

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Denny Hamlin

Billy Scott



what do you remember about whether it's your blood pressure or where your head space was throughout the entire course of those last few laps? I can't imagine what it's like to be you in the chair.

THE MODERATOR: We have now been joined by Billy Scott, our race-winning crew chief today for the No. 45 with Tyler Reddick. Billy, congratulations. I know all wins matter, but the Daytona 500 is always one that feels a little bit more special. Just tell us about those final laps and what it was like from your vantage point on the pit box to watch Tyler make all those moves for the win.

BILLY SCOTT: Yeah, it's a little different. I think once in these situations when you've made the last pit stop and we've kind of (audio interruption) where we can, but in moments like this when their spotters are talking them through every move they make and they're having to make so many decisions in a few laps, it's just kind of watching and out of our hands, kind of hoping for the best.

BILLY SCOTT: Yeah, it was incredible. We don't get to really see the full view of it, so I'm sure it'll be fun to go back and watch. It really hasn't sunk in yet, either.

Q. You look at all that you put in to try to win a race like this, it now no longer is win and you're in. So you win this race, and what does it mean when you think about that and you think that it's just this win? What does it do for the team? What does it do for the season? We used to say it was win and you're in, but now it still does some things to kick off the season this way?

Certainly exciting. You're happy to just be in contention after these races. You never know how they're going to play out. And a lot of carnage, and we barely missed a few of them, right there in the first run, first 10 laps or so of the race, got hit in the right rear and got in the middle of that one wreck, and then we barely made it through.

BILLY SCOTT: Absolutely. Points are still going to be important. You still get more points for winning. That's still what we come here to do. Yeah, it doesn't make it where we're locked in, but if we had to depend on this win to get ourselves into the Chase, then we probably didn't deserve to be there anyway.

So just to be in contention, first off, is always exciting. To realize as we were coming down to the last couple laps that we kept having the lead of a row, and then ultimately to get a big push from our teammate Riley, that's just hats off to him for staying committed with us and giving us the big push and Tyler making all the right moves.

Yeah, we obviously came off of a less-than-desirable year last year and put a lot of work into a lot of different aspects of our team and how we wanted to approach things and how we wanted to be disciplined on what we could control, and I think we did pretty well at those things tonight, and it paid off. The results are usually just a result of doing that, putting in your best, and sometimes it works out.

Q. The last time you guys celebrated a win, Tyler used the outside lane to fly past Blaney and get into the championship. Now you guys got a crown jewel. Where do you rank these finishes among your eight wins as a crew chief, and how does he keep doing this on the last lap?

BILLY SCOTT: Yeah, that's impressive. There's been a few of them. But that's what it takes.

Q. What does your team owner do for you, Denny Hamlin, when you win? Is it like party at 23XI, beer for everybody, bells ringing? What do you do over there?

I'd say this is probably the first one. Again, it hasn't really sunk in yet, and I think all the stuff to come out of this is going to be very special. But more than anything, just growing up here on the West Coast just a few hours from here and sitting in the stands watching (audio interruption).

BILLY SCOTT: All of the above, yeah. This is going to be a different one, celebrating here. He knows how to do it, though.

Q. It's probably hard to articulate in the moment, but

THE MODERATOR: We have been joined by our race-winning team owner, Denny Hamlin. You have the most wins of an active driver currently with three. You've



... when all is said, we're done.®

won it as a driver. You obviously know the excitement Tyler has, but what does it feel like to win it as an owner?

DENNY HAMLIN: It's different, but, like, it's fantastic. Certainly, I know the odds of winning here is very, very small, but I also know that this is the most chances I had with five cars, myself and these four 23XI cars.

Just after I got crashed for the last time at the end, I was like -- all I'm looking at is the scoreboard, how many horses I still got left in the race. To see we had quite a few cars up there for that last restart was fantastic.

I knew we had a great shot. When they told me at the end, I had no idea how it happened, but watching it back, it just was great to see Tyler making all the right moves and Riley just being a great teammate there at the end, giving him the pushes when he needed it.

It's very gratifying. It's certainly more gratifying than other wins that I've had -- Brickyard was close, but the 500 is just a little different as an owner.

It feels great. It certainly soothes the sting of our day on the 11 car.

Q. How do you feel like Tyler reacted to the winless season last year? Was he frustrated, angry? Or is he kind of more go with the flow? How did he handle it all?

BILLY SCOTT: From my side and the things we worked on, certainly frustrated, certainly disappointed, as all of us were. We had expectations and do have expectations way higher than that.

