

# NASCAR Media Conference

## Press Conference

Sunday, July 18, 2021

*An Interview with:*

**Aric Almirola**

**Greg Zipadelli**

**Mike Bugarewicz**



**THE MODERATOR:** We'll start our post-race press conference with today's winning crew chief, Mike Bugarewicz, and today's VP of competition, Greg Zipadelli.

Guys, congratulations on the victory today. Why don't you open up, Mike, about today's performance.

**MIKE BUGAREWICZ:** Yeah, I mean, today to say the least is just almost unreal. I mean, the challenges that this particular team and the organization has been through this year has been a difficult one, to say the least.

You know what, the team never gave up. Aric never gave up. SHR never gave up. Every person back at the shop, there's a lot of frustrated people, but nobody gave up. It means a lot.

We go into a day like today, we're showing up thinking that, Man, if we have a top five, top 10 day, we're getting better, right, things are going the right way. An opportunity presented itself to win the race. It was unbelievable. But it just showed the dedication everybody has, the ability to never give up and keep fighting.

I think we're on the right path. As a whole group, we're on the right path. It all starts with the leadership up top with Greg and everybody else and the desire to keep hanging banners like we talk about all the time.

**THE MODERATOR:** Greg, you locked a Playoff spot today. Talk about what that means to the team.

**GREG ZIPADELLI:** Yeah, I mean, just echo what Mike said. It's about the 350 people we have at Stewart-Haas and their families. There's a lot of them that don't get to come to the racetrack obviously and live this moment. They all work really hard to prepare cars.

But like Mike said, his group has worked really hard. Honestly, I can say this without even questioning what I'm about to say, is I don't think there's anybody in the garage

that works any harder than Mike does, his group, his cars. He takes everything to heart. Very passionate about what he does. They've had a lot of good opportunities this year, just things didn't happen right.

From a Stewart-Haas perspective, from a global perspective, it's been a tough year. What we did last year as a company, you come back this year, it's a little bit shocking, then it gets everybody second-guessing, all that.

Like Mike said, the first six months have been pretty tough. But last month or two I feel like we've made some gains in the right direction. Today we had a couple good race cars. Even Cole ran decent today. He was this close, you know what I mean, from being right up there with him. That's kind of how I judge everything, how do all four of our cars run. They have been running a little bit better.

We still have a long way to go. But this certainly is a little bit of a motivating factor to Mike, his group, obviously his driver. As you head into the Chase, any time you can win, a little bit of confidence is a good thing.

**THE MODERATOR:** We'll open it up for questions.

**Q. Greg, being from New England, I know coming up here must be special each year. To get a win here today must be big. Mike, talk about the pit strategy that you and Aric discussed during the last run.**

**GREG ZIPADELLI:** Yeah, here and Watkins Glen are home to me. But this place has always been special because when we raced modifieds, that was the first car to ever come here and test when the place first opened up with Mike McLoughlin. We came back and won the modified 150 and Busch North 150 in the same day. That was how we opened up this place. That's how it's always been to me.

Obviously this is Mike's race today, but yes, coming home, there's usually a lot of friends and family up this way. It's fun. Mike is not too far from here. Pocono is home for you. Can't count that, even though it's a couple hours.

Anyway, always fun to come to New England. It's all about the seafood. We get plenty of lobster.

**MIKE BUGAREWICZ:** As far as the pit strategy part goes,

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about three quarters of the way through the race, watching our lap times and our ability to get through traffic relative to the other cars, it showed opportunity to potentially win this race. When we did, when we drove up through and got the lead, I was in a wait-and-see position.

Obviously it was a little bit nerve-wracking and confusing to hear from NASCAR that we're going to give you a 10-to-go warning of when the race is going to end. At the time you're thinking, This could get ugly. People start pitting and people don't pit, all these thoughts are going through your head.

But with that said, not knocking on them, I think once the pit cycle started, I had faith in them that they were going to let it cycle through and do the right thing on that side of things. I think they do. I think they try to keep an equal and fair playing field. They did that.

With that said, I wasn't going to be the first one to pit road. I wanted to see what these other guys were going to do. Once they started peeling off, taking four tires, in all honesty, it really isn't that big of decision for me any more. It's come down, take the four tires.

