

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Larry Foyt

A.J. Foyt Racing

JR Hildebrand

A.J. Foyt Racing

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. The countdown to the 105th Indianapolis 500 Presented by Gainbridge continues. It will be a full four-car effort for A.J. Foyt Racing this month after, of course, the recent addition of one JR Hildebrand, driving the No. 1 ABC Supply Chevrolet.

Larry Foyt, the president of A.J. Foyt Racing joins us this afternoon, as does JR, the 2011 INDYCAR Rookie of the Year, making his 11th run at the famed Borg-Warner Trophy in just a couple weeks.

We'll start with JR. Joining a team like A.J. Foyt Racing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, driving the No. 1 car, a car that's reminiscent of A.J.'s '61 win, you're a history buff, what does that mean to you heading into the month of May?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, man, it's a really cool opportunity, for sure. It's exciting just to be here in a fresh environment, really excited to join the crew. Take away all the throwback stuff, what makes the entry interesting, looking forward to being with A.J. Foyt Racing.

Some familiarity with the guys on the team. Excited to have Sebastien as a teammate. Obviously a guy of his caliber, I expect that to be a great relationship, to be able to build over the course of the month, lean on him and his experience. His engineer Justin Taylor was my race engineer in 2017 when I raced full-time last for ECR. We were pretty sporty at the Speedway that year as well.

Charlie and Dalton, Larry will talk about how it's a lot of cars, but from a driver's perspective it's great just to have more info and more people to kind of spread the load across.

Looking forward to that just in terms of getting on track this

year. Like you said, couldn't do it in a cooler way to join A.J. Foyt Racing in this 1961 throwback car with ABC Supply, obviously a long time partner with the team. I've seen some pictures of the car that have been fired off to me from some guys at the shop. It's looking really cool. It's one of those things you're like, Man, I wish we could just get it for a couple days with no sponsors, no nothing, just to get out there, because it's such an awesome paint scheme, the base livery is so cool.

Excited to be a part of it. Really happy so far with just working with the team and the job that everybody is doing in their preparation for the event. My goal certainly is to bring the heat when it comes. Looking forward to getting out on track.

THE MODERATOR: Smooth segue off of what A.J. said. Larry, it's one thing if you have a couple cars to start the season. Things amp up when you get to May. Charlie Kimball joins, JR, you have Sebastien and Dalton. How are the preparations going for this four-car effort heading into May?

LARRY FOYT: It's going well. Like you say, it is a lot. No doubt, growing from two to three, which we're accustomed to, been doing that for a few years now, but two to four is even a bigger jump.

It was good we were able to get the Charlie deal done early so we were able to get a big head start on that. Honestly, we wouldn't have done this if we didn't think it was something that was going to add and contribute to the team. I mean, you have a great sponsor and friend of ours in ABC Supply. When JR became available, it just made all the sense in the world to take a guy that you know is going to give you some great information, he's going to help the whole group.

At the end of the day he can win the thing. That's what we're going there to do. When all that came together, it was really a no-brainer for us. I'm sure it's some extra work, the whole team, we got everybody together, everybody has to buy into it and say, Hey, we're doing this because it's going to be a good program.

Everybody is working hard. I think it's going to go really well.

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THE MODERATOR: JR, I know you've been watching the races on television. Four races into the season. What have you made so far of this 2021 NTT INDYCAR SERIES season?

JR HILDEBRAND: Like everybody said, it's obviously as competitive as it's ever been. Texas last weekend, obviously for our squad not the kind of result or just experience over the course of the weekend that you'd hope for. You can tell everybody, with a year under their belts, with the aeroscreen, really starting to figure that out. I think coming into Indy, we've got some new bits and pieces on the car. We have some different aero parts that hopefully make it a little easier to be in the window. It's the same for everybody.

I think we're looking ahead to just a hypercompetitive field at the Speedway this year. I think it's more important than ever. One of the things as a driver watching the first bunch of races, watching them closely through practice and qualifying, not that it's never the case that you need to bring your A game, but in every aspect of what you do on track as a team and as a driver, it couldn't be more important now.

