

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Dale Coyne
Jimmy Vasser
Ed Jones
Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning to everyone, first and foremost. Certainly glad you could join us for a huge announcement from Dale Coyne Racing with Vasser Sullivan. We'll begin with some introductions.

Dale Coyne is set to begin, we did the math, his 38th year in INDYCAR competition. The former driver, now long time owner of Dale Coyne Racing. Jimmy Vasser is on the phone, former INDYCAR Series champ, turned team owner, winner of the 2013 Indianapolis with than Tony Kanaan as a driver. Fourth season in his partnership with Dale Coyne. Great to see Ed Jones returning to the NTT INDYCAR Series, announcing earlier this morning that Ed will be the driver of the No. 18 Team SealMaster Dale Coyne Racing with Vasser Sullivan Honda during the 2021 season. Ed, of course, 2017 Rookie of the Year in the series, 2016 Indy Lights champion, a total of 47 starts in the NTT INDYCAR Series with 14 top-10 finishes.

We'll begin with Dale. Congratulations. A reunion of sorts. How good is it to have Ed back?

DALE COYNE: We're very happy to have Ed back. We were happy with him a couple years ago when he drove for us. He didn't put an asterisk by that third at Indy. He had a hole in the nose of his car. He touched somebody's gearbox, put a hole in the nose of his car. We couldn't figure out why he was so quick in the corners and slow in the straights. It turned out it was a drag penalty for that hole, otherwise he might have been two positions higher, which really would have been something.

But, no, Ed is a great friend of the team. My wife, myself, we all get along really well. So we're very happy to have him back. As I told Ed when we were talking about all this, we both have unfinished business. We're very much looking forward to a competitive year.

THE MODERATOR: That might be the theme for you in 2021 for sure.

We'll move to Ed right now. 2020, as you know, was different for all of us in so many ways. Different for you, too, without a ride. How did you pass the time last year and how excited are you to be back in the NTT INDYCAR Series?

ED JONES: First of all, it's great to be back. As you said, 2020 was different for everyone. Unfortunately the ride that I had fell through with COVID there. So it was a different year for me a year where I didn't do very much driving.

One side of that was a negative, on the other it was a good time to reflect on things, get recharged. I actually did a lot of sim racing.

I've been back not in the INDYCAR but in some other cars the last few weeks. Feel as good as ever. It's really been fantastic to join up with Dale again, with Vasser Sullivan this time. As Dale said, we have unfinished business. Had a really strong rookie year. Just really looking forward to hitting the floor running, getting back to the standard that we were at.

THE MODERATOR: Do you care to get into how all this came about?

ED JONES: I've always kept in contact with Dale. I've been fortunate where I have a good relationship with pretty much everyone in the paddock, and I'm able to talk to people quite often.

After the year out, I knew I really wanted to be back in INDYCAR. I was talking to Dale, seeing what we could figure out. Things took quite a bit of time. It all came through in the end. That's what's important.

As Dale said, we've had a great relationship. I know a lot of the guys at the team already. Having that extra partnership of Vasser Sullivan, continuing their success, is something I'm really excited to get going with.

THE MODERATOR: Jimmy, what could Ed do for your race team during 2021?



JIMMY VASSER: He's going to jump back where he left off with his consistency. You look at his numbers, 30% of his INDYCAR starts have been in the top 10. So he's a finisher, and he's consistent.

I think also he gives us a chance to fight for the Indy 500. Three starts, third and a sixth. In my opinion, should have been Rookie of the Year at the 500, but that's a whole 'nother story.

DALE COYNE: Co-rookie.

JIMMY VASSER: Right.

We're excited and energized for the 500, what he can bring. Again, just echo what I said about his consistency. I can tell you all our stakeholders and partners are really stoked to have Ed coming onboard. This is going to be good.

Dale, you might have mentioned there's some unfinished business there. The cars particularly on the ovals have proven to be very quick, so we're excited.

