

NASCAR’s championship weekend shrouded in drama

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AVONDALE, Ariz. — NASCAR heads into its championship weekend locked into a federal anti-trust lawsuit with NBA Hall of Famer Michael Jordan. Its officiating has been under months-long scrutiny, and this week it issued a wave of hefty fines for alleged race manipulation in the final playoff qualifier.

And Truck Series championship contender Ty Majeski was fined \$12,500 for skipping media obligations in North Carolina on Tuesday so he could vote in person in his home state of Wisconsin.

Other than that? Three champions will be crowned starting Friday at Phoenix Raceway.

But those national series races have become a sideshow to the off-track drama that has engulfed NASCAR the last several months. The four drivers who are competing in Sunday’s winner-take-all finale have tuned out the distractions, starting with Tyler Reddick, who made the final four for the first time in his career and is trying to give Jordan his first championship since Jordan became a team owner in 2021.

“No, for me, and for our group, it is championship weekend and everything else is not in our focus,” Reddick said Thursday.

A federal judge in North Carolina is due to rule Friday — the same day of the Truck Series championship and the first practice for the Cup Series — on a preliminary injunction filed by 23XI Racing and Front Row Motorsports. The two teams refused to sign NASCAR’s take-it-or-leave-it offer in September on a new revenue sharing



Ryan Blaney, center, celebrates in Victory Lane after winning a NASCAR Cup Series auto race at Martinsville Speedway in Martinsville, Va., on Sunday.

agreement and instead have sued both NASCAR and chairman Jim France.

Now the teams want to be recognized under the charter agreements as they proceed with a lawsuit that accuses NASCAR of being “monopolistic bullies.” The ruling is due the same day NASCAR is slated to give its annual “State of the Sport” address.

Ryan Blaney, the reigning NASCAR champion who is seeking to become the first driver to go back-to-back since Jimmie Johnson won five Cup titles in a row from 2006 through 2010, said the off-track issues have nothing at all to do with him or Team Penske. Blaney and teammate Joey Logano give Ford and Roger Penske a 50% chance to win a third consecutive Cup title.

“For me it feels normal because I am not a part of any of it,” Blaney said. “I am part of what I am doing, the championship, so it’s nice to not be a part of any of the things going on outside sheer competition. For me, it’s a great week, championship week and we’ve got a chance to do it. To me, it’s normal.”

NBC Sports does not think the off-track drama will spill into coverage of the three national series races at Phoenix.

“I think during the race, we are here to crown a champion and I can’t imagine us talking about anything other than that,” said analyst Jeff Burton, who said play-by-play announcer Leigh Diffey is unlikely to declare Reddick the winner in the same breath as “but there’s a lawsuit!”

But there are other issues pending.

NASCAR on Tuesday levied \$600,000 in fines and suspended nine members of three different Cup teams for alleged manipulation at Martinsville Speedway last weekend. NASCAR ruled Bubba Wallace of 23XI helped fellow Toyota driver Christopher Bell by allegedly faking a flat tire. That allowed Bell to hit the wall to avoid Wallace and ride it for momentum to claim the final spot in the playoffs over William Byron.

But that move had been ruled illegal after Ross Chastain did it in 2022, and it took NASCAR officials nearly 30 minutes post-race Sunday to decide if Bell was disqualified or not. He was, and Byron of Hendrick Motorsports got

the final spot.

“It was excruciating,” Byron admitted Thursday. “It was so long. I was honestly numb to it. I was just preparing for not being in and thinking we had done all we needed to do to get in.”

NASCAR also ruled Tuesday that fellow Chevrolet drivers Chastain and Austin Dillon acted as blockers for Byron over the final few laps to prevent anyone from taking position from him.

Trackhouse Racing and Richard Childress Racing appealed the penalties; 23XI withdrew its initial appeal while denying it manipulated the race for Bell, and RCR withdrew the appeal before the hearing. The appeal panel late Thursday ruled Trackhouse violated the rules.

And then there’s just the scrutiny over NASCAR officiating in general.

NASCAR for the entire playoffs has flip-flopped on its damaged vehicle policy, which was completely botched during the playoff race at Talladega Superspeedway.

Confusion over the DVP rule began early in the playoffs when Blaney and Josh Berry were in first-lap incidents and although the damage appeared minimal, the way the DVP rule had been previously officiated, both were deemed out of the race and ineligible to be towed to the pit stall because they were unable to continue after contact.

