

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Friday, May 28, 2021

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Zak Brown

Sam Schmidt

Taylor Kiel

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon and thank you for your attention to our guests here. We have Sam Schmidt, Taylor Kiel and Zak Brown available to answer questions.

I'll start off by getting thoughts from each of them on this year's Indy 500 in terms of Arrow McLaren SP, thoughts about being back here at the Brickyard this year, and expectations for Sunday.

Maybe we start with Sam. A few words from yourself.

SAM SCHMIDT: Great to be here. I was thinking this morning, 25 years straight we haven't had rain on Carb Day. I don't know whether it's the British influence or what (smiling).

Really glad we got the practice in today just to get some confidence heading into Sunday. I think the team's done an amazing job preparing for this event. All drivers were really happy afterwards.

I think first and foremost we got our eye on the championship, but of course the Indy 500 is the biggest event in motorsports, so we really want to win that one really bad.

THE MODERATOR: Zak.

ZAK BROWN: Just echoing Sam's comments, it's always great to be here in Indianapolis. I think the weather will be more cooperative on race day. I think we had a good final session today. Really pleased with all the effort that Taylor and his team are putting in.

We've got three happy drivers. I think we have three fast racing cars. Looking forward to competing with everyone on Sunday, which will no doubt be one of the most competitive Indy 500s ever.

THE MODERATOR: Taylor, taking a step back, looking at where the team is at, the three drivers, what are your observations, thoughts for the coming race?

TAYLOR KIEL: Yeah, no, from where we started this month to where we're at now, I think we've progressed each day. I think our driver lineup is second to none. We've got three race winners, three cars that can compete, and three cars that can win this race.

I'm certainly excited to get going, excited to take the green flag on Sunday, see where we line up. But it's certainly been a great month. Echoing what Sam and Zak have both said, the teams worked very well together. We've worked through some issues. We've stayed ahead of the curve balls. That's really all you can ask for for somebody in my position. Very pleased with that. Like I said, ready to get going.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Zak, McLaren always comes here with high hopes. You look back at it, is this probably your best shot at winning the Indy 500?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I mean, we've been here a few times recently, as you know. In '17 we led quite a bit. 2019 I watched on television. Last year Pato had a strong run. Obviously Oliver got caught up in his accident.

Yes, I think we have three cars capable of winning the race. Unfortunately I think there's about 15 other cars capable of winning the race. I think our drivers are ready for it. Taylor and his team are ready for it. I think we have a good shot.

Q. Throwing former McLaren driver and two-time Indy 500 winner Juan Pablo Montoya in, could you talk about what he's kind of brought residually to the team that's helped the other two drivers and the operation?

TAYLOR KIEL: I'll jump in because I've seen it every day. He's obviously, as we all know, got a ton of experience. Our driver lineup is young, it's exciting. They're talented, but they lack a bit of experience. What Juan has been able to do is level that out.



He's been around here a time or two, he's had some success obviously. That's been a really good piece to add to the puzzle of our group, certainly trying to raise the level of Pato and Felix here. Throw in a few tips, throw in a few experiences, and they're stronger for it.

It's been a really good addition to our team.

SAM SCHMIDT: Echo. I mean, even going back to the winter when we were talking about our program, he knows this place inside-out. When you hear him talk about his approach, what he wanted to accomplish in practice, and even today, just so much experience there on how to approach the race, how to approach the 50-lap mark, the hundred-lap mark.

A lot of fast cars at the back of this pack, so it's going to be very interesting to see how that progresses throughout the race. Very confident coming out of this morning. That's all we can ask for.

Q. In some ways Juan being Juan, he's going to bring a few laughs with him. Has that helped a little bit?

SAM SCHMIDT: Absolutely. The commentary is quite colorful. That's a good way to put it.

ZAK BROWN: I mean, Taylor has been much closer to it. I've known Juan for quite some time, as we all have. I think he's brought a lot of experience and a really good vibe inside the team. He's been very strong with his feedback. I think he's contributed a lot to the month of May. Looking forward to watching him race.

Q. It's quite an unusual relationship you have as a Formula 1 team married to an INDYCAR team. Second year now. How happy are you with how that relationship is working? How long-term are you building towards with this project?

SAM SCHMIDT: Yeah, I mean, one of the key parts of this relationship is the technical support on many levels. Just being a team that only runs INDYCAR, solely focused on that, we really look to them for a lot of knowledge in the way of simulation and CFD, other software packages, et cetera.

I think Taylor and his team have done an excellent job, Mark and the engineers over across the pond, so to speak, throughout the winter getting up to gear, figuring out how they're going to handle the communication. It's all come together to peak at this point. Really thrilled with the way everybody's getting along.

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I think it's going extremely well. I think the pace we've shown in the winter, in most of the races this year, have demonstrated that. First year with COVID and not being able to travel, I think we were limited on what we could do because of the interaction of having to do that via video conference. This year we've been able to do it more together. I think we're starting to see those results.

I think we still have room for improvement, but very happy with how everything's coming together on and off the track.

