

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Tuesday, January 18, 2022

Jimmie Johnson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: I'd like to introduce you today as an Indianapolis 500 rookie. How is that preparation mentally at this point?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, haven't had a lot of time to really do much with it. I feel like the half day that I had going through rookie orientation went by way too quick and the weather shortening it wasn't ideal, but just really excited for the opportunity and excited to get the season started. Have the Rolex stuff coming up so I'll be able to get some reps and get going, but not long into the year we get to test at Texas, obviously race at Texas. We have the Indy test sessions coming up.

I'm just eager to get more oval experience to try to sense and understand the car. I feel like I'll be much more competitive on the ovals, and the faster I can learn the cars and sensations and adjustments, the better my chances will be at a podium or better yet.

Just excited to get to that. I spent last year just trying to hitch my trailer to the back of the pack and keep up with everyone, and I was finally doing that at the end. I do think the ovals should increase my competitiveness and get me right in the mix with everybody.

Q. 2021 was a baptism by fire for you. How much more confident do you feel going into a second season INDYCAR racing?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: So much more comfortable and confident. I think my performance at the end of the year suggests and really reflects, I guess, probably better to say reflects the learning that I did over the course of the season. To add to that, we had two races on the INDYCAR Road Course, and from race one to race two, my comfort level was four or five times more than it was the first go-around.

Very excited for year number two. There will be some new circuits for me. I have not been to Toronto yet, the ovals, some of them -- Iowa I've never been to oddly enough. I didn't run the Xfinity car there or anything, so that will be

another new track for me.

Excited to get back. Second time around at a track, to know the nuances of the track, to have notes to work off of, to have video to work off of, those things really make a big difference.

Q. How easy was it for you to get reacquainted with the ovals after some time away?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, the speed is quite a bit faster than what I was used to in a Cup car, but once I got my eyes in the right spot, I was surprised how familiar it felt. As the Texas test session wore on, we started making adjustments to the car, and again, I was surprised how those -- I knew how those adjustments felt in a stock car and I wasn't sure if they would feel the same in an INDYCAR, and they did.

A lot of hope from those two test sessions that I had on the ovals.

Q. I was talking to Marcus Ericsson yesterday, and he reckons that your NASCAR experience on ovals might translate across to INDYCAR. What do you think will help in that regard with your transition to doing ovals this year?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: The NASCAR side, although at track limited with technology, the infrastructure the teams have and the detail that the NASCAR teams put into a race car and into a setup is really impressive. For all these years, there has not been a spec car, so there are many areas to work and many areas to make a more efficient race car, a better handling race car.

I'm hopeful that some of the lessons I learned there can help, help my teammates, help Chip Ganassi Racing perform at the highest level.

I certainly hope from a driving experience that I'm able to stop thinking so much and just start reacting and driving. I know how much of a difference that made for me on the street and road courses over the course of the year, and I'm hopeful I get on an oval and that I'm more worried about going forward than I am sensing and feeling and paying attention to all the little details.

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Q. And in terms of tracks that you haven't been to yet, which one are you most looking forward to?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I know this doesn't fit that question, but Indy. I've been to the track plenty, but just so fired up. I've never wanted to compete in a race so badly as I did watching the Indy 500 last year. I knew it would take me one way or the other, either in or out, and after watching the first car go by, I looked at Steve Letarte, we were both working for NBC, and he goes, okay, what happened, do you want in or out, and I said, I want in, and he just started laughing. Excited to be doing it.

Q. I'm curious after you and Chip Ganassi and everyone on your team went through all the effort to test things out and finally make the decision that you wanted to run the 500, put all of this together, I know your original deal with Chip only ran through the end of this year. Is it still your plan at the moment to just run this one full season in INDYCAR, or do you have your mind set and aim set to run more than just this one full season?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: There's really nothing formal after this year. But my intent and desire is to keep doing it as long as I can. For many reasons, first and foremost, I'm just having so much fun and really enjoying this challenge.

I also feel like the more reps I get, the more years that I'm around, the better my performance will be. I certainly want to run better and be more competitive on road and street courses. But on the oval journey, I think I will perform better and look better, run better. In a year or two of oval races, I might be able to be an INDYCAR winner, and that would ultimately be the goal to pull that off.

There are a lot of steps between now and announcing or getting that done, but I feel like Chip is open to it. I know the team, other members of the team, everybody would be really excited to have me back another year.

All the wonderful people at Carvana and their involvement, if I've had a lot of fun in the INDYCAR Series, I think there's only one group that's had more fun, and that's been them. They've really enjoyed their experience, been welcomed into the sport really well.

Long story short, there's still a lot of work to be done, but my intent is to try to return in '23. Or '24 or '25, whatever. 50-year-old INDYCAR driver out there. I did read that Mario won his final race at 53, so that gives me a lot of hope.

Q. This might be a simpleton question, but after

spending so much time in NASCAR, do you feel like an INDYCAR driver now, and if so, when did you get that feeling?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I don't think I totally do yet. There are aspects of it that I do feel like I'm in this kind of family and been very well welcomed into the family, but the freedom as a driver to say, yeah, I'm one of the boys, I don't think that I'm quite there yet. I think at the end of the year I was a lot closer, but I hope to have that moment sooner than later.

Ironically it took me a while to feel that way in NASCAR, too. I think it wasn't until like I won a championship before I really had that at-ease feeling and felt like I really belonged to be out there.

Q. Also, how about your IMSA deal in there's going to be the Roar Before the 24 and you're going to get together with those guys, I believe, at the end of the week. How excited are you for the Rolex?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Really excited. I don't have a lot of reps in high-performance -- high-downforce cars I should say, not high-performance. The IMSA car is not identical, but braking and some of the techniques that go with the IMSA car are the same things you do in the INDYCAR, so it's just more reps for me, and I have an amazing team with Action Express, three incredible teammates. We finished second last year, and I hope to finally stand on that top box for that race.

Q. I wanted to ask, as far as your experiences at the Brickyard 400, everyone talks about how IMS is such a fickle mistress in terms of you can change nothing on the car and yet you go out different times and the car is completely different and you're either a lot faster or a lot slower and there seems to be no explanation for it. Is it the same deal in NASCAR, so therefore is it something that you're used to?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It is. We'd come and test for the Brickyard 400 and leave with an opinion good or bad and then return for the race and oftentimes the opposite thing happened. The track is so finicky, sunlight, wind direction. It really changes the performance of the car so much.

I assume it's because of the very flat corners that you have and the smallest percentage in grip change changes the balance of the car.

When I look at the Indy 500 right now I think qualifying is probably the most daunting part of it. The car is on edge. That's when the driver needs to be most in tune with the car and lay it all on the line.

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At the same time, the team, and I equate this a little bit to Daytona for NASCAR, you watch an organization go for the Daytona 500 and their cars are all up at the front or all at the back, so not only does a driver play such a big role but also the team's performance or even manufacturer performance that year weighs in.

To watch someone like Will Power fight for the last spot in last year's starting lineup, that's intimidating to watch, especially as a rookie coming in.

I hope we are as fast as we were last year, and we had all four cars up there in the top 10. That can make life a lot easier. But man, if it goes the other way, then the slightest temperature change or wind direction change just puts you on your heels, and it can be a tough day.

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