

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Jimmie Johnson Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Greetings from Barber Motorsports Park where the NTT INDYCAR SERIES will open up its 2021 season with Sunday's Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama.

Certainly you know our guest today as this weekend will mark the NTT INDYCAR SERIES debut for Jimmie Johnson. Jimmie Johnson, the seven-time NASCAR Cup Series champion. His career is far from over as he fulfills a lifelong dream of competing in the INDYCAR Series. This weekend the wait is over as Jimmie prepares to drive the 48 Carvana Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing.

Jimmie, first of all, welcome. How excited, how nervous are you? What are the emotions right now?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I'm really, really excited. The drive in this morning, what today is versus what I've experienced the last 20 years on a race weekend, it's just different. Everything looks different, faces are different. It's been a nice change.

Certainly appreciate this opportunity that Chip Ganassi Racing has allowed to happen, and the folks at Carvana obviously have allowed to happen.

Excited to get going. I have plenty of nerves. There's so many scenarios and situations I have not been in yet. I won't until I get out there, get in the race, get in these conditions.

I'm just as ready as I can be. I'm not as ready as I want to be. I'll show up and give it my all this weekend. Certainly going to enjoy this experience.

THE MODERATOR: It's already been a busy week for you. Yesterday you were on the Today Show. Your sponsor Carvana has put together some spots that will debut this weekend, on and on. How exciting is it to see the support you've seen heading into this?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: The support has been truly amazing.



To see Carvana's activation to the level they're pulling this off is quite impressive. The American Legion is doing a phenomenal job as well. Our partners are all highly dedicated to this. That shows in many ways.

Just the text messages I've received over the last few days as this weekend has drawn near has been pretty incredible as well. From Juan Pablo Montoya, Casey Mears, Paul Tracy, a lot of different friends that I have that either lived in this paddock and around this industry or people that just know how much this means to me, how badly I want to be involved in it.

THE MODERATOR: Do you feel like an INDYCAR Series driver yet?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Not yet. That's probably going to be an interesting journey for me. I know that I didn't feel like a NASCAR Cup driver until there was a certain level of competitiveness that came with that.

I know it says on this license that I'm a driver. I know that tomorrow I'll be behind the wheel and take that first step as a driver. But before my heart of hearts says it, I think it will be a little while until I'm in there racing, mixing it up. I know that day is coming soon.

THE MODERATOR: The best word I guess is once you get in that car, get going this weekend, I think it's going to be phenomenal. We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Got to ask you this question. Have you found a Talladega Superspeedway T-shirt on the property yet?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I have not (laughter). I've been stuck in the transporter with a variety of meetings. That's something new to me in the INDYCAR world, is how many meetings take place with engineering, meetings with Honda, everybody working on a plan.

I have not really been out yet. I'm not used to cars driving through the garage, race cars driving around my motorhome. I will be on the lookout for that Talladega shirt.

Q. You brought some NASCAR people with you like Earl Barban. What is it going to be like having him as



your spotter after having him for so many years in NASCAR with Hendrick Motorsport?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: For me, having that comfort is key. That comfort falls into all categories. Obviously you think of the race car, people you work with on a performance side. When it comes to a spotter, public relations, all the things that make up a day, a week, a year in motorsport.

I have so many new people and faces that are around. It's really nice for me to have people I know, people I trust, that familiarity and comfortableness and confidence with folks.

There are hundreds of new faces I'm around. Thankfully there are two very important roles that are here to support me.

Q. There's a lot of national attention that you're bringing to this weekend. How important do you feel that is to spread new eyeballs on what is a very entertaining series?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's an awesome series. I'm happy to be a part of it. I'm happy to bring some eyeballs to it. At the end of the day this is for me. This is what I want to do. I want to be an INDYCAR driver. I want to be out there with these guys duking it out.

For once in my career, I'm putting more of a selfish hat on. This is about my experience, me really testing myself and trying something new. The stuff around it I'm very proud of and happy for. But this is all about going fast in a really fast race car.

Q. Now that you're back with people here, have you gotten lost? What has it been like with a full paddock?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's quite different. I haven't worked off the side of a transporter in 22, 24 years, something like that. So to have all four of our cars under a tent moving in and out of the transporter as you do, working out of it, reminds me of my off road days.

