

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

Monday, August 7, 2023

An Interview with:

Chris Buescher

Scott Graves



THE MODERATOR: We have our race-winning team members. We have the driver of the No. 17 RFK Ford, Chris Buescher and his crew chief, Scott Graves.

I'll start off by asking you guys, you won the Heritage Trophy here for Ford, nine straight. Can you each talk about what it means to keep that here for Ford.

CHRIS BUESCHER: Yeah, obviously when we come up to Michigan, I think for us Michigan is Ford country, right? We talk about the manufacturer wars when we come up here. This is home for Jack Roush and Brad. There's a heavy weight on our shoulders. To be able to keep that streak alive, keep that trophy out at blue oval headquarters, that's certainly very cool for us, very awesome opportunity for us to be the ones that brought that one home this time.

We have such a massive Ford presence here. It goes a long way. On the weekend, we felt like we were the most competitive Ford at the racetrack and were able to get that win through a lot of hard work, some great strategy, an extra day on the schedule.

Yeah, it's certainly big. Like I said, nine in a row, that's fantastic, especially knowing a lot of those were double-up years. Pretty cool.

SCOTT GRAVES: Yeah, it was Friday we had a Ford event with all the crew chiefs. Edsel talked to us about how important it was to him, how much it's meant to him to have it for this many years, really kind of stressed to everybody that he really wants to continue that tradition.

For us to be able to get the win today, bring it back for Ford, it means a lot. Obviously it's a pretty good day.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. How do you explain half your career wins have come in the last two weeks?

CHRIS BUESCHER: I don't like your statistic (smiling).

If you think back just where RFK is right now, if you think back to where RFK was in the last time we got to be up here together, Xfinity days in 2015, right? To be able to take the last couple of years and continuously work to build RFK back to that heyday and to keep working and getting after it. So much has gone into that. So much that is completely over my head. So much effort back at the shop.

It's neat to see so many new faces during the celebration that we had last week. Every bit of a dozen, maybe 18 people, raise their hand when Jack asked whose first Cup win that Richmond was. That's awesome to see that. But also to see the people that have been at Roush for 25, 30 years, to see the people that when I was allowed to work in the shop, be in there, see the people that were in the fab shop or in finish fab, see the people that worked alongside, see the excitement back on their faces, it's certainly good times, certainly just a testament of all the work that's gone into the Next Gen car, all the work that's gone into continuously developing it. It's making my job a lot easier to go out here and win these races.

I just think it's good timing. When we look at where we're at in the season, sure would have loved to have won at Daytona and said felt like we were pretty much locked in. We've been fast at a lot of places and haven't quite been able to grab that trophy.

To grab the last two weeks, that's certainly good timing as we head into the Playoffs here in just a few short weeks.

Q. If I told you 10 days ago you were going to sweep Richmond and Michigan, what would you have told me?

CHRIS BUESCHER: I hope you're right and that would be our plan.

I don't know. We talked a lot in the past several months because we've gotten close to Playoffs, we've been in a decent place in points but not locked in by any means. More than I would like, we've had considerations about points, what we're going to have to do, right?

Kind of got to the point where I don't like points races, I don't like doing it that way. We come to tracks to win



races. That's been our goal every single week of the season. Just being able to execute at a high level. For Scott and our group to bring fast cars in the racetrack, to make the right calls, to be able to fight off a champion in our sport for the win, that obviously goes to show it's been a lot of hard work.

Like I say, it surprises you a little bit, but it was always our intention to go win every single weekend we show up. It's good that it's at two drastically different racetracks, as well.

Q. When Martin got under you there with 12 to go, a lot of side drafting, you were loose in turn one, what was that like from your seat?

CHRIS BUESCHER: Yeah, knew that was going to be really tough. Where they were so good was just wrapping the bottom. I seen it yesterday in the race. We talked about it when we went in the rain delay, that felt like the 19 was probably the car to beat.

Was just able to maneuver, get through traffic very well. Knowing that, we had to commit to a little bit higher, kind of a low mid lane to make our minimum lap time to try to make max speed. That was letting him get enough clean air to get really close to us at times.