THE MODERATOR: Let's open it up for questions.

Q. Ed, they talked about your experience, your expertise, your engineering background. Also returning to this team there's got to be the comfort level. You've worked with these guys before. How important is that comfort level coming back to the team?

ED JONES: Yeah, for sure. Although I had two full seasons in INDYCAR, it was with different teams every year. It's always hard to keep some consistency there. So it's really nice to go back to Dale. As I said, I'm familiar with the team and all the guys there. It should help a lot getting back into things. I've already been in contact with everyone. I'm just really looking forward to that.

It's a different dynamic to what I've had in the past, as I said. Changing teams every year hasn't been ideal, something which I think should be positive going forward.

Q. According to the release today, it said that last year there were issues with traveling because of the COVID situation. Was that from the Dubai standpoint or in Europe?

ED JONES: Well, last year I was meant to race in DTM. Every series in the world, everything in the world, got delayed. The partners I had there weren't so keen after what was going on, so that was the reason why I didn't

participate in that last year.

That was the time when I started thinking about INDYCAR, how we could get back into that. Yeah, it was frustrating. As I said, it was frustrating for everyone. You had to deal with it, work on yourself, see how you can make yourself better to be racing again in INDYCAR.

Q. Dale, I'll spin the comfort level question around from your end. How comforting is it to get a guy back like Ed that you've worked with before because you already have an idea what he can do, how he interacts with the team?

DALE COYNE: We're very happy about him. He has a new engineer this year, Ross Bunnell, who has been with us, worked with him before. They like each other, know each other from the past.

Ross was actually ready to move up as an engineer last year. We held him for one more year. He's really ready for the challenge. He is a diamond in the rough. He's going to be a great engineer.

What Ed is really going to enjoy is having Jimmy Vasser in his ear on the radio. Jimmy keeps you pretty pumped up there, so it will be good.

Q. What can you tell us about the status of the 19?

DALE COYNE: We hope to announce our other driver next week.

Q. Ed, after the DTM ride fell through, what did you do all year?

ED JONES: Yeah, I didn't race. I did a few different things. Actually went back to studying, did some MIT courses, which was a bit different for me (smiling).

Otherwise, the only racing I did last year was at Goodwood, racing in the Goodwood Revival, in an AC Cobra. Very different to an INDYCAR. What I also was doing was a lot of sim racing. Although it's not the same, a lot of the drivers are very competitive on there. It was good to keep sharp.

As I said, once I got back in the car finally, I felt like I was right back there. I didn't feel like I'd been away. Although it wasn't ideal, I did the most I could to keep ready and keep fit. I think it will put me in good stead for when I get back in the INDYCAR next month.

Q. Can you tell me more about the studying you did.

ED JONES: Yeah, so I did artificial intelligence, digital business management. It was different. I hadn't studied for 10 years, so it was just something I wanted to do to keep myself busy and learn something new. Probably not what other drivers did, but yeah.

Q. Did you say you did this through MIT?

ED JONES: Yeah, I did. It was online courses.

Q. What did you learn?

ED JONES: Artificial intelligence, about how businesses and companies use it to take advantage of big data. Yeah, very different to what I need for racing, but something I was always interested in, how things are evolving.

On one thing with the data, it's something you can use into motorsport, maybe not from a driver perspective, but with data on handling how you use testing the car and things like that. Through simulation, as well.

It's something which can be beneficial in the future, and something which maybe isn't really important for me now, but something I could use in times to come.

Q. Ed, you mentioned from being almost out of the car entirely, in any car entirely in 2020, to going to kind of a leadership role or presumed leadership role with Dale Coyne Racing this year. Do you feel there are any adjustments or a learning curve you'll have to make specifically with a little bit new car with the Aeroscreen that we have, just a somewhat new role, similar to what you had been doing earlier in your career, hopping from team to team previously?

