

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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Sonoma, California, USA

Sonoma Raceway

An Interview with:

Cliff Daniels

THE MODERATOR: We've now been joined by our race winning crew chief, Cliff Daniels. A victory last week, now a victory here today in Sonoma. Talk a little bit about this week and what it has been like to be a part of the 5 team.

CLIFF DANIELS: Yeah, it's been a special week for sure. After the Coke 600, that was quite a race. It's hard to even believe that the race played out then the way it did, our car stayed up front the whole time.

This week we were a little tired on Monday and Tuesday. I'm so thankful and proud of the guys back at the shop, everyone at Hendrick Motorsports, because we let opportunities like that -- we let moments like that create opportunities for us to get rejuvenated and go work hard. Our guys put in a lot of long hours, the whole shop did, to try to get these cars ready to come out west. The trucks had to leave early this week.

Tuesday was a long day. Wednesday was a really long day. The guys were just ready to grind it out. It takes all of that prep and focus to get us back here. Very, very thankful.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

Q. Did your plan coming into the race, did it change at all or was it set in stone and it unfolded as you expected?

CLIFF DANIELS: Stage one was pretty set. I think we executed that basically how we planned to. Didn't know how good our car was going to be. Haven't been here before with Kyle. It's been a couple years since we've been here anyways. It's no secret the last handful of trips here, the Hendrick cars, Chevrolets as a whole, we just haven't been as good as we need to be.

We were hoping we could stay up front and get stage points in stage one. We were prepared to shorten the stage like a lot of guys did in stage two. Once we realized we had a really fast car that could pass, Kyle was doing



such a good job with it, it allowed us to gamble a little to try to get another stage winning, stage points, which luckily we did.

Then having a tire advantage on a handful ahead of us only by a few laps, but then a good chunk at the front of the field we had more than a handful of laps of tire advantage. Looking at that, assuming we could get through with clean tires and clean fenders, we thought stage three could play out eventually and work out okay for us.

I did not expect us to get back to the front that quick. That just shows how hard Kyle was able to drive the car. He's just a master in traffic. To see that play out was really cool.

Once we got up front, from my perspective, it's a little nerve-wracking because you know you have a fast car, there were still a lot of laps left. We didn't want to abuse our tires or push too hard. Even the way the race played out at the end, he had three restarts that he had to nail. He nailed them perfect, so really cool.

Q. Coming into this race, as it unfolded, have you noticed winning the regular-season championship is more attainable and that has affected your wanting to go after stage points?

CLIFF DANIELS: I can't say you're wrong in that assumption. It's definitely something we've had our eyes on. Credit to the 11 bunch, as good as they've been all year for a little while for the whole rest of the field. It didn't really look like that was going to be achievable for someone else because the 11 had built up such a lead.

Our team is strong right now. Knowing that is kind of in our sights, we're certainly going to pay attention to it. There's still a lot of racing left. It's going to be a long summer. A lot of weeks in a row where we're going to have backup cars and practice-qualifying events.

We've got to stay sharp. Then come Playoff time, that's when we've really got to be on top of our game.

Yeah, we're going to keep our eyes on it, but we need to keep sharp in the meantime.

Q. Do you have a set number of points that by this time of the year we want to be within this much of



Hamlin, a month later... Do you map it out when you're trying to catch somebody like that?

CLIFF DANIELS: I understand the thought process, but honestly no way. Since the beginning of the year, we knew we were close in a couple races, for one reason or another, things didn't work out for us. We really just want to focus right now on executing every week. It's more about building our process, making sure the team -- if there's 10 tens out there to get, we don't need to try to get 11 and stub our toe or we don't need to get complacent and only get eight either, if that makes sense.

Yes, the points matter. Yes, the outlook of all that matters. Having the distraction of thinking we need to achieve a certain amount of points per event, we're just not really going there right now. We're keeping all of our focus just on what it takes to go execute every week.

Q. It's not the same equipment, but Kyle always has been fast here, but he hasn't had good races here. Was there anything you saw in his past races that you harped on him to focus on these things because if you do you'll have a good race just like you qualified?

CLIFF DANIELS: Not specifically. I think he naturally, and we all saw it today, right, even from the drop of the green flag, he has an amazing knack for this place.

To be very candid, the issues he's had of handling and the cars in the past at Ganassi, we have had the same issues. I can't say Hendrick has been as good as we need to be here. I think it was more of a Chevrolet thing in the past. We struggled the last couple trips here with Jimmie. Some of our other teammates did as well.

Thankfully we've had a great foundation of the road course setups that we've been building, credit to Alan and to Chase on the 9 team, that we've all been able to take that kind of foundation of what they've built and we get to go apply it at these tracks we haven't been at in a while. Obviously we have a few new tracks coming up that we haven't been to either.

He have to keep building on it, which is a really cool spot to be in. We'll just see how it goes.

Q. What was the difference with the tires this year? Seemed like they wore out a lot more than the past at Sonoma.

CLIFF DANIELS: There was a lot of falloff, for sure. To me, I guess what stands out is, as hard as we were able to run them at the beginning of the run, because we ran pretty hard, they didn't fall off a cliff of lap time after eight or ten

laps. It was more of a gradual progression. Still plenty of falloff, we know it's a soft compound tire.

