnhardt Jr., Hall of Famer, owner JR Motorsports. On the back row, active drivers: Chase Briscoe is here from Joe Gibbs Racing, driving that 19 Toyota. Ryan Blaney is here from Team Penske, driver of the No. 12. And Chase Elliott, driver of the No. 9 from Hendrick Motorsports. It seems appropriate to have two guys on the panel named Chase, I believe.

I want to go around and get the reaction from all of you on today's announcement and the format that will unfold in 2026.

Dale, we'll start with you.

**DALE EARNHARDT JR:** I think there's a lot to say. I was really excited to hear the news that we were getting a little closer to a full 36-race format. This is as close in my opinion that you can get without going all the way.

What I believe it does is it makes it simpler for our fans to follow. I'm a fan of the sport, and now I'm compelled to plug in every single week because I know there's a long form objective for my driver to accomplish to be able to give himself the opportunity to win the championship.

So even though my driver may have success early on in the season, it does not assure him success in the postseason. So with the way that they're going to stack the bonus points and everything else, it's critical that these drivers have success every single week. Every single race, every single lap will have more importance. I think it's fun for the drivers to have a more clear objective for how to get to the championship and easier for our fans to follow.

**THE MODERATOR:** Mark, your thoughts?

**MARK MARTIN:** The fans were yelling at me we want full season points. So I yelled even louder and almost got thrown out, as Steve said.

I think that this is the most perfect compromise that you could ever ask for. It's going to require our 2026 champion to be lightning fast and incredibly consistent, and that's what we can all get behind.

So I'm really excited. I think it's fantastic. I would just appeal to the race fans, all the race fans, but especially the classic fans who say to me, I don't watch anymore. I say we need you. Come on back. We're headed in the right direction. Come back and join with us, and we'll keep making progress.

One more thing. For the broadcasters, for the media, the journalists and everyone, this is a time for a change, a change in how we cover the sport, and that means, instead of every week talking about the cutoff line, the playoff, who's in, who's out, all these things, we need to focus even more on our heroes.

These guys behind me that are winning these races are our Pearsons and our Yarbroughs and our Buddy Bakers of today, and we need our fans to connect with these guys. We need them to connect with the crew chiefs. We need to connect with the engineers as well. Give the fans something that they can connect to and help us bill these superstars like they deserve to be.

**THE MODERATOR:** Chase Elliott, lead us off from the back row.

**CHASE ELLIOTT:** It gets harder as you go along to add to this. I think, look, this is -- a couple things come to my mind, first and foremost, to Steve's point, willing to listen, right? Not only to Mark and Dale and even guys like myself and Ryan, who I think have kind of screamed at some of these things over the course of time of just wanting it to be better. I think we all want it to be better because, to Dale's point, we are fans of this sport.

I grew up a fan. I watched that video. A lot of those years of Jimmie dominating and the championship of Tony and Carl all during the Chase were incredible runs. I think we oftentimes forget how good we had it through all those years of Chase format. I think it is a really nice compromise. I think getting a full season was going to be a pretty big challenge, and I'm not sure there's really a better place to land than a true 10-race Chase, really similar to what we had through those years of the epic battles that we saw.

I personally appreciate Steve and the folks at NASCAR for being able to come together with our TV partners and making everyone happy. That's a really hard thing to do, and I think sometimes we all forget about that and just how many pieces make this puzzle.

Really proud to be here. I can say that with complete honesty. This is something that I'm proud of as a competitor, something I'm looking forward to competing in



and against these guys with, and I think, just from my perspective, challenge the race fans this year, let's enjoy what we got. We're so quick to complain about everything, everything that we have and everything that we do. Let's enjoy what we have because we're making history whether you like it or not.

Celebrate the champion. Celebrate the guys who went out there and did a good job. I think this format promotes that. Let's enjoy what we have. We've got a pretty cool thing at the end of the day. Let's not forget about it, and enjoy what we got today.