I knew the first five laps we'd be at a little bit of a disadvantage, exactly what I saw the 2 car, he fired off really good, kind of fell off on the longer run. We had a good long run car. I knew if we could maybe maintain a little bit more of a lead, we could stay ahead of him. He did end up getting around us, but I knew we could run him back down, and we did. Aric did a fantastic job.

Again, credit to a really fantastic car that SHR has brought to this track.

**Q. Mike, it's been since 2018 that you've been able to get back to Victory Lane. What has that journey back here been like for you? How meaningful is this moment?**

**MIKE BUGAREWICZ:** Yeah, the biggest thing I always say is you never know when it's your last one, right? Don't get me wrong, back in 2018 I wondered whether that was going to be one of my last ones.

To say the least, you cherish every one of them because you never know when the last one is coming. With the struggles honestly that we've had this year, whatever you want to call it, luck, performance, whatever it may be, various things throughout the year, this one by far is probably the most sweet.

Martinsville, I think we dominated as a team. Michigan, kind of stole that one away in some senses. But this one

we earned. It was through a lot of trials and tribulations. Yet this whole team and Aric and everybody at SHR never gave up.

**Q. Now that Aric is here, I'll ask this. Given the success of the 14 last year, how do you feel you're the guy at Stewart-Haas Racing this year?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** I wouldn't say I'm the guy. It's an organization, it's a team. That's how it's built. It feels good to win for our organization. There's 370 something employees there that put their heart and soul into building these race cars. So it certainly feels good to bring home a banner for them.

We have so many people that support our program. Gene Haas, Tony Stewart, obviously the owners. Smithfield, Ford, Pit Boss, GoBowling, Mobil 1, everybody that supports it. It just feels good to deliver for them. It really does.

I feel a weight on my shoulders always. I feel like you have to deliver for the organization, for the sponsors. People put in a lot for me to get to do what I love to do. I get to wake up every day and drive a race car. I'm living a dream.

There's a lot of people that just work their guts out, a lot of people that put a lot of money into me getting to do that. So I've never really viewed it as me being the guy. I feel like I'm the guy that's got to go out and try and deliver.

**Q. Aric, you got three Cup wins. Would you say this is probably the biggest one?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Man, they're all good. I've only got three, so every one is pretty sweet. I haven't forgotten any of them (smiling).

That's a good problem to have when you win enough to where you forget some of the wins. I don't have that problem. I remember each one. They've all been very sweet for their own right, right?

To win on the anniversary of Richard Petty's 200th win, to do it in the 43 car, to bring that car back to Victory Lane for the first time in, like, 30 years, that was a special day.

To do it at Daytona, a place that I grew up as a kid going to watch races there, it's only two hours from home, that was a really special day. My first Cup win ever.

Then to show up to SHR with a lot of high hopes and a lot of expectations to make the Playoffs in 2018, then to run as good as we did in the Playoffs, have some things happen. We came here and gave a win away with a car



we should have won with. We went to Dover and let one get away. Then we were able to rebound and go to Talladega and win and advance in the Playoffs. That one was sweet for its own right.

Then you come here. Yeah, to win at a non-restrictor plate race... My wife hates the fact that I've only won at restrictor plate races. She's told me for years, she's like, Honey, I know you always have a good shot when we go to Daytona or Talladega. I so badly want you to win somewhere else.

So, yeah, it feels good to be able to capitalize on fast race cars. This year's been a struggle. Since we won the Duel, we went into the Daytona 500 with very high hopes and a very fast race car, wrecked out early.

From that point forward, man, it has been a battle. To battle and fight the way that we've fought, and sometimes literally fight, to just continue to grind it out and show up to the racetrack every week with a new hope that we can get the job done this week, and today we were able to do that.

**Q. With how tough the year has been, have you questioned yourself at all?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Yeah, I mean, you always do. When you run good it's easier, right? You have a lot of confidence. People don't understand. People are just always like, Man, you got to keep your head up, you got to have confidence. But that's based on results. I mean, you can't just fake that stuff.

You can go to the racetrack with hopes and you can go to the racetrack feeling good about it, like I did this weekend. Our 750 package has been good, especially here lately. We went to Nashville, qualified on the pole, ran in the top five all day.

