

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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James Hinchcliffe

Andretti Autosport
Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have James Hinchcliffe, driver of the No. 29 Andretti Autosport Honda with a variety of sponsors this year.

Hinch, you're back to a full season with Andretti Autosport and it almost feels like back to the future. What are the expectations for you going into 2021?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, I think kind of basing off the races that we had last year with our partial season, we were really starting to gel at the end of it. It's obviously always tough kind of coming in as a part-timer and especially with a switch to a new team. But throughout the course of the year, we got to understand each other and learn how each other works and kind of get that group back molding together and gelling together.

Yeah, I think expectations are high for the year. We've got a pretty stacked lineup with Ryan, Alex, Colton and myself. Had good momentum within the team at the end of the year last year.

You look at Mid-Ohio and what could have been potentially another podium sweep at St. Pete before Alex, Colton and I ran out of talent. But the pace was there so we're very excited to get the season started and kind of just hit the ground running.

Q. Not to ask the NBC question, but what did you learn being sidelined a little bit last year that you can take into the season? Is there anything that you sort of look back and think on your brief sojourn into TV that you found can be relatable now that you're back racing full time?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, I think one of the benefits of kind of being on the TV side of things is you really get to see so much more of what happens during a race. When you're in the car you know exactly what happened in one race: yours. And then if you watch the broadcast back after the fact, you see what was covered on the TV.



So much of what happens on the racetrack doesn't make it into the show. But when you're on the ground at the track and you can kind of have more of a 30,000 foot view over what's happening with everybody, you can learn a lot about how certain races end up the way they do, how did this guy start here and end up or why did he start up here and end up down here. You can actually pick up a lot of how people win races, how people lose races when you can sort of see the whole picture from being on-site there.

There were events where I picked up a couple notes and things that will apply to the year, but I'm definitely looking forward to having the helmet on instead of the headset.

Q. Does that make you more trusting then, realizing that drivers don't always get the full view of what's happening, that if the team is telling you trust us on this, this is when you'll pit, you'll do it?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: For sure. That's always been a mentality I've tried to have when we are having kind of debates back and forth on the radio with the engineers about usually when to pit or which tires to go to. I'll say, Hey, man, you guys can see a lot more than I can. Here's what I can tell you what's happening with my car but you're seeing everything so you tell me what makes sense.

Yeah, it sort of reaffirms that you can get a much better perspective from outside the car.

Q. Big picture, obviously you're coming back and coming in with this huge wave of big names with Jimmie and Romain and everyone, Scott McLaughlin. What do you see this year for INDYCAR in terms of driver lineup? As competitive as it's ever been, what's your take on how things size up?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It's incredible. I think every year for the last five years we've done interviews at the start of the season and said things like, Man, this is the deepest talent pool we've ever had in INDYCAR. And it's started to sound like a line, but it's true. We just keep adding talent the whole way through the field.

When you look at the fact that those three guys in particular that you mentioned all come from different



disciplines, all have been successful in those disciplines and whether it was the goal to come here always or whether it was the next opportunity or whatever, INDYCAR is where they wanted to be next. For whatever reason they left their old sport, this is where they wanted to be, and I think that speaks volumes for what we're doing as a series, for the product we have on track, the quality of the racing.

I think it's kind of become a real drivers' championship in the sense that people from all different kinds of backgrounds are like, No, this is fun, this is competitive, these are awesome cars to drive, I want to go race INDYCAR.

I think it's the biggest endorsement we can get having guys like that come over here.

Q. How beneficial is it to you to be continuing your relationship with Andretti this season instead of going into a new team? And what are your goals for the year? Is this a one-year deal or is there room for next season, as well?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: So I think it's huge to be coming back to the same program. I think if you had to start from scratch again, it would certainly take a little bit longer to get up to speed. I feel like we can really kind of hit the ground running, like I said.

Yeah, the engineering staff that I'm working with is a little bit changed from the races last year, but for the most part it's a lot of familiar faces, so I think that's a huge advantage.

Expectations for the season are like any time. We're not going to know what we have until we get to that first race. And certainly going off the tail end of last year, I think the team was very strong across all the cars, and we're kind of hoping to keep that pace up and that momentum up.

If we can have a good sort of first stint here going into the month of May and the season, it's going to set us all up for a good shot at being in the championship fight come Long Beach.

What was the third question?

Q. Is it a one-year deal or is there an option for next year?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, so it was a one-plus-one sort of thing. So there's an option for continuing for sure, and obviously that's the goal of all the parties involved.

Q. You talked about the depth of the field in this

series. I'm curious to know, INDYCAR off track has a lot of things going on with hoping to secure a new broadcast deal, hoping to secure a third engine manufacturer. Seems like there's a lot of potential change, virtually all of it good that could be coming from the series along with these new drivers. As a driver, do you sense any of this change as you guys are preparing this off-season with what the season could mean for the series long-term?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I think so. I think there is very much an air of improvement, of advancing the sport. I think that's what we all really have wanted for a long time is to kind of help push the message and really get the INDYCAR product out there a little more.

With all the things that you mentioned, we've got a lot of cool things happening. A bunch of great new drivers coming in that are going to bring extra eyeballs. If we get that extra manufacturer, that's going to be awesome. The new engine formula is coming. There's so much kind of momentum behind it.

