

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Sebastien Bourdais

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. Great to see everyone. As always, busy stretch. Happy to be so really. Three races remain of the 2021 INDYCAR Series championship that begins this coming weekend at beautiful Portland International Raceway.

Sebastien Bourdais certainly has some very fond memories of Portland, two-time race winner there, also picked up five total podiums, a pole position, as well, and the driver of the No. 14 Rocket AJ Foyt Racing Chevrolet joins us before his trip out to the Pacific Northwest.

Seb, thanks for doing this this afternoon. What do you look forward to perhaps the most when it comes to racing up at Portland International?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: A great dinner on the river.

No, jokes aside, it's always great to go there. Really awesome fan base that's been waiting for a long time for us to go back. They've had to get an off year again, and I'm sure they'll just be super pumped to see us and cheer us on again this weekend.

Yeah, always really excited to go there. It's a fun little racetrack, full of challenges, tough racing, and it's definitely got quite its fair share of history over the years. Always great to try and align to the racing we have over there.

THE MODERATOR: Ticket sales are up from 2019. I remember which the series came back they were lining up literally around the block for that opening practice, so it's going to be great to see the fans back in the northwest.

Seb coming off a top 5 at Worldwide Technology Raceway, best finish since the opening at Barber Motorsports Park. What does a run like that at Gateway do certainly as you look ahead to the final three races of the season now?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, I mean, it wasn't a straightforward run. Obviously we had to work our way towards the front with a little bit of strategy and not such a

great run in qualifying, but I think it's just so competitive. As soon as you're missing a tenth or two, then you're just nowhere, and that was another very good example.

In the race I don't think we were exactly where we wanted to be as far as just the pure speed of the car, but it seems like we were taking fairly good care of our tires and had a really consistent pace over the long runs that just allowed us to kind of play the long game and just fuel save like crazy the whole race.

Yeah, finally it just kind of fell in our lap, extending the window on that last stop, a lot of guys got caught out, and we didn't, and yeah, that was great because thankfully for once we were on the right side of the window and got that top 5. So it was really good for the whole team.

They've been working really hard, and like you mentioned, we really didn't get a whole lot to back it up since the first race really. We had quite a bit of speed in St. Pete but didn't show it in the race after a little contact and some front wing damage, and ever since it's just been kind of okay. It really wasn't bad, it's just the competition has been really strong, and we just couldn't quite capitalize and put all the things together.

We had glimpses of speed here and there during the weekend and couldn't quite put a weekend together. Yeah, it was nice to get back in the top 5, and looking forward to that last stretch there with the West Coast Swing and the three races in a row.

Q. Obviously you're coming off, as you say, a top result. What kind of benefit does that give you guys going into this weekend? Obviously I know the tracks are completely different, but does that give you kind of renewed confidence going into the final three races?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: No, not really. I think the mood in the team is always very important, though. The morale of the troop was getting a little low, and you kind of need a bit of a boost every now and then, just some reward for your hard work. It was definitely pretty timely for us going into a bit of a break and just before a three-races-in-a-row stretch.

Yeah, I think it doesn't really change anything as far as



Portland is concerned because you unload and you're just going to have to prove everything all over again and see where you land and how the car is, but yeah, it's always nice to get a bit of mental momentum in the game in the next event.

Q. Obviously this weekend's race is very long, so does that give you an opportunity to play around with strategy a little bit?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, I mean, this race can obviously be a race strategy that can be quite interesting. Fuel can often at times come into play. The nature of the track being a very short track, there are a lot of laps, and to save a lap, two laps, three laps is not out of the question.

Yeah, it's definitely one of those races that's been played out in fuel saving mode sometimes pretty aggressively. Surely '18 was. '19 there was some drama, as well. Yeah, I think it's never really a boring race, and with the number of cars you increase the chances of these things happening, and I think we'll be, what, 27 cars or 28 cars. So yeah, it's definitely going to be one to watch.

