

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Thursday, March 4, 2021
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Jimmie Johnson

Chip Ganassi Racing
Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to Jimmie Johnson, driver of the No. 48 Carvana Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing. Jimmie, thanks for joining us today. We really appreciate you carving out the time.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about how everything has been going so far. It's been well chronicled, but at this point in your development, how is everything going and how are your goals and expectations for this season adjusting?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Things are going well. I'm progressing every time I'm in the car. Really been able to spend time with my team and understand really how INDYCAR racing works, how a race weekend works.

I have my engineer now, and we are working through a plan at the races. Been to the simulator a few times. So it's all going really well. I just wish there were more actual track days that I could take advantage of so I could get up to speed quicker.

But I'm really going to have to use this year if not the first half of this year to acclimate myself to the car, understand where the limits are with the car.

All things considered, I'm doing well, and really more than anything having a great time.

THE MODERATOR: I know you've been drinking from a firehose ever since this started, but what's been the biggest adjustment between more than two decades in stock cars and then IndyCars?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I would say the intensity, and the intensity is not only what the car demands, but also the layers with the engineers that come with that. We want more data on the NASCAR vehicles, but we're just not allowed to with the way the rules work, and I didn't realize how that simplified things in some ways.

From a homework standpoint, a weekly to daily check-in standpoint, pre- and post-race -- pre- and post-test, I haven't done a race yet, I've been really surprised how much time is required. It's a lot more work than what I experienced on a weekly basis in the NASCAR side of things.

And then the intensity of driving that car. It's a monster. That's the best way I can put it. There's so much power, so much downforce, so much grip. It's wild to drive.

Q. How are you feeling?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I'm better. I had a tough night; ended up getting food poisoning. My post-Sebring IMSA test meal did not agree with me. It was a rough night, and thankfully INDYCAR worked with me to kind of jockey things around.

And obviously this is happening much later than it was supposed to be, but I've been on my feet. I've been able to keep a bar down and not have it come up, so I'm trending in the right direction.

Q. It wasn't Sebring Ponderosa, was it?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, it was the Sebring Outback. Watch out for the salmon and broccoli. It will get you every time. I try to go healthy and I get sick. I should've gone like bloomin' onion. I would have been fine.

Q. You made the announcement on the IMSA stuff this week. What happened there? How did that develop into more races?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I think we were all hopeful that it would turn into more, and then with the success on track and all the amazing exposure that all four drivers received, Action Express Racing, Ali, Mr. Hendrick, everybody involved was like, We've got to do this again.

Literally by Monday morning after car dropoff at 8:00 for my kids, I had a pretty good sense that it was going to happen. There was just that much excitement immediately following the race and the morning after it.

Q. You talked about the biggest adjustment that you've had in taking on this INDYCAR pursuit. Is there any one piece of advice that you've gotten from someone on your team or a driver that you've consulted with or talked to in the paddock that has really stuck with you and made a big help in this transition?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, every time I'm in the car there's so many steps forward in all these different areas that it's hard to say one thing. But I can tell you this: I am so thankful for Dario and for Scott Dixon. Those two have -- especially Dario and just how thorough he is, the notes that he took from when he was driving, his role that he has now and how involved and focused he is on still collecting notes and passing that information along has been so helpful.

I'm really thankful to have those two in my corner and really helping me kind of get things going.

Q. I know part of this transition in the off-season has been running some lower formula cars. From what I read I think some drivers less than half your age. What has that experience been like, and what did you get from not necessarily driving in INDYCAR, but driving something that was close and being able to get a little bit more testing time than you might have otherwise gotten?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, one big challenge I'm dealing with is trying to get the tires up to their -- the peak pressure and peak temperature when there's still enough grip in the tire. I'm more delicate with the car than I need to be, so my fast lap is two to three laps after the desired fast lap when the tire has the most ability in it.

Being able to drive some of these lower division formula cars, they have the same stuff to worry about, and it's nothing that I ever worried about in a Cup car. Your first lap in a Cup car was always your fastest, then it just progressively got slower, and it's quite different in a lightweight formula car.

I had a lot of great lessons learned there about bringing tires in, and I'm still not where I need to be, but I'm so thankful for those laps. I was also able to experience some tracks that I hadn't been on before. Went back to Barber and had a couple days at Barber. I've been to Sebring in it.

It was good for me at the most basic of levels, and then also at the same time the excitement that it brought, being around, for myself to be at the racetrack in such a simple manner, and then being around these families and these young drivers that are coming along, and I could see myself in a lot of them, dreaming big when I was a kid.

I really enjoyed being around some of those young drivers and their families.

Q. I had seen the story where you said you felt like you were about 60 percent acclimated to the INDYCAR. When do you think during the 2021 season like you will be able to get to that next 40 percent? When do you feel like you'll be 100 percent there?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I can say that the last 10 or 15 percent is going to be the hardest. I've made some great strides. I'm going in the right direction. I'm within a second of my treatments now, which has really been my goal out of the box was to try to be within a second of them.

But that last little bit, that's what the elite guys are so good at and chase their whole career. I don't know if I'll get to 100 percent with the amount of years that I have to give this a try, but there's still so many things I haven't even experienced yet. I've never been on a red tire. I've just recently had a chance to drive a street circuit tire and understand how much more grip it has versus a traditional road course tire.

When you look at the street course tracks, I won't even be able to drive on one until the practice, the opening practice session that we have prior to qualifying.

I feel like my best chance, though, with all that being said, is later in the year when we get to Laguna Seca. I've been able to test there twice. I will have a large part of a season under my belt, and I think that's probably, looking forward, a track that I should be in there racing with the guys. Or I hope to be.

