ALEX'S MOTORSPORTS PREVIEW:

THE BIGGEST CHANGES TO NASCAR IN 2026

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With the NASCAR season officially starting this weekend with the Cook Out Clash at Bowman Gray Stadium, some major changes have been implemented in NASCAR over the past month.

First off, the "playoffs" are no more. The playoff format that took place from 2017-2025 has officially been axed as viewership and fan engagement has been declining steadily since 2021.

The format had six different champions, Martin Truex Jr (2017), Joey Logano (2018, 2022, 2024), Kyle Busch (2019), Chase Elliott (2020), Kyle Larson (2021, 2025) and Ryan Blaney (2023).

The biggest gripe the fans had with the previous format is specifically against Logano in 2024. Logano won the championship in Phoenix that year but had a 17.11 average finish across all races.

That average finish was the lowest of any NASCAR champion in the history of the sport. That also includes this year's finish In the Cup Series where Denny Hamlin led 208 out of the 312 total laps and was leading until a caution in the final three laps which, cemented Kyle Larson's come from behind championship. In addition, Connor Zilisch's Xfinity Series campaign, where he lost the championship with a few laps to go despite winning 10 out of the 33 races (the most ever by a rookie in Xfinity Series history), should be taken into account.

Those three scenarios were when NASCAR knew it was time for a change.

That's why NASCAR switched back to "The Chase" format (used from 2004-2013) with a few changes.

For the Cup Series, there will be 10 races to decide the champion, then nine for the O'Reilly Auto Parts Series and finally, seven for the Trucks Series.

The field size will be the same as before, 16 for the Cup Series, 12 in the O'Reilly Series (formerly the Xfinity Series) and 10 in the Trucks Series.

The win and in rule is officially out, so if you win a race, you are no longer guaranteed into the Chase.

Another change is that race winners will now get 55 points for a win instead of the previous 40 (15 more than previously) and the other positions points do not change.

For the chase, the drivers' points will be reset with first getting 2,100, second getting 2,075, third getting 2,065 and then each position from fourth to 16th getting a five-point drop for each seed after (16th gets 2000 points).

To win the new format you need to have the most points at the end of the 10, nine or seven races.

Also changing for the upcoming season is the fastest lap eligibility. In 2026, drivers will be disallowed from getting the fastest lap once their car has had repairs in the garage. So, if you set it before you wreck and go to the garage, it counts. This is because previously, cars that got wrecked and would go back to the garage, would come back down however many laps and take the fastest lap point. This was famously exploited by Kyle Larson and the No. 9.

Another change is NASCAR lowered the minimum age requirement for racing at 1.25 mile and short tracks in the O'Reilly Series to 17 and older.

NASCAR is also increasing the horsepower for Cup Series cars from road courses and oval tracks that are shorter than 1.5 miles to 750.

Penultimately, Cup Series drivers that have three or more years of experience in the Cup Series will be able to race more races in the lower Series in 2026. Cup drivers can now race up to 10 O'Reilly Series races and up to eight Truck Series races.

Finally, the Roval, which was at Charlotte Motor Speedway and the only playoff road course, will be switching to an oval this season.

With that being said, all the changes NASCAR has made have been received well by fans, and it will be fun to see what the Chase can produce in terms of playoff racing.



Chase Elliot stands on top of his car to celebrate his NASCAR Cup Series victory at EchoPark Speedway in Hampton, Georgia, on June 28, 2025. The NASCAR season ahead anticipates several changes to the playoff picture in 2026. PHOTO COURTESY OF @DURAG_DALE ON INSTAGRAM.

BRAYDEN'S BREAKDOWN:

THREE TRADE TARGETS FOR THE BOSTON CELTICS

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ESPN's Shams Charania recently reported that the Celtics are pursuing trade options to acquire a new starting center.

After a slow start to the season, Boston has kicked it into high gear, claiming second place in the Eastern Conference with a record of 29-17. This has been done without All-NBA player Jayson Tatum and the departures of Jrue Holiday and Kristaps Porzingis among others who were vital to the 2024 NBA Championship team.

Despite the departures, President of Basketball Operations Brad Stevens has reconstructed the roster in the way that only he can. Stevens drafted Jordan Walsh and Hugo Gonzalez, two non-lottery picks who have become mainstays in the Celtics rotation this season.

At the center position, Neemias Queta and Luka Garza have filled in effectively after Porzingis, Luke Kornet and Al Horford manned the position for the previous two seasons. Adding another big to the rotation would be crucial for Stevens and the Celtics if they want to make another deep postseason run.

Here are three centers that could be on their way to Boston before the trade deadline of Feb. 5.

Ivica Zubac

The Clippers big man has been linked to the Celtics in trade talks all season. The 7-footer is averaging a double-double for the second consecutive season, along with his seventh straight season shooting over 60% from the field. The Celtics have struggled with rebounding this season, the addition of Zubac and his 11 rebounds per game would be crucial down the stretch. It was revealed that the Clippers are looking for multiple firsts in exchange for Zubac. The Celtics have five first-round picks in the next six years along with many second-round picks that could be packaged as well. If the Clippers wanted a player in return, Boston could offer one of their young wings to sweeten the deal. Walsh, Gonalez and Baylor Scheierman have all been great rotation players, however there would be no need to keep all three in the long run, especially with a Tatum return looming. Los Angeles has revived its season after a very slow start, sitting at 22-24. If they were to move Zubac and focus on the future, Boston has one of the best offers available.

Daniel Gafford

An injury filled season has the Dallas Mavericks at 19-27 and looking to unload some assets. The Mavericks have already discussed trading Anthony Davis, and it looks like almost anyone not named Cooper Flagg could be up on the trade market. Daniel Gafford would be the best option for the Celtics to pick up. He has been dealing with a nagging ankle injury all season and has only appeared in 30 games. This may be beneficial for Stevens and the Celtics as it could lower his trade value heading into the deadline. When healthy, Gafford creates an instant impact for Dallas. After being acquired at the 2024 trade deadline from the Wizards, Gafford averaged nine points and 1.5 blocks per game in the postseason to help bring Dallas to the finals for the first time in over a decade. He was excellent in the Western Conference portion of the playoffs but struggled in limited finals minutes against Boston. The coaching staff clearly know what his strengths and weaknesses are, and if they had the chance to fully utilize his strengths, it would have a sustainable impact on a Celtics playoff run.

Jaren Jackson Jr.

This trade is more farfetched than the other two, but there is no reason to believe a deal could not get done between both sides. The Memphis Grizzlies seem to be heading towards another rebuild with trade talks surrounding Ja Morant and JJJ. The 2023 Defensive Player of the Year is having another phenomenal season, averaging 1.5 blocks a game to go along with almost 19 points per game. Jackson is not a center by nature, but the 6'10 Michigan State product would fit perfectly in coach Joe Mazzulla's schemes. Jackson is a career 35% three-point shooter which would be an increase from Queta and Garza. The mere threat of Jackson from beyond the arc would cause defensive schemes against Boston to change and create more opportunities for the likes of Jaylen Brown. Obviously, a player like Jackson would require a serious haul in return for his services. Thankfully for Celtics fans, there are picks and players who can be shipped off to attain JJJ. A player like Payton Pritchard or Anfernee Simons would have to be involved in the deal along with a young player like Walsh or Gonzalez. Stevens has not been afraid to let go of any players before, so anyone could be on the trade block on the road to banner 19.

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