

LATE MODEL DIGEST

March 13, 2026



Finch doesn't flinch

closerlook: Johnson's rebound boosted by Bolen and Eury ... by Jim Carson

Entering the 62nd running of the Alabama 200, now a Pro Late Model race at Montgomery Motor Speedway, Presley Johnson was needing a turnaround. He built some good momentum at the big half-mile just south of the state capital, placing fifth and sixth in two late-spring starts in 2025.

His other appearances likely ruined that momentum. The second half of last season found him dropping out of two other big Pro races and fail to qualify for the Snowflake 100 at Five Flags Speedway. This year he was at opening night for Florida Speedweeks, but he was collected in a first-lap pileup and didn't return to New Smyrna Speedway.

The Alabama 200 was Johnson's first race that he has finished since June. The 24-year-old from Huntsville, Ala., notched his best-ever result at Montgomery, placing fourth about three seconds behind winner Jake Finch and on the same half-straightaway as runner-up and midrace leader Dylan Fetcho and upstart Gage Gilby.

"We were free the whole first stint and fell back to 14th or 15th," Johnson said. "We weren't too happy with the

car, but then we were able to fix the stagger a little bit. When we went back to green, we got better and everybody else seem to get worse. When we got the last caution, I knew we had something for the leaders. We got by (two-time track champion Christopher) Tullis, and if there had been a few more laps, I could've passed Gilby and Fetcho, but we'll leave that for another day."

In this event he also outqualified and outran his part-time mentor and two-time track champion John Bolen. The #2 crew and former NASCAR na-

tional crew chief Tony Eury Jr. have offered invaluable advice to Johnson. His #82 machine is one of the final cars built at chassis builder Fury when Eury was on the staff there; Johnson labels it as a GMS Race Car because Eury now runs the Late Model program there.

"Over the off-season we got more in depth with both of them; I've reached out to them more," he said. "The Bolens live an hour and a half away, so if I need something, I'll go down and see him."

Johnson has some more racetracks to visit later this year, and he certainly

wants another crack at the Snowflake. There are also a couple of trips to Lebanon I-44 Speedway, near the home of one of his sponsors, M3 Hilltop Ranch in Rogersville, Mo.

"The Massengale family has been great to me ... superb isn't the word. We go to Talladega with 'em," Johnson said. "We were second in one race at I-44 last year. I've become good friends with (two-time track champion and frequent dominator) Dylan Bates. He's a lot like me and does 90 percent of the work on his own, with some good help from some good guys. We both work jobs 9-5 and then race cars. I think that's why me and him get along. We understand you don't just climb in the car and go."

The installer at family business Quality Glass Company is likely to take the low-effort route heading into the next Montgomery date May 2. He probably won't race until then; he'll watch and lend a hand to Phil Renfroe, a veteran at Huntsville Speedway, the site of Johnson's last win in 2023.

"I think we'll let the car sit on jack stands until it goes back to Montgomery," he said.



David Kranak/Impact Zone Photos

Presley Johnson came home fourth, his best-ever Show Me the Money Pro Late Model result at Montgomery Motor Speedway.

closerlook: Familiar car fast at first for Floridian newcomer ... by Jim Carson

Several of the Pro Late Model racers in the 62nd annual Alabama 200 have wide-ranging reputations. Race winner Jake Finch has won Late Model shows at five different short tracks, and he has triumphed in ARCA Menards Series cars at Talladega Superspeedway and Dover Motor Speedway. Runner-up Dylan Fetcho has competed as far north as Indianapolis Raceway Park. Behind Finch in time trials were Weston Marthaler, a regular at tracks in Minnesota and Wisconsin during the warmer months, and Kaden Honeycutt, who won the 2024 Snowball Derby and has made 62 NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series starts.

Entering this Show Me the Money opener, Cody Martell had only raced a full-sized car outside of the Sunshine State three times. But the #99 car which now has his name over the window is one of the most rec-

ognizable Late Models from the early 2020s. It was once a #131 VanDoorn Racing Development out of the RMD Racing stable of Stan and Judi Rosen.

"They said Kyle Crump ran nine races in it ... won six, blew up in three," said Martell, from Arcadia, Fla.

The car had strong speed right away for Martell, who was in his first visit to Montgomery Motor Speedway. The feeling of accomplishment didn't last, and he was out before the quarter point of the 200.

"I believe we had a water pump failure. It was running hotter than it should, and we finally pulled in," Martell said. "I started noticing it when I was running behind Kaden Honeycutt in fourth. I moved to the high side when other people started getting to me. We've got another motor coming; the engine we ran last year was put in to text at Pensacola before the

Snowflake, and it broke a cap and a couple of valve springs. We're getting that one back."

