

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Tuesday, July 27, 2021

Jimmie Johnson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. I hope you're having a great day. Today's guest still a rookie, which we all snicker at every now and then, a rookie in the NTT INDYCAR Series. A year ago tomorrow, Jimmie drove an INDYCAR for a test at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Hard to believe it's been a year ago.

He's set to make his eighth start come a week from Sunday in the Big Machine Music City Grand Prix, the seven-time NASCAR Cup Series champ and driver of the No. 48 Carvana Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing, we say good afternoon to Jimmie Johnson.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Good afternoon. Wow, that's a good fact there. It's hard to believe it's been a year. In some ways it feels shorter and in other ways it feels longer. I don't know what to think of it.

THE MODERATOR: How would you describe your journey since then?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's been beyond my expectations, honestly. The cars, the tracks, the people within the sport, the experience I've had, it's been greater than what I could have hoped for, so I've really enjoyed my six months, seven months of really being a formal INDYCAR driver.

About a year ago obviously that fire was lit, and after chasing that from July to November, December when we were able to put things together, I had no idea what was in store for me, but again, it's just overdelivered.

THE MODERATOR: After a few weeks away now, the series gets back at it, certainly in a big, big way next week, first ever Big Machine Music City Grand Prix. There's little doubt really that this is an event that has been circled on everyone's calendar ever since it came out, the announcement, about 10 months or so ago. How much are you looking forward to next weekend there in Nashville?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I'm really excited. It is the race that

all my friends here in the Charlotte area have asked to go to, so it's really popular even over here in NASCAR country, a state away. But I love Nashville. I've really enjoyed my time racing there in the ASA Series, in the Busch Grand National division, and then I tested there a lot at the newer Nashville Speedway with the Cup car before testing rules kind of locked that down.

It's somewhere that I travel to personally, as well. My wife and I would love to come over and catch shows whenever we could. It's been a few years since we've done that, so I'm really happy to be back in Nashville. Granted, we'll be the source of entertainment and won't be able to catch much Friday or Saturday night, but very excited to be back.

I hope it's cool. I know that's a laughing matter, just thinking that a cool August afternoon, low humidity, could be in store for us, but training is in full force, and I'm ready to go.

THE MODERATOR: Hydrate, Jimmie. That's the key. Hydrate.

Q. Following up on your Nashville history and the interest that you have there in Charlotte about having NASCAR people want to go, what's your history of the Nashville area? It's sort of reemerged as such a mecca with SRX a couple weeks ago and the NASCAR Cup race last month at Nashville Superspeedway. What do you make of what's transpired in Nashville recently in motorsports?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Really excited to see it. I go back to my ASA days and went to the national fairgrounds for my first race in Tennessee. In a car for that matter -- I guess I did race dirt bikes, the Redlands Dude Ranch when I was very young, but the more professional setting was the ASA Series, and then came back and raced in the Busch Grand National car at the Nashville Speedway, and then eventually moved over to the Superspeedway.

Then as I mentioned, just enjoy being in that city. I have friends that live in and around the area, friends in the equestrian world that my daughters are now involved with are in and around the area, friends from Charlotte want to go and be a part of the race, friends from the West Coast that want to go and be a part of the race and see what's



going to happen downtown Nashville.

Q. Did you always sense that there was sort of an untapped potential there for -- obviously INDYCAR had raced there before, but for Cup going there and for INDYCAR going back, did you sense it was kind of growing in terms of the motorsports community?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I really did, and honestly, I'm like many that were really perplexed that the Superspeedway didn't have the kind of success that we hoped that it would and that a Cup date didn't happen before, finally has now, but from a facilities standpoint, from a fan base, from a town that is into motorsports, I've always scratched my head over it. I'm glad to see things turning around. I'm glad to know that there's a NASCAR Cup event and now an INDYCAR event in town.

I feel like it's a strong market for racing and a lot of people in the area -- there's nothing better than music and cars. I think the two things really go together well.

Q. In terms of the course, just wondering with it being new, do you feel like this is the first track you go to this year where maybe not everybody else has a big advantage, and if you've had a chance to look at it, what are you thinking of the bridge on the course?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I do feel like it could be helpful for me, that nobody is going to have a leg up on laps or experience on the track. I still am in a big hole just trying to get experience, period, in an INDYCAR, so that's still something I'll need to overcome, but I've studied up on the track.

We have some virtual things to look at, what we think the track might -- how it might flow, what the roads might look like, some renderings, a lot of pictures. During the SRX race my engineer went down and literally drove around the track and took video and photos and sent them to me, as well, so I can get a better understanding of the track, and then I guess the 5th I'll be down there and be able to do a track walk and see it for the first time myself.

