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News Conference

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Chip Ganassi

Tony Kanaan

Dean Kessel

Sergeant Major Michael

Barrett

Press Conference



CHIP GANASSI: Good morning. Thank you for coming out today.

I want to start by saying how proud and honored I am to represent the American Legion in their entry to racing. A lot of people around Memorial Day, it's extra special because it's Memorial Day. It's veterans and how I was brought up respecting veterans and revering veterans, employing veterans, honoring them in what they've done for our country.

I was telling Dean the other day that this type of relationship for me sort of completes the loop of how I was brought up to think about veterans and the American Legion.

I don't mean to go off script, but we have this sort of view of what the American Legion is. When I was a young child, I didn't really know what the American Legion was. Until recently I thought it was a little smoky bar somewhere with some old guys in it just smoking cigars and cigarettes talking about the war or whatever, only to find out and learn that it was the American Legion that authored the GI Bill that created the middle class in the United States. It was the American Legion that started the VA. It was the American Legion that led the charge against agent orange and lobbied for taking care of the Vietnam veterans coming back.

Jumped ahead of myself a little bit there because also each Memorial Day the teams have red, white and blue cars. I'm proud to say that our American Legion car is red, white and blue all the time. I think that says a lot about what this program is about.

I think we obviously have a driver here that can win the Indianapolis 500. Over the years we've represented a lot of big companies. It's been a great thing to represent multi-national corporations that have hundreds of thousands of people. I'm not sure I've ever represented 12 million in anything. That's an honor.

I think today we're here to make an announcement that I think is going to be one of the most important things in the news this weekend, maybe second only to the winner of the Indianapolis 500. But we're going to announce something here that I think will go down in history. They're

THE MODERATOR: Let's go ahead and get started. First of all, good morning everyone here in person. Welcome back to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Chip Ganassi and the American Legion press conference.

This is a very special moment. We also want to welcome everyone joining us virtually as well. We have reporters from around the world that have logged in.

We're also live on the American Legion's Facebook page. Welcome all those watching from wherever you are as you join us in our countdown towards the Indy 500 this coming Sunday.

Let's start with some introductions.

We say good morning to Sergeant Major Michael P. Barrett, 17th Sergeant Major of the U.S. Marine Corps and an American Legion member as well.

Dave Kessel is here, chief marketing officer from the American Legion.

Chip Ganassi as well, from Chip Ganassi Racing.

And on the right Tony Kanaan, who will drive the No. 48 American Legion Honda from the fifth position on Sunday.

Thank you all for being here this morning.

We'll begin with the only team owner in history to win six of the biggest races in the world, CEO of Chip Ganassi Racing, we say good morning to Chip Ganassi.



going to say, That was started at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on Memorial Day weekend in 2021. This is something we're very proud to be associated with.

I couldn't be more proud to be here this morning, again, representing the Legion, representing its 12 million members, representing its 12,000 posts. I think we should have an Indianapolis post. We have quite a few veterans working for us. There's a post here right across the street. But we have almost 20 veterans I know at the race team that we employ.

We've had a lot of relationships over the years. None have I heard more about than this program. When we announced it, I hear from people that I didn't know paid attention to racing.

They say, Hey, that's really great. We heard you were doing the Legion.

How do you know?

I heard it down at the post.

I just can't say enough about representing veterans, representing the American Legion. We're certainly proud to be here today to announce another initiative. Days like today that make me proud, like I say, to represent the American Legion. Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Let's continue. I'd like to introduce the chief marketing officer of the American Legion, Dean Kessel, to tell us a lot more about this initiative.

DEAN KESSEL: Thank you, Chip, for your kind words. You have been a supporter of our mission since day one, since we first started talking about becoming involved in motorsports.