For me, I've been lucky to be friends with and kind of be around guys like Scott Dixon for a long time. Just seeing the ever-evolving learning process of the guys you think of as being the experienced vets. They're the ones that are oftentimes trying to figure out where those little bits and pieces are as much as the young guys are just coming into the sport.

I think that's definitely a mentality and attitude that I've tried to adopt even coming to the Speedway over the last couple years. If the car is not in the window, the strategy quite play out, how can I get myself, even if it's just that one extra finishing spot that you wouldn't have had if you don't do everything right coming in and out of the pits. Sometimes that's the difference between 15th and 16th, depending on how things play out. For a lot of guys watching Texas, that was obviously kind of their MO over the weekend. But sometimes it's the difference between first and second or second and fifth or something.

I think just knowing from watching what's going on and how kind of hypercompetitive it is, how good the teams have all gotten, how much more accustomed to this new package they are, being prepared for that has been definitely one of the things that I've gleaned, I guess, from watching the first few races.

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

Q. Larry, how beneficial is it to you guys going into the month of May know you have four cars to work around, kind of tease ideas off one another, that kind of stuff?

LARRY FOYT: Yeah, no, it is important. I think it is good because even though it feels like we have a lot of time, run 12 to 6 every day there getting ready. But it always seems to go quickly. You just kind of know you're going to lose a day or two probably because of weather where we get a little rain or it's a windy day. I think we'll be able to run through a lot of things. We're really excited.

I think everyone knows JR is a pretty technical driver. That's going to bring another good addition to the team. Obviously with Bourdais, he's pretty technical. Dalton did a great job last year, but he's coming into his second 500. Charlie has a lot of experience, we know he's technical.

I think it's going to be a really good group. As JR kind of alluded to, with everything so close right now, so competitive, this little bit of setup stuff from qualifying day is going to be super important. You're really hoping you're not a part of any of the drama on qualifying weekend unless it's for that Fast Nine. That's certainly the goal.

Everything is going to have to be perfect. You just got to hit everything right on the number because there are going to be some good cars going home. Pretty much everyone that's entered is very, very good. It's going to be tough. We know that. This is a great addition to bring some more technical information to the team.

Q. JR, how excited are you to be joining a team of A.J. Foyt's caliber? Given their history at the Speedway, given your own history at the Speedway, how excited are you to be kind of starting the month of May with these guys?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I'm definitely looking to feed off a little bit of that energy from our livery. Being around A.J., I was out at the test day, the two-day test a couple weeks ago now, spent a little bit of time with super tech. That was fun.

The Speedway is one of those places that as much as it changes, as much as the car changes, it's the type of thing for having guys around who have either been in or watched 50 of these things now, whatever, A.J. obviously it's been 60 years, 60th anniversary of his first win, every little bit counts.

It's funny, back when I was racing for Ed, my first couple years when I was just part-time racing for him, I had Tony George on my timing stand, he was the one on my radio

over that period of time. It was kind of like weird little things that, despite the fact that might not normally have been his positioning, or he's not around it in that capacity all the time, at the Speedway there's little stuff that kind of rubs off on you over time.

Obviously, like Larry mentioned, these days it's so much just about how much can you extract out of the car, where are you at in qualifying trim, how much grip can you build into it, can we go into race day confident that we have a car that you could have a bad pit stop and make up a few of those spots on track.

As a driver, that's all you hope for because it gives you, I guess, just that confidence throughout the race, that kind of anything can happen, it can get put back in your hands and you can fire your way back up to the front. That's what we'll be working on and spending our time on once we get to the track.

So I guess to close the thought, just back to the idea that we've got a lot of high-caliber talent on the team is exciting to be a part of from that perspective. I feel like we can show up and maybe have the cars not be where we want them on the first day of practice, and work our way out of that towards the window that we want if we're all smart about what we're looking for, how we're chasing that, how we communicate over the course of those first few days in particular.

Racing is kind of in a way, it's about learning and problem solving. That to me has always been kind of a fun part of what we do at the track. Even if it's hard when we first roll out, I'm certainly looking forward to that challenge, facing it head on once we get there.

THE MODERATOR: JR, it's one thing to be a driver, but you've always been a bit of a historian, fan, Parnelli... Where did that come from growing up?