It took more than Francis Engineering power to get the 28-year-old Martell back into the sport. He was heavy into Florida's truck class and dabbled in Super Late Models in the late 2010s, but then he took a break

"We had a lot of work, plus two young kids," said Martell, whose family business is site development company 4M Services. "It was just growing up, and we couldn't given the cars the attention they needed."

His return was boosted by the location of the Rosens' car, and by the advice of a superstar who has recently returned to the VRD fold. He regularly talks with Georgia standout Bubba Pollard.

"He wanted to help us, and I was at a place where we depended on other people to work on the car," Martell said. "He wanted me to try to get on the same program he's on, and he talked to Butch (VanDoorn)."

With their advice, and hopeful new sponsorship deals connected with 4M clients, Martell has a list of bigger Pro shows on his 2026 calendar. Cordele Motor Speedway is the nearest site, although weather took away his first chance to race there this year.

"I could run at Auburndale, which would be closer, but we've got a new car and I really don't want to go there and ding it up when I'm hoping to go to some places I've never been before," he said.



Rory Malloy/RPM Media

Cody Martell (99) leads Kaden Honeycutt (54), Dylan Fetcho (89), Luke Yarbrough, eventual winner Jake Finch (18) and Chris Tullis early in the Alabama 200 presented by Chestnut Creek Materials and RM Motorsports.

closerlook: Carolina purchase gives Canadian racer new speed ... by Jim Carson

It's nothing new for Wayne Smith to spend a part of his winter in Florida and bring a race car. The 60-year-old Nova Scotia veteran, who has a combined five championships in the FGI Maritime Pro Stock Tour and its predecessor series MASCAR, has shown signs of competitiveness in the Sunshine State since his last attempt at New Smyrna Speedway's February festivities in 2013.

Auburndale Speedway has been where Smith has shown up in a firesuit in recent years. His speed in some 2024 Pro Late Model efforts wasn't where he wanted. He also visited last summer for the Billy Joe Ingram Memorial Super Late Model race, piloting a crate-engine Pro car to fifth place from 16th on the grid with the expected attrition; he ranked second in the hard charger category that night.

What he accomplished in his latest visit, also the first in the new UARA Pro Late Model slate, showed even more speed. Smith topped time trials for the scheduled 100-lap feature, cut to 75 by impending weather concerns. His engine lost power after he had just taken the lead on lap 53, but his #44 was ahead of recent Auburndale track champions Cody Stickler and Jason Vail in the late afternoon.

"We had an issue with the car quitting in practice. We thought we had it cured," Smith said. "It's either the MSD box or the distributor. We went through the wires and couldn't see nothing wrong there. We'll have new pieces to go to the next race."

That next race is set for March 20, the Friday Pro



Darling Photography

Wayne Smith topped qualifying for the UARA Pro Late Model race at the bullring in Winter Haven, Fla. An electrical issue knocked the Canadian visitor out of the 75-lap feature while he was battling for the lead.

Late Model race on the weekend of the Rattler 250 at South Alabama Speedway, all under the UARA banner. It'll be his first time at the oval near Opp, Ala., but he also has plenty of confidence due to his new ride, a Hamke Race Car once owned by an AK Performance crewman.

"We left home in November and came down through North Carolina to see this car at a place for sale. We stopped, looked at it, bought it and drove down, then had a guy go back to North Carolina and pick it up," Smith said. "The first time I drove it was

this race."

The Baby Rattler will likely be his last driving appearance before heading home. Smith has a more pressing racing interest from April to September, as the owner of Petty International Raceway in his home province. Petty managed to have an off-weekend when Auburndale held its Ingram tribute last August. The 'Dale has set the second annual Ingram tribute for September 18-19, and that's the weekend of the Mike Stevens Memorial season-ending Late Model special at Petty so Smith isn't a likely 2026 entrant.

closerlook: South 01: Best bullring run for younger Williams ... by Jim Carson

Dylan Williams' Pro Late Model effort brought a couple of familiar Sunshine State racing figures back into action. One was Rick Newton, a car owner for Randy Anderson a few years ago; they won a track championship at Citrus County Speedway among the honors for the #01.

Another had been absent for even longer. Michael Williams was a fixture at New Smyrna Speedway and elsewhere around the state, in a mostly-green South 40 Motorsports Super Late Model and in a Limited and a Pro Cup car for other teams.

