

# 1997

## 37th Annual Knoxville Nationals

August 13-14-15-16 (17) • \$559,530 purse

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On the victory platform (back row, L-R) Kristen Wood, Greg Hodnett, Jessica Woodward, Dave Blaney, Denise Zahrenhusen and Danny Lasoski. (Front row, L-R) Ed Lynch, Jr., Steve Beitler, Jeff Swindell and Randy Anderson (*Ron Pahl photo*).

The 1997 Nationals was filled with drama and weather. Leading up to the Nationals Mark Kinser had won two features at Knoxville earlier in the season but so had Sammy Swindell. And the two drivers would bring their rivalry with one another to its highest level at the Nationals.

Mark Kinser made it known he was the man to beat during the Wednesday night preliminary show by setting quick time late in the qualifying order, finishing second in his heat race and winning the preliminary feature. Kenny Jacobs had the race lead for the first six laps until Dave Blaney got by on lap seven. One lap later Mark Kinser went by Blaney and pulled away to win handily. "It definitely helps to have a good run the first night out," said Mark. "We're real fortunate

to come in here with a great crew and a great car. It gives you a real boost in confidence.”

While Mark was able to use the low, middle and high grooves, Blaney was rim-riding his way around a thin cushion next to the fence. “There was a little cushion there, but I knew there wasn’t much to lean on,” said Blaney. “I was struggling to stay with him (Kinser) so we’re pretty happy with second.”

Sammy had a battle with Jacobs for the third position in the closing laps. “We got a poor start, then had a guy hold me up most of the race. But there at the end they said we were three-tenths quicker than everybody else, so that’s good.” Sammy looked strong in his heat race as well coming from tenth to first in less than one lap.

Thursday night Danny Lasoski set quick time and Jac Haudenschild got the feature win. Paul McMahan led the first two laps before being passed by Minnesota native Craig Dollansky. Dollansky appeared to have the win in the bag but he was unable to hold off Haudenschild in the closing two laps. It was a miraculous feat for Dollansky to finish second after having to race the final five circuits with only one hand on the wheel, but he was still disappointed.

“The car was working great tonight,” said Dollansky. “On about the 12th lap the car popped out of gear. I managed to get it back in gear. It popped out again, I got it popped back in but it didn’t stay. I ran the final four or five laps with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the shifter. We should have won one tonight.”

The win for Haudenschild was an act of redemption as he had missed the 1996 Nationals trying to recover from back injuries. In the third heat race Jac spun out and caused a caution but was able to regroup and start at the tail and race up to fourth to earn a transfer spot into the feature.

“I just about stalled the thing that one time and the other guys got out away from me,” said Haudenschild. “I wasn’t sure about running them down, we just had a hard time getting a hold of the car.” But Jac then praised his crew chief Guy Forbrook for working on the car throughout the night. “It’s hard for a driver to do it all, set the car up and all that, and he’s a guy that’s in the top five in the country as mechanics go. We’re lucky to have him. He really knows this place and how to figure it out.”

The Friday non-qualifiers’ feature saw Texas driver Gary Wright pick up the win after passing Rick Ziehl at the halfway mark of the 20-lap feature. Dave Blaney won the A scramble and improved his starting position to seventh for Saturday night. Mark Kinser finished

seventh and was able to earn the pole for the championship feature.

Saturday night was to be televised live on TNN, but after the E- and D-Mains were run the weather turned scary with tornado warning sirens blaring and the facility had to be evacuated. A rain storm followed and washed out the remainder of the event forcing a postponement to Sunday night, which was still held on live television.

Once the show started on Sunday night, Mark Kinser took off with the early lead but Sammy Swindell was lurking in his shadow and took the point away on lap eight. On the 11th circuit Don Droud Jr. wrecked in turns three and four in front of the leaders bringing out the red flag. Swindell swerved high to avoid Droud's machine and Mark did not see the red light making contact with Swindell as he slowed and both cars came to a stop up against the fence. An irate Swindell showed his frustration. It had been a long 14 years since he had won his only Nationals title and to lose the race while leading was unbearable. Both drivers had to go to the work area to make repairs.

