

# NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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## Tony Kanaan

Chip Ganassi Racing  
Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. Let's go ahead and get started. My name is Dave Furst. All is right with the world when Tony Kanaan is racing in the NTT INDYCAR SERIES as he is this weekend. He makes his 2021 debut when he drives the No. 48 Bryant Honda in the Genesys 300 on Saturday night, and then Sunday he'll drive the No. 48 American Legion Honda in the XPEL 375, of course all taking place at the Texas Motor Speedway as it celebrates its silver jubilee and where TK won back in June of 2004.

Tony, I would assume there's got to be a level of anticipation about starting your season this weekend and in front of fans, perhaps most importantly. How excited are you?

TONY KANAAN: Oh, really excited. 10 months ago that's how I started it again. I guess we all started it in Texas 10 months ago, and I can't wait.

I haven't been in the car in a while. Obviously we tested at IMS for two days, which is two days more than I had last year when we went to Texas.

I'm really excited. I think with the challenge this year with Chip Ganassi Racing, the responsibility of the No. 48, having Jimmie texting me to take care of his car the entire weekend, which I keep reminding him, it's Chip's car, but it's his number, right.

So I'm excited. I can't wait.

Obviously I can't thank my sponsors enough. Bryant -- I mean, look how -- it's going to be a big effort. I know some of this team has done it before. We're going to race one livery Saturday night and the guys are going to come in after the race, unwrap the car and wrap the car with the American Legion, so it will be Bryant on Saturday like you said, American Legion on Sunday.

A lot of folks are going to watch that race in person. As far

as my sponsors, 7-Eleven is still on board. The NTT guys, apart from sponsoring the series, they sponsor the team, they sponsor myself, so I'm excited. I can't wait.

THE MODERATOR: It's a pretty fascinating return for you to Chip Ganassi Racing. You rejoin the team, your friend Scott Dixon, you take over the 48 of your friend Jimmie Johnson, who I know you know pretty well. How reassuring is that as you get back into this?

TONY KANAAN: It's, I mean, like somebody asked me the other day, how easy was it to adapt again to the new team. It's actually -- it didn't feel like a new team. I have the same teammate. My locker is still the same locker as when I left in 2015.

I mean, Eric is my engineer, some of my mechanics are still my mechanics from when I was there.

It felt like I just came back, came back home. I feel extremely confident. Obviously we have high expectations for this weekend. The team was extremely strong there last year. We have not changed -- INDYCAR has not changed the rules much. We're coming in with a better tire this year, a softer tire this year, a little bit more downforce, trying to get the second groove working.

I'm ready, Dave. I'm really excited. It's a big challenge coming back to a team that expects us to win, and Chip is going to be putting the pressure on all of us, so I like that.

THE MODERATOR: Lastly, you mentioned earlier, but maybe just touch on your sponsors again. You've known the great folks at Bryant for a long time and American Legion has gone all in, as well.

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, I mean, Bryant obviously -- last year it was funny, when I jokingly said, I don't think I should retire, I think racing without the fans here, it's not fun. The phone rang five minutes after I made that quote, and the Bryant folks said, "let's do it." NTT came back and said, "let's do it." 7-Eleven said, "let's do it." Then as a great surprise, American Legion came on board to be on my car full time for this race and the 500, and he's there on Jimmie's car as an associate.

Great folks, great cause. I got a huge response from when

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we announced that so many people that I didn't even know they were related to the American Legion.

The car looks awesome. I mean, it's like unbelievable.

Again, we talked, you and I, but I would never expect at this point of my career having a chance like that again, so I'm really pumped. I'm really excited. I feel like a kid.

My wife is looking at me this week, she's like, I've never seen you that excited or that anxious in a while, and that translates to how happy I am.

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

**Q. We've done oval back-to-back double-headers before at Iowa and at Gateway. This is a little different animal, though, Texas Motor Speedway. Usually when things happen they happen big, they can happen bad. What's your mindset in having these back-to-back races at a track where usually if you lose control you're not going to really save the car very well?**

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, I mean, it's tough, right. Race one is going to dictate a lot of your weekend as far as that. But you can only worry about things you can control. Obviously we're there to race.

I think you will see some guys maybe taking it a little easier in the first race to be able to just gather some points. The way the championship is right now, I mean, look at -- there is 40 points separating P1 to P18. I think you'll probably see a lot less crashes this year, though, as you're throwing your championship chances away.

It will be no different than what we did on those two double-headers we did last year. You're going to have to be prepared. I think the teams are more prepared if something like that happens if going to have an advantage, and the teams that are not they're going to have to tell their drivers to take it easy probably in race one.

