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Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Jeff Gordon

Rudy Fugle

THE MODERATOR: We've now been joined by Jeff Gordon, vice chairman of Hendrick Motorsports, and no stranger to Martinsville Speedway.

Jeff, take us through the final laps and maybe just what it was like from your position watching, knowing that Kyle was in the mix, as well.

JEFF GORDON: I felt like a total stranger watching (laughter). That race is so nerve-wracking to be so close to accomplishing the ultimate goal, which is to get two through. So many things that can go the opposite way: cautions or who knows what else.

To get so caught up in the 24's race, the 5's race, the 9's race, it was just a fantastic battle and race. I mean, the 12, Blaney, we've seen what he's done here the last couple years. They're so good here.

When they got the lead, I didn't lose faith, but I will say I thought it was going to really be challenging to get by him. Just could not be more proud of the job that William did. Obviously qualifying played a role, that number one pit stall, the pit crew did their job. Just a great race car, great race car driver, total team effort.

Yeah, just absolutely an epic race. Can't think of a better way to go to Phoenix next week to battle for a championship in that way, as well as the solid job that the 5 did all day.

THE MODERATOR: We'll now go to questions.

Q. Kyle is the only driver among the four who has won a title. Cliff is the only crew chief among the four who, as a crew chief, has won a Cup title. Does that matter?

JEFF GORDON: I mean, it doesn't hurt (smiling). You got to remember though, too, William and the 24 team has battled, gone through the process of this week, what takes place championship week leading into Phoenix and the pressures, the responsibilities that could be a distraction.



To me, those are the biggest things. It's just being on the stage and the pressure of being on that stage to win a championship. Then the distractions that can come along during the week.

Having a championship under your belt and doing it at Phoenix the way the 5 car has done in the past, yeah, I mean, all that experience and knowledge is good to have in your back pocket.

It's going to be an epic battle. You got four cars, two organizations, that are going to give it everything. It's going to be a fascinating week of preparation, seeing how it unfolds at the racetrack in Phoenix.

A lot of this is just the things you've been building on during the year to try to make sure, if you're in this position, you capitalize it by improving your cars at this track. I feel like this is anybody's race.

Q. What do you think it would say about the 5 team and Larson if they are able to win it? So many highs and lows this year, the month of May with Kyle.

JEFF GORDON: I would say maybe more than the month of May. It seemed to linger more than that.

I just think you have Kyle, who is very unique in the way he blocks things out. I feel like he's always had confidence, always been able to fall back on his talents, his race team, his race cars to get himself back there.

Cliff is an incredibly strong leader and a very positive thinker. I think that the combination of those two, the people that they surround themselves with, really help them fight through that.

I think when the Playoffs started, their performance was there. I think all through the Playoffs they've been building up to this point. Yeah, I never count those guys out.

Q. Your short track program has come a long way. How did that happen for you guys? Where do you see things turning around?

JEFF GORDON: Yeah, I mean, I think you just got to prioritize, right? Maybe we gave up a little bit on our mile-and-a-half stuff, not purposefully, but you only have so



much time in a day. When you start looking at prioritizing what it takes to win a championship, probably if you're in this round, going to come down to what you do at Martinsville. If you get through Martinsville, then it's going to come down to what you do at Phoenix.

It's been a top priority for us. Penske has raised the bar in such a big way of the way they performed here, the way they've gone and won the championship in Phoenix, when all year long you didn't necessarily think they had what it took, but they had what it took at the right time, the right places.

You have to adjust with this format, with certain tracks that become that important. So I know that, go back two years, getting beat at Phoenix, we've got work to do here. Last year we stepped it up, and it still wasn't enough. This year, I think it became a much bigger priority. The effort, the folks that are at Hendrick, that have the brainpower to put the effort into mechanical grip, aero, horsepower, all the things, tire modeling.

Obviously we give a lot of credit to our crew chiefs because they work tirelessly on it. Then the engineers, they're head engineers. But Tom Gray I think is a guy that does not get enough credit. He heads up our engineering group, development group. He was my head engineer next to Alan Gustafson when I ended my career. He's one of the best in the garage.

Him being in this role I think has really elevated our game. I give him a lot of credit also for orchestrating the improvements we've had on the short tracks.