ED JONES: Yeah, it is different. But I'm fortunate that I have the team around me which is going to allow me to make everything work. I don't feel fazed at all by what is going to happen. I feel confident we're going to be strong from the get-go.

Although it's different circumstances in '17 when Seb had his injury, I had to kind of take lead of the team for a while then. Obviously it's different now, but not something which I haven't done in the past. Even in junior categories, I had to take the lead role quite often.

No, I'm looking forward to it. A new challenge. As I said, I'm happy that I have the Dale Coyne guys. Jimmy Vasser there will be a great addition. The experience from him will help me fast track everything I need to do. Yeah, hope that we can get it done.

Q. Beyond the familiarity you have with this team, with

Dale specifically, what excites you the most or what helped push you toward saying yes to this? Obviously a racing driver wants to be in the car as much as possible, and this was an opportunity to do that. Beyond the ability to get back to the INDYCAR Series, the familiarity you already have, what is the biggest excitement for you?

ED JONES: Yeah, so for me there was many options in different categories to race in this year. The way 2019 went for me was really disappointing, my last year in INDYCAR at the moment. It bugged me. I knew it didn't reflect what level I could compete at. There's a lot of young guys in there doing well, and I beat most of them in junior categories, things like that. I know what level I'm at. I know it didn't reflect that. I knew I needed to get back to INDYCAR, prove what I can do.

That's exactly the reason why I pursued this so hard. In a way I was very frustrated about it. For that reason I'm extremely grateful for this opportunity to get back and really give it everything.

As you said in 2017 we had a good run going, but you can't just think of it like that, that it's going to be all great again. You've got to put in the work. I'm going to make sure I get the team around me and do everything we can to make that happen.

Q. Dale, after the 2017 season you left the season finale feeling like you were going to be returning and working with Ed for at least another year, had a handshake agreement that fell apart. You said you always stayed in touch. Doesn't sound like there was necessarily any bad blood or anything you had to work out in order to make this deal possible for this year.

DALE COYNE: No, I mean, we lost Ed to Ganassi. Last year we lost Alex to Ganassi. That's not a bad thing. That's a good thing. People come to our team and want to prove themselves. Obviously everybody wants to drive for Penske or Ganassi. If they can do a nice job with us and move up, that's good for us. That's not bad for us. That's good for us.

We understood what he did, why he did it. It's business. Like I say, we did remain friends through all that. Here we are back together again.

Q. Dale, obviously the guy who Ed is replacing, Santino, one of his strengths was ovals, probably his main strength. Ed has not raced ovals other than the 500 since 2018. Are you confident that you can get Ed performing as well as you did Santino?

DALE COYNE: Yes. I think Santino was a very good racer on the ovals, maybe not as good a qualifier. I think Ed is the same way. I think Ed is a very good racer on the ovals.

We have worked very hard on our 500 cars every year. We've arguably been the fastest Honda the last four years, given a couple situations here or there. I think we've got a good car for Indy. Ed showed he can qualify well with Carpenter there and race well. I think Indy, very much looking forward to Indianapolis.

Q. Ed, are you confident about getting back into the swing of it, especially now that this is your first time with the Aeroscreen on an oval?

ED JONES: Yeah. I feel like I've always been strong on ovals, short ovals especially. To be honest, if I could race INDYCAR ovals every weekend, that would be my dream thing (smiling). It's something which I love to do.

Although the windscreen is different, it's just one of the things you've got to get used to. I changed from old aero kits to the new aero kit. It's not a problem. Just something you have to adapt to and it won't be an issue.

Q. Lack of testing available isn't a worry for you?

ED JONES: Well, I'm pretty sure everyone else gets the same amount. I should be fine. Although I didn't drive last year, I still feel sharp. People came out from longer breaks in the past and get back on it. Yeah, I have no worries about that.

The most important thing is we work well together as a team. I'm confident we can do that. As long as we have that sorted, two days, three days, it will be enough.