Q. Obviously it was announced that Charlie Kimball is going to be back for the final race of the year with you guys. How beneficial is it to have Charlie back on board?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, I mean, I think we seem to have a fairly competitive street course package. The car was fairly good at Nashville. Again, nothing that we could really show for.

But I think it's always great to get another read on the car, what direction we've been heading. To be honest I don't think we've really very much diverted from what he's driven, which we kind of drifted towards the end of '20, obviously, when we were teammates last year. So I don't think he's going to be super spectacularly shocked about where we're at in setups. But yeah, it's always great to get some different feedback, different datasets to look at.

It's obviously a bit challenging and difficult when you just kind of come like this without a test to get back up to speed, but he knows his way around Long Beach, so I think he'll definitely be a good addition to the team.

Q. I wanted to ask, firstly, do you think that the characteristics of the Portland track favor the Chevrolet at all because of the long straight and the Chevy being strong at the top end?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, I think it's probably one of those tracks that really doesn't really put a big gap between

the two. Not that there is a big one anyways, but I think it kind of levels things out between the torque side of the competition and our more crisp top end. Yeah, I would say it's probably a bit of an equalizer.

Q. Are the cars now so different that you require a different driving technique to excel at Portland as you did back in the Champ Car days?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah. I mean, I think there's no denying that the way you used to be able to drive the Champ Cars is very, very different from where we're at, even in like -- it's probably mostly the way you have to treat the Firestone tires. The construction has changed a lot. The compound tends to be quite a bit softer, and the weight of the car is obviously a big factor in it.

So yeah, I think there are a lot of variations from my early career in the U.S. to where we're at right now.

Q. About a year ago at this time you were joining Foyt. Obviously I know you signed a contract before then, but how much different would you say the team is now compared to when you were making your first start and at this point last year?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I mean, the real only significant difference is Justin Taylor's arrival over the winter, which obviously helped us to just do put more work in because it's just an extra brilliant mind in the program. So we've been able to crank up on the simulator side of things, trying to weed out a lot of things.

It's just a heavy process where you just don't make things happen overnight. You need correlation, so you need to go to the simulator, do your race weekend, do some correlation post-event.

Yeah, it's definitely quite a challenge, but as far as the team is concerned, it's just been mostly a solidification of the base and just making it stronger with the addition of Justin.

Q. Three races left; what are some of the goals you'd like to have for the last three races? Obviously I know a championship is unfortunately out the window, but where would you like to see the team go the last three races? Obviously a win has got to be a top goal, but what are some of the goals you'd like to see?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I mean, obviously it would have been great to get away with a podium at some point, but it's obviously quite difficult. I think if genuinely on pace, we can be in the top 10 for the last three events, I think that would be great, and then get a top 5 or two. That would

be, I think, a reasonable expectation that I think is feasible.

But still, to be able to do that, you look at the number of cars that you need to beat, and it's definitely not automatic. You need to temper the expectations and underpromise and overdeliver.

Q. We saw what happened with the incident with PK and Dixon and Palou at Gateway. What's your mindset with racing drivers that are up front going for a championship? You obviously have to be aggressive in this series because it's so tight, but do you think about other drivers and going for a championship when you're trying to make moves, or does that just go out the window and you try to take care of them the best that you can?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yes and no. I mean, we've had such a complicated year anyways with a lot of crash damage, especially over a 48-hour period at Texas that really doesn't allow us to wreck a whole lot of material. I think Larry is pretty deep in the pocket already, so that definitely sets the tone as far as how much you want to dare it, and plus for the longest time and really until Gateway, we were really starving for points.

The best way to score points isn't really to take yourself out of the equation with a very aggressive move, knocking a front wing or something out of the car.

Fortunately this year we've been a lot on the receiving end, but yeah, we've definitely been very mindful and conscious of constraints and the need to finish the races.