Q. There isn't a Penske car in the Championship 4. Does that make it feel like a wide-open thing?

JEFF GORDON: It does. It does. You saw what they did today. We saw what they did at New Hampshire. You saw what they did today. I mean, where did Blaney start, 30th?

Q. 31st.

JEFF GORDON: Honestly, I thought it was impossible to win this race from 31st. He drove up the field. He didn't do it immediately. It took long runs, it took pit stops, it took some gambles on some strategy. They put themselves in position.

First I thought the 22 kind of had the magic there early on when he was making some gains. I was like, Oh, boy, the 22 is going to go up there and take this thing, battle for it again.

Then you started really seeing one long run, you saw

Blaney. We were chatting among ourselves going, 12 just showed up. Once he got the lead, I thought, Man, I don't know how we're going to get away from him.

They've carried that on into Phoenix, right, and have won championships last few years. I think it is wide open. With our improvements that we've made on the shorter tracks, I feel like it gives us even more confidence next week.

Q. For an organization built on wins and championships, for the last championship to have been 2021, how long is that within the halls of Hendrick Motorsports?

JEFF GORDON: I mean, these days, with this format, maybe this changes next year probably, but when you just make it to the Final 4, it's sort of like a championship. It comes down to, yeah, ultimately one team and driver's holding up the trophy, but just making it into that Final 4 is such a huge accomplishment that I think we've kind of been measuring our abilities and success on that, hanging it on that a little bit more than just ultimately what happens in one race at the end of the season, which is another reason why to change the format.

I think we probably haven't been counting the days and the years quite as much as maybe some others have. In our minds, we've also had two there, but it's usually been with an owner and a driver.

This really is a huge accomplishment. Again, just to be there, just to get this far in the season, have two going for the championship.

Yeah, we want it bad. If we're in it and we've got a shot at it, we want to come away with it.

Q. Cliff has talked a couple different times, he says at some point he wants to tell the full story of the 5 crew, what they have gone through off the track, the personal losses, challenges. Obviously you've seen a lot of that. How has that team stayed together? How has that challenged Cliff to be a different leader? How has that group overcome some of the personal things that life happens?

JEFF GORDON: Yeah, I think that's racing, that's life. When you think you've got all the ingredients and everything, it's going exactly the way you want it to, usually something is going to remind you that life and racing's not perfect.

I'm a big believer that those things that come along to a team, whatever challenges they may be, is what makes you stronger, makes you better and grow, get yourself in a



position to be stronger in days like today, and in the battle next week for the championship.

They have been through a lot - more than most seasons in a team when you look at personnel. He's right. They've been through a lot. A lot of times you just have to fight through it internally, make the proper adjustments, hope that you stay in the fight and stay strong.

They have. I think it goes back to, again, Cliff's great leadership. This is where I'm going to go a little deeper and say Chad Knaus and Jeff Andrews and other folks, Rick Hendrick, of having the support and strength and guidance around Cliff to help him with some of those, as well.

Crew chiefs tend to want to do everything, kind of control everything. That's part of their job. But we're all still human at the end of the day and you can't do it all. It takes that support.

Q. Looking at the adversity Kyle and William had to overcome throughout different ways of this season. In what way does it feel different to see both of them reach the Championship 4 this year?

JEFF GORDON: I didn't want to take anything away from what Dustin was asking about the 5 team, so I'm glad you asked. In my opinion, the 24 has been through quite a bit, right? Maybe it's not as much personnel and some of those personal challenges as much as it has been performance.

You win the Daytona 500, you got high expectations, you win a couple races. All of a sudden you have this summer slump where you feel like you can't do anything right. What's happened? You start doubting yourself as a driver, as a crew chief, pit crew member, mechanic, engineer, all the way across the board. You start searching.

I'm proud of how they search and got back, found themselves and got back on track the way that they have.

One thing that I think they have done is proven that they're championship caliber this year, not just by winning the regular-season championship, but what they've had to do to do that, as well as what they've had to overcome to get themselves in this position, the pressures that were on them.

They're as complete of a race team as I've ever seen right now.

Q. A couple years ago at this race, he was struggling to run top 20. Ended up making the Championship 4

that year. Fast forward to this year, tonight, passing Ryan there. How does that speak to how you've seen William grow and adapt as a driver?

