

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Denny Hamlin

Chris Gabehart

Joe Gibbs

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by our winning crew chief of the No. 11 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota, Chris Gabehart.

Chris, maybe just give us an opening statement about your view atop the box, winning one of NASCAR's crown jewel Bristol night races.

CHRIS GABEHART: Yeah, no secret, my favorite race. I'll go ahead and say it. What a fantastic atmosphere. Just electric. Representing everything that is quintessential about stockcar racing, short track, high bank, action everywhere.

I say it all the time, the reason I love this track so much is it shows you just how hard it is to drive these race cars. It's amazing to watch these guys do what they do. My favorite track. Won our second Bristol night race. Super pumped and really proud of this team, no doubt.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Despite as good as your car was, when Larson is in the rearview mirror, you have to be a little bit concerned.

CHRIS GABEHART: Yeah, I mean, I've told all of you how I feel about Larson and his talent. If he has a sniff of it at any point, and you saw it late in the race, right? We had such a lead that we kind of got a little conservative behind the 8, some other car there. Kind of nowhere to go for a little bit. Here comes Larson like a prize fighter off the mat. He's right back on our bumper giving us all we want one more time.

Him, that team, that whole group, what a class act. We've had our run-ins lately. When you're two teams that consistently find yourselves up front, you race with a lot of passion and to win, like that group does, you're going to have that. That's why we all show up to watch these races, right?



I think the world of Kyle Larson and his team and I'm glad we were able to beat him today.

Q. I know there's several others, but seems like both you and Larson are the teams week in and week out. What will you have to do to beat them for the championship?

CHRIS GABEHART: Just keep doing what we've been doing. I mean, obviously the first round is full of really good tracks for Denny and this team. Clearly we were capable of winning all three races, and just had situations keep us to only winning one.

Texas, we tested there. Should have a great race. But you just got to keep executing. That's all you can do is move on to the next race. Tonight we're going to enjoy this one. It's a big one. We've had a tough couple of weeks mentally with the team to perform at such a high level and not get the wins.

But I told them in our meeting today, nights like tonight, it's so easy to do, but you just got to keep competing at a high level for the love of the game. It can't be about results. To put in the passion that it takes to perform at this high a level, you have to do it for the love of the game.

The team that I'm with, I'm just so thankful to stand on their shoulders 'cause they were giants, Denny included. We just got to keep executing at that level and we'll find ourselves in Phoenix with a shot to get it done.

THE MODERATOR: Also joined by Coach Joe Gibbs.

We'll continue with questions.

Q. Chris, you mentioned how challenging this track is for the drivers. How challenging is it for you as a crew chief?

CHRIS GABEHART: Yeah, great question.

Again, quintessential stockcar racing. There's no loads higher than here. When you talk engineering and the stress and the strain that it puts on the tires, the steering components.



We were here last year, had tire failures and steering component failures. I don't think there was a single one in the field this year. Some of the very brightest minds in the sport like Goodyear, NASCAR, race teams, figuring out how to handle this place.

But it is a monster. There is nothing like it other than maybe miles up there in Dover, since I say the words 'monster'. This place from a physics perspective, getting in all the nitty-gritty details that my team has to do, there's simply nothing else to look at. This is the one.

Q. Coach, your thoughts on Ty's run tonight.

JOE GIBBS: Yeah, just really, really proud of Ty. I think he was in the middle of a race there, really felt good, really fast. We just appreciate the fact that he understands this. You got to earn your way. He's got to keep fighting and we'll just see because there's no way to talk your way or buy your way. You got to race your way.

We're proud of what he's done so far. I wanted to say just proud of our teams. Chris and Denny, I mean, that car has been really, really as good as any three races we've had. Just really appreciate that, the fact that we got to win tonight.

Appreciate Martin from the standpoint, couldn't have had two worse races, and you wouldn't dream what could happen to you like that. But it shows you how hard our sport is.

Also I felt like Christopher was really fast tonight, too.

It was a thrill for us. You work so hard. As Chris said, there's so much can happen. We love coming here. This is one of the real showcase places for our sport. We appreciate being a part of it. We appreciate a win like tonight.

Q. Coach, were you a little bit flabbergasted after the first two weeks that Martin potentially could miss after winning the regular season?

JOE GIBBS: I think everybody all week talked about it. You couldn't turn on Sirius radio without people saying this could be the first. It just shows you what can happen in our sport, how hard it is.

We probably made some mistakes at Darlington, which is one of his best racetracks. Hit the wall there. Probably should have taken a different approach on it. James was certainly upset about all that.