There's a lot of excitement in the INDYCAR paddock about this course. I think the bridge is going to be quite exciting. It should be a really rough and bouncy ride across the bridge because it's tough to build a smooth bridge, and the speeds we'll be going on the bridge, it's going to be exciting.

Q. Have you made any progress in terms of I know you were looking at oval testing at maybe Homestead or Texas to do the IRP at Indy. Any progress on that front?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, we're looking at a Homestead test in August. I've been kind of out of pocket on vacation for the last week or two and need to dive back in, but last I heard things were really heading that direction for late August.

Q. The years that you went to Nashville for the Cup banquet, how big of an impact did you think that they did for that banquet, and how much did some of the drivers sit there and say, we really need to be racing here, whether it be NASCAR or INDYCAR?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: You know, sadly the year of the Nashville banquet I didn't make the playoffs, so I sat and watched at home, and like everyone else through social media and reading articles and stuff, I was able to understand how the town received NASCAR, and from afar it looked incredible.

I feel like it was just -- again, it's been interesting how things kind of faded for a little while and motorsports weren't present in Nashville, and now we're back in a big way with the two biggest series competing relatively close to one another in a stretch of time.

I'm very happy for it. I think the market really supports all forms of motorsports, and I think a race downtown is going to be very special for the fans and for INDYCAR.

Q. It seems like there's a lot bigger buzz for this race than maybe the return to the Superspeedway. Do you think they were able to kind of capture lightning in a bottle with the concept of this race, because not only is it going to be downtown with a unique course going over a bridge but also all the entertainment that's going to be part of the weekend? That's some world-class entertainment that they've got lined up as part of the ticket.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think there's just so much that INDYCAR offers, when you look at how competitive the series is and how exciting it is, you look at the way street circuits kind of play into a sweet spot and kind of a niche for motorsport in North America. You've experienced it far more than me. I have this year been able to finally go in person and see it on a deeper level, and street racing is just incredible. It's so special.

From a competition side, I think we bring an amazing product, then where the track is located, how we're crossing on the bridge and the excitement that's going to bring, the ownership group that's involved, the entertainment that's going to be involved and really making a festival out of this is going to be really special, and I have

to agree, too, I've heard a lot more people and a lot more excitement about the INDYCAR event than really anything else that's gone on over there.

Q. How valuable has the Honda simulator been in Brownsburg, Indiana, to help you get up to speed and learn new tracks, and is it too early to have this course on the simulator?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, it has been helpful. The one thing that's tough is you can't replicate G-forces, and the second piece of that is fear in a simulator is a lot different than fear in real life in the car. But it has been useful.

We do have something to try in the simulator. None of us really know how accurate it's going to be. We feel like visually we can get close, but as far as the content of the track and the scanning of the track, to really understand where bumps are located and grip level of the surface, that part we can't really model like we would hope. But at least I'll understand where the turns go and understand the rhythm of the track.

Q. The bridge is the Korean War Veterans bridge which is very important to one of your other sponsors, the American Legion, and I know there's going to be a little bit of a ceremony with some legion people involved in that. When you think of that particular bridge being the Korean War Veterans bridge, what goes through your mind?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, obviously with the relationship that Chip Ganassi Racing has with the American Legion, it gives us an opportunity to celebrate the veterans that are so close to us and such a part of our program. It's really a neat opportunity for us, one we take a lot of pride in. Add an extra layer of pressure to perform and do the best job that we can.

But just one of those things that worked out for all of us. I'm thankful for the relationship with the American Legion. I look forward to what they have planned on the bridge.

THE MODERATOR: Jimmie, take us back to Detroit a little bit, from the sim to what it was like actually out on the race course. I think your buddy Dario Franchitti said there's nothing that can prepare you for a place like the Streets of Belle Isle, so it is a lot different when you get there in person isn't it.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It really is. The thing at Detroit that was so tricky is the track was probably three seconds off from where the teams expected it to be, and we already know the tracks evolve a lot, but to have it three seconds even further off than anticipated threw a wrinkle at the

experience teams, and then for myself the grip was so low, I felt like the simulator hurt me in a sense because I was used to a higher level of grip.

But as we got to day two and race two, the grip did start to match the simulator and things started to make sense.

It's a tool, and I've got to remember that and use it appropriately.

Q. I'm curious if a lot of your INDYCAR drivers have asked you about stock cars, especially with the double-header coming up at IMS and some of the guys that have been looking for either an Xfinity ride or a Cup ride for that weekend.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I've talked to Sage Karam a little bit. He was curious about the differences between the cars. But that's really the extent of it from anybody fishing around for a little advice.

