

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Denny Hamlin

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by the winner of tonight's race, Denny Hamlin. We'll take questions for Denny.

Q. When we look at Phoenix, it's a couple weeks away, Joe Gibbs Racing in the spring versus Joe Gibbs Racing in the fall, that's been the Achilles' heel. Why will this year be different? What can Chris Gayle do with his fresh perspective that's going to give us a better shot?

DENNY HAMLIN: I mean, I don't know why this would be different. I mean, I don't think that I've been in the champ four in the Next Gen era. I don't have that answer. I can't sit here and give you false promises and things like that.

I'm just going to try as hard as I can. Maybe I can get lucky.

Q. There's been some references made to your dad the last few weeks. Do you care to elaborate on what might be going on with him.

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, just not doing well, not feeling well. He's the one that got me into racing. Just took me to a racetrack when I was five. Then made all the sacrifices financially to keep me going. Sold everything they had. We almost lost our house a couple times. Just tried to keep it all going.

So I'm glad he was able to see 60. That was super important to me.

Q. Is that where the emotion that we saw was coming from or was it getting the milestone 60?

DENNY HAMLIN: Absolutely all of it. I don't know if I could have scripted it better. I don't know, like a win at Talladega for 60 would still be awesome, but not like this. Not in the fashion I had to do it in the last 10 laps.

This race, I talked about it before the weekend started, just how important this race was, right? I thought this was the most important. All of it. My friends all weekend, We're getting 60 this weekend.



Yeah, I mean, I guess we could. I don't know. All of it. Just putting all the factors, I can't imagine there's a win bigger for me than this one. With the family, with the significance of it, now being back on top for most wins in the season, punching the ticket to the 4, all of it. The fashion in which the last 10 laps played out.

All of the above is why I think this means the most.

Q. How old is your dad?

DENNY HAMLIN: 75.

Q. This race seemed like a microcosm of your season. Needed to unlock another level in the last eight laps. As a whole, the Next Gen car, you're at six wins this year, what do you feel like has clicked for you that wasn't clicking previously?

DENNY HAMLIN: Hmmm... I don't know.

In every off-season I try to put focus on getting better in one or two areas. Whatever the glaring thing is that is holding me back from winning more races, I try to focus on that, improving that, whatever that is.

So I don't know. I think this is as strong as JGR's cars have been in some time. I think that's a factor. I think Toyota is doing a fantastic job with everything they bring to the table. The cars are as good and as fast as they've ever been. I feel as good and as fast as I've ever been.

I never would have imagined winning a pole at Vegas. This is just not in my wheelhouse of trying to go out there and get fast for one lap. I've never been a driver that's been fast for one lap. I noticed that it was something that could improve my chances of winning week in, week out, was focus on getting better in that part of the racing.

Yeah, I don't even know what your question is. I'm just rambling at this point.

Things are going well. Chris Gayle is bringing obviously some different stuff to the table, too. I mentioned it whether we talked about qualifying. I think Chris Gabehart loves to run good on Sundays. He's willing to sacrifice Saturdays to do it. Chris Gayle is maybe a little bit more of



a, Let's put the whole weekend together.

I give full credit to Chris Gabehart for putting the team together. He's really the one that kind of rejuvenated my career five or six years ago, took me from a guy that didn't win a race in 2018 to winning a lot in the next few years. Obviously instilling in me a work ethic and a process that allows me to prepare for each weekend.

I mean, I finished the drivers meeting and hauled ass back to the bus today because I was like, there's one more thing I need to look at that I think I might just have overlooked. Maybe it was the difference. Maybe, maybe not. But I never want to leave any stone unturned. I'll never compromise knowing when I get in, I've done everything I have to do to go win.

Q. We rarely see you so emotional. You talked about the significance of this milestone. Did the moment meet the hope or the expectation of actually achieving that goal?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yes, no doubt. I mean, what you saw, that was going on for the last three laps. I did say a prayer into three with two to go for no caution. I try not to ask for prayers for things that really don't matter, like competition (smiling). I needed to see this one through all the way. So I borrowed, asked for a favor on this one.

Q. Walk us through the final laps, what you were thinking.

DENNY HAMLIN: I didn't. I need to see it. I have not seen it. I don't remember a whole lot about it. This reminds me a ton of my 2016 Daytona 500 where I didn't do a whole lot. I had to go back and watch it to figure out what did I do. This was very, very similar.

I just knew that I needed to make speed, I needed to position myself. I thought it was going to be a monumental task getting by Larson on the same tires. I hadn't been faster than him on the short run all day. But I just went for it. If I wrecked, I wrecked.

You never know when these opportunities will come up again. I made speed. I found a way to make speed when I needed to. It's super gratifying.

