

NASCAR SPRINT CUP

ROOM FOR ONE

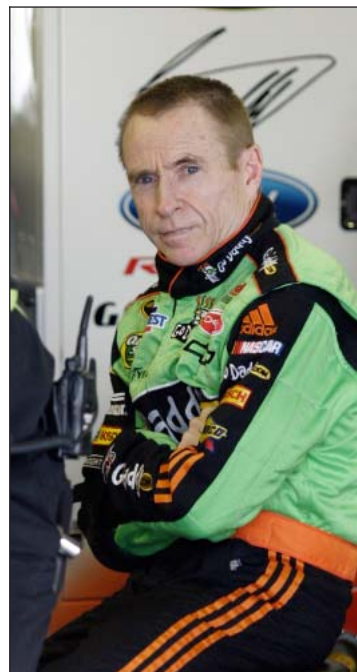
With two races left until the 12-driver Chase for the Championship, we take a look at the fight for the final spot. Only the top two in points, Kevin Harvick and Jeff Gordon, have clinched spots. But realistically, those in spots 3-11 are all but in. So who's fighting for No. 12, and what are their chances heading into the races Sunday at Atlanta and Sept. 11 at Richmond?



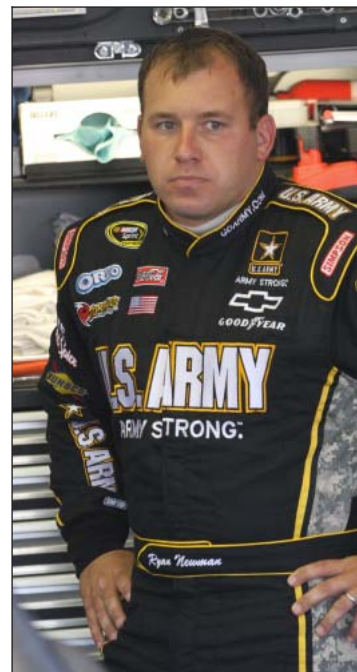
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Clint Bowyer

POSITION: 12th
POINTS: 2,920

LOWDOWN: Bowyer has the inside track to be the third Richard Childress Racing driver in the Chase, joining Harvick and Jeff Burton, who's in seventh. Richmond is his best track, with an average finish of 10.2, including one of his two career Sprint Cup victories in the 2008 spring race. He also owns one of his eight Nationwide series wins there. He has finished sixth at Atlanta four times, but in his other five races there he has finished 20th or worse. If the race Sept. 5 doesn't go well, he's likely to be under the gun.

CHANCE: 80 percent

Jamie McMurray

POSITION: 13th
POINTS: 2,820

LOWDOWN: He has moved up from 19th place in the past six weeks and will be one to watch if he does find his way into the Chase. This season, his first with re-branded Earnhardt Ganassi Racing, has been better than he could have dreamed, with victories in the Daytona 500 and Brickyard 400. "I'm really fortunate that we were able to win those two big races, because if we don't make the Chase, it's not going to be devastating." Tell it to your sponsors.

CHANCE: 7 percent

Mark Martin

POSITION: 14th
POINTS: 2,819

LOWDOWN: The sentimental favorite at age 51, Martin was in the top 12 for most of the season but fell out two weeks ago at Michigan. Martin's powerhouse Hendrick team can focus on his efforts with Gordon in, Jimmie Johnson comfortable in ninth and Dale Earnhardt Jr. out of the running. Martin's form has been poor lately, with one top-10 finish in 11 races, and his glory at Atlanta (two wins, most recently in 1994) and Richmond (one win, in 1990) has faded.

CHANCE: 10 percent

Ryan Newman

POSITION: 15th
POINTS: 2,802

LOWDOWN: A bright side is hard to come by considering his deficit, but he has 11 top-10 finishes in 17 starts at Richmond, including all three of his races there with Stewart-Haas. At Atlanta, Newman has five top-10 finishes in 17 starts and one top-five, which is likely what he will need by the time the regular season finale rolls around. He has two top-fives this season, which would tie a career low.

CHANCE: 3 percent

— Jim Tomlin
St. Petersburg Times

FASTLANE: Move from Labor Day weekend to Mother's Day weekend has benefitted Darlington, C5

USC MEN'S SOCCER

USC seeks to rebound

Gamecocks coming off first losing season in 14 years, feature talented freshman class

By CHRIS DEARING
Special to The State

The South Carolina men's soccer team opens its season tonight against Clemson at Stone Stadium in a nationally televised match on Fox Soccer Channel. The Gamecocks are coming off of a 7-8-3 campaign in 2009 and enter their 33rd season under the guidance of coach Mark Berson.

Five story lines for the season:

GETTING BACK TO WINNING

USC will attempt to rebound from its first losing season since 1996.

Doing so will depend on finding the right mix between a

strong, seven-member senior class and 12 talented freshmen. Senior Sam Arthur, the Gamecocks' leading goal scorer a year ago and their catalyst on offense, will be out for the opener and possibly a few more games after sustaining a broken foot in July. In his absence, Blake Brettschneider, Mark Wiltse and Mike Lindsay will have to play key roles.

In two exhibitions, freshmen Chipper Root and Bradlee Baladez each scored goals. If the newcomers can blend with eight returning starters, USC could challenge for the Conference USA title.

"We have a fine group of student-athletes that will be the leaders on this team,"



Berson

SEE SOCCER PAGE C6

CLEMSON AT USC

WHEN: 8 p.m. today

WHERE: Stone Stadium

TV: Fox Soccer Channel

STEELERS 19, PANTHERS 3

Panthers attain goal but little else

Carolina emerges from final exhibition with healthy starters

By DARIN GANTT
The (Rock Hill) Herald

PITTSBURGH — The Carolina Panthers learned a few important things Thursday night.

Or at least, you hope they did, since it was hard to tell that anything was accomplished by the offense or defense at Heinz Field.

A pitiable crowd of 52,130 souls watched the Pittsburgh Steelers beat the Panthers 19-3 in a fourth and final exhibition that neither seemed interested in playing.

Panthers coach John Fox admitted his main goal was to escape injury free for the Sept. 12 opener at the New York Giants.

"The key was getting our starters ready, healthy," Fox said. "We didn't get anybody nicked up, and we'll be full speed ahead for New York."

Ostensibly, the Panthers felt good enough about their starters after three games to

not to play them in the finale. And there's perhaps something to be gleaned about the depth of the Panthers, namely that you can only hope they don't get into it.

Otherwise, perhaps you worry that John Kasay's 50-yard field-goal attempt hit the crossbar and bounced backward (though he hit a 51-yarder in the fourth), or that the Panthers still haven't found an acceptable second starting receiver. But for the effort the two teams put into it, you also have to wonder how closely they could grade the tape of this one.

The result of the last month of fake football? An offense that went an entire preseason without a touchdown, and a defense that performed better than expected.

Is that enough as they go into the regular season just over a week from now? We'll see. But nothing that was on display against the Steelers will matter much in New York a week from Sunday.

"I think we'll be ready for the regular season," said wide receiver Steve Smith, who didn't play a down in the

SEE PANTHERS PAGE C2



DAVID T. FOSTER III/MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

Carolina running back Dantrell Savage is separated from the ball after a hit by Pittsburgh's Stevenson Sylvester during the second quarter Thursday.

college football
2010

CLIFF MARTENS IS THE FACE OF USC'S DEFENSE

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