

Stewart and Co. Lock-Up Top-Five at Michigan

Home Depot Driver Donates Winnings to Assist Hometown Flood Victims

Date: June 15, 2008
Event: LifeLock 400 (Round 15 of 36)
Series: NASCAR Sprint Cup Series
Location: Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn (2-mile oval)
Start/Finish: 12th/5th (Running, completed 203 of 203 laps in a green-white-checkered finish)
Winner: Dale Earnhardt Jr., of Hendrick Motorsports (Chevrolet)

While it may not have been pretty, Tony Stewart and the No. 20 Joe Gibbs Racing Team rallied their ill-handling race car to finish fifth in Sunday's LifeLock 400 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series race at Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn.

It was a much needed result after finishing 18th or worse in five of the last six races, despite a No. 20 Home Depot Toyota that has been capable of contending for the win each time it rolls off the transporter.

"It feels like a win. As bad as we've been the last couple of weeks, this feels like a win," said Stewart, who now has 13 top-10s in 19 career Sprint Cup races at Michigan, with 10 of those top-10s coming in his last 12 races at the 2-mile oval.

Others who felt that Stewart's fifth-place effort at Michigan served as a win were those in Stewart's hometown of Columbus, Ind. The area was ravaged by flooding last weekend, and Stewart's portion of the \$136,986 he earned by finishing fifth in the LifeLock 400 will be donated to the American Red Cross in Columbus, with the money specified for flood assistance. Those wishing to join Stewart in helping those affected by the floods throughout Indiana can call 812-379-9551 or send checks payable to The American Red Cross, 931 Repp Drive, Columbus, IN 47201. If writing a check, write "Indiana Flood & Tornado Relief" on the memo line.

"I'm happy we got a top-five for everyone in Columbus, Indiana, and that we can do something to help our community out," Stewart said. "It's been on my mind all weekend. That's what this top-five is for. When it's your own community and your own neighbors, it's good to generate a good amount of winnings for them."

Getting that needed top-five was not easy, for the No. 20 Home Depot Toyota was a handful for Stewart as he wheeled it through the track's corners. From the time Stewart began the race in 12th, which he earned after qualifying was rained-out on Friday and the field was set by current car owner points, he would slide his front tires through the center of the corner and on through the exit. In addition to his race car not being planted to the track as firmly as he'd like, the tight handling condition prevented him from getting back on the gas as quickly as his competitors.

Crew chief Greg Zipadelli worked tirelessly on each of the team's seven pit stops to cure the car's handling woes, and while no surefire elixir was found, progress was made.

"Our car wasn't good enough in the beginning to get up there," said Zipadelli, referring to the team's hard-earned top-five. "We made a lot of adjustments on it. Rubbers in, rubbers out, air pressure – just a ton of stuff. It worked out today to get at least a top-five out of it. We elected to put four tires on and hoped what happened, happened so that we could benefit from it, and that seemed to work out for us."

What happened was a gutsy call to take four tires on the their final pit stop on lap 186 while others either stayed out on the race track in an effort to win the race on fuel mileage or took tires to lessen their time on pit road. The four-tire pit call allowed Stewart to go all-out. He had all the fuel he needed to make it to the finish, and with four fresh Goodyears and a chassis that was the best it had been all day, Stewart was able to wheel the No. 20 Home Depot Toyota from 17th and into the top-five, as those ahead of him either had to pit for fuel or didn't have the tires to hold off the two-time Sprint Cup champion.

Stewart's Joe Gibbs Racing teammates – Kyle Busch and Denny Hamlin – finished 13th and 14th, respectively, in the LifeLock 400.

Busch remains the lead Joe Gibbs Racing driver in the championship point race and he continues to be the series' point leader, extending his lead to 32 markers over second-place Jeff Burton. Hamlin and Stewart occupy the sixth and 11th slots, respectively. Hamlin dropped one position while Stewart gained one spot. Hamlin is 287 points behind Busch and Stewart sits 439 points arrears Busch.

Dale Earnhardt Jr., ended a 76-race winless streak by winning the LifeLock 400. It was his 18th career Sprint Cup victory, his first at Michigan and his first since May 2006 at Richmond (Va.) International Raceway.

Kasey Kahne finished second, while Matt Kenseth, Brian Vickers and Stewart rounded out the top-five. Jimmie Johnson, Carl Edwards, David Ragan, Elliott Sadler and Jamie McMurray comprised the remainder of the top-10.