

FOREWORD BY
JOE GIBBS

WINNING BUSINESS
PRINCIPLES THAT FUEL
JOE GIBBS RACING

TAKE THE WHEEL

**DAVE
ALPERN**

PRESIDENT OF
JOE GIBBS RACING
with David Thomas

Coach Gibbs has always said that you win with people. I know from my own experience that running a race team can be difficult even under the best of circumstances, but in recent years Joe Gibbs Racing has had more obstacles than most. Dave Alpern has been a steady influence throughout a lot of those challenging times. *Taking the Lead* does a great job of taking you behind the scenes and showing you how Dave and the many other key people at JGR help us continue to win at a high level. For as long as I've known him, Dave has shown endless energy doing his job at JGR. He is a respected executive within the NASCAR industry and is equally as dedicated to his family and his faith.

KYLE BUSCH, two-time NASCAR Cup Series champion and NASCAR's all-time wins leader

Without a doubt, Pern has led a lot of amazing things, and you are about to experience them in *Taking the Lead*. To me, though, I am most impressed and encouraged by who Dave *is*. It is his heart and character that is revealed throughout every page of this book. Dave is an incredible leader, father, "bro," friend, champion, Kingdom builder, and most importantly, a son of God. So enjoy every story, every leadership nugget, and most importantly, my servant-leading friend and his passion to strengthen others.

JACK HOLLIS, senior VP of automotive operations for Toyota Motor North America

I spent twelve years at Joe Gibbs Racing and got to know Dave really well. Even during the most challenging times, he kept a positive outlook. While he has learned a lot from Coach, Dave has always had an impressive work ethic and a keen understanding that the right way of doing things is the only way. He'll come out on top in a battle of wits, too. Dave's sense of humor puts everyone at ease. If you're looking for a leader, just look to Dave.

TONY STEWART, three-time NASCAR Cup Series champion and NASCAR Hall of Famer

Taking the Lead is an excellent story of leadership lessons learned while overcoming the personal challenges and self-doubt that all great leaders experience. But perhaps more importantly, it's a touching tribute to a best friend lost too early and to an amazing mentor in Coach Gibbs. Through a culture focused on people first, Joe Gibbs Racing has built a team that goes fast and delivers, operating with the fundamental belief that winning in life *is* winning the race.

SHANNON LAPIERRE, CCO of Stanley Black & Decker

I have had the privilege of knowing Dave Alpern since high school. Along with being a great father and husband, Dave embodies what it means to be a servant leader by leading with a meek strength that is rare in men. I have watched him serve with excellence throughout his many roles at JGR, and he has much wisdom to share with us through the principles he has learned on his journey from unpaid intern to president of JGR.

TOBY MAC, seven-time Grammy Award winner and multiplatinum recording artist

J.D.'s influence on this book, its author, and the DNA of Joe Gibbs Racing lives in these pages. I'm proud that Dave wrote this book so that others can see and ultimately learn from the culture Coach Gibbs and J.D. instilled in their top-flight organization. The style in which Dave offers real-life experiences followed by questions for the reader to reflect on is effective and thought-provoking.

DENNY HAMLIN, three-time Daytona 500 champion and driver of the #11 FedEx Toyota Camry for Joe Gibbs Racing

Dave Alpern has been a friend and mentor to me for more than twenty years, and his measured, graceful approach to leadership is rare and impactful. But nothing he has accomplished professionally has impacted me more deeply and personally than his wisdom. In a moment of great complexity and confusion for me as a father, Dave picked me up and walked me through his lifelong negotiation of Tourette's syndrome and the difficulty he faced in attempting to articulate that moment-by-moment negotiation to his own parents and friends. Seeing his success and relationship skills while managing Tourette's gave me tremendous hope.

MARTY SMITH, ESPN reporter/host and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Never Settle: Sports, Family, and the American Soul*

Having been in relationship with Dave, Coach, J.D., and the JGR crew since the very beginning, I can say that alignment on the principles outlined by Dave in *Taking the Lead* are what brought us together, and those same principles have sustained our winning relationship for all these years. What a ride it has been!

SCOTT MILLER, CEO of Interstate Batteries

Dave has had the opportunity to work with leaders of successful corporations and with Hall of Fame coach Joe Gibbs during his career at Joe Gibbs Racing. This book does an excellent job distilling those experiences into practical advice to equip you to be more successful in your professional and personal life.