First glimpse, that is a huge difference from the world I was in, a little bit I'm coming into. It just goes on and on. From media centers, gatherings, the tech process, interaction with medical folks. Just thinking of all the different layers I've been through today. It's just different in every fashion.

Q. What is the scooter life like?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Scooter life, yes (laughter). Thing's got more power than I would ever need. At least here it's a bit -- I'm not sure it's very effective because I think I could walk faster from the transporter to my motorhome. I have

that scooter, I'm in the scooter club, so I take advantage of it.

Q. How many people will you have here for your first race?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I have a group of probably 20 friends and family that are here for the first race.

Q. Are the girls excited?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: They are. They're very excited. Unfortunately they can't get very close to the car with protocols, being minors and such. They're very excited for dad. They've watched me study all this in-car video, all the different things I've done. I've been sharing it with them. They're very excited. They both want to sit in the car. I'm not sure they'll have a chance to do that any time soon.

Q. What will be a successful result for you? Have you thought about where you ultimately want to be come Sunday evening?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I have. I haven't been in a real practice session yet to understand the intensity and the pace. I've been to a handful of test sessions. My last test session here at Barber, I know where I rank in the overall running order of cars that were here testing. I wasn't last, so that's a good thing.

Of course, I'm hopeful that that will be the case over the weekend. But I just don't know. I really don't want expectations to play any effect on my attitude or my approach to what I need to do here.

I can't state enough just how little experience I have in these cars, how different they are than what I've grown up driving. It's just going to take me this year. It's going to take weeks, months, this season to really find that last bit of speed and be in the mix with these guys.

Ultimately I need to make every lap that I can. If I go out there and try too hard, make a mistake and tear the car up, miss practice time, crash out of the race early, I'm costing myself valuable time.

I need to enjoy this moment and make sure I run as many laps as possible is the first goal. Tomorrow after the practice session, I might be able to adjust that goal and raise the bar some, but right now it's (indiscernible).

Q. There was excitement locally here earlier this week that an oval test is probably in your future. Any timeline on when you will try out the oval?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, there's no timeline. I've let the team know, we've talked a little bit about it. We have so much going on with starting this team up. Obviously focusing on Tony, his opportunities this year in the 48 car on the ovals. There's really nothing there yet. There's a sliver of an opening that maybe something can come together for the future.

Q. Is there anything you want to say to the folks in San Diego before your first event?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: First and foremost, just thank you to everyone at home. Hope everybody pays close attention to what I'm up to. I think Benny can relate to this INDYCAR desire I have, probably been up to Long Beach to see the races.

If I haven't seen you in a while, tune in, pay attention, maybe come see me at the end of the year when we're racing Long Beach.

Q. Back in March I asked you a question about where you rate on the scale. 1 being not ready for your INDYCAR race, and 10 being good to go. You gave me a 2. It's been a while. Where are you at? Have you closed that gap a bit?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I guess maybe at a 3. Again, for the testing I've done, I should say the situations I've been in, I feel competent. There are so many situations I haven't been in yet. There's some discussion about rain tomorrow morning. I have yet to be on a rain tire in an INDYCAR. I have no idea what to expect when that happens. There's just a long list of firsts.

I'm trying to set realistic expectations for the fans watching. I know many of my hardcore fans expect me to hop in and be right at the front of the pack. I'd love that to be the case, but I have a long road to get there.

Q. Are you nervous at all getting into your first race here? If so, how do you manage those nerves? You've won so many championships in NASCAR. You have all that experience. At some point every racing driver has to deal with nerves, don't they?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: For sure. I mean, nerves... Honestly, the more I've broken it down over the years, the nerves that come with racing is the thing that makes me feel alive. That accountability that I check in with every day makes me train, makes me study, makes me try harder in the sim, puts me in the race car. All those moments really come from that anxiety or nerve that it takes to be a race car driver.

I've learned to really welcome that and expect it and enjoy it. But there are different nerves because there are so many unknowns. I'm really trying to chase those out of my head, just focus on what I do know, just how cool of an opportunity this is.

It is a totally different world. My smile has been seen under my mask all day long walking around. People can see it through the mask and in my eyes that it's really a neat change of pace for me.

Q. If you could, compare and contrast your feelings of when you made your debut in Cup to making your debut heading into this weekend?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I've reflected on that quite a bit. I think it's similar. I mean, there's so many unknowns in the start of my Cup career. I feel like that's probably the closest experience that I have to what I'm about to go through now.

