

# NASCAR Media Conference

## Press Conference

Sunday, September 15, 2024

An Interview with:

**Chris Buescher**

**Steve Newmark**

**Scott Graves**

**THE MODERATOR:** We are now joined by our race-winning team of tonight's NASCAR Cup Series race here at Watkins Glen. We're joined by Steve Newmark, president of RFK Racing, and Scott Graves, crew chief of the No. 17 RFK Racing Ford.

Questions, please.

**Q. Take me through your guys' emotions going into the overtime and then ultimately the final lap there.**

**SCOTT GRAVES:** Yeah, obviously when you have a four-, four-and-a-half-second lead and the caution comes out, it's kind of frustration. You know the way the race is, if you have -- at the end of them you get one caution, you're likely to have more, but I think to me at that point it was more about, all right, let's just kind of stay calm, keep Chris calm, you know, don't get too upset about the situation.

It is what it is, and we just have to go do our job. Obviously Chris was able to do that. Yeah, I mean, did a great job through all three of them. Obviously the last one got beat up a little bit in turn one, but went and fought his way back and showed the tenacity to get back to the lead and win the race. He did a great job with it. That's exactly what we want.

**STEVE NEWMARK:** Represent the team side and the other end of the spectrum because the rest of us were not calm, and it was frustrating. I think that what was special is to listen to Scott and Chris and Herm, the spotter, talk because you would not know that something didn't go their way, having a four-and-a-half-second lead and taking off on a perfect restart and getting the big lead again, same with the second restart.

I think it was one of those things that the emotions, I think, in the whole pit box were just kind of we were all probably just racked with kind of anxiety at that point.

If you look at how this year has played out, they've been a



model of consistency, but we just haven't gotten that little bit of luck to win. I would say that they didn't get much luck here either. They just went out there and earned it.

**Q. What does it mean for you guys to be able to get this win at this kind of track in the playoffs when all the focus is on the 16 guys who are going for a championship?**

**SCOTT GRAVES:** For us as a team, we would be disappointed if we didn't get a win this year. We've had wins the last two years. I know in our mind it was going to be disappointment if we didn't.

It's pretty big. To get it on a road course, we've won all the other types of tracks with Chris, so this was kind of like the last one for a style of track to win.

So getting the road course win in the Cup Series with him is really big. Then for me personally I grew up in Upstate New York on Cayuga Lake. It's big for me to win here. It's a pretty cool place to be in New York and win a race.

**STEVE NEWMARK:** Yeah, I think that many of you guys know the guiding principle at RFK is that we exist to win races and compete for championships. I think their ability to go out there and win a race despite not being in the playoffs and despite having that disappointment is a testament that they are relentless. I think it's a huge lift for our organization because that's where we expect to be at this point in our evolution.

Obviously also want to see Brad continue to advance and try to win the championship, but I think that we're thrilled that the 17 came out and got a win, and we think that there will be a lot of opportunities for them to do that in the next few races as well.

**Q. The last lap with Chris chasing down SVG, what was in your mind on the pit box? What were you expecting Chris to do? He doesn't seem like the kind of guy that would typically use his fender, but he kind of did. What was going through your mind during that last lap?**

**SCOTT GRAVES:** Yeah, I wasn't sure. I didn't realize he was going to get that close to him again until I heard the spotter say coming up through the Ss exiting that I heard



the spotter say, He's gaining on him. I was like, Oh, okay. I didn't know we were getting back to him.

Seeing how close he was coming into the bus stop and then he was able to get to his bumper and do what he had to do. I feel like he did it respectfully, if you can put it that way. I know he's been used up a lot worse this year in a lot of other circumstances. I'm proud of him for what he did. I know he learned a lot this year. He learned a lot from Kansas. Obviously Larson ran him down the track and got him sideways to get the win there.

I know he regrets that and lives that in his mind a lot this year. So to come back in that situation, I mean, rightfully he had a four-and-a-half-second lead. The race was his. He went and took it. I'm proud of him for that.

**STEVE NEWMARK:** You're not allowed to ask about the charters.

**Q. I wasn't even going there. How would you describe Chris's demeanor since not making the playoffs? Has he seemed more angry, determined, frustrated, or is he the same guy that he was pre-, let's say, -Daytona this year?**

**STEVE NEWMARK:** I'll let Scott answer too. For any of you that have been around Chris, he is completely even-keel, but he is always laser-focused on winning. I haven't seen any change.