I knew coming here that this being one of my favorite racetracks, this is going to be an opportunity for us. We were pretty good here last year. Talking to Buga before the race, they made some changes based on last year. I was like, Man, this is an opportunity for us.

On my calendar knowing that we had to win between now and Daytona, I had here and Daytona really marked on my calendar as these are the two places we've got opportunities to figure out how to make it in the Playoffs and to win. Today coming up here, I just felt good about it. But you never know.

So we started the race and the car was good, not great, but it was good. Buga just kept making adjustments. Every time down pit road, we gained spots on pit road or

stayed even. Our pit crew did a phenomenal job. Every time the adjustments made the car a little bit better, a little bit better. Then finally that last adjustment he made for those last two runs, the car was just lights out. I knew if I could keep pace for a few laps, I would have him on the long run. We were able to do that.

**Q. A huge psychological win. How does this motivate your whole team going forward? What are your plans for the lobster?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Is the first question for Greg or Buga?

**Q. Yes.**

**GREG ZIPADELLI:** Obviously any time you win in this sport, it's a big thing. They both commented, I did earlier, on the struggle we've had this year. To be able to have an off weekend, for everybody that touched this race car back at SHR, I hope they just didn't enjoy it, it motivates them a little bit more to get us through the rest of the year.

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** I mean, I agree. I think, like Greg said, I said it earlier when I sat down in here, this is an organization. It's not about just me winning the race today. I mean, there's so many people that it takes to get me to the racetrack, to be able to drive the race car.

Buga and I obviously get a lot of the credit as him being the head of the team as the crew chief and me being the driver. There's so many people back at the shop that it takes to build the cars.

Honestly we've worked so hard this year, not only because we've been behind and trying to play catch-up, but because we've wrecked a lot of race cars. I've had more DNF's this year than I have, like, combined in my entire career. It's been an awful year for bringing home wrecked race cars. It's really challenging when you do that on the organization. They're constantly trying to rebuild race cars.

This feels so sweet to be able to do that for all those men and women back at the shop as much as it does for our team.

**MIKE BUGAREWICZ:** Absolutely. I can't say anything more than what these guys have said. It's a win for 308 people, Aric, Greg, everybody. I can't do it alone. It takes the travel person, it takes the secretaries, it takes every single employee. Then beyond that 308, it's every family back at home.

I think about my wife and kids, how much time I'm away from them. It's hard. It's hard. They stuck behind me, everybody else did. This is what it's all about.



**THE MODERATOR:** Mike and Greg, thank you for your time. Appreciate it. Congratulations on the victory.

We'll continue with questions for Aric.

**Q. How well could you see there at the end? Did you think the right call was made?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Yeah, I do. Until the 21 pitted, I could see perfectly. As soon as the 21 pitted, it got really dark really quick (laughter).

No, I felt good about it. We could see plenty good. Then it really did start getting dark quickly. I felt good about my race car. I felt like if it went the distance, we had a good enough car to win. I paced myself there knowing that we had a good car and that we had a big enough lead.

When the 20 got by the 2, I had a 1.8 second lead. I was still pacing myself trying not to run the tires off of it. I got down to about 1.2, 1 second. I should probably get going here. When I took off to get going again, it was about the time I got hung up behind the 3 car. The 20 closed in quite a bit in those few laps I got hung in behind Austin. Once I was able to clear Austin, I started putting some good laps back together. I was beating the 20 car about a 10th, 10th and a half a lap. I felt pretty good about it.

**Q. (Question about SHR's struggles.)**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** It's not one thing. If I could pin it on one thing, we could fix it immediately. It has alluded us. We just have not been as good, especially with the 550 package, as we need to be. It's not from lack of effort. It's not from lack of just want to. It's we're scratching our heads. We can't figure out the race cars we need to bring to the racetrack. It's been very challenging.

But the one thing I do know is that our 750 package has been really good, especially here the last couple months. So I felt good about today. We were able to have a fast race car. We were able to get it done and win.

Going into the Playoffs, I will view the 750 racetracks as our strengths. To start the Playoffs, I think it's Bristol and Richmond in there to start, Darlington, all of which are 750 racetracks. Feel like those are good opportunities for us.

