

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Jimmie Johnson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. We are wrapping up the rookie orientation program here on a special October day, involving of course Jimmie Johnson, seven-time NASCAR Cup champion.

We want to welcome in Jimmie Johnson, who completed Phase I and Phase II, Phase III up over 215 miles an hour. He still has a couple of laps left. By rules, certainly approved now to join the veterans. If you so choose to enter the 106th running of the Indianapolis 500 next May, you'll be allowed to join and finish up those few laps when the IMS open test kicks in April 20th and 21st.

Overall your day, you had to dodge some raindrops, but your thoughts on the day here today.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No, just a special day to drive an INDYCAR at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. I have truly, truly enjoyed it. It was a childhood dream come true. The experience is more than expected and something that I really, really enjoyed.

Big thanks to everybody at CGR, Carvana, the American Legion. Dario flew across the pond to come, be a part of it, Marcus Ericsson was there, Tony Kanaan, Dixon was texting in, Palou was on the simulator and texting in. My CGR family was keeping a close eye on me, helping me get up to speed, which I think came in pretty easily, especially through these phases take place.

Dodged some rain showers. Certainly didn't run as many laps as I hoped to. In the crunch, felt like I got up to a great pace and had a good sense of the car around the track.

THE MODERATOR: Did you feel like you had the sense of speed with being an NTT INDYCAR SERIES driver at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, knowing 212, a few laps were 215, isn't quite what you're going to see at the end of the day, but still much different than what you're used to in a Cup car?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I heard so many drivers talk

about the slower miles an hours, Phase I, in the rookie orientation. The car is less stuck because you don't have the vehicle speed to create the downforce. I was able to experience that firsthand.

As we had the car limited in speed, the car moved around a bit more. I was trying to adapt to the speed, just how fast things were coming at me. As we worked out of Phase I into Phase II, started into Phase III, the car was just more stuck. Running flat was very easy to do. We trimmed out quite a bit because we were getting ready to make our final run when the clouds opened up on us.

Things felt surprisingly similar. Once I got through the notion of downshifting and upshifting through the course of the lap, the speed at which things were coming at me, the driving line, the technique, even the behavior of the car in different turns around the racetrack was all very familiar to me. I was very excited to see that.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for Jimmie Johnson.

Q. When we spoke after the first go round today, I think you'd only run five or six laps. You talked about how it was a little bit of a tease. How much of a tease was it for you to get this close to finishing ROP completely, then having the sky open up at the end of the day?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, definitely wanted to complete it. It's so hard to get laps in an INDYCAR on the racetrack with the right tire. We didn't even get into our third set of tires.

30 or 40 laps more that I could have run that I didn't get to experience. At this stage of my INDYCAR career, every lap makes a difference. Certainly on the ovals it makes a huge difference for me.

A bit of a tease. I feel a little shorted. INDYCAR did a great job of getting the track ready the first time. Then the second time, now, I mean, it still hasn't stopped raining, so there really was no chance to get back on track today.

Q. How much did you want to be able to run unrestricted laps today once you got through ROP?



JIMMIE JOHNSON: I would say the last half of set two tires, finishing Phase II of the rookie test, we had the car at trim settings where they raced, actually went below those trim settings. I got a good sense of changes on the car, what light downforce feels like, moving the center of pressure around.

I think I ran 55 laps or so, not only just focusing on running lap times to work through the phases but also feeling changes we made on the car. I was excited personally to go through that and understand what minus rear wing feels like, less front wing feels like.

While I stood and watched last year, I would hear those changes being made. It would make me pucker up. It was nice to get out there and attach a feeling to that.

Q. Has this increased your desire to run the 500?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Definitely, definitely increased. I think the look I had at Texas increased it and brought me here. A little short on laps for what I wanted to experience today. As comfortable as I felt my interest is at the highest it's been, certainly my comfort is at the highest it's been. All that said, there's still a lot of work between now and really pulling through with this opportunity.

Q. You've driven here the oval in a stockcar, an INDYCAR on the road course. Today is the first time you drove an INDYCAR at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on the oval. Did you really feel the history of what this place is?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I did. It was more from watching some video that Earl, my spotter, took as I came through turn one. I didn't have as big of a moment when driving it. When I saw a video from the outside, I could hear the sound of the INDYCAR, watch the speed, see it was my liverly on the car. That was the moment that really got me.

Q. Is the line still the line as you switch from stockcar to INDYCAR? There's a great video of you and Rick Mears going round the speedway in a Corvette from 10 years ago. You were discussing different lines. Is it the same line that you take?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It really is, which surprised me. Actually brought some comfort as I was trimming the car out, going faster in Phase II.