JEFF GORDON: Yeah, no, he's matured. He's never lacked in effort. He'll have to share with you what kinds of things he does every week prepping for races, but it's unlike anything I've ever seen. He's just very narrowly focused on it. He cuts out distractions and minimizes them.

We all have things in our life going on, but he's just laser beam right now. I think it shows in his effort, his prep, his relationship with his team, Rudy, everybody. He had that fire today burning and was not going to hold him back.

I don't even remember what your question was (smiling). Those guys have had to prove to themselves and a lot of others what they're capable of and what they're made of. All those tough things they've been through to me only has made them even a stronger team and allowed them to do what they did today.

Q. He was talking about the way William has grown. This fall race has been brutal to him the last couple years. He was completely calm and levelheaded this entire race. What have you seen that's led to that change in his personality? Is it maturity? Winning more races?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, I think two years ago was a really tough race. Last year was a pretty good race with a weird ending, with getting some damage there. Opposite run of the 12 as what was today.

Himself this year has grown a ton. Maturity I think is the main thing. He's worried about himself and his race team, the close people in his inner circle. Then it doesn't seem like he cares about much else. That's great. That's the way I try to live my life, too, not worry about what y'all have to say or anybody else on some Internet website or that crap. Anytime you can ignore that, that stuff's going to help you.

JEFF GORDON: Nobody take that personally (smiling).

Q. Jeff, wondering how you feel about the fact that this feels like a heavyweight fight, two Gibbs, two Hendricks, feels like one of these Las Vegas world heavyweight unification title fights. How do you feel about that?

JEFF GORDON: Yeah, no, I totally agree. I mean, we have a tremendous amount of respect for one another. We've battled through some big events and championships



in the past.

Yeah, it's Penske, Gibbs and Hendrick that were in this round. You narrow it down to two, which it was going to be. Either one of them was going to be a heavyweight battle, right?

But yeah, no, we're pretty excited to have two-on-two in a heavyweight fight, as you mentioned. I don't know. Rudy can attest to how confident he is going into that race. I don't know. I feel like our chances are extremely good.

Right now I'm excited. Now that we've gotten through this, this is an exciting day, a lot of emotion of being able to pull off this accomplishment. Now what I love doing is watching these guys leave here and go to work on what it's going to take to go win it.

They already started. I'm sure they've been prepping for weeks hoping this would happen. Now it's like all the details that come along with what happens from now until next Sunday, that's what I love watching these guys do 'cause they do it so well.

I'm sure the Gibbs folks do a lot of the same things. It's why they're as successful as they are. I think it's what makes us as good as we are.

Q. Rudy, he's ready for you guys to go to work. How much more of going through stuff with a fine-tooth comb is there? What's different about prepping a car for a championship?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, the biggest thing I think is the plan starts probably two to three months early. Those big races, the plan for the car and how it's built, how it's put together, starts way, way earlier. It doesn't always have to just fall in the last couple days. It started from when that car gets assembled and put together and gone through from everybody that works at Hendrick Motorsports.

Yeah, we'll get to this week, get to tonight when I get home, and hopefully get there super early tomorrow with a bunch of vigor, which I have right now. I'm ready to get there and start working, go through the final details of the setup, the plan for practice, all those things.

Those are exciting things for the race team. We get to practice. Three sets of tires. We have a whole bunch of guys that are really raring go, change stuff during the practice to make the car better.

We're just excited to go do it.

JEFF GORDON: If you don't mind, I think it's kind of

interesting 'cause it just happened, we were just talking about. I think it would be fine, Dave Alpern just sent me a text, how honored they are to go battle with us next week. He just beat me to the punch. I would have done the same thing.

It just goes to show you the respect we have for one another. We're honored, as well. I'm really proud to call him a friend and have the relationship that we have with Gibbs and be able to go and next week we're going to be fierce competitors. Off the track we say we're teammates, but on the track we're fierce competitors. I thought that was interesting that that just popped up.

Q. Jeff, decades ago you were just starting out with Hendrick when Rick was helping Joe Gibbs come into this sport. Now the two teams that Rick really kind of built are going for the championship. What does that mean to you now? The proud father with the son or we got to beat you because we've done this?

JEFF GORDON: Again, like I say, off the track when it's not Sunday and the green flag has fallen, there's relationships there, there's friendships. You help one another out. You're there for one another in good times and tough times.