I thought that was encouraging, from the racing standpoint where a guy could go hard and kind of beat his stuff up, and didn't have to pay a one-second penalty for the next five or eight laps. You could kind of get everything back underneath you and keep going.

Even when we were passing our way back up through there and we had to work our tires pretty hard, once we got back into clean air, Kyle did a great job of being patient once we reestablished track position, the tires seemed to come back to him. We haven't had a chance to debrief yet, but it seemed pretty reasonable.

Q. Coming into the year you preached about building a foundation early with this team. Is there anything about how quickly things have come together for this team that is surprising or surreal?

THE MODERATOR: Hang tight. We will try to reconnect with Cliff. We'll get started as soon as we can.

Go ahead with your question again.

Q. You preached coming into the season about building a foundation early, the importance of doing that. Is there anything about how quickly things have come together with this team that is surprising or surreal, you have to pinch yourself about?

CLIFF DANIELS: It's definitely a very special place to be in for our whole team. There's been a lot that has gone into getting us where we are. Kyle had an amazing year on the racetrack and had a lot he had to overcome last year off the racetrack. He's probably never been in a better spot in his career now. He's definitely amazing in any car that he gets in every week.

Then for our team, it's been a challenge the last three or four years. We've really been seasoned to that. We have just an amazing chemistry back at the shop. Road crew, pit crew, our whole team is just absolutely phenomenal.

To kind of see it all come together in this way is really special. Even still, yes, with an amazing start to the year that we've had, very thankful for that, we're still going to Texas All-Star next week. That's the first time this team will be at Texas with Kyle behind the wheel. Then when we go to Nashville, that's a totally new track. It will be our first time with him behind the wheel. So on and so forth.

I think the first rerun track we get to, correct me if I'm wrong, is Atlanta quite a few races from now. Every week

in a way is still kind of a new week for us. It's a good opportunity to continue to learn and continue to build that foundation. Again, still a lot of racing left. Hopefully we get it right when it counts.

Q. Given what you've seen from your team and Kyle, the organization in general over the last four weeks, the entire season, can you foresee anyplace on the schedule where one of your four Hendrick guys wouldn't be a legitimate contender for a win?

CLIFF DANIELS: It's a great question and it's kind of tough to say. Pocono is always a challenge I think for everyone. If I remember correctly last year, we weren't where we needed to be at Pocono. I do think there are a few more tracks coming up that are going to be challenging. Thankfully our company is so strong right now, everyone is working so well, locked in arms with each other. Hopefully that energy and that momentum can get us what we need when we go to some of those challenging tracks.

Going back to Watkins Glen, it's been a couple years. Indy road course will be new. There are some of these places that it's hard to say because we just don't know. Pocono is definitely a challenge, and it has been for us for some time. We'll brush up on our notes and give it our best shot.

Q. What is it like as a crew chief, you mentioned you were talking about how you didn't come here last year because of the pandemic, we missed you out here on the West Coast, but how difficult is it when you have all these little rule changes over the past two years, trying to rely on notes from 2019? How difficult is it to approach a track with all the different rule changes?

CLIFF DANIELS: It's definitely a big challenge. Another layer on top of everything you just said, is the tire construction changed coming here. It's a place, that, yes, all the factors you just mentioned, plus the difference in the tire, I had a lot of anxiety even before the start of the race just because we know kind of our process of what we looked at from old notes, trying to do our best job to understand the tire or predict the tire ahead of time. There's still so many unknowns.

Thankfully we had a good spot on pit road. Kyle is so good here. We saw that from the drop of the green flag. All of that helped. We did tune on our car just a little bit as the day went.

Yeah, there was a lot of prep to get us to this point that was our best educated guess, I would say.

Q. What kind of small things can you rely on when you

have so much changing?

CLIFF DANIELS: Again, I mentioned it earlier. I think the foundation of where the Hendrick Motorsports road course package is right now, very thankful that it is strong and we can really compete well at all the places.

Thinking back to the Daytona road course at the beginning of the year, our cars ran up front. COTA, our cars were going to be up front wet or dry. Then to come here and be strong. Just a great a foundation. Those are the notes we rely on, then just try to piece together the uniqueness of Sonoma, how to apply that to here.

Didn't expect it to work as well as it did today. Thought if we got it right, we could compete. Certainly a great day.

Q. As later stages of the race were unfolding, you were making up some ground on Chase in big, big chunks, but the tire was falling off really bad. Did you feel like the late cautions saved things a little bit?

CLIFF DANIELS: Yes and no. I mean, I think either way once we had gotten out to the lead, still under green before the yellows happened at the end, I think Kyle was going to be really smart with how he managed everything. He was going to maintain a pretty good gap. I think we would have been okay at that point.

Obviously it's hard to say how bad the tire falloff would have been the last handful of laps of the race because that was going to be our longest stint of the day. Once the yellows happened, it gives everything a chance to cool down obviously, and that kind of more or less equalizes things to guys behind you.

I knew it was going to be critical to make sure we had a good launch on the restarts, have a good first couple corners. Kyle did just a phenomenal job of nailing I think it was three restarts, nailing all of that.

They certainly got to beat on our bumper for a corner or two, which is good, hard racing. Then it worked out after that. Yeah, tough to say if or if not the yellows. I think we were in a good spot either way.

THE MODERATOR: Cliff, thank you again for spending some time with us. Congratulations again on the win.

CLIFF DANIELS: Thank you, guys. Thanks for having me.

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