Then to come back and puncture a tire like that. I've never

had that happen. Puncture a tire probably sometime just warming up for the race coming on pit road for checking everything on pit road. It never happened to us before. We were in a real hole.

Just appreciate those guys, the way they fought tonight.

Q. Coach, can you talk about Ty tonight, how he kept going along, had a solid finish, morale builder.

JOE GIBBS: Yeah, it is. It's taking a step. I think thinks the most laps he's led. Is one step after another for a young guy.

I think the only young guy that came into our sport and just killed it right off the bat is sitting next to me, the only one we've had, I think (referring to Denny Hamlin).

It's hard work, Ty is going to have to earn his way. I think tonight was a really big step for him.

Q. Coach, from the ownership perspective, having all three cars advance to the Round of 12, how significant that is for the organization?

JOE GIBBS: It means so much. This is our Playoff. Way it's designed, it's so tough to get from one round to the next. It means so much for us. It's Toyota. It's our sponsors. Our sport, obviously you got FedEx on Denny's car, Interstate Batteries, Bass Pro. Johnny, call me, from wilderness someplace.

It just means a lot to our sponsors and to our manufacturer. It's just all the way across the board. To have three cars advance is really a big deal for us.

Q. Chris and Denny, when you have everything go wrong and still advance, does it give you confidence, allow you to reset, forget about it?

CHRIS GABEHART: Yeah, so when someone asked coach what it meant to let the 19 to advance after everything they fought --

DENNY HAMLIN: I think he's writing a story about Martin Truex.

CHRIS GABEHART: That's okay, let him write. I'm going to give him something to write about.

What I was thinking was they're going to be tough to beat. I know what they have. I know what their resources are. I work very closely with them. If you get down once, shame on the situation. Get down twice, shame on them. They're not going to get down twice. They're going to be tough to

beat.

I'm ready for the challenge. I guarantee you they will bounce back stronger in round two.

DENNY HAMLIN: Certainly they got through because of the hard work they put in in the regular season. They get rewarded for it, as they should.

It buys you some insurance, right? Certainly they didn't plan on having the finishes they did. Some of it was unfortunate circumstances. Some of it, just didn't hit it that day, right? But they earned that position to live another day.

They're good enough that, I mean, there's not one week that you go to, just because of this whole three-race stretch, ain't nobody sleeping on 'em, that's for sure.

Q. Do you consider yourselves the championship favorites?

DENNY HAMLIN: I don't think I've been any better. I don't think our team has been any better. At our best, I know that we're good enough.

CHRIS GABEHART: Yeah, I mean, 'championship favorite' is a term that I think loses its meaning.

Certainly I think we're a final round favorite. Then you get to Phoenix and it's one race. But, yeah, we're executing at a super high level. We have all the pieces put together to do it. Certainly why not us.

Q. Coach, what does it mean to win at Bristol? 15 in the last 14 years.

JOE GIBBS: I think for our whole sport, if you ask fans all across the country, NASCAR fans, they're going to rate this place as one of the absolute favorites, the place where they like to come.

I remember all the way back to Dale Jarrett. I asked him what racetrack he liked the best. He said Bristol. The sense of speed. I think it's really hard. It's hard on machine and driver.

For Denny to be as good as he is here, I think it says a lot for the talent of a driver to be able to come to Bristol. We just think it's a special place. Really appreciate something like tonight where we do run good.

Q. You could have swept this whole round, so you're on it. How do you keep that up at this point going forward?

CHRIS GABEHART: No race owes you a thing. This sport owes you nothing. In fact, it will take from you far more than it gives to you. We had a talk about that today.

So you just have to do it for the love of the game. Show up every week as prepared as you can show up. Thankful that you get to play a game for a living at the sport's top level. When you have all the pieces that it takes to achieve greatness, whether you get it or not, that in the grand scheme of things isn't necessarily what it's all about.

We're going to keep taking that approach. It's been working well for us. See how it goes. I think we definitely have all that it takes to do it.

Q. Denny, you entered knowing Bubba was 19 points out. He comes in on merit. This could have been a really heavy weight did for him. To see him overcome that, how significant is that for you as the car owner?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I'm really happy with where that team is progressing to. Really happy for Bubba. I think the highest he's ever finished is 20-something in points. He's doing well. He's really working on his craft. He's doing all the right things. He's really working with the team well. Him and Tyler are working really well together.

Yeah, I'm very happy with the trajectory that that whole organization's on. I mean, not three years complete, to have two cars now in the round of 12, very humbling. Certainly our goal going into the year was to have two cars in the Playoffs. Now to have two in the next round, this is just icing on the cake. This is nothing but bonus from here on out.