Mr. Hendrick and Coach Gibbs have an incredible relationship. They talk on a pretty regular basis. They don't talk racing. They don't talk about what happened on Sunday unless there's congratulating one another on something.

It was something that was built over time because of the way it started. Rick is just an incredible type of person, where he's done this in the automotive industry, he's done in racing. He loves helping people get their start and get them going. He's proud.

I don't know if he considers it a brotherhood or a father figure or whatever, but he does it for so many people. He loves to see them succeed and excel. He loves to be a small part of that in some way. I know it makes him really proud that he's been a part of that with Joe Gibbs, that organization.

Q. Jeff, Byron had the race under control, then the caution comes out. A Spire car getting into another Spire car. Was there any --

JEFF GORDON: You mean the third time the 77 was in an incident (laughter)? I was thinking that, yes. More than three, I don't know. I lost count (laughter).

I'm just far enough removed. Rudy, I can't imagine what

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he's going through, the crew chiefs. I know for those of us that have been in these meetings, we're all thinking, Wow, that Monday morning meeting is going to be a tough one over there at Spire because there was a lot of contact, not just with their current drivers, but one of their future drivers, too.

Yeah, I'll end it at that (smiling).

Q. What were the nerves there on the final restart, given you guys have seen what can happen here at Martinsville?

JEFF GORDON: I mean, listen, there was some contact between Ryan and William, right? I think it was just really hard racing. There was a gap there. I'm proud as can be of William that he went for that gap, right?

I think we talk about him maturing. It's not just him maturing, it's his aggressiveness, too, his yearning for how bad he wants it. That was his opportunity there, and he went for it. There was contact. When there's contact, you know that 85 opened up the door for there to be contact that you could receive.

I was really curious to see how he and Ryan raced one another. I knew they were going to race one another hard. To me, William, I believe, had the race of his career today. I know it wasn't a Daytona 500, but to me the way he handled himself, the way he approached it and raced today, it was just unbelievable.

That last restart, I would put right in there with that. I mean, he nailed that restart. Not only did he get the jump in the restart area, but then he drove that thing deep down into one, went up wide, turned it, drove off and cleared the 12.

We saw how strong the 12 was on some of those restarts. I was anticipating the 12 giving him a heck of a battle, but I was also expecting him to give him the bumper. William didn't give him a chance to do that.

Q. What is more nerve-wracking, you yourself leading this race...

JEFF GORDON: Not today, I don't want to be in there at all. I know where you're going (smiling).

It is so tough to have basically zero control over what happens and sit there. You just want it so bad because you see these guys, the effort they put into it, how bad they want it. You want it so bad for them, for the organization, for the people, for Rick.

You lose a lot more than you win. I was talking to Rick a little bit earlier. As many good things that have happened for Hendrick Motorsports over the years, to want something as bad as we wanted two to transfer through today, you're still doubting whether it's possible or whether it could happen, what's going to disrupt that.

Yeah, those kinds of nerves, looking at it from that perspective, is far more nerve-wracking than being in the car.

THE MODERATOR: Jeff, thank you so much for your time. We appreciate it.

JEFF GORDON: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to continue questions with Rudy.

Q. Rudy, it would be really easy for you guys to dwell on what happened at Vegas, how Talladega played out. How are you able to block that out between you, the team, and William to focus on the task at hand and perform?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, I mean, at this time of year it's easier 'cause there's not many weeks left. All's you have to do is win to have a chance to go to Phoenix. You have to refocus. If you sit there and worry about other things that have already happened, nothing good's going to happen.

It was pretty easy Monday afternoon to put Vegas to bed and move on, recognize it was a mistake. We're not going to get it back. Put ourselves in the position to win Talladega. Stuff happens. You move on.

Martinsville is a great opportunity for us. We proved we could do it today.

Q. There were some fans in the grandstands chanting your name. Felt like a movie. Have you had that before?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, it was good. Just cool to have that nickname, then be able to have the fans behind the whole team. I mean, just to get the 24 team rolling like we have been, I think it just gets a lot of people that used to cheer for that guy excited again. If we can get that kind of momentum rolling behind us, there's nothing like that.