**Q. You talked about the SHR struggles, that it hasn't been just one thing. What worked today? Fords in general had really strong performances, but you and Kevin particularly.**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** I think just our 750 package has been

good, like I said. This racetrack has been one of our best racetracks I feel like as an organization. We've always run really well up here. For me in particular, it's been one of my favorite and best racetracks.

So, yeah, I think when I come here, I feel good about it. I know what I need out of the race car. I know what to ask for adjustments in the race car. So I'm able to help lead that a little bit better here than I am at other places.

So, yeah, I think coming here everything kind of lined up perfectly, and we had a fast race car, and finally we capitalized on that. I've had fast race cars here and other places, too, and we've had bad pit stops, loose wheels, late-race cautions, just a lot of different things happen that we've let it slip away.

Today we were able to capitalize and get the job done.

**Q. You've had strong runs at other racetracks before. What was it about today's car or strategy that allowed you guys to execute?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Just unloading with a fast race car. Taking off from the get-go, early in the race knowing we had a fast race car, marching our way through the field, I think we started 22nd. Kind of steadily marching our way through the field, making adjustments every pit stop.

Every adjustment we made, it made the car better, with the exception of one. Early in the race we made one adjustment, it wasn't very good. We went immediately back on that and started making some other adjustments. We were getting the car faster and faster and faster.

Yeah, I mean, Kevin Harvick always says: You can't drive a slow car fast. The guys just brought me a great race car. We weren't making wholesale changes on it so we were allowing our pit crew to do their job. They were ripping off some fast pit stops. We were gaining spots on pit road. The adjustments were making the car better. We just consistently worked our way towards the front of the field.

**Q. It seems recently it's been year to year for you and Smithfield. What can a win do?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Really, Bob? You got to bring that in. We're sitting here all happy, talking about all this, and you want to bring in contract stuff.

**Q. What can this do for that?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** It makes people happy, right? Yeah, it shows the delivery. I talked about it earlier when I sat in here. That's the only way I really know how to deliver.



Besides the fact that we do a lot of B-to-B stuff, a lot of the stuff that Smithfield does with the race program, selling into a lot of the retailers. There's a lot of stuff off the track that helps make all of this work.

But the real goal is always to put Smithfield, the company, everybody out in front of the spotlight. I mean, that's why they put stickers on a race car, is to be on national television and to put them out in the spotlight. The best way to do that is to win. We've done that a few times.

But every year it feels good to be able to deliver. That's the best way I know how to say thank you for everything that they've done for me and my career. I wouldn't have a job and I wouldn't be driving a race car right now if Smithfield Foods had not supported me for the last 10 years. It has been a phenomenal relationship. I owe them the world.

Unfortunately I can't give them the world, but I can give them a race win every once in a while, and today we were able to do that.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Absolutely. Yeah, I think that would have been devastating. Ever since I got to SHR, I made the Playoffs every year. This year it didn't look so good. It didn't look like that was going to be a possibility unless we won.

So, yeah, I mean, that feels good. They are a great sponsor, not only for us, but for the sport. They've been in the sport for 10 years now. They're one of very few sponsors that take a majority of the car. That is a huge deal not only for us as a race team but for the support. The fact that they have that continuity with the fans, people see the 10 car, they know that's the bacon car, right, that's the Smithfield car.

Yeah, to continue to have success for them and put them in the limelight, win races, be in the Playoffs, that's what they deserve.

**Q. I asked Hamlin this morning about practice and qualifying. He said track position was going to be key today with no PJ1, cold, not a lot of rubber. Did it hurt not having practice and qualifying here this weekend?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** Not really. I mean, I think the race still played out. We came from 22nd. We had a really fast race car. We were able to pass cars. I think we were one of a few cars that could actually pass throughout the run.

I could barely hold my own for the first 10 laps, then after

lap 12 to 15 we would just start marching through the field. So, yeah, I felt like the track was very racy. I kind of liked it without the PJ1. Obviously I won so I'm biased.

I really did. I thought it was racy. I thought the grip really went away. It really caused you to have to drive the race car, more car control. You didn't feel stuck. When you caught somebody, you could move around and pass them.

