

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Rick Hendrick

Jeff Gordon

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us. We now have been joined by Rick Hendrick and Jeff Gordon, who will spend some time with us here to talk about the exciting news of Kyle Larson competing in the Championship 4 this weekend, also William Byron.

Rick, I would like to start with you. Thank you for joining us. It was 30 years ago this year that Hendrick Motorsports won their first championship with Jeff Gordon. Can you take us back to that time in the organization, but also what it means to you to be in this position again 30 years later?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I was thinking about that this morning and how hard it is to win a championship. I remember very well the couple of days leading up to the banquet, calling everybody I knew, thanking them for helping us, helping me, all of my life in racing. So excited to share it with everyone and being in New York and just really letting it sink in what a NASCAR Championship really meant.

It's pretty special. In some ways it doesn't feel like it's been 30 years. In some ways it feels like it's been a long time (smiling). But I'm really thankful for Jeff in that first one. Hopefully we can get number 15 here next weekend.

THE MODERATOR: Jeff, you've had the opportunity to compete with Hendrick Motorsports both as a driver and now in the role that you get to be at vice chairman. Can you take us through what it felt like in '95 for you, but how does it feel to have the 24, in addition to Kyle obviously, but to really have the 24 going for that championship victory this weekend in Phoenix?

JEFF GORDON: Yeah, thank you. I'll second Rick. It's hard to believe that it's been 30 years. A lot has happened at Hendrick Motorsports since then with a lot of wins and championships by multiple drivers. It's been exciting to be a part of that.

Obviously honored to be a part of that first one with Rick



and this organization. I think all of us on campus at that time saw something that was special and was building, and the resources were there and the people. I think you look back to the years leading into that, they were close.

At that time it was nobody can beat Dale Earnhardt Sr. To go to that '95 season with a new car, enough experience with the team and led by Ray Evernham and everything that Rick provided, you just knew right away that we had something special and had a shot and were running up front each and every weekend, winning racing early in the season, leading laps. You still just weren't sure if you could pull it off and beat "The Intimidator."

That's special. Ever since that accomplishment, this company has been on an unbelievable trajectory to continue to keep that success going, and now it's all about maintaining the legacy that's been built over the last 30 years.

THE MODERATOR: We are now going to go to the media for questions.

Q. Rick, interested in hearing Cliff Daniels talk over the weekend. He was saying that he was reading Sun Tzu and had assigned it to the members of the No. 5 crew. It seems to me that way back when when Ray Evernham got with the No. 24 team, it was that same thing, that same ideology that he was trying to spread among the team.

RICK HENDRICK: That's a great leader when they can motivate the people. I know he had them reading different books. It's that extra effort, that extra special umph that you put into the team, preparing them for something that is that important.

I mean, for us to go up there and William has to win or Chase has to win and then for Kyle to have to beat the 20 car, you can't show up with just the normal enthusiasm. You got to have tremendous preparation.

I'm just so proud of our guys for the hours they put in and the way they work together, all the crew chiefs and drivers. I know Jeff's gonna echo that. Our guys met the trucks at 2 in the morning to get the cars off, because with NASCAR's rules, you have to run a single motor. We want to run 'em again, put them back in the cars.



Our guys are just relentless in execution and preparation. I think it shows. Cliff's a leader. I mean, we all read the Maxwell books on leadership and servant leadership. I think he just takes it another step.

Ray did the same thing. All of our crew chiefs are the same way. I think they kind of lean on each other, and it just builds that extra energy that we need to go show up and perform.

Q. Jeff, when you were there and won that first championship, the intensity that was surrounding that team, it seems to have kind of carried through Hendrick over the years. How do people maintain that intensity and that drive that takes them to the finish line?

JEFF GORDON: Yeah, it started with Rick and the culture that he built coming from the automotive business and then incorporating those things into motorsports the way he wanted to see this company run and the type of people that he felt like were important to be a part of it. That foundation was there.

Then you started seeing, as success started coming, and guys like Ray Evernham and Chad Knaus, and now you have Cliff Daniels and Rudy and Alan, just guys that have won championships here and the type of leadership that they have displayed.