Really sort of the driving force about getting into motorsports is the audience of motorsports, right? There's a tremendous amount of military and veterans that are passionate about the sport. We are certainly passionate about them, getting them the care and compensations on the veteran side they deserve. We couldn't be represented by more of a class organization than Chip Ganassi Racing. We are proud to be a part of your group as you are ours.

We are here to make a special announcement today that involves a significant issue that's facing today's veterans. Additionally we couldn't think of a better place to do this than here at Indianapolis on Memorial Day weekend. For us Memorial weekend starts on Friday, which is Poppy Day. You can see all of us here wearing poppies. It's a time to honor the fallen and support the living. That's what

Poppy Day is all about.

As Chip said, no other organization like the American Legion is poised to take on the biggest issues facing veterans. Chip mentioned we took on the GI Bill, took on agent orange. Today we're here to talk about an issue, Sergeant Major Barrett will speak passionately about it in a moment, about stopping and preventing veteran suicide. This is the biggest issue facing this generation of veterans, including Vietnam veterans, then post 9/11 veterans, as well. We are going to be the tip of the spear on this initiative to lead it into the next decade, however long it takes for us to wrestle this.

We are not mental health experts, but we know how to pull the right people together. We do have a tremendous peer-to-peer support network with our 12,000 posts, our millions of members that we have. That's a place for folks to go and join and have common interests and align that way. Today Sergeant Major will speak more about it.

At the end we have something we're super proud of that we're going to debut for the 500, which is a television spot around veteran suicide, working with Jimmie Johnson, who is a great spokesperson for our organization, as is Tony Kanaan. We're just thrilled to be a part of this. We're very excited to take this initiative on.

THE MODERATOR: It is a hugely important topic, that deserves some more perspective.

It is my honor and pleasure to introduce to you an American Legion member who is also the 17th Sergeant Major of the United States Marine Corps, Michael Barrett.

SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL BARRETT: Good morning, everybody. Thanks for that introduction. Chip, thank you for being an amazing partner to the American Legion. We hope we get a whole lot more just like you.

Just as Dean said, today the most critical issue facing veterans is something that is more ominous and mysterious. Suicide is on the rise in America. The facts about veterans suicide are daunting. Upwards of 20 veterans take their lives every day. Our nation's veterans are at a 50% greater risk of committing suicide than those who have never worn the cloth of this nation, the uniform.

Additionally these numbers don't include data from the COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health professionals have told us that the numbers could be much worse than the 22 a day.

Folks, this is unacceptable. But more so it's very personal. As a battalion sergeant major, two deployments in Iraq, I



watched 21 of my Marines die to IEDs, ambush, sniper fire. Over 300 wounded in two simple deployments. 13 months in Afghanistan as a regional command sergeant major for all of Helmand Province, Nimruz Province. Over 250 killed under my watch, over 2,500 wounded.

To come home, to have three of my friends that I've known for decades, who I served with in the United States, who I served with overseas, and who I served with in combat on multiple deployments, when I learned that they took their lives, with each notification I was floored. It felt like somebody was standing on my chest and with the heel of their boot they were stomping my guts out. I'm sitting here right now shaking just recalling all of it. It's coming at me at one swell moment.

It was heartbreaking. It's gut-wrenching. I can't even imagine what their families were feeling and what they were going through.

So this is personal. It has to stop. As a Legionaire, I'm proud to be the one that makes the announcement that the American Legion is activating the full might of the nation's largest veteran service organization to win the race, the race to stop veteran suicide. To use a military phrase, we're going to attack this issue on all fronts:

First, we're going to fight for legislation that will bring about real tangible solutions.

Second, we're going to leverage our vast footprint, over 12,000 American Legion facilities and communities across the country, to establish peer support programs.

Third, we know that we must do more research, either on our own or with partnerships with others, and will share our findings to help make an impactful change.

To do this we are committed to continuing to raise awareness of this important issue and the money needed to make an impact.

