

7-23-23: Pocono Raceway

I hadn't actually intended to go to Pocono but when my micro sprint race on Friday and the New Hampshire Cup Series race I'd intended to go to both got rained out and the weather forecast looked beautiful for the first weekend in a while I figured it was finally time to make the trip. It's the second closest NASCAR track to me at only 4.5 hours away but I'd somehow never made it out there. It became the most last-minute NASCAR race I've ever attended as I only decided midday on Friday that I was actually going to go.

Because I had plans on Saturday I picked up my brother early on Sunday morning and we left around 6:30am. We didn't hit any real traffic until the exit off the freeway going into the track, where the last two minutes were pretty bumper to bumper but didn't add a significant amount of time. It's was also way later than I otherwise would have arrived at a Cup race but I wanted to get at least 3 hours of sleep last night after the midnight movie I attended.

It looked like they were parking people starting closer in and working out, so might actually have been a bit of an issue if we'd arrived significantly earlier. As it was I got parked right about where I'd have wanted to be, very close to the exit gate out of the lot. After Daytona, North Wilkesboro, and Chicago it was kind of nice going back to the traditional parking setup of big fields around the track that I can walk from.



You can tell just how big the track is as soon as you pull in, especially with the long straight grandstands. Every other track I've been to of a comparable size has been a tri-oval setup where the illusion makes it look not quite as large from the outside. Getting into the gates took basically no time at all, I love the new security systems where you can just walk right through and they only flag certain bags to look at.



The midway was sizeable, larger than the average Cup race I've been to. There were a lot of more local booths set up, much of them surrounding the Pennsylvania army and whatnot, but with a number of other things as well, and there were a lot of displays of military vehicles including a plane, helicopter, and lots of various others. There were the usual team merch trailers and sponsor displays and even a carnival area with four or five carnival rides. There were multiple tents throughout the midway and under the grandstands that sold various NASCAR merchandise, mostly assorted older stuff. I always enjoy looking through places like that, especially to find cool old pins to collect.

We were able to get through everything in the midway in about an hour and a half. We could have spent longer but didn't need to, which was good since we only arrived at the track about 2.5 hours before the race started. We walked into the main track area. It felt different than most of the other tracks I've been to, definitely older but not in an old and rickety sort of way, more of a clearly dated but it also gave it character. There was a large variety of food stalls, a mix of what seemed to be track operated and seemingly independent stalls/food trucks. The lines were all pretty long but there was an impressive variety of options.



We wandered through the grandstands to get a feel for where to sit in the future, since we were pretty limited in ticket options this time. I actually think we ended up in a great spot, where the screen didn't block any of the corners and we were closer to turn one where a lot of the passing happens. The stands are short compared to some other tracks at less than 50 rows but I could see almost all of turn two at row 44 and that was better than I expected. It turned out that the short chute was actually the least visible area in general due to the RVs parked close to the inside.



The stands weren't particularly steep but were fairly wide for decent legroom. It was all aluminum bench seating without backrests and there was a small covered section at the very top. There were actually bathrooms at the top back which was convenient. It was nice sitting right by pit road since the last several races I'd been to I didn't have much if any view of the pits. There were a few screens in the infield and one right in front of us that was useful for replays.



There was a big crowd. They kept announcing it as a sellout, though there were more empty seats than I'd expect there to be for a true sellout but I have no reason to say that it wasn't. It was nice having a couple empty seats next to me to spread out a bit.

My biggest complaint about the grandstands is that they're too close to the track and too straight so it's hard to see into the turns. I spent almost the entire time either standing or seated as far forward on the bench as possible in order to lean around people to actually be able to see the entrance of one and the exit of three. There was a lot of trying to adjust my vantage point to see, and on the restarts when everyone was standing up I had to be up on the bench in front of me to see around people and into the turn.

The race was actually really good. I listened to the MRN radio broadcast and that's definitely the way to go, I first did it for the Chicago race a few weeks ago and I'm going to continue henceforth, it's so helpful in following the strategy and getting caught up on the things I missed on track. It was especially useful for the multiple fuel and tire strategies that were being run throughout the day. Pocono really does race like a road course in a lot of ways with the expected long green flag runs and the fact you can pit under green without losing a lap. There was more three wide racing than I expected including multiple cases through the tunnel turn which is not something that's always going to work.

There were a number of big wrecks too, including one stretch where they wrecked in the first turn three times in a row before finally cleaning it up and making it through. Joey Logano was involved in a wreck after winning the first stage then apparently the two trucks had the car up too high and were dragging the front end on the ground and hurting it. Austin Dillon had a huge hit into turn one, getting airborne with at least three tires after backing into the wall from contact with Reddick. Dillon later threw his helmet at Reddick, missing him entirely but getting it across the track and into the outside wall.

Ty Dillon then dumped Chase Briscoe in turn three for no apparent reason, setting up a late race restart. Larson and Hamlin were racing at the lead and Hamlin ran Larson all the way up the track, putting him into the wall decently hard. Larson's car never looked quite right after that. Justin Haley had a big drivers-side hit into the turn two wall. Ryan Preece got turned exiting two with two to go and couldn't get the car started with multiple flat tires. It looked like the flagman had the yellow out then drew it back and put out the white flag instead. There was tons of time to throw the caution and the entire rest of the race they threw the yellow immediately as someone spun. The decision not to throw the caution was extremely inconsistent with NASCAR in general and a bizarre call, especially since there was no impending rain or darkness. I don't know what was up other than they just wanted to end a caution filled race. Denny Hamlin won, and between him seemingly being more disliked over the last couple years and the anger over the bad call to end the race, most of the fans were booing at the end. It was a poor ending to an otherwise excellent race.

Still, the race was a lot of fun and much more exciting than I had expected of Pocono. The crowd seemed really into it throughout (except for the very end) and there was good energy within it. Getting out was no problem at all either, we only lost about 10 minutes on the way to Selinsgrove for some sprint car racing to round out the night. It was well worth a trip and was an easy day trip at that.