Each team has its own unique personality. I think they all lead in a strong way. They all work well together. But Cliff has his style and surrounds himself with the guys that fit into the culture of Hendrick, but also into the culture of that team.

Then you have Rudy that leads. Both him and William are a little bit more quiet, right? They're a little more reserved, but they speak loud on race day in their performance.

Kyle I think is a very confident driver, drives anything and everything. Is fairly well-regarded. He's one of the best out there. Cliff feels the pressure to deliver, that car and that team, and surrounds himself with people that want to do the same.

I try not to take it for granted, because I've been around it for so long. This is that reminder of days like Sunday and what's happened every minute since then of how special this place is and the people that we have here and how bad they want to go out and win and live up to the expectations that Rick built over the years.

Q. Rick, Kyle hasn't won since Kansas in May, his

longest winless streak since joining you. How much do you think the month of May maybe had to do with that? How have you seen Kyle kind of react to I won't call it a slump but this mini-winless streak?

RICK HENDRICK: William has led the most laps this year, and Kyle is number two. They both led over a thousand laps. I don't know that that's a slump.

It was a downer in May. We get out, and we didn't do what we wanted to do at Indy. Then he comes back in Charlotte and loses it on the first or second lap. That was an emotional roller coaster. The team has to get back up on their feet.

I look at what they're doing now. He was in a position to win the race at a plate race where we haven't had a lot of success with that car. He ended up running out of gas. There's a lot of races he was leading the race, and a caution came out and something happened.

I'm excited about going to Phoenix with both cars. I think he's got the bit in his teeth right now. I don't think you can deny William Byron for what he's accomplished this year and how close he's been in some races.

The guys have worked hard on our flat track, short track program. Kyle's ready, and so is William. I'm looking forward to this coming weekend and trying to get another championship.

Q. Speaking of William, obviously he's won the Daytona 500. I'm curious, is there any challenge for a driver who's won the Daytona 500 to keep that intensity throughout the year? We've seen that team have its ups and downs, as well.

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I know Jeff can speak to that, too, 'cause he's won Daytona. You come off of Daytona, it sets it up for the year for you. You're a Daytona champion. That's the Super Bowl, but then you got to run all the races because you want to be a champion.

You're going to run through down times. We may be behind as an organization at certain tracks. We got to work hard to get better, 'cause everybody in the sport, they're a lot of competition out there and a lot of guys that can win any race. Things fall apart for you, cautions come at the wrong time, you're speeding on pit road, or a tire gets away like it did with Chase and cost you an opportunity to win a race.

Daytona is special, but I think right after you win Daytona, you realize that, Hey, we got to be up in the points, we got to win races, we got to advance. There's a tremendous



amount of pressure all year long.

William had a fast start. I think you can't take away the Daytona 500 Championship as a champion, because a lot of drivers go through their careers and never win that race. That's one that everybody wants.

But I don't think after two, three races, you can't live on that. You got to move on.

Q. What I've admired about the two of you for a long time is how fricking competitive you both are. Yet it doesn't appear that way outside. You're not pushy, not mean, but you're so competitive. This pre-finale weekend, you eat it for lunch. Tell me what the week is like at Hendrick Motorsports. More meetings? Are you pounding on doors a little more? You are both very competitive and so is that place.

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I'll go first (smiling).

I think Jeff will tell you, they know what to do. The best thing I can do now - I'm not speaking for Jeff - but I can stand back. I've talked to all of them and said, Listen, I'm proud of you, we got two cars out of the four, and let's go get it done. You don't want to put any more pressure on them than they already have.

Jeff has lived it from a driver and now the vice chairman, so he's seen both sides of it. But I can tell you there's nobody any more competitive than the two of us are.

I remember one of the first races we went to when he wasn't driving, and we ran like a mess. We got on the plane. He was all excited, going around to everybody. I was like, Man, what are you celebrating about? He was just pumped because he was in another role, and he was watching. I was mad and frustrated.

We're super competitive. We always talk before the race. Where are you going? I'm going over here (smiling).

I remember when we were in Phoenix last time we had a couple of cars in the show, my wife asked us, Why aren't all four of 'em in there?

