

# NASCAR Media Conference

## Press Conference

Sunday, February 23, 2025

*An Interview with:*

**Christopher Bell**

**Joe Gibbs**

**Adam Stevens**

**THE MODERATOR:** We are joined by the joined by the winning crew chief of the No. 20, DeWalt Toyota for Joe Gibbs Racing, Adam Stevens. Incredible race out there. Certainly edge of the seat for your fans out there, but how about for you on the pit box as you were watching those final laps unfold? It.

**ADAM STEVENS:** Yeah, I think I fell off the edge of my seat a couple of times. Especially there, what was it, maybe 10, 15 to go and we were up in the top three or four and then fell back outside of the top 10. I thought we were toast.

Bell just kept his head down and really dug deep all day. The first part of the race certainly didn't have track position, and we just didn't have the balance very close. He stayed patient with us and just took what he could get. Didn't put himself in any bad spots, and he we just got the car a little bit better and the closer we got to the front, he was able to work some magic and dig deep and make it happen.

**THE MODERATOR:** We'll open the floor to questions.

**Q. We talked on Friday, Adam, about just having a clean day and executing when you need to. Just talk about Christopher Bell's race craft today and being able to come from the back and work your way to the front by the end of the race?**

**ADAM STEVENS:** I touched on it there a second ago. Even think back the last week, right, we were in position there at the end of the Daytona 500 to contend for that win and got a bad push there and ended up in the fence. These speedway races are tough. You have to make good decisions for the entirety of the day to have a whole race car to race with at the end, let alone put yourself in position with a solid race car. He was able to do that.

Like I said, the first part of the race we had to start so deep in the field and did not have track position and had a pretty crappy pit stall selection because of it. You know, he just



stayed really, really patient and never asked more out of his car than it was capable and never put himself in a spot that he was going to regret. As it turned out, we had a competitive car with decent balance at the end. He was just really on top of getting the runs and finding the pushes from behind and taking those runs and passing cars and getting himself cleared on the other side.

So that was a real testament to how much work he has put into it. I think we saw a little bit of it last week and then a continuation of it this week here at the speedway races.

**Q. How does getting a win and being locked in the playoffs in Week 2 change strategy for the rest of the regular season?**

**ADAM STEVENS:** It frees you up a bunch. I said this in the offseason when asked that question too. The position that our team is in, we expect to run up front. We wouldn't think that even if we didn't win a race that we would really be counting points when it came time for the playoffs to start.

What we really need to be thinking about is winning that regular season championship and stockpiling as many bonus points as we possibly can. This is a great start tonight to win the second race of the year. Probably a track that maybe we didn't think that we had circled as far as a potential win, so to come in here and really take one away from them is really good.

**Q. Why is this so good and Daytona seems so frustrating? What's the difference in the tracks or the way they run that makes it...**

**ADAM STEVENS:** I think you have a couple of things going on here. Daytona, the length of the runs is outside of the fuel window, so it puts everybody really trying to make the fastest green flag stop they can. So up until the green flag stop, nobody is racing. Everybody is running around like a bunch of buffoons.

I think it's horrendous, and I wish we could do something to change it. The simplest thing to do to change it is change the run length to match the fuel cell, match the amount of laps we can run on a tank of fuel hard. You saw that in stage one today where you didn't see a bunch of people limping around scared to make a green flag stop. You saw

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a bunch of people running hard.

Then we had cautions in stage two and three that negated that green flag stop. The other thing is, this track is a full mile, damn near, smaller than Daytona. There's not a lot of places to hide here. Things happen really fast. You don't need seven or eight cars to be fast. It takes away the manufacturer allegiances because it's just not a pack style race.

The whole field is in a pack, but you can't separate and make decisions for the benefit of six or seven or eight or ten cars.

**Q. NASCAR didn't throw the caution on the final lap yesterday. They told everybody that today, Hey, same situation, the caution is coming out. Did you kind of feel like you knew if the caution was going to come out, and do you feel like -- or do you just have to race and whatever the call is the call is?**

**ADAM STEVENS:** I don't have control of that button. I think they do the best job they possibly can. It's not easy, and they're trying to give the fans a checkered flag finish, but they don't want to put anybody in danger either.

They're trying to assess if the field is going to come back around. They're trying to assess how hard the person may have hit. It's a lot of decision-making to make in a split second. So they do the best they can.