With us in the audience right here to my back right is Pam Swan, the vice president, military relations, for Veterans United Home Loans. We are grateful to announce today that Veterans United Home Loans is our first partner to join us in this race to end veteran suicide. They have made a commitment of \$2 million to support the American Legion towards this cause.

Pam, when you get back to Columbia, Missouri, please take back this message to the team back at Veterans United Home Loans: From the bottom of our hearts, we are very grateful for your generosity. Let's not stop at \$2 million.

The Indy 500 is already the most famous race in motorsports. But today is a day that we are going to look back on in history and say, It started here. It started with this race, the race to end veteran suicide. Help us save the lives of veterans who are either suffering from the emotional scars of war or other overwhelming stressful life experiences.

Join Team 48 at Legion.org/48 and give. If you're a veteran, join the American Legion team and help us win the race to end veteran suicide. For all those veterans who are looking for someone to talk with, I say open the door, just open the door to one of the 12,000 American Legion posts all across this wonderful nation. We are here. We care. We understand. Let us help.

I've been a marine for four decades. I know every great team needs great leaders. On Team 48, we are thrilled to have two of the best: Jimmie Johnson and Tony Kanaan. Both are super competitive. They're both winners. That's exactly the type of people we need on the American Legion team right now.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your service and now more than ever.

With that we welcome the driver that will be in the No. 48 American Legion Honda come race day, and the 2013 Indianapolis 500 champion, Tony Kanaan.

TONY KANAAN: How do I follow up with this? I sat up straighter when he started talking (smiling).

It's an honor to be part of this team. I got the call from Chip last year. I couldn't believe it. They actually wouldn't tell me who my sponsor was going to be for the 500, it was a surprise. It's awesome.

I think, like Chip, I became more aware of many things that the American Legion does. To me all I can say to all the veterans, I can't count last week how many coins, extra coins I got. I think I got some extra fans, which I didn't think was possible at this place.

All I can say, we're ready to fight this. We're ready to help the American Legion. Chip told me to go win the race on Sunday, and I think it's a good thing to have, a good thing to start a program like this.

I just want to send a message to everybody out there that's watching that's part of the American Legion. Every time I'm in that car, I'm proud to represent them. It has our nation's



colors. I'll be fighting. Trust me, I'll be fighting with everything I can to give Chip and the 48 team and the American Legion a win.

My partner couldn't be here. Believe me, he wanted to be here. He probably wanted to be driving my car this month as well (laughter). But he recorded a very powerful message about the veteran suicide. You guys should take a look.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: (Via video) When our veterans came home from serving our country, the American Legion helped them with the GI Bill to get a head start. When they came home from Vietnam, we helped those affected by agent orange to get care and compensation.

Now a new generation is dealing with their own challenges. Every day 22 veterans who put their lives on the line for our country came home and took their own. As it has for over a hundred years, the American Legion advocates for our veterans so when they leave service, there's a place to go when they need to get help.

THE MODERATOR: We are going to go ahead and open it up for some questions both in person and virtually.

Q. Tony and Chip, one of the most emotional parts of the pre-race is when we honor those who have given their lives, and they also play Taps. Is that going to mean a little bit more to you guys this year considering who you're representing?

SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL BARRETT: It means something to me every single day. I don't know if that question was just for the whole group or just for Chip.

CHIP GANASSI: Let's face it, Memorial Day is to honor the veterans that gave their life for our country. I think that's an important point. But for God sakes, we need to stop veterans taking their own life when they come home. Let's work towards stopping it.

I had no idea 20 or so a day take their life. That's unacceptable. 20 veterans a day taking their own life, a day. That's more than a hundred a week. Multiply that number out. It's staggering. That needs to stop. We need to do everything we can to stop it.

TONY KANAAN: I mean, I wouldn't call it more or less special. I just think now especially personally for me, I mean, knowing what we know now, because that's all about getting the right information, seeing how many veterans take their lives.