JR HILDEBRAND: It's a good question. I think a lot of it comes, my dad had a vintage race car when I was a kid, he had a '68 Camaro, it had been a race car when it was new, he raced it as a hobby. But he raced in the kind of '60s and '70s Trans-Am group on the West Coast. He's from that heyday on Parnelli, Dan, Mario, A.J., all these guys. That's really the era we remember them from, whichever category they were in. What made that period in time so cool was that they were kind of in all of the categories all at once. They just drove everything.

I feel like in a weird way growing up around, a little bit, vintage racing, obviously in the San Francisco Bay Area we had Laguna Seca and Sears Point, so we saw NASCAR races and CART at the time, everything in

between, drags, motorcycle, all that kind of stuff. I did honestly just grow up as a fan.

When I was a little kid, I played baseball through varsity in high school. That was more what I was doing when I was young. I didn't start racing go-karts till I was like 13. If you would have gone into my bedroom at 10 years old, I had like 500 Hot Wheels cars and no baseball cards anywhere.

I grew up appreciating the sport from all of those different angles, the personalities, the history you see. You go to a vintage race, you see all the different shapes and sounds and successful stuff from over the years. That was super intriguing to me.

Obviously I'm fortunate to have been able to make a career out of this as a race car driver, sort of emulating what those guys did. I think all of that packaged together, I have a lot of respect and appreciation for where the sport's come from.

Once you get a taste of it as a driver, I've had the chance to drive some of that stuff from back then, man, it really gives you an appreciation for what those guys did. Driving an early '70s Formula 1 car, this thing is like a Formula Ford with a Top Fuel engine in it. It's not the most refined piece of machinery in the world.

It's a cool experience for me just to be a part of motorsport doing this. Obviously this kind of fits right into that whole MO.

Q. JR, I want to go back a couple weeks to Texas for race two on the start. Obviously a lot of crash damage, especially for A.J. Foyt Racing. Your thoughts on what you think race officials should do with rolling starts? Should there be a min speed sort of set?

JR HILDEBRAND: That's a good question. It's just something that for my entire INDYCAR career we've been talking about how do you kind of avoid these types of situations. Actually something that came up on Twitter this morning. We talked about it on this podcast I'm doing with Jack earlier in the week.

The thing to me that's interesting, you try changing the start speed, you try changing the restart zone or the start zone, whatever, all these things, I think to me just thinking about it from a driver's perspective being in the cockpit, I've fortunately never been caught up in one of these oval first-lap crashes or something.

It feels like every oval start you take, you narrowly have avoided getting in an accident. A lot of that honestly is

because like the cars, the tire is designed to work at 200 plus miles an hour through a banked corner. When you're going like a hundred, even 150 or something, coming through that dogleg on the front straight at Texas, the car is set up totally asymmetrically. It doesn't slow down in a straight line very well. So you kind of get this accordion effect and this pack-up.

To me, some of those things like start speed and where exactly the start zone is, I think you could take a really big swing at some of this stuff and it doesn't fundamentally change that dynamic that much. I mean, definitely if you're going faster, then you have less, like, instant acceleration. Maybe that creates less of an accordion effect.

Honestly, we've been talking about this a little bit since it happened, that the only thing I can kind of think of is, like, this almost never happens at Indy. Despite the fact that we're starting three-wide, which is altogether like a sketchier sort of situation, I think the reason it doesn't happen at Indy is all the drivers, from the sanctioning body, from the moment that you're gridded up, you have this picture in your head of being a hundred feet apart from the row in front of you.

I think just the row spacing there basically is what accounts for the fact. Every year, I mean, I've unfortunately started towards the back of the pack a couple of times, and you still have that big accordion of, like, it seems like the whole field is going. We were coming through turn four, whatever, and, in fact, it hasn't. It jams up at the exit of turn four, then everybody re-accelerates back out of that.

Even despite the fact you're in a corner, all of these same low speed, the car doesn't want to do anything that well in that situation, all of those things apply, but you just have more room to kind of give yourself to the row in front.