DALE COYNE: The other teams went out to Barber for a day and Sebring for a day. I think we've got our three days. INDYCAR moved the window a little later so we're able to do those three days now with the drivers that drive for us. We'll get our second driver done, then we'll get out testing three days February and get our testing done in a hurry.

Q. Ed, you came in 2017 as a 20-year-old. How have you grown since that point and how do you think that will help you this year?

ED JONES: Yeah, I think, as you said, when I came in in 2017, I was still very new to everything in America. I had two years in Indy Lights which went well. But, yeah, you learn so much through the early years in INDYCAR.

As I was saying, yeah, as a rookie in the first two years you can always put in some very good results, but it's very hard to be consistently at the front. That comes with experience.

Yeah, I had seasons where maybe the success/reward didn't go so well and it didn't work out. Now I've learned from that. I feel like that although the year out isn't ideal, I feel I've also progressed in many ways. I think that I can come back stronger and have a better shot at racing.

Q. Jimmy, this is your third or fourth season now with Dale. What is it about partnering up with him that you guys enjoy?

JIMMY VASSER: We're like minded. This will be our fourth year, by the way. Dale has been in for 38 years I guess is the number, right? We like that Dale is always going to be here.

I think we really complement each other as two organizations. It takes a village. It's so difficult to try to fight the Penskes and Ganassis and Andrettis of the world, all the way down through the paddock these days, it's so hard. We're able to pool all of our resources and pull against the rope together.

I think we've shown going into our fourth season that it has given success.

Q. Ed, obviously you know the team from the past. I guess you kind of know INDYCAR well enough now. What kind of expectations do you go in with this year specifically? Have you set specific goals for yourself in terms of wins, podiums, top 10s or anything like that? What would you be happy with at the end of 2021?

ED JONES: We haven't set targets exactly. But you always go out there because you want to win. The competition is very tough. I think the driver level is the toughest it's ever been. The level of the teams is extremely high. I'm really confident that we'll put things together, we can finish on the podium. Ultimately we want to win the Indy 500.

Again, INDYCAR is so tough now that to get a win, you've got to have everything right. It's all about pulling up all those different aspects. The team has had some great success in the SealMaster car.

I remember the first year they ran that livery in 2018, I had just left the team, Seb was running at St. Pete, they won the race. I thought that is the (indiscernible) car and something I want to drive in the future.

The addition of the guys with Jimmy there, the experience he brings, I really want to target to get back up to speed immediately. As I said, it's very tough. Top 10s from the beginning would be great, but then you want to progress up to the podium again, ultimately fight for wins.

I know it's a tough path, a tough ask, but I really believe that as a team, together we can challenge for that.

Q. Dale, I've got to be the unpopular guy and ask the difficult question. There's a lot of talk about Romain Grosjean being linked to your team for next season. You said you're hoping to announce your driver next week. Can you say if there's any mutual interest there or if you're speaking to Romain, if you're interested in him for this season?

DALE COYNE: You all could make a list of a hundred drivers, we've talked to probably every one of them this winter. Employed, unemployed, America, Europe, every country. It's been kind of amazing.

Obviously Romain is a good driver. We'd love to have him. We're working on a few other ones as well. Hopefully we get all that buttoned up and make an announcement next week and then get out to testing in February.

Q. Ed, it's been sort of talked about briefly within this chat, but your relationship with Jimmy Vasser, how far back does that go? How did it kind of come about? How do you two work together so well?

ED JONES: Yeah, so I haven't worked with Jimmy in the past. Ever since my rookie year, Jimmy was always there. We would have a chat here and there.

It's great when you have a lot of respect for the past champions and guys that have done amazing in INDYCAR before. So I've always respected him, always tried to learn little things here and there, what I can.

I'm really excited to take it to the next level, really draw from that experience. He will be a great addition to have on the stand for me.

Q. Jimmy, Ed had kind of mentioned getting up to speed. What are you going to have to do to help Ed get back up to the speed, especially on ovals?