Q. Chris, I don't recall hearing you talk about for love of the game as much as you have tonight. Is that something you've always had or is that a new philosophy? Is that the mantra for the team this year in a sense?

CHRIS GABEHART: It's just a reminder for myself.

Listen, there's no way you can perform at this level as well as this team does and not love the game. It's impossible. You cannot put in the amount of effort that it takes to compete at this level without an extreme amount of passion for what you do. It's impossible.

But I think sometimes we let the numbers and the Kansas wins that slip away, the Darlington wins that slip away, you lose the pole by eight-thousandths of a second. You're caught up in the numbers, in the details. The details and the love for the pursuit of perfection is what brings you to



the opportunities to win. They do not guarantee it. Again, they will take it from you. This sport will take it from you more than it gives it to you.

I think it's important to focus how lucky we are to do what we do. Even on your worst days, things won't be that bad. I think that's an important message for everybody. Not just our team, but certainly a great spot to be in and I don't take it lightly.

Q. You reference Kansas. You both talked about how last week was 60, how many of those opportunities you had.

DENNY HAMLIN: 20 of 61 now.

Q. You hear you shouldn't say the negative aspect because that gets stuck in your head. Don't go long on the box, that's the last thing you hear from the crew chief. If you're focusing on the races that you lose, are you not doing more damage to yourself?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, but from my standpoint, since we've been together to have 61 opportunities to win, that just shows that what we have is pretty special.

Q. (No microphone.)

DENNY HAMLIN: It is. But it also shows you how unpredictable the sport can be, right? How much of a team aspect... I've said this a billion times. Other sports, competitors make a mistake, boom, you capitalize. In our sport, Chris Buescher blows a tire, and it costs us a win. It happens in our sport.

You're not going to win 100% of the time that you've got the best car or a car capable of winning. We're on a 30% clip right now. It's okay. It's really hard in the Next Gen era more than ever. I think with the Gen-6 car, your win rate should probably be a little higher than that.

Everyone is so close nowadays, track position is everything, restarts, blah, blah, blah. 30% is not terrible. It isn't. We definitely can get caught up in, Man, we should have had that one. But we keep showing up like we're doing, these nights happen because we just keep showing up. We keep giving ourselves more opportunities.

If over the next seven weeks he gives me a car rated number one all seven weeks, by the numbers we should win two and a half of 'em, right?

We're still in a really good position. Certainly I don't take for granted that we put in a lot of work to do this. As Chris says, it doesn't happen by accident, right? We're clearly

doing something right.

At times you do have to remind yourself that it is a game. We get to do what we love. I still love it as much as I ever have. I do. A lot of it is because I show up every week knowing I can win.

There's been many years that that's just not been the case. But there's just something special about this year and really the last four, five that's just been a lot of fun from my standpoint.

JOE GIBBS: Let me mention one thing. I always think about our people, the 450 people that work there. I wish they could be here. I'm glad that we get to hang a banner where I get a chance to thank 'em.

J.D. was always focused on everything that happened with our race team, he related it back to those people. The obligation that we have to take care of them. I just really appreciate them and the fact that we can live in a country where we can race cars and do this, have the fun that we have, and provide a place where people can maybe stay for their entire career.

I just want to emphasize that, how fortunate we are. Most people around the world don't even have enough to eat, and we get a chance to do this. J.D. was always focused on that. Thank you.

Q. You talk about the march for 60 wins as a goal. You get 51 here. You're 13th all time. You break the tie with Junior Johnson. Now you're the most all time without that title. Want to change that in seven weeks. How does that feel in this moment, to be the winningest without the title?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I mean, I've had a lot of great opportunities. This era of NASCAR racing, it's tougher to win than it's ever been. There's more cars capable of winning. We all run the same parts and pieces nowadays. Finding an edge is so difficult.

We all share each other's data, so there is no secrets for drivers any more. To find edges, it's really, really difficult.

For me, I feel very blessed and honored to have the amount of wins that we've had in this era of NASCAR racing. I've been blessed to be with Joe Gibbs, honestly. I didn't have to go with an up-and-coming team, I went straight to Cup in a race-winning car. Wasn't race winning when I got in it, but the team was, right? I never really had to cut my teeth for years with a lesser organization. That's carried me.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

JGR's team, the 450 people we talked about at the shop, built me the fastest cars for decades. Now we're racing NASCAR's car and still being successful, right?

It's really cool to win on all kinds of different tracks with different cars, different tires, all this different stuff, and we still find a way to adapt and win.

