

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Ryan Blaney

THE MODERATOR: We're going to roll into our post-race media availability here with our race winner Ryan Blaney in today's Cracker Barrel 400 at Nashville Superspeedway. Honestly, it feels like you're soaking this one in a little bit. You have your drink, you're smoking a cigar, you were extremely excited out on the start-finish line. This season has held a lot of ups and downs for your team. What does it feel like to know that you've won a race at this point?

RYAN BLANEY: Yeah, I think it means a lot because you said it perfectly, just been pretty rocky this year and had a lot of misfortune and a lot of down times, just crappy things happening to us, and it's like, man, what do we got to do to just finish these races or close one out and just kind of things go our way.

So I think that was more -- it's kind of like, I don't want to say relief, but just like, okay, finally nothing crazy happened and we were able to just run our own race and bring the speed and execute and do our job very, very well.

So yeah, it was nice to finally get in Victory Lane tonight after a rocky start to the year.

Q. Did you do anything different in this race, different from last week or any of the DNFs?

RYAN BLANEY: No. No. I didn't do anything different. I think it just kind of didn't go sideways for us. Everything went smoothly, went like a normal race should go and we executed like we should and the speed in our car was good. It feels like those races for our team are hard to come by, just nothing funky happening or nothing playing out the normal way. But it's nice it finally went that way tonight. The fastest car won the race and nothing wacky happened that we had to kind of -- couldn't win the race.

No, didn't do anything different. Last week from this week. I love my guys because we didn't finish the race last week, it's been a rough year so far, and they don't ever think anything negative ever. They just go to the next week and the next racetrack and prepare like we're going to win the race and prepare like the championship team that they are, and they don't let anything bother them. That's why I love being with the group of guys that I'm around is they have



that mindset and that mentality, and I'm really proud to have that and share that with them. That's a special group to be around when you all can share that same mindset no matter how good or bad things are going. You just focus on next week and focus on how to do the job the best you can.

Q. How important is it to win early enough in the regular season where you've got some runway left and you can kind of start preparing for the playoffs? Is it important to have some of that time?

RYAN BLANEY: Yeah, I think it is. Honestly, I don't think that like anybody lays up after they win a race. It's not like they go on this whole science experiment type of thing because being top 10 in points matter in the regular season. It's playoff points. You still want to run well and you still want to win races. But it does matter. It just kind of sets it all at ease, like okay, we're in the playoffs. All that stuff is good. Nice to finally get the monkey off your back and win a race and then move on and go try to win more.

So this is important. Obviously I would have liked to have won a little earlier, and I feel like we've had great shots to do it, just didn't really happen for us. Yeah, it's really nice to finally get in Victory Lane and have that little sense of ease in your brain.

Q. What does it do for Penske to have all four cars at this point qualified for the playoffs? Does that make you guys tougher to deal with down the road?

RYAN BLANEY: Yeah, huge. I've been really proud of Team Penske and the Wood Brothers speed this year so far through the first dozen races. For the last couple years we've struggled a little bit kind of getting going before the summer months, and I think we've figured it out come the fall and things like that or late summer. But I thought we just fired off this year with tons of speed, and was really proud of their efforts over the winter for that and carrying over what we accomplished at the end of last year and bringing it bigger and better at the start of this year.

So it's great to have everybody with a win and everybody locked in there, and hopefully we can just continue to rack it up. It's nice that we have all the speed and all the teams are working very well together right now. Between myself and the 22, 2, 21, we're all really in sync right now, and



that's tough to get when all four teams are really communicating great and we're all playing off each other. That's a really great thing that we have going on at our race shop.

Q. Not to move on too quickly from this win, but with Michigan and Pocono coming up, two tracks that you've had success at, what is the mindset coming off this win? Of course you want to win more, but do you feel good about your chances?

RYAN BLANEY: Hope so, yeah, we'll see. Michigan is kind of a unique place, but I feel really good about how our kind of mile-and-a-half program has been this year. It's bigger than a mile-and-a-half, but a lot of the same tendencies as some mile-and-a-halves that we go to. So I'm curious to see where we're going to be at next weekend. The run that we had at Pocono last year was definitely good, getting to Victory Lane there. So you just hope to keep building off those things. It definitely makes me look forward to next week.

I always try to look forward to the next week, no matter if we win the race or run 35th. I always try to close the book Monday morning and move on to next week and look forward to having a shot at winning, running well.

