

'Like a gut punch': Wallace crushed after a runner-up finish

Michelle R. Martinelli

For The Win | USA TODAY Network

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Bubba Wallace was devastatingly close, painfully close.

And he felt the agony of defeat immediately, finishing the Daytona 500 on Sunday as the runner-up for the second time in his NASCAR Cup Series career.

Wallace missed out on what could have been his second consecutive superspeedway victory by just 0.036 seconds behind Cup rookie Austin Cindric in the 2022 season opener. It was the third-smallest margin of victory in Daytona 500 history, but in the No. 23 23XI Racing Toyota's driver's eyes, it's first or failure.

"Damn, I wanted to win that one," said Wallace, who's at the beginning of his fifth full-time Cup season and second with Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin's team.

After parking his car on pit road with Cindric and the No. 2 Team Penske Ford team celebrating in the background, Wallace climbed halfway out of his car and sat in the opening of the driver's seat window, taking a moment to himself. His heartbroken emotions seemed to be building inside, as he held back welling tears in his eyes.

Speaking to the media afterward, he reiterated his dejected feelings.

"Going down the back, (I was like), 'Alright, pal, it can either end really bad or end really good,'" Wallace said he thought to himself on the last lap in overtime. "This could hurt or the victory could be sweet. I think I'd rather get wrecked out than finish second."

He was running among the top-5 drivers during that final trip around the 2.5-mile track. By the time he exited Turn 4 for one last push to the finish line, he was up to third.

"We were gonna turn and burn right there," Wallace's crew chief, Bootie Barker, said about the No. 23 team's approach to the two-lap shootout to close the race. "All out, take 'em out, whatever you've gotta do."

And when Team Penske's Ryan Blaney went to make a move on his teammate Cindric, who was leading the race, Wallace had an opportunity on the inside of the track. Cindric moved to the outside to throw a block on Blaney, but with an open lane on the inside, Wallace just couldn't get there.

"I felt like I had a really good chance to lose it, and to lose it means you've got a shot to win it," Cindric said.

"You talk about Brad (Keselowski), Ryan, Bubba — a lot of the guys that I was having to fend off there at the end of the race are guys that have been in



Bubba Wallace finished second in the 2022 Daytona 500 in one of the closest finishes in race history.

MIKE DINOVO/USA TODAY SPORTS

the sport for a while and have paid their dues and put themselves in position every time at these types of races."

This is the second time Wallace has been in this specific situation, finishing second to Austin Dillon in the 2018 Daytona 500. But he said this one came with "a total different emotion."

Wallace was a Cup rookie four years ago and said he "didn't know what (he) was doing" back then running up toward the front. This time, he "really thought we had it."

"I didn't have a fighting chance in the first time in 2018," Wallace said. "This one, being that close, it's just like a gut punch. So going from all the confidence in the world to literally having it ripped out from underneath you is a really (expletive) feeling."

Wallace being in contention at the end was far from a surprise. He now has four top-5 finishes at Daytona and was the runner-up in August in the 400-mile regular-season finale before earning his first Cup victory at Talladega Superspeedway in October.

"He definitely has a knack for (superspeedway races)," Barker said, noting it's instinctual and not something you can teach racers. "You gotta have good stuff, but Bubba's exceptional at these places."

23XI Racing director of competition Mike Wheeler praised Wallace's confidence and aggressiveness in the final laps not taking his foot off the gas. But second place, even one by 0.036 seconds, still isn't a win, and it stings, Barker said.

Wallace caught his first glimpse of the finish on the big screen while on pit road and couldn't help but look as it replayed.

"Ooooh, I don't want to see that," he said. "That sucks! God! That sucks!"



Austin Cindric and his team celebrate in victory lane Sunday after winning the Daytona 500. DAVID TUCKER/THE DAYTONA BEACH NEWS-JOURNAL

Racer's dream: Cindric 'didn't make a mistake' in Daytona 500 win

Michelle R. Martinelli

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DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — For the past 3 ½ months, Austin Cindric has been "haunted" by his performance in the NASCAR Xfinity Series championship race.

"Every moment of every day," he said of how often he thinks about losing a second consecutive championship in the second-tier series by 0.030 seconds to Daniel Hemric in November.

"I've never been in so much pain that I wanted to vomit. Never in my life have I been in so much pain, felt like I let so many people down that I've wanted to just throw up on the sport."

But in the 23-year-old rookie's debut as a full-time Cup Series driver, he found redemption, taking the checkered flag in the biggest race of his life, Sunday's Daytona 500, for his first win at NASCAR's highest level.

"This makes up for losing the championship last year," Cindric said. "It's a racer's dream, and so many people get close to it. And I feel very grateful and very proud to be able to pull it off."

Replacing Brad Keselowski — who became a driver-owner for Roush Fenway Keselowski Racing — in the No. 2 Team Penske Ford, Cindric edged Bubba Wallace by 0.036 seconds in the third-closest Daytona 500 finish.

It was Cindric's eighth Cup start, and he became the second-youngest Daytona 500 champ after 2011 winner Trevor Bayne, then 20. He led 21 laps.

He raced like, and beat, hard-charging Cup veterans in the final laps around the 2.5-mile track, elevated by his No. 2 Ford that was fast enough to finish second in his qualifying race Thursday and start fifth in "The Great American Race."

"If you looked at Austin this week

and the way he ran, he didn't make a mistake today," said team owner Roger Penske, who celebrated his 85th birthday Sunday. "He was up second, third, almost the entire race, and then at the end to be able to pull it off, (it) shows you the quality of kid he is and also the experience that he already has as a young man."

With multiple wrecks in the final 10 laps of the 200 go-rounds scheduled — fairly standard for the end of the Daytona 500 — NASCAR went to overtime and ended the race with a two-lap shootout.

Cindric clung to his lead from the inside lane after the final restart with teammate Ryan Blaney, Keselowski and Wallace among those chasing him. Coming out of Turn 4 on the last lap, Blaney moved to the top of the track to attempt to pass his teammate, but Cindric went with him and threw a block.

Blaney made contact with the outside wall as Wallace went to the inside, but they ran out of time to get around Cindric.

"I was able to get Austin in front and off of (Turn) 4, where we were good enough to make a move," Blaney said. "I got blocked and I ended up getting fenced."

Confident going into the weekend, Cindric said he knew he had a car capable of winning. NASCAR's second-longest oval breeds chaos, and simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time can shatter very realistic shots at winning the Daytona 500.

"I did not pack an extra set of clothes, by the way, so I'm not that confident," Cindric said, laughing about how his expectations influenced his weekend wardrobe.

"I'll be re-wearing my clothes from (Sunday on Monday), and I will have fresh underwear," he joked. "So that's a win."

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