**Q. With your schedule and the fact there's four ovals, your season is going to be half over come Sunday night.**

TONY KANAAN: Well, true, in INDYCAR. But I'm doing SRX with Tony Stewart, which is six races there, and 10 stock car races in Brazil. Actually I wish my wife was listening to you, thinking my season is almost over, but I'm having -- she was like, what part of slowing down you told me you were doing? Going to Brazil -- I just came back two days ago from the race in Brazil. I will leave next week to do another race there before the 500.

Yeah, my INDYCAR one will be half over, but it was totally expected, so...

**Q. Also I know you and Jimmie talk a lot, but how would you kind of assess how his first two races have gone, and what kind of advice have you given him?**

TONY KANAAN: I mean, we knew it was going to be hard, right, and I think he's just trying to learn as quick as he can. As competitive as he is, he's trying to go as fast as he can, and sometimes mistakes happen.

After the fact, after the mistakes he's been doing pretty solid. I mean, he finished both races. He was getting a lot quicker towards the end of both races. We talked, and it's just time. That proves how INDYCAR is tough, as well.

Some of the drivers had a hard time when they did the switch from INDYCAR to NASCAR, and it's no different.

He's going to get it. He has good teammates helping him, and I love the way he's relentless. He's the type of guy that he's going to make this work. I can see it on him how he's been so successful, and I wouldn't count Jimmie Johnson out just yet.

**Q. Obviously we have different qualifying like we had at Iowa and Gateway this year. Do you approach that differently? Do you have to go easy on the first lap, or is it just go as fast as you can on both laps?**

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, you can't, right, because you qualify for both race, so you've got to go as fast as you can on both laps.

Sometimes -- the only thing you do, you approach qualifying differently because sometimes you would say, okay, I will do well to have to put it on the field and then I'll try everything I can on the second lap. Here you're talking about two races, so no, it's a lot more nerve-racking. Qualifying, it's nerve-racking enough, but yeah, no, you've got to put it down both laps.

**Q. Is it something where you just have to change the setup a little bit to get the maximum --**

TONY KANAAN: Yeah, and then as per rule, you cannot change your car after qualifying to the race car, so you can only make a few adjustments on the wing. You're basically qualifying your race car, which is the same for everybody, but yeah, that's the way they made the rules.

**Q. Tony, you've got an extra job tomorrow, downtown Fort Worth with the Pit Stop Challenge. I think Eddie Gossage is counting on you to sell some tickets.**

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TONY KANAAN: Yeah, I'm excited about that, especially I haven't done any pit stops yet this year. I did a couple of them at the test in Indy. For me when they invited me to do it, I said, I'm in. It's extra time in the car for me. The guys have done two races already and I haven't.

Hopefully -- I think John, especially with Texas being -- it's all begun with them making the efforts to start the season last year, it's more deserving that we can have some fans there and get the word out.

I think people are, at least I am, with four kids here at home, you try to figure out what to do and where can we take the kids that it's going to be safe enough. The track is big enough. Anybody can bring their families there, and we'll have enough separation and social distancing. Hopefully that will invite people to come over. First it's to get the word out, and I think the pit stop downtown Fort Worth, it's going to definitely bring some attention.

**Q. I know that it rained real hard last night, so maybe that'll help some of that PJ1 off, but the track supposedly also has begun running old tires around the track around the PJ1 area to try to get a groove, maybe a groove and a half. Would that help the racing?**

TONY KANAAN: A hundred percent. I think INDYCAR did a lot of effort. They made a lot of effort to increase a little bit of the downforce. Firestone was coming with a softer tire, and Texas Motor Speedway has been doing a lot of work to be able to work it out that lane and a half.

I think we need that. I think we're going to make it work. I hope so because Texas -- without going side-by-side in Texas, it would be a boring race.

**Q. I wanted to ask, because you're part-time and don't have to worry about the championship, I realize you have to worry about bending Chip's car, obviously, but do you go into this with less to lose and therefore able to take bigger chances against those guys that are trying to build up their championship tally?**

TONY KANAAN: Oh, a hundred percent. I think my goal is I have four races to win. As far as being aggressive, I've always been aggressive. I think the guys will know if they race when they're racing me that I don't have a lot to lose. I'm not saying we're going to do something silly just because of that to take advantage of that, but I think I will be thinking of that.

