



RANDY SARTIN / USA TODAY NETWORK

NASCAR Cup Series driver Denny Hamlin during introductions for the Bass Pro Shops Night Race at Bristol Motor Speedway in Bristol, Tenn., on Saturday.

ANALYSIS

# NASCAR Cup Series' Round of 12 offers plenty of storylines

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After Kyle Larson's dominant performance in Saturday's Bristol Night Race, the NASCAR Cup Series playoff field was whittled down from 16 drivers to 12. Ty Gibbs, Brad Keselowski, Harrison Burton and Martin Truex Jr. all saw their postseason hopes come to an end at Bristol, and four more drivers will be eliminated after Charlotte on Oct. 13. With the playoff grid

reset, here are the storylines to follow before the Round of 12, comprised of Kansas, Talladega and the Charlotte Roval. **Will Talladega be Larson's death knell, or just a bump in the road?** Larson's relationship with superspeedway racing has always been rocky. Ever since he finished 38th in his inaugural Daytona 500 start in 2014, he's been snakebitten on drafting tracks. Talladega is in between two of Larson's best tracks, but if he fails to win at Kansas, a

disastrous day at Talladega could end up being the nail in the coffin of his playoff hopes. You can't count him out at the Charlotte Roval, but it's not wrong to say that Kansas could make or break his title hopes. Talladega doesn't care about your championship aspirations – a truth ever since the track was a part of the inaugural Chase schedule in 2004. **Hamlin's hopes on life support** Denny Hamlin and the No. 11 team have made

one fact very apparent over the last month – momentum matters. A crippling penalty that voided 10 playoff points after Michigan sent the team into a postseason spiral. Finishes of 24th and 23rd at Atlanta and Watkins Glen forced Hamlin to drive the race of his life at Bristol. A fourth-place finish earned him a Round of 12 bid, but the speed just isn't under the hood like it needs to be at the moment. Hamlin's drafting acumen has been significantly nullified with

NASCAR's Next Gen car, meaning Talladega isn't a race he's guaranteed to be up front in. **Blaney, Byron look to repeat 2023 performances** Defending champion Ryan Blaney and William Byron both won in the Round of 12 last season, and parlayed those victories into Championship Four appearances at Phoenix. Byron's win came in the round's opener at Texas, the 1.5-mile track that's been swapped with Kansas this year. Unsurprisingly, Blaney's triumph came at Talladega, where he's now won three races in the last four years. A win isn't necessary for either driver to advance, but it wouldn't hurt to guarantee a Round of 8 berth early. **'Bowman the Showman' no longer an underdog** Getting through the first round may have been the most pivotal step in Bowman's championship chase. He earned finishes of seventh and fifth at Kansas and Talladega earlier in the season, and in five races at the Charlotte Roval, he's never finished outside of the top-10. This round shapes up well for Bowman, who's also won at Las Vegas and Martinsville in his career – tracks that make up two of the three races in the Round of 8. **Finally ... who is eliminated?** With every passing round, the margin for error gets slimmer. The best teams and drivers will rise to the top after this round. Here are the four drivers I'm picking to miss the Round of 8. **Austin Cindric:** Cindric has made it to the Round of 12 for the second time in three seasons. He may have silenced his critics in the first round, but the No. 2 team simply doesn't have the speed or pedigree behind it to knock out one of the favorites. Cindric's

best chance at advancing could be a win at Talladega, but putting all of your eggs into that basket isn't advisable. A solid postseason run for Cindric will come to an end at Charlotte. **Daniel Suarez:** Much like Cindric, the No. 99 team overperformed in the first round. However, Trackhouse as a whole has been a tick off in 2024, and it's hard to trust a driver who finished 31st in the elimination race at Bristol, only saved by a cushion built up at Atlanta and Watkins Glen. Suarez can't be completely written off, but his second playoff run with Trackhouse will end just like his first. **Chase Briscoe:** "The Lady in Black" may have slipped on Briscoe's glass slipper when he won the Southern 500, but the cruel hand of the Charlotte Roval will finally wrangle it off. Briscoe managed to make a Cinderella run to the Round of 8 in 2022, but he doesn't have the speed that he did two years ago. The Roval does provide an excellent opportunity for Briscoe to snag a win, but excellence is the requirement to advance to the Round of 8. The No. 14 team may have the hopes of an entire organization on their back, but like Cindric and the No. 2 team, they don't have enough speed to knock out the big dogs. **Denny Hamlin:** Call it crazy, abominable or whatever other word you want to use – Hamlin barely clawed his way into the Round of 12, and if he doesn't win at Kansas, things could go south very quickly. It seems ill-advised to bet against one of the best drivers of the 21st century, but Hamlin is infamous for coming up short when the chips are down. For the 19th consecutive season, it won't be Denny Hamlin's year to hoist the Cup.



KYLE ROSS / USA TODAY NETWORK

Phillies OF Brandon Marsh is showered by 2B Bryson Stott after Wednesday's game against the visiting Cubs.