JIMMY VASSER: I don't expect any real delay. Watching Ed while we were around a bit in '17, then competing against him the following two years, just being a driver and knowing he hasn't been out of the car not that long for a young man like that. I fully expect him to jump in and find

his pace pretty much immediately. There's no concerns on my end it's going to take him any time to get back up to speed.

As far as the ovals go, we're going to have a doubleheader at Texas. Some of these tracks, Indianapolis, we're going to be there for so long. Looking at St. Louis. It's really not an oval-centric series like it used to be.

I don't have any concerns either on the ovals or the road, street circuits, there's not going to be any more learning curves.

Q. Ed, you're coming into a whole new series, new ownership, new ownership of the IMS track, new car. You've been through an interesting road. What do you think you've learned over the past couple years at INDYCAR, the types of people that you've met, that you can bring forward to 2021?

ED JONES: Yeah, as you said, it's been an interesting ride so far. Probably not the most ideal. Because of that I've learned a huge amount. I've had some great experiences with teams and some not-so-great.

What I learned the most is it's all about who you have around you in the team. That is the most critical part. The most important part I've learned so far is having people around you which you can really trust, people that are there trying to back you. If you don't have that in a team, it's going to be really hard for you to succeed.

Yeah, I feel really comfortable with the guys that we have on the 18 car, which gives you confidence. The experience I learned. Also it's key to find the right people. The engineers we have, Ross, a great addition to the team, somebody I'm really confident in. All those people around you, it's going to make this work. That's probably the biggest thing I've taken from the few years I've had.

Again, you learn so many things in the racing. Everyone keeps on bringing up the oval aspect, getting up to speed. For me, it's not about that this year. I'm not here to try and take time to get up to speed, I've not come back for that reason, or have any excuse like that. I want to be there and be straight on it from the get-go and back like I've never left. That's really important for me. That's my target. I'm looking forward to getting after it.

Q. Jimmy Vasser, he's good at ovals, so on. Is there anything specific you see in Ed that you can bring forward talking to him from the box?

JIMMY VASSER: We're going to find out, right? As I mentioned earlier, Ed has shown consistency. He's a

finisher. That's the most important thing. From there, hopefully working with Ross and Michael Cox as a junior engineer that was on the team last year, who is a very bright kid, with Isaac Townsend being promoted in the team up to crew chief working real close with Todd, we got to put together a nice, tight little group, keep it in the box, give Ed a good car that he has shown what he can do good.

He's a pretty methodical driver. If we can be there and then put ourselves in a position to take opportunities, try to make the right calls strategically, then I think we can, like Ed said, just find ourself in the top 10, then let's kind of put ourselves to get in a position to get on the podium, then who knows. From there, things can happen and you can win a race.

So I hate to be cliché about it, but you got to take it one race at a time, one session at a time, really just hone in on keeping it as simple as you can really, not make mistakes.

I'm going to say it again, Ed said it, I don't anticipate any getting used to the new car, the Aeroscreen. We've seen with the other drivers just jumping in. Ed is going to be right on the pace, at least match the pace of the car, what it's capable of, in my mind the first days.

Q. Dale Coyne, it seems like you almost have a potential tiger by the tail with Jones and Vasser together. How do you see it? Where do you involve yourself?

DALE COYNE: Jimmy and Sulli, Sulli is in the air right now or he'd been on here, he's flying from Texas to Daytona. We talked about drivers. Santino has gone off in the NASCAR or Xfinity. Ed was a natural choice for both of us. We looked at who was out there, who was available. My relationship with Ed, we knew his background, what he could do.

I think Ed is going to have a really nice environment there, with the people around him, chief mechanic, Jimmy in his ear. I think it's all going to gel very nicely.

This is all about making that team work. It's not just the driver. The driver is the most important cog for sure. But giving him a good car, having a good team around him, trying to get podiums. Wins are hard to get, but we can get them. That's the goal.