We've done that in the past when Ed Carpenter was racing just the ovals, which he's extremely good. He was running

up front there with us. We knew. If it's five laps to go, three laps to go, you're going to try and move on me and I'm leading, we might not finish the race, or you're going to let me go.

Yes, to answer your question, yes.

**Q. You touched on it a little, but I want you to expand on your confidence for this weekend. Like you said, Chip has had really good cars already this year and at Texas last year, and last time you were with Chip you had a great stretch at Texas. How confident do you feel about this weekend?**

TONY KANAAN: I'm confident. I think like I spent the time in the sim yesterday. The car felt great. I'm pretty comfortable in Texas. Look at last year. Like I said, we finished in the top 10 there. It's a track that has been pretty good to me.

I'm going in mindful that it's a tough series, and those guys, everybody is going to be fast. But when you have a fast car, your life becomes a lot easier.

I'm 100 percent confident that I can actually be fighting for a win this weekend.

**Q. You said a little bit earlier that you're like a little kid in a candy store because you're just so happy. Are you also like a little kid in a candy store because you feel so good about this weekend? You feel like you really have a chance this weekend?**

TONY KANAAN: A hundred percent. If you think about when this opportunity came about, I mean, I'm with one of the best teams in the series, and I'm racing in a few of my strongest racetracks that I had on my record, including the 500. That alone is just -- like you're telling a race car driver he's getting into a team that is a winning team or back to a winning team that has a lot of potential, it's -- you lose sleep over that. It's actually -- you daydream a lot.

**Q. You said last year in July, I never said I'm going away. Obviously you're racing this weekend on the oval tracks as well as the other series, but just how much of an adjustment is it for you not running a full-time INDYCAR schedule this season? Was it tough to let go finally and say, okay, I'm only going to do this?**

TONY KANAAN: Look, I have to say, if I had to pick a positive and selfish spin off of COVID, I think last year would have been a lot tougher for me to watch because I think -- I would say at the end of the year before, that really didn't sit well with me just to do the ovals, but I didn't have

a choice, so I decided that before somebody made that choice for myself, I announced that I was only going to do the ovals.

It was hard, and then with the pandemic, I mean, I started when everybody else started last year, so it was a little bit easier, and then it was tough, like the only race that I -- I attended two races last year that I wasn't racing, here, the Indy road course, and St. Pete. St. Pete I have to say it was tough. It was tough to be present and watch and not be there.

And then it came this year, I'm not saying I got psychologically prepared. I think it's just as a human you get used to your new whatever. Look at us right now, using a stupid example the other day, I said, when could you walk in a place wearing a hood and a mask and you wouldn't get arrested, and now actually if you don't do that, you probably get arrested.

I got used to it, and then some exciting things started to happen, right. The stock car races in Brazil and then SRX with Tony Stewart, and then I realized that eventually INDYCAR was -- it is my life, and I still get to do the races that I wanted to do. I still get to race in the 500, which is the most important race.

To do other things, it wasn't bad, but when you do the same thing over and over for more than two decades, that first six, seven, eight months it's hard to adjust.

I think that's normal for anybody that has done the same job for many years.

Now I'm good. I'm happy. I'm okay with it. I have a three-year deal with Chip. I'm going to be doing the same thing next year. I get to try other things, other race cars, and I'm excited about that.

**Q. Tell me about SRX really quick and what you're doing to prepare for competition in that series.**

TONY KANAAN: Nothing. I have no idea. We're going to tracks that I've never seen. I looked at the schedule, I didn't even know they existed, no offense. They're short tracks, they're dirt tracks. I've done Eldora a couple years with Tony, but it was a completely different car. I saw the car for the first time two weeks ago. I'm going to go do my seat probably next week.

But I have no idea what to expect apart from I'll be racing with a lot of legends. When I show up there and I see we're in line -- we had this photo shoot and we're all doing this COVID rapid test and stuff, and I had Bobby Labonte, Tony Stewart and then Bill Elliott with his original

McDonald's bag with his helmet on. I'm like, you know what, this is pretty cool.

I know I'm going to get smoked, but we'll try to give those guys a hard time and bang some wheels. I'm really excited about it.

**Q. Tony, this will be your 24th season that you've competed in INDYCAR. I know I've talked to some NASCAR guys over the years and some of this influx of young talent has kind of changed the way they've raced because of their aggression and INDYCAR has got a lot of good young talent now, too. Has that changed anything now compared to the late '90s when you were these kids' age?**

TONY KANAAN: Well, when I was those kids and I was racing Bobby Rahal and Al Unser Jr. that hard, yeah, it changes because you go from, I'm going to go beat those guys, and you go, those kids are crazy, man, what are they doing. They can wait a little bit.

