

## Johnson widens points lead on Kenseth's bad day

Written by Associated Press  
Monday, November 11, 2013 12:00 AM -

---

Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz.— Matt Kenseth had one of those rare seasons in which everything seemed to go right every time he got behind the wheel of his car.

Until the one day he couldn't afford for anything to go wrong.

Kenseth had one of his poorest performances of the season Sunday, finishing 23rd at Phoenix International Raceway to allow Jimmie Johnson to seize control of the championship race. Johnson, who started the day up seven points in the standings, finished third behind Kevin Harvick and Kasey Kahne to pad his lead to 28 points.

The 5-time champion goes to next Sunday's season finale at Homestead needing to finish 23rd or better to win the title.

Kenseth, who won his only championship 10 years ago, gave what sounded like a concession speech following his disappointing day.

"Of course I'm disappointed — we go there basically without a shot to win," Kenseth said. "On the other hand, I couldn't be happier and more proud of my team and, man, this has been the best year of my racing career. We hoped to go down to Homestead and race for it on performance. On the other hand, I'm extremely happy and really, really proud of my team.

"There's not a car out here I'd rather be driving. We've had just an amazing, incredible season and we've still got one week left. So I'm really thankful for them putting me in a car and everybody who has given me this opportunity."

## Johnson widens points lead on Kenseth's bad day

Written by Associated Press

Monday, November 11, 2013 12:00 AM -

---

Johnson, who had a mechanical failure in last year's season finale and finished 36th, wasn't ready to claim the title following his workmanlike performance at Phoenix.

"We're heading into Homestead in the position we want to be in," Johnson said. "I'll have to go down there and run 400 miles. It's far from over. You've got to finish that race. Although we have a nice cushion, we still have to go down there and take care of business."

Harvick won at Phoenix for the second consecutive year, capitalizing when Carl Edwards ran out of gas coming to the white flag. But all eyes were on Kenseth, who struggled mightily for the first time in the Chase for the Sprint Cup Championship and for one of the few times this season.

Kenseth had only finished lower than 23rd four times this entire season and three were related to either engine failure or a crash.

But his car was off from the very start, and he struggled to even tell crew chief Jason Ratcliff what adjustments to make on a Toyota he described at one point as "just not drivable."

Figuring track position and clean air was the only fix, Ratcliff opted for a strategy of having Kenseth do the opposite of other drivers: If they pitted, Kenseth did not, and vice versa. It worked as Kenseth cracked the top 10 but then backfired badly on a pit stop at the worst possible time.

Moments after contact between Johnson and Edwards knocked Johnson out of the groove and forced him to save his Chevrolet from wrecking, a caution was called for Josh Wise's spin. The Joe Gibbs Racing crew botched the pit stop, changing strategy mid-stop, and Kenseth compounded the problem by running over his air hose. His car had to be backed up before it could be serviced. It dropped him to 30th, two laps down, and he restarted behind Johnson at the one opportunity he'd had to make up some ground.

## Johnson widens points lead on Kenseth's bad day

Written by Associated Press

Monday, November 11, 2013 12:00 AM -

---

"I called left sides trying to get some track position and I looked up and there weren't many cars coming down pit road, so I thought we might as well put four on it," Ratcliff said. "But when I called four, those guys had left-side tires in their hands and half of them went over the wall and had to come back to get the right-side tires. It's just a mess.

"I let the guys down. They do a great job on pit road and I made them look bad with the mix-up."

Johnson, stressed over the incident with Edwards, knew when he saw Kenseth behind him after the caution that he was in great shape.

So off in the waning laps, Kenseth's frustration could be heard over the radio when he couldn't pass Bobby Labonte and David Gilliland.

"Man, this is bad," Kenseth radioed. "I can't believe I can't even pass these two cars."

Although he wasn't great all weekend, Kenseth said he never saw Sunday's performance coming.

"Honestly, it was the first day like that, that we've had all season long," Kenseth added. "That just, gosh, that speaks volumes about my team, we haven't had a day like that all year where we've been far enough where we couldn't stay on the lead lap. It was an unfortunate, disappointing day, but man, we did the best we could do. We just were off."

After seven wins this season, Kenseth's first driving for Joe Gibbs Racing, Ratcliff did not believe the team choked.

Harvick, meanwhile, picked up his fourth win of the season when Edwards ran out of gas headed to the white flag. Harvick sailed by right before the last lap to grab another memorable moment in a career with Richard Childress Racing that will end next week after 13 seasons.

## Johnson widens points lead on Kenseth's bad day

Written by Associated Press

Monday, November 11, 2013 12:00 AM -

---

The victory also put Harvick in the title race — albeit as a long shot, 34 points behind Johnson.

“We’re talking about locking him in the port-a-potty, so that should sum it up,” Harvick joked. “Those guys are good at what they do and they’re good at every track.”

**Harvick closing out RCR run with a flourish:** It would have been easy for Harvick to coast through his final season at Richard Childress Racing, do what was expected of him and little else before heading off to Stewart-Haas Racing.

Instead, he put the pedal down and raced off to what could be his best season in Sprint Cup, one that has a chance of ending with his first series championship.

“There’s no better way to go out than to do what we’ve done this year,” Harvick said.

Word leaked at Phoenix last year that Harvick was leaving RCR for Stewart-Haas and he shook off the distraction to win the race.

Instead of a lame-duck final season, Harvick got himself in the Chase for the fourth straight season. The victory at Phoenix was his fourth of the season and fourth at PIR, matching Johnson for most at the track.

Harvick would need a lot of help from Johnson and Kenseth next week to take the title but it has been a successful final season with RCR no matter how it turns out.

## Johnson widens points lead on Kenseth's bad day

Written by Associated Press

Monday, November 11, 2013 12:00 AM -

---

"We committed to each other early in the year that we'd give 100 percent and we have and Kevin has," owner Richard Childress said. "Just like we talked, we've had a great relationship and when this race is over, I haven't got a driver out there that's driven for me or crew chief or anyone I can't walk up and talk to, and that's the way we want this to be."

It wasn't always this lovey-dovey.

The relationship between Harvick and Childress has been contentious at times, perhaps no more so than last month when Harvick lashed out at his grandsons, Ty and Austin Dillon, following a Truck Series race.

Harvick and Ty tangled on the track a few times during the race and a member of Dillon's crew threw a rubber mallet at Harvick's truck after he blocked their stall. Harvick called the Dillons spoiled punks and later apologized after Childress fiercely defended his grandsons.

Harvick and Childress patched up their relationship enough that Harvick became emotional when asked about what Childress has meant to him as he heads into his final race with the team.

"We've had a lot of life lessons together and it started in 1999," Harvick added. "So we've had life lessons and you try to become a better person and I think as I've been at RCR, you learn from situations."

Harvick and Childress have learned a lot from each other over the years.

Harvick started with RCR on the Nationwide Series in 1999 and had the daunting task of filling the void left after Dale Earnhardt was killed at the 2001 Daytona 500.

Harvick won twice during his first Sprint Cup season in 2001 and was a consistent winner, winning 24 times with RCR. He won the 2007 Daytona 500 and qualified for the Chase seven

## Johnson widens points lead on Kenseth's bad day

Written by Associated Press

Monday, November 11, 2013 12:00 AM -

---

times in the 10 years since it debuted in 2004, finishing fifth or better five times.

It's been a good run, one he and Childress can appreciate as it nears an end.