But it was never a frustration of discouragement or disappointment or blame or anything else. It was collectively how do we get better, how do we work on the things that we can improve ourselves. And he has been all in on everything that's come up, from ownership, from within our team, and he's entered the season with a new, I think, rejuvenated outlook on things.

I think we've all felt that internally, and tonight it shows.

DENNY HAMLIN: Well, so from my standpoint, obviously I was not able to -- the off-season is usually where I spend the most time at 23XI. Obviously this off-season I didn't get to spend as much time there as I wanted.

But I talked to a lot of people in the shop, and they felt like Tyler had changed his -- not approach. What's the word I'm looking for? Changed his outlook, really was optimistic, all in on correcting the wrongs and wanting to get better

this off-season.

We held an -- ownership held a meeting with everyone in competition a few weeks ago, a couple of weeks ago. I look back there, Tyler is the only one making notes, and he just was really turned on.

That's what we want out of him, right. I knew four or five years ago, whenever it was that I talked to him for the first time about, hey, I need you over here -- Billy, the same way, by the way. These are two guys that I specifically recruited for 23XI, and Billy was one of the very first ones.

So I just knew that his ceiling was so, so high. Last year I don't think -- the expectations were certainly higher than the results as a whole, but hopefully -- and I'm sure it will. Winning a race like this so early in the season is just going to -- I think will relieve a lot of self-pressure that Tyler puts on himself, and hopefully he can race this season loose like he always has.

That's what we loved about him from the very beginning is the guy raced loose.

Q. Denny, Michael today -- going back to outside the courtroom, you guys were all conciliatory, we're all in this together. That message continued today. Michael before the race told FOX Sports, we're moving forward, we love this. In Victory Lane, much the same message. Where is that coming from, and what is the message you would send down to the sport as it's trying to move forward and putting the past in the past?

DENNY HAMLIN: I think December was a wake-up call. I think that the conversations since then have been a lot of self-reflection, in my opinion, from NASCAR about -- I think they would have done things differently had they had the opportunity to.

But we knew that we needed to stick up for what we believed was right. I said all along, I was very confident for the last year because I knew what the facts were.

But we have to now figure out how we can get the sport back where it was decades ago. In order to do that, the only way we can do it is we're all going to have to pull the rope in the same direction. Even conversations that I've had with NASCAR executives as late as a couple days ago, sitting in a bus talking about what do we need to be five years from now, two years from now, ten years from now. What does the sport need to look like. Those were all really good conversations, and they were very open to suggestions.

This is just a little different now. Now, the proof will be in what happens, right; is there actions behind the words. But it seems like there's more of a collaborative pull of the rope than what I've -- even since December. The team owner meetings were much more productive than what they've been really since I've been an owner.

So it seems like they're willing to make the changes that it needs to to make the sport grow because we're all going to be better when the sport grows. We've got to work really, really hard at it, but I think we can get there.

Q. You're a notorious trash talker, MJ is a notorious trash talker. Why not have a little bit of fun or talk a little bit of smack in the euphoria off what happened today?

DENNY HAMLIN: I think we feel like this is a -- you don't want to take away from what the team accomplished and what Tyler accomplished. Certainly we don't want any headlines written other than Tyler Reddick wins the Daytona 500.

I think that's the most important thing. It's his day. It's Billy's day. They need to be celebrated.

Q. Denny, all throughout this last few days, NASCAR was holding the yellow. There seemed to be a trend of that. Then obviously they did so, including the last lap tonight. How do you view that as a driver and the way that they officiated the race?

DENNY HAMLIN: Well, I think everyone is okay with whatever it is, as long as it's consistent. I think you mentioned it on social media; it's like, fine, as long as it's the same. Somebody said, as long as it's the same for all races, and this weekend, they were very consistent. So I don't think anyone should have any gripes about that.

We saw they set the tone really on Friday, and so they let those guys race it out.

I was on the other end of the track. I can tell you that I didn't think I was in any danger or the cars -- the ones that did wreck in Turn 1, they ended up all in the apron of the grass so they were off the racing surface. There might have been one kind of running the apron or limping home, but there was no more traffic to go through there.

It seems like how they're calling this now is that if you have to drive back through it, if there's multiple cars that's got to drive through it and somebody is on the racetrack, they're going to call the caution. But it seemed like to me when I drove through there 30 seconds later, nobody on the racetrack had any -- was in any danger. I was fine with it.