One thing that is different, though, is the car has so much potential that you can run other lines. There's really just one line in a Cup car. There's probably two or three lines in the INDYCAR.

I started off with my traditional Cup line. Then Dario had me work on some options to work with the car, if the balance had too much understeer in it, some other options I could drive the track with. To my surprise, the car had the potential to do it. That was new for me, though.

Q. Fairly obvious question. The bumps that are almost imperceptible in a Cup car, do you feel them magnified, turn one, did that feel alarming to you?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's been interesting. I even experienced this in Texas. The ride height for an INDYCAR on an oval is higher than I'm used to experiencing, and the car does not drag the bottom. In a Cup car that ride height is on deck, a lot of contact and you feel every bump. The airflow in the underwing of an INDYCAR, the preferred ride height is off the ground. So the bumps are actually a lot smaller than I anticipated them being here and certainly at Texas.

Q. You came to INDYCAR and said no ovals. It didn't take you too long, Maybe I want to try an oval. Now we're here, the season's over, and you fulfilled a childhood dream. Do you regret not doing the ovals this year?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I don't know if I regret. I think it would have been a much easier pathway for me. Now that I'm looking to do it, there's still a lot of work to be done. Even if I say, Hey, everyone, I'm in, we still have a lot of work to get done just to pull it off.

That aspect, it would have been easier to make this decision a year sooner. But I really had to go through what I have to get comfortable with INDYCAR, hit a couple walls. Hitting the wall at 180, Nashville, as much as I hated doing it, it was a good data point for me. Also for me family to be around these cars, the industry. Seeing a couple bad crashes this year, seeing what the aeroscreen has done to protect Ryan Hunter-Reay at Barber when the wheel assembly came back into the windshield.

It's not that I regret it. It would have been an easier path. But I had to go through this journey on my own.

Q. You've been to Texas, a little bit on the Speedway today. Does it feel the same to you or are there any similarities to the experiences had you in the Cup car?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I would say the ovals, there are many similarities. On road courses there are zero similarities. I do feel more at home, more comfortable. The adjustments that you make for a NASCAR vehicle and an INDYCAR oddly enough kind of do the same thing. I'm

much more in my comfort zone on ovals.

Q. With all of the input from your teammates, the prep from your team in advance of this, what was your biggest surprise in the first couple laps? Anything jump out at you that was a little different than what you were prepared for based on all of the advice you had?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: In that first phase I thought I could lift a bit more. I was surprised just how much throttle I had to run to hit that 205 mark. As I did that, the car just got better and better. You hear people talk about more pace plants the car harder. Until you actually go out and fight through it on your own, it's hard to convince your foot to stay flat. That was a bit more of a process than I thought.

Once I felt it the first time and ran flat in turn two, first corner I ran flat, damn, that was so much easier, I need to get flat everywhere. Sure enough, the car drove better.

Q. I don't know which way the wind was blowing today. One corner that was more difficult to get a handle on?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It was more of a cross-blowing kind of towards turn four. But turn one, I feel like it's probably more visual effect than anything, but that was the last corner that I got flat.

Q. You've talked about the process of evaluating whether or not you were going to run the full schedule. There's been questions about whether or not you're going to run the ovals. You put all the commercial considerations aside, logistics, in terms of you Jimmie Johnson ready right now, if I was Chip Ganassi and said, it's ready to go, are you in, can you answer that question definitively now?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I can't just yet. I need to leave here today, go home, sit down, get a good bottle of wine open, maybe even pull Vasser's bottles off the shelf.

I'm as close as I've ever been. The racer in me is taking a real serious look at this, but I still need to sit down and have that conversation at home.

Q. Curious if you can describe the sensation of charging into turn one once you're up to speed, the kind of time warp, Star Wars lightspeed type thing some drivers talk about. Can you tell us about that experience. The mental processing rate for sure would be something different than anything you did in Cup.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I feel like Texas really helped me get my eyes up high enough, look far enough down the

road, even recalibrated my body to the lateral Gs, the potential of the car.

It still was extremely fast. But I think Texas for me was that first moment of, like, whoa, this is way faster than I thought it would be.

Turn one was really the challenging turn, the last one that I ran flat. It's kind of a little different with the banking, the curb on the inside, a bit bumpy, kind of has you on edge.

Once I settled into it, had that conversation with my right foot and convinced it to stay down, the car just was a dream to drive. Actually quickly got into trimming the car out, got to a pretty aggressive place with trimming the car, felt very comfortable in it.