**Q. JGR as an organization allowed their drivers to compete in dirt racing again, and Christopher had competed out in Tulsa and won races. Do you believe that helped? Obviously he is the race winner anyway, but just starting the year off as the new year helped on that mentality?**

**ADAM STEVENS:** That's a great question. I absolutely think it does on a couple of fronts. He's a race car driver. For him to stay sharp, he needs to drive a race car.

Cutting simulator laps just really doesn't do that. You wouldn't ask a professional golfer to lock his clubs in the closet for three months over the winter and show up at the first tournament. I bet he wouldn't play very well.

But for him to compete and stay sharp, he has to be on a racetrack racing. There is some risking that comes with that, but it's to our benefit. It's not only to our risk.

I think staying sharp and enjoying yourself is the other component. He doesn't have a lot of other hobbies. He loves to drive race cars. He loves to work on race cars, drive race cars, watch race cars, and that's what he loves

to do. When he has downtime, that's what he wants to do.

When I have downtime, I have a list of things I want to do, and I think we're all a little bit different in that regard. It's nice to have an avenue to clear your head and focus on something in between races.

**Q. Eight months ago you and Christopher were the last JGR team in victory lane. You're in victory lane tonight. There was a lot made of that gap. I know Gabehart being moved to the competition director role was in part because of all that. From your seat, what was the level of whether it was concern, discomfort? I mean, it took probably longer than you wanted to get back to this point, but has there been kind of any four-alarm fire feeling at all in this period?**

**ADAM STEVENS:** Not from my team's perspective. You know, that is a long time. That's a long time for the organization to go, for sure, and a long time for this 20 team to go, but we were super competitive in that gap and had a lot of opportunities slip through our fingers for a litany of reasons that I won't even go through.

So for us we didn't feel like it was lack of performance. On occasion it was lack of execution, and on other occasions it was just pure circumstance. You're going to have that. We had that today in our favor. I feel like the changes that were made in the offseason are nothing but a colossal positive for Joe Gibbs Racing, for my team, and for the future success of our company.

I think that maybe we've seen a little bit of that this year already. We were pretty sporty as a whole in Daytona, and we certainly all qualified better. We had competitive cars here today once we got the balance close.

Probably not the two best examples, but we get six or eight races into the season, I think you're going to see a lot more competitive Joe Gibbs Racing.

**Q. To build off that, you said small sample size still, but what do you feel that Gabehart brings to the organization as a whole in the position that he is in now that you might not have been able to get when he was the 11 crew chief?**

**ADAM STEVENS:** Well, I think there's a couple of things there. Number one, for Gabehart filling that role, we haven't gotten rid of anybody. All the same players are still there. We just shored up that competition side with another guy. It's a guy that's fresh off the box that was competing at a high level.

It's hard to stay sharp and know exactly what the race



teams need if you're far removed from it, from a time standpoint. He is certainly not. He is more of a visionary. Probably more than myself. He thinks more ahead in that regard. I think having that guy that's constantly there at the shop chopping wood when we're not there to chop the wood is a big deal. I think he's really in tune and aligned with what the race teams need and what we don't need and how we can allocate those resources.

It's a resource allocation game anymore, and he's certainly tuned into what we need.

**THE MODERATOR:** Adam, congratulations on the victory.

We're going to continue on the post-race press conference for today's Ambetter Health 400 with the winning car owner of the No. 20 Toyota, Coach Joe Gibbs. Coach, you had to have experienced the full range of emotions in this race. How sweet is it to get into victory lane after such an exciting finish?

**JOE GIBBS:** Well, it is, and it's so hard. I'll put it that way. The day started off with us yesterday, I guess you could say, instead of today with qualifying. I don't think we've ever qualified that far back, all of our cars. So we knew we were going to have to do a lot of work today.

Really proud of our teams. Hated it for 54 and Ty and get caught up in the wreck. It was Saia's first race for us, and they're located here in Atlanta. We had a great hospitality. Really appreciate those guys. We're looking for a long road with them. Appreciate them.

I really felt like our other three cars, we just kind of kept fighting all day long, worked our way up, and eventually with restrictor plate and particularly here at Atlanta you have to have things go your way.

At the end for Christopher, he did a good job just keeping us in it, the top 5, and then had some good things happen to us at the end.

**THE MODERATOR:** We're going to open the floor for questions.

**Q.** Joe, obviously you mentioned it, full range of emotions, but to see Christopher be the one to put this organization back in victory lane after almost a year, I mean, Adam was in here earlier and said he didn't feel a sense of panic per se, but what was the sense of urgency maybe behind the scenes as you guys have made these changes and fought so hard to get any of the teams back in victory lane?