**THE MODERATOR:** Ryan?

**RYAN BLANEY:** Yeah, just to echo what all these guys said in front of me and before me, I am very excited for it. I grew up -- I think probably all three of us sitting up here are at the age where we all grew up, the Chase was in place, and this is what we watched as kids. I loved seeing it, and I loved seeing close battles.

I feel like it also is going to -- I sit back, and I look at this new format, and sometimes we all get grief about overaggressiveness and things like that, and sometimes you get put in these situations where it's a win and move on type scenario. I think it's going to clean up a lot of the racing side of it and get back to the purity side of it to where it is a little bit more of not brash, a little bit more of the beautiful art form that I grew up loving.

I am a huge fan of it, like Chase said and all these guys said. I appreciate NASCAR for listening. I appreciate all these guys, Mark and Dale, for being big voices for us. It's just fun to be a part of it. I look forward to next year, and consistency is going to be a massive part of it.

It's not going to be -- I don't think you're going to get guys who get out and say good points day. It's still going to be winning is a huge product of it because of the increase in the winner's points. Yeah, I'm excited. I hope everyone is as excited as we all are to be a part of it and for them to watch it on TV.

**THE MODERATOR:** If the art form of this Chase format models your mustache, we're in for a real treat.

Chase Briscoe, your thoughts?

**CHASE BRISCOE:** I like the name. It's a great name. I'm excited. Like these guys said, I don't know what else I can add. It just has every characteristic you want in a championship format where winning matters, consistency matters, DNFs are going to matter.

Just the points swing now with winning, you're not going to have that win and in, but with the 15 extra bonus points, winning can take a guy from fourth in the championship all the way to having the lead and vice versa.

I think it just adds so many new elements, and it's honestly a great format. Like Ryan was saying, I grew up with the Chase format and loved it. I think this makes it even better. Yeah, just looking forward to finally being a competitor in it and looking forward to seeing what we have.

**Q. Steve, what was the process like from the very start of the conversations with all the people, the committee and everybody, to start the ideas of what we should do to kind of change the format to first week, second week, like through that? What was the processes like for getting everyone to have a good compromise, and how much influence did, say, drivers, team owners, and fans outside of this main committee, how much did you all look at things like that?**

**STEVE O'DONNELL:** That's a really good question. Over a year, probably a year and a half process, if I'm totally honest with everyone, which that's my nature, going into even Phoenix this year, it was kind of a hold your breath moment. We recognize more and more that someone winning a Championship, absolutely, they win it by the rules, but was it the best format that we could go with?

The tide had turned in the garage area, and that's important to us and certainly important to our race fans. We did a lot of listening. We did a lot of talking and looked at a ton of ideas, modeled a lot of different things. But I applaud the industry, and that includes the media as well.

You'll hear me often say, when I say NASCAR, I'm not just talking about the folks who are making the rules at the R&D center. NASCAR is everyone here. It's everyone here. It's the team owners, the OEMs, and all those people had a voice in this.

We tried to strike a balance. Not everyone's going to love it. We don't expect everyone to just go out and love it. We don't expect this to be the magic wand we wave from a NASCAR standpoint and say everything's now great. We've got a lot of work to do from our standpoint with the relationships in the garage, getting back to those, but getting back to who we are. That's hard-core racing and the Chase and people having fun. We work in a pretty damn good industry, and we need to have some fun, celebrate the wins.

It was a great process. We looked at everything, beat up a ton of models, and I'm proud of where we landed as a

group.

**Q. Also for Steve and I guess anybody on the panel. You guys have talked about the compromise to get to this point. What is the desired end game overall? You said not everybody's going to agree with it, not everybody's going to love it, but what are you trying to most maximize out of this Playoff format or going back to the Chase?**

**STEVE O'DONNELL:** I think from my perspective, and I'd be interested to hear it from the other guys, is re-engage with our core fans. The folks who got us there are a loud voice.

