

FORT WAYNE, Ind. – It took him eight years and a boatload of effort to do it, but Tony Stewart finally returned to the top of the heap at the Rumble in Fort Wayne on Friday night.

Stewart raced to victory for the 10th time inside the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum with a dominant run through the field in the headlining 50-lap national midget feature.

The three-time NASCAR Cup Series champion had to transfer in through one of three B-mains after missing the cut in his heat race, but once the main event started there was no stopping Stewart's familiar No. 2 Our Gang Poker Munchkin midget.

Stewart raced from ninth to third by the halfway point of the event, then moved into second behind polesitter and race-long leader Cap Henry on lap 30 after then-runner-up Tim Buckwalter caught air with the front end of his car in turns one and two and slid back in a hurry.

From there, Stewart ran down and dogged Henry for four revolutions before making the winning pass on lap 35 with an inside maneuver off the fourth corner.

Once Stewart took the point, not even a red flag for fumes with 14 to go could keep his momentum down. He pulled away from Henry on two late-race restarts and never looked back after that.

Friday night's triumph extended Stewart's all-time record for event wins at the Rumble, as well as broke a tie with the late Rich Vogler for the most indoor midget wins in North American history.

It was a moment that left the usually-vocal Hoosier nearly at a loss for words in victory lane.

"It's pretty damn cool; any time you put yourself in the same category as Rich Vogler, or take a record from him, you know you've done something pretty special," said Stewart, whose last Rumble win prior to Friday night was in 2011. "Rich was pretty badass; it didn't matter whether it was a midget, a sprint car, Silver Crown car, dirt or pavement. He was one of the best of all time for sure. That kind of thing is something you don't think about when you show up here, but it's a pretty cool stat to know now.

"It makes this win that much more worth it, really. The car was pretty good there in the main, even though I forgot all the tire rules and ran the same right rear the entire night," he tipped. "After qualifying it was chewed up, so we dismounted it, flipped it around backwards for the main and luckily it cleaned up, but it started going away again right at the end of the race. This place is feast or famine and there are so many things that can happen in these races. You just have to hope everything goes right.

"For us tonight, everything did work out and we're standing here with a trophy because of it."

Henry topped the special dash race, contested between the four heat winners, to earn the pole for the midget feature and used the prime starting spot to lead the first 34 laps uncontested.

However, once Stewart got around him, Henry just didn't have enough pace to keep touch with the leader and faded back in the final laps off Stewart's bumper before his eventual second-place finish.

It tied Henry's career-best Rumble mark, set during the opening night of competition in 2018.

"We just weren't quite fast enough," Henry noted. "We were kind of struggling there (toward the end), and I think I kind of burnt the tires up trying to hang on to it. I knew those guys were going to be coming. Tony had to run the B, so I knew it was only a matter of time until he got there.

"My guys did a really good job, though. I couldn't be prouder of them and we're excited for tomorrow now."

Henry's co-team owner, Joe Liguori, completed the podium ahead of former Rumble winners Justin Peck and Derek Bischak.

Famed Munchkin fabricator and designer Mike Fedorcak was sixth, followed by Bryan Nuckles, Jim Anderson, Kyle Hamilton and Cory Setser.

Saturday's Rumble program will feature another complete midget program of time trials, heat races, consolation races and a 50-lap main event. Peck is the defending Saturday winner at the Rumble.