Yeah, I mean, not have an even bigger motive to go out

there and show it's worth it to come back. Whatever we can do, if it's in the race car, in my personal life, whatever we can do to send a message out to help these people.

I don't know how can you make that moment here in the grid more special, but we'll try.

Q. Mr. Kessel and the Sergeant Major, how do the mechanics of this program work? Are there going to be crisis counselors that are going to help out? How does the system work?

DEAN KESSEL: As Sergeant Major alluded to, there's multiple steps we'll take from a legislative perspective, from a peer-to-peer support perspective. Our job with the racing program, what we're doing here today is raising awareness of the initiative. That's a big piece of it for us obviously around sort of the fundraising to help us put the programs in place, do those types of things.

It will be an evolving process. There will be things that we haven't even recognized yet as we start doing the diligence on this. But we've got great leadership in our D.C. office that spearheads our legislative efforts, works with Congress. We are poised to take this on.

But it's going to be a heavy lift. We know that. But there's no organization like the American Legion that can handle this.

SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL BARRETT: I'm going to jump on and say for over a hundred years the American Legion has consistently taken on all the serious very critical issues that surround veteran care. They've never failed this nation. They've always developed the solutions and they've created transformational changes for the next generation of warrior.

This PTSD thing, the suicide thing, has been going on forever. It is not new. It's in the limelight right now. We are going to make it stop. You're going to hear me beating the drum and I'm not going to be quiet about it.

Q. T.K., you've had so much fun this month. Is Jimmie going to have to wrestle you to get his car back at Detroit?

TONY KANAAN: No. We have a very straight forward deal. Actually it's Chip's car. We don't make any decisions anyway. We do whatever Chip says.

I'm going to have to work on him because I'm pretty sure he's going to want to be here next year. It's for another time. We have a race to win. I'm happy with what we got. We had a great shot in Texas. Unfortunately the weather

let us down. I think we could have actually fought for the win there. If that's the trade, we'll take the win here. I'll be happy.

Q. Chip, when you were in here a week ago you talked about American Legion, how eye-opening it was to you, how many things you learned that were different than what you expected about the organization. The further down this relationship you go, what has it meant to you?

CHIP GANASSI: Like I said earlier, I think it sort of for me personally closed the loop, if you will, on a lot of loose ends that I didn't really understand growing up. It was a huge learning thing for me in a very short time, just about what the Legion was all about.

Like I said, mentioning of course what we've already talked about with the GI Bill, agent orange, whatever, all these sort of things. To me it would change the image completely, okay?

Then to understand when you have something how many millions strong the Legion is, how powerful that is. To have 12,000 posts around the country. It's a powerful thing. I had no idea that they were facing challenges like they are with this veteran suicide. I had no idea, none.

First of all, as you know, I have some close friends that are veterans. We just hired a young man recently who had some friends, veterans, die of suicide. I just thought it was kind of like, Hmm, that's odd. I didn't realize it was so rampant. To say it's unacceptable doesn't scratch the surface. It's a crisis. Just to be aware of that to me, I don't know, it's staggering.

Q. You come from an area and live in an area where legions and clubs are prevalent. Were you aware? Did you recognize it before this?

CHIP GANASSI: Not at all. Not at all. I thought whether it was the Elk's or the VFW, the WMBU, all these different organizations that are around veterans. I didn't realize that the Legion was sort of the granddaddy of them all, what the Legion stood for and what they did.

I hate to keep saying this, to me it was just another smoky little place that was a bar that guys hung out at. Then speaking to more veterans who are friends of mine, just understanding their camaraderie, having my friend Dave, who we just hired, when he meets another veteran, I mean, instantly they go to this sort of other area almost like an unspoken sort of language that they suddenly go into.

Talking about initiatives and programs that I had no idea

existed, how many veterans I meet, Albert Arciero is another veteran who is a friend of mine. When we announced the Legion sponsorship, he called me and said, That's great. I can't believe it. Do you know this? Do you know that?

