

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Denny Hamlin

THE MODERATOR: Denny, with the 61st NASCAR Cup Series victory, you hold sole possession of 10th place on the all-time NASCAR Cup Series win list. Denny is also the fifth driver to win a Cup race in 20 different seasons, joining Richard Petty, Bobby Allison, Dale Earnhardt and Jeff Gordon. Quite the accomplishment.

DENNY HAMLIN: That is awesome.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations.

DENNY HAMLIN: My name is not like others (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. I think about everything you have been through the last few months. For someone in your position, could have been so easy to step aside, this is a lot. What kept you going?

DENNY HAMLIN: Well, I mean, ultimately I'm still a competitor, right? Everyone's got to go through that process, the grieving process. There were a lot of different things through the off-season that were really, really tough.

Yeah, I mean, I showed up at Bowman Gray. I ran the race. Still just up until a couple weeks ago not fully locked in to what I need to do, got to do. That's just natural. I mean, everyone has to go through stuff.

I think for me ultimately, I said it before, promise to Joe Gibbs, that family, that I'd fulfill my obligations to them. Then the thrill of going out there and getting more wins. That to me is what drives me. It makes me work as hard as I do at this.

Everyone goes through tragedies and stuff. It doesn't change kind of who I am, and that's a competitor that loves to go out there. This is my life's work.

Q. I know in a process like that, there's certain days or moments that really touch your soul. How much does today mean to you?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, it's very gratifying because it's



always the first race of every season that you can win is gratifying. I don't know what goes on in those two months. I'm no fool. I know my reaction's deteriorating. There's all kind of things that are deteriorating. Father Time is undefeated. Three months is a long time where it's like, Okay, am I still at the level that I was last year, especially to end last year.

Today confirmed that nothing was changed, which is really good. It's a good sign. We're still able to do it at a really, really high level. So it's just gratifying to me that I'm still at this age getting it done.

Q. What has the start of this season meant to you? Effectively by you winning this, you won four out of the first five.

DENNY HAMLIN: Four out of five I got to talk to y'all (smiling).

Q. How do you process the first month of this season, considering the challenges?

DENNY HAMLIN: It's been really good. Obviously, things have gone really well for me personally and the team. To win early in the season is always a really good thing. To have my cars going out there and winning three straight to start the season, I mean, those are all big momentum builders.

It certainly helps me. If anything, Tyler's wins fueled me to shake the tree and, Okay, let's get ours now.

Q. Earlier in one of the interviews you said you didn't go into the race expecting to win.

DENNY HAMLIN: I did. I expected to win.

Q. You did expect to win?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yes.

Q. Overcoming the pit road penalty, is that what you were talking about?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I can't think. I don't know when the last one was. Typically in Next Gen when you speed on pit road, if it's somewhere near the



middle of the race, you're usually not seen again.

But I just knew within about 15 laps after that first restart when I was cutting through everyone, I was like, Well, there's still time. I can't waste any time getting around guys. I can't get stuck behind anyone. So we just kept marching.

When we got to fifth by the end of the second stage, I'm like, Okay, I'm back in it. I'm close enough to the front that surely those guys up front looking at the scoring pylon and have had to think, Holy shit, he's back already.

We got through the field quick. So we knew we were going to be strong. Guys work on their cars. Everyone makes their stuff better. Chase came on at the end similar to what he did in '21.

But today was just our day. Speeding penalty... The car was just too fast for a speeding penalty to stop us.

Q. You had your own stuff to go through all off-season. Chris said he had a really hard three days after Phoenix, but started to work through it. I imagine by the time you got back to him, he was in a much better place.

DENNY HAMLIN: Uh-huh.

Q. Did you ever have to talk to him or pick him up at all?

DENNY HAMLIN: You know, I don't know. I don't want it to reflect badly on me. He left me alone. I didn't have much interaction with Gayle until a couple weeks before the season. He kind of let me be.

I don't know. I've somewhat always had that kind of relationship with my crew chiefs. It's been more professional than personal. It doesn't reflect, like, how I think of him as a crew chief or a person. It's just I've always kind of kept my work personnel and friendship personnel separate.