Granted, I did have a couple years running the tracks in the lower division, which I don't have that luxury here. But magnitude of the moment, the weight of the moment, is very similar.

Q. A couple days ago Chip spoke highly of you, said you were a good worker. With all that coming together, even though this is an unknown for you, do you feel having the support from Chip, Dario and Scott, how do you feel about all that?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I feel great. I honestly have the best support group and best team. They all genuinely care. Starting with Chip right on through, everyone in that shop. It's really been a pleasure to drive for the team for this short period of time, the relationships that I've built.

I'm happy to know that they see how important this is to me, that I am all in for this opportunity. I've always joked in my Cup career that I really wasn't that good, I just would outwork people. That's just me. It's taken me a while to figure things out through my career, but I've always put in the time and worked hard to figure it out. I find myself doing that once again.

It's nice to be recognized for the hours and time I put in.

Q. The difference between the Cup car and where you are now in terms of the seating position? You had the run in the Formula 1 car a few years ago. The whole seating position within an INDYCAR is so different to the Cup car. What has that done in terms of things like muscle memory, overall sensation for you?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: First thing that comes to mind is it took me three tries to get my seat right. I wanted to sit more upright (loss of audio).

I'm on my third seat. I'm in tune with the car, I understand the parameters of the car. I can't sense this car swinging and moving laterally like I could in a Cup car. I feel like some of that is just due to where the mass is located in the vehicle, a different sensation for me.

Then also the slip angle in a Cup car is much greater than the slip angle in a formula car. I'm still trying to dial that in. I was known for driving a very loose race car in NASCAR. I seem to like a much tighter car in an INDYCAR right now. Open wheel, so apologies.

Q. How have you done with the change in terminology from NASCAR to INDYCAR?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Thankfully at CGR they have a NASCAR team. They just told me don't get lost in your head about worrying about the right thing to say, just go. I'm sticking with that.

Q. How is it to keep having Earl still with the team? He's also making the transition from NASCAR to INDYCAR. How has that been for him?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's been good. I mean, he's been at each test session with me. He came to the three test sessions. Just to learn, right? On a road course, a spotter finding the right perch, knowing the track, knowing people at gates to get through, to have access to different areas. There's like a skill to the craft. He is eager to make sure he can do everything that he can for me on the INDYCAR side.

On top of that, he's doing more than just spotting for me. He's really helping me and my family with life in a lot of ways. Through these 13 INDYCAR races, he's driving my motorhome, taking it to the tracks. He and his wife are helping with some small hospitality needs we have with friends that come through. He's working with the team and spotting when the car is on track.

His roles and responsibilities have changed quite a bit with this adventure into INDYCAR. He's learning it all and doing great.

I would say from a spotting standpoint, he won't be able to see me all the way around the track. That's something I need to be much more aware of my mirrors and not rely on a spotter. Also these drivers drive as if a spotter is not there. In NASCAR, if your nose broke the bumper plane, that means you're there and you can't take that position.

Here there's a different way of having ownership of a turn or exit of a turn. I have to learn my way through that.

From Earl's standpoint, the braking zones, passing opportunities are so short and small basically, things happen so quickly, that his cadence will need to pick up as well. With all that said, we're all eager and ready.

THE MODERATOR: We were talking with Romain Grosjean, what a rookie class, you, Roman, a guy like Scott McLaughlin. The welcome you've received from the paddock. Grosjean was flabbergasted how different it is to Formula 1, not comparing Formula 1 to NASCAR. What has it been like for you in the response?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Response has been great. Having the friends that I've had in this paddock for so many years, from afar I've always sensed this brotherhood, this vibe that comes from the INDYCAR paddock. NASCAR has its own. I'm sure Formula 1 has its own, as well.

This one always has seemed to be a bit more upbeat, a bit more energetic, fun if you will. I don't know if that's the case for a 20-year veteran having a conversation with us, if they feel the same. From afar it's what I've witnessed.

The few samples I've had in this paddock area through watching races last year and walking around today, it certainly feels that way. It's a very welcoming environment. That shouldn't take away from the intensity, just how damn good these drivers are in the series. It's all fun and games right now, but I know when the helmets go on, it's going to get serious.

THE MODERATOR: We'll all be watching. Good luck this weekend. Try to enjoy it. Have fun. Good luck.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Will do.

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