

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Josef Newgarden

Team Penske
Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Josef Newgarden, the No. 2 Hitachi Chevrolet, Team Penske Chevrolet. Don't like that number, do you?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: You know, we seem to win championships in the 2. Hopefully it's a good year for us, though.

THE MODERATOR: What is the outlook for this season? That's the goal, championship or nothing?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, it's definitely the same. It's a little boring, but it doesn't change. We want to win an Indy 500. For me specifically, that's a big goal. I've not won that race. Obviously as a team, we've had a lot of success there. They'd like to add to that.

For me, I'd like to get my first. Then the championship as well, yeah, we're looking for another one. Obviously I was hoping we were going to win our third championship last year and we could be working on the fourth. We're going to have to go back to square one and try to knock the third off this season.

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

Q. Back in January before the Daytona 500, you talked about how much you started preparing for Indy already. How hard is it in INDYCAR these days to not throw all your eggs in one basket, gain in one area but not lose in area?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: It's a balancing act, for sure. That's a good point. You have to try and understand, when you push resources one way, how does that affect everything else. I think for us, we're pretty good at balancing that formula.

Indy is a really tough track, not only because it's the most important race but I think because it's all about very small details, and those little details take a tremendous amount

of time and effort to move the needle. It's all these little things that add up at the end of the day when you show up in the month of May. It takes a tremendous amount of time to make large progress at Indianapolis, whereas at another track you may find a small difference or small change with something that you found that didn't take nearly as much energy or money or resources.

I think you can have these bigger magnitudes of shift at a place like a street course or a road course compared to Indianapolis. Indianapolis really takes a ton of time, ton of resources to make those little incremental improvements forward. That's why we emphasize trying to get that right. For us, it was skewed last year in that Indy was probably one of our worst tracks. There's no doubt. We didn't perform like we wanted to at the 500 from a qualifying standpoint and race standpoint. I think that's why we've heavily leaned to get that right in the off-season.

We haven't left anything else behind. We're still pushing forward on all the other fronts because we need to be strong across the season.

Q. Is this one of the toughest seasons top to bottom with the talent level that is in the series?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: It just seems like it gets better every year. It's hard to diminish what happened the last couple years. I think our depth of talent has been incredibly high since I've been in the series. It's just been incredibly high. It's only gotten better from 2012, whether that's teams, personnel or the drivers themselves.

Yeah, I think if you look at the championship, who is in there now this year, certainly the additions with people like Jimmie Johnson or Romain Grosjean, there's a lot of talented people in the mix. It's going to be really tough to stay at the front of the pack.

The field count is going up. It's not just the depth of talent is increasing, it's the depth is increasing but the size is increasing and you're keeping that depth with increased size. Yeah, it's going to be a tough task. INDYCAR is so tight nowadays. This is the closest form of racing that I see on the planet at the moment, the most parity out there. To try to find an edge on this competition, it takes a tremendous amount of work.

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Q. How do you feel the pandemic has affected the big teams in INDYCAR? It feels like the shorter window for getting your car in the right place across the weekend, stuff like that, kind of gives a bit of an advantage to the smaller teams almost. You guys can't get everything ready as much as you would have done before. Do you see it that way or do you feel like maybe you have a better advantage because you have more resources at your disposal?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: That's a great question.

You can look at it both ways, right? I should say you can look at it from both perspectives. You could argue we should have an easier time because there's less track time, less time to figure things out when you show up to the weekend. The big teams, more resource, they should show up more prepared.

I actually look at it the opposite way. I feel like where our strength is, when we show up on a race weekend, we have two days to work through it, we are so good at if we have a deficiency right when we roll off, we're so good at figuring out how to fix all the problems we need to fix by qualifying time Saturday afternoon, then race time on Sunday. That's where we really shined in the past, especially when you have three or four cars that are all strong. This year we're going to have all strong drivers, engineers. That's where we shine is when we have enough testing time to sort it out on a weekend.

I think last year we struggled a little bit with the shortened sessions. We were not always prepared. And not prepared in that we weren't doing our job, we just didn't forecast correctly what we needed some of the time showing up to these tracks. When you don't do that, you don't have a lot of time to figure it out. If you don't have the time, you might not get there on race day.

I think that is the new challenge with the pandemic, how do we work better in simulation, how do we show up more often with exactly what we need right away. We just know we don't have the time to fix it across a race weekend. Pretty much how you roll off is going to dictate a lot of how your weekend goes. We've been working a tremendous amount figuring out how to be better right off the truck so we don't have to play catch-up like we did last year.