Q. Zak, it's early in the season, but you've been over multiple times now to the races. Is that a kind of sign of McLaren and your commitment to this project?

ZAK BROWN: Yes, definitely. INDYCAR is extremely important to McLaren. Fortunately, much like Taylor runs the team here in America, Andreas runs the team over in Formula 1, which means I can float around and pick which weekends I participate in and how I can contribute. That allows me to pick and choose between both racing. Never want to miss the Indy 500. Happily this year it doesn't conflict with Monaco.

Q. Zak, INDYCAR obviously filled with some amazing personalities and stories. Do you think there's a benefit in doing some type of docuseries like Drive to Survive? Have you had any conversations with INDYCAR about that?

ZAK BROWN: I have spoken with Mark Miles about it. I think it's something INDYCAR is interested in. It would be great for the sport. Drive to Survive has been phenomenal for Formula 1. Made a huge impact around the world and North America. I think more importantly it's turned new fans onto Formula 1.

I think doing something similar for INDYCAR will have a similar impact. We do have great personalities not only with the drivers but some big personalities in the sport, what goes on behind the scenes. I think that's what Drive to Survive has done so well, is it's captured the off-track action which there is plenty of. INDYCAR is very similar in that manner.

I think the more we can let fans in behind the ropes of these great sports that we participate in, the more intrigue there will be and the more fans we'll create.

Q. Zak, do you have any formal program commitment obligations with Montoya after this race?

ZAK BROWN: We personally?

Q. The team.

ZAK BROWN: No, no. My job is to cheer on Taylor.

Q. This event was billed somewhat under the heading of leadership. When you made the commitment to deal with Sam and the partners to come into the series, you obviously had a fairly lengthy list of business objectives from the McLaren standpoint. Unprecedented world event happens with COVID. Give us a little bit of background behind the scenes on how you had to take what you had committed to and then make all of these appropriate adjustments. Have you planned for the post virus era, to come back to some of those original objectives?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I think we've all learned a lot during COVID, which is unfortunately still here. Hopefully we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, getting nearer the end of the tunnel. I think there's been lots of learnings that we'll continue to carry forward. There will be certainly elements where we get back to our old ways, if you like. Same really in Formula 1 as INDYCAR.

INDYCAR from what it's done for our racing team, it has hit the objectives. North America is very important to McLaren, the majority of our partners. Being in INDYCAR allows us to amplify the North American marketplace. You see our partners like BAT and Mission, most recently Darktrace who are on our Formula 1 team joining us in INDYCAR. The same time you see Arrow expand their participation in motorsports, are obviously the title partner of the INDYCAR team, have joined us in Formula 1 to reach the other parts of the world that Formula 1 does. Commercially it's worked out very well.

The racing team was the clear one we wanted to work with. We wanted to work with someone we thought had a tremendous amount of potential, some of it untapped where we thought we could contribute technically to help them go faster. Very impressed with Taylor and his leadership. I felt it was someone that we could work with very easily operationally.

We've been able to recruit I think the strongest driver lineup that the team has had, which is critically important in this racing series. I think it's very much a driver's series.

It's ticked all the boxes. It's working very well for us. We've just had to navigate COVID like everyone else, but knock on wood so far we've done that successfully. I think I'm excited for our future. I think we've got a strong foundation. McLaren had investment from MSP, our partners, so we now have new partners in McLaren, which has bolstered our foundation. We have new technologies

coming. We're in a very good place at McLaren Racing.

Q. Would you be able to provide a more specific example of a business objective that you had to pull back on last year that now you feel you can begin to reengage on?

ZAK BROWN: Commercially all we had to do was adjust like everyone else and start doing things virtual. Hospitality, driver appearances via CISCO Webex as opposed to live. All of our partners adapted to the new world as well.

Obviously we miss not having fans at races. We miss not having partners at races. That's now starting to change. It's great to see we're going to have a big crowd here. I think really the biggest thing that COVID held us back on was on the technical side. It's difficult for the INDYCAR team to come visit us in the UK with the various quarantine issues, their schedule, vice versa. It's been difficult for us to get over here as much as we would like. I would say the biggest delay, if you'd like, on COVID this last 12 months has been more on the technical than the commercial side.

Q. What is McLaren's status regarding 2023 sports car regs, IMSA?

ZAK BROWN: We're constantly reviewing other forms of motorsports. We definitely will not go sports car racing in 2023. It's under review. Right now we're still not where we want to be in Formula 1. We're kind of halfway through our journey. We want to stay very focused on that. We're not yet where we want to be in INDYCAR, which is winning championships. We want to stay focused on that. So we are reviewing other forms of motorsport. If we were to do sports cars, it would definitely not be in 2023.

Q. Taylor, if you find yourself in the happy position of having three cars running in the top 10 in the race, do you put all your eggs in one basket or do a diverse strategy? If that doesn't look like a necessarily logical one, how do you break it to the driver that may have to do something different?

TAYLOR KIEL: Well, I think it's circumstantial a bit. We will have discussed as many scenarios as we could think of in our head prior to the race so everybody is on the same page with what we may or may not do there certainly internally.