Q. You talked about how you could tell the day after the Rolex 24 that it was looking good for more races this year. It seems like that kind of buzz that you're generating, ever since you've left NASCAR you've kind of been center of the conversation in a lot of ways, the latest example being the bootcut thing you started on social. Seems like it's gotten a ton of traction. What's it like for you to be a part of -- seems like the last couple years of your NASCAR narrative weren't great, but now it seems like since January you're kind of in the middle of things again, you're the seven-time champion being talked about again. Do you feel like you've gained some traction there and are sort of center of the conversation and narrative when you're starting controversies over firesuits?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I did realize, or I do realize that my decision to go INDYCAR racing, my sports car race, the Rolex 24, I can see and we can all see that I've had

some effect in growing, helping. There's been a nice effect of me participating in these things. It's great to know.

I kind of talked some sponsors into being involved with me because I felt like I could do that. So to have that taking place has been really good. Certainly the last two years in NASCAR were trying for a lot of reasons, but I think a lot of people can identify with my desire to try something new, my desire to be uncomfortable and kind of chase a childhood dream of mine.

And then I think from the sports car side, I've always let it be known that I've had a great interest in it. I raced in the early 2000s quite a bit with GAINSCO team and with Bill Riley and the Crawford group, as well. So it's really kind of coming around and I'm really happy to see that it's being received well, and it is fun to have that connection back to my NASCAR buddies.

Believe me, there's a lot of them asking questions about these cars and what it's like to drive them and how much fun I'm having. I think a lot of people are feeling inspired to maybe get uncomfortable and try to drive other vehicles.

Q. Are you sad that Chase and Clint and everybody has sort of said you're a traitor because you're no longer team bootcut?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, it's hilarious. I think it's hilarious. I didn't expect it to do all that, but what is funny is I remember racing forever with the peg leg style pant, and then when I went to NASCAR I had the bootcut and I thought that was so cool.

So I can identify with what they're saying and have a good laugh from it.

Q. Speaking of your NASCAR buddies, I don't know whether it's poetic justice or irony, but your INDYCAR career is going to begin 40 miles west of Talladega Superspeedway. When you think of that, first race at Barber Motorsports Park, you're starting your INDYCAR career in Alabama where you won two races just up the street. What do you think of all that?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, it is wild how that is coming together. The tracks, though, are much different in appearance, as I'm sure you know and have experienced.

You know, I think that the intensity that comes with Barber -- you go to Talladega, you're always fearful of something happening or a big crash and all that kind of thing. But Barber is such an intense track that to start things off, although I might be near a track that I raced at in Talladega, I'm going to have my hands full.

That is such a tough track to get around. I'm going to test there again next Tuesday, so I'm thankful to get another try at the track to try to be on pace and in the mix. It's a demanding, demanding racetrack.

Q. What's it been like working with Honda, the engineers, the whole Honda Performance Department group?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, for me it's different, obviously. I've been with a different manufacturer my entire career, but you do see parallels in the dedication and focus and quality people. I've really enjoyed the engineers that I've worked with. I've been in their simulator quite a few times already.

And then the HPD assigned a person to our car working with me. There's a lot of things on the steering wheel that we can adjust to help me with drivability of the car. So I'm learning to be more interactive with the manufacturer, the engineers, the manufacturer's supplies than I ever have in the past.

Q. I asked this question to Romain earlier and he gave me a 5. I'd like to see what you give yourself. If you started off, say, a 2 and 10 is completely race ready, where on the scale do you feel you are right now?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: If he's a 5, then I'm at a 2. He's spent a lifetime in formula cars. I mean, I still have to learn the flags and the procedures and all the stuff that's different. I'm starting over from square one here. I'm just laughing at myself and enjoying the ride as I'm on it.

You know, all the practice and testing I've done has just been single car. I was at Sebring yesterday in the DPi and was in traffic and really understanding the aero effect in traffic with a car that is so aero dependent, and I was blown away by the implications.

I thought NASCAR had a problem with aero tight. These downforce, high downforce cars that are so dependent on it, it's even worse, and I haven't had a chance to experience that yet in an INDYCAR.

I'm at a 2 for a lot of reasons. But I'll be there with a smile on my face giving it my all.

Q. What have you found kind of the most challenging from this whole experience so far but also the most rewarding?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I would say the G-force in the car. I thought that I've experienced some G-forces and would be



able to really know where the edge of the vehicle's grip is based on racing at Bristol or Dover where I thought there were a lot of G-forces, and I couldn't be further from correct in those instances.

I'm like recalibrating my senses right now to understand how fast the car can stop. I'm doing a decent job of getting it stopped, but I'm actually over-slowng the car. I'm just missing the sensitivity in knowing how much the car naturally slows down on its own.

I don't know, there's a few things that I'm still trying to sort out. Then you get into the lateral G-forces that are in the car. I'm used to slipping and sliding cars around all the time and thought that I would be able to handle one of these pretty easily or it might be easier with all the downforce.

When we get in these high downforce, high lateral-G corners, I'm way shy of the potential of the car, and I thought that my brave nature and willingness to commit would be easy to get to the limit, and I have not. So those are two big eye openers for me.

Q. What about the most rewarding so far, or is it kind of too early to say?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: When I do get one of those right. I've been able to -- in our test sessions I haven't been able to put together a full lap and pop off a fast lap time or a faster lap time for myself.

But I've been able to get sections of the track together, and when you get it right, man, the rush of really reaching the limits of the car literally and then on the brakes, it is unlike anything I've experienced before.

THE MODERATOR: Jimmie, thanks so much for taking the time. We hope you feel better. Everybody is really stoked that you're in the series. We can't wait to see you behind the wheel this year on all the road and street courses.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's going to be fun. Thank you, everybody.

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