Certainly nights like tonight are certainly pleasing after having a couple weeks of, like, Darn, we should have got 'em. Keep knocking on the door, keep showing up, keep making the Final 4, eventually your number will be called. Hopefully this is the year for it to be called.

Q. Looks like it could come down to you and Larson. What are you going to have to do to beat him over the next seven weeks?

DENNY HAMLIN: Well, I'm not looking to beat him over the next seven weeks. I'm just looking to try to get there, try to get to Phoenix. Once we get there, I'll focus on what it will take to be the best that day. It's not him. It's us, right?

We know week in, week out, if we're at our best, we can't be beat. I just don't think so. But you just never know. You just never know.

The process, I don't want to keep skipping ahead of the next round and the next round. There's no way I can focus on Phoenix right now because there's too many unknowns between now and then.

Certainly this year is different. I told you guys before the Playoffs started, this year just feels different with the capabilities of our team and the speed we're showing.

We've raced head-to-head the last three weeks, right? It's been 1-2, 1-2, 1-2. Anything can happen. Certainly he's not looking at me over the next six weeks. There's no way I can look at him. We just have to figure out how we're going to get there with a shot.

Q. Was there a point that you decided you were going to play to the crowd, play to the hate, just taunt every time you win?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I mean, at some point I got to realize 18 years in that I'm probably not going to win the most popular driver award (smiling). I've come to the conclusion of that. I understand it.

Yeah, they think they bother me. But clearly it's having an opposite effect. I welcome any fan to want to come to the dark side. All five of my fans are still out there chanting my

name. They're over in turn three right now.

But yeah, as Cat Williams said: A hater can't stand a winner.

Q. How did it feel to win the Bristol night race with M.J. in attendance? Did you talk with him after the race?

DENNY HAMLIN: I have not, no. It was a big weekend for the 45 car, Jay on the car, that clab. I was being a fan boy in the middle of practice. Taking pictures of Tyler Reddick's suit. Make sure I get that suit after this weekend. Really cool the crossover stuff they're doing.

Yeah, I'm jealous at times of the paint schemes, jealous of the M.J. stuff that Tyler gets to run. We're still partners. Michael views us winning just like he does our race team. He says every weekend he has three chances to win, so this one he won.

Q. What are you doing with that sword?

DENNY HAMLIN: Fighting off all the haters. Jam 'em in the gut if they come close to me (smiling).

Q. You've said this year feels different. If you keep knocking, eventually the door is going to open up. How exhausting is it at this point year after year, not be worn down by the fight to get to that winner-take-all race?

DENNY HAMLIN: It's a grind, for sure. He said it, right? You have to love the game. I still love it, right? I very well could get knocked out next round or the next round, then we failed again. But I still love it.

I love the process it takes to come to the racetrack and be fastest in practice, fastest in qualifying, win the race. It takes a lot of work and a lot of dedication.

Usually at this point of probably driver's careers, they start not loving it as much because you just got so much other stuff going on. But I'm a competitor. I love competing. At 42, I love this sport as much as I ever have, what it takes to find an edge.

Used to be back in the day, Joe would just build me a faster car than everyone else. Come up with a new trick chassis, smoke everyone. I didn't have to put in a whole lot of work. You just kind of rely on the fast car.

Now with everything common, the driver's the number one X factor in your performance week in, week out. That's a fact. It's on my shoulders to find the edges, find the gray



areas of where can I get better, where is my deficits. I enjoy that process.

Q. The joy and your love of competition, when it gets to the Playoffs, how different is the satisfaction of winning a race versus the first 26?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, it's different for sure. This is different than if we would have won Darlington, right? Even after Darlington, now you still got work to do in this round. I think a couple years ago we won the first race in the first two rounds, so we had four races where we were let's move on and work on the next tracks in the next round.

Right now we're in the grind of we're week to week. Up until this week where we felt pretty locked in. But, yeah, it is different. Winning in the Playoffs is different because you know that everyone, all the drivers, are as focused as they've ever been. The teams are bringing the best. They're putting as much time as they've ever put in all season long. When you can get the best of 'em, you know you did your job that week.

Q. Tonight you led over 14,000 laps in your Cup Series careers. Top 12 of all drivers in the sport. What kind of accolade is that for your career? Is that important to you?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yes. I mean, Chris says we can't get too caught up in the numbers, but that's a lot of laps (smiling). It's crazy. Time has just flown by. 14,000 laps. That's crazy.