To me, something of that variety is maybe the only thing practically speaking that I think would consistently make a pretty significant difference. I think the other thing that's interesting about that is, the Texas of old where you used to have a couple lanes, if there's more row spacing and you're getting a little bit more of that buildup into the first couple of corners. At Indy that is what creates for some of those really epic first-lap runs that guys make, passing 10 cars. You need a little bit of room to maneuver and you need for things to be a little bit spread out to see that kind of thing happen.

I've only spent time thinking about this because it's come up, but that was my kind of thought. I wonder if it would make sense to get the rows a little further apart and have that be kind of a prescribed method at least for the superspeedways.

Q. Larry, your thoughts? Obviously your cars were involved in the incident. Your thoughts on what you think INDYCAR maybe should do?

LARRY FOYT: Yeah, I think the Texas deal also was made worse just with the fact that passing was such a premium. That second lane wasn't really working great. All the guys know getting a jump on the start, if you could get three or four spots was huge. It might take you half the night to do that on track, especially because you really work that right front tire, you get it hot, then you're kind of stuck.

I don't know. I think that was just a bit of a perfect storm of a lot of things. I haven't really gone back and reviewed it in its entirety. But it looked like some of the guys at the back -- when we have one to go, it seemed like those warmup laps went by really quickly and the field looked pretty spread out. I think the guys at the back were hustling to get caught up, lined up. They were carrying quite a bit of speed. Even as the green comes out, the spotters are telling the guys green, but as you start checking up, like JR said, these brakes aren't really hot, the oval brakes are cold, you have to try to well these things up and it wasn't going to happen.

Definitely something we need to look at, maybe get the guys a little bit more time to get everything warmed up and get in line without having to hustle back out. Just one of those things. Everybody trying to get the best start they could because passing was a premium. I think it made for that perfect storm.

Q. JR, you mentioned spending some quality time with A.J. What has that experience been like? What did you learn from hanging around A.J.?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, it's a kick, especially to be able to do it at the Speedway. I think it's somewhere obviously that he's even mentioned in a few of the interviews that I've noticed over the last just month or so how kind of appreciative he is of what the Speedway has meant for his career and his life, all that kind of stuff.

Just to be able to kind of listen to a little bit of that reflection is really cool. It really hits home how important the place is and what a significant part of history it still is being at Indy. But it was cool.

There was a few things that, I don't know, we ended up kind of shooting the shit about old tracks. He was talking about Trenton, he was the master at that place, a weird circuit with a dogleg in the back straight after they had done a bit of work on it, all this kind of stuff.

Just hearing about the history of the sport from his perspective as a guy that kicked ass all the way through it through multiple decades at different places, different kinds of cars, that's always been really interesting to me. It's just cool to be able to kind of soak a little bit of that up. I'm looking forward to more of that over the course of the month.

Certainly I think, as everybody who meets A.J. and talks to him, there's always a few things that you're left with that you can't repeat anywhere else, but that's part of the fun of it, for sure.

Q. Larry, what does it mean for A.J. to come back here year after year, see people, still be such a huge part of this track?

LARRY FOYT: Well, I mean, frankly I think it's what he lives for honestly. He thinks about Indy from June 1st until we get back to May. He loves that place. He's always the first one to say it's what made his name. The history of him and everything he went through, his friendships with Tony Hulman. It's an amazing story.

The highs and lows he's experienced, the friends that were killed in races. For him to go on and win, the battles he had. The longevity he experienced there is unbelievable.

It's everything for him. He definitely, even as he's gotten older and mellowed a bit over the years, you really see that intensity when we get back to Indy. Of course, I get it because I'm getting chewed out when the cars aren't running as well as he wants them to be. Other races he is just kind of like oh well sometimes. Indy still lights a fire under him unlike anywhere else we go.

He lives for it. I think he always will. It will keep him coming back until unfortunately he's gone. Indy will always be number one for him.

Q. Larry, can you maybe go over what it takes to put together an extra program like this resource-wise, whether it's people, parts, time? How hard is that to do when you get later, closer to the 500?

LARRY FOYT: Yeah, sure. People obviously is the number one resource in what we do, one of the harder ones these days. Important from engineers, mechanics, all the way down. People are number one.

We are pleasantly surprised obviously with Scott Harner up at Indy, he's been in the sport so long, he knows just about everybody. That was a big help. Even JR knew some guys. You put everything together the best you can.