Q. You've been one for big burnouts, today was spectacular, going into Victory Lane.

DENNY HAMLIN: There was hardly anything left on the tires. Once I got into Victory Lane, I want to enjoy this one. I certainly want to celebrate it because I just know how much work it took to get it.

Q. It's a good thing from a competition and car preparation, but is it a good thing that you have three weeks now to stress out about Phoenix instead of just one?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I mean, truthfully I don't get nervous anymore, but I will at some point (indiscernible) is this my last chance to do it? Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. I just know I'm going to do it, do the work, and I hope it works out. If it doesn't, I'm going to be okay with it. I've had a season that far exceeded what I thought it would.

Yeah, I mean, it'll set in. I'll get nervous certainly over the next few weeks about it. But I'm going to be nervous about the things that I control, not the other things.

You guys have seen it. There's been weird and crazy things that have kept me from winning a title or advancing to have a chance to. I've said many times, if you get enough chances, like eventually just the tides will turn. It's like, did they start turning today? Maybe.

Q. The glass half full that you just mentioned, getting the victory here where you didn't necessarily see it coming, starting on pole, what kind of confidence does that actually give you going forward to finish out not only this round but a kind of confidence that you didn't necessarily have before?

DENNY HAMLIN: I mean, I think instinctively we all question our ability at times. Even the greatest drivers will always have a moment where they question their ability.

It's days like today that are, like, huge confidence boost. You can still do it at a really, really, really high level. It affirms that. Yeah, it's a chest-out moment that you get. It's hitting a game winner in basketball, right? The spotlight was on you, it was your race to win, and you did it. They gave me the ball at the end, and I was able to make it.

Q. Do you think the seven hours of sim played a part in the closing laps there?

DENNY HAMLIN: I'm not really sure. Who knows. I certainly know that one of the things that I ran back and looked at right before I got called into intros was something that played out at the end of that race. Maybe that was it.

I don't know. I know the car was fast. I know that me and Chris really talked about track trims, all the variables that change from Saturday to Sunday. We prepared for that. We prepared for the end of the race today. We got through all the other stuff to get to that point.



When that opportunity came up, I was able to restart second or third on those four tires, that's what we had worked for, that's what we had prepared for, is that moment. The car was the best at that moment (smiling).

Q. Have you spoken with your dad yet? If you did, what did he have to say?

DENNY HAMLIN: I haven't, no. I saw that he texted me. That will be a longer... I'll see him versus that. That's more of a long, extended conversation.

When I see him this week, we'll sit down and reminisce (smiling).

Q. Obviously fathers and sons have had such a significant role in this sport. You're sharing your story. Also Joe was in here earlier talking about how his son played an important role in your career with J.D. Joe talked about the greatest sporting event that he's ever experienced was when you won the 2016 Daytona 500. What does it mean for a son to be able to have his dad see him back in a championship race, and to be able to keep the spirit of J.D. alive because of J.D.'s influence in your life, what that means for Joe to take the 11 car back to a championship race?

DENNY HAMLIN: Listen, I never could imagine, like, going through what Joe has gone through. Yeah, I mean, fathers are not supposed to bury sons. That's kind of the wrong way.

One thing that my dad, I said to J.D. a long time ago, is that he's yours now (smiling). Your responsible for him. I got him to this point, but look after him.

J.D. was my road dad, my track dad. When J.D. passed, it's more of Joe now. I think that father figures are really, really important to make sure you do the right things. They're the ones that kind of keep you in the lane of life. They are your bumpers. I know that I do outlandish things and say outlandish things at times, but I always know that eventually I have to answer to the higher power, and on earth here it's Joe (smiling).

I appreciate that he lets me be me, for one. He never asks me to change. Probably should at times. But I see him as family. The relationship and the bond is really, really close. I'm very, very grateful for what his family has done for me. They allowed me to start a race team. Everything that I got, I owe to the Gibbs family.

I've got two dads. One's at home and one's here. I think I'm very, very grateful for that because not a lot of drivers have that kind of relationship with their team owner. These

guys are the ones that found me and took a chance. So my loyalty to them runs very, very deep. His loyalty to me has made me feel that way.

It's fantastic that I was able to -- Joe was here, dad's at home watching. Certainly love making both of them proud.

Q. Certainly want to respect your privacy. When you have that conversation with your father, what is something that you want to tell him about today?

DENNY HAMLIN: Just thank him for sacrificing really his and my mom's life to chase around my dreams. My parents had no money. My parents had very normal jobs, but they found a way. That way is a path I would never recommend anybody taking. Every credit card that comes to the mail, Okay, we'll use it. Asking people to help. Second and third mortgaging the house. All these things. The arguments I had to listen to. I'm in my room, and my mom and dad are going at it. One is saying, I can't do it anymore. The other one saying, Please, just one more week.