Just worked to try and cover as best we could. That one I missed, he got a good run down the bottom, I just didn't pull the car down the hill far enough, and he was able to pull up on our quarter panel there. I knew that was going to be a very difficult move to defend.

Fortunately at that moment we were close enough to the tail end of the field that we were able to pull a little bit of draft from the outside lane. I guess probably on the unfortunate side, it's probably also the reason we lost some speed, being that little bit of dirty air. Probably got that a little bit tight.

Yeah, I mean, it hurt us to get in that position, but also helped pull us out of it. Truex is a very clean racer. Try to live by that same mindset ourselves so that we can get into those situations and have that level of respect where we're going to be able to race hard and race clean and get a win out of it but say that we worked for it.

Q. Chris, what does it say about your progression as a driver when you have two wins, feels like you can make the deep run in the Playoffs instead find being another one-and-done?

CHRIS BUESCHER: It's not just me. I think our group has come so far. I don't think that after last week we ever, ever thought we would be one-and-done.

Coming into this week, before where we're sitting right now, we knew we had some really good races coming up for us before the Playoffs start. With this one, maybe not feeling quite as strong as some of the road courses and Daytona coming up even. That certainly sets well with us.

I think if you look at the Playoffs and the rounds, great racetracks for us that we've been very strong at. Bristol, we won it last year. Some road course racing. Talladega. I'm missing some here, but a lot of good racetracks for us that make us feel like we're going to be able to make a run at this thing.

I think that today really kind of helped set that in stone more for us. But I don't think that we ever thought before today that that wasn't the plan.

I think it's just a lot of things have come a long way. We are consistently much faster when we get to the racetrack every week. Brad finishing fourth today, both of us have been very competitive the last two weeks together, but also we've been competitive at a leave different places through the year. Not always having the finish to show for it. That's ultimately what most people would judge it off of.

We certainly felt we had a lot of momentum at these styles of racetracks to where our day was coming if we did a good job, made all the right decisions, made the right moves on restarts.

Everything that goes into this, it's not just me. There's a massive team element to this thing. We have hundreds people back in Concord, North Carolina, that are helping us sit here right now.

Q. Scott, you've been at the company long enough to see what Brad's influence has been. Before last year no one had won in five years. I'm kind of curious if you can tell us inside the walls at RFK, what is the fundamental change there? What is the difference between taking an organization that has tried to right this ship? I can't tell you how many times I've sat in the January pre-season stuff, We're going to right the ship, it's going to be better this year. Now we're seeing it. Talk about the philosophy that we're seeing that hasn't been there in the past.

SCOTT GRAVES: Yeah, I think a lot of it is in the past there's been expectations, right? We're always saying we're going to right the ship and get things going.

With Brad, there's expectations, but he has been very adamant and supportive about actually giving us the tools. He's really pressed for just getting the investments. We

got a new hauler this year, a new pit box. Those might not seem like big things on the outside, but they make coming to the racetrack easier. They make being in the race, having all the right information in front of you, having the right equipment makes things better.

There's other things. You look at the shop. Everything looks new. A few years ago it wasn't something you'd necessarily want to take a lot of pictures and put it out there. You look at it now, everything is bright, everything is clean. It starts at that level, then it works down to everything you do, the expectations that everyone has.

It's hard to just say specifically what it is. It's a lot of things. But it's really just been his support, I guess, to the teams to make sure we have everything we need to be competitive.

Q. Chris, Brad said he expected to be okay at Richmond and okay at Michigan. He thought Indy was going to be the race that turned the deal around. I asked him about you, what would you tell Chris at this point in his development. He said that he wouldn't have you change a thing. Where do you see yourself compared to your first round at Roush to now?

CHRIS BUESCHER: I mean, if you look at how our season's gone, a lot of it does come back down to the organization, the investments that have been made. The things that have gotten better that put us in these opportunities.