I think it bodes well. Like I said earlier, I think our speed is really good, and that is kind of across short tracks and speedways and mile-and-a-halves and two miles. So hopefully we can have a good run -- big weekend next weekend for Ford and RP being in their backyard.

Q. It felt like everybody wanted to take the INDYCAR drama from the Indianapolis 500 and put it on this NASCAR organization, as well. You and Joey have great runs tonight and you get the win. What is it to be able to move on from that and prove that that has nothing to do with you all?

RYAN BLANEY: Well, hey, I hate it for those folks over there last week at Indy. For those guys to have to go through that. The people that got let go were really prominent figures in the company. It definitely stunk.

But on our side, we just focused on kind of what we were doing, and RP told us all, things happen, and we've done things about them, and we're going to move forward, and what's the next step and how do we move on from this.

Yeah, we had to hear all week that Penske cars are bad because the INDYCAR guys got caught and that's why we were bad at Charlotte and then we come here tonight and kick everyone's ass. Ebbs and flows of this sport, it's crazy. But it's nice to -- I'm excited to talk to Roger

because it's been a tough couple weeks for him, and I'm really excited to talk to him on the phone tonight and kind of share some joy with him.

Q. On the subject of what you were just talking about, I saw Joey come over to Victory Lane to congratulate you. Austin did the same thing. Is there an extra -- in regards to all the INDYCAR drama going on, is there an extra element of, hey, let's circle the wagons at Team Penske, or is that just a matter of -- I know last year you came over to congratulate Joey. Is that just a matter of doing the same as they've done for you?

RYAN BLANEY: We've always been that way. We've always supported each other. No matter really who wins, you always -- if you can go see them in Victory Lane, you do. If not, you'll see them on the plane that night and you always talk and cut up with each other.

I think we have this unique relationship in the Penske building that's just expected by Roger of, like, we are Team Penske, we are one team, and we support each other, and we share all this information. When one team runs good, you try to share stuff from that team what made them good, let's try to focus on this car, and it's just an open pool.

I don't know other teams, but I just don't see other teams doing that as well as we do, so we utilize our four-car team really well and the drivers have great relationships, crew chiefs have great relationships.

We're always supporting each other, and you want to win yourself and you want to win for your team, but you're also happy for Roger and everybody who is affiliated with the 2 or 12 or 22 or 21 just to have their hands on everything that they get to be successful, as well. That's how we've always been, to be honest with you.

Q. What was with the cigar coming in here?

RYAN BLANEY: That was some company had a box of them in Victory Lane, so I lit one up. They made me put it out before I got in here, unfortunately.

Q. Ryan, with tonight's win, in the first 14 races, 13 have been won by either Gibbs, Hendrick or Penske. I'm including the Wood Brothers in that. Obviously the one difference is the 1 car last week at the Coke 600. There weren't any significant rule changes going into the season. How much is the gap closing between the three teams? It seems like it's a three-organization race at this point, and what's the challenge? I know it's still 12 different drivers out there so still a lot of competition, but how much is it narrowing down to maybe more you guys even with the understanding the



77 was second tonight?

RYAN BLANEY: Yeah, I don't know. I mean, hey, Spire has been really, really fast this year. Mainly the 77; he's been really, really good and had a great shot to win that race last week and ran really good tonight.

I think you just kind of find teams that find things at certain times and they kind of separate themselves, and you also think that it's the fourth year on this car, so the teams that have a ton of great people, the Hendricks and the Gibbs and the Penskes, they'll figure it out. They just work it out and they have the resources to figure it out.

So yeah, I don't really know how to attribute that. But like I said, I think you have other teams, like Legacy looked really good tonight. I thought the 43 was pretty strong. Just kind of goes week to week; you never know who's going to be good. But you have this kind of crop of a few teams that have been the strongest, but I personally feel like those are the three powerhouse teams in the sport, right, so they should be running that well.

I guess that's the best way I can kind of answer that for you.

Q. With that being said, if it's kind of -- of all those other teams you wanted, the powerhouses, what do you have to do as a driver as it gets tougher and tougher to win some of these races? I know it's got to come down to execution, but from a driver's perspective, what more do you have to do? How much more is this making you do? How much more is this putting on your team's shoulders because the gap is narrowing between the top teams?

RYAN BLANEY: Yeah, I guess from a driver perspective, I've probably prepared more than I ever have as far as like the details because all those little things matter more than they ever have.

