

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

Sunday, June 22, 2025

An Interview with:

James Small

Joe Gibbs

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by James Small, the crew chief for the No. 19. We'll start with questions.

Q. James, understanding that you guys didn't get as much fuel in on that final stop as you hoped to, to come away with the victory, what does that say about the unity of this 19 and team and Chase's ability to be able to conserve?

JAMES SMALL: Yeah, believe in everyone in this team. It's been a tough couple years. Since 2023, we haven't won. Never lost belief, any of us. Just backing the engineers, what they were telling me, Drew and myself trying to work with Chase.

It's one thing, he's very open to listening, trying to put in place what we're trying to tell him. That's one great thing about him. He did an excellent job just managing that. I was shocked that we made it, to be honest. We even had enough fuel to do a couple burnouts. Rolled into Victory Lane there and it ran out.

Credit to everybody, all the engineers, everybody at TRD, everybody behind that.

Q. Did he just leave the box?

CHASE BRISCOE: Yeah, he just left the box early. Our play is we drop the car and wait on fuel. He told me he had a (indiscernible). He couldn't hear. We made the call, Ready. As soon as he heard anything, he just went.

When we rolled out there, went green, we were nine laps short. It was going to be a mountain climb. We've lost many races by things not going the right way for us. Thankfully that caution saved us and put us in position that we could manage our fuel till the end.

You've seen this happen before. It was the same thing with Denny here in 2022 when he won, later taken away. He did the same thing. Worked out for them that day, as well. Just so thankful and proud of everybody in the team.



THE MODERATOR: We're also now joined by Joe Gibbs, team owner of Joe Gibbs Racing. Coach, congratulations.

JOE GIBBS: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue on with questions.

Q. Obviously it's not the first rain delay you and your team have dealt with. How was it trying to manage everybody's emotion?

JAMES SMALL: Honestly, this was one of the cruisiest rain delays. Not a stop-start. We hate those ones.

Honestly didn't really notice it that much. The sun came out like we thought. Track conditions were very, very similar to what we planned. Just thankful that rain came through and allowed us to get the full race in there.

Q. James, as you referenced, it had been a while. You've had speed, a lot of things have happened. How do you get through that and not let that beat you down? You've gone through some really tough experiences with some cars that didn't win. How did you get through that to get to today?

JAMES SMALL: It's been tough. I'm my harshest critic. If something goes wrong and I thought I could have done something better, I let it eat me. I try to make sure I learn from all those mistakes.

I'm just thankful to be surrounded by really, really good people. We know when we roll up to the track, if we can put a race together, it was the same with Martin, if we could put a race together, we're capable of winning every race.

There's been a little bit of a learning curve with Chase, just trying to understand all of that. But I feel like last five, six weeks we've been in that position. Speed has been incredible. It's just finally today we had a little bit of a luck on our side. But we had that speed. We put ourselves in great track position. We showed what we are really capable of as a race team.

I know, and everybody else knows at JGR, this is what we can do every week. We're going to keep fighting all the way till the end, no matter what happens.



Q. Chase has talked about how big of a step this was, going up to JGR, bigger than he maybe anticipated. What are the things you can do in working with a new driver but trying to catch him up to the level of the car that you have had?

JAMES SMALL: Yeah, it's been a lot of work. From where he came from, there wasn't much accountability. Nobody was holding his feet to the fire. That's probably been a big wake-up call for him.

We expect a lot. We demand perfection. That's the personalities on this race team: we're going to kill our grandma to win the race (smiling). That's probably a little different. He is a different personality type, especially to me, a couple of people on the team.

It's been a challenge. I won't lie. He has taken it in his stride. He absorbs everything like a sponge. I think the more and more reps he gets with these cars, just working on his technique. He's surrounded by two of the greatest drivers out there in Denny and Christopher. We have a lot of data to work back on with Martin, things like that.

We're still a work in progress, we're far from being where we think we can be. At this point he's meeting our expectations. I still expect a lot from him. He's only going to get better, I know.

Q. James, in the final few laps when you're coaching Chase as he's saving fuel, how surprised were you to see him pulling away from the 11?

JAMES SMALL: Not much. One of Chase's great habits is to drive it until he sees Jesus (smiling). So I think he said out there before, he learnt something today, as well.

It's one of the things we've been working on, just trying to focus on getting off the corner and not overdriving entries and things like that.

Clean air is important. We've seen it before. You're capable of being able to lead and save fuel here and do the right thing and drive well. It was a long run on tires there. The guys following in dirty air, as well, which helped.