T. MICHAEL GLENN, retired executive vice president of FedEx

Taking the Lead is about a man's willingness to serve. Dave Alpern's humility, transparency, and perseverance are inspiring. But his abiding loyalty to those around him, especially to J.D. Gibbs, and his deep faith in Jesus Christ are at the foundation of his leadership and life story. In the end, we witness a leader who embodies the cultural values of Joe Gibbs Racing: honor God, put people before profits, and relentlessly pursue winning. It's like Dave is standing before us in the race of life and giving the command, "Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines!"

NEWT CRENSHAW, president and CEO of Young Life

I've known Dave since he and I both started working in NASCAR almost thirty years ago. I can tell you firsthand that Dave Alpern lives out the mission-driven life. After working for more than two decades alongside legendary Coach Joe Gibbs, one of the most focused and godly men on earth, Dave has a truly unique perspective on life as a leader, friend, father, and husband. I really admire Dave's steadfast commitment to his faith, his family, and his mission in life.

MARCUS G. SMITH, president and CEO of Speedway Motorsports

Dave's book is an inspiration for anyone looking for purpose or a North Star in their business or personal life. He reveals deeply personal stories on how he has learned to follow his heart and his faith and describes the great people he has learned those lessons from. Dave provides great insight on how to find motivation from the people around you, and his words on the importance of relationships and putting people first are a must-read for anyone looking to ensure their focus is on the things matter. I am proud to call Dave a friend and proud of him for sharing his wisdom and his faith so we can all learn from him.

JILL GREGORY, former NASCAR CMO and current executive vice president of Sonoma Raceway

It didn't take long for me to realize that Dave Alpern was not only a great person but was also going to grow into a great leader at JGR. We've spent a lot of time together over the years. Pern is a great friend, a great role model, and a man of God.

BOBBY LABONTE, Hall of Fame NASCAR driver

Taking the Lead is an engaging and inspiring celebration of life and faith by someone who knows he was blessed beyond measure, found his passion, did well, and did good. Whether you are a NASCAR fan or not, you'll find that Dave Alpern's story is an amazing saga of perseverance, creativity, dedication, and friendship.

NICHOLAS DIDOW, professor at the Kenan-Flagler Business School, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Dave Alpern humbly and transparently shares his personal and professional journey and traces his rise from the "T-shirt guy" to the president of Joe Gibbs Racing. I loved hearing so many of Pern's familiar stories told within the context of rich business and life lessons.

DAVID WILSON, president of Toyota Racing Development (TRD)

Successful in family, faith, community, and career, Dave Alpern knows how to lead and the qualities it takes to be a great leader. And it starts with sharing, and that's exactly what he does here in this brilliant book.

WILLIAM CLEMENTS, general manager of Mars Properties and Family Brands

You should take the lead from Dave Alpern, a leader whose principles extend from his personal character to his business relationships. I can't think of a better person to learn from than Dave. With this book as a guide, each of us can be the Dave on our teams, leading them to even greater success.

MONICA SKIPPER, vice president of brand experience marketing at FedEx

This book is more than good; it's one of the most authentic and thought-provoking playbooks for winning in business and in life. Get ready to be challenged. Be prepared to see Dave's mastery in synthesizing our calling and maximizing our impact. If you ever wonder what it means to plan as if you'll live forever but *live* as if today is your last, this will get you going. This book will remind you why legacy matters and of the power of your yes.

MANNY OHONME, founder, president, and CEO of Samaritan's Feet International

I have lived a lot of life with my friend Dave Alpern, and I can honestly say few have combined business with keeping a nonstop Christlike posture the way Dave has. From stories about how to be a fountain and not a drain with your workmates, to how to care for what's most important in your life, to "traits of the greats," Dave shares his key life experiences to help you "take the lead" in your own life. Well done, Pernski!

MARTY SNIDER, NBC Sports

"Why me?" Who else but me! In *Taking the Lead*, Dave transparently walks us through a chapter of his life he never imagined and never wanted. In a moment of unexpected change, what does it take to rise to the occasion? Understanding the importance of relationships, and faith—real faith, not some folly or wild fairy tale, a faith Dave first witnessed in his dearest friend, a living example of Christ to him that he honors to this day. For each of us a moment comes when we, too, may be unexpectedly "taking the lead," and you, like Dave, can confidently conclude, "Who else but me?"