There are a lot of little things that probably people outside the sport don't think about that are really costly but sometimes they have lead time, they have prep time. A lot of times it's on the electronic side. All the stuff we do with tire pressure sensors, all the electronics it takes to run these cars these days. When you're re-outfitting all of that, the timing stands, it really starts to add up.

We got enough of a jump on it that we feel like we're pretty under control. Could have done without Texas, that weekend, a lot of that carnage. The good thing was neither of those cars were slated for the Indy 500, so we are putting them back together for the road course races. They weren't 500 cars anyway. Parts and pieces wise we're still in pretty good shape.

Yeah, it's a big ramp-up for us as a team. We're going to have a lot of extra stuff. It's good that the league is kind of giving us the heads up on where we're headed in five years. We knew going in that even though we're purchasing a lot of parts and pieces, it's a big cash outlay for us, a lot of these parts aren't going away in the couple years. It's good to know we can still use these for many years.

It's a lot, I'm not going to lie. It's a lot. Having the right people helps a ton. When you have a driver like JR coming onboard, you have more people that want to be a part of the program.

Q. JR is well-liked, knowing a driver that is good to work for, that does help?

LARRY FOYT: Absolutely. That's a first question when you call a mechanic. You say, You want to do this at Indy? They say, Who is the driver? A lot of times that's the first question. That's a big help for sure.

Q. JR, is this the only race you're going to run this year, INDYCAR race, and how do you stay in shape? What do you do to get ready for this race?

JR HILDEBRAND: Right now that's the plan, is just Indy. That's kind of the extent of what we've got on the schedule right now. There's always the possibility. Like Larry said, he's going to have some extra stuff after Indy, maybe we'll have a conversation about that later in the year.

But in terms of staying in shape, it's something that I've gotten sort of used to these deals, where you have to go and get in the car. I guess the benefit at Indy as opposed to some other races or some other scenarios is that you got to few days to really get comfy, you have a lot of time in the car. Even first day of practice, a lot of time back in the

car.

I always feel prepared like I'm preparing myself from a training perspective for any situation to occur. I'd feel really strong about getting in a road course car if that was an ask next weekend.

It's definitely a process. It's something that I've spent enough time in INDYCAR kind of knowing the things in a training regimen that work, the things that don't. I live out here in Boulder, Colorado, so I have the benefit of good outdoor space, a little bit of altitude. Always makes it a little easier getting back down to sea level. It's a constant thing.

I think for me, I played sports before I was ever racing cars. I guess the idea of being in, like, training mode is just kind of built in for me. Looking forward to it this year. There's certainly some specific things that we all do to be in the car. The guy looking weird in the gym doing neck exercises or whatever. It's all just part of the program, something that for me has always been kind of a fun part of doing it.

Feeling ready, for sure.

Q. Larry, your team seems to be a little more competitive this year. Is it because you've improved your engineering? As far as Indy goes, where do you think your team has been lacking compared to the top teams? Is it shocks, aero? What have you done to try to get there where you're right there with the top teams?

LARRY FOYT: Yeah, I just think the whole team, we've been working on a lot of different engineering programs over the past few years. Even with I think COVID and that last year things have been a little bit more time, we were able to really go in and extrapolate a lot of data from some of these programs that when we were racing week-to-week we weren't able to.

I mean, obviously getting set in the car towards the end of last year was big. St. Pete, obviously we were fast there. Fast when we went back this year. I don't know, I think a lot of it was just Seb helping get us a feel that he likes for the road courses, which has been good. We were running well at Texas, unfortunately, until we got taken out in that race.

It's good. It's just still so tough, like we were talking about earlier. You know if you miss it just by a little bit, like Barber we qualified 16th, but we had a fast car. We just missed it that little bit in qualifying. You can see it, even if it's a Penske car with Will Power missing it a little bit in

qualifying. It's just super tough.

At Indy, yeah, I mean, we've had good cars there. Typically in the last few years, we haven't been great qualifying. If you look at three years ago, Kanaan led a good part of the first half of the race, we were leading at the halfway point, a flat tire ruined our day on that. That would have been a good opportunity. I would have loved to see that race play out, what potentially could have happened.