But I spent probably 10 or 15 minutes chatting with him and trying to -- it's interesting because clearly I'm having my challenges in understanding and adapting to these cars, and then hearing Dario talk about what his experience was like in NASCAR, and then trying to process that and filter that all out and give good quality advice to someone that's depending on me was a fun thing to go through.

But ultimately I think Sage and if any other drivers are going to do the double or crossover, they're going to hop in there and get sorted out pretty quick. But I look forward to hearing Sage's reaction after his first practice session and just how the car won't stop or turn versus an INDYCAR.

Q. Are you staying for the Xfinity and Cup races? Are you going to be doing garage tours for everybody? Or are you going to peace out after the INDYCAR race?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I've been working too much as it is. I'm supposed to be retired at this point, so I'll get out of there Saturday night and get home and enjoy Sunday at home.

Q. Did you ever have conversations with anybody from NASCAR about, hey, why are we not in Nashville? Maybe this is a city we should be in, and what can we do to get back there?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I can't say that I personally did. I do recall conversations taking place around it, and I remember Dale Jr. being a big advocate for it and pushing hard. I can also remember a social media campaign that maybe happened a year or so ago where I participated and said,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

heck, I'd come back and run a race there if we can pull it off. It's been a soft spot for a lot of the competitors, and even NASCAR, especially the fairgrounds, it's such an integral piece of NASCAR history, and so many drivers have come up through that track, crew members. There's just a lot of history there.

I don't have a great answer for you other than we've all been scratching our heads and wondering why, and now it's finally going to happen.

Q. Another question I have, is there any itch to get back in a stock car at all? You've kind of mentioned before maybe doing a one-off if possible. Has that crossed your mind anymore?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I'm definitely open to it. I haven't had really a ton of interest. I believe most of my NASCAR friends believe I'm pretty busy with the IMSA schedule I have and the INDYCAR schedule, which is very true. I feel like I'm very near the cap of races that I would want to run in a year. I'm at 17 and kind of 17 to 20 is that number I've been aiming for. But if a great opportunity came along, I'd definitely look hard at it and probably do it.

Q. A few weeks ago you're at the IMSA race at Watkins Glen. You took a photo with a fan who had your number sunburned in his chest and wondering if you remember that interaction and how it happened and what you thought.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, actually I've seen the guy in the past. In the past he had a 9 on his chest and Elliott, and then that weekend he did -- the frontside had Elliott on it, too, and I saw him when I was heading out to the grid at one point, and thought, man, this guy is dedicated. Then after the day kind of slowed down, I was leaving the race car after driver change practice, going into the back of the transporter to change, and there he was and he was screaming my name and I turn and look and I saw his back, and I didn't realize that he had done that to his back and went and took a picture with him and spent some time. He said it didn't hurt, but I don't believe him. That or the beers were still working too good.

Q. You're obviously three or four events into having Scott Pruett working with you. What has been the biggest benefit both on track, maybe one thing on track and one thing off track that he's been able to pass on to you?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Gosh, so many things that he's helpful with. I guess to summarize and pick one would be his leadership, and that crosses over from the areas I need help. We have a young team with other rookies on it, as

well, not just a rookie driver, we have a rookie engineer, some young guys on the car, as well, in various positions on the mechanical side, and he really brings in a leadership role that was so different from day one when he showed up.

We certainly were looking at more things relative to myself and this learning curve, but Scott Pruett is somebody that's done it all and has really had an interest in all aspects of the sport, and his knowledge has spilled over into many areas for us.

Q. So he can help you communicate open wheel language with the engineers probably a little better? Is that something that he's helped with?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I would say what I've seen him do more specifically on the car side is he kind of stands back and listens and lets myself and the engineers work through what we're doing, and then he's like the father that comes in at the end with this advice and a 30,000 foot perspective of hey, I get where you are but let's think big picture, let's look here, let's think about this and not chase this little trick over here, let's get the basics right.

So he's maybe a voice of reason I guess is a better way to put it. He's been very helpful trying to help me find the sweet spot for the car, and to be truthful with you, Dixon and my teammates are really good at finding a very narrow sweet spot, and in time I will get there, but right now we have to figure out how to open that sweet spot up for me, and he's been kind of our conscience on that journey and making sure that we don't get outside of it.

Q. I was talking to Dario Franchitti last week and asking him about what he thinks your progress has been like, and he said he's been very impressed with how you've adapted to kind of racing in an INDYCAR. From your own perspective what has it been like working with him, kind of alongside Alex, as well, with you guys being so new to the team and for yourself new to the sport?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, for me trying to select a team to race with in 2021, it was really hard to -- I had some good options, but at the same time it was really hard to get to know anyone with the COVID restrictions, and all along I knew that my relationship with Chip, Doug Duchardt, Dario Franchitti, Scott Dixon, Mike Hull, all people I've known for years, and Doug Duchardt I've worked very closely with when he was at Hendrick Motorsports. I knew in my gut right away that that would be home for me, be the best place.