BILLY MAULDIN, president and senior chaplain of Motor Racing Outreach

Just as it is in our personal lives, faith is a critical element in business. Faith in your colleagues, your company, your mission, and most importantly, in a purpose far larger than your day-to-day work. Dave Alpern understands the relationship between faith and achieving true fulfillment in business and in life, and the rise and success of Joe Gibbs Racing is a testament to that achievement. In *Taking the Lead* Dave speaks to that connection and the ubiquitous role faith plays in leading a purpose-driven life. This book is a valuable read for anyone wanting to learn and improve.

STEVE PHELPS, president of NASCAR

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ALPERN**

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GOVERNANCE

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and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

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Foreword

ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES of Dave Alpern comes from a football game outside my house involving my son J.D. and a group of his friends. As head coach of the NFL's Washington Redskins at the time, I was accustomed to quickly evaluating players.

I surveyed the players in that friendly game, and Dave stood out. He was skinny and probably weighed thirty pounds less than anyone else on our snow-covered lawn, but he impressed me with how he wasn't backing down at all.

This kid is really competitive, I thought.

I've known Dave since he was a teenager in J.D.'s closest circle of friends. I've also known him as a young man, a developing leader, and now as president of our race team, Joe Gibbs Racing. At each step in that progression, Dave has impressed me.

Dave was among my first hires—as an unpaid intern—when we started our team in 1991. I hired him alongside J.D. and Todd Meredith, another member of that friend group. None of them had specific assignments, but over time they naturally developed into complementary roles for which they were individually gifted. Along with Don Meredith, my business partner, and Jimmy Makar, my first crew chief and NASCAR expert, they helped JGR grow from eighteen employees and one car to

our current staff of more than five hundred employees and nine cars competing in three stock car series.

We started JGR with the hope that our one car would have a chance to win races. Thirty years later, we have far exceeded those initial hopes, winning seven series championships, including five in NASCAR's top series. The number one reason we developed into one of NASCAR's top teams is because of great people. Dave Alpern is one of those.

As you will read in this book, Dave started as a gofer. On his own initiative, he became an expert at licensed products and led our young company into opportunities we did not know existed. He later moved into other front-office positions. In February 2016, he became our president.

The circumstances were difficult. My son J.D. had held that position, but he was struck with a rare disease. I started JGR as a family business to share with my two sons. (My youngest, Coy, is JGR's vice chairman and chief operating officer.) Dave was the clear choice to step into the presidency. And he has led us well.

Four reasons come to mind for Dave's success as a leader.

First, Dave possesses unusual wisdom. More specifically, he possesses *godly* wisdom. That is why even when he was known around JGR as "the T-shirt guy" because of his licensing work, I didn't hesitate to bring him into important decisions for our growing company. Now, many of those types of decisions run across his desk as our president.

Second, Dave has a gift for developing relationships. That is an important gift because I believe business is about relationships. Racing wouldn't exist as we know it without sponsors. I brought Dave into our relationships with sponsors long before that was part of his official job description because I noticed how good he was with people. JGR typically has thirty major sponsors at any given time. That's thirty important relationships for our company, and Dave's gift shines in that area.

Third, Dave is loyal. He has been loyal to our company since his first day on the job. And he was especially loyal to J.D. during his illness.

Few people will ever know how much Dave helped my son behind the scenes as J.D.'s disease progressed. In fact, when it became apparent that someone needed to officially take over J.D.'s responsibilities and we chose Dave, he struggled with the idea of becoming our president, because it meant replacing J.D. Dave cares about JGR and our people, and he has devoted his entire career to us. He provides us with a great sense of comfort because we know that he comes to work every day desiring to do what is best for our team and our people.

Fourth, Dave represents the values of Joe Gibbs Racing. He describes those values in detail in this book, offering the unique perspective of a non-family member who worked his way from unpaid intern to president of a family business. As you learn what those values are and how we make them work in our professional environment, I would like to add that Dave exemplifies all that you will read.

I am glad Dave wrote this book. He is part of the group that helped build our team from start-up to the success we now enjoy. I am honored he decided to provide this insight to the team we started. But more than that, I am proud to call Dave a friend and a member of my family.

Joe Gibbs

Prologue

ALL RIGHT. I'M GOOD WITH THIS.

I stacked the pages neatly on top of each other.

Ten minutes.

How to sum up my best friend's life in only ten minutes? To do his life justice in that amount of time. To articulate how I felt about the friend I admired more than any other.

