

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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Daytona Road Course

An Interview with:

Christopher Bell

Joe Gibbs

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for taking some time with us, Christopher, our race winner. I am sure you're feeling pretty good right now. Can you walk us through the final lap for you.

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, the last lap was pretty surreal. All race long I kind of felt like I was trying to do my best job and not screwing up, hit my marks, not overdriving the corners. Whenever I got by the 22 coming to the white flag, I knew I was faster than him. I ran him down from a while back. All I had to do was get a couple good corners and get away. The last thing I wanted was coming down to the checkered flag with him on my bumper.

You have to make a decision if you try to protect, just race the racetrack. I was thankful I was able to get away there through the infield section because I felt like that was my better part. The chicanes were my struggle points. I definitely didn't want him on my bumper going through the chicanes.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions.

Q. Can you describe what last season was like not having a win, and is today more relief or excitement?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, I'd say this is all of the above. This is the happiest moment I've had in a very long time. 2020 was one of the hardest seasons I've ever had in my racing career. I think I won a race at the Chili Bowl, and that was it for the rest of the year. That's obviously up against the Cup guys and on the dirt side, too. 2020 was a really, really low point for me.

To be able to come back in '21 and win in the Cup Series this early on a road course is something that I'm going to cherish for the rest of my life. Yeah, just can't wait to see what we can do on the ovals and build on this.

Q. You sounded very sad that you weren't going to be



able to do a burnout. Do you feel like you've missed something?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: No, no, it's all good. Yeah, I mean, burnouts are cool, but everyone does it. The cool thing is getting your trademark celebration. I need to keep winning some more so I can build that trademark celebration, whatever it is.

They didn't want me to do a burnout, so I didn't want to force the issue there.

THE MODERATOR: We've been joined by Coach Joe Gibbs. Thank you for taking some time to join us. We'll just continue with questions for Coach Gibbs and Christopher.

Q. Christopher, the other drivers we've heard feedback from after the race felt pretty good that you would win this season, but they're totally surprised it's a road course. How about you? Are you surprised this win came early on a road course?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: You know, after last year, I'd say that I'm not overly shocked. To win the first road course of the year is quite surprising. Last year the road courses were not my best finishes, but speed-wise I was really fast at both of them. I certainly knew we would be in contention or at least competitive today.

Winning, I probably didn't see that one coming, but I thought that we were going to be in contention.

Q. Coach, how do you feel now with not only do you get back-to-back wins on the weekend, but it looks like you reloaded with young drivers that can get the job done?

JOE GIBBS: For us, it's a huge deal for us, as you guys know, the talent. To have Christopher, everything that he kind of fought through last year, then to come back this year. When you think about it, Christopher got in that car last year and never made a lap, was going to racetracks. It was a lot to overcome. He did show speed at a number of racetracks there.

It was great for him to get that victory. It was great for Rheem, our sponsor, JR, Chris, everybody down there.



For us, Stanley Black & Decker, Jim and Tony, all the guys up there. It's always a huge deal for us.

As you know, in our sport, the sponsors are more than sponsors, they're partners. It's a huge deal when you get a chance to win. To have Christopher already in the Playoffs, it's a big deal for us, for sure. It's hard to do, put it that way.

Q. Christopher, first wins are obviously always special. How is this enhanced by the way you did it in passing one of the sport's top stars, Joey Logano?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yes, it's a dream come true, man. To win my first race at a road course, I didn't expect that to happen. I've always had a tremendous amount of respect for the guys that are good at road racing because I feel like it showcases talent. The cars, especially here today, the low downforce package, they're slipping, they're sliding, you're kind of riding the car more than you're driving the car. It was just surreal, man.

To be as competitive as we were today, I felt like I went toe-to-toe with Chase Elliott, we were pretty equal there. That was really cool. Chase is the benchmark for road racing at the moment. I feel like we're close. My group is close. Whenever I say 'we', I mean my crew chief, my car, my team.

Q. Christopher, obviously throughout the course of your career on very many different kinds of tracks and cars, you've been in winning situations a lot. How did the nerves or anxiousness or butterflies, if you had any, compare to other times in your career in those final laps?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, honestly I was able to stay pretty calm. I'm proud of myself for doing that because it's hard to do, especially at a road course where you have so many heavy braking zones. There's plenty of opportunities to make a mistake.