I know that he felt horrible. Not that it was his fault. Maybe I could have done something. I mean, that was just a moment that certainly he wishes he could have back and I wish I could have back.

But yeah, we both went through it for some time. By the time I got back to him, he was certainly in a better spot. And we never talked about it.

Q. You never have?

DENNY HAMLIN: No.

Q. Not once?

DENNY HAMLIN: No, not once.

Q. (No microphone.)

DENNY HAMLIN: Nope.

Q. Long after the driving days are over, what are you going to remember most about this victory?

DENNY HAMLIN: Hmm... It's kind of split. Half of it is the drive through the field. The other half is, like, the family being able to be here when they weren't here for 60. We were driving on the track earlier today. It was like, Yeah, I don't remember this, I don't remember that. It's been years since y'all have been at the racetrack.

In Vegas the kids can only do so much and whatnot. It was cool for them to get to experience my latest win. We had some friends and other family here this weekend, as well.

Driving them around in the race car on the frontstretch was awesome. I probably will remember the drive through the field.

Q. Chris was in here mentioning how the finish at Phoenix ate him up for three days last week. Did you have to play any conversations with him at all leading up to today?

DENNY HAMLIN: No. I mean, we didn't talk about it. Phoenix, I mean, if we did, it was like 15 seconds. I think he might have, like... I said, I don't care. It's fine. I don't need any reasoning. I'm with you. Same thing when Gabehart stuck a 10-inch piece of tape on the front grille and blew the engine when I'm charging to the front. It's fine, you're going for it. It didn't work out, right?

I don't need any explanation. We're going to win and lose together. It has been an absolute pleasure to work with Chris Gayle for these seven wins over the course of these 40 races or so. He's just a great guy. So underrated in what he does. I'm glad he's getting the wins now that he deserves.

Q. You mentioned coming into the day you thought you had a good chance of winning. You have a really good, solid day in addition to getting the win. What does it mean to have a day like that this early in the season? How can you build off of that?

DENNY HAMLIN: Yeah, I mean, I've had seasons where I went winless until the end of the season or midpoint. I can tell you it's so much better when you win early. It is. Especially with the new points system, I think every driver is now looking at the points to see where you're at in the regular season. I think NASCAR just did an amazing job overhauling that to make us understand and really feel like this is a big reward for us to go out here and win.

When you have the tough days, also it's pretty crushing. When you leave Daytona 500 finishing 31st and I'm looking back and I'm like, oh, my gosh, I'm already a race behind. It certainly puts the panic back in you.

It's great to win early. It gives us some momentum. But realistically, I look from last week to the next six weeks, Okay, we got a bazillion wins at all these racetracks. In this group of races I expect to win multiple. If we don't, that's where I get concerned.

If we come here, lay an egg, don't finish well, I'm concerned because we're all going to have these weeks where we're going to have mechanical failures, wrecks, things like that. If you want to win the regular season or be part of the championship picture when they reset it for the Chase, all these 26 weeks count.

I'm certainly feeling better about the start of my season now.

Q. One more thing on Chris. This is really the first time that we've heard his side of how he felt after last year. You said you two have not talked about Phoenix. Obviously you had so much other stuff going on that that's what kept you away. How does his call from instead of two tires, going for four, in that situation, how do you not hold that against him and ruin that relationship?

DENNY HAMLIN: Well, it's because when he called it and I looked at the code, I said, Okay, sounds good.

I believed in it, too. So I would have been just as guilty. You know what I mean? It wasn't like I was going, Oh, shit, are you sure?

If I would have thought that it was the absolute wrong call, I would have questioned it. I would have said, Are you sure? I would have said, I think track position means the most.

I mean, damn, we dominated the race. Every restart we were blowing by everybody. I can't speak to what the war room thought or he thought or whatever. I certainly was surprised to see fricking nine guys stay out or take two and

put themselves right in the middle of championship battle. I couldn't believe all those cars stayed out there. But they did.

It's only the wrong call because of one or two extra cars stay out. If one or two don't, I'm right where I need to be. If Larson is not right behind a teammate, does he get through as easy? We'll never know. Those are the ifs and buts. You just can't live in that world. That's why I didn't want to talk about it because you can't change it.