I knew Albert was a veteran, he was a Vietnam veteran, but I had no idea the bond that these veterans have. It's incredible.

Just to be chosen as somebody to represent them is an honor. The more I learn, the more my scope is just widened about what's really going on with veterans, with the Legion, with initiatives like this.

SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL BARRETT: Can I pile onto the end of his statement? I want to share a story to show you how the Legion will come to you in a heartbeat.

A few months back, driving through Wyoming, Rock Spring, Wyoming, if you've never been there, if you blink, you missed it. It was 5:00 in the morning, pitch black out. My daughter-in-law's car just crapped the bed. As we limped along helping her get off an off-ramp, I saw the American Legion logo on one of the little Welcome to Rock Springs signs. I told my daughter-in-law, we're going to be okay. Watch this.

I called that gentleman right there, Shaneen Numptival (phonetic). He was in Washington, D.C. I said I'm stuck in Rock Springs, Wyoming. Help. I called the guy that lived in Rock Springs. American Legion came out in full force. Everything was closed till Monday. They came in, opened up a garage, got my daughter's car fixed and we were on the road by noon. That's the Legion.

Q. This guy seems a little intense. Can you get him in one of your cars on Sunday?

TONY KANAAN: He and Chip should do the speech before the race (laughter).

Q. I think you got a secret weapon here.

CHIP GANASSI: Yeah.

Q. Tony, you're not a veteran in this sense. You're an Indianapolis 500 veteran. This crowd loves you. This community loves you. Can you speak to this community and why this community loves this event and loves these drivers. Why do they show out for you guys?

TONY KANAAN: If you look around, this place has been around since 1911. I think this place put Indiana on the



spotlight around the world. Every race car driver on earth want to be part of this. Every race car driver has a chance to win this race, they want to win this race. You become a legend when you win this race.

I thought I understood that before I had one. Now I really understand that. Look at me, I mean, I'm a foreigner. I came from Brazil. I lived the American dream. My kids are American. My wife is American. I became an American citizen six years ago. This place is just magical.

It's hard to answer that question. I have to say you have to come here and watch this. It's so special. I don't think I can describe. Obviously it's addicting.

Last year you all know I actually had announced it was going to be my last lap. Racing with not a single person in the stands, it just didn't seem right to me. I put the word out there. Chip came to the rescue with American Legion and Jimmie.

I couldn't be more proud. Look at the twist, right? Look at what this place did for COVID. We vaccinated 7,000 people a day here. When I thought this place was not going to amaze me any more, I got my call to get vaccinated at 9:30 at night. I thought, you know what, I'll take my pace car out there. I got my vaccine inside the race car. People went crazy. It was another special moment.

There's so many things about this place, it can change your life. It changed mine for sure. I'm really proud to represent them, but also I don't take for granted a single moment that I'm very lucky to be back here. This year, this is my best shot in quite a while. I think everybody knows that. I think the people that race against me knows that. They're going to try make it even harder.

I live for this. Actually we talked about this last year. Somebody asked me, When is going to be your next retirement?

I said, I'm not announcing anything ever again. I'm just not going to show up one day.

Q. When did you get that tattoo?

TONY KANAAN: The story of the tattoo was when I won the 500, I love tattoos, I needed motive to have a special tattoo. People do their dogs, their cats, this and that. I decided that I wanted to have tattoo. My history of racing. Coincidence or not, we did the Rolex 24 that I won with Chip. We put the crown of the Rolex. The bricks, the Borg-Warner. Then I have my kids' birth date, which helps me a lot sometimes when I forget. I know exactly where to

look. My kids' footprints, hands.

This is to show you guys how important this place is. It's my life. It's when I promised my dad when he was in the hospital bed about to die when I was 13, that I was going to win this race. I'm living the dream all over again thanks to this guy.

Q. The Sergeant Major needs some space on that arm, I think.

SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL BARRETT: I can help you. I can actually put a tattoo on there somehow.