RESULTS: 22nd annual Rumble in Fort Wayne Opening Night; Dec. 27, 2019

National Midget Qualifying (best of two laps): 1. Tony Stewart, 2, Stewart-7.723; 2. Tim Buckwalter, 8, J. Dietsch-7.817; 3. Mike Fedorcak, 97, Stewart-7.876; 4. Jim Anderson, 36, Anderson-7.889; 5. Derek Bischak, 31, Bischak-7.900; 6. Justin Peck, 5x, Clay-7.908; 7. Kyle Hamilton, 16, Kenyon-7.940; 8. Troy DeCaire, 67, Williams-7.943; 9. Cap Henry, 44, Williams-7.968; 10. Joe Liguori, 8up, Williams-7.975; 11. Russ Gamester, 46, Gamester-7.997; 12. Brian Vaughn, 49v, TnT-8.024; 13. Nick Hamilton, 6k, Kenyon-8.025; 14. Matt Westfall, 9, Ryder-8.032; 15. Cory Setser, 24, Setser-8.033; 16. Bryan Nuckles, 59, Nuckles-8.036; 17. Travis Welpott, 18, Gorman-8.039; 18. Austin Nemire, 19, O'Connell-8.051; 19. Trey Osborne, 61, Kenyon-8.099; 20. Rico Abreu, 2.5, Stewart-8.185; 21. Chris Jagger, 88, Jagger-8.188; 22. Rich Corson, 15, Corson-8.297; 23. Junior Gould, 65, Gould-8.387; 24. Billy Wease, 99, Burrow-8.447; 25. Billy Lewis, 49, Burrow-8.475; 26. Jordan Caskey, 33, Caskey-8.512; 27. Don Dietsch, 5, D. Dietsch-8.539; 28. Sean Murphy, 4b, Murphy-8.610; 29. Justin Harper, 53, Harper-8.866; 30. Mario Clouser, 99, Guess-9.081; 31. Chris Malaterre, 6m, Malaterre-9.156; 32. Tyler Roahrig, 8r, Brewer-NT; 33. Aaron Pierce, 98, Burrow-NT.

National Midget Heat #1 (10 laps, top two transfer): 1. Cap Henry, 2. Derek Bischak / 3. Tony Stewart, 4. Nick Hamilton, 5. Travis Welpott, 6. Chris Jagger, 7. Billy Lewis, 8. Justin Harper, 9. Aaron Pierce (DNS).

National Midget Heat #2 (10 laps, top two transfer): 1. Tim Buckwalter, 2. Joe Liguori / 3. Justin Peck, 4. Matt Westfall, 5. Mario Clouser, 6. Austin Nemire, 7. Jordan Caskey, 8. Rich Corson.

National Midget Heat #3 (10 laps, top two transfer): 1. Russ Gamester, 2. Mike Fedorcak / 3. Cory Setser, 4. Trey Osborne, 5. Junior Gould, 6. Don Dietsch, 7. Chris Malaterre, 8. Kyle Hamilton.

National Midget Heat #4 (10 laps, top two transfer): 1. Troy DeCaire, 2. Jim Anderson / 3. Brian Vaughn, 4. Rico Abreu, 5. Bryan Nuckles, 6. Billy Wease, 7. Sean Murphy, 8. Tyler Roahrig.

National Midget B-Main #1 (10 laps, top two transfer): 1. Tony Stewart, 2. Cory Setser / 3. Billy Wease, 4. Brian Vaughn, 5. Chris Jagger, 6. Mario Clouser, 7. Austin Nemire, 8. Don Dietsch, 9. Aaron Pierce (DNS).

National Midget B-Main #2 (10 laps, top two transfer): 1. Justin Peck, 2. Bryan Nuckles / 3. Nick Hamilton, 4. Trey Osborne, 5. Sean Murphy, 6. Billy Lewis, 7. Rich Corson, 8. Chris Malaterre.

National Midget B-Main #3 (10 laps, top two transfer): 1. Kyle Hamilton, 2. Travis Welpott / 3. Matt Westfall, 4. Rico Abreu, 5. Junior Gould, 6. Jordan Caskey, 7. Justin Harper, 8. Tyler Roahrig (DNS).

National Midget Dash (4 laps, sets first two rows): 1. Cap Henry, 2. Russ Gamester, 3. Tim Buckwalter, 4. Troy DeCaire.

National Midget A-Feature (50 laps): 1. Tony Stewart [9], 2. Cap Henry [1], 3. Joe Liguori [6], 4. Justin Peck [10], 5. Derek Bischak [5], 6. Mike Fedorcak [7], 7. Bryan Nuckles [13], 8. Jim Anderson [8], 9. Kyle Hamilton [11], 10. Cory Setser [12], 11. Travis Welpott [14], 12. Russ Gamester [2], 13. Tim Buckwalter [3], 14. Troy DeCaire [4].

Lap Leader(s): Cap Henry 1-34, Tony Stewart 35-50.

Hard Charger: #2 – Tony Stewart (+8)