It's great it's all paid off. Certainly they got the life now that they deserved before I decided to do this.

Q. This win ties you with somebody you competed with a lot throughout your career, Kevin Harvick. What are your thoughts on that?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I mean, Kevin is just one of the best. I have a huge amount of respect for Kevin. Just one of the toughest competitors to beat.

I mean, I felt like him and Jimmie are like 1 and 1-A of the toughest guys I had to compete with and against. I'm super humbled by it. I think that Kevin Harvick's probably wildly more talented than what I am.

I never would have imagined that certainly I'd get to this point or position in my career. To be in the names that I'm around now on that list, it's just wild to me.

I didn't see anything. All I just kind of did was scroll through my phone to see the names. Martin Truex. I've never heard from Martin Truex (smiling). I think they were saying he must have tuned in for "Law & Order" and the race happened to be on. That's Tyler's quote, by the way (smiling).

Kevin was one of 'em that I saw that had reached out. Yeah, it's awesome to be on the names of the list and certainly tie Kevin. I think he's one of the sport's greatest. I got to compete against him. I was very grateful to be able to compete against some of the sport's best drivers.



Q. What was the one thing that you thought you might have overlooked? Do you think it made a difference?

DENNY HAMLIN: I can't say. I can't say. But I just have a mental checklist that I go through before I leave the bus for the drivers meeting. I have a mental checklist of checking all the things that I think's going to be important today. One small thing just kind of slipped through the cracks. Maybe I was distracted. I don't really know.

I was so antsy during the driver meetings thinking, I got to get out of here, I got to get out of here because I have to go back to the bus and look at something.

I don't know. It would have just... I don't think I could have... It would have mentally bothered me the entire race had I not gone back and looked. Then I would have said, How did you let that slip? How were you not prepared for this? Had you known this, then you would have been in a better position to win.

It's just a weird way that my brain works.

Q. When the season started, you seemed to be apprehensive about Chris Gayle coming on board. You told us you had no discussion, which is mind-blowing given your seniority with the organization. Looking back on that now, how has your mind changed from January to now?

DENNY HAMLIN: Well, I mean, I was worried. Chris Gayle's résumé was not mind-blowing by any stretch of the imagination. He also had a lot of young guys that he had to work with. At the time, I mean, Joe gave me essentially 24 hours to say yes or no to it, because Chris had another opportunity with another team in Cup. That was his option. He had an offer. He didn't want to get drug around.

So I just told Joe essentially, Do whatever you think is best. I trusted you in the past when we've made these kind of decisions. I'll trust you again.

I was worried. When I had those interviews that I talked about him and my apprehension, one of the first conversations I had with him, I don't want you to take that personally, but this caught me off guard. I didn't know I was going to be in this position just a week ago.

I really appreciate his leadership. He pushes me as hard as Gabehart did. I made it very, very clear to him that regardless of my accolades or his, he is the leader, and I will respect whatever he tells me to do.

I think that's very, very important as a driver, is to give the

reins to your leader, which is your crew chief, comp director, whoever it might be. No one driver is bigger than the team they drive for or the person that leads their team.

I wanted to make it very clear to him that he has my respect, he has my confidence, and do what you see is fit. Do not be afraid to tell me when you think I need to be fixing something or doing something. I can understand why it would be intimidating for someone like him. Me and Gabehart had a lot of success. Was nervous whether he was going to get the same out of me that those guys did.

I can confidently say that Gibbs made the right decision in choosing him, giving him the opportunity with me. I think it's been a very good mix of kind of our thoughts. That's why I think we've gotten better as a team, as a whole, is it's sometimes a fresh, new perspective and ideas can teach you something. I think he has.

Q. I noticed when Coach was in here, he noticed that ampm is on the car for the second time this season. He was trying to have conversations with them in the winner's circle. Did you participate in those conversations? What's the relationship been like with them so far?

DENNY HAMLIN: We obviously had a big void to fill to start the season. I mean, I don't know. I was unsponsored for the bulk of the season. I think we had this conversation at Bowman Gray. The hauler had no stickers on it. FedEx had left. They were trying to figure out what they were going to do.

JGR has done a really good job filling up the schedule. Next year looks really, really good. Yeah, they had these conversations. I think at Sonoma was the first race I had with them. I'm glad they paired it with Las Vegas. Hate for that to be the one sample size you get from me. I tell all my sponsors, sponsor as many races as you can because I need a big sample size. If you pick and choose three races, it's kind of Russian roulette on whether you're going to get your value in it.

Whenever we have a new sponsor, we make sure we get their logo up front. That certainly has been a good return on value for them.