I would say this was equal to my first Chili Bowl. I've been in that position so many times. I was anxious and nervous, just focusing on hitting my marks. It was definitely there, but I was thankful I was able to pull it off and not make a mistake.

Q. Christopher, you were talking about Chase being the class of the field. Did you learn anything being behind him as many laps as you followed him today?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, I'd say that I at least learned where I was good and where he was good at. I feel like I was pretty competitive with him. We were pretty

equal everywhere except a certain part on the racetrack. He was really fast through there.

This is a very special win for me. Really proud to be able to be at Joe Gibbs Racing. This is a huge opportunity to be in a powerhouse team like this. I can't say thank you enough to Coach, Rheem, Stanley Black & Decker, for the opportunity to drive one of the best cars in the sport.

Q. Can you tell a significant difference between the equipment you're in right now?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: We had a lot of speed at certain places last year. If you look at the road courses in particular, I was really fast. We just had issues. We just could not get off of pit road and maintain our position. We would always lose track position somehow, some way. You're back in the hornet's nest.

I think out of the 30, however many races, I think we had damage 20-plus times. That's just because you're put in the back so many times, you get run over, or you get beat around.

I don't know. We just didn't have all the pieces of the puzzle. Now at JGR, I'm very thankful that we do.

Q. What have you done personally or through JGR or TRD to improve your road racing acumen from where it was when you entered the NASCAR national level to where you are sitting right now?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, so I would say the biggest thing is just seat time. Growing up dirt track racing, I didn't even know what a right-hand corner looked like before I got in the Truck Series. We went to Canada. Before I went to Canada, Toyota gave me the opportunity to run an ARCA race at New Jersey. I guess that was about it. I went to New Jersey with the ARCA car, then the two Mosport races between the two years.

I didn't love road course racing at the time. I wasn't exceptional at it, but I didn't suck at it. I didn't care for it.

Moving into Xfinity, I think we had three, four, maybe five road course races during the course of the year. You're just going to have to get good at it. Just seat time doing it. I actually did a couple Trans-Am tests and marked with Michael Self. He's a very good road racer, knows road racing in and out. Thank you to Michael for coaching me. I would say he's been a part of this success as well.

Q. Interesting that two of NASCAR's greatest road course racers ever are Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart, who have the same background as you. Is there

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anything you notice tangible or something off the track that translates from USAC dirt racing to NASCAR road racing?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, I definitely think dirt racing is very beneficial for road racing. Whenever you go road racing, you're always kind of at the limit of the car. You're sliding around, you're slipping. It's all about getting the most out of your equipment in every corner.

I think dirt racing teaches you the car control of how to pick up little bits of speed here and there, just being unorthodox about it in some places. I enjoy it. I definitely think dirt racing gives you the skill set needed to be a good road racer.

Q. Christopher, certainly a big change from last week to this week. From your perspective, with the last week, how did you work through that and build up the confidence going into this week?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: I mean, that's speedway racing, you know? That's the name of the game. You go out there and you're in a pack, you're at the mercy of the cars around you. I mean, if one guy wrecks, then the whole field's in it.

I've gotten wrecked I would say 75% of the speedway races in my career. Fortunately I haven't been on the other side of it until last week. I felt terrible. I wanted to crawl into a hole after the rain delay and stuff. But it's speedway racing. It is what it is. One car getting turned or wrecking just creates a big old mess.

Yeah, I was really excited to get away from pack racing and get back to racing the racetrack and trying to go as fast as you can.

Q. You talked in the off-season about your goal for this year was you want to be a factor in the races. You noted there would be times your folks would call and ask how your race was because you weren't on the television screen. Have you had the opportunity to talk with your family? If so, what have you said? Or has it been more yelling and screaming into the phone at this point?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, I haven't got to my phone yet. I haven't heard from them. But I'm definitely looking forward to seeing them. Hopefully they can get out to a race here pretty quick.

Q. Coach, how are you feeling after these two wins?

JOE GIBBS: Well, I'm elated, to tell you the truth. Just a

huge weekend for us. There's so many positives to it. Excited for Christopher. He talked about Stanley Black & Decker, our sponsor that's been with us now for seven years, then Rheem, JR and all the people at Rheem. It's so important for us and our sponsors. We got Christopher to talk to both CEOs. Actually Chris Peel is the CEO at Rheem. JR is the chairman of the board.