MW Race Cars has been a presence in Florida for 30-odd years, but right before and after the pandemic he worked as a shop foreman for a construction company. Now racing is Williams' full-time job again. Of the 10 race cars in his shop just down Highway 44 from the New Smyrna oval, five are Pro Late Models, including the CRF chassis with Dylan's name over the window.



JimJonesphoto.com

Dylan Williams finished fourth in the Pro Late Model show at Auburndale Speedway, in the car in which he ran the 2025 points races at New Smyrna Speedway.

The season opener for the UARA crate-engine division was the 27-year-old Williams' best result at Auburndale, as he came home fourth. During his rookie year in Pro cars in 2025, he made more laps at New Smyrna than the 'Dale, once placing second at his home half-mile. This UARA race, shortened

from 100 to 75 laps by weather, was a breakthrough for him.

"Any time you can keep up with guys like Cody Stickler or Jason Vail, it's good. I consider them the benchmark, and it's good to not let them get too far out of your sights," Williams said. "For the first 40-50 laps they were right in

front of me. Then the farthest they got was a half straightaway or maybe three-fourths. Once they did that, with 15-20 to go, I just rode it out."

The Williams gang looks forward to remaining races at both tracks this year. He has a teammate for the weekend in Scott Arnone, but he just kept his #21 out of trouble and off the pace while looking to make laps.

They'll probably stick close to home for most of the season, but Dylan has targeted one longer trip. The UARA circuit has a July 18 date set at Veterans Motorplex at the Rim, which is a few miles north of Nashville and just over two hours north of Huntsville, Ala. In the Huntsville area is Tim Laurent, a journey man racer who is one of MW's customers.

"Me and Tim and my dad and Rick and a couple other people might also go to Montgomery or Mobile a couple times," Dylan said.

Hickory Motor Speedway

closerlook: Tucker, Ransone leap back into LMSC action ... from staff and ARCA reports

The atmosphere at Hickory Motor Speedway's LeapFrog Landscaping Blowout was an exciting one. The crowd – the biggest attendance for a season opener at the track in a few years – watched six regular divisions plus the visiting Carolina Pro Late Model Series put on a strong show at the historic .363-mile oval.

Many fans likely needed a reminder on two of the names on the Late Model Stock Car roster. Nick Tucker and Lucas Ransone weren't factors up front at the start or finish of the 75-lap headliner, but they remembered why they love LMSC racing.

Tucker has been among the biggest newsmakers in all of American racing over the past few years. He's the main man behind Nitro Motorsports, the organization which acquired Venturini Motorsports last year. The Venturini family's group is the most successful ARCA Menards Series team over the modern history of the series, with team founder "Big Bill" Venturini winning series titles in 1987 and 1991, and development drivers Christian Eckes and Jesse Love taking ARCA crowns since 2019. The team has more than 100 victories under the ARCA banner.

Nitro Motorsports began in the late 2010s when Tucker returned to his karting roots after a career in Late Model Stock Cars and 29 starts in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series. Nitro Kart soon became one of the winningest organizations in modern karting, and Tucker's Charlotte-based team also began developing drivers in Trans Am and Toyota GR Cup road racing.

The 40-year-old Tucker, a native of Bremerton, Wash., entered just one oval race from 2012-25, and that was in a one-off PASS South Super Late Model show at Hickory. He's targeting Hickory's first-ever ARCA Menards Series East race April 4 in one of his own cars. As a warmup, he found an LMSC ride here, fielded by Michael Klein; Klein won the 2024 Limited Late Model track championship with Jordan McGregor behind the wheel.

"Hickory has a special place in my heart," Tucker said. "We ran here four or five years before I went to the Truck Series. With ARCA coming to Hickory, I thought it was a good opportunity to come back. We didn't have anybody



Andrew Cardinale IV

Nick Tucker, the owner of Nitro Motorsports which is Toyota's flagship team in the ARCA Menards Series, finished ninth at Hickory in his first Late Model Stock Car start in many years, driving an entry from MKM Racing Development.

running the East race, so this is a neat deal to go have some fun with our guys and relive some memories."

Tucker finished ninth and was happy to shake off the rust. He also had a chance to see Limited drivers Jackson and Ethan Tovo in person as the twins finished third and fourth in that race; the Tovos' father Joe is an ownership partner in Nitro Motorsports.

Tucker did complete all 75 laps in his Blowout feature. The same couldn't be said about 12th-place finisher Lucas Ransone, who ran an oval race for the first time since the spring of 2021. Ransone's peak came in the late-2000s, with a triumph in the November LMSC extravaganza at Myrtle Beach Speedway and two wins in the old Pro Cup circuit.