Yeah, he definitely executed there, kept doing exactly what we asked of him. That's what got us to the end.

Q. James, this is your ninth career win. How does this compare to the other eight?

JAMES SMALL: No, this is my best win, 100%. This is

my proudest moment, for sure. It's been honestly the hardest win. It's different. I inherited a position with a championship-winning driver, won a lot of races. This has been a lot of work, a lot of work by a lot of people, a lot of frustration. There's also been a lot of good times and a lot of letdown.

I'm just so proud of Chase. He's done an amazing job just trying to absorb it all. He's never complained once. He's probably scared to complain to me, to be honest. He has done a great job. Today he showed that. Yeah, just proud of him and everybody on the team.

Q. During this stretch, New Hampshire in 2023, did you ever think you were never going to win a Cup Series race again? I hate to ask, but what your tenure as the crew chief of this team may be?

JAMES SMALL: No, I never stop believing in myself. I know I'm as good or better as everybody out there. I have incredible self-belief. Maybe it sounds arrogant. I don't walk around portraying that. I think I'm pretty low-key. I know what myself and my team are capable of doing. I think this just showed it. We're ready to rip now.

Q. Joe, what have you seen out of this 19 group over the last two years? What have you seen out of Chase and the pressure since he joined the team?

JOE GIBBS: First of all, I'm glad you said you'd run over your grandmother, not your granddad. I might get in the way (laughter).

No, you're talking to the right person, James and Chase. I mean, when you think about it, I think it illustrates everything that James has been through, is how hard our sport is. He's paid a big price. Best engineer and everything on the 19, then he gets to be a crew chief. Just a huge step. Then everything that you go through. Now our first year with Chase. He just deserves so much credit.

If you look at Chase, if you look at his background, he's paid a huge price to be able to get here. If you look at the years he spent sleeping on people's couches and everything, it shows you again what a hard climb it is to get to Cup.

So I think it's two great stories, two guys that deserve it. Really appreciate it.

The other thing I think about is Johnny Morris and J.P., how much it means to the sponsor. Had both of them there talking. They wanted to talk to James and they wanted to talk to Chase.



I think our sport, the thing that I really appreciate, it's different than any other sport, you got to have a great sponsor partner. They are partners. So it just affects that so much.

To all of our people back there working at the race shop, it's just a huge deal. Appreciate you guys. Thank you for questions for James and you get Chase in here, he deserves it.

Q. Coach, I believe it's around the same time as last year's announcement bringing Chase onto the JGR roster. You pursued Chase.

JOE GIBBS: Yep.

Q. How has this season proved you and this team right that Chase was the right choice?

JOE GIBBS: I think to be truthful, super speed. When you're talking about five poles and five top fives before today. So they've been knocking at it. Normally when you do that in pro sports, you get the victory.

But I just think for our whole team back there, when we make a decision for a driver, it's just a huge deal for us. We went through a lot, tried to research every single thing that we could. James and our crew chiefs were a part of it. I think we came down to Chase was the guy. He was being pursued by other people, so we went after him hard.

Q. Coach, considering your success in both NASCAR and football, what lessons from your coaching career have you found most transferrable to your role as a team owner in motorsports, especially when you add a new driver to your roster?

JOE GIBBS: I think what we're dealing with in pro sports, what I love, it's constantly changing, pro sports are. I said 30% a year in football and 30% a year in NASCAR. The thing that doesn't change is human nature.

You win with people. We got great people. Two of 'em took part today. I think James, the way he cares about things, really comes across. Then Chase. You win with people. All the other people we have at Joe Gibbs Racing. We're surrounded by really, really good people. That's what you eventually win with. Human nature, same things. Excited as two thousand years ago. Same thing to discourages us. Human nature doesn't change.

Get the right people and you'll win.

Q. James, when a new driver joins a racing team, it's crucial to establish a strong working relationship.

What was the process this off-season to build that bond?

JAMES SMALL: Honestly, it started last year, right after the announcement. We started spending time together, just hanging out. First time I met him was actually in coach's office. Sat there for an hour and talked about random stuff. Just trying to build a relationship. It's just trying to be friendly about it, too. You know what I mean?

I'm going to hold him accountable for everything, as well, but I'm not going to be a complete ass about it. Just trying to take an interest in things he likes. We had a great trip a few weeks ago before Kansas. We went out to Johnny Morris' property, whole team, had an incredible fishing trip. That was a great team-building thing for us. To hang out there with J.P. and those guys. First time I've ever been finishing and it was the best time of my life (smiling).