MLB

## Phillies top Cubs, clinch 1st-round bye

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Brandon Marsh hit a three-run double, Nick Castellanos and Bryson Stott each collected three hits, and the Philadelphia Phillies topped the visiting Chicago Cubs 9-6 on Wednesday. Castellanos, Trea Turner and Kody Clemens homered for Philadelphia (94-65), which clinched a first-round bye in the National League playoffs with their win combined with the Milwaukee Brewers' loss to the Pittsburgh Pirates. The Phillies were a half-game behind the Los Angeles Dodgers (94-64) in the race for the NL's top seed after the Dodgers beat the San Diego Padres 4-3 later Wednesday. Philadelphia wrapped up its home schedule with a major league-best 54-27 home record. **Dodgers 4, Padres 3:** Shohei Ohtani drove in

two runs as Los Angeles moved to the cusp of another NL West title after a home win. **Tigers 7, Rays 1:** Spencer Torkelson homered and drove in three runs and red-hot Detroit moved closer to an American League wild-card berth with a home win, the eighth win in nine games. **Blue Jays 6, Red Sox 1:** Jonatan Clase collected three hits, including his first major league home run, as Toronto defeated visiting Boston. Toronto right-hander Kevin Gausman (14-11) allowed one run, four hits and three walks while striking out three in six innings. **Diamondbacks 8, Giants 2:** Zac Gallen struck out a season-best 11 in six innings and pinch hitter Pavin Smith slugged a three-run homer in a win at Phoenix. Gallen (14-6) gave up one run, two hits and two walks while winning his fifth consecutive decision.

**Orioles 9, Yankees 7:** Gunnar Henderson collected three hits and Colton Cowser drove in three runs as visiting Baltimore hung on. Both teams were closing in on playoff seeds. **Mariners 8, Astros 1:** George Kirby pitched six strong innings, Julio Rodriguez joined the 20-20 club and Seattle kept pace in the playoff race with a win in Houston. **Guardians 5, Reds 2:** Jose Ramirez hit a tie-breaking three-run homer in the eighth inning in Cleveland. **Royals 3, Nationals 0:** Robbie Grossman supplied a two-run single, and visiting Kansas City survived the early departure of starter Michael Lorenzen to beat Washington. **Pirates 2, Brewers 1:** Luis L. Ortiz allowed one run on four hits over seven innings and Liover Peguero drove in two runs in his season debut to lead host Pittsburgh. **White Sox 4, Angels 3 (10 inn.):** Andrew Benintendi's RBI single in the 10th inning helped host Chicago avert a modern major-league-record 121st loss in a season for the second straight day. **Twins 8, Marlins 3:** Carlos Santana hit a three-run double to cap a five-run seventh inning in Minneapolis. **Rangers 5, A's 1:** Wyatt Langford ignited a three-run first inning with a home run and Texas turned out the lights on 57 years of night baseball at the Oakland Coliseum with a victory over the Athletics. **Cardinals 5, Rockies 2:** Erick Fedde struck out 10 over seven strong innings and Masyn Winn tripled, doubled and scored twice in Denver. Fedde (9-9) allowed one run on six hits and a walk.



BRETT DAVIS / USA TODAY NETWORK

New York Mets shortstop Luisangel Acuna (2) hits a single against the Atlanta Braves in the eighth inning at Truist Park on Tuesday in Atlanta, Georgia.

# Mets-Braves postponed; Monday may decide NL wild-card race

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The games Wednesday and Thursday between the host Atlanta Braves and New York Mets were postponed by MLB due to Hurricane Helene approaching the southeastern United States, meaning the newly scheduled Monday doubleheader in Atlanta may determine all three National League wild-card spots. Entering Wednesday, with the season series tied at 5-5, the Mets (87-70) held a one-game lead over the Braves (86-71) for the second NL wild card and a half-game lead over the

Arizona Diamondbacks (87-71), who were set to host the San Francisco Giants on Wednesday night. Monday's traditional doubleheader between the Mets and Braves is scheduled to begin at 1:10 p.m. local time, with the second game slated to start 40 minutes after the opener ends. MLB's four wild-card series are scheduled to begin next Tuesday. The Mets open a three-game series with the NL Central champion Milwaukee Brewers on Friday, while the Braves host the American League wild-card-contending

Kansas City Royals in a three-game set starting on Friday. The Diamondbacks host a three-game series with the San Diego Padres, who already clinched an NL wild-card spot, starting on Friday to conclude the regular season. As the hurricane approaches Florida's Gulf Coast, heavy rain is in the forecast for Atlanta on Wednesday and Thursday. Helene is expected to make landfall in Florida on Thursday as a Category 4 hurricane, with winds over 110 mph. Georgia governor Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency on Tuesday.

**BONUS:** Subscribers will find coverage of yesterday's MLB games in the Edition at [charlotteobserver.com/edition](https://www.charlotteobserver.com/edition).