**JOE GIBBS:** Yeah. Well, you made a good point too. We

made changes. I think many times in pro sports you analyze your year and where you are. In our case we felt like we needed to reorganize some things and do things a different way.

Last year we led a lot of laps, but we didn't win races like we should, so we went to work in the offseason. Moved Chris up, kind of reorganized, and kind of redid the 54 car, and we made some other changes. So it's great for us to get off to a good start here with the second race of the year to get a win.

I just really appreciate every time I've been in the winner's circle calling our sponsors. For us you've got to have great partners if you're going to be able to race. DeWalt has been with us for a long time. It was great getting them in the winner's circle. Rheem and JR, appreciated them. So I wind up calling Mark Reser, Reser's. So we have a great team of sponsors on that car.

Appreciate Christopher and the way he hung in there. Adam and Christopher have a lot of experience, and hopefully we get off to this kind of a start, we can have a great year.

**Q.** You mentioned moving Gabehart up. What qualities do you feel like he brings to that bigger picture role that maybe you couldn't fully explore when he was more focused on Denny's car?

**JOE GIBBS:** Yeah, we felt like that we needed some help for our crew chiefs in general, all four of them. They're so caught up on their cars, and they're so focused on it. We felt like by getting somebody to look at things overall, we might be able to give them more help. So that was our reason for that.

I think Chris was the right guy. We tried to talk him into it about a year and a half, two years ago. We were able to get it done this time.

**Q.** Christopher seemed much happier going into this year because he got to race during the offseason. I'm curious, how hard of a decision was that for you to let him do that, and did you watch any of those sprint car races, or did you turn your head away?

**JOE GIBBS:** No, I didn't watch them, but I think as much as anything, we have three of our guys are heavily involved in dirt stuff coming up. I felt like that the thing that I probably made the decision on, they're really focused just on racing. They love it, and they talked about the offseason, being able to get a chance to race some dirt stuff would help fill their time and get them excited about things.



We'll kind of see where he leads, but I made that decision, and we'll kind of see what happens with it.

**Q. (Off microphone).**

**JOE GIBBS:** Yeah, I guess you could say that, yeah.

**Q. Along those lines, Ty obviously is a dirt racer. Did that influence your decision a little bit having your grandson coming up and racing on dirt like he does?**

**JOE GIBBS:** We sat down with all three of them, I did. Obviously Ty, yeah, definitely -- he had not really come up racing dirt, but he kind of got real excited about it here lately. He was up at Little Bridge doing some stuff and wanted to expand on that.

Christopher obviously is always heavily involved with it. Chase right now has a team, but has kind of backed off. That's kind of where we are with all that.

**THE MODERATOR:** Coach, congratulations on the triumph. Good luck next week in Austin.

**JOE GIBBS:** Thank you to all of our sponsors. Toyota, just really appreciate Toyota and the partnership. It's awesome to have great sponsors. I think as much as anything when you get in the winner's circle, you see everybody that kind of went with you, supports you, and it's great being there not for yourself as much, but for them.

Appreciate Toyota, DeWalt, Rheem, like I said, and Reser's and Interstate. Thank you all. Appreciate all of you. Thank you.

**THE MODERATOR:** We are now joined by today's race winning driver, Christopher Bell, for today's Ambetter Health 400. We're going to go right into questions.

**Q. There were multiple other drivers that got out of their car and said, Dude, that was fun. From your perspective, comparing it to Daytona, Talladega, what was the biggest difference, and did you have fun before the actual win?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** I mean, certainly that was the most -- or this is the most fun style of speedway racing that I've done in my career. It's different. It's different than Daytona, Talladega. I think a lot of it just has to do with the way that the lanes open up, and it seems like, for the most part, there's always somewhere to go.

You can take your runs, take your momentum, and the top opens up, the bottom opens up, and for the most part if you

do a good job driving and your car is handling well, you can move forward. Yeah, I will echo that and say this is the most fun speedway that we have.

**Q. Christopher, I want to know from you, obviously dirt racing doesn't compare to this style, but just getting back behind the wheel in dirt and having that early start to the season, the reaction time and just being able to make quick decision, obviously that translates to NASCAR, but how important is it to actually get behind the wheel instead of just it being three months of sim work before then?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** I definitely feel the best I have as a race car driver. I'm sure that some of it or part of it is due to the fact that I have been racing through the offseason.