TONY KANAAN: I'm scared of you, man (laughter).

Q. Quick question for Chip. How proud are you to announce this expanded deal with the American Legion given that it's for such a worthy cause?

CHIP GANASSI: Obviously I think 'proud' is not as big a word for me with the Legion in terms of just being honored to do it.

We've spoke about what the Legion means, what it means to us as a team, what it means to us as a citizen of the United States to have so many people that wore the cloth of this nation and protected our freedom.

The Legion stands for a lot of things, not the least of which is a strong defense, a powerful feeling about what it is to be an American and why we need to protect that. Representing this group of people that sacrificed their life or gave their life for our freedom is maybe the ultimate -- to be recognized to represent a group like that could be the ultimate representation of what it means to be an American.

Q. Tony, obviously you're representing the American Legion on the biggest motor racing stage in the world. In terms of how lucky that makes you feel, but how proud you are of that, how are you feeling going into the weekend? Do you feel a sense of responsibility to do them proud?

TONY KANAAN: Big-time. I mean, it's always a big responsibility to be part of this race, but also now you've heard the press conference, we have even a bigger cause. It's not just about the race, it's about saving lives and helping veterans who actually saved us in a way.

Yeah, man, I feel like I'm going to war myself on Sunday. It's a healthy one. Obviously it's a competition. We're not here to harm each other. But it is a battle out there. I feel like I'm ready to do it.

So, yeah, definitely adds extra pressure, if we needed it a little more.

Q. You talked about Friday being Poppy Day. How long has this been in existence? How did it come about?

SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL BARRETT: Poppy Day is about honoring the fallen by assisting and remembering and serving and supporting the living. Poppy Day has been around, I'm not going to get the year or the date or the battle correct, but it's been around, it predates World War I. It's about remembering the fallen. It's the start to the Memorial Day observations. Remember the fallen by supporting the living.

Q. Obviously suicide is a problem in our country at-large. How much bigger a problem is it relatively for veterans? Why is it a bigger problem, if it is, for veterans?

SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL BARRETT: The stressors of serving this country are immense. I'll just use a real simple example. For a young United States marine, you have to do this thing called the pre-deployment training program. It's six months of high-intensity training. You have to cover down if you're an infantryman. You're covering down over a thousand infantry training standards that you must master before you're allowed to leave. If you take that and put it into the squad, platoon, company and battalion and larger, you are training non-stop for six months.

Then you deploy to the most dangerous places in the world, people trying to kill you, and you have to sprint for seven months in combat, only to come home after a seven-month deployment where people are trying to kill you. You get a little bit of time off, then you're right back into the pre-deployment training program workup for the next deployment.

Now let's add a family into the mix. Now you're not seeing your wife, you're not seeing your kids, you're in the field training to not get killed, and you're training to kill. Just add all these stressors.

Now add the stressors of regular everyday life. Am I going to be able to pay the rent, is my car breaking down, are there diapers, is there milk in the fridge? When you start adding all the enormities of what life brings you, and on top of the life you live sprinting a thousand miles an hour for seven non-stop months after another workout and another workup. All those things have a tendency to weigh heavy on you.

It's unfortunate to say that people turn to alcohol, they turn to drugs. Guess what, nothing good happens when you start doing alcohol and drugs. Throw in the stressors, throw in the unseens, the emotions, the scars of combat. Just put it all together.

For reasons that I personally can't understand, because to me that is not an option, but I've always had people that supported me. When I needed to, I asked and I received. That's the problem. Sometimes people are just too proud to ask. I beg, go to one of the 12,000 facilities because we're there. We want to help.

THE MODERATOR: We'll leave it there. There are some other things to get to today. Over the years, you learn quickly in this sport, Chip, you have sponsors, but you also have sponsors who are so much more. This is certainly one of those. Thank you all so very much for being here.

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