Fortunately we were able to obviously put everything

together, and then to really dive in with Dario and -- he's just so good at communicating the world that is so hectic inside the race car and so good at kind of seeing and spotting things and also looking through the data and seeing and spotting things that might be troublesome for me, and his approach, his sincere desire to see me succeed and our teammates succeed, all that kind of rolls up into just an amazing experience.

As I started the interview, this has overdelivered, the experience has, on so many levels, and being able to work with Dario so closely and everybody at Chip Ganassi Racing so closely, it's a special place with a really, really neat environment, and I'm really happy and proud to be a part of it.

Q. Obviously in terms of like the oval stuff, I know it's something you're considered. I know Romain Grosjean is testing today. Will you have a chat to him in the next couple of days? I know he's working with a rival team, but from a rookie perspective will you get any kind of tips or pointers from him?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I already sent him a text asking him how it went. I haven't heard back yet; I guess he's still busy. But I'm trying to find my comfort with the ovals. I think he's in a similar place.

We've both been chatting over the course of the year about ovals and really about the experience altogether. As I get more and more comfortable with ovals, hopefully the test when it happens late August will go well, and I'll continue to work closer to the INDYCAR 500 or more ovals in general.

Q. Do you think obviously your NASCAR experience with the ovals, will that kind of carry across to INDYCAR do you think, or is it just two different beasts so it's completely different?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: You know, I feel like there's some carryover, and if there is -- of all the tracks we run on, street, road and oval, there should be some crossover on oval. I found there to be zero crossover on road courses, so that's interesting.

But yeah, I spent some time talking with Juan Pablo, and he felt like when he was able to return to INDYCAR after his NASCAR experience that there was a lot of knowledge that he could bring over and driving technique, and he felt like he had a leg up on the traditional INDYCAR drivers at that point.

That's the carrot that's hanging out in front of me. I'm running around the back of the pack now on street and road courses, and thinking, man, if I was on an oval where

would I be. That's the balance I'm fighting with right now, the risk versus reward during an oval race.

Q. I wanted to ask, before the season started you seemed to have -- your main issues seemed to be kind of low to medium speed corners. Has that evolved at all? Have you kind of like narrowed the gap most there? And are you still confident on the high-speed stuff?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I would say I seem to be kind of on a circle of sorts, where if you laid out all the challenges that I have, I just kind of work my way around back, and the pattern is getting smaller and the deficit is getting smaller as it goes on.

But I can say I feel much more confident with cold tires, bringing tires in, the exit of corners. Those were pretty fearful moments for me in the test sessions that I had before the season. Made a lot of mistakes on cold tires and spun.

I was good for five spins a test session it seemed like, and I've been able to pull that back quite a bit and not spin on some weekends, which has been nice.

But I think right now where I'm leaving the most time on the table is on the brakes, and I'm finding that I'm getting in deep enough into the braking zone, but I'm just overstepping the car and using a bit too much brake for a little too long.

As my senses start to adapt to this very short and compact braking zone, I'm starting to develop a feel of how to release the brakes and when and how much speed I can carry to the apex because it's so much faster than what I did in a Cup car that finding that subtle touch, I'm probably a tenth to two tenths depending on the corner off in these braking zones. 14 turns, call it seven big braking zones a lap, that's the deficit that it turns out that I'm off.

Again, the pattern is getting smaller, but it's really getting down to those fine little nuances.

Q. I realize you haven't had a lot of IMSA races this year, but is the IMSA helping you in that area or is the handling so much different that again it's kind of confusing you?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, it's the closest thing I can get right now to an INDYCAR. I ran an F3 and I've looked at some other formula style cars to drive, but the IMSA car with the brakes and the downforce that it has, it really is the best thing I can be driving.

Sadly, there is very little testing and very little practice time, which has led to me not having as much track time in the car that I want to really help me develop as a high downforce race car driver.

But directionally it's correct. I'm doing all the right things. I'm getting every rep that I can. I just envision the IMSA races being endurance races that I would have more seat time, but when you're sharing a car with three to four other guys, three or four other drivers, that the drive time really gets compressed.

Q. You and I spoke back during the media day back in I believe it was March, and you had given yourself a 2 out of 10, and in Barber you gave yourself a 4 out of 10 in preparedness. Where do you see yourself now?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think I'm in that probably 4 to 5 range. I know I'm getting --

Q. Still?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I thought that so much of this would be closer than it has been, and I've been more surprised than anyone. I've always been very fair and realistic and honest with myself about challenges I would take on, but learning a new track and learning this car all at the same time is a lot to handle.