I think, when the industry is talking about they want a different format, we want that as well. We want the drivers to feel like -- they're the best drivers in the world, and we want them to feel great that, when they win a championship, that they ran through a gauntlet of the toughest race tracks, 36 weekends, and they pulled it off.

At the end of the day, it's growing the fan base, but it's not just chasing new fans. We need to be with the folks who brought us to the dance, make sure they believe in us, where we're going. New fans will come along because they're going to see that this is a cool sport to be around.

**Q. For any of our active drivers, with wins counting for more points now, how does that help counter what we used to hear of just having good points days, still incentivizing winning while also rewarding consistency now?**

**CHASE ELLIOTT:** I think from my perspective winning mattered in the previous format that we had as well, but you could also have good points days too. I don't think that it's totally gone. I don't think either side of the fence is gone, and to me I think that's kind of the whole point of this.

You can go out there and have a great stretch of top 5s and top 10s and get stage points and all of those things. You can still have good points days. I don't think that's erased. But certainly the amount of points that you're going to get for winning is eventually going to add up.

Look, I've always kind of been a believer that I think a lot of the formats and things, a lot of times it's going to come out in the wash. To me, that was where as long as we had an opportunity for a format to make it come out in the wash, I think we were doing the right thing. To me this format does that.

Having bigger sample sets, as we've heard, not coming down to one race -- there's just a lot of variables in

motorsports. I think, as long as you give these drivers and teams and just the races play out and let it come out eventually the way that it should, I think we're doing right, and I think this is a great step to achieving that.

**Q. Dale, obviously you won't be in the booth for these races, but from your broadcasting perspective, what does this do for the overall storylines as opposed to four drivers or eight drivers or 12 drivers at any given part of the rounds?**

**DALE EARNHARDT JR:** Well, I think that for us, we'll be in a pretty unique part of the season throughout the summer as we're building toward the Playoffs or the Chase, and we'll be sort of trying to understand who is trying to fight their way into that position to be one of those 16 drivers.

I recall 20 years ago how cool it was to be able to stand on that stage at Richmond after that final race of the regular season and be one of the guys, right, that had worked all year, every lap, every race, put a good points record together one week and win the next and drag a tore-up race car across the line for 20th to get that stage every single week and grind and grind.

That's kind of what I'm excited about for these guys to experience, is the pride and the work that they've got to put in every single lap and every single race to finally be one of those few people who actually gets to be a part of that at the end of the year.

So that will be fun for our portion of the season. I love the idea that, once we do get to the Chase, we just get to sit back and watch these guys go at it for 10 races, and they have to put together the full body of work. I feel like whoever can accomplish that can feel pretty darn good about what they've done at the end of the day.

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. Like I said at the first of this, it's simpler, easier, I think that's great. We all understand what the objective is, pretty cut and dried. It's the full body of work. It's the entire season.

You can be hot at the end of the year and still have success and do well and have a shot at the championship, but what you do in the regular season of the first 26 races is going to be critical to giving you that chance.

**Q. This one's for Mark. You seem to really have your finger on the pulse of the fan, the classic race fan. So do you think this format is enough? Because some classic race fans, of course, just want a straight race, just like it used to be in the '80s or whatever. What would you say to that?**

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**MARK MARTIN:** Yeah, it's not going to be enough for some. You just can't make everyone happy. I think that it is the best possible scenario that you could have asked for.

After the second meeting that we had, I was still convinced that we couldn't even get to this. I am so happy. Everyone wins with this format, everyone. The fans win. They were heard. They win. The drivers, the teams win. NASCAR wins. Everybody wins. You know, you can't always have everything you want.

I wanted it all, but I'm sure happy. This is great for our sport.

**Q. Steve, how close, if at all, did you come to going to a full race or full season points? And what was the determining factor not to go there?**

**STEVE O'DONNELL:** I think I'd go back to we looked at everything. I think the leader probably to begin with was maybe a longer four-race championship format that I think some people thought about, then it was five, what would the different mix of tracks be. Then really it narrowed down to a full season or some type of a Chase.