Q. You mentioned that going into Belle Isle, you said that Texas kind of affected the way you guys did things for the month of May. Would you say that had a fallout for the rest of the season, maybe you had to change some aggression because you couldn't afford to get any more crash damage?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, some of that, and the fact that when you are behind the 8-ball like that and you really need to score fairly consistently and at a fairly higher rate than we definitely did, again, to be able to score points, you need to finish the races. Yeah, you definitely kind of maybe become a little bit more conservative than you should be, and I think unfortunately it kind of showed with the performance of our starts and restarts at times, you just kind of hang back a little bit, you leave a half a car, whatever, and then unfortunately right away you get swarmed with a couple of cars that just get on top of you and lose a couple spots.

Yeah, it's definitely a tough balancing act to get on top of,

but yeah, it's just the way it is.

But the management of aggression is definitely a harder thing to do when you're trying to cover getting to the finish, not crashing more than you already have. Yeah, it's not exactly what you want to be thinking about when you're in the middle of a tight pack as it is these days.

THE MODERATOR: We've gone over 20 minutes and we have not talked about Turn 1 at Portland. As a two-time winner there, is there a secret to kind of tiptoeing through Turn 1 in the opening lap at Portland?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah. Be on pole, brake as late as you can and get away. That's the easiest way to go about it.

But yeah, as soon as you start second, third row and back, anything can happen. It's obviously not as bad as Cleveland used to be, but it's still awfully inviting to go one up on the inside, and then next thing you know you're five or six wide going into Turn 1 with an impossible corner to make. Yeah, hopefully everybody keeps his head, but yeah, we've seen time and time again how inviting that corner is and the kind of chaos that can be led from those kind of aggression levels, which we've definitely not been shy of this year.

THE MODERATOR: You can talk about it all you want, but when you put that helmet on, sometimes you kind of lose perspective, right?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, and it is very easy to just get sucked into the moment. It's one of those where if you get a run, you tend of kind of forget that there's already another three guys that are side by side going for it, as well, and unfortunately at Portland going in that chicane, you're all going to meet at the exact same inch point between 1 and 2 if not at the apex of 1. Yeah, that definitely puts on a scenario that ends up in tears with cars torn up more often than not.

Q. I had a related question. We've heard a few drivers just talking about the general aggressiveness of INDYCAR lately and the conversation came about from Gateway with the few wrecks we had there but it's been other recent races, as well, and some were even saying it's been a little over the limit from the field at large. I was curious what your view was of that.

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, I mean, I think that's kind of the name of the game. When you have a monotype series for the most part with two engines that are very closely matched and they're very high density, you're going to see very, very high aggression on starts and restarts



because unfortunately everybody knows that this is when things are happening, and if you are looking for positions, well, you're not going to have that many chances. That drives the aggression level up.

When the gaps are as tight as they are, you have to use pretty much every opening that you see, even if it's kind of a long shot and a risky move.

Yeah, there's definitely a lot of guys that feel a huge urgency to make things happen right away, because we all know how hard it is to make it happen later on.

Q. Do you think some drivers are taking it too far or that it's gotten worse recently, or is that just a real short-term view because we've had a couple races with some wrecks in them?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, I think obviously sometimes the amount of risks that are taken is not directly related to the outcome of the situation. Sometimes you just get lucky and things kind of sort itself out. There's a little bit of contact, but all the cars keep running. In Gateway's case for sure it's a very unforgiving track where as soon as there is any kind of contact, it ends pretty badly for most parties involved.

Yeah, it is kind of the nature of the track, but yeah, I think we also have had deeper fields with more cars, which obviously also increases the probability of getting incidents on track.

Q. You mentioned the restarts is where the opportunity is; have you noticed any lack of restart smoothness from the lead cars or that creates an undo accordion affect that causes some of these problems?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Well, I don't know if anybody noticed what I tried to show at Gateway when I did lead the restart, but I pretty much did what I would very much like race control to kind of get on board with, but we seem to have a bit of a varying perspective on the whole thing.

