SPORTS

IS IT OVER FOR DENNY HAMLIN'S CHAMPIONSHIP HOPES?



Denny Hamlin honors fellow racer Kyle Busch with a flag. The first four races of the Chase have solidified Hamlin as a choker for some fans.
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Denny Hamlin has lost ground yet again to Kyle Larson in the standings after Larson's perfect day at Kansas Speedway on Sunday, Sept. 27.

Hamlin now sits 26 points behind Larson with six races to go, and I think it's time to bring up the fact that Hamlin hasn't been the driver he was entering the Chase.

In the 14 races leading up to the Chase, Hamlin had one top 10 and nine other top five finishes, including three wins. That stretch secured Hamlin first place entering the final 10 races and gave him a 25-point lead over Ryan Blaney.

The first race of the Chase was disastrous for Hamlin. At Darlington, he finished third in both the first and second stages. Contact with Michael McDowell on lap 240, however, gave Hamlin's car major damage and he dropped like a rock to finish 18th. Hamlin's 25-point lead dwindled to just 12 points after Christopher Bell won the race, but the worst was yet to come.

At Worldwide Technology Raceway the following week, Hamlin had another stinker. He wouldn't get any stage points in stage one but would salvage a sixth-place finish in stage two to net him five points. But Hamlin didn't have the speed to get higher than that, and he would finish in ninth while championship rival Kyle Larson won the race and scored 18 stage points. After Gateway, Hamlin only had a nine-point advantage, which would disappear the following race.

At Bristol, Hamlin would finish third in stage one and be just shy of the points in stage two. Larson, meanwhile, brought Hamlin's lead down to just two points entering the final stage. Hamlin would need to show some more pace as Larson was vying for the win. Once again he shied away from the moment.

Hamlin would finish in eighth while Larson finished second and took the lead in the championship. Entering the fourth Chase race at Kansas, Hamlin needed an amazing day to stop Larson from increasing his lead as Kansas is one of Larson's best tracks on the calendar.

At Kansas, Hamlin showed a lot more speed than the previous three weeks, finishing second in stage one and third in stage two for 17 total stage points. It wasn't enough to stop Larson, as he would go on to win both stages with ease for 20 stage points.

Entering the final stage, Hamlin would need a major boost to dethrone Larson and minimize the damage on the day, and Chase Briscoe was here to save the day... kind of.

Briscoe took the lead of the race late and would lead 23 laps before Larson came back and took the lead with seven laps to go, and Larson wouldn't look back. Thankfully for Hamlin, who was in fourth, Briscoe would fade away massively after brushing the wall, and he would be able to salvage a third-place finish.

Even with a great day from Hamlin, Larson would come away with maximum points at his most dominant track, causing Hamlin to fall further from first. Is this the end for Hamlin?

Absolutely not. The next track on the calendar is Las Vegas Motor Speedway, which is a track Hamlin has succeeded at immensely in the past. Hamlin has had three wins at this location since 2021 including the past two races there earlier this spring and last October.

But Hamlin will have competition. Joey Logano is also very good at the track, and has won there four times since 2019 and since "even year Logano" is back in full swing, it could make the race interesting between the two.

The first four races of the Chase have solidified Hamlin as a choker for some fans. Hamlin has been seeking a title since his first full-time season in 2006, and he came excruciatingly close twice.

The first was in 2010 in the first iteration of the Chase when Hamlin came to Homestead-Miami Speedway with the points lead over Jimmie Johnson. But a spin on a restart on lap 22 and a poor finish of 14th dropped him to second in the standings after Johnson finished second.

The closest Hamlin got to a championship was last season at Phoenix, when Hamlin started on pole and led 209 laps. Hamlin even led William Byron in second by 3.1 seconds with four laps to go, but Byron blew his right rear tire trying to catch up and brought out the caution. In the pits, Larson took two tires while Hamlin took four, and Larson jumped Hamlin in the running order.

Hamlin wouldn't be able to recover from that blunder, and he would fall painfully short of the title after being the most dominant car on the racetrack for almost two-thirds of the race.

And again, Hamlin's hunt for a title isn't over. If Hamlin wins while Larson has a bad race, Hamlin will be back in the hunt and might even take the lead again. But it won't be easy; Larson has historically turned it on when the lights were at their brightest.

But with some of Hamlin's best tracks coming up in the next few weeks, he has control over his destiny. And how sweet would it be for Hamlin if he won at Homestead-Miami, 16 years after his first title hopes were first dashed in the championship format that has come back this year?



Denny Hamlin accepts the Pole Award in Chicago, Ill. Hamlin is chasing a championship in his racing career.
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