Q. Denny, having Michael Jordan involved in the sport, whether it be today him being in Victory Lane or during the lawsuit, what do you think that means and has meant to the sport?

DENNY HAMLIN: Well, it's big for the sport. He's the most popular athlete in the world. I don't think there's any disputing that.

He loves the sport, and certainly he goes to a lot of races. Sometimes you don't even see him and he's there. He makes more races than people know.

But he loves this race team. In that same meeting that we had just a few weeks ago with the team, I reminded them about Talladega and how excited he was on pit road, and I was like, you know, do you guys understand the responsibilities that you have, that you have the power to bring joy to Michael Jordan? You have that power.

Nobody else can do it. There's nothing else that can bring him the joy that seeing his team can do. They took it to heart today.

Q. Playing off that, what's it like for you two to win a championship with Michael Jordan?

BILLY SCOTT: Yeah, like Denny said, it's just cool to see him get the joy out of that. I can't imagine what it's like playing at the level he did and accomplishing the things he did and then just walking away from it and going back to the things that the rest of us experience in daily life.

This is a huge day for us and a big celebration, but I can't even imagine how it compares to the things he's accomplished. But to watch him genuinely be excited and the celebration that he has is a lot what drives us. I think Denny has always commented that we really celebrate when we get a win, and part of that is feeding off of that.

I remember Talladega, and today was much the same, of the level of excitement he has is unmatched.

DENNY HAMLIN: I hope this isn't our last Daytona 500 because I'm still a competitor. No matter how excited I am, I would be more excited if I wasn't in the race myself. I hope that these guys can win a lot of races after I'm done racing because there's always a part of me, after they win -- if they won, that means I lost.

I just want to get -- I wish I could get rid of that little competitive bug that's in me that says, yeah, but your day, blank-blank, because I want to have moments like this where I'm unburdened by the competitive fire that I have

for driving cars.

Just 72 more times, 71 more times, something like that, that I'll have -- after that I'll have more opportunities to really celebrate and enjoy moments like this. It's going to be up to them to make sure they do it well after I'm done.

Q. Denny, sorry to keep bringing up December, but Front Row won on Friday, RCR won on Saturday, you guys won on Sunday, all three of the big players from December. Thoughts?

DENNY HAMLIN: All we do is win. (Laughter.)

Q. Is that weird?

DENNY HAMLIN: It's coincidence, obviously. I'm really happy for them, too. They're the ones that had to answer all the questions and stuff from last year. We were working vigorously behind the scenes, late nights, reading documents and just on and on and on. They had no idea what we were doing. They just were the ones that had to come to the racetrack and ask the questions. Was it a distraction, right?

But they handled themselves like true professionals, and it's great that they're rewarded by winning the first race this year.

Q. Teams, drivers, maybe some fans that didn't win today, they pointed out the fuel saving strategy and that type of racing, especially the three Toyotas in front slowing down the pace. Is that fixable? Does that need to be fixed, that type of racing? Is there a fix to that?

BILLY SCOTT: Well, I doubt there's a fix to it because we're just going to figure out the next way to exploit it, and I don't know that it needs to be fixed.

I think we all as competitors are spending as much time trying to figure out what the next best thing is and how to combat what each other is doing. I mean, I think it would be like asking if you need to change how chess is played. Everybody is trying to react off each other and figure out a way to get in the front at the right time. That depends on whether cautions fly, like in Stage 1 where some of them were able to stretch it all the way to the end.

To me, from where we stand, that's a very enjoyable part of it.

DENNY HAMLIN: There's a way, but we're going to have to increase the speeds by a lot. You're going to have to make it to where handling matters. That's going to spread

the field. That's going to make it to where we're not -- it'll look a little more like racing from the past.

But as long as their insurance company is okay with it, you're going to have to speed up the cars because right now we're so planted in the racetrack that we can just run in this really tight pack. One of the suggestions that we talked about just a few days ago is come here next year in the Clash. Let a few of us come up with a package that we think you won't see any fuel saving, you're just going to see people hanging on. That would be the only fix.

Q. This is going to be a question for Denny. At Bowman Gray you talked about how you expect Riley Herbst and the 35 team to really improve this year, and now fast forward to today, on the last lap he plays sidekick to Tyler Reddick and gets praised by Michael Jordan for being a team player. Are you pleased with the way Riley has responded, and obviously you're pleased with the result of today, but with Riley specifically?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yes, because I can tell you at his age and after the year he had, it would be very -- even for me, it would be very, very hard, as selfish as I am, when he had that run, to not just take it.