But at Talladega, after a 28-car crash brought out the red flag, NASCAR struggled to control the cleanup. Numerous damaged cars were stranded with flat tires and then-playoff contenders Chase Elliott and Aric Almirola were towed back to their stalls to allow for repairs.

Under previous implementation of the rule, the cars should have been ruled out of the race because they had four flat tires and were not able to drive back to pit road.

Drivers were incensed over the change in officiating. NASCAR officials later told teams they’ll operate the DVP policy the rest of the playoffs the way they did at Talladega.

“The DVP policy could spill into the live event,” NBC analyst Steve Letarte said. “So when it affects on-track clearly to us, we have to cover that, that’s our job. But there’s no chance I’m going to pull an off-track story and connect it to an on-track performance. I think it’s a slap in the face to whatever teams wins the championship trophy.”

JACKSON

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for 264 yards and three touchdowns, including a 5-yarder in the final minute to bring the Bengals (4-6) within one. Cincinnati — which lost to Baltimore in overtime last month — decided to go for 2 and the lead, and Joe Burrow’s pass for Tanner Hudson sailed high.

“We had our opportunity,” Bengals coach Zac Taylor said. “We got down there, went for two and just didn’t work out for us. This team is going to continue to put us in good positions, and there’s going to be a point in the season where that turns.”

The 14-point deficit was the largest for Baltimore (7-3) since the finale of the 2022 regular season at Cincinnati — a game Jackson missed because of an injury. The last time the Ravens trailed by 14 with Jackson on the

field was exactly three years earlier. On Nov. 7, 2021, Baltimore rallied from a 24-10 deficit to beat Minnesota 34-31.

Cincinnati actually had the ball while up 14 in the third, but a fumble by Chase Brown gave the Ravens a short field, and a nifty scramble along the sideline by Jackson set up Derrick Henry’s 1-yard touchdown run. With the ball at the 11, Jackson dropped back and retreated all the way to the 30 before outrunning a couple rushers to the sideline, turning upfield and managing to stay in bounds all the way to the 1.

“Just trying to make something happen. That’s all that was,” Jackson said. “I was going to throw the ball away, but when I turned I had room.”

In the fourth, Tylan Wallace turned a short pass into an 84-yard touchdown, barely staying inbounds himself as a couple of Cincinnati defenders failed to stop him. Justin Tucker missed

the extra point, but the Ravens were within one.

Cincinnati drove into Baltimore territory, but on both third-and-2 and fourth-and-2, Burrow threw incomplete deep. Jackson gave the Ravens the lead with an 18-yard touchdown pass to Mark Andrews, and then the two-time MVP-winning quarterback ran himself for a 2-point conversion.

Chase beat Baltimore deep for a 70-yard touchdown that tied the game at 28 with 5:37 to play, but the Ravens answered with Jackson’s 5-yard scoring toss to Rashod Bateman with 1:49 remaining to go ahead 35-28.

Jackson threw for 290 yards and four touchdowns. Burrow threw for 428 yards and four TDs.

The Ravens lost All-Pro safety Kyle Hamilton to an ankle injury late in the first half.

Cincinnati scored on a 1-yard touchdown run by Brown on the game’s first drive. The Ravens

thought they’d stopped the Bengals on fourth down near the goal line, but a holding call on cornerback Brandon Stephens gave Cincinnati a new set of downs.

Baltimore also burned two timeouts on that first drive, one on an unsuccessful challenge.

Jackson threw a 6-yard scoring pass to Nelson Agholor in the second, but the Bengals took the lead on a 3-yard touchdown pass from Burrow to Tanner Hudson shortly after Hamilton’s injury.

The Ravens got back to around midfield at the end of the half, but by then they were out of timeouts and the clock ran out on them.

Burrow threw a 67-yard touchdown pass to Chase early in the third.

NO ANSWER

Chase had 457 yards receiving in two games against the Ravens this season, an NFL record for one player against another team.

“Honestly man it’s just two great football teams going at it,” Chase said. “Every time we play Baltimore it’s a dog fight, the game’s always close to the end.”

SNAPPED

Jackson’s kneel-down on the game’s final play knocked the Ravens back to 99 yards rushing. The Ravens had run for at least 100 in 42 straight games, one shy of the NFL record.

INJURIES

The Bengals needed a big game from Chase because receiver Tee Higgins was out with a quad injury. ... Harbaugh said Hamilton has a sprained ankle and the injury isn’t too serious.

