

# Wheels falling off JGR's season at the wrong time

By JENNA FRYER  
AP AUTO RACING WRITER

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Joe Gibbs Racing used the first 26 races this season to establish itself as NASCAR's top organization.

It took just two races to undo all that work.

Two terrible showings to start the Chase for the championship led Kyle Busch to concede his title hopes Sunday after his engine failed at Dover International Speedway. Denny Hamlin didn't wave a white flag, but his 38th-place finish has him stuck at the bottom of the standings with his teammate.

Timing, it seems, is everything, and the wheels are most certainly falling off JGR's season at the worst possible part of the year.

"About what you would imagine," team president J.D. Gibbs said Monday when asked the mood at the race shop. "I'd say there's a good amount of frustration and disappointment. It's obviously very frustrating because you work

so hard all year. So it's frustrating for the drivers, for the crews, for the 400-plus people at the shop — everyone who puts everything they have into this — and then the small things bite you.

"But stuff like that happens in life. We don't like it, we don't have to like it, but we have to work through it."

Problem is, there's not much time to work through this.

Busch started the Chase with an 80-point advantage over most of the competition. Two races in and he's plummeted to last, 210 points behind new leader Carl Edwards with just eight events to make up the difference. Hamlin sits in 11th and two-time Cup champion Tony Stewart is clinging to his title hopes in seventh.

"Look, all you want is a chance in the final race, and I haven't sat down and looked at all the points and all the scenarios," Gibbs said. "But we're not giving up on having a final chance in that last race."

He'll have trouble convincing

Busch of that, though. The winner of the "regular season" declared his run at a first Cup championship over after his last-place finish in Dover. But his gloom and doom is based on experience: Busch started the 2006 Chase with a wreck in the opener and an engine failure in Round 2; he never recovered and finished last in the standings that season.

"We're out of the title hunt, that's for sure," Busch said as his crew diagnosed his ailing engine.

This isn't like February and March when bizarre mechanical failures hit all three JGR cars.

Hamlin's power steering failed in Atlanta, and he had a fuel pickup issue while leading on a restart in the closing laps at Bristol. Stewart had a similar pickup problem at Bristol, and his cost him the lead to Hamlin shortly before Hamlin suffered the same fate.

Busch lost his power steering in Bristol while leading, then broke a rear gear in Martinsville. A broken gasket also took him out of contention at his home track in

Las Vegas.

It got to a point where the JGR tally showed more races lost than victories, and frustration was mounting among all three teams.

"All they know is they broke a part and it kept them from winning a race," Jimmy Makar, senior vice president of racing operations at JGR, said at the time. "There's nothing you can do but fix the problem and show them that it's fixed."

That they did, ironing out every little blip to string together a wildly successful regular season.

Busch won a series-high eight Cup victories, and Hamlin added one other win. And they were untouchable in the Nationwide Series, as Busch, Hamlin, Stewart and Logano combined to win 16 of 28 races.

So why now are these issues popping up? And why are they happening to Busch, who was seemingly flawless the past four months?

"That's the question we're all trying to figure out right

now," Gibbs said. "There's nothing we're doing differently. If anything, now is the time to be more conservative. And our people are as good as anybody at testing products. We are very good at checking parts and qualifying parts and making sure we have everything in order."

It's easy to say that in this year of JGR dominance, not winning the championship would make the season a bust. But crew chief Steve Addington said Sunday the hole his team is in will allow Busch to get aggressive and race for wins from now on.

"We've had three very different things happen to three very good race cars at the wrong time," Gibbs said. "But there's not much we can change at this point. All we do is go as hard as we can. We had good cars that just didn't finish."

"We were pretty good before the Chase. We're still pretty good, and we'll just have to see where we are four or five races from now."