It's just huge for our sponsors. It's huge for us. It's great to have Christopher making a statement. That's a huge deal for us. To be in the Playoffs already with him is a big deal. I'm thrilled to be quite truthful.

Q. What does it say for JGR's future with these two wins?

JOE GIBBS: Well, I think young talent is very important. We know that we got three veteran guys, and they're performing great. I don't see any of those guys at a point where they want to quit racing. They're making it happen.

At one point tonight in the race, we had all four of our guys up in the top 10, so I felt good about that. But road racing is taking on a new importance in NASCAR. We're now going to be going to six tracks this year. It's a huge deal for us to step up and improve. I felt like that's what happened tonight.

Q. Christopher, as we look towards the future in NASCAR moving more towards road racing, maybe a street course mixed in in the future as well, not entirely what you thought you would be doing, but do you feel you're poised to continue having this kind of success even with more road races, especially after getting this first win on a road course?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, it's tough. I enjoy road racing because I think it's very difficult. Racing the racetrack, producing lap time, seeing who's fast at it, is very rewarding. It's real, right? If you go out there and run well at a road course, that's real.

On the flipside, whenever you get restarts, everyone is boxed up, just running into each other, that's the side of road course racing I don't love. Being at the mercy of everyone else, it gets a little bit superspeedway-ish on the restarts. It's a ton of fun whenever you finally get strung out and you can race the racetrack to try to make lap time and set up passes. You're sliding around, you're really out of control the majority of the time, you're just hanging on.

I love road course racing from that aspect, but I just hate it's so easy to get caught up in other people's mess. It's so easy for guys to poke you, spin you out. It's a love-hate relationship for me.



Q. When did it click with you that you were not only catching Joey but you could pass him and take the lead? How hard was it for you to do the right things in the car so you didn't make the mistakes you were worried about?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, I remember watching Chase Elliott win. I believe Chase won his first race at Watkins Glen, is that correct? Anybody? I remember watching that race. Chase Elliott won his first race at Watkins Glen. I believe Truex was behind him.

I remember saying this is the test right here. How mentally tough is Chase? Will he be able to stand the pressure of the best road racer taking him on? And Chase did. He was able to hit his marks for however many laps and win the race. I thought that was really cool, gave me a lot of respect for Chase.

I've always put a lot of pride into my mental strength aspect, as well. I feel like I've matured a lot over the course of the years, been put in positions of high-pressure moments. It was definitely one of them trying to run down the 22.

Aside from winning the race, I didn't really know that I was going to get there. Adam on the radio kept telling me just keep doing what you're doing and you might get there. I just was focused on hitting my marks and not overdriving the car. I think he had a couple moments where he slipped that gave me a lot of time.

Q. Coach Gibbs used the word 'a statement victory'. Do you call this a statement victory for your career and this season?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: I don't know. I'd say that's more for other people to say than me. I knew going to Joe Gibbs Racing that this is my time. I'm either going to put up or shut up. I'm very grateful for how it's played out so far between the first two weeks.

It's a dream come true to be able to drive for the Coach, have all of our great partners at Rheem, Stanley Black & Decker. Those guys are who made it happen. I just want so bad to be in this No. 20 car for the rest of my career. I need to perform well to do that. I just got to stay after it.

Q. Coach, Ty winning, Christopher winning, a really good weekend for your young stars. J.D. was a big part of that. What does this weekend do for the family? What do you think J.D. might say about the last two days between Ty and Christopher?

JOE GIBBS: It's interesting that you mention that. This is J.D.'s birthday today. Our family back home is celebrating it. There's not a day goes by that I don't think about him. Of course, any parent or grandparent out there would know what it feels like when you have that heartbreak.

But J.D. spent his whole occupational life building our race team. So I think he's getting a full view of it right now. I think he's loving it. We sure miss him. I think everybody at Joe Gibbs Racing misses him.

A lot of other people in our sport have been so great, all the letters, all the responses, all the phone calls and the texts that we've got honoring J.D. has been fantastic. Anybody out there wants to go to his website, JDGibbsLegacy.com. We're really excited. We just passed nine million people have gone to that website, nine million people. I think a lot of them said it's impacted their lives. J.D.'s life has impacted a lot of people. He was very much a people person. He certainly cared about our race team and our people there.