UP NEXT

Bengals: At the Los Angeles Chargers on Nov. 17.
Ravens: At Pittsburgh on Nov. 17.

MCLLOY

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doing with the swing.”

McIlroy said the lack of wind and the generous size of the fairways at Yas Links made his task easier and allowed him to

focus on his modified swing.

“I am quite fortunate that it’s a nice week to come back,” he said.

Fleetwood — the next highest-ranked player in the reduced 70-man field at No. 10 — was more in the zone, making eight birdies to go with an eagle at the par-5 second hole in

a bogey-free round of 10-under 62. The Englishman took the solo lead for the first time by rolling in a birdie putt from 10 feet at No. 18.

Fleetwood was a stroke clear of Thorbjorn Olesen of Denmark and Johannes Veerman of the United States, with Tyrrell Hatton — a LIV Golf player —

in a share of fourth place after shooting 64 with Laurie Canter, Paul Waring and Francesco Laporta.

McIlroy, who was in a tie for 18th, has a huge lead in the Race to Dubai standings and can win what was formerly the Order of Merit title with an event to spare with a victory

in Abu Dhabi. That would take some suspense out of the season-ending World Tour Championship in Dubai next week.

McIlroy has finished a season as the European No. 1 five times and can tie the late Seve Ballesteros with a sixth. Colin Montgomerie has a record eight.

NASCAR

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Allmendinger early in the race, ending his day, and raced Chandler Smith hard at the end. Smith, who could have made the championship four win a win, didn’t appreciate Custer’s on-track bluster and confronted him after the race, landing a slap on the 24-year-old’s face that cost him a \$10,000 fine

from NASCAR.

Title race or not, Custer may want to look over his shoulder at Phoenix on Saturday.

“At the end of the day I am going to go run my race and see where we end up, and try to maximize the day,” Custer said. “You race how you get raced, and you go from there.”

Allmendinger missed a chance to contend at Martinsville, but had already clinched a spot in the cham-

pionship with a win at Las Vegas on Oct. 19 — his only win of the season.

The 42-year-old Kaulig Racing driver made the Xfinity playoffs three times, including a fourth-place finish in 2021. Allmendinger is seeking his first championship in an Xfinity and Cup Series career that started in 2007.

“I don’t feel the pressure of the championship like I have in years past,” said Allmendinger, who will return

to the Cup Series full-time next year. “Being here as many times as I have and it’s not worked out, you just get this sense of peace of like, I’ve been here before and we’ve not been able to accomplish it, so change the game plan, go into it with a different mindset and we’ll see what happens.”

Allgaier can empathize.

The 38-year-old JR Motorsports driver has won 25 career Xfinity Series races, including two this year,

reached the playoffs every year and has finished second in the championship twice — last year and 2020. Allgaier got the 2024 season off to a slow start, but won twice and took fifth at Martinsville to qualify for the championship four.

“There was a time in the middle of the summer where ... we might just have to do something to make the playoffs, let alone worry about trying to go through each round,” Allgaier said. “It’s

definitely been an up-and-down year, but I want to win a championship.”

Hill’s season was nearly the opposite to Allgaier’s.

Hill won the first two races, at Daytona and Atlanta, but didn’t take the checkered flag again until the second Atlanta race in early September. Known to ruffle a few fenders with his aggressive driving, Hill added a win at Homestead in the Round of 8 to earn his first shot at the championship four.

TEAMS

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(\$311 million) and Dodgers (\$266 million) had the top three payrolls in baseball last season, though those numbers will change

slightly this winter when bonuses are calculated. The Guardians ranked No. 23 at \$109 million. Unlike the NFL, NBA and NHL, baseball does not have a salary cap.

As the Guardians showed, it’s not impossible to go deep into the playoffs

with a modest payroll. But it’s not easy and it’s not getting any easier.

“You have to scratch and claw and match up and make moves, take shots and hope that it works,” Guardians manager Stephen Vogt said last month. “Whereas for the other three teams,

for the majorities, they set their lineup and go play.”

Not everyone believes that MLB teams are suffering much financial hardship. Baseball super agent Scott Boras called the regional sports network uncertainty “last year’s news” and doesn’t believe

it will have much affect on the free agent market this winter.

“Clubs have been offered contracts from RSNs and they’ve rejected them, they’re building their own platforms, they’re using different methods for streaming,”

Boras said. “You’ve seen it with Texas, Milwaukee. They’re offered money but they feel they can do better with other elements.

“That should tell you about their evolution of thought — how they feel going forward with streaming.”