He's very easy to get along with, there's no doubt. Very, very different to some drivers, no ego. It's easy. It's not a challenge at all.

But once again, I'm just proud of the guy. We've asked a lot of him. He's trusted the process. He's bought into it. That's the big thing. Now he's finally being rewarded.

Q. James, when did you maybe know that you had enough with Chase saving the fuel, think you were good to the end?

JAMES SMALL: Looking at the numbers, once we got into a certain rhythm there, we hit a certain fuel number per lap based on what we were saying, the way he was driving, that was probably about 15 to go. If we maintained that kind of pace till the end, we stood a really good chance of making it within the error of what we can calculate. Super, super close, so yeah.

Q. Back to the pit stop in the second stage, the caution came out, that helped get you in front.

JAMES SMALL: Obviously there were two things that happened there. The 71 cut a tire, which he was getting back to pit road. There was a piece of debris on the frontstretch, which is what we called the caution for. Looked like somebody's rotor band. You could clearly see it was out there. Thankfully that worked out. That was the trigger for us pitting there. Saw the debris. It's like now or never. We were at that point three to four laps short of our window when we pitted. We took the gamble and it paid off.

Q. James, you were racing 36 other cars, but one of those cars was Denny Hamlin. How worried were you

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

about Denny coming up? Were you nervous on the pit box?

JAMES SMALL: Oh, 100%. Whenever Denny's behind you, you're always nervous. He's one of the highest racing IQ people I've ever come across. We all know how masterful he is around this place.

We knew our situation better than everybody. I know they were pushing him to push us, try to make us run out. Chase did a great job just putting him in his wake, doing everything he needed to do to win a race with these cars.

To beat Denny, he is one of the best of the best really out there. So yeah, that's a big feather in Chase's hat.

Q. Bragging rights this week?

JAMES SMALL: Oh, yeah, they've still won some more races than us, so I'll keep it quiet (smiling).

Q. Coach, this is the second of your teams this year where you have a new driver-crew chief combination that have won a race in the first half of the season. What does that say about the people and the culture at Joe Gibbs Racing that these two unknown quantities are able to go into a season and rip off a win like that?

JOE GIBBS: I think we've kind of been talking about it. I have. It's the people. I think everything, for instance, with Chris Gayle, we signed his contract when things weren't going well a year ago because we just think the world of him. We decided to make that change that we made. He's jumped right into the 11 spot.

The other part of it is, everybody knows here, we took Chris Gabehart, moved him to competition director. Inside of our race team, we were doing a lot. I think all those moves were really thought over, prayed over. But we got great people. We made those changes. You're never sure in pro sports. It's so hard.

It certainly has been rewarding for us so far this year, the moves we made.

Q. James, we saw the emotion in Victory Lane. The stretch you've had over these two years, does this feel like a weight lifted off your shoulders to get back to Victory Lane, especially with a new driver?

JAMES SMALL: Yeah, huge weight, huge relief. It's been hard. We've been very, very close. I've lost about 10 times as many races that we've won. It's just so hard to win in this series. You have to be perfect. You have to have perfect days. It all just comes down to execution.

You can have a fast car, but that's probably not the biggest thing. You need a little luck and you need to keep it clean all day. Just happy we had one of those days today. We got coach a win that he deserves.

Q. Coach, I'm curious about the last 10, 15 laps when it became evident the win was going to come down between two of your drivers.

JOE GIBBS: I think that's a great question. The most nervous I get is when two of our cars are up front. It's always been that. We've had some tough things happen, too. You always think about that. You worry about that.

Your point is well made. That's where I get the most concerned. Just like we're talking about, Denny wants it. His sponsor, his career, everything he's racing for. Chris Gayle over there. On the other side you got James, you got Chase, you got our sponsors. You're just never sure. That's why we love our sport, I think.

But I do get nervous, really nervous.

Q. James, now that you got that first win out of the way, back into the regular season and the Playoffs, do you see this as an opportunity for the floodgates to open, try new setups?

JAMES SMALL: I think it just gives us a little more confidence to play a little freer. But realistically there's a lot of new tracks, a lot of learning with Chase. Outside of Atlanta here and Daytona, two speedway tracks, we have not been to any of these tracks with him yet. Still a lot we need to learn, a lot we have to get accustomed to with him.

But yeah, biggest thing is just we've been in a hole in the points. We scored next to no stage points. Average finish and our finishing rate has been excellent. Just trying to build our points position and anything we can do here to get as many Playoff points to start. That's going to help.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, James, congratulations on the win.

JOE GIBBS: Thank you.

JAMES SMALL: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