I've never been a leading laps type of guy. I typically manage races. I manage it to get to the end, right? I don't really care about leading the first lap, leading all the stages. Typically my style is not going to lead to leading a lot of laps. It's more race management to figure out what I need to do to win the race at the very end.

It's a great accomplishment. I'm blessed to be with the team that I'm with and the manufacturer I'm with. That's what's got that for me.

Q. Your outlook on Texas Motor Speedway next weekend?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I mean, we already started working on it. We were there. We did the test with Goodyear, myself, Logano and I think Suarez.

I feel pretty good about it. I feel like that tire is very, very different. I think it probably could catch a few teams off guard and not be what they expected 'cause it is very

different. We at least kind of have a baseline of what that is, and we're going to start to work on it to try to put the fast car on the track next week, too.

I feel like we're in as good a spot as anyone going into next week.

Q. Last year you talked about how you like to thrive on chaos. This year you said with the 23XI cars in the Playoffs, your focus was going to shift to being just driver. With both your cars in the next round, how do you feel you're handling everything as driver Denny versus owner Denny?

DENNY HAMLIN: It's been fun. I mean, the last few weeks honestly, there's more to it than that, too. Personal service deals that I have, sponsor obligations, my team always front loads all that stuff for before the Playoffs. Get all my obligations done. That way I have more time these last 10 races to focus on the small details that you don't always look at during the regular season.

Just fine-tuning, right? More time to massage your craft or the car or information you have with your team. For me to kind of put 23XI a little bit on the back burner the last 10, it's been awesome. I've actually had a few afternoons where I was able to sit down and not do anything, which is fabulous.

It's been refreshing, for sure. I've had more time to hang out with friends, play golf if I want to, basketball league started back up. My team is undefeated there. We're on a roll.

I'm having fun right now, I really am. There's a lot of stress with the ownership side, for sure. We're working a lot of different things. Sometimes it can kind of scatter your brain in a ton of different ways. It certainly helps me sleep better because my mind is not in a creative mode or thinking mode right before bed.

There's a lot of benefits. Obviously on track has been really good the last three weeks.

Q. You mentioned the cool factor as far as the collaborations. How much of a morale and motivation boost can that be for 23XI?

DENNY HAMLIN: It's good those guys know what they're representing. A big brand they're representing. To see seven or eight of Jay's crew here, seven or eight from Jordan here, that don't always go to races, that's big. That's why Michael came into the sport, is to open up his platform to an audience that probably is not as familiar.

I think they understand what they're representing. That team works really, really close together. Certainly it's a lot different than a lot of teams that are out there.

Certainly when you have these type of clabs, the biggest hurdle to me is getting everyone's shoe order delivered to their house on time.

Q. Since Chris joined you guys in 2019, I remember what a gut punch it was at Homestead, devastating. From that low moment to now, what has been the biggest gain as partners and a team?

DENNY HAMLIN: We really haven't changed that much from year one to now because we realized as long as we keep trusting each other, things are good. When I have concerns, I'm not afraid to reach out to him and express those, right?

A crew chief and a driver, it's like a marriage. I guess I wouldn't know anything about that. I guess you're supposed to listen to the other person, be empathetic, all that other stuff (smiling). Yeah, well, that's what I heard.

So I feel like I can't be afraid to say, Hey, I have concerns about this. He can't be defensive when I have those concerns. When he tells me, You knucklehead, you shouldn't be doing this, you should be doing that, I understand it comes from a place of him wanting me to get better, right?

It's very easy if you're a veteran of the team to say, This is the way I've always been doing it, sorry. If you just make the car drive like I want it to drive, we'll win every week.

His job is to say, Well, perhaps you should adjust, as well.

That's what makes this relationship really work well, is that we trust each other and we're pushing each other to be better. So I think that's really special in our series and you don't get it often.

Q. What's the like to stand in the middle of this massive arena, all the attention and energy is directed on to you, you're addressing all these people like you have the floor for a moment?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, that's why I love this track, right? It doesn't matter whether it's cheers or boos, you've earned the right to be on that stage for that given moment, for that interview or whatever it might be.

It's gratifying. I mean, I'm a person that feeds off of that because I know my hard work has paid off, right? As tough as it is, (indiscernible) says: What in me thinks I care

about what you think about me because it's not the same opinion I have of myself, right?

I know who I am. I know how I treat people. It's okay, right? It's okay to have fandom one way or another. But to have just electricity, that's fun. This is a really fun moment in sports. It's really fun in NASCAR to have that many fans passionate one way or another, right? That's good for our sport.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations. Thanks for all the time.

DENNY HAMLIN: Anybody talks shit, come bring it...

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