Just looking at both of those, there are a lot of fans, yes, there are a lot of vocal fans on social media. Those aren't all of our fans, and there are a lot of fans who like Playoffs or liked a Playoff format as well. So we felt like this was a great balance.

And it's simple. There's no Playoff points and all those things. Ryan McGee said it best, I think, in the committee that you need to get on an elevator, get to the 20th floor, and be able to explain this to somebody, and we could finally do that. We couldn't do that in the past. It was really challenging.

So this we feel like, as Mark said, is the best of both worlds. It gives us room to take a look at it. It won't be perfect. We'll learn some things along the way. We've got the smartest group of engineers and drivers and teams who will look at this and say, Here we go, this is the way I am going go after it. And we'll learn some things along the way as well.

**Q. Steve, what went into settling on 16 as the right number to qualify for the Chase? Then also, what was the balance of the points for winning versus a win-and-in scenario? I look back at maybe last season where a guy like Shane van Gisbergen, what he did in the regular season versus being able to get in this format?**

**STEVE O'DONNELL:** Let me answer the first part in terms of the win and in. One of the challenges around there, we're going to the Daytona 500, biggest race of the year. Mark Martin wins the Daytona 500, and what's the first thing the announcer is going to say? He's in the Playoffs. What are we doing?

When you look at that, it doesn't happen in any other sport, and it really became something that was taking away from the entirety of the season. So it was important to us to still have winning matter but every race matter.

Even when you got to the old Playoffs, you could win in the first round, and you could test for two races if you wanted to. The sponsors probably wouldn't allow that, and you're going after it, but there were some unique situations we learned along the way that allowed for some things that we didn't love.

This was important for us to have winning still matter, adjust the points, and make it as simple as possible going in.

I forgot the first part.

**Q. Settling on 16.**

**STEVE O'DONNELL:** 16, yeah. Not lost on us that a lot of things were going on in Phoenix and throughout the year, and we wanted to make sure that we limited the disruption as much as possible in the industry to make this happen.

16, when you look at it in totality, it still felt like it was a fair number, and if we could keep it the same, we felt like that would be important.

We recognize there will have to be some tweaks with drivers and owners and how those things were structured in the past, but we wanted to keep the number the same if at all possible.

**Q. Steve, there's going to be people on both sides that still won't be satisfied with this, particularly the people that were on the 36 race side that were really hoping for that. How do you do outreach, or how do you get them back in the fold so to speak and embrace them even though this decision didn't turn out quite the way they wanted maybe?**

**STEVE O'DONNELL:** Again, I'd go back to we think it's a good compromise. At the end of the day, it's going to be all about are we putting on great races that's people want to tune in and go and see? Do they care about our drivers? Are we promoting the heroes that they are, as Mark and

Dale said?

We were talking in the past about, if you go to Bristol, Ryan Blaney wins the race. Chase Briscoe - I'm making it up here - finishes 18th but makes the cutoff. The story was all about the 18th-place finisher instead of the winner. Long term that wasn't good for us.

We wanted to build heroes. It's hard to win these races. It's hard to be in the top 10. Really important for us to get back to these storylines. We think the fans will come with us.

We've got work to do on this. It's not lost on any one of us at NASCAR. We have talented people who are hungry to get back to where we were. We're going to work our asses off for the industry to deliver to our race fans.

**MARK MARTIN:** I'd like to add a couple of things to Jeff. Steve won't say it, but there are contracts, team contracts with sponsors. It's a lot more complicated than our fans really realize. It's very complicated.

We're really lucky to have gotten what we've got here. This is a great compromise, in my eyes. And the jump from 10 to 36 is not nearly as unlikely as from Playoffs to 36. So you never know what happens in the future. He didn't say that. I did, though.

**THE MODERATOR:** That's a good place to end it. That wraps this portion of our announcement. We thank our panel here today. We thank those gathered in the room. We also want to say a special thanks to those watching on the YouTube channel and the NASCAR Channel and listening on SiriusXM NASCAR Radio.

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