Q. Christopher, I was listening to your radio coming across the start/finish line. I was expecting you to go crazy, be all excited. You were so subdued. Has this sunk in yet that you're a Cup winner?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, it's interesting. I was just trying to soak in the moment, trying to cherish it. It's definitely different here in 2021, and 2020 as well. It was a shame that my wife wasn't able to be here to celebrate with us. Even the team being able to come up and take team pictures. All the emotion in Victory Lane has completely changed.

I hope that we get to get back a little bit closer to normal here pretty quick where we can celebrate these moments together more. It sucks not having your team by your side to throw water on you.

Q. Christopher, from how humbling last year was to this peak moment today, what has this journey been like for you? A lot of Cup drivers find when they get to this level, they may not win as regularly as they became accustomed to. Was that ever a concern for you?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, just the highs and lows. Last year was very disheartening for me. I mentioned that before I think on this call. Aside from the NASCAR side, which I knew going into the Cup Series is going to be very difficult, but even on the dirt side I didn't win outside of January at the Chili Bowl. That was very disappointing. You start doubting yourself. You're wondering if you can do this, if you're capable of it.



Last year I had glimpses. I look back at, for example, the Daytona road course last year. I finished horrible. I got caught up in a bunch of wrecks. I spun out a couple times. I ran into the back of Kevin Harvick once. We were really fast. I think I had a top-five lap time in the race. We had glimpses of being fast. It just didn't come together last year.

Man, I'm glad it came together this year.

Q. How validating is this moment for you personally? There was some criticism, fairly or unfairly, for your move to this 20 car. What does this victory do in your opinion to validate the team's decision to move you into this car?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, man, I don't know. I'm just very thankful for the opportunity, very grateful for the opportunity. It's unbelievable to be here and to be able to win this early. I wouldn't be in this 20 car without great partners like Rheem, Stanley Black & Decker, Toyota and TRD as well. Without sponsors, without partners, there is no racing. It's a dream come true to be here. I just want to be here for the rest of my life. To do that, you have to have sponsors. I hope to be here for the rest of my career.

Q. You were talking about sponsors. Considering that last season was considered a disappointment for Toyota after the dominant year it had in 2018, what does this mean for you to pick up the victory for your team and Toyota? How much momentum does this give you and your teammates moving forward?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, so I would say this is a huge moment for Toyota. It's really cool to be able to get their first win of the season. That's really cool. I have an all-star cast of teammates between Denny, Martin and Kyle. Those are three of the greats in the sport. It's going to be tough to keep up with them. To be able to beat them to Victory Lane is pretty cool. Hopefully we can keep it up.

We know all three of those are going to hit Victory Lane at some point and hit Victory Lane often. It's going to be hard to keep up with them, but we're off to a pretty good start so far.

Q. Have you heard from your teammates yet? What have they said to you?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Denny drove up beside me. I guess that was his congratulations to me. I haven't seen my phone yet. I don't know if they've reached out or not.

Q. Talk a little bit about next week. Three out of the

last four races at Homestead have been won by your teammates. There's a lot of talk about the dirt guys running well down there. Do you have any expectations? Are they a little bit higher now coming off of this win?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, Homestead was one of my best races last year. It's definitely one I've circled on the calendar to potentially run well at. Yeah, so we definitely expect to be competitive nonetheless. Definitely going from Homestead to Vegas has the potential to be two good races for us. I'm looking forward to it.

Q. Is this stretch of the season one you're looking more forward to, getting out of the speedway tracks, get a break from that?

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Yeah, I mean, speedway racing has definitely not been my favorite. Getting through Daytona one was very glad to move on from that. Road racing has become a little bit of a new normal and a big part of the schedule. I'm not really opposed to road racing. Obviously I like it today, so we'll see how that feels whenever we go to the next one.

Homestead and Vegas will be a good tell because mile-and-a-half's are a big part of the schedule. You have to be good everywhere. I think we have the opportunity to be good everywhere.

THE MODERATOR: Christopher, that's all the time we have. Thank you so much for taking some time to join us. Congratulations on the win. I hope you get to go home to your wife and enjoy it. We will see you next week at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

CHRISTOPHER BELL: Thank you. See you guys.

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