Obviously there was disappointment and we didn't make the playoffs, as that was the first goal, and we didn't check that box. He is a relentless competitor. I think if you look at his preparation, and nothing has changed. He approaches every race just like he did before, and the goal is the same, to end up up front.

**SCOTT GRAVES:** I look at it more as an evolution. I don't think making the chase or not making it. Obviously there's that disappointment, and we all had to get over that. I think we got passed that, and we realized the situation and it was, like, All right, let's just go for wins.

In a way it takes some pressure off. We can sit back and have fun and watch all the other guys struggle and just go have fun and try to win races.

I consider it more of an evolution with Chris. If you look at his stats, what he's done on restarts this year, you know, we talked with him in the past about restarts, and he's really gone to work on that. His numbers look much better.

I think just it's an evolution of just trying to become the complete race car driver, what it takes to compete at the

cup level. He's shown a lot of progress this year. I think that's a really cool thing for all of us at RFK and on the team to work for him. It motivates the guys to be better, and I think we're all heading in the same direction.

**Q. Chris Buescher started in 24th. That's as far as we've seen a winner come from at Watkins Glen. What was your thought process starting back there and what you guys would need to do, what you did to make it all up and win the race this season -- or in this race here?**

**SCOTT GRAVES:** Yeah, obviously didn't qualify as well as we wanted to. Knew we had a really good car in practice yesterday. I think we were -- if you looked at the averages, we were right up there with the best of them.

I knew we were going to be in good shape. One thing you see when you get into the chase, this race hasn't been in the chase in the past. I think you saw a lot more guys in the chase. They had to stay out for stage points, and that puts them behind you. So it's an easy way to get by them. That's all right. I'll take it. It gets us up front.

So you saw a lot of that. He passed a lot of guys too just by having a good car. Got up there at the end, and you saw him drive by the 34, the 1, the 16. Drove by the best cars that were up there.

So, I mean, I knew it was going to be a tough day. We talked about it before the race that we were just going to have to claw for each spot. We kind of talked about what's likely to happen at the stages and hope to be around that top five at the start of the third stage, and that's where we were. It all worked out pretty well.

**Q. I have two questions. So Chris's car seems to come alive with 34 laps to go, and he started picking off guys. What happened around that time that allowed him to just start getting by guys easily when no one else could seem to do that whole race long?**

**SCOTT GRAVES:** We knew we were better on a longer run. With this tire, you did see some guys start to struggle after 10 or 15 laps. So I think the 1 and the 16, they had stayed out to start the third stage. So they had laps on tires.

It put us in a good spot because we didn't have many laps at all at that point. We knew we had a good, long-run car, and that started to show up about that point, and other guys started to struggle. Like I say, it all played out in our favor really the way that whole third stage played out.

**Q. Steve, for RFK this is the first time in 11 years that**

**this team has had more than one car win a race in a season since 2013. I'm just wondering, where do you view this team being -- where is it right now compared to just a few years ago?**

**STEVE NEWMARK:** It's interesting. I wasn't aware of that stat. There's no doubt that if you go back for a period that we had -- sports are cyclical, and we hit a rough patch and weren't achieving what we had aspired to and what our goals were each year.

What we've seen, and a lot of credit goes to Brad and how he's come in with his leadership and kind of helped us continue to evolve as a race team, but our goal is for both cars every week to be a threat to win the race.

There's no doubt if you rewind a few years, we weren't there, but we do feel that we've gotten there in the last year, year and a half. Obviously finished seventh and eighth in points last year. The 17 had three wins. Brad had some close opportunities, but we didn't get both of them in victory lane last year.

You fast forward to this year, and I really think that the statistic that probably tells the story the best for us is that we had the fourth and fifth highest average finishes with the 6 and the 17 this year. So you had two of the top five.

I think what that is a testament to is at every style of racetrack, both cars have the opportunity to run up front and win races. Obviously you have seen, as Scott mentioned, Chris has evolved as a racer. He is a threat on short track. He has won at Bristol and Richmond and now won on the road course, won on super speedways, won at intermediates.

So we feel like we need to be good and a threat at every type of track in order for us to get to where we want to be. We're not there yet, right, because you want both cars in the playoffs and you want both cars in the final four, but we feel like we're taking the right steps.

**THE MODERATOR:** Thanks for coming in, and congratulations.

We're now joined by the race winner of tonight's NASCAR Cup Series race here at Watkins Glen International, Chris Buescher, driver of the No. 17 RFK Racing Ford.

Questions, please.