My progress I made at the Detroit race from a Saturday race to a Sunday race was measured and everybody can see it and notice it, and I haven't had that opportunity again in the season.

Just when the checkered falls I feel like I know where I am on the track, I know how to exploit the most out of the car and the setup, but I'm three days behind compared -- more than that, but compared to the other guys.

It's going really well, but this has been a bit more of a challenge than I first bargained for.

Q. You had mentioned earlier about your time and how much of your time you kind of want to give back to motorsports. Looking at where you're coming from with the NASCAR schedule, it's quite intense, and now you look at the INDYCAR schedule, it's pretty decent. I wanted to get your take on the INDYCAR schedule. Do you like it? Is it spaced out enough? Do you like the summer break that we're in or would you rather have something that's a bit more intense?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, I really wanted to slow down this year and try something new, which both of those things are definitely happening.

I've never had four weeks off in the summer before, so I've made the most of it and have had an amazing time with my family and really have enjoyed the summer break.

I feel like the cadence of racing every other weekend has worked really well.

The season, I'm used to a February to November season, so to have a March which ended up being April this year to September, that's much more my pace and speed, and I get it that -- I saw Alex Palou post something about wishing he could race every weekend, and I almost responded and said, be careful what you wish for, I just came from that world.

For me where I am in life right now, this 17-race schedule is exactly what I'm after.

Q. In the past you posted some photos with Justin Timberlake, having fun with him at his concerts. Now of course he's part of this ownership group. Have you talked to him about this race? Do you know if he'll be there? Do you plan to hang out with him at all?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, I haven't touched base with him on it. I actually kind of forgot about that in all the announcements that continue to roll out on their ownership group and the track and everybody that's affiliated with the race. I've kind of let that one slip by, unfortunately.

Q. How have you been spending your time? We see a little bit of it on social media, but you said you've enjoyed your summer. What kind of things have you been doing to pass the time?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, the end of June we went to our home in Colorado. I came back for the Mid-Ohio race, went to Ohio and raced and then have been in Colorado ever since.

We just returned back to Charlotte yesterday and kind of getting back into the grind. Kids have school starting here in a couple weeks, so we're just kind of getting back after a long, great summer break in a place that we truly enjoy spending time, and just kind of trying to get back to it.

Q. A few weeks ago when Jeff Gordon pretty much was named I guess the successor to Hendrick, he said any time you'd be interested in sharing your input when your career is over he'd listen. Are you interested in no matter which race team, which race series, in ownership or having a big role in a team once your career is over like Jeff, or do you think once you'll retire you'll just walk away and not stay and be

day-to-day involved?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I'll have to look at my options and what's really out there for myself. I've not been -- my path hasn't led me to being an owner or a great desire to be an owner. I would certainly look at an opportunity if it came up, but it was very obvious with Tony Stewart that he wanted to own his race cars. That's been a journey of his his whole career. For me I always wanted to drive for people.

One day when I hang up the wheel, this is home, motorsport is my home. I feel very fortunate that I've been able to race in multiple series and probably have options to be involved with teams on either INDYCAR or NASCAR. I've done a little commentating and feel like there could be an avenue for me to be on television. So I don't know where that will all lead.

But I'm open to anything. I really am, down the road. I'm not there yet, but I would certainly have to entertain it, and if it had anything to do with Hendrick Motorsports and working with Jeff, Rick Hendrick, it would be a high priority for me to sort out. Rick has changed my life. Rick is like a second father to me. Jeff gave me my start. Jeff even helped me meet my wife and I've been able to start my family as a result.

I have a lot of care and compassion for the company, and if an opportunity came together there I'd really have to look hard at it.

Q. You've talked a little bit here with working with guys like Dario Franchitti, Scott Pruett, Scott Dixon, but what can you say about being on a team with Alex Palou who leads the championship, and especially Tony Kanaan, who even carries your car's number in competitions like the SRX and Brazil and stock car. In Brazilian television you have a lot of fans here who liked you from NASCAR and INDYCAR. A friend of mine called Sandoval is absolutely crazy for you; he wants to do a tattoo with the 48. We are excited in Brazil about your idea of maybe racing ovals next year, but it's scary to think what will happen to TK if you do that. Can you please tell us about your plans?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, TK is safe. TK will have a car to drive on the ovals next year. The agreement is for two years. If I was to put together the Indy 500 or some other ovals, we would have to get another car number and get another car out, and then we'd have to decide who runs the 48, so maybe Tony and I could be in an arm wrestling contest for that. Maybe I could use two arms to try to beat him.

Either way, there's nothing for the Kanaan fans to fear. Tony will be racing in an INDYCAR in the ovals next season.