We said, We're blessed to have one in there, let alone two.

JEFF GORDON: If you think he and I are competitive, let's get Linda on here (laughter).

He lights a fire under me, I will say. Sometimes I get my mindset, Okay, what can we do to support him and help him? Rick has always done that for everybody here.

I look at the role now of, Guys, what do you need? What can we give you? What are we not doing? We can't drive the car, can't work on the car, can't pit crew the car.

The resources, whatever you need, is here for you. That's what Rick has always offered. It's been amazing. Our guys will tell you, there's nothing they're lacking from that side of things.

Now sometimes when maybe I am taking a little bit more of a step back and not getting fired up, he gets fired up, and that gets me fired up. We work off one another. It's exciting. It's fun.

It's just one of those things that I think our teams appreciate how involved Rick is and how much he cares about it and how driven he is, how competitive he is.

I think for me, being one of those competitors, gives me a bit of an edge of I do know what they're going through. Cars have changed. Championships, some things have changed. I do know what they're going through. You try to analyze personalities and say, What does that person need to get a little bit more out of themselves? What do they need right now? Is it a pat on the back or crack the whip?

Rick reads the room better than anybody I've ever met in my life in any situation. I've learned a tremendous amount from him of when to back off and when to maybe light the fire a little bit more.

Q. Rick, in my heart I feel like no matter what's going on in the news or who wins the championship, despite the legal things that are going on with NASCAR, the championship format discussion, all of that is intertwined in us talking about the finale and who's the champion. How much do you hope that to the end of the year, some of that the champion gets to do that, no matter who it is? Do you understand what I mean?

RICK HENDRICK: Listen, those four drivers that are going out there and those four teams, that's all they care about is winning a championship. All the other stuff that's going on, I mean, that's not even on our radar.

We want to win. Joe Gibbs wants to win. Jeff has coached William at Martinsville, 'cause nobody's been more successful there than Jeff has. We've won 30 races there. I can't believe it.

Jeff coaching them. Hey, he's been there, he knows. But those guys, William's been there three times now in a row, and Kyle's, he's won a championship. Our guys really know what to do. They are laser-focused. We don't pay any attention to anything other than, as Jeff said, what do



you need, how do you want to get there, what do you need that you don't have?

I think, and give Jeff a ton of credit, the connection between the crew chiefs and the drivers all has been so good. I don't think there's any team, any organization, that has the kind of relationship between drivers and crew chiefs that our company has. I give Jeff a ton of that credit, because he's there with 'em. He's been a champion. He's been a driver and an owner. He feels it all.

I think right now, I think he said it best, if nobody else cares about the championship, we do. I know everybody does, so it's going to be a hard-fought battle and we'll go get it done.

Q. Yesterday, Joe Gibbs did his call. He was asked a question about how you helped him get into NASCAR. He said to ask you about you going to the NFL to see him coach in Washington. Something happened with your shoes apparently?

RICK HENDRICK: Oh, yeah. Biggest mistake I made in racing was helping Joe Gibbs (smiling).

No, Joe, I can't believe it, but Joe has been kind of one of my idols. I love the Redskins. When I got a call from him, and I went up to camp, and then I went to a game when they were playing the Falcons. I think it was the Playoffs. It was cold, and I got off the tram. I started toward the field, and the bottom came off of my boot. I had one of these I guess mountain boots I hadn't had on in a while. So the bottom came off.

I go down on the field, and I'm standing in water. It's freezing and sleeting, and I got no shoes on. I mean, I got the bottoms come off both of my boots.

There's Joe Gibbs up there. I'm like, Should I go up and try to ask him can he get me a pair of shoes or something (laughter)?

After, when I told him, he said, You should have said something.

I said, Man, all those bodyguards around you, if I walked up to you, I probably would have been put in jail.

No, Joe and I have had some good times. We've had some sad times together. There's nobody I respect any more than I do Joe Gibbs and the great organization he's put together. I mean, I admire the man for his strength, what he's gone through.