Q. How about from a feeling standpoint? You've spoken about the car talking to you, the car's voice getting louder. How about here where one or two cars on track at most, not huge banking, were you able to hear what it was telling you with that quiet speedway voice?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I think ovals, I can hear that voice much better than I do on the road courses. For obvious reason, it's a much more controlled environment. You don't have the big braking moment, the big excel moments. It's following into the car, sensing the lateral Gs, figure out where the weight is sitting on the tires.

That's much easier for me to sense and feel on an oval in an INDYCAR. Still have a lot of work to do to get there on the road courses. That's been the thing I'm taking away, and what makes me smile the most, is how I can feel that, I can feel and sense that.

Q. Listening to your reflections on the day, sounds like you're immediately more comfortable on the oval as opposed to how you felt when you first came onto the road course in an INDYCAR. Is it safe to say that kind of plays into your decision as to whether you go on ovals, knowing that you immediately feel more comfortable in the car?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I would naturally hope so. I have a lot of work to do on street courses, to be in the mix, to be competitive. I think it's fair to have higher expectations on the ovals if I do make that decision, the 500 or more, whatever that might look like.

I know myself, that's all I'm caring about in this journey is what I feel like I can do, what I'm capable of. If I choose to do it, I will raise my expectations and expect to be much more competitive.

Q. The tools are a massive part of the Indy 500. How much did you get to play with things in the car today?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Got into the car tools, it started to rain. The team was making adjustments with ride heights, taking front wing out. Aggressive spot with trim level. I was happy to feel that and experience it, just get a sense of it.

Granted, (indiscernible) air, the sun wasn't out, the track was pretty forgiving. But at least to get into a truly trimmed-out spot with the car helps me sleep well, know that I had a good experience on track with proper trim.

Q. Were you ever close enough to Romain at any time to get a sense of what a tow would feel like? Did the team tell you to stay away from doing something like that?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: In the rookie process they want us half a track apart. That would have been a big no-no, unfortunately. I would have loved to.

Q. You were here on the road course a few times this year, but can you explain how different it was preparing to go on the actual IMS oval?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: My process was very similar in studying video, looking at data. Again, not having any of my own to compare against what I'm looking at. I ran a bunch of laps in iRacing, just did what I could with the tools that I have.

Now that I've had this opportunity, I have video to go off of, I have data, then I can try to correlate to my racing game, have something to work off of from there.

Just another first that I accomplished today. If I do come back, I think I can start -- my ceiling today will be my floor the next time I'm here.

Q. How much do you think you've developed over the season from your first test at Texas to your test today?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Pretty close together. There was a marked increase in confidence, just knowing the lateral Gs that I was going to experience, understanding how fast things would be coming at me. My mind was prepared. Wherever your G meter is in your body, your butt, your head, whatever, all of those senses were much more in tune and straightaway I was ready to go.

Q. You said T.K., Dario and Marcus were helping you out, Scott from afar, Alex in the simulator. How much

of that helped you get up to speed during your ROP? How much will that help you going forward in making a decision when it comes to whether or not you compete next season?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Having depth in the human resource category is just rare. Especially guys that will give you the truth, they're not hiding anything, they're not protecting anything. To be surrounded by the five drivers that are at CGR, they want to see me succeed. There's a deeper level of trust that exists as a result.

Any question I have, they're there. They were here physically today helping me prep on the way in, more to talk about after. If I did choose to come back, I think that experience will continue to get deeper and deeper.

One of the many things I'm grateful to have here at CGR is human capital and resources I have within my teammates.

Q. Have you spoken to Chip at all before the test? Did he give you any advice?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I did. He was here at the test session. Just encouraged me to have fun and forget about it, relax, go experience the car.

Q. Off topic, Bubba won on Monday. You were pretty pivotal in the events last year. What did you think when you saw him win? What do you think his win with mean for motorsports?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I think it's a massive win. I'm super happy for Bubba. MJ, Denny, the commitment they made to join the sport, reading from afar their expansion program, how committed they are to have a top-notch program, super cool to see for NASCAR and motorsport.

For Bubba to come back to Talladega, a track where so much took place, to win the race, I'm just personally very happy for him and proud of him.

I think the first win gives a driver a lot of confidence, helps you calm down in a lot of areas, and I think Bubba will be in a sweet spot and performing well moving forward.

THE MODERATOR: Jimmie, thanks for doing this. We'll cut you loose.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Awesome.

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