Q. I asked Joe and Chris this question. You've had a little bit of an interesting month, things going on, a lawsuit, New Hampshire, Charlotte, Kansas City. How do you compartmentalize all that and do your job, keep showing up, not let any of the noise sidetrack you?

DENNY HAMLIN: I mean, yeah, the cliché things I've said is thriving in chaos. The record would show it. There's

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

absolutely a correlation to the more stuff that goes on, the more that you're going to get out of me in those moments.

It's really, really hard to do. I mean, I know this week coming up alone, every day is jam stacked and packed with stuff. I am really glad now I don't have to worry about concentrating on racing next weekend.

I asked before the race, I forget, Gabehart came to the car, Just win this one, we'll let you take next week off.

Wait a minute, I don't have to show up?

He's like, No, you're going to have to show up, but we'll pardon you for all your work that you got to do.

Okay.

It's a good thing because I've got a lot of stuff going on this week. I'm going to take a mental break from racing a little bit.

Q. Do you think today is the most emotional or at least visibly emotional you've ever been in your career? I don't recall seeing tears from you before.

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I think so because this has been building for quite some time. When I moved the bar from 50 to 60, I had to stew on that for a few years.

When I won the Daytona 500, I had always hoped to win the Daytona 500, there's a letter that I wrote when I was eight years old that's in my garage that my mom kept that says, My wish is to win the Daytona 500. I hope that this comes true on February 18th, 1998. I thought when I was 18 years old, I was going to be in Cup for some reason. There's something about manifesting, because I've won it twice on February 18th, the Daytona 500.

I don't know. Some things are kind of meant to be. So while that took 30 years to happen, that was just one race. There were no other implications to it, right? The reason this one is more is because of all the things, right? I got the home things, we got the lawsuit things, we've got just the Final 4, the 60. There were just so many other factors that played into today, which is why I think that it's my biggest win. Certainly one that I was absolutely the most excited about.

Q. You crossed the finish line and the in-car camera shows you were getting tearful. Some drivers suppress that. Was it too hard for you to do or were you going to embrace it, I don't care if I'm going to cry on national television?

DENNY HAMLIN: I don't know. I'm probably softer than what I put off. I maybe shed a tear during a love story on a movie or something if it's a really emotional moment. I'll never let my kids see it. But I do have feelings. I know it's hard to believe (smiling).

I don't know. I just know how much work it took for this to happen. It didn't just happen. It wasn't just luck. It just was so gratifying 'cause of all the things I talked about. Then I had the ball at the very end and made it. Like that's just...

Maybe y'all played recreational sports as a kid, had that game-winning moment, but it's just so big for me personally because this is what I do, this is what I'm paid to do.

Yeah, I don't know. It will take a few days for it all to sink in. I knew there was no chance I was holding it back, no chance. Just let it go.

Q. It feels like this weekend was the perfect storm. You also talked about wanting to be involved with 23XI. When you look at this weekend down the line, what is going to be the most important part and memorable from your perspective?

DENNY HAMLIN: I'm not sure. Hopefully 15, 20 years from now I'm coming in before my driver wins a significant race. I'm the Joe of the organization. That would be the goal.

I knew I wanted to be involved with the sport well beyond my driving days. Obviously took a lot of faith from a lot of people to make that happen.

Yeah, I love living in the moment right now of my accomplishments. There will be a day when I'm just as happy and proud of what I built over there at 23XI, as well.

I hope I can remember how I feel in this moment 15 years from now. That's what I hope.

Q. You said earlier when you were talking about your relationship with Gayle that no one driver is bigger than the team they drive for. Have you had that mindset throughout your career or...

DENNY HAMLIN: No, I definitely had to learn it, for sure. I got to give credit to Chris Gabehart for instilling that mindset for me. What he would always say is if I ask Denny to drive backwards for six laps during practice, he would just say, Okay. He wouldn't ask questions. He would just go do it. It's because of that relationship that I had with him that it was a full trust, that I trusted he has the team's best interests and my best interests at heart.



I realized also that when I broke my back in 2013, those races that I had to sit out and watch from the pit box, I realized pretty quickly that those guys have a lot more information at their fingertips than what I do inside that car.

At that point, too, I started to understand let everyone just do their jobs. I just focus on doing the best I can at my part, and I'll be a whole lot more successful if I work that way.

Yeah, that's why I think it was really important to make sure Gayle knew he was my leader from this point forward. I think there's something to be said about that because now you've emboldened him, given him the confidence that I can do this. He trusts me that I'm going to make the right call, the right play, that he knows that I can provide him what he needs to go win. It just snowballs after that. Now he'll have success long after me because of what he learned in our relationship.

Yeah, I really want to make everyone around me better because they all make me quite a bit better.

THE MODERATOR: We appreciate you taking the time, Denny.

DENNY HAMLIN: Thank you.

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