It's a dream come true to be able to drive for Joe Gibbs Racing in these Cup Series cars, and I'm honored and privileged to be able to have some fun outside of the Cup Series cars now. I hope that I can make this the best year ever and prove to the company that it's the right thing for me to do to be out there racing.

**Q. Carson Hocevar didn't thrill other drivers today. There you are battling him. You don't know when the cautions come out. Are you treading lightly around him? How do you race somebody who maybe, I don't know, if you are not sure what he is going to do?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** Well, I mean, yeah, he's been around enough now that you know he's going to be the aggressor. If there's a hole, he's going to take it. If there's not a hole, he's going to make one. He ultimately gave me the shove to pass or break through to lead the side draft tandem with myself and Kyle down the back straightaway.

Then I didn't realize Kyle had opened up the bottom like he did getting into three and allowed Carson to sneak middle of three wide, but I was looking in my mirror, and I saw them crashing. I figured it was a matter of winning the side draft battle to the yellow flag. I felt like I had it whenever the yellow came out, but you never know until they make it official.

The last thing I wanted to do was go out there and let my emotions get to me and feel like I won the race and then them come back and say I didn't. Yeah, it was bonkers, that's for sure.

**Q. Kind of expanding on the caution at the end of the race situation, a lot has been made of that over these first two weeks of the season, and I know there was a lot of driver conversation after Daytona and even after the Xfinity race yesterday. Where have you sat in this**

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**discussion, and were you one of the drivers that had something to say after last week and the fact that you guys were allowed to race back to the flag at the 500?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** Well, I wasn't part of that. I wrecked out a couple of laps earlier. So, no, I wasn't really -- whenever you're out of the race, I was in the infield care center. I was shocked that they allowed them to race back to the checkered whenever the leaders wrecked.

We have been down this road before. I myself got crucified at Talladega a couple of years ago because they wrecked, and I was able to avoid the wreck, and I advanced positions. They were, like, Okay, from now on whenever the cars wreck in the last lap, the yellow is coming out so that we don't endanger people, and I think it's the right call.

I think it just stems from the Thursday night duel where Erik Jones and Austin Cindric had that finish. They threw the yellow a couple of feet before the line, and then fast forward to the Daytona 500. They had been going on a couple of years of not finishing under green, so they were determined to try and finish under green, but I think that you don't want to endanger the drivers. Throwing the yellow flag to not make the back half of the field race for a position, that means so much on the white flag lap.

I think it's the right call.

**Q. You sit here in victory lane exactly eight months after your win at New Hampshire last year.**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** I am glad we don't have to hear that. Joe Gibbs Racing has not won since June. I'm very happy to end that narrative.

**Q. In that narrative, though, obviously a lot of changes have been made and, seemingly, have helped so far. From your seat, you were the one JGR car that really performed well down the stretch last year. Was there ever any real I don't want to say overwhelming urgency, but sense of worry that you weren't where you needed to be, I guess?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** Absolutely not. Absolutely not. That's why I got so frustrated with all of you guys, all of you guys saying, JGR hasn't won since June, they won't win since June. You look at Gateway. Gateway could have, should have won. We had Las Vegas. That was definitely a could have, should have win.

There's a ton of races littered throughout that second half of the year that at least my team had. I know from firsthand. I'm sure Denny and Martin and I don't know

about Ty, but I know the other guys probably had those same races.

It is relieving to finally end that narrative, and we have now won on February 20-something, 2025. So not winless anymore.

**Q. Christopher, you're no stranger to taking the win in the second week of the season, but how does that change your mental approach for the rest of this regular season?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** Yeah, it really doesn't change our approach at all. Leaving last year, we set out on winning more races. We know we need to win more races.

Frankly, Atlanta Motor Speedway was not one we had circled. I'm glad we were able to win one here. If we don't win another race before the playoffs start or the end of the year, it's not going to be a good season for us. We're here to stay, and we need to prove that. We need to walk the walk and quit talking the talk.

The Atlanta Motor Speedway, that comes down to Aric Almirola. He has been a huge addition to our team at Joe Gibbs Racing. I'm just beyond thankful to have him as a mentor. He's really helped myself and my mental state whenever it comes to these races, because I normally don't enjoy coming to the superspeedway stuff. Aric has done a great job of making sure that I am the best speedway racer that I can be.

**Q. Daytona I feel like Toyotas changed the narrative about their qualifying because there was a lot of fast Toyotas there.**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** And then we came to Atlanta.