Q. The Indy 500, that's the big focus for you guys this season. What are you preparing for and what have you been working on the specifics of the 500? A complex event with so many different elements to it that you need to nail.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Last year our qualifying form was not strong. We were all disappointed with our speed. That was first and foremost. How do we fix the speed of the cars from last season? There's been a tremendous amount of work that's been put in. We have the best of the best in my opinion when it comes to talent and personnel. There's been no shortage of effort and time to make these Penske racecars as fast as possible. That was first and foremost.

Then I think the race condition of the car, how does it really work across 30 laps on a set of tires in multiple-car drafts? That's probably the most important ingredient nowadays is just figuring out if you get buried 10 or 15 cars back, how is your car reacting in that much dirty air. That was something we needed to be stronger at.

Just outright speed and the car's potential in a big wake. That's all different this year, too. We tried to learn where we were deficient last year, but now we also need to figure out where we need to be better in the future with the new aero parts. Quite a bit of difference with not only the front wing but the underside build of the car aerodynamically. There's going to be some new elements. The car is going to drive different. We need to be better all around.

Q. Conor took high praise from you about his hair. He considers you a Greek God. If you like it, it must be good. I'm wondering if you actually like it.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I got to tell you, I thought he looked amazing. It's not for me, but it fits him. At this point he's built a brand, okay? I think he should own it, which he clearly is. You show up with that type of a haircut, he is on brand for Conor Daly. I thought he looked good. That was professionally done. I don't know if he told you his backstory. He went to a hairdresser this morning and got that done up. The commitment level, admirable. I admire the level of commitment he has for his brand. Good for him. Good for him. He is a very committed person.

I think Conor probably gets a bad rap at times. From a personal note, I've known Conor since he was a young kid. We grew up together racing karts. He's a super talented individual. He does work very hard and tries to get the most out of himself and out of situations that he's in.

Don't be deceived by this brand that he's got going on around him. I do think he's a hard-working individual. Yeah, I support what he's doing. I think it looks great.

Q. He said he achieves it by a lot of staring at the American flag.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Pretty sure he went through like

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three cans of hairspray. He literally got up this morning to have someone do that before he showed up.

Q. Year two under Roger Penske's ownership. What were the biggest things you saw that he achieved last year and what could be next?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Tremendously excited. I think we're all so thankful to have the leadership of Roger. I've been lucky enough to be in front of that personally, having driven for the team now for the last four years. I got to witness how Roger works within the corporation at Penske Corp and certainly within Team Penske. Just the way he leads people, he's really a tremendously impressive individual, but I think he's probably the best ally you could have in racing.

Now he's not an ally that I have or that our team has, but he's an ally that the entire series has. Yeah, I think they've done a tremendous job trying to weather the storm. No easy task, not for anybody, any racing series out there. I think Roger and the entire group at INDYCAR has done a great job trying to keep us afloat, get us moving to the next phase.

I think this year has strong potential to really go to the next phase of where we're at in this pandemic, hopefully back to a newer normal and working towards what we love, and that's having people at the track, putting on great shows, providing great entertainment.

I'm really excited. As we get to this next phase, I think the best is still yet to come from Roger Penske and the entire organization. I think, like I said, we're all very thankful that he's in charge and that we've got a good direction in front of us.

Q. You mentioned you feel like the best is yet to come from Roger and his team. In a year where the series is looking for a third engine manufacturer, you're looking to sign a new deal with NBC, explore new opportunities with broadcast, you mentioned the talent coming in, as drivers do you sense everything going on around the series off the track as you're getting ready this off-season?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, you definitely have a sense of what's moving, what needs to move, what's taking place around you definitely. There's a lot to do. Like I said, the best I do feel is still to come. But there's a lot of moving pieces. There's just a tremendous amount of effort that's going in, much more than I could fathom. Thank goodness I only really have to work on figuring out how to make cars go fast and keep it out of the wall and in Victory Lane. That's my job, which is much easier than what they are

tasked with at the moment.

Yeah, there's a lot on the horizon. I think the pandemic, navigating that, has been first on the list, trying to understand how do we just get to the racetrack, how do we serve our customers the best, how do we give our race fans the best experience possible. That's still number one for all of us. Then how do we take the series as a whole, keep moving that forward every year, whether that's TV contracts, engine manufacturers. There's a lot at play there.

We have a sense of that. Thankfully that's up to better people than me. I think we do have the best of the best looking after it.