**Q. Chris, you had a couple of close calls to get into the playoffs this year at least. How tough is it to think, sitting here thinking, that maybe this could have been a win that could have gotten you into another round?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** Yeah, it definitely stung there. To have the season we had and have that many close calls, near misses, certainly -- haven't thought about what it would have meant. That's just good old-fashioned win right there.

In that sense it's very special for me for this team to get this buildsubmarines.com Mustang into victory lane on a road course. That's a big accomplishment for myself. We've been so good on these things. We've averaged out so good. Much like our season. We've had a fantastic average throughout the year.

We just haven't been able to win a road course yet, and we finally got that done today. This race car was so good.

Practice was really good. I think lap averages we were P1 on averages after the two practices, so we knew we were good after a couple of laps and qualifying certainly was not very good.

Had to pass a lot of cars, had to have some fantastic strategy, and, if we're going to be blunt about it, not having to think about points at all on the playoff side of it or any cutoffs, opened up more opportunities for us today to be able to go out there and get that win.

**Q. Take me through the overtime restart and then the final lap.**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** Yeah, man, I sure did like it being four second out in front and cruising to victory. That sure seemed a lot easier.

A little bit wilder at the end. To have caution after caution was certainly frustrating. Of course, the two that we got away clean, we had cautions immediately up through the Ss, right?

The third one there everyone just drove into one a little bit deeper yet knowing it was OT, and ended up just up the hill and lost the lead. Knew that that was going to be a very tough pass to get SVG back. We tailed them there for that last lap. Took the white and realized that we had gained a little bit and went up through the Ss. I seen him just hanging on to it really loose.

I went to a point that I wasn't really comfortable at my entry marker into the bus stop. I think he was still going. I kind of had a feeling something big was getting ready to happen, and sure enough, he had that big slide there.

I went to try and go left, and he was still correcting coming back. I went to try and cross over, and just could hard

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

race. He tried to cover it, and had already gotten the fender in. Just was able to get clear of him off the carousel and run. You know, just run.

**Q. Were you surprised you were able to get back to him?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** I knew he was very -- the team had been telling me he was very good in the bus stop on entry and through the center, but that we were very good turn one up to that point and that we kind of just fell even otherwise. I knew we were very good. I knew it was going to be a hard pass.

The bus stop wasn't very much of a passing zone at all today other than just some big restart moments, which kind of is kind of what was predicted ahead of time. My head doesn't hurt near as much right now, though. So I certainly appreciate that side of it.

It was to the point where he could bottom out if you had big moments. Then it would really take off on you. Without that and without putting that pressure something on him up through the Ss, it would have been a very difficult pass to make, but with that bobble there and having that opportunity to cross over through the bus stop, that was our one shot, and we took it.

**Q. So much was made of the tires going into today. Looking at scoring, it didn't look like the fall-off was as much as anticipated.**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** I would say that they were more of a factor earlier. The track did take a ton of rubber. These things marbled up a lot. At times early on in the race both the first stages had cautions at points where they really only ended up being 15-lap runs, and we really needed to see it play out to 25 laps to really be a factor, I believe.

Man, we hit a point where we -- I think all those cautions kind of tightened it back up and made new tires less advantageous there at the end.

**Q. I wanted to ask you, maybe instead of cruising to a four-second win, is there any extra satisfaction in getting this win, your first road course win, this way, going against SVG, one of the best, in such a tight duel on the final lap?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** I said it would be easier. Not more satisfying. I guess to your point, yes, in a way. I could have done without some of that stress there at the end. And I know how good that we played it and how that was going to work out for us. I would love to win one that way too.

That one was ultimately -- it was a lot of fun because it worked out. If we had finished second on the day, I wouldn't have enjoyed that very much. To be able to in the hunt there at the end, SVG has been such a phenomenal road course racer, or is a phenomenal road course racer, and knew when he got that spot on that last restart that it was going very tricky to get back by him and just wanted to make sure that we stayed in the hunt, that we drove the thing hard and kept pressure on him and made him at least realize we were still there, that it wasn't going to be a cruise away.

I think ultimately that was the ticket, right, was just to make sure that you get other drivers in their mirror and looking up instead of looking forward. It was a lot of fun. Just a good old-fashioned hard battle to the end.

There's been so many fantastic last one or two laps here at the Glen, and I certainly feel like I'm going to go back and watch that one and going to feel like it's going to add up right there with some of the old-school Ambrose-Keselowski battles or a handful of others. It's going to be a good one.