I'd had two weeks since his death to write the eulogy even though we had known for months this day was nearing. I had tried several times to turn my thoughts into words, but not until a week before the memorial service could I actually put pen to paper.

"Everybody sounds better at their eulogy than they really were," I told a friend. "But not J.D."

J.D. Gibbs was everything good that I could think to say about him and more.

He had been my moral compass since seventh grade. The person who helped lead me to my faith through the way he lived out his. The leader who brought me into the family business when I was neither family nor qualified. The man who served as my picture of what it means to be a Christian father.

So much to say, but so unsure of how to say it.

My father had died nine years earlier. I eulogized him, too. Writing

J.D.'s eulogy was more difficult than writing my dad's—and that had been difficult enough. A son eulogizing his father seems natural. Our dads are supposed to die at some point, and we, their sons, are to honor them. That's how aging works. But J.D. was forty-nine. A best friend isn't supposed to die so young. Especially a best friend like J.D.

I had spent much of the past two weeks reflecting on how in 1992 J.D. and his father, Joe—then the head coach of the NFL's Washington Redskins—had hired me as an unpaid intern when they started Joe Gibbs Racing. And how, as I advanced from intern to president, I witnessed the way our company grew into one of the premier franchises in all of sports. From working alongside a two-sport Hall of Famer in Coach Gibbs to partnering with some of the most successful companies in North America through their sponsorships with JGR, I had learned and developed business principles for what it takes to be the best. Not just the best company or even the best employee, but the best husband, father, and friend I could be.

I had learned that business, no different than life, is built on relationships. And no one I have known—no one—was more intentional about relationships than J.D. He had given so much to so many people. And yet he had so much more to give.

That's why his death—and his cruel illness of more than five years—made no sense. Even with all the faith I could muster, I still thought, *I just don't get this one.*

Two days before the memorial service, I finished my eulogy. Then I crumpled the papers and started all over. I wouldn't typically write out a speech to read word for word, but this time was different. It had to be. I owed it to J.D. not to get too emotional as I spoke.

I could hear him laughing. Poking fun at me. Just like he would when he walked past my office door.

Pern, don't you turn into a blubbing idiot when you're up there talking about me.

But more than that, I recognized the opportunity awarded to me.

The opportunity to honor J.D. in front of his wife. The opportunity to make sure his four sons understood how great a man and a friend their father was. And the opportunity to share the importance of J.D.'s faith on his behalf, because J.D. was always sharing his faith. Eulogizing my best friend was one of the most important responsibilities I had ever been given.

The night before the memorial service, I timed myself as I read aloud through the final version.

Ten minutes.

Finally convinced that I had used those minutes wisely, I laid the stack of papers on the desk and released a deep sigh of relief.

The question that guided me through the process of writing the eulogy was the same one I had employed since taking over J.D.'s job as president of Joe Gibbs Racing. And it is the same question that guides me today as I try to lead our company based on the principles that allowed us to grow into the winningest team in NASCAR history.

How would J.D. handle this?

DELIVER MORE THAN YOU COST

PRINCIPLE 1

Chapter 1

THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

KYLE BUSCH HAD JUST WON the 2019 NASCAR Cup Series championship to cap our greatest season ever. The title was Kyle's second and the fifth in the history of Joe Gibbs Racing. Kyle's championship-clinching victory at Homestead-Miami Speedway was the nineteenth race win of the season for Joe Gibbs Racing. Four cars, nineteen victories out of thirty-six races—the most for any team in NASCAR's modern era.

I could not imagine a more emotional ending to our first season since the death of J.D. Gibbs, the son of team owner Joe Gibbs, my best friend, and the man I had replaced as president almost four years before in the early stages of his illness. As Kyle crossed the finish line to complete our dream season, his pit erupted in celebration. But instead of running straight to Victory Lane, I hurried down pit lane to catch the guys on our team who *weren't* celebrating—Erik Jones, Martin Truex Jr., and Denny Hamlin.

A unique juxtaposition exists from leading multiple race car teams that contend against one another. On the night Kyle's team won the championship, our other three teams lost. Like a parent with kids

competing against each other, I hurt for each one who lost—the drivers, their crew members, and their sponsors. They are family.

Martin had won more races (seven) than any other driver in NASCAR that season. He finished second to Kyle in the championship race. Denny had won six races, and he had entered the final race as a popular favorite to win his first title because of his late-season momentum. Erik, who finished third in the race (and who was the only one of our drivers not in contention for the championship), was a young, up-and-coming driver with a bright future and one victory in 2019 to his credit.