Q. The car has been taken over by young boys this year, but do you see yourself as part of a glorious old generation with guys like TK, Montoya? Do you set yourself an age limit to stop competing in INDYCAR or something like that?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, I don't have a timeline or age limit. At some point the fire will go out, and when that happens, I'll move on and see what's next in life for me.

I love driving race cars. I'm at a point in life where I can experience something new, try new cars, new tracks. I've been very fortunate to be with Action Express in the IMSA car and also be with Chip Ganassi Racing in the INDYCAR and meet and work with some amazing and great people.

So I'm really enjoying this kind of 2.0 for me in my life of racing.

Q. As you focus on the second half of the INDYCAR season, how have you adjusted your goals in terms of acclimating to INDYCAR, in terms of your perspective and the team's goals?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: My goals are still the same. I think I've had to recalibrate my expectations. I felt like I would be much closer than where I have been. That part I realized early on after St. Pete that this mountain was a little taller than I first anticipated.

Since I've come to grips with that, I've really enjoyed it, and just looking forward to getting in the car more and more. Every time I get in the car I feel more at home and more comfortable, and then trying to learn these new tracks, as challenging as that has been, it's been a lot of fun.

The circuits we run on are so interesting. Mid-Ohio, I didn't know what to expect going into it and left there thinking, that's probably the coolest lap that I've made in a race car so far in my career with just how fun the track is and how it flows.

I knew it would be challenging, and I heard a lot of drivers talking about the challenge of it, but from an experience of driving, what a cool place.

I still have a handful of races left to go this year and some more tracks to learn, and very excited about that.

Q. Speaking of those final races of this year, I'm sure it's been exciting to have your family around to watch

and document everything you do, whether it's social media or just the personal time you've had with them, but with your wife and your daughters, how has it been to share what you're doing in INDYCAR and know it's everyone's firsthand experience?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, it's been a neat experience for us all. It is different on many levels, and of course we know and remember our NASCAR world and the relationships, the friends, the camaraderie, the environment, the energy, like we remember that and know that. NASCAR is a very special place.

But INDYCAR is just different, and it's special in its ways, too. It's neat to watch my wife and children discover those differences and find things that are new and exciting and fun for them.

And then at the same time with my daughters watching me so closely and being at an age where there's a good chance they'll remember this chapter in their lives and my life and what Dad is trying to achieve, there's certainly teachable moments here that I'm showing my children that, hey, hard work is a big part of anyone's success, but there's no guarantees that it's going to be what you hoped for.

Of course I hoped to be winning races in INDYCAR, and that's kind of where I want to be, but then watching me go through this journey, watching my apply myself and work so hard and have the right mindset and apply myself, Chandy and I sit here and hope that our kids really pay attention to that and learn from this moment, learn from these couple of years that I have driving INDYCARs, and that makes them stronger and better in their lives.

Q. Looking ahead to Nashville, in a lot of ways it's a blank sheet of paper for everybody. It's a brand new race course. Do you look at the Nashville event as one that maybe is your best opportunity to get a result this year?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, there's definitely a line of thought for that. Things have been much more different than I expected, so I don't know how to read an event going into it. I can say that double-headers treat me really well, and I wish that we had more double-headers on the schedule. Race two is always -- not always, but race two at Detroit was way more competitive than race one.

Yeah, there's something to it. We're all going to discover things. I think it puts a lot of pressure on each team. The first team to really hit on the setup that's required and can kind of find a compromise out of all the challenges that the Nashville track is going to throw at us, they're going to

have a clear advantage.

I do feel like more pressure is off of me heading into Nashville, not necessarily -- doesn't guarantee me anything I guess I should say, but with it being new, it does relieve some pressure from myself.

Q. With your experience in stock cars, this was something I noticed at Detroit like you mentioned, you had a really good weekend there, dealing with the heat generated by the aeroscreen, it seems like a lot of drivers in INDYCAR struggle with that, but your stock car always kind of was a very hot experience. Is that something that kind of works to your advantage on a tough track like a street circuit?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, it does. Yes, it is very physical in the INDYCARs, and it is a different kind of suffering that you experience, but it's really due to a very high heart rate, very high physicality of wrestling the race car around, forearm pump, shoulders, core, back. It's just a very physical car that you have to muscle around.

But it's 30 to 40 degrees cooler than what a NASCAR vehicle typically is in the middle of the summer. We have sensors in the cockpit of the INDYCAR, and I know what the cabin temp was in the Cup car.

To your point, yes, this is a much cooler environment than I'm used to, and it's been nice to not melt in the cars. I know a lot of guys have suffered with the heat, but man, you get in one of those Cup cars and it's a whole new level of suffering from heat.