Q. Jimmy, the Rolex is this weekend. How do you feel going into the Rolex? You and Sulli have sort of branched out, doing your own thing this year. What are Lexus' expectations for you? If you can talk about Zach Veach, the enjoyment he's had so far.

JIMMY VASSER: Expectations are we're here to win the 24. Sorry to say, that, Ed. We're competing against Ed in the GTD class. We're going to kick your butt, Ed.

We have branched out, but the team very much looks and feels the same as it had last year with our past partners. But we've stepped it up in our minds with some personnel, engineering, and the driver lineup.

Having said that, it leads me to Zach Veach. He's done three test days in the car. He's really embraced working on the simulator and kind of trying to adapt to the ABS system in the car. I haven't driven it, but it seems to be something that is tough to get used to for drivers.

On the radio, on the in-lap from the qualifier race, he came on the radio and said that was the most fun he's ever had. He's really looking forward to the series. He seems really enlightened and extremely happy. That kind of energy, you know, it trickles down through the whole team. It's infectious. Hopefully that will help keep things light around here and we can deliver not only for the team but Lexus and all the stakeholders in the team.

Q. Jimmy, do you think both your entries are championship contenders?

JIMMY VASSER: Yeah, I do. I do. Although the 14 is very, very strong. We're going to see how Zach, leading the full season as the professional in the 12 car. With Frankie I think he's shown that he's able to win races and get podiums.

We expect between the two cars they should vie for the championship and more importantly we're well positioned with the two cars to get the manufacturers championship for Lexus.

Q. Just wanted to ask about SealMaster. Everyone who watches the races on TV appreciate having such an eye-catching design amongst all the red, whites and blues out there. How do you feel they have kept faith in terms of what they get out of it? You started a relationship with a huge bang with the win at St. Pete. What have they seen has been the value for INDYCAR racing over subsequent seasons?

JIMMY VASSER: First of all, they're a great partner, a very successful program for them. It's based around the franchisees. They get a tremendous amount of value from our media partners in Spectrum. They also activate, although they couldn't, they a few of the franchisees were able to come at Road America.

They understood while last year was the pandemic and they weren't able to do as much, but they're looking forward to things lightening up a bit this year and resuming what they did in prior years.

I think Dale will remember and a lot of people would, there were 110 franchisees that came to St. Pete when we won that first race. When you can give that kind of an experience for them, it's in their blood, you could probably ask anyone, when you bring somebody to an INDYCAR race, you can smell it and feel it and hear it, you get hooked.

They are a great partner, but they're very, very happy with how things are going. Their leadership ironically, too, a bit of an Ed Jones fan. We were really happy about that. Double thumbs up when we let them know who our new driver was going to be. We're really, really looking forward to getting this thing rolling and getting back to business, as usual.

DALE COYNE: There's a lot of nice parking lots and Sonny's Barbecue in Florida (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Our buddy Asher has chimed in. He has one question for Ed. Go ahead, Asher.

Q. Ed, you were champion in the SealMaster car after some great drivers including Sebastien Bourdais and Santino Ferrucci. How excited are you to be driving that car after all those good drivers?

ED JONES: Yeah, well. First of all, thanks for the question.

It's fantastic to be driving that car. As I said, the first time I saw it was the year after I left Dale the first time. Sebastien had won that race at St. Petersburg. The car looked awesome then. It's looked amazing ever since.

It's always one of the cars when you're on track, you see it. You're like, That looks good. I'm really excited to be there. They've had some great success over four years. Really hoping I can add to that.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations to everyone. Good to see good people return to the NTT INDYCAR Series. Dale, Jimmy, Ed. Our congratulations to Sulli, as well. Looking forward to seeing the No. 18 Teams SealMaster Honda at the opener April 18th, Barber Motorsports Park.

Thanks to everyone. Have a great day.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