Since a full-year run in the inaugural CARS Super Late Model Tour in 2015, he had been out of the sport. Now 35, he and wife Annelise are parents to two young children. Ransone also had a health scare, a severe bout with psoriatic arthritis.

To spark his interest again, he relied on a connection with his former short-track crew chief Darren Shaw, who's now the workhorse at the Beard Motorsports NASCAR Cup Series team. The end result was a Banks-powered Hedgecock chassis, and the assistance of LMSC veterans Bobby McCarty and Andrew Grady. McCarty now has his own team after years of success with Nelson Motorsports (three CARS Tour championships) and the R&S Race Cars house team.

everything."

Ransone did get his #24, sponsored by Champion Automotive, Fortiline Water Works and LTR Utilities, lapped once during a long green-flag stretch. He also looked back at an error in qualifying that put him deep in the field, and there was also some radio issues. But he was mainly just happy to be back in the seat, especially with his ill father Larry there to see it; he actually underwent an infusion treatment the day before the race.

"He watched every lap, and he rode his bike around the pit area," Ransone said. "On the way back from the race, me and my dad kinda reminisced, thinking 'What just happened?' I hadn't been in a Late Model Stock Car since the Fall Brawl 15 years ago, when we battled with Frank Deiny Jr."

Ransone is likely to be back in a LMSC field sooner than Tucker, who was clearly using this race as a warmup. Ransone wants to rent out this car for some future Hickory shows and plans to drop in himself on some other Saturdays. He'll also be at South Boston Speedway in support of track title hopeful McCarty, who was Ransone's spotter for this event.

"A man bought it; he owned all my trucks," said Ransone, from Taylorsville, N.C. "Bobby said, 'Let's team up,' and he helps take care of it. It's great being back in a race car ... but how things have changed in 15 years. I learned a lot throughout the race. I was highly surprised how good the competitors have gotten and how close everything is. I'm not exactly enthused about the cost of



team photo

Crewmen from Bobby McCarty Motorsports adjust on Lucas Ransone's Late Model Stock Car during the afternoon of the LeapFrog Landscaping Blowout.

nuts&bolts: Speed Week @ Southern National ... from team and staff reports



Andy Marquis/Honey Badger Photography

Matt Cox converted three wins into the Late Model Stock Car championship in the four-night grind for the top class at the .4-mile oval near Kenly, N.C.



Corey Latham Photography

Landen Lewis (29) muscled his way to the inside of Kaden Honeycutt (17) for the lead during the first night's Jerry Moody Memorial LMSC feature at Southern National Motorsports Park.

Results refresher

March 4 Jerry Moody Memorial: 1. Landen Lewis; 2. Kaden Honeycutt; 3. Matt Cox; 4. Doug Barnes Jr.; 5. Chase Burgeson; 6. Connor Weddell; 7. Matt McCall; 8. Jamey Caudill; 9. Caleb Johnson; 10. Kaeden Ballos; 11. John Goin; 12. Ryan Wilson; 13. Deac McCaskill; 14. Sam Yarbrough; 15. Daniel Vuncannon; 16. Helio Meza; 17. Atley Wiese; 18. Clay Jones; 19. Wyatt Miller; 20. Matthew Laprade; 21. Michael Fose; 22. Haley Moody; 23. Dylan Newsome.

Lap leaders: Honeycutt 1-107, Lewis 108, Honeycutt 109-110, Lewis 111, Honeycutt 112, Lewis 113, Honeycutt 114, Lewis 115-125 • Cautions: 2 • Fast qualifier: Lewis, 15.321 seconds

March 5 Twin I: 1. Kaden Honeycutt; 2. Matt Cox; 3. Chase Burgeson; 4. Matt McCall; 5. Ryan Wilson; 6. Doug Barnes Jr.; 7. John Goin; 8. Matthew Laprade; 9. Clay Jones; 10. Deac McCaskill; 11. Helio Meza; 12. Dylan Newsome; 13. Wyatt Miller; 14. Atley Wiese; 15. Michael Fose; 16. Sam Yarbrough; 17. Conner Weddell; 18. Caleb Johnson; 19. Tyler Matthews.

Lap leader: Honeycutt 1-30 • Cautions: 0 • Fast qualifier: Honeycutt, 15.392 seconds

March 5 Twin II: 1. Matt Cox; 2. Kaden Honeycutt; 3. Ryan Wilson; 4. Matt McCall; 5. Chase Burgeson; 6. Deac McCaskill; 7. Helio Meza; 8. Wyatt Miller; 9. John Goin; 10. Matthew Laprade; 11. Clay Jones; 12. Michael Fose; 13. Dylan Newsome; 14. Atley Wiese.