Q. Just looking forward to next year, you've had a lot of questions about the ovals. Would that just be something you'd be looking at to do the INDYCAR 500 or would you be running for the full points championship next year?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's just too early to tell. Right now most of the -- right now it's really just focused on getting ready for the 500. It would depend on how the test would go. Honestly to run a full schedule next year would really be complicated, so I don't know how realistic that opportunity would be at the end of the day.

We have a commitment with TK and the 48 car and all the sponsors that he was able to raise and bring on board to run those four races, so to run a one off at the 500 is a more realistic option than looking at the full schedule, but we'll just have to see how things unfold.

Q. Jimmie, you talked about the physical discipline involved with INDYCAR. I wanted to ask you about a

mental discipline, if you will. I don't know if you've been following what's happening in the Olympic Games with Simone Biles pulling out of the gymnastics competition, the team competition today because she wasn't there mentally, and of course Naomi Osaka has been open about her mental health struggles heading into the Olympics. I wanted to ask you as an all-time great in a sport that also requires a tremendous amount of mental discipline, without getting too personal, how important is dealing with mental health to you as an athlete, as a race car driver, and do you believe that mental health gets taken seriously enough in the world of racing?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, gosh, there's a bunch of questions you asked and a bunch of big ones. It's a great conversation. I think as brave athletes stand up and talk about the mental challenges that they're dealing with that it helps bring awareness to it. It helps people feel comfortable to speak up about what they're dealing with.

For myself, I have -- sure, I've had low moments, but I've always been a glass is half full optimistic kind of guy, through my career, through my life, and I don't know where that comes from. There have been plenty of challenging moments along the way and certainly no guarantees with my career path and where I started off in El Cajon, California.

I don't know if I felt like I was playing with house money all along and that's helped with the mindset, but it is real, and we have to listen and honor and try to understand where these athletes are coming from when they're dealing with it.

I think five, ten years from now we'll be in a better place of understanding, the more people that speak up and understand what's behind it, understand how to work through it.

Some of it, being an athlete is not an easy occupation. There is inherent pressure and stress that comes with the job, and sometimes that can take a toll on people. Other people can handle it longer. There's just so many layers to it that it's really hard to hit on just one thing.

Q. How would you rate your first INDYCAR season so far? We have a big break so we can make go back and look at some data and work for the second part of the season. How would you rate your debut?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Well, from an effort standpoint I know I can't do any more. That's what helps me sleep at night. Anybody that has been around through the start of the year has been blown away with the amount of effort I've made to get in the sim, be around the shop, drive F3 cars,

anything and everything I can get my hands on, I've done so. So I'm really proud of that. But the results aren't where I want them to be.

I'm trying to be patient. I'm trying to let myself learn these tracks and the car and get up to speed.

I guess an overall goal, I feel like I'm probably in that C range. I feel like I could be -- I've left some points on the table. I've left some race finishes, some positions on track on the table. I haven't been able to get everything that was available to me, and that's the first step. I need to clean up my mistakes, get all that I can on a race weekend, and I think I would have a little higher grade for myself and how I've done so far.

Q. Do you think that having the double-header with NASCAR on the IMS road course is an advantage for you, and do you think having the first race in the Indy Grand Prix will help you to have a result for the second race, or do you think the track will be very different because we raced in May, now we'll race in August with the heat? It's going to be quite a new challenge maybe?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, I've had the second Indy road course race circled on my list. I've been able to drive there my first time ever in an INDYCAR back for the first race weekend, and now to come back again, that should be -- I have high expectations for myself on that weekend.

Sure, it's going to be warmer, sure, there will be different rubber down on the track with the NASCAR vehicles. I don't think that will hurt me much. I think coming back for a third time to a racetrack will help me more than anything.

Q. You said you were going to do the first test on an oval in Homestead and you said you were thinking about how the test will go in order to make a decision maybe for Indy next year. What would you consider to be a successful first oval test in an INDYCAR?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Ultimately I'm trying to understand the safety level of the INDYCAR on the ovals. That's really been my fear, from being a fan and watching from afar and watching my friends race on ovals. That's the part that's worried me.

As a father of two and a deal I made with my wife a long time ago about the Indy 500, I've kind of watched the ovals and really never thought that I could be out there.

But then anticipating this year as a television commentator, being around the sport all season like I have, seeing a few big crashes at the Brickyard and speaking to the drivers

after, I'm becoming much more comfortable with the ovals and with the crash dynamics that take place, with softer walls, the halo, the aeroscreen, the top of the car, and I'm at a point now where in a funny way I'm willing to go hit a wall, and in some ways it's like, I'm not going to know unless I really hammer a wall how much it hurts, the difference between a Cup car and an INDYCAR, and the folks at Ganassi are going to hate to read this wherever it comes out, but yes, I need to go make laps and I need to understand what that experience is like, but ultimately I'm just trying to understand the safety level of the car, and as I get more comfortable with that, my participation on ovals will increase.