Then there was the handful of executives from FedEx, which had sponsored Denny's number 11 car and requested that "#DoItForJD" be painted in purple letters across the car's back. How could I not root for the car honoring my best friend? Denny had come close to winning the championship twice before with FedEx, only to fall short both times. Obviously, I want all our drivers to perform well. But a first championship for Denny and FedEx, with their desire to honor J.D., would have made for a memorable conclusion to a historic year. Then with only forty-five laps to go in the race for the title—less than seventy miles—Denny experienced car trouble and had to settle for a fourth-place finish in the season standings.

I told Erik, Martin, and Denny that I was proud of them and thanked them for their contributions to our team's nineteen victories. I thanked the FedEx executives for their fifteen years of support and friendship. Then I joined Kyle's team in Victory Lane. The Mars (chocolate) family was there, along with all their top executives as the primary sponsor of Kyle's number 18 car. They are wonderful people, a family to us at JGR.

But when the championship celebration started to shift toward scattered locations, I wondered whether I should even post about our victory on social media out of consideration for Denny's and Martin's heartbreak.

To be clear: I definitely enjoyed being in Victory Lane for Kyle's team's moment. Being part of the immediate aftermath of the clinching win was awesome. That's the moment every team pursues throughout the nine-month grind of the NASCAR season. My disappointment

amid that celebration was the welcome result of leading one of NASCAR's top teams.

Three of our drivers had earned spots among the "Championship 4" that arrived in Miami with an opportunity to leave as Cup champion. The annual goal is to place as many of your drivers into the final four as possible, and we became the first team ever to qualify three. But because we are a company built on relationships, even the crowning achievement in our sport came with disappointment mixed in.

Which is a lot like life. Most of life is a mixture of victories and defeats, often competing simultaneously for our emotions. Even when life seems easy, it can be difficult. But on this night, we won a championship and my family was with me, and I couldn't help but reflect on how far our team had come.

Joe Gibbs Racing's journey to a four-car, record-setting team started in 1991 with one car and a ton more hope than experience. I have been at JGR since the start, when the Gibbs family allowed me—a clueless, unconfident college graduate who had moved back home to live with his parents—to join their new company as an unpaid intern, happy to work out of an emptied broom closet with no electrical outlet (but a long extension cord). I have witnessed how a family business with eighteen employees grew to a championship team of around five hundred, and how every step in the process has come from a steadfast commitment to a simple mission: go fast.

And now as president of JGR, I help Coach Gibbs run that business. These days my office is larger and, fortunately, they pay me to work here. But the company-wide commitment to go fast remains the same.

When I reflect on JGR's history, I see five overarching principles that have guided us from nothing to greatness:

1. Deliver more than you cost.
2. Create a winning culture.
3. Stay on mission.
4. Treat people as souls, not transactions.
5. Win at life.

In addition to exploring each of these overarching principles, this book shares lessons within these principles that I have learned along the way. These lessons are keys to succeeding in business and in life. The pursuit of both is what makes Joe Gibbs Racing unique in our sport.

Accepted into the Family

Starting out as an unpaid intern established a pretty low bar for delivering more than I cost. Heck, I just tried to stay out of the way most days. But from the beginning, I tried to create value for myself and earn my keep. Ultimately, delivering more than I cost is how I became the president of a family business without being in the family and why, thirty years later, I am still here. (And still not named Gibbs.)

But the story of how I became an unpaid intern at all is about the power of influence.

I met J.D. Gibbs in 1981 in middle school in Fairfax, Virginia, when his father, Joe, became head coach of my beloved Washington Redskins. The week after the Redskins lost to the San Francisco 49ers for an 0–5 start to Coach's first season, I invited J.D. to spend the night at my house. We joked that, based on the team's record, that might be the last time J.D. came over.

I recall that even though J.D. was living in a new city and already hearing angry fans speculating that his dad could be fired, he did not seem to have a care in the world. From seventh grade until the day he died, I never witnessed anything that could unsteady J.D. Even from an early age, his excited and depressed moods were no more than an inch apart.

By high school, J.D. held larger-than-life status to me. He was that guy who always seemed to do the right thing.