I lost a son. He's lost both sons. We both had plans, and

they kind of got shattered. We have a bond and a friendship that no matter what happens on the track, we talk during the weeks. If I win two races, he's on me. I tell him, Now you've won three or four, now it's time to quit and let us have a chance (smiling).

We want to win, but we have tremendous respect for each other.

Q. We've been talking a lot about the championship. I want to get both of your perspectives of this year overall. Seems like it's been a great year for Hendrick with Chase, and with William, Kyle, and Alex had a great start to the season. Overall, how would you look at the season? I know the angle is winning this week, but looking from the 30,000-foot perspective, what are your overall thoughts on this year?

RICK HENDRICK: I think we won the regular-season championship, and for a period of time we were 1-2-3 in the points toward the three-quarter work. That's all you can ask, if you can be competitive. Two of the cars have led the most laps. William with the most and Kyle second. If you can lead laps and be competitive -- Chase won the Shootout, the Clash, and he's won two races. Alex, he was in the points battle right up there toward the middle to the end of the year. He just had horrible luck.

We knew where we were short. We knew we had to work on our short track stuff. Our guys, they go through every race thinking about Phoenix. I'd like Jeff to elaborate on that.

When we look back and we have a car that's two or three years old, and Ford and Toyota had a shot at making their stuff better, and we had to work our butts off to be competitive and look at areas where we thought we needed to improve, and our guys did it. I think that's all you can ask.

It's a very competitive series. You're not going to get out there and win every week. You're going to have tires, and you're going to have bad timing with cautions. Those things are going to happen.

I look at it like if you can lead -- and you're not going to win races. You can be lucky sometimes, but you got to be able to run up front and lead and win stages. I think we won more stages than anybody.

Denny did win more races than any of us, but at the same time, William dominated Charlotte and came up short. You got to just try to be competitive every week in order to win.

JEFF GORDON: I mean, the only thing I would add to that

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

is you look at the last few years and who's won the championship in Phoenix, and you respect that, what Penske has been able to accomplish. At the same time, you are driven by it.

With this format, we recognize how those points that you accumulate through the regular season are very important to get you advanced far into the Playoffs. You certainly focus on those things. But if you're going to win the championship, if you're going to make your way into the Final 4, you got to typically go through Martinsville and be competitive at Phoenix.

We've been getting beat at those tracks recently. We feel like that was a top priority. I would say throughout this year, we've been gaining on that because of the amount of effort that's being put in by our engineering group, our crew chiefs, and the feedback from the drivers, the communication with everybody, our teammates at Chevy, as well as Chevy and their engineering group, as well. This is a top priority, is to get to this point in the season, go to Phoenix, and have a shot at the championship.

If you had asked me two months ago were we ready, I would say we're gaining on it, maybe not there. If you asked me today, I'd say we're ready and excited about the opportunity that's only come from a tremendous amount of work and effort by our group and the season they put together.

Q. You're always trying to stay competitive. What are the things you're looking at for next year? Chevrolet is coming out with a new body style. Alex Bowman, he seems to be the team that's running in the fourth spot always. What is the emphasis you put on the 48 team to get up there?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I think they put a lot of pressure on themselves. They had a good start on the year. There have been some tracks that Alex was our best car. So no different than trying to work on the short track program. That team is working hard on getting better everywhere.

I think they're showing great signs, but you're always going to have someone that's following the rest of the group. If you remember, Chase wasn't having that good a year a year or so ago. Now we've stepped that one up.

Jeff will tell you, there's a tremendous amount of focus on the 48, 'cause of our sponsor and just our pride. I think Alex will have a good year next year.

JEFF GORDON: Yeah, obviously the 48 and what that number means to Hendrick Motorsports throughout its history, there's a lot of pride there for a Hendrick car, but

specifically the 48, when you look at the seven championships that have come from that car. We want to keep that going for the company, for the people that worked so hard on that car, as well as for our sponsors.

What I would tell you is a couple things. That team has contributed tremendously to the success of this company, to all of our teams. I mean, they add a lot of value in what they bring, the information that comes from Blake and his team and Alex.

We know that they're very valuable, but we also know there's things that need to be improved there. It's a big part of our focus in this off-season, is giving Alex, Blake, the tools that they need and making sure surrounding them with all the things that can help strengthen their team and button up some of those things.