Q. Does the fact that in the last 10 years we've gone with less aero on the cars on the ovals, less pack racing, does it also help you to feel more safe in that kind of way?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think watching the Indy 500 this year and seeing Alex's huge crash that he had in practice, he was fine. He walked away. That was a big check mark for me, like okay, wall, car, that speed, that all worked well. What's tricky is climbing wheels, and we know that what open wheel cars. The less pack racing has been directionally correct for me in considering running on ovals.

Q. You're doing IMSA also this year with the DPi also with Simon Pagenaud. Is it something with the new rules that are coming to endurance racing and the 24 Hours of Le Mans, is it a race that you would maybe like to take part in the future to still broaden your motorsports agenda let's say?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I would love to. That's absolutely the -- left on my to-do list or my wish list or bucket list. That's at the top. I've always had a great desire to race at Le Mans, and I ran a fair amount of GRAND-AM races in the early -- I guess like 2008 to 2010 or somewhere in there, ran a bunch of races just trying to get my foot in the door, trying to learn these cars, trying to be better at it, trying to keep my name out there, and now I've circled back around to that and trying to compete in IMSA. Of course I want to race in the IMSA events, but that's all really teeing up a hopeful opportunity at Le Mans someday.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you talked to Sage Karam about racing NASCAR Xfinity. Would you ever consider like being a coach for him if he has a full-time ride next year?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I would definitely help him. I have a few NASCAR drivers that I talk to and try to help. I was very lucky when I was coming along in racing that

drivers would give me advice and were there to help me, and I've always felt like I wouldn't be where I am today without that and that if I was ever given the opportunity I would try to coach or mentor young drivers, as well.

I'd definitely offer up any help that Sage might need.

Q. Obviously with Nashville coming up, would you love to see that as a night race maybe next season?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: A street night race would be pretty amazing. Yeah, I didn't really think that would be possible, and I'm running through the location and lights. Yeah, I guess it would be possible. I'd hate to pay the light bill, but that would be pretty awesome.

Q. Just given the fact like you've kind of run NASCAR races at night, obviously I know it's different on an oval, but given the way they do it in Singapore in Formula 1, Nashville being a new circuit, it could be something that would be pretty sweet, given that they have their -- like the Music City stuff like all the music kind of stuff around there, too.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think that's a great idea. Yeah, I would be in favor of that. That would be pretty awesome.

Q. With the Olympics being on right now, have you been keeping an eye on it here and there, and if you could do any of those sports, which one would you do?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I've kept an eye on it. We were traveling back from being out in Colorado for a few weeks, so I missed yesterday and haven't really seen anything today, but I love the Olympics, winter or summer, to tune in and watch these athletes do their thing. The commitment to succeed at that level is so impressive, and with my love of swimming, cycling and running, I just can't imagine at that young age that most of those athletes are to be so gifted and have a chance to represent your country and compete.

Obviously a huge fan of the Olympics, and if I could compete in a sport, the first one that comes to mind for me is swimming. I swam in high school and love to tune in and watch the swimming portion. I know triathlon just happened for the men recently and saw a little bit of that. Swim, bike or run would be the area that I would focus on or dream of focusing on as an Olympian.

Q. Do you think you can give Michael Phelps a run for his money?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, not a chance. I've had a chance to meet him in person, and with how tall he is and that long wingspan of his arm and the gift that he has, there is no chance, unless I had a motor hooked to my feet.

Q. There's a lot of focus on the next street race being at Nashville, but the season is going to end with a street race that I know is near and dear to your heart, it's kind of what motivated you to become a race driver in the first place. How excited are you to wrap up your rookie season in the Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach enjoying the list of those great names that have raced there all the way back to the Formula 1 days?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I am so excited for it. I keep watching the pandemic with its ebb and flow of cases, and you look at states, and I start to worry. I just keep wondering, are we going to have an issue and I can't go to the dream track. I certainly obviously hope that doesn't happen.

I have so much excitement for it that I'm almost fearful something is going to go wrong. But with all that said, I've hung on the fence and have dreamt of being on the inside, and to have a chance to race there to kind of close this loop from a childhood dream to make it reality, be close to the area I grew up, I'm sure I'll have tons of friends there from my hometown and then new friends that I've met over the years that want to come in and support. It's going to be a very fun weekend, and Sunday night we'll have plenty of celebrate.

THE MODERATOR: That will wrap up season No. 1 for you at Long Beach, which will be a cool way to do that. Don't get used to three weeks off in the middle of the summertime in the series.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Man, this has been nice.

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