But he specifically followed the 45, pushed the 45 when he needed to, when he could have been pulled beside the 45, and then given himself a legit shot.

But definitely. I really like Riley, especially as a person. He's just a great kid, very humble, very, very humble. A very hard worker. Absolutely we expect more from him, and today was a great sign that hopefully he's turned the corner.

Q. You mentioned his humility and his hard work. Is that what you've seen from him in whatever conversations you've had about what you expect from him for 2026? Have you seen that reflected in his response to whatever conversations you may have had?

DENNY HAMLIN: He's always been really self-reflecting. I never question if he doesn't run well, the first thing he does is figure out -- he asks what he could do better. It's not, I need -- this is not right, that's not right. He's very aware and self-reflects, which is someone that's going to get better at their craft if that's their mindset.

I've never seen anything in his work ethic that has made me question his ability to get better, and again, time will tell, and we'll see this season where that 35 team is.

Q. Denny, I wanted to ask you a question that's similar to the one I asked Jeff Gordon last year, which is he won the Daytona 500 three times as a driver, twice as a car owner for Jimmie Johnson and once as an executive for William Byron. I asked Jeff how many he considered himself to have won. He said three, even though he could have put himself up there with Richard Petty if he wanted to. I'm curious, do you feel like you're a three-time 500 winner or a four-time?

DENNY HAMLIN: I would introduce myself as three. I certainly think that our role is very pivotal to getting these guys the resources, but when they unload here early this week, the owner's are hands off. We've given you all the resources. They've made the decisions. It's the team at that point that goes out and wins the race.

They're the ones that truly deserve all the praise.

Q. Bubba mentioned on pit road that it was a big deal for Chumba Casino to be on the winning car at the Brickyard last year and now Daytona this year. How big a deal is that for the sponsor?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, they're the main primary on the 45 for this year. They stepped up and did some great things. Xfinity, over on Bubba's side, stepped up to be the primary. We've got some great partners that really in the off-season step up and loved to take the lead role of these cars.

For them to have the Brickyard 400 win and now the Daytona 500, somebody told me on the last restart that they were starting beside the other casino car, so I'm really glad that we got the better end of that deal overall.

I know that they're absolutely excited. Most of them are over in Australia. They've just been fantastic to work with. To see them grow their presence and now be the main sponsor on that 45, this is a way to reward them for that.

Q. Denny, earlier you talked about how the sky's the limit for Tyler. I know champion is the easy answer, but can you expand upon that further about what heights you think he can reach?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I just know his ability. The ability to get the most out of a car, to get speed out of it, certainly at times I can't get out of cars. It might be just for a lap, but he'll get speed out of it.

Once you find someone that can do that with raw talent, then you start to put -- give him a little bit of race craft, give him a little bit of 20-year old wisdom from mistakes I've made in the past, next thing you know you've created a

driver there that has got all the pieces that can win a championship. Road course racing, that's been a big part of the NASCAR schedule over the last few years. While it's reduced this year, he's no slouch there. He can go compete.

Really, other than probably short tracks, that's the last little step for him to get a little bit better at, he's there. He's got the race craft.

Like Riley, very humble. He's not afraid to come up and ask a lot of questions, even though he's been in the sport now for a little bit of time. I just try to do my best to give him all the knowledge I have. Some of the stuff he probably needs to think twice about implementing. But it's just my job to try to give him all the information and let him do with it what he wants to.

That's what I love about my job is that I'm able to come in on Monday, listen to what these drivers talk about, need out of their race cars on Monday, and can relate because I was just on the racetrack, too.

So it allows me then to be able to allocate the resources to the right areas that I see fit.

Q. Denny, this is three top-10 finishes for 23XI in the Daytona 500. What does that mean for the organization? That hasn't happened for you guys very often, to have three cars in the top 10.

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, it's certainly good momentum for the team, certainly knowing that every race really this season is going to matter, whether it be someone that's trying to fight for a playoff spot or someone that's probably going to be battling for a regular season championship.

Trust me, I'm going to be in a big hole leaving here, but my team is certainly going to feel good about going to Atlanta knowing that they had a good points day here in Daytona.

It's just really a -- this is where the most eyes is on our sport. This is good for our partners. It's good for everyone on our race team. Winning races certainly helps a lot of things, but when you can win the Daytona 500, I'll tell you, just early in the season, because I've done it, it really helps with momentum to start the year because now you're not chasing anything. You're in a good spot.

You can race a lot freer.

Those guys that had a top 10, fantastic job for them.

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