J.D. could have been created in a lab rather than born. He was good looking, he played quarterback on the varsity football team, and he had status and material possessions because of his dad's career. Yet his greatest enjoyment seemed to come from sharing his popularity with others. J.D. recognized the power of his influence and often sat at a cafeteria

table with kids who weren't among the most popular or who belonged to a different social circle than his. He understood that with just a few words—"Hi, I'm J.D. How are you doing?"—he could make a positive impact on those kids who needed attention from a respected student-athlete like himself. And not once did I see J.D. take a seat at one of those tables and look over his shoulder to see who was watching.

J.D. was my moral compass. From observing how he conducted himself in high school, I started asking myself, *How would J.D. handle this?* when I found myself in a situation I felt unprepared for.

The Gibbs home served as a popular hangout for the friends of J.D. and his younger brother, Coy. Coach was not there much during football seasons. I remember late nights when Coach would walk in around eleven o'clock or midnight after a long day at the Redskins' office. He loved his sons having friends over, and he would sit down and talk with us for a little bit before excusing himself to grab a few hours of sleep.

The Gibbs family also hosted weekly, biblically based meetings for a high school Young Life group. I accepted an invitation to one such meeting only because the offer came from a pretty girl. Plus, who wouldn't want to attend a party at the Redskins coach's house?

I did not grow up in church, and before I became a Christian, I wrongly considered Christianity a crock and Christians mentally weak people who had been brainwashed. But the pretty girl kept asking me to go, and I kept going.

J.D.'s home felt different from mine. By the time I entered high school, my dad had married his third wife. Dad was a former CIA agent who spoke multiple languages and had briefed presidents of the United States. The engineering firm he cofounded following his departure from the government almost instantly became successful with hundreds of

employees. He was a gourmet chef, a brilliant pianist, and a big personality. Achievement was the chief pursuit in our family, and as the only son, I had a tough act to follow in my dad. He often told me, “You’re going to do great things. You need to get great grades so you’ll get into a great college.” I wanted to make my dad proud, so accomplishments became my god. Except the accomplishments weren’t coming.

In a high school of over three thousand students, I was by far the smallest boy in my freshman class at five feet tall and eighty-five pounds. I hadn’t reached puberty yet. I had also been diagnosed with Tourette’s syndrome in sixth grade. My symptoms got worse—of course—in high school. What a great one-two punch for making friends! As a teenage boy trying to fit in, battling those conditions and also chasing the god of great accomplishments to please my dad, I did not see much of a path to glory ahead for me.

Yet all throughout high school, J.D. treated me like I was the coolest guy in the world.

After graduation, J.D. and I attended different colleges but remained close friends. He moved on to the College of William & Mary in southeastern Virginia to play football. I stayed in Fairfax to attend George Mason University. Not that I preferred to stay close to home.

I planned to study electrical engineering to follow in my dad’s footsteps, and my top three choices were Virginia, Virginia Tech, and Georgia Tech. None of those schools accepted me. Two of the rejection letters came on the same day. The dreaded thin envelope from a college admissions office was the telltale sign that you had received the one-page “Sorry to inform you” letter. I opened the two letters in the driveway and, before entering our house, detoured into the garage so I could fall to my knees and weep. I had no clue how I was going to tell my dad about the rejections, but I could hear those words he had said to me so many times.

You need to get into a great college.

I loved and respected my dad, and I didn’t want to disappoint him. But I couldn’t have felt like more of a failure. I wound up attending my fourth-choice school.

I can look back now and call my freshman year at George Mason the worst year of my life. Had I taken a ten-minute personality profile before college, I could have spared myself a miserable year in engineering. Before my sophomore year, I changed my major from engineering to mass communication and media studies. After finding a good academic fit, I helped found a fraternity. By staying home for college, I was able to be mentored by my Young Life leader, Rick Beckwith, and to grow in the faith I had come to call my own. I even became a volunteer Young Life leader at my old high school. Both helped me discover the untapped leadership potential I possessed. But most important, I met my wife, Stacey, during my sophomore year. George Mason proved to be the right place for me.

Staying in Fairfax also kept me in close contact with the Gibbs family.

Mrs. Gibbs would invite me and Moose Valliere, a close friend of mine and J.D.'s (and the future best man in my wedding), to sit in a luxury box with the family during Redskins games. Because J.D. was playing college football more than a two-hour drive away, I made it to more games than he did.