Q. We've seen other drivers and teams do it. Is there any challenge to coming off such an emotional high of this race to then try to win a title seven days later?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, definitely. I mean, if we're not focused on the right stuff fast enough, especially when you have to load early to Phoenix, a lot of work has to get done. Thankfully, a lot of the car build, all of that stuff to make your car as best you can, have the best parts and pieces on your car, has been in the works. Our car is sitting there in great shape. I spent a lot of time with it the end of this week. We'll have two, two and a half days of really good prep this week.

I told the guys last week that a Martinsville win would feel great because it's my kind of celebration, which is celebrate on Victory Lane, do the inspection part, get home, then go back to work the next morning and start working on the next win.

I'm ready for it. I know our group is, too. They'll enjoy it. We deserved it. We'll have a shot to enjoy it. There's still a lot on the line that we'll focus for.

Q. What are those emotions like when it comes down to a late race pit stop? If the 24 makes a mistake, that could be the race. To see the 24 pit crew, to put William out front. Also knowing you're going to go to Phoenix.

RUDY FUGLE: They've been doing great lately. They had a great day today. We talked about it in the pre-race meeting of wanting the ball at the end of the game. Whatever the situation is, we wanted the ball. They wanted the ball. They performed. It's what you hope to have.

Q. I was seeing a stat here that says William Byron just became the first Cup Series driver to start on the pole, sweep the stages, and win a playoff race. This is a big clutch moment. To do that in any Playoff race, as long as the Playoffs have been around, what does it say about his mentality? You've known him since he was coming up. How have you seen him change to be this strong?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, I think this is huge. This can be a steppingstone into getting some more great victories. Really, really excited about that.

He's grown a lot. This will be the third time in a row we've been there. Every one was a different feeling. The first one was like, Oh, my gosh, we can't let this go, we don't know if we're ever going to get back here. Last year was more calm, we knew what was in front of us, what went with it.

This year will be even more know what to expect and just go bring it. Hopefully that experience will bring us --

doesn't mean you're going to win the race or have a better shot to win the race. It means that we're going to be more prepared, we should execute better, we should execute practice better. We should be better because of it.

Q. (No microphone.)

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, absolutely. He's changed 100%. He's got his own house now. He takes care a lot of his other things that he never had before.

Just his routine. That's what's changed in the past probably year and a half, is his routine. What he likes to do, how he likes to do it. You don't have to worry about him being prepared. He's able to do all those things with his group, his circle, to be prepared for the race weekend.

I'm just really proud of him for that.

Q. When you were talking about experience, what to expect, third time may be the charm going to Phoenix. What have the last two years from a racing perspective, car perspective, the biggest lessons going into that race, what can you share about how prepared or what you've learned the last couple years?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, I think every year has been different 'cause it's like what you have going into that race, right? Two years ago, that was a different aero package. We had won the race prior, but we had struggled as a GM group really, especially at Hendrick, of trying to win any races with that short track package. We went there and had to deal with that.

Then the stress of knowing that.

Then last year different package with a lot of struggles at those type of tracks. Still performed fairly well, but searching for a baseline.

This year, since that 5 car Gateway test, we've had a package that we could work with at all these races. Loudon, it's a different setup, but a lot of the same stuff, a lot of package. We had a car really capable of racing with some of those Penske cars. That's what you look for.

Now we have that package, we'll fine-tune that, adapt our practice plan and all those things because of it. I think it's a concerted effort for all of GM trying to get better at this type of track, getting ready for Phoenix. Really, really helpful that we were able to work as a big group, Chevrolet, all as one, to get better.

Q. Do you think there's any momentum? When you have a win like today, the last race to get into the



championship, do you think there's any momentum of the team that wins this race going into Phoenix?

RUDY FUGLE: Yeah, I mean, it never hurts to have a little wind in your sails. Everybody is going to be ready to go to work, drive home, take a shower, get to the shop and work. There is nothing wrong with that.

Does it mean that you're definitely going to win? No. The effort level, the preparedness, all those things are definitely at our backs. Momentum and confidence is a lot for him and a lot for the pit crew. Different levels, right?

The car guys that build the cars, we need the confidence to do the setups and do the things. We don't need to really perform in a moment necessarily. The driver and the pit crew have to have that confidence to go perform in those seconds, in that intense competition. That will be big for them.

THE MODERATOR: Rudy, thank you so much for your time. Best of luck this week and next weekend.

RUDY FUGLE: Thanks.

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