Lap leader: Cox 1-30 • Cautions: 0

March 6: 1. Matt Cox; 2. John Goin; 2. Ryan Wilson; 4. Clay Jones; 5. Chase Burgeson; 6. Dylan Newsome; 7. Alex Fleming; 8. Wyatt Miller; 9. Jamey Caudill; 10. Deac McCaskill; 11. Caleb Johnson; 12. Michael Fose; 13. Matthew Laprade; 14. Atley Wiese.

Lap leader: Cox 1-50 • Cautions: 3 • Red flag: 1 • Fast qualifier (of 15 drivers): Cox, 15.432 seconds

March 7: 1. Matt Cox; 2. Dylan Newsome; 3. Michael Fose; 4. Matthew Laprade; 5. John Goin; 6. Chase Burgeson; 7. Caleb Johnson; 8. Wyatt Miller; 9. Deac McCaskill; 10. Clay Jones; 11. Delaney Gray.

Lap leaders: Cox 1-2, Fose 3-42, Cox 43-100 • Cautions: 0 • Fast qualifier: Fose and Cox, 15.525 seconds

Bouncing back:

Perhaps no oval racer in North America has competed in as many different types of machines in the first 2 1/2 months of 2026 as Matthew Laprade. (Maybe Kyle Larson.)

In February the 14-year-old from New Smyrna Beach, Fla., ran three divisions at Florida Speedweeks near home. The results were mixed, as he peaked with a win in the sportsman class for Jason Boyd's team and had ups and downs in the modified and truck ranks.

Three weeks later came another multi-night affair, Speed Week at Southern National Motorsports Park. This marked the first chances in Late Model Stock Cars for Laprade (pronounced lap-rayed) and in one of the mid-Atlantic region's high-profile rides.

He began the week in a #27 R&S Race Car from Tom Usry Racing, as a teammate to 2024 Snowball Derby winner and current NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series driver Kaden Honeycutt. His Flor-



Tom Usry Racing

Matthew Laprade finished fourth in the final night's 100-lapper, one night after a horrific crash.

ida modified effort was also out of the same shop as Honeycutt, as the families became friends at that fateful Derby. In 2025 Laprade ran a few truck races in Texas for Kaden's dad Kirby Honeycutt.

"We did a test at Caraway for (Usry team boss Kenneth) Packer to see if they had interest in Matthew," his dad Damon Laprade said. "They called us in October and asked if we would be interested in putting a deal together for this year. It just ended up being a good fit. Mr. Packer and his family came down to New Smyrna and stayed at the house and watched Matthew race Speedweeks."

Laprade finished the Wednesday special, the Jerry Moody Memorial, then completed every lap in the next night's twin-30s. His roll came to a crashing halt with 19 of 50 laps left in the Friday race, as he was involved in a literal stackup with Wyatt Miller while battling for sixth.

That car was done for the week, but Honeycutt left after the twin-30s to focus on the Alabama 200 at Montgomery Motor Speedway. Laprade took over his #17 and turned in a strong fourth-place finish on Sign Shop Championship Night. He also beat his previous night's qualifying time by .75 second.

"I think it was important for him to get right back out there," the elder Laprade said. "For Mr. Packer to show faith in Matthew by putting him in the primary #17 car meant a ton for Matthew. To



go out and take care of the equipment and bring home a solid finish was good for the entire team."

His remaining LMSC schedule includes the other I-95 Showdown races at SNMP and Florence Motor Speedway plus a few other races. He's also slated to run a truck for Grant Thompson Racing at Five Flags Speedway plus some in the Modifieds of Mayhem Tour.

Another traveler: Michael Fose also had an extremely busy week. The 2025 weekly race winner at SNMP didn't enjoy his car at the Moody tribute and skipped the Thursday event, but he peaked on the final night when he qualified second and finished third.

One day later Fose put in some road time and placed fifth in the season opener at Caraway Speedway.

Strong debut: California teen Chase Burgeson kicked off his stint with Lee Pulliam Performance in a satisfying way. In five races he finished no worse than seventh, and his best was a third in the first twin-30 on the second night.

"We got every single lap possible all week long ... and keeping my head high after making a few mistakes that cost us better results," Burgeson said. "I cannot wait for South Boston Speedway (March 21) and to rally back racing against boss man Lee."

Andy Marquis/
Honey Badger Photography
Chase Burgeson (22) reeled off finishes of fifth, third, fifth, fifth and seventh during Speed Week at Southern National.