As the race progresses, I think you make calls given the information that you have. Our goal as a team is to win the race. I don't really care who does it. I think we would onboard the information and make the decision when the time is right.

In terms of breaking the news or whatever might need to happen as a consequence of that, we're all professionals, we understand what our goal is as a team. That's communicated very clearly.

I think in a situation like that, if there's heartburn that comes with it, so be it. As I said, we're professionals, we're big boys, we're trying to win this thing at all costs.

Q. Are you good with that?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I mean, I'd probably want the driver that has the least performance payout to win (laughter). Short of that I'm just going to be cheering Taylor on. What I'll do is after the race is over I'll tell him whether that was the right decision or not (smiling).

SAM SCHMIDT: That was apropos. Where we're to win. Like Taylor says, it doesn't really matter which one wins. Win the race.

Q. Zak, how important to you and the McLaren team is the legacy of the name 'McLaren'?

ZAK BROWN: It's huge. I think it's a tremendous responsibility to be responsible for the McLaren brand, racing team, its history. It's a privilege to work at McLaren, work with all the men and women at McLaren. For me it's a dream job to come into McLaren every day.

You look down the boulevard and you see Emerson Fittipaldi's world championship car, Johnny Rutherford's Indy 500 winner, Le Mans winner, Niki Lauda, Ayrton Senna, Alain Prost and on.

Growing up McLaren was always my favorite team. I never in my wildest dreams thought I'd be wearing a McLaren shirt and working for the racing team. It's an honor.

Comes with a big responsibility because it's an awesome brand. Bruce himself in New Zealand is very important to us. It will be our 60-year anniversary in 2023. We're looking forward to a variety of celebrations, but a lot of racing to go between now and then.

Q. How impressed have you guys been with Juan Pablo in terms of his feedback this month? What can you take from his input for the rest of the season? Felix said the help he had during the road course event helped him a lot going forward.

TAYLOR KIEL: I think what Juan has been able to do is come in with a fresh perspective. That's really been the biggest thing. Both the road course race, which for us

operationally, tactically was huge to get Juan comfortable with the team, how we communicate those types of things.

Having him there to give the feedback of what he was experiencing for really the first time was big because a lot of it aligned with some things that Pato and Felix both were feeling but didn't quite know how to articulate. What he's been able to do is just say it in the way that Juan does. He's been there, he's done that, he knows what he needs out of the car to be quick. He was able to communicate that to our guys. Pato and Felix both on multiple occasions, Yeah, I'm feeling that, too. That's continued on through the 500.

As I spoke about earlier, beyond his experience and certainly his résumé, he's brought a lot more to the table than what you see with your own eyes.

ZAK BROWN: I guess the one thing, as Taylor said, his experience. Felix is an experienced racer, racing in multiple different formulas. Any time you get someone with Juan's experience, that benefits your other drivers. They just kind of watch how he communicates. I think they can learn quite a bit from him. I think that's been happening.

Q. Juan and Pato have said they speak in Spanish to each other a little bit. Juan also said they argue in Spanish. How much of that becomes an issue within the team?

TAYLOR KIEL: Not so much. We talked about it on day one actually. It was funny, they started to go back and forth in Spanish a little bit, just talking about the car. The engineers are like, Hey, we don't know what you're talking about. We decided in that moment, You guys can speak your native language as you wish, but in the debriefs let's make sure the engineers know what you're saying.

Outside of that, it's been great. Even then, it's a good opportunity for them to just be themselves and talk amongst each other. Honestly the relationship and the chemistry in the driver room has been very good.

Q. No concerns they're talking bad about people?

TAYLOR KIEL: Hey, if they are, we probably deserve it.

Q. Pato has been driving around in a McLaren we've seen. We asked him about it. He said he's been given rules that he's afraid to break. What are these rules?

TAYLOR KIEL: I think one is don't crash it. Don't get speeding tickets. All the obvious stuff, right? Pato is a young kid. He's a race car driver. Now he's got a McLaren. It's like a parent, you worry a little bit.

He's also very mature. Same with Felix. We don't have to worry too much. We just have to say the obvious things so that it's said.

Q. Did Felix get one as well?

TAYLOR KIEL: Yeah, both Pato and Felix have been ripping around in a 720S, I think. They've got the best company cars in the paddock, I would believe.

Q. Are these just loaners? What's the deal here?

SAM SCHMIDT: Depends on if they win.

ZAK BROWN: That's correct.

Q. Pato acted like he hasn't tested the speed.

TAYLOR KIEL: I don't know if you can actually drive these things to their limit in Indianapolis. I've been fortunate enough to drive one around. They are beyond words to drive around. I think you'd probably have to take it to a racetrack to find its potential.

Q. Did you get one?

TAYLOR KIEL: I did not get one.

Q. If you guys win the Indy 500, do they get one, Zak?

ZAK BROWN: We can at least let them borrow one (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Thanks very much to Sam, Taylor, Zak. Have a safe and enjoyable 500.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports