

# Rookie Test Session at Atlanta Motor Speedway

Story: Phillip Prichard, MSA/Photos: MSA Staff

Before the 2018 season officially begins, three NASCAR drivers participated in a two-day rookie test session the last week in January at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

Christopher Bell from Joe Gibbs Racing, Dalton Sargeant (GMS Racing) and Tyler Reddick (JR Motorsports) turned laps in preparation for the February 24th Xfinity-Camping World Truck Series doubleheader on the 1.54-mile oval. All three begin 2018 with new teams. Bell and Reddick move into their first full-time rides in the Xfinity Series while Sargeant goes full-time in the Truck Series.

Christopher Bell started the year, racing to his second consecutive Chili Bowl crown a couple of weeks ago. He said that he went to the Chili Bowl as a kid and dreamed of winning the race, now he has won two. Bell is the 2017 Camping World Truck Series champion.

Bell said, competing in the Xfinity series is super cool. The Xfinity cars use basically the same engine and tires as the trucks, but the Xfinity cars handle better in traffic. Being a dirt track racer, it has taught him to move around and find grip. The 20 Car basically uses the 2017 19 team but Joe Gibbs Racing sent an All-Star support team to the



**CHRISTOPHER BELL PILOTS THE GIBBS TOYOTA FOR ROOKIE TITLE IN THE XFINITY SERIES**

Atlanta test including Crew Chief Jason Ratcliff, Dave Rogers and other engineers.

Ratcliff, who led Matt Kenseth to his 39th-career win at Phoenix Raceway, started his career as a crew chief in 2000 in what was then the Busch Series with Casey Atwood at Brewco Motorsports. He won two races there with Jamie McMurray before joining Joe Gibbs Racing in 2005.

I asked Bell if Atlanta should be repaved after the 2018 race. He stated most definitely no, Atlanta allows the driver to race from top to bottom of the track to find their best line.

Bell said, "His most memorable race was his first Chili Bowl win, but his truck win at AMS last year was a close second".

Tyler Reddick joined JR Motorsports in

2018 in the No. 9 Chevrolet, replacing 2017 Xfinity Series champion William Byron.

Tyler Reddick, who has two races in the Camping World Truck Series at Atlanta under his belt including a fifth-place finish in 2015, is aware of the unique challenges



**CASEY REDDICK WIDE OPEN IN JR MOTORSPORTS #9 CAMARO**

a track like Atlanta, with its 21-year-old surface, will present for a rookie racing there for his first time in the XFINITY Series.

"The track is going to wear the tires out quickly. Tracks like these are a lot of fun. They knock the dust off and get your feet planted back where they need to be."

Before Byron, it was Georgia native Chase Elliott who occupied the No. 9 for two seasons in 2014 and 2015 and won both the series championship and Rookie of the Year in 2014. It's big shoes to fill for the 22-year-old driver, but with a win at Kentucky

and poles at both Kansas and Homestead in 18 XFINITY Series races last season, Reddick knows he's up to the challenge.

"It's a good amount of pressure," said Reddick. "I ran a partial schedule last year, so I have a little bit of an advantage over some of the other guys that will probably be running for Rookie of the Year."

"We're all chasing the same thing: win Rookie of the Year and, hopefully, the championship. We're capable of doing that. We've got to be smart. I've got to do my best to learn how these cars drive, and try and make this learning curve as short as possible."

Dalton Sargeant is a NASCAR Next Alumnus joining GMS Racing for 2018 Season. Dalton Sargeant is the 2016 ARCA Racing Series Rookie of the Year scoring one win and 12 top-10s, and winning the North-South Late Model Shootout.

NASCAR racing returns to Atlanta Motor Speedway Feb. 23-25, 2018, featuring the Rinnai 250 XFINITY Series and Active Pest Control 200 Benefiting Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Camping World Truck Series doubleheader on Saturday, Feb. 24 and the Folds of Honor QuikTrip 500 Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series race on Sunday, Feb. 25.

For more information or purchase tickets today, call the AMS ticket office at (770) 946-4211, (877) 9-AMS-TIX or visit [www.atlantamotorspeedway.com](http://www.atlantamotorspeedway.com).



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