Q. As Team Penske becomes a four-car team this year, how does that dynamic change when you add another driver into the mix?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I'm pretty excited about it. It's good timing for us. We operate well as a three-car team. When I initially came to Team Penske, it was a four-car operation. I've seen both sides of it.

I think at this time and place, I think a four-car team will give us more strengths than weaknesses at the moment. Like Jack had asked the question about limited time on race weekends, trying to show up as prepared as possible, which is so critical now. I think having an extra car, extra hand, extra set of data, extra engineer full-time, it's all going to benefit what we're doing. We're already seeing that. We're already seeing the benefit of it.

Scott is a really smart, accomplished driver. He's really good at what he does. He's still learning INDYCAR. He's not fully up to speed, I would say. He's not going to struggle. He drives his car to a very high level. His engineer, Jonathan Diuguid, is a strong addition to our operation. I think it's going to be a big benefit to us, to have a four-car operation. I'm excited from that standpoint.

Q. Does a strong finish to a season like you had last year where you almost won the championship, but you did have a great run at the end, any of that momentum carry over or do you spend a lot of the off-season thinking about how close you came to getting a championship?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I've tried to wipe last year from my memory as best I can, at least the tough parts. I felt like our momentum was quite consistent throughout the year, at least from a performance standpoint. We could just not seem to catch enough breaks. That's the nature of the beast. Sometimes things just go your way without

even realizing why; you can't seem to do anything wrong. Some years you seem to be on the wrong end of the stick half the time.

I feel like last year was one of those years. We were just in the wrong place, wrong time, a little too often. You have that happen just one too many times, basically what happened to us is the result of it.

Yeah, we had a good run at it. I felt confident in what we could do every weekend. I felt like that in the beginning of the year, the middle and the end. I'm not trying to just ride the end-of-the-year momentum. I think the consistency we've had year over year is really strong. We need to keep that going. I think from year to year it's been really good.

Q. The Music City Grand Prix, seems like every week they're announcing another big name into the ownership group: Justin Timberlake, Dale Earnhardt Jr., the other day they announced a whole list of high-powered people in the business community. You as a Nashville resident, how excited are you about the prospects of how big that race is going to be?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I'm tremendously excited. I honestly think it's going to be a huge deal, I really do. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe we show up and it's not that big of an event.

If I'm a betting man, all signs are pointing to a ginormous event, world-class event. I'm excited. The people, they have some serious hitters involved, like you said. They seem to keep just adding to that list. They're very prepared. They have everybody onboard that needs to be onboard as far as the city, the support from the Titans, the support from local business owners, from national business owners, from brands, large-name individuals. They just have everything in place to make this a world-class event.

I think that's their ambition. They want to host an incredible INDYCAR event but on top of that they just want to host a world-class event. Really that's what we should be going for. We should be able to bring race fans in to this track in Nashville to have a great time and watch a great show, but we should be attracting people that don't know anything about motorsports, maybe don't care about motorsports. Bring them to an environment where they can enjoy it.

I think the knock-on effect is they'll probably become motorsports fans as they leave the event. I'm energized about what they have going on. I think it's in the best city in the world right now for an event. I don't think anyone shows up better than Nashville at the moment when you bring these type of sporting events to that town. The sky is the limit from what I'm seeing at the moment.

Q. I was watching a Twitter video you did the other day, listing cameo videos or whatever, and you said you were in your apartment. Weren't you building a house in your hometown? Are you still doing that? Will it be ready for INDYCAR's big arrival in Nashville?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, still kind of transitioning. Trying to get that out of the way off my plate so we can focus on racing.

Q. With the NASCAR-INDYCAR crossover happening again this year, you've talked about wanting to run NASCAR. Is that still a possibility in the near future? Is it still going to be depending on the Indy 500 and then worry about that stuff?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I'd love to. I would love to say it's on the list right now. It's not, unfortunately. I'm focused on what's in front of me, which is purely INDYCAR. But I would really love to run some stockcar events. It looks like a blast. Similar to what you see going on with Jimmie Johnson and other guys from that series, they're interested in driving in our world, and vice versa, we're interested in driving in their world. I only see that as a positive. This crossover stuff is fantastic for the sport. We're all racers at the end of the day. We all kind of want to drive anything we can, have new experiences.

I'm really hopeful at one point I can get an opportunity to cross over and dabble a little bit over there. Not take away from my INDYCAR commitments, but just kind of add to it.

THE MODERATOR: Josef, thanks for your time.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Thanks, everybody. Take care.

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