**Q. SVG said that part of the reason he was running so hard there and kind of forced himself into a mistake is because he had contact with you on the restart, so he felt like, all right, it's going to drive pretty cleanly. Can you settle it, if you had gotten a chance? The contact you had was you were already there, and he kind of came down. It didn't look like you intentionally bumped him up. If he hadn't hit you there or either way, were you going to initiate that contact?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** Racing got more aggressive, right, and we see it time and time again. I didn't think that it was dirty. It was very aggressive racing, right, when it came down to it and we were able to single-file out and seen that he pulled away for half a lap there, and I kind of thought my chance was slim.

Then when the white flag came out, we were able to really pull up on him. Yeah, it was -- I was going to keep the pressure on him. If the opportunity arose, I was definitely going to -- we were going to push and shove a little bit. I'm not out here to flat-out wreck somebody. He didn't do anything to me to deserve something like that, but we were going to race hard for it and have a battle all the way to the finish.

I guess ultimately if he is running that hard, then he knows where his mindset was at and knows that if the roles were reversed, he probably wouldn't like being shoved up the hill like that. If he is thinking I was going to return the favor, I

think if the roles were reversed, that kind of means that he would be in the same mindset as well.

**Q. So he needed to run that hard to make sure he stayed far enough ahead of you?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** If the right corner would have happened, that wasn't going to be the place. The bus stop was not a great passing zone and not a good place for -- it was actually where they were better than us pretty consistently there in those last 20, 30 laps. I really had been really good through the carousel, so I wanted to get through the bus stop clean.

Like I said, I drove in hard, but I wasn't going to go crazy. He was still digging when I lifted, and he was two car lengths ahead. Just kind of clicked at that moment that that was probably not going to stick through there, and it was going to open up an opportunity for us.

**Q. Chris, what was the thought that popped into your head when I guess they came over the radio and said, "Caution," when you are out there four and a half seconds?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** Yeah, we had an in-camera today, so you'll see it. That was disgust. That was pure disgust at that point.

I'm not surprised by it because we passed the 21 because he had the left rear coming apart. I seen the carcass hanging on for dear life through turn six when we went by him there.

I don't call 10 10. It's 6 to me. I had a bad feeling at that point. It's not something that caught me off guard, but it was frustrating. Our team had a good strategy and had put ourselves in a good spot to have that massive cushion to the point where -- and the long run speed in our race car that we were really going to -- weren't going to have a contender there all the way to the end. We were going to be able to cruise across the line to a pretty easy victory ultimately had that caution not come out.

**Q. The top five finishers today aren't playoff drivers. What does it mean for you when pretty much everyone is focused on the 15 guys in the playoffs, what does it mean for you to be able to say, Hey, I'm still here, and be able to have a say in what happens today?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** Yeah, our sport is not like others, right? We have this playoff format that starts, but nobody goes home. We bring the same 36, 38 cars to the racetrack every week. We race the same drivers and teams every week no matter if there's a playoff going on or

not.

Our sport is not like others in that sense. We're here to race to win. We're going to play spoiler as much as we can in the next seven or eight weeks coming up as well.

It's big for us to get a win on the year. It's been over a year without a win. We've been so close so many times to start off the season at Phoenix and be runner-up there. We knew we had the speed. We carried it over through the offseason, and just haven't been able to seal the deal.

We talked about it a lot with the team the last two weeks. Obviously it's been a challenge to kind of take that reset. Nobody's head was hanging, but certainly difficult mindset to be in knowing that we didn't put ourselves in a playoff spot and in a year we felt like we could make a deep run in the playoffs had we been able to secure one of those victories earlier.

With that, yeah, we're going to keep after it. Next week is my favorite racetrack, so excited to go to Bristol. Played spoiler there two years ago. We can go do that one again.

We have some other really good racetracks coming up as well, so excited about that. I would say that today the fact that we weren't in a playoff spot, we didn't have -- we had a terrible week last week ultimately, but that didn't put us in some kind of desperate position on a playoff bubble that made us play it safe today either. That let us go out there and race 100% to win.

That's what our team did, and that's what we were able to accomplish. I think the fact that that made playoff drivers weren't in the top five, and I know a handful of them had issues, so that makes a dent in it too.

I think that just shows where, with the strategy of the race, we were able to take bigger chances and kind of the stage finishes out of it.

**Q. With all of the beating and banging that was done through the whole race, how close did you come?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** It was a pretty easy day for me. I don't know how bad it was in other areas. The closest call I had was lap one coming out of the bus stop. I was racing with a handful of cars that qualified poorly, so we were in the thick of it.

The seas parted, and there was a parked car in the middle of the track. That was by far my closest moment. At least where we were at. I know obviously all those cautions came out at the end for a reason, but I haven't seen why. So for us quite a nice day.