Coach had a ritual of hosting dinner at a local restaurant after his team's home victories. In that era of Redskins history, that meant after almost every home game. Coach invited his assistant coaches and family friends to the dinners. I felt both honored and unworthy to be among the invited.

I still remember the first time I attended one of those victory celebrations. I walked through the doors into a room filled with dozens of people. Before I had a chance to survey the crowd for anyone I recognized, Coach shouted, "Pern's here!" Then he walked directly to me, gave me a high five, and asked, "How about that game?"

Coach always made me feel special and like I was part of his family.

Turning a Dream into Reality

The start of Joe Gibbs Racing is a right-time, right-place story. Coach had long held a dream of undertaking a business venture with J.D. and

Coy (younger by four years). Football seemed a natural fit, with Coy also playing in college at Stanford University. But J.D. had stated numerous times he would not get into coaching football professionally. Coach was well known for putting in long hours, typically sleeping in his office three nights a week during football season. J.D. had no desire to choose that lifestyle for his family, and Coach recognized that making his dream come true would require a shift on his part.

Coach grew up around auto racing in Southern California, and he owned a hot rod he raced on weekends in his younger days. In 1991, he and his boys decided to get into the racing business. Coach got into NASCAR, as they like to say in the South, while the getting was good. He entered on an uptick in NASCAR that led to *Sports Illustrated* declaring on one of its covers in 1995 that NASCAR was “America’s hottest sport.” If Coach had waited three or four years to start his team, the barrier to entry might have been too great.

When Coach joined NASCAR, he stepped into competing with car guys who had been in racing most or all of their lives—team owners like Roger Penske, Robert Yates, Jack Roush, and Rick Hendrick. Some were billionaires. Penske had bought, refurbished, and sold race cars as a teenager and then became a championship racer before achieving business icon status. Yates had built engines for cars that won seventy-seven races at NASCAR’s top level before he formed his own team. Roush was a former drag and road racer who had worked as an engineer at Ford before creating a business that built engines for race teams. Hendrick became the youngest Chevrolet dealer in the country at age twenty-six, and his success led to the creation of a large network of auto dealerships. His Hendrick Motorsports team, established in 1984, became one of NASCAR’s innovative leaders.

Although Coach had drag raced and loved cars, he would be the first to say he was not a car guy on a par with those he would compete against. Coach was a football guy—one of the best coaches ever, at any level—and he was about to take a full dive into discovering the differences between NASCAR and football.

Perhaps the biggest contrast between NASCAR and football is that the franchise model of football (and other team sports, for that matter) allows an owner to stay in business even if the team stinks. An NFL team can finish with a losing record season after season and its owner still turn a profit. I've heard Coach tell stories about going to NFL owners meetings, looking at the teams represented around the room, and crossing off about a third of the teams from having a legitimate chance to win based on the questions the teams' representatives asked and how they ran their businesses. They didn't seem to understand what was required to win in the NFL. But the teams in that room were making money because of the league's franchise model.

Coach quickly observed that wouldn't be the case with NASCAR. Race teams were not franchises, and those that did not win couldn't raise the money necessary to stay in business. There would be no handouts, no guarantees from the league. Owners like Penske, Hendrick, and Roush owned mega-successful businesses. I don't know if they ever covered for their race teams' down periods with income from their other businesses, but we assumed they could if needed. Coach's team could not. He made good money for an NFL coach, but he didn't make enough to float an underfunded NASCAR team. From the first day, Joe Gibbs Racing would have to hunt for everything it ate.

NASCAR teams stay in business by obtaining and retaining sponsorships. Sponsors are the lifeblood of NASCAR. Currently, 80 percent of our income is from sponsorships. If Joe Gibbs Racing could not secure a sponsor in its early days, Coach's dream for him and his sons would never make it to a track.

Coach had to sell the belief that because he had won in football, he could and would win in NASCAR.

To start his team, he paired with a trusted friend, Don Meredith (not the quarterback), who had partnered with Coach on ministry ventures. They targeted five companies to which they wanted to pitch the idea of sponsoring the team.

Coach's second pitch was to Interstate Batteries. Norm Miller was—

and still is—Interstate’s chairman. Coach met with Norm in Dallas, Texas, at the site of Interstate’s headquarters.

“Who’s your driver?” Norm asked Coach.

“We don’t have one,” Coach replied.

“Where’s your building?” Norm asked.

“We don’t have one.”

“What manufacturer are you using? Are you using Chevy? Ford?”