When I was 15 years old and was sitting in Robbie Reiser's office at Roush, sitting there staring at a piece of paper that says, You have an opportunity to do a development program here. I didn't have a whole lot of credentials to be sitting in that office at that time. A lot of Legends car wins, not much big car experience at all. Had an old late model, David Ragan's old late model that we ran a few times. David would go to the track and help spot. Terrible spotter. Turns out I am, too. When I spotted for him running his several years later, I almost got him in the same amount of trouble he got me in.

I just think back to that, kind of the credentials at that time, knowing the work that was going to have to be put in. Then also realizing that was only 15 years ago. A lot of things have happened really quick. May not seem like it, but look back now and it's truly flown by.

Just surely makes you appreciate the time, the work that went into it, the 5:30 a.m. workouts that I was forced into because I'm not a morning person. The time in the shop. The time working to try and improve the simulator that we use so much. All that isn't the most fun at the time, but

certainly builds up your skill set and just puts you in a better place to where you're just constantly learning.

It's like any profession, right? You're constantly learning and trying to figure out how to be better. We've been through a lot of years of doing that and trying to keep developing, but also with everybody around us right now and the improvements that we've had, it's just elevating everything all at the same time.

Yeah, it's been a very short period of time, and also an eternity at the same time. Think back to the same point 15 years ago. Roush was dominating. That was eight or nine wins on a season, competing for championships, knowing that this was going to be a great place to go win races as you continue to build up through your career, right?

Fast forward a handful of years later, it's kind of that time where Roush had gotten to probably its low point, then the steady climb from there. Like Scott was saying, the expectations for a little while was we're in a bad spot, we know it, we needed to be 10 spots better. 10 spots better was only 15th at the time.

You look back at it now, you're looking for those steps, but we needed to take a massive step and a big swing. I think that's where, with some of Brad's direction, the rebrand within RFK as a group, I think that's been the investment, to say our expectation is not to get five spots better, it is to win races and to compete for championships.

The investment is there. The people are there. Everything is behind it to get us to that point. We're starting to reap some of the rewards from that right now. We also have a lot of racing to go this year.

Like I said, momentum is something that I didn't believe in it for a long time. My career didn't really feel like that was a real thing. I was wrong. I was certainly wrong. I feel like you see it more now. Just to know that this Next Gen car, it's probably a little bit more similar across some racetracks than the old cars, but also it certainly goes a long way.

When you think about what Richmond is to Michigan, you weigh those tracks over each other, not even in the same ballpark, right? To be able to sit here two weeks in a row at both those places that's in my mind the biggest accomplishment. Two drastically different racetracks.

Q. My question is, is there a little bit of a culture shock to go from being so long without a win to winning this much in a short period of time?

CHRIS BUESCHER: I wouldn't say a culture shock. That's what we expect (smiling).



Yeah, I mean, it certainly is just a mentality. It's an energy that is back at the shop. We're full of a bunch of racers. We are competitive people throughout, hundreds of us. Nobody likes losing.

28 races without a win, that doesn't sound like a drought. Our sport's tough. It's not like other team sports or team versus team sports where it's a 50/50 on your day, right? We are in a battle with a lot of other teams. You don't get to win very often because it is so difficult to be that consistent and make everything fall into place at the right time.

Certainly there's a lot that goes into it. No, it's not a shock so much as it's just amazing to see the energy, again, from those that have been at Roush for several decades to those that last week was their first win. That's awesome. That's special to see.

It's also to know that kind of energy builds that momentum that I used to not subscribe to and keeps us moving forward to where we can be better every single week that we go to the track, try not to have any more droughts any longer.

Q. You were paired together in the Xfinity Series, won the title together. 2021 you reunited in Cup. RFK came to be. How would you describe how you work together? Has that been just as much of the success as Brad coming in?

SCOTT GRAVES: Yeah, I think it's been helpful, for sure. For Chris and I to start working together, we had the previous time together in the Xfinity side. I think it probably shortened the time it took for us to kind of click on things. I think we saw that.

We did I think five races at the end of 2021 and had some decent runs there. Then we got into last year and felt like, like I say, we saw steady improvement throughout the year. Obviously the win at Bristol last year.