It's funny how that goes. I love to see what they do, like you get Palou, you get some of -- some of those rookies are being so aggressive and so strong, and sometimes they mess up. Look at VeeKay at the Indianapolis test. You're like, dude, you could have waited a couple laps, but that's part of the learning curve, and I love their aggression. They're fast and aggressive.

Now I got to experience the both sides, being the kid that wanted to -- I will never forget my first race in Homestead and I'm racing Al Junior for ninth. One lap -- it was Homestead, the old track. He ran high outside of Turn 3 the lap before, so I'm like, okay, I'm setting up for a pass. So next lap I'm like, okay, I'm going to go down low and pass him because he's running the high line. What happens the next lap? He runs down low, I wash out and I hit the wall. I will never forget after the race he came to me, I'm like, that was a good move. He says, oh, well, you will learn, kid.

That's pretty much how I feel. I mean, I think if we get down to a fight in Texas with the young kids, I think they will learn a couple more things about oval racing.

**Q. You've been really good at Texas and Indy over the years. I know obviously it's a similar package, but the last time you were with Ganassi it was 2017 and we had a completely different race car there, different package. You've got similar guys on the team that you're accustomed to, but is there any learning each other this weekend because it's a new car, new setups, anything changed since you were with Foyt that may be a change since the last time you were with**

## Ganassi?

TONY KANAAN: I mean, a lot has changed, but like I said, it's still an INDYCAR, but when it's a good setup it's easy to adapt. It might take me a little bit, but I don't see a problem. The cars are extremely different, not just from what I was used to but also from the cars that I drove last year.

**Q. How difficult is it to get back up to speed in the INDYCAR after you've been driving the stock car? And how beneficial is that sim time?**

TONY KANAAN: Oh, the sim time is extremely beneficial. It is actually kind of a reset, I have to say. I think it was more -- it was a bigger difference when I did the test in Indy and I went to the stock car in Brazil. It was like, whoa, because they are much slower, the brakes and speed and stuff.

As far as going back to the INDYCAR, for me it's a no-brainer just because I've been doing it for 24 years, so it's my comfort zone where I know. The problem is when I do the opposite. So leaving this weekend to go back there in a couple weeks, that's a bigger change for me than actually the other way around.

It's just obviously completely different. It will take you a little bit of -- when I first get in the car, remember, the buttons are different, the pit lane speed limit in one car is on one side of the steering; the other side, the paddle shift, the clutch. I got into a stock car and they said, okay, green flag, go, and we had a pedal clutch, not a pedal -- on your pedals basically, not in your hand, and I'm trying to look for the butterfly to put first gear. And I said, well, okay, that's not it, so hopefully I won't be looking for a clutch on my INDYCAR this weekend.

**Q. I'm just thinking about something that you said earlier about the rookies' experience. Last year we see this track have this change with what they do with the asphalt. Do you think you can find something to do a little different and you keep it for you?**

TONY KANAAN: Well, I mean, it's going to be hard for me to find out something that the others won't. But I think if we can manage to run the lane and a half, which it was extremely hard last year, but the guys that did were the guys that actually ended up winning the race and succeeding and finishing well, that would be the key, but right now it's hard to know what's going to happen.

There are a lot of things in our favor. It's going to be cooler than it was last year. We have more downforce from INDYCAR, Firestone is bringing a softer tire, and Texas

has done a lot of work to try to clean that whatever they put down for the NASCAR boys a couple years ago.

But no, to answer your question, I don't think there is a secret that I can keep apart from the experience I have in that racetrack that actually I can't say what my plans are, but yeah.

**Q. Since you and Scott Dixon have really raced in the Texas Motor Speedway, like have had lots of starts, most out of everyone, do you think that gives you an advantage to help you finish near the front in the Texas race this weekend?**

TONY KANAAN: I would like to think so. I mean, like if you look at my results, record there, my average results, it's actually the highest I have in my entire career is in Texas. I finished, I think, 80 percent of my races inside the top 10.

So yes, I think I have a lot of experience there, especially being two races. Some guys will probably be too tired in the second day, make a mistake.

The key for Texas is to know when to attack and how to do it, so I think that's something that some of those guys have not figured out yet, so hopefully Scott won't have that much of an advantage so he will give it all to me, so yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everyone. We'll leave it there for now. Thanks to Tony Kanaan, 2004 NTT INDYCAR SERIES, 2013 Indy 500 winner.

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