“You don’t understand,” Coach said. “This is literally a dream on a sheet of paper.”

Coach returned home realizing how ridiculous the venture he was attempting to undertake was. As he reviewed his meeting with Norm, Coach concluded, *He must think I’m nuts*. The next day, Coach called Norm to apologize for wasting his time.

Norm interrupted Coach before he could issue the apology. “You know, it’s funny,” Norm said. “We were going to call you today. I think we’re going to do this.”

With a sponsor secured to provide funding, Coach spent his short NFL off-season making trips to Charlotte, North Carolina, where the majority of NASCAR teams made their homes. Coach met with representatives from various teams to ask, “Who would you like to have on your team?” Coach compiled a list of names and started researching. And then he did what Coach does as well as anyone: recruit. Coach is the quintessential recruiter, because he can sell people on an idea and the opportunity to be part of a winning culture.

His first target was a driver: Dale Jarrett. Dale possessed NASCAR pedigree and an enviable future. At thirty-five, he had raced five full seasons in the Cup Series. His dad, Ned Jarrett, had won two championships at NASCAR’s highest level and, at the time, was a color analyst of NASCAR races for CBS and ESPN. Ned has since been inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame. Dale had grown up in racing.

When Coach contacted him, Dale was in the last year of a contract with Wood Brothers Racing, which had fielded a NASCAR team since

1950. Ned held a long friendship with Eddie and Len Wood, second-generation owners of the team. On top of that, Jarrett was driving the number 21 car long associated with the likes of David Pearson, Neil Bonnett, Buddy Baker, and Kyle Petty. Dale had not won a race yet—he would later that season—but the combination of Jarrett and the Wood Brothers seemed to be a team bursting with promise.

Coach could have pursued more prominent drivers, but Dale was relatively young and a high-character guy who would represent a company well. Not being under contract for 1992 also made Dale a candidate to drive for Coach in his team's first season.

Coach made his pitch to Dale, who asked his brother-in-law, Jimmy Makar, his opinion of joining the upstart team. Makar, who had worked in NASCAR about fifteen years and had recently become a crew chief, advised Dale, "It wouldn't hurt you to go there. But I'm not leaving for there."

Dale decided to leave a team with a rich history in NASCAR to drive with a team that barely existed.

Naturally, Coach's second hire was Makar, who left Penske Racing South midseason to accept Coach's offer to become his crew chief—his car guy—and to take on the task of filling out the remainder of his fifteen-person team.

Makar hired all but three of those fifteen: J.D.; Todd Meredith, Don's son; and me. Todd was a friend of mine and J.D.'s who had recently completed his accounting degree. Todd, J.D., and I were unique and complementary to each other in our giftings. We must have been created to be a team of three.

I had wound up on the four-and-a-half-year college plan and graduated the previous December. I had great friends and an amazing girlfriend in Stacey, whom I wanted to marry. But I was also living with my parents and working at a Nordstrom store in the mall with no real career plans other than an interest in broadcast journalism. I still felt like a failure who was letting my dad down.

With Coach leading the Redskins, J.D. said JGR needed someone who could drive memorabilia signed by Coach back and forth between Northern Virginia, where I lived, and the race team's new office in Charlotte. He offered me the job with a \$500 stipend to cover expenses. Any pay would still have to come from my part-time job at the mall. I was hoping to find a full-time job somewhere, but J.D.'s offer seemed like it might later provide a chance.

J.D. could have made the offer to many of his friends, but he picked me, he said, because I was reliable and because he and Coach could count on me. Their hiring me—even though I was basically a gofer making eight-hundred-mile round trips—felt like a bright red stamp on me reading “APPROVED.” I realized that in many ways, the manner in which I had handled myself as friends with J.D. had unknowingly served as my audition for this job, and the influence he had—as my friend and as someone I looked up to—served to change the course of my life.

TOPICS FOR REFLECTION

1. J.D.'s influence in my life helped me to gain confidence and eventually led to my being invited to join Joe Gibbs Racing at the ground floor. Who has been influential in your life? How did they gain that influence? In what ways has their influence made you a better you?
2. J.D.'s influence was often as simple as sitting with people who were lonely or making others feel wanted or approved. Consider your sphere of influence—home, work, school, church, your neighborhood. Can you think specifically of someone in each circle who might need encouragement or who could benefit from your influence? What steps could you take today or in the coming week to use your influence to benefit others?