Yeah, I mean, it's definitely helped I think speed up our progression. Hopefully we see this kind of like the results we've seen from the last few weeks, just getting started and we can keep building on that.

CHRIS BUESCHER: Yeah, I mean, certainly those five races, we had some really solid runs, were in the top five in a couple of 'em. Then we got hit with the Next Gen car. I think the Next Gen, Brad, it becoming RFK, lots of changes. So having that chemistry and not having to go far or to start from scratch certainly helped get us to a place where we were much closer much earlier in the

season.

That felt like us working together was more elevated than maybe where we were at with the car itself so it only took, call it, eight to maybe 10 or 12 races in the season last year to figure out the car so we weren't having to learn each other, we weren't having to learn the organization.

When there's so much new, we talked about it a decent amount last year with the 6 team, about most of that group coming from a different manufacturer, different organization, with Brad coming in from a different organization, same manufacturer. That's a ton of moving pieces. We had to deal about half of that.

Felt like that was certainly a big way for us to be a lot more consistent through the summer when we kind of found a good baseline, enabled us to get that win later in the season last year, and to be in a good spot now to where feel like we have a good understanding.

I'm definitely not one to overexaggerate. I think Scott has a pretty good read on my number scale, knows that on a 1 to 10, if I say 4, we're probably turned around backwards in the fence. Work within three numbers.

Just that understanding, that chemistry that enables us to dial in much, much better and much quicker when there was so much changing around us at the beginning of last season especially.

Q. It seems people view you as underdogs. You have two wins in a row. Do you guys view yourself as underdogs?

SCOTT GRAVES: I kind of like being an underdog. I like being under the radar a little bit where people aren't looking at you, I guess. Not one to have a lot of attention. Maybe that's where it fits.

I also know with a couple wins, it's kind of hard to hide at that point (smiling). We won't be able to live with that underdog, I guess, kind of name very long obviously with the way we've been running here.

That's fine. Like I say, I think from a performance standpoint obviously you want to be peaking at this time of the season getting ready for the Playoffs. If we were underdogs to this point, that's good. Like I say, it fits with my personality. We also look forward to being one of the contenders.

I'd be proud if people look at the 17 and think that's one of the top teams. That's where we want to be. The last couple weeks, what we've done, beat people outright, that

gets some attention, but it's good attention. Definitely happy with that part of it.

CHRIS BUESCHER: I was going to say 'ditto'.

Q. Scott, you undercut the 19 by three laps. What went into that? Is that what got you the track position to win the race?

SCOTT GRAVES: So ours was based on when we had to pit. We stayed out at the start of the third stage, so obviously we weren't in the same fuel situation they were. I think the 19 came in and had topped off at the third stage.

We pit based on basically where we had to. We ran it as far as we could. We maybe had another couple laps in it. I don't think you ran all the way to the end of the fuel, but we basically ran to the point where we were in the window where we could make it to the end.

This kind of race with minimal lap time falloff, that was the play we had. I was kind of surprised that everyone responded as quickly as they did. I thought some guys would stay out and keep running just based on the way it's played out in the past.

I think when we pit and we actually cycle out in front of 'em, and with faster lap times for a few laps there, they realize they had to do something to counter that.

It just worked out really well for us. I mean, the main thing was just track position. Obviously for us, it was more based on our fuel window, what we had to do. Responding the way they did, it was a little bit of a surprise that as many people did that. It all worked.

Q. Does the last two weeks change the ceiling for how you view what this season could be? Could this be a Final Four caliber season?

CHRIS BUESCHER: I would say feel stronger about it now. I would also say that was the mindset and the goals that we set for ourselves at the beginning of the season. At the beginning of last season even. Didn't get there near as quick as we wanted to last season. Obviously our win came in the Playoffs, so it didn't elevate you to the next level. We weren't where we needed to be.

We started this season with the same mentality of there's three things we want to do: we want to win races, make the Playoffs, drive into the Playoffs, not be a placeholder there.

Feel like at a lot of times throughout the season we knew we were capable of making the Playoffs, winning races for

the first several months. Maybe saying we were heading to Phoenix was a little bit of a stretch. But there's been improvement throughout the year at basically every style of racetrack, some massive improvements at some of the tracks that have been my worst, Richmond for instance.