Definitely what I'd say is with the aeroscreen, there's a new feel for these cars on ovals. I think just where that weight is up high. We weren't real happy leaving the test. I don't think Sebastien or Dalton really liked the feel of the car. I think it's something to do with the way that weight is transferring up so high. I'm sure that's something we'll get into as soon as we start practicing, JR and Charlie's input, searching for that feeling.

I don't think there's any one thing. We've done a ton of shock work here lately. We have a lot of options. I don't think there's any mechanical piece that's missing that we don't have that other people have. It's obviously how you put it all together. How you get your roll centers with your cambers and tows, everything else, weight distribution. That's what we got to figure out and get the drivers happy with the feel of the car. I think that will make a difference.

Q. When people hear JR Hildebrand, they think back to your runner-up in your first Indianapolis 500 appearance. 10 years later, what stands out for you from then?

JR HILDEBRAND: I'm glad that it wasn't the lap before. No, I'd say it's obviously just kind of a part of my history. Thinking back, that was my rookie year, I think it always actually gives me a lot of confidence there is a lot of stuff I didn't know about how to be competitive at Indy, and found myself in that situation.

Honest, from my perspective as a driver, I've had much better 500s from a driver's perspective since then. Like I alluded to earlier, every year I feel like I come out of Indy with something else, something new in my toolbox, something else that I've learned, a new situation that I'll be more prepared for the next time around. All of that just gives me confidence that when the car is right, we kind of get things together, that I'll be able to capitalize for sure.

Even the last time that I was full-time in 2017, we had a couple of podiums that year. Just being able to kind of put all these pieces together. I would have obviously have preferred to have been full-time since 2011, right? That's just now how it works out. You got to kind of take every

little experience that you have in the car and learn from it and get better, be kind of ready for what's next.

It's obviously a bittersweet memory in some respects. For me, it's just kind of a part of being a racer. Stuff happens. I think at the end of the day, for me it's a positive thing for me to be able to look back on and know that I'm ready for any kind of situation like that that happens again.

Q. Having come so close, does it add fuel to the fire, make that desire to win the event even more?

JR HILDEBRAND: At a place like Indy, you don't need any more motivation than just showing up year after year. I think for me, especially over the last few years, when I was younger, earlier in my career, you felt a little bit of that urge to find redemption or prove people wrong, whatever that feeling might be.

Now when I show up at the Speedway, I know how much all the little things matter. I know how much the process itself matters. You need to be able to take it one step at a time and be more just kind of in the moment if you're going to be successful there.

To me it's just not a distraction, not something that I think about, not something that really has an effect on my approach or mentality in terms of my desire one way or the other at this point.

I think if I went and won the Indy 500, that would be the narrative probably. To me they'd be completely independent situations at that point. Like I look at myself as a different driver, a different person even in some ways just in terms of it's been 10 years, a lot has changed. My attitude has a racer and within the sport has evolved substantially since then.

To me, when I look forward to coming back to Indy, it's just because I look forward to coming back to Indy and competing in the Indy 500, going through that process of trying to do all the little things right that are in my control. So that's my point of view on it these days.

Q. Larry, it's been well established that Texas was a rough weekend for the team. How has that affected your prep in getting ready for Indianapolis?

LARRY FOYT: Well, it's just some extra work for the guys really to get more ready for the road course race, the Indy GP. The Speedway cars are all independent. They've been sitting aside. All those parts and pieces for that are in pretty good shape. It's just some extra work to get ready here for the GP. Guys are already in good shape. Cars have gone back together. The Texas truck will leave I

think Monday to head up to Indy.

We'll be all right. It's just buying some extra parts and pieces that we were hoping we'd get out of that weekend a little less damaged. But it's part of motor racing and part of Texas. Oval, usually the crashes are big when they happen. The guys are doing a good job and we'll be ready.

THE MODERATOR: We will leave it there here this afternoon. By the way, the Hildebeast, JR, love that on your Zoom ID.

JR HILDEBRAND: I think it's going to stay now.

THE MODERATOR: The beast is back.

JR HILDEBRAND: Probably a screen name function you can change that (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: You have to keep it now. We'll leave it there. Our thanks to Larry Foyt, JR Hildebrand.

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