

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Joe Gibbs

James Small

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by our race-winning crew chief, James Small, and our owner, Coach Gibbs.

We'll open it up for questions.

Q. James, we know about Martin Truex's futility on superspeedway races. We know about Chase's. You as a crew chief have never won one of these races either. What is it like to check that box?

JAMES SMALL: Yeah, absolutely amazing. To do it in the Round of 8, check our ticket to Phoenix, is just amazing.

We've had fast cars in the past, but usually luck has evaded us. Today everything kind of came together. Kind of stepped on our pee-pees there at the end of stage one. Bounced back and won that stage, and just amazing.

Couldn't do this without your teammates, like Ty at the end was just incredible, what he did to help us. So thankful to him.

Q. What did you step on?

JAMES SMALL: I didn't step on it. Chase did (smiling).

Q. Now you're going to Phoenix. What does that feel like, to make that statement?

JAMES SMALL: No, really good 'cause guys like Bob over there still don't give us credit (smiling).

It's been a hell of a year. Every week I think we're still just getting better and better. Chase has grown a lot. He had a lot of pressure on him. We asked a lot of him.

As I said a million times before, he's done everything we've asked and then some. Credit to him for pushing himself. But yeah, we just got such great people. Had new people on the team as well. Everybody has gelled really well. This is the most fun I've ever had racing. Just a great



group of people. Just very thankful.

Q. Coach, when you guys make all the changes at the organizational level you've made this year, typically there's a patience period. To have possibly three cars in the final four, if it shakes out that way, are you surprised?

JOE GIBBS: I think definitely. I mean, if you think about Chase and James getting together, first year together, you just don't think about that or think that that could happen.

All the poles, the fact they've run so well. To be here, have a chance to win... James deserves credit and Chase deserves a ton of credit. Then the team. James would be the first to tell you he's got a great team. Really put together. Pit crew. I mean, we got great people.

You win with people. I'm so happy for everybody back at our race shop. I wish they could have been here today. Hey, it's just a thrill for us to be in Talladega. We love this place. Love to get a chance to come here and race. It's just a big deal for us all the way around.

For our organization, today was just a huge day. I appreciated the fact that Christopher was able to get everything done that he needed to get done there. Ty helping Chase was a big deal. Toyota, our partner, you just can't say enough about them and what we've done together. Just really appreciate it. It's a total team effort.

As you know, in this sport it takes a lot. You got Toyota, everybody back home, the sponsors that work together. Johnny Morris being in the winner's circle, I can't tell you what that means to us.

Q. James, I was talking to Gabehart, and he said obviously Chase insinuated that if I can't win and race for a championship with JGR, I need to find something else to do. He said you felt up against the wall, too. Did you feel that way about yourself, that you had something to prove this year with Chase?

JAMES SMALL: Yeah, big-time. I know I'm not immune to the fact that people like to question. When we have years like last year, so close to winning many races, but we didn't win any. People have very short memories of the success we had before. It was a little bit of a roller coaster

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when you look through '21 to '22 to '23 to '24.

I never lost belief in myself or my team. I always had the support of everybody back at JGR. I knew if we had this opportunity, it was going to take a little bit, but we were going to be a force to be reckoned with. I think you've seen that since Kansas, Charlotte. We're consistently, in my opinion, the best team in the series. We scored more points than anybody, more poles, had the most points in the Playoffs here. Now we're going to Phoenix.

I'm thankful, we have the best people working on our team. We have the greatest people back at JGR. It's just a pleasure to be able to represent them.

Q. James, you mentioned the pressure that Chase Briscoe was under stepping into the 19 car. As Chase has responded to that pressure and developed into a Championship 4 driver, how have you noticed he's similar to Martin Truex Jr., and how is he different than Martin was?

JAMES SMALL: They couldn't be more different if they tried (smiling). Just very, very different people. Very different demeanors.

The closest thing is they both like fishing and hunting. That's it.

Q. Today was special winning it, but what makes Talladega so special even off the track, in your experience?

JAMES SMALL: To me this is the most NASCAR race, especially coming from a long way away, coming here. I always say to everybody, You've got to go to Talladega. Like the Boulevard, the fans here, the atmosphere. The American flag is just unbelievable. It's just a special place.

This place especially means a lot to somebody like Johnny Morris. He loves coming here. It's his favorite track. To win here and have him in Victory Lane is incredible.

Q. Coach, about a month ago you had some controversy internally with how Denny and Christopher didn't like the way Ty was racing them at New Hampshire. Some internal discussions had to be had. Today you had Ty push Chase to this victory. Chase credited Ty for it. What did you need to do as the team leader to step in and say, Hey, these are my expectations?

JOE GIBBS: It's such a competitive world, kind of used to it in football, you get it, but over here we got four teams. The challenge is always trying to get them to work

together. If you think about it, each driver has their own career, they got their own sponsor. It becomes extremely competitive.