I'm with Rick, I don't think they're that far off. When you're at Hendrick, the expectations are high, especially when you look at the performance of the other three. But I think those guys are right there. They're already contributing a lot. I think a few minor adjustments, and I think those guys can be right there in the hunt. We've already seen Alex very capable of winning races, going deep in the Playoffs. We think there's a lot of promise there for next year.

Q. Rick, what will be the words of wisdom to your teams racing for the championship, or have you already given them that for this weekend?

RICK HENDRICK: You know what I've been thinking about? I was thinking back when Jeff and Terry Labonte were racing each other for the championship. I was so concerned about, Okay, if one of 'em wins and I go to Victory Lane, what is the other guy going to think about? He's going to think, Well, I was pulling for that team.

I've already rehearsed what I'm going to say. I'm going to talk to them and tell both teams, Look, when you look up, I'm going to go shake the loser's hand, the guy that finished behind, and then go to Victory Lane.

I hope that's the problem that I have. I hope I'm going to be dealing with going to Victory Lane. But I'm going to tell 'em both, and this is what I tell 'em every week, Hey, you guys have done a heck of a job. You've really won by being here. You've put yourself in this position to win. No matter what happens, we've got the "big mo" for next year.

When you have two cars, no matter how you get there, we got a lot to be proud of. Whatever happens today, happens. It's a race, but we'll have a lot of momentum going into next year.



Q. Rick, I know through the years we've seen you at the track a lot. What has this year been like not being at the track and not being there in a physical presence as much?

RICK HENDRICK: I've really enjoyed wearing Jeff out on the phone.

JEFF GORDON: I was going to say, he is there every second. You just don't see him (laughter).

RICK HENDRICK: I'm in constant communication with Jeff Andrews and Jeff Gordon. I have to remind Jeff Gordon, Don't forget me now, I want to talk to the driver when we win.

One race, he was standing in Victory Lane, but he never handed the phone off. I wouldn't speak to him for a week. I wouldn't even talk to him. I said, I'm not talking to you anymore (smiling).

JEFF GORDON: I said, I am so sorry, Boss. I said something about, I just wasn't in position.

He said, That's not true. I saw you on TV. The camera was showing you. You were standing right there. You just didn't give him the phone (laughter).

RICK HENDRICK: Listen, I think my job is during the week and when the crew chiefs are back here, knowing what they need. I'm trying to run a hundred dealerships. I've also had an operation on my leg.

But I do have the ability to listen to every guy and to monitor what's going on and be the Monday morning quarterback, why did you do this, why did you do that, you know.

I'm very confident in the people we have. I miss going every weekend, but there's a lot of other things I have to handle. No matter where I am, I'm in constant contact with the guys. Hopefully you'll see me more next year. I kind of like my role as I can watch, listen, and critique (laughter).

No, I'm just kidding. Those guys know what to do. Jeff and I are from the beginning to the end of the race, except handing the phone to the driver. Doesn't do that part well.

JEFF GORDON: I made up a little bit this past weekend.

RICK HENDRICK: You did. You did. You were really quick (laughter).

No, from Jeff Andrews to Chad Knaus to all the engineers and Jeff Gordon, I'm so confident in the group we have and

the way they execute. You got to know your place, you know? I love to go to all the races, but then there's some times that I just can't make it, so...

But I've been wrestling with this leg for about a year. Anyway...

JEFF GORDON: What he doesn't wrestle with, he knows when the engines come off the dynos. He knows what we're working on in the wind tunnel or on sim. It blows my mind how engaged Rick is and how engaged he is on the automotive side and every meeting and how important that business is, too.

He has a lot on his plate. I've never seen anybody that has the capacity and the energy to be involved in the things that he's so passionate about, not to mention collecting cars on top of that.

Yeah, he's an incredible leader for us to know that somebody is there that is that involved and engaged in everything we do.

THE MODERATOR: Mr. H and Jeff, thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it. A big "good luck" to both of you this weekend in Phoenix.

RICK HENDRICK: Thank you.

JEFF GORDON: Thank you.

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