I mean, on the race control side, they tend to put a lot of responsibility on the leader to try and lead the field with the safety car just getting away before we even get it back up, and therefore we barely ever get it back up before starts or restarts, which to me it's a very risky move because you end up starting races with a field that has very, very large amounts of speed differential, and we've seen cars on top of each other many times.

I very vehemently disagree with that approach, but I'm not the only one and I'm not race control, so everybody's opinions just matter for themselves, but yeah, at Gateway

when I did that restart, I kind of pretty much went to safety car speed right away at the line and for the entire lap until the restart, and that seemed to have just kind of settled down a little bit and not trickled as much accordion effect as we've seen in a lot of the starts and restarts.

I wish we were kind of getting more involved with that, but for sure everybody needs to be on board, as well, and respect the gapping and how much throttle brake is applied and stuff like that. Yeah, it takes a bit of everybody to fix the problem that we've had lately for sure.

Q. If you get in the happy position of leading again, is it possible to save fuel and also stay ahead of the pack there, or is it better to kind of like drop a couple of spaces back and have someone kind of like breaking the air for you?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: You're talking about Gateway?

Q. No, sorry, Portland this weekend.

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: No. I mean, Portland -- I don't remember any instances at Portland where clean air is not key. It's just awfully difficult to follow the complex at the back. Obviously three, four, five, six, seven there is just torture, and as you start to get on a sunny day with a little slightly higher track times and less dense air with warmer conditions, you're just starving for downforce.

Yeah, following has always been a very tricky thing. It's a very narrow track. There's really mostly only one line, so getting any kind of air behind someone is a huge challenge, and tire deg comes into play very quickly after that. Yeah, unfortunately I think it's getting someone -- I like the idea, but unfortunately with the nature of the track it's almost impossible to get dragged along.

At Gateway for sure, that's definitely the tactics. If you're trying to save fuel, it's awfully easier to do when you have someone creating the road block for you. But yeah, when you're behind someone at Portland, not so much.

Q. Obviously we're going to Portland for the first time since 2019; do you think that the addition of the aeroscreen might cause a couple of problems in terms of like running in traffic and that?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: No, not really. I mean, I think the car is just heavier and it's a little bit more aggressive on tires, depending on the track. But overall I don't think the cars have become harder in traffic with the aeroscreen. It's just harder on tires.

On a track that's already a bit rough on tires, it can still

definitely not help. But for sure we've all kind of agreed that in many ways the addition of the aeroscreen is outweighing the little compromises that we're seeing sometimes.

Q. I read that you held the fastest lap from 2019 in the Grand Prix of Portland in practice. I know you weren't there last year, and now you're in a completely different car, different team, went from Dale Coyne to AJ Foyt, so how are you preparing for the Portland GP after being gone two years so maybe you can be fast again and bring home another top 10? How are you preparing?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: We actually went to the simulator and prepared for the last three races as much as we could. So that was the biggest preparation you can do. Obviously the team has worked very, very hard to try and look at all the setups historically from years prior to adjust and make the best decision on what the baseline would be, and then we tried that at the simulator and different things and came up with the setup that we're going to start with.

Hopefully it works out.

But in 2020 nobody raced at Portland, so we're not at a disadvantage. But for sure we've got a pretty steep uphill battle for us at AJ Foyt Racing. We've been trying to get things better, and I think we have, but the competition has progressed, as well. It's never easy, but we'll keep digging, and I think we've shown that we can have speed, not necessarily on a super consistent basis, but that's definitely one track where it would be pretty good to be able to display something.

THE MODERATOR: We'll leave it there. Thanks to the four-time INDYCAR Series champion Sebastien Bourdais. You leave for the northwest tomorrow, right?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yep, leaving tomorrow morning, straight to Seattle.

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