Sometimes you wind up with issues like that. The bottom line is we're pretty good here I think about working our way through 'em. That's part of sports. Guys are very competitive and want to make it happen. At different times you may have issues that you got to deal with.

Certainly was proud of Ty today pushing Chase. That was great.

Q. James, Briscoe was the only driver among the eight who hadn't been to the Championship 4 before. Does he handle himself like a Championship 4 driver, or is there -- I don't want to say naivete, but just more joy in him because he hasn't done this before until today?

JAMES SMALL: I think Chase, nothing fazes him. His personality. He's cool under pressure. He's a weird dude. I've never met anybody like him.

To be a race car driver, that's a great quality to have. For him, it's going to be a great experience.

I just expect him to treat it like another race. There's not really any added extra pressure, in my opinion. We just got to go out there and try to win the race. Try to do the same thing we do every week. It's all going to be about the preparation, putting the work in, making sure we go there with all our ducks in a row.

I have full faith that he has the ability to do it, and the occasion won't be too much for him at all.

Q. Martin is a weirdo, too. Do they just give you the weirdos?

JAMES SMALL: I guess. But they're both differently weird (smiling).

Q. After the problem at New Hampshire, obviously Ty, his team cred must really be there. It must be a good team meeting tomorrow. You have two drivers in the Finals. What is that meeting going to be like tomorrow? Got to be a good one.

JOE GIBBS: I sure hope it's going to be a good one. You're right, our sport, it's very challenging. One of the things I love about it, normal football, basketball and baseball, you get one team to deal with. Over here, the challenge is you got four.



Back at our complex, we try to work together to solve problems. But obviously when you get to the racetrack, it is really hard. It's hard to get four drivers, four crew chiefs, all are after it wanting to win. So it's hard to get them to work together.

Sometimes you see the great part of teamwork, somebody really working to help somebody else have a chance to win.

Q. Coach, Gabehart, obviously Denny was not pleased when he was moved. You did it for the good of the organization. Do you feel this year has shown why you did that? Is that working out as well as you intended?

JOE GIBBS: Yeah, I think for us, it's interesting, it's not one person ever doing it. It's a group. All of our people that are our management group make decisions. That was a tough one. There was a lot to go through there.

Chris was in that, too, because he had opportunities to go other places. Could he go to the 11, and would Denny be happy with that? Could they work together? That couldn't have worked out better.

It was -- again, I just emphasize, it was great people working through that. Denny, that was not something that was easy for him, but he worked his way through it. Chris did the same thing.

Then Chris Gabehart moving up also has filled that role for us. It was people, you know, looking at it. A group made the decision. Then people followed through. It's one of those things in an organization.

It wasn't easy, I'll put it that way. But I couldn't be more pleased with what's happened.

Q. You didn't know you were getting Chase Briscoe, Final 4 driver, multi-race winner. Maybe you thought the potential was there, but nobody really knew yet. He had to prove himself. At what point had you seen enough from him that he was going to be able to keep his job going forward?

JOE GIBBS: I think when you start showing that you're on the pole a bunch and you got real speed, okay? He was kind of getting a lot out of the car, he and James. I just think it was gradual. You start seeing it. After a while I know everybody here, the thing that you look for in drivers is speed. Certainly he's got it.

Yeah, I think it was just a process of working through it. But you start to see a pole, second pole, third, fourth, fifth.

After a while you start to say, Hey, this is something special.

Q. Coach, Briscoe still races and admits he feels like he's still auditioning on a weekly basis. Do you reassure him now and give him a 10-year contract or...

JOE GIBBS: You shouldn't have brought that up. Okay? Do not suggest 10-year contracts (laughter).

I think right now he can get anything he wants. I'll put it that way.

JAMES SMALL: You have to keep him on the edge. You got to keep him hungry.

JOE GIBBS: Anyway, look, I think when you see something like this, James and Chase, you just say to yourself, This is hard to do, so ride this. This is what we want to do going forward for a long time. I'll just put it that way.

Q. James, yesterday Chase said he's not driving any differently this year, doing anything differently. Maybe it looks like that way because the cars are faster. From your point of view, what do you see from him as a driver? How reassured are you that you know you're going to get what you need from him on the racetrack? I'm assuming there's no questioning that he's doing everything he needs to do.

JAMES SMALL: It's still a weekly process. I disagree with him that he's driving the same, but...

There's things we work on every week to just try and get him out of bad habits, help him be better. Just many things I don't think people have focused on him before on how to make speed.

He listens to everything. He's done an exceptional job of taking it all on board and getting better. A lot of it is also him getting accustomed to our cars, getting more of a feel, especially on the bigger tracks. That took some time.

I think he feels at home now in the cockpit. He knows what we're after, what we need him to drive like, all of that. Yeah, it's finally started to mesh. We're still not at our full potential I don't think.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you for your time.

JOE GIBBS: Thank y'all. Appreciate it.

JAMES SMALL: Thank you.