When we had the PJ1, you had to work twice if not three times as hard to get by somebody because the PJ1, even if their car was not handling, it was the preferred groove, you could not get by them.

Now I feel like it was a lot more available for options to be move around the racetrack without the PJ1 sprayed. The car was a lot more skate-y, up on top of the racetrack, drive off as we've always typically had here at Loudon was a premium.

So managing your tires at the beginning of a run and not roasting them on drive-off was paying dividends on the long run, where when we come here with the PJ1, you could just floor it and the car stuck in the PJ1.

**Q. NASCAR's decision to do the 10 to go at some point, as a driver, without knowing when or if that's going to come, how was that at the end of the race?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** I was really just focusing on one lap at a time, just putting laps together, taking care of my tires, but still running as fast as I needed to to go.

When we pitted there, the 2 short-pitted us a little bit. When we came out, we were on newer tires. I wasn't taking off as good. I knew I needed to take care of my tires to be good on the long run like I was the previous run. The 2 wasn't nearly as good on the long run. He was really fast for a short run. He caught me. I kind of just let him go, managed my stuff.

About seven or eight laps later, I was able to drive back by him. At that point I knew we had the race kind of in control and we had the best car and that we were going to win barring anything crazy happening.

At that point, yeah, I was ready to either race it to the end or I was waiting for them to tell us when it was 10 to go. At the same time having the 21 stay out there, there was some anxiety involved with that. Man, I hope NASCAR doesn't think it's too dark yet while he's still out there. We were running him down really, really fast.

Once we closed in within a couple of seconds, they peeled off to pit, and at that point I knew we were in control of the



race.

**Q. The way you won today, having one of the best cars, your teammate Kevin led more laps than he has the whole season, does it feel like maybe you're turning the corner at the right time?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** I would hope so. I mean, we've had seasons where we've dominated the regular season as an organization. We've went into the Playoffs and it seems like everybody got better, elevated and caught up, and we've not always been the best in those years when it counted the most.

Yeah, I mean, it's sports, right? It's always about being the best when it matters the most. We were able to come away with a clutch win today to propel us into the Playoffs.

It does feel good to see the progress we're making as an organization, getting our cars better and better. We want to be peaking at the right time going into these Playoffs.

**Q. There's not a bookie on the planet that gave you a chance. Only the guys in the Aric Almirola shirts today. What does it feel like to win a race when nobody thought you could?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** I'll answer that very honestly. Nobody should have thought that we were going to win. Only our race team is the people that should have thought that or believed that. I mean, based on our performance especially this year on the majority of the racetracks, we haven't been a contender to win.

Nashville, we ran up front but we still weren't as good as a few of the cars that were better than us, but we were a contender.

So, yeah, coming into this race we never really gave anybody a reason to pick us, to be completely honest. I know that. It feels good to be the underdog and kind of come out of nowhere and have a race car like we did, kind of put it to 'em at the end of the race and drive off and go win this race.

**Q. A lot of time upset wins have weird quirks. You took on some of the best, Keselowski, Blaney, Harvick, and won. You're an upset win, but you have to be satisfied to take on the big dogs and put them down?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** I am. I am really satisfied with the way it turned out today. We went up against the best of the best. I was really proud of the last couple restarts that I had, being able to hold off the 9, the 5, those guys that were really fast on the short runs. We were better than

everybody on the long run.

I would give up too much time in the first 10 to 12 laps. I knew if we could get far enough up front to where I could just hold my own for 10 laps, we would have a shot to go drive to the front and take the lead.

Finally those last couple restarts I executed and did everything I needed to do right. I was able to hold off the guys I needed to with still managing my tires. Then my race car just kept getting better and better on the long run while all those guys were falling off.

That felt good. That felt good to win it legitimately and have the right adjustments in the race car to honestly at the last hundred laps or so really dominate the race.

**Q. How hard was it to see at the end? What were you feeling?**

**ARIC ALMIROLA:** It honestly wasn't that bad. There was enough light to keep racing. When I did my burnout, when I did my interview on the front straightaway, I could see everybody's face in the grandstands and stuff.

I guess it was definitely dusk, but it wasn't dark.

Thank you, guys.

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