**Q. But then you didn't run as well at Daytona and come to Atlanta and qualify the back and run up front. What's the difference for the driver's seat behind the wheel? I know you're not going to give up the setup here, but what's the difference behind the wheel that your car is doing? Does it have to be significantly different at Atlanta because handling is so much more important here?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** Honestly, I am just struggling to put the correlation together between qualifying and racing. The whole motto is if you don't qualify well, you're going to race well, and if you qualify well, oh, my gosh, is the car going to drive good? You know, the JGR cars qualified really well at Daytona, and we raced how we did, however that was. Here we qualified as bad as it gets, and it raced pretty similar, I would say.



Then the Penskes, the Penske cars have been the best of both worlds. They qualified well, raced well. I don't know. I don't know what to say about qualifying or what to think about it. At this point I genuinely just don't think it matters because I've had good races qualifying bad, and I've had bad races qualifying good.

**Q. So you said you have a list circled. Tell us what that list is, and why is Vegas at the top?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** A list circled of?

**Q. Of the races you want to win.**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** Well, COTA. COTA is a good place to start. Honestly we're just getting into the bread and butter of what the 20 car likes. COTA should be a strong track. Phoenix, Vegas, Darlington, Homestead. All of these tracks coming up in the early part of the season is where we think we can compete for wins and do good, score a lot of points.

Atlanta was not one of those racetracks we had circled. It's very refreshing to be able to get one early in the season, especially one where we didn't expect to win at. Hopefully we can keep the ball rolling.

**Q. (Off microphone).**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** I felt like Vegas has owed me one for a very long time. I go back to the Truck Series. I never won at Vegas. The Xfinity Series, I've never won at Vegas. The Cup Series, I have never won at Vegas.

But I would be curious to see the stats. I feel like I've led more laps at Vegas than I have any other track without any wins. We'll try again in a couple of weeks, and hopefully it plays out a little bit different.

**Q. You never know when your next one comes at the Cup level and when the schedule came out for this year, New Hampshire and Gateway were in the playoffs.**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** Yeah, I'm excited about that.

**Q. Now that you do have that win out of the way, just how much more does that get you excited about the postseason knowing that you have that win now in the bag and are in the playoffs?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** I mean, I don't know. Yes, it is refreshing to be locked in, but I go back to what I said earlier. If we don't win another race before the playoffs,

we're not performing up to the standards that we hold ourselves to.

Gateway and Loudon being in the playoffs are two great racetracks for me, and I'm super excited about the round of 16 and the round of 12. I'm kind of dreading the round of 8. Hopefully we score points, and we need to bank a lot of playoff points before we get to those races and help our cause whenever we get to the round of 8.

**Q. I'm actually fascinated by the Aric Almirola element there. I'm curious, how often is he in y'all's meetings? Is it just superspeedways or places where he's good, or is it every week? What is his addition?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** It's every week. I would say the majority of his input and expertise has come on the speedway side because he came from a very successful superspeedway organization and manufacturer, and he's provided a lot of valuable input into my driving style, Adam's setup choice, and our strategy.

So he has tremendously helped myself in the 20 car as a speedway racer and speedway team, but he's there every week. Every week he's going through the debrief and talking about what he sees and what we need to be better, and he's just a super smart and experienced guy. He's very valuable to have, and I'm very grateful to have him on our team. He's been a huge resource to us the last couple of years.

**Q. Can you start 32nd here in June and still win the race, or has the mentality changed?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** No, I think you can. Blaney spun out with, what, ten to go? Is that right?

**Q. Somewhere around there.**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** And he drove all the way up through there. I think if your car is driving good and you do a good job driving, you can make your way through the field.

The beginning part of the race, I started in the 30s, and I could get up to the teens, but then I would stall out and just couldn't figure out the moves that I needed to make to get up front.

So, yeah, I think that here at Atlanta, this package, for whatever reason, at this racetrack has allowed the cream to rise to the top a little bit better. Yeah, I'm careful saying that because I don't feel the same way about Daytona, Talladega, but here it certainly works.



**Q. Does the temperatures make that much of a difference between here and June, or is that something that everybody likes to talk about and use that as an excuse?**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** It doesn't feel like it makes that much of a difference, honestly.

**Q. You were a little bit far behind the Cindric, Larson deal. I'm curious if you saw it and your view.**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** What was that? The wreck off of turn two?

**Q. Yes.**

**CHRISTOPHER BELL:** I'll be honest, I wasn't focused on that. I saw them. Cindric got into the wall off of two and then spun across the racetrack, so I saw it out of my peripheral, but I didn't see exactly what happened.

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