I know we've said that in the past, but these are some big-ticket items. This isn't just small things. We added a cool new race. Like cool. But these are some really big things that I think are going to have some really positive long-term effects for the series. And I think everybody in the paddock is feeling it. There's definitely a bit of a buzz right now.

Q. To get a little bit of clarity, I've been told that you suffered some sort of injury this off-season that required some rehab. I was wondering if you'd be able to clarify what that was and if that affected your driving prep for on track this season.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, no, something happened earlier or the end of last year, but all sorted now. Hasn't really affected me in that sense.

Prep for the season has gone really well, so not too worried. Just anxious and looking forward to getting back in the car.

Q. Were there times last year where you thought, Geez, my INDYCAR career is over? And what made you keep fighting so hard to get back into the series full time?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: No, honestly I never really had that outlook because I was supposed to be on the grid. I never thought that I should be anywhere else. So the drive and the fight was always going to be there to come back.



It was a weird year for sure. But in a lot of ways, had it not happened the way it did, the opportunity that I find myself in now wouldn't have presented itself. It's one of those door close, window open deals, and I truly am a believer that everything happens for a reason, and there's a reason it all played out the way that it did.

I'm now back with a phenomenal race team with incredible partners like Genesis and Capstone. And yeah, that was always -- there was nothing else to do. You say what was the drive, because that was the only option, was to come back.

Q. Obviously NBC contract is up this season for TV, but that's still to be renewed. We've seen INDYCAR make a lot of massive growth over the past few seasons. What in particular would you like to see INDYCAR do to keep that momentum going?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, selfishly more races in Canada would be cool.

But no, I mean, honestly I think all the things that really add that momentum, they're already in the pipeline. A third manufacturer would for sure be one of the big ones. I know that is something that is actively being worked on all the time. If there are cool venues to add like Nashville, okay, cool, we're doing that.

We're obviously moving forward with the new engine formula in a few years here. These are all big-ticket items that really do boost the series up and prop it up. I can't say that I would add - other than Canadian races - that I would add much more to what management and the owners are doing because it really is on a really good track right now.

Q. I wanted to ask about your Genesis deal. We know there's a horrible economic situation occurring, imminent, and yet you managed to convince a company to not only return after a toe-in-the-water experience but actually increase their backing for you. How the hell did you do that, and what did they see as the value in you, in Andretti Autosport, and also in the series?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, yeah, I think a lot of the credit has to go to the series and to the product that INDYCAR is. Genesis were new to sports sponsorship, so obviously new to motorsports. And even in a year like 2020 where one of the best parts about being a partner to a race team is the at-track activation, we couldn't do any of that, but they saw the potential.

They knew eventually the world would open back up and those opportunities would come back, and they loved the

INDYCAR product. They loved working with Andretti Autosport. They'd been looking for kind of a spokesperson.

There was a lot of boxes to check to be more involved in the Indianapolis community specifically because they do have a big office there.

So it was a combination of a lot of things, but I think the overwhelming one is the fact that even with everything that 2020 was and what that took away from all the partners in the series, they still wanted to come back because the foundation, the product of INDYCAR, is still very valuable to them in a lot of different ways.

Yeah, it's a real testament to the series and then of course everybody on my personal team and then the team itself and Andretti Autosport and then Genesis people all working together to put the deal together and come to the right terms, and here we are going racing.

Q. Just curious, do drivers look at maybe stats differently now? You guys keep talking about how deep the field is. Does a podium now feel like a win? Does a top 5 feel like a podium? Does that change mindsets from a driver's point of view?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think to a certain extent, yeah. A win is always going to be a win. It's only ever going to be good enough, a win. But yeah, I think being on the podium is going to be a greater reward and a better feeling than it probably was five years ago.

Top 5s, (indiscernible), these are going to be very difficult to do week in and week out with the series as competitive as it is.

Like I said, you'll only ever truly be happy if you won the race. But at the same time I think results and the sort of like fourth to seventh range are going to be looked at as this is a good points days.

Q. A lot of these drivers have talked about the last couple days their race craft has changed a lot over the years. Has yours changed a lot over the years, the Aeroscreen, when you came back last year change anything from where it was in 2019? Curious if anything has changed for yourself.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I don't think the Aeroscreen affected me at least that much in terms of race craft, whatever. But yeah, as the years have gone on and the cars progress and develop a certain way, and then like we've talked about the talent pool in the series is getting deeper and deeper, you do have to make some

adjustments because things are more challenging, areas you need to focus on more, because you have to maximize every single area of your job as a team, as a unit, to be victorious on a Sunday.

Yeah, you've had to put in a little extra effort as the series gets more and more competitive, and that's awesome. I love that.

Q. What goes through your mind as you're racing in your car out on the track? Are you thinking about fuel mileage, tire wear, or does your crew take care of all that for you?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: You know what, there's a lot that goes through your mind when you're driving your car on the track. You are thinking about all those things. You're thinking about fuel. You're thinking about tires. But you do have the crew that are giving you a lot of that information, as well, and so you can try to focus as much as you can on just winning, on just going faster than the other guys, on trying to pass as many people as you can, hitting every apex, every braking point. There's a lot that you've got to think about just to drive that car fast.

It is nice to let the engineers think about all the numbers and stuff and you can just focus on driving the car.

THE MODERATOR: Hinch, thank you for your time and for being early. Good luck to you this season.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Thank you, everybody. Take care.

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