There's not one person on that Tuesday in that awards ceremony that didn't think that I was good enough to be a champion on that day. I just didn't take home the trophy.

Q. Winning this race today, you came over the radio and said something to the effect of, Old dog can still hunt. What kind of a race like today is a feather in your cap of the way it was done, winning at your age?

DENNY HAMLIN: I mean, it's gratifying because I saw, like, the legendary Mount Rushmore guys, I've raced against them. I think probably at least two on the Mount Rushmore I got to race against and know how good they are.

I also saw at the end of their career when they got my age that the performance changed, for whatever reason. I think Kevin Harvick is kind of the one that sticks out that he was still doing it at this level at this age. I don't know when he stopped winning. Maybe 46-ish, 47-ish. I'm not really sure. That was, like, motivation to me that, Okay, it's possible. Not everyone ages the same. Eyesight is the same, reaction is the same at the same age. But that gave me hope that, like, I think that I can still do.

I mean, I can tell you, there are Mondays and Tuesdays where I'm, like, I'm over it. I just don't... I don't know whether I just want to keep doing this grind over and over.

It happens after you have the failures at like Phoenix where it's like I spend all that time working, all that time studying, I ace the test and failed. That's where it was, like, discouraging. Do I really want to do this again?

So days like today... Last night I was grinding still. I was working hours and hours and hours after this practice was over to try to figure out how we could make our car better, communicating with the team on that.

It feels good when you get the cookie at the end.

Q. You had a really cool moment after the race where you took the kids in the car. The importance of being able to have those moments at this time in your



career? Also the fact they got to witness you go into number 10 on the all-time wins list, comprehend their dad is that good.

DENNY HAMLIN: It's awesome. There was only one other time that I think Taylor got to ride in the car, then NASCAR took the trophy from me about five hours later (smiling). Hopefully we make this one official and move on.

But yeah, I think it was Molly's first time in the car. They stepped in there and were like, Wow, it's hot in here. I'm like, Welcome to my world. It's a good reality check that it's not all nice and cozy inside that car.

Like I talked about earlier, they weren't here for 60. You get FaceTime for 10 seconds. I got to go do more pictures, whatever, media. It's cool when they get to see it and feel it. It's something that they'll remember for a long time.

Q. (No microphone.)

DENNY HAMLIN: Hourglass is running out (smiling).

Q. With your win today, you've jumped to fourth in the standing. Have you as a team or you individually looked at the season and kind of planned out an average points day that you need to accrue throughout the year?

DENNY HAMLIN: No, not really. I just look at the schedule and say I expect to win at these tracks. I hope to run good at these tracks. I need to not wreck at these. That's how I look at it.

There's not really one point thing. I do set goals before the race. Those goals change with every caution. I shift the goalpost when I go to the back at the end of stage one, that sucks, I just screwed this up. Let's figure out a way to get to the top five. Might take strategy or something. Again, I realized pretty early after that restart that as fast as we were, we still had a chance.

But yeah, this is hugely gratifying. It's something, I don't know, it just makes me feel good about what I do.

Q. You've now won as many times, almost as many times, in your last seven-plus years as you did in the first 13 years. In the first 13 years you had 31 of your wins. Now you've won 30 times since the start of 2019. Why have you won so much more later in your career?

DENNY HAMLIN: Hmm... Well, I think data and analytics probably played a role in that. I'm a very analytical person.

I'm a very structured person. What data and analytics allowed me to do was identify my weaknesses, then allowed me to figure out how I'm going to shore up those weaknesses.

Before that, you're kind of just seat of your pants. If you want to get better, you have to go over to Matt Kenseth's garage or Tony Stewart's garage, How are you driving turn three?

When we started sharing data and stuff like that, while it was negative because my information got out, it also was a positive at some racetracks where I wasn't very good. It was a double-edged sword.

I think that I really embraced, Okay, here's the tools I got to identify my weaknesses, now what am I going to do? How can I fix them and what do I need to work on that can give me the best results?

That I think was kind of the turning point in 2019.

THE MODERATOR: Denny, congratulations and thank you for your time.

DENNY HAMLIN: Thank you.

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