When we look at that and say we're improving some of those, knowing what races are in the Playoffs, what was good for us last season, with the momentum that we've had in these wins, it certainly gives you a stronger opinion that, yes, we should be able to make a run at that.

It was always our goal, to be clear. That was never not in our vision for what we were trying to do on the season.

SCOTT GRAVES: I think the way we've raced recently, the last few weeks, the way it's come together, definitely gives us the confidence to know that we can go pretty far into the Playoffs.

We know there's some tracks that are going to be tough for us, and there's some tracks that we'll be strong at. Obviously we got to manage and get better at the ones we think are going to be tough.

But like I say, Richmond was one I didn't expect necessarily to happen the way it did, so it gives me a lot of confidence to know we can go into the Playoffs and be really strong.

Like I said, I look at the way we won the last two weeks, and it wasn't by luck or backing into it. It was something that we just went outright and beat the best people out there. That gives you a lot of confidence going into it. For sure I think we can get to Phoenix.

Q. This win helps your bonus points situation in the Playoffs. What are your thoughts on the depth your team can achieve through the various cutoff rounds? Can this team be a championship contender?

CHRIS BUESCHER: I don't know what it looks like. I haven't seen any of that. I don't know.

SCOTT GRAVES: I think bonus points like Playoff points, you have 11 now. For sure helps, every one of them.

CHRIS BUESCHER: Yeah, that's a whole lot more appealing than last week. Especially two weeks ago. Yeah, that gives you a nice cushion. I don't even know where that ends up putting us right now.

Yeah, that certainly helps you drive through different rounds when you have that little bit to lean back on. Another one in the next couple weeks would just sure

enough be good.

SCOTT GRAVES: Yeah, that's kind of like we talked about after Richmond. Really changes the focus. Up to that point we had been looking at overall points on the day, the points racing mentality. Once we got the win and knew we were secure in the Playoffs, then it really changes the mentality of right now let's try to get the Playoff points and see what we can do to keep padding that side of it.

Q. The last time the 17 car won back to back in the Cup Series was Matt Kenseth in 2009. The team getting back to Victory Lane multiple times, what does that mean to emulate what was done when Roush was really at the top of their game?

CHRIS BUESCHER: I guess that's kind of the era that I'm talking about 15 years ago when I was looking at signing that piece of paper. Man, this is awesome. This is going to be great.

It's a cool stat, especially knowing how good Matt Kenseth is, or was now. Is it 'was'? He's a retired Hall of Famer, right? Certainly it's a cool stat for us to look back on, to know that we're able to keep improving RFK, obviously the 17 being a pretty nostalgic number in the Cup Series.

Surely a good stat to hear now. Probably not what you're thinking about in the closing laps of the races, but very cool to hear and know that kind of progress it's being made.

Q. I wanted to say that, Chris, you're now only the third driver in the Next Gen to win back to back, joining Harvick and Byron.

CHRIS BUESCHER: Also a good stat. That's really cool. Like I said, to look at two vastly different racetracks, that's the measure to me that progress is being made. I feel like we've talked about it the last couple weeks through some of our media sessions, in the past you can get known as a superspeedway organization, short tracks, whatever it may be. I've ended up with a road course label on us through the last couple years. I feel like we don't have to submit to those labels any more, that we're very universal right now.

Seen it on the season. Don't have the wins on all these styles of racetracks, but surely some great performances that we've been able to measure throughout a lot of different styles of racetracks and know that if we could do a little better here or make a better decision on where I was going on a restart or be cleaner on pit road at times, any of these things that the whole group and the whole team works together to do together, that the we could have had a win here or there at different styles of racetracks.

So, yeah, certainly feel like we're very universal right now. We got two road races coming up too. Somehow that label has stuck pretty decent, and we've been pretty decent. Looking at them as another opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. See you next week in Indy.

CHRIS BUESCHER: See you right here in Indy (smiling).

FastScripts by ASAP Sports