At this time it was obvious the racing surface was becoming abrasive on tires. Jeff Swindell had won the B-Main and the tires were nearly worn to the cords when he was finished in that 22-lap race.

By the time the red flag was out for the Swindell and Kinser snafu in the A-Main with 20 laps to go, Dave Blaney had raced his way up from the fourth row to third place and now found himself in the lead of the Nationals. On the restart Larry Pinegar II jumped the cushion

The winning car in 1997 (*U.S. Photo Graphics*).



and found himself in the fence off of turn four. Blaney then took off on the next restart and had a ten car-length lead as he caught the tail of the field. Greg Hodnett was able to get to Blaney's bumper in traffic with the bottom groove being crowded but Blaney was able to win by five car lengths at the checkered flag.

Blaney had been close in the past and had seen opportunities slip away, especially in 1986 and 1988. But this would be the year that fortune had found him after a string of disappointments and six prior top-five finishes.

Ohio's Dave Blaney had won the \$100,000 to win the Historical Big One at Eldora Speedway the prior week and in the last 20 laps he raced around the bottom of the rubbered-down Knoxville surface for the win and his second \$100,000 payday in as many weeks.

"It's been unbelievable here lately," said Blaney in victory lane. "Things have been going our way for the last ten days or so. I couldn't be happier." The Nationals win was also the first for veteran crew chief Kenny Woodruff. "It was a different kind of race than expected," said Blaney. "You don't usually see this race track go one lane like it did, and I got a huge break with the front two guys wrecking. I couldn't ask for much more. I have a great crew and my partner Keith Hylton has been great as a first-year owner."

Sammy Swindell would find his way to an 11th place finish while Mark Kinser finished 14th. 🏆

Doug Wolfgang returned to the Nationals after his devastating crash in Kansas. He drove the Motter-owned # 71M (*Mark Funderburk photo*).





Greg Hodnett powered the David Helm #11H to a runner-up finish, a personal best for Hodnett (*Dave Hill Photography*).

**Finish:** 1. 10, Dave Blaney, Cortland, OH (7); 2. 11H, Greg Hodnett, Memphis, TN (4); 3. 1z, Danny Lasoski, Dover, MO (2); 4. 22, Jac Haudenschild, Wooster, OH (6); 5. 47, Johnny Herrera, Tempe, AZ (5); 6. 3G, Joe Gaerte, Rochester, IN (8); 7. 1w, Craig Dollansky, Elk River, MN (9); 8. 23s, Frankie Kerr, Fremont, OH (13); 9. 75, Paul McMahan, Oroville, CA (16); 10. 11, Steve Kinser, Bloomington, IN (10); 11. 1, Sammy Swindell, Bartlett, TN (3); 12. 2, Andy Hillenburg, Broken Arrow, OK (17); 13. 1AU, Garry Brazier, Sydney, NSW, Aust. (12); 14. 5m, Mark Kinser, Oolitic, IN (1); 15. 4J, Jeff Shepard, Upperco, MD (22); 16. 8h, Terry McCarl, Pleasant Hill, IA (19); 17. 12A, Kevin Gobrecht, New Oxford, PA (20); 18. 71m, Doug Wolfgang, Sioux Falls, SD (18); 19. 92, Kenny Jacobs, Holmesville, OH (14); 20. 7, Larry Pinegar II, Des Moines, IA (15); 21. 7TW, Jeff Swindell, Memphis, TN (21); 22. 55, Skip Jackson, Sydney, NSW, Aust. (23); 23. 35, Tyler Walker, Wooster, OH (11); 24. 1BK, Don Droud Jr., Lincoln, NE (24).

**Preliminary feature winners:** **Wednesday**, Mark Kinser; **Thursday**, Jac Haudenschild; **Friday**, Gary Wright; **World Challenge**, Skip Jackson; **Saturday:** E-Main, Billy Vielhower; D-Main, Steve Beitler; C-Main, Ed Lynch Jr., B-Main, Jeff Swindell; **Rookie of the Year**, Randy Anderson.