

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Thursday, January 27, 2022

Mark Miles

Rod Reid

Jimmie McMillan

Ernie Francis Jr.

Press Conference



During Black History Month no less. The season begins Sunday, February 27th on the streets of St. Petersburg.

Let's start with Rod. Congratulations. How important is this next step for you and this organization?

ROD REID: Well, it's so important to us to continue this journey that we started about a year ago. Also my goal and the goal of the team is to really develop talent that's from the community, black and brown communities. That's something that we've done from the very beginning, trying to bridge that.

Today we're here to announce moving up the ladder. We started last year with USF2000. We were really excited about doing that. I think we were quite successful. I feel really great that the team put together what we consider a top 10 winning effort.

Of course, we had a win in August last year with our driver there in Myles Rowe, who has gone on to continue in USF2000 actually this year. Was just glad to be able to develop him.

Today to announce us moving into Indy Lights with Ernie Francis Jr. is so exciting, especially to maintain our legacy.

THE MODERATOR: Ernie, congratulations. You've driven and won in a lot of machines. What does it mean now for you to hop up to Indy Lights? How big of a step is this for your career?

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: This is an probably one of the biggest steps that I have taken in my career. This is just an incredible opportunity for me. If you told me a year ago I'd be racing in the Indy Lights Series, I never would have believed you.

I'm so excited to get back out there on track. I remember in 2013 my first pro race was around St. Pete really excited to get there this year and get on track.

THE MODERATOR: Tell us about your progress. We talked about Trans-Am, seven-time champion there. A couple wins in your first dive into open wheel racing. Certainly SRX, the win not too far away at Lucas Oil Indianapolis Raceway Park. Tell us about your career,

THE MODERATOR: Good morning and welcome to the world's greatest racecourse. Great to see everyone this morning. You braced the cold, the snow to get here. We're very appreciative of that.

Joining us today in the middle, Coach Rod Reid, who is of course the team principal of Force Indy. After some 40 years or so, a lot of racing experience, outstanding work of course with NXG Youth Motorsports as the president and CEO.

To his left you'll get to know driver Ernie Francis Jr. momentarily.

We welcome Mark Miles, president and CEO of Penske Entertainment Corporation.

On the far right Jimmie McMillan, the chief diversity officer of Penske Entertainment Corporation.

It was just over a year ago, hard to believe, when we witnessed the launch of a groundbreaking and completely diverse team in open-wheel racing called Force Indy, a team that focused on diversity through mechanics, engineers, drivers and