You can't make mistakes anymore as a driver. If you make one mistake, no matter what it is, not even speeding, if you slip big one time and you lose two or three spots, there's a good shot you're not going to get those back. You make one dumb move and choose something wrong, you're not going to get it back.

Mistakes, you definitely cannot afford those. But at the same time, you have to push the limit every single lap because the speeds are so close and the competition is so close.

Like I am worn out tonight. I had a three, four, five-second lead at one point and I was driving my ass off, 110 percent,

every single lap, just because that is what I have to do to keep the pace that I need to to stay in front of everybody.

The gap is narrowing. The drivers have to be more perfect than ever because the competition is very, very close.

Q. So what was that like when you were racing there with the 11 and the 24 at times? How close were you to losing it and what did we not see, how difficult it was?

RYAN BLANEY: I was on edge. There was a couple times where Denny and I were on edge. There was a couple times where he slipped pretty big in front of me. He's pushing the limit and I'm pushing the limit. When I went three wide bottom on the frontstretch, I've got to do that. I cannot sit there and just ride behind those guys. I have to do that.

It's a risky move. Going on the apron and entering as low as I did into 1 was not ideal. It was not where you wanted to be. I said on the Amazon thing, I didn't enjoy being down there but I had to go down there. You've got to take everything that you can get, and then you have to be cautious of, like, hey, this is not my normal entry into the corner. I have to kind of calculate and adjust how I can get in here so I don't wipe these guys out.

Yeah, you have to take chances and risks, but you can't afford mistakes. That's the double-edged sword of it. You're 110 percent every lap. You have to take risks but you can't afford mistakes. All those things have to come together to run well and win. It's pretty wild.

Q. Considering how many rakes you stepped on this season, are you sure you weren't just a little nervous during those final laps?

RYAN BLANEY: I was waiting for a yellow. I figured this was coming and we were going to have to defend a restart. But you just keep making laps. You just keep doing it. My spotter counts me down laps and everything like that, but yeah, as a driver and you're leading the race, you're always expecting something to happen, especially when you have a comfortable lead. But fortunately for us tonight that didn't happen and didn't have to fend off a restart or pit stop or anything like that where things can get wild like they normally do here when you have a bunch of late yellows.

Q. Ryan, Bubba fought back from an early pit road penalty and finished sixth and on the post-race he got emotional talking about being a new father and this change in his life. What's it been like to see your friend enter this new stage in life and how has that



changed him as a person and as a driver?

like that.

RYAN BLANEY: Yeah, he's a mushy teddy bear now. Yeah, it's cool. Bubba and I have known each other for two decades, 20 years, raced together, grew up together, live five minutes down the road from each other nowadays, and really good friends.

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Yeah, it's cool. It's cool to see kind of -- it's weird when you get to that period of life, whether it's yourself or your friends are going through big transitions like getting married or having kids and things like that. So it's great. I'm happy for him. I'm happy for him and Amanda. It's been a pleasure to just be close to them. Looking forward to seeing Becks on our plane ride home. I'll fly home with them here in a little bit. They're probably waiting at the airport for me.

But yeah, it's been cool to see -- I'm sure it changes you. I can't speak to that matter. I'm not a dad. But just to see his change and his outlook on life and his attitude about everything, it's cool to see and I see it a lot because I spend a lot of time with him.

Q. Ryan, I want to go back to what you were talking about, the relationship there at Penske among the drivers and crew. Do you think that that is a result of people being there for so long and the promotion from within? For example, you've got Michael Nelson now over the NASCAR operation and Michael started as data acquisition engineer and was the team engineer for Newman and Borland when they first started. Do you think that plays a role in that?

RYAN BLANEY: I definitely think it does. I just think -- like Roger is incredibly smart at hiring people who he thinks are going to work well together. That's what is expected at Team Penske. What is the point of having hundreds and hundreds of employees if we don't all talk to each other and support each other and work with each other. That just doesn't make sense. Roger has always put a big emphasis on communication and being on the same page. I think that's one of the best things that Roger teaches everybody when they come to work for him, and I think it's not a surprise. Like you said, Michael has been there for 17 years. There's a wall at Team Penske for 10 years, 20 plus years. There's a lot of people on that wall.

They just get to know each other, and there's just community around there that Roger expects and he preaches, and when he preaches, people listen because he's just that guy.

I think it all starts with Roger, and it filters down with the leadership from Michael and Travis Geisler and everybody