**Q. Career victories have come in the last two years, and this organization has grown so much. What about Chris Buescher has changed in the last few years?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** I have been underneath the RFK banner for half my life now. I had a couple of years there and you kind of watched it from the outside and seen the struggles. That goes back to what you would consider the heyday of it, when you were able to win eight or nine races across the organization.

The racetracks we were able to get it done at, that matters. That shows how we are adapting to different styles of racetracks and how our organization has stepped up.

For me I have spent a lot of time in situations that would be underdog situations or just in an era where our team was not in its best place either, but none of that time was wasted. It was a learning experience. It's focusing on how do you get better. It's breaking the mindset of having an 18th place day and saying, Man, that was great progress. It was not. You know what, that was 18th place. That was a terrible day.

But it got to the point where it had been there for so long that you almost tried to find tiny victories in it. You look back at it now and say that was a lot of learning experiences through the years, a lot of realizing that complacency may have struck you at different times, but you're not happy with that.

We've turned a massive corner at RFK. There's a host of reasons for that for us to be in this spot now. Obviously we're not in the playoffs on the 17 side, but the 6 for Brad to get that win at Darlington and to be in the playoffs now, that's big for us.

To have both our cars in the playoffs last season, we've found a massive increase in speed, and that's helped me as a driver really enjoy coming to the racetrack a lot more.

It brings me back to the good old days of short track racing where you love to be that hauler that rolled into a speedway and the rest of the teams or drivers looked up and said, Crap, we have to race them today.

We're in that spot now to where we are a factor at a lot of these different styles of racetracks. It's more fun for me. It makes it more enjoyable. It makes me think back on the harder days and what was good about them and certainly what was bad about them and how do you fix some of that and get your mindset right to make sure we're battling to be happy with wins and disappointed with second. Not happy with a top ten.

**Q. You mentioned the lows. Was there one particular low, a turning point, that stood out to you?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** No. There was a handful of really hard years. Very well documented hard years. It's definitely tricky. You do your best to keep your head up and through all that we've come out in a much better place now.

Whether that's everybody back at the Roush shop from that side, whether it's the Fenway group and their big investment into commitment, their big commitment to making us better, or if that's Brad Keselowski's fingerprints all over everything that we're doing now, there's a ton of factors that come into play, but ultimately the results are speaking for themselves. We are in probably the best place that I have seen in 15, 16 years.

**Q. Speaking of going back to one of your favorite tracks, Bristol, next weekend, it was a chaotic race back in March. What do you expect next weekend?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** I did the tire test with our team, and so coming out of there I would say that I would expect some similar characteristics. I don't feel like there's a lot that's going to massively change how that day plays out. We're starting to hit a little bit cooler weather. It's kind of a stretch. Humidity is still there everywhere in the South, but I would say that there's a very high possibility that it's going to be a high tire wear race, and you are going to have to play it differently.

Don't doubt for one second that every team is aware of that; that everyone knows that they're going to be on high alert. We are going to be thinking about how to make tires last without giving up overall speed. How do you push that?

You know, the bigger thing from the test that seemed to help was the PJ1. Certainly seemed to put us in a little better spot. I guess I thought that was staying, but it sounds like it is not. We're going back to resin.

So I think from that side of it to me that means it's going to be very similar to what we had last time. Maybe a little bit better just because teams are going to learn what they need or have learned from that last experience, but I would expect some chaos there.

**Q. I don't know how well you know SVG. So, I'm curious, when he came into victory lane to congratulate you, did you know he was coming in to congratulate you?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** I figured so. I didn't feel like anything was dirty there at the end. We talked about it. There was a little push and shoving on both sides. Ultimately he had a big error there into the bus stop, and we just took advantage of it and really had to be aggressive to get to the hole.

But, yeah, I didn't feel like there was anything that was dirty about it. I didn't expect him coming over to be mad about anything.

On that note, I think that's the one guy out here that's bigger than me. So if there's that moment where I feel like he is mad coming over, I better take note, right? Just on the flip side, I'm sure some others don't like seeing me.

So, yeah, I appreciated him coming over and saying Good race, because I feel like it was a really good race. We got after each other hard, but ultimately there was nothing crazy in those last couple of laps. Just good, hard racing.

**Q. (Indiscernible.)**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** No, no. You said it, not me.

**Q. Would you have ducked?**

**CHRIS BUESCHER:** Would I have ducked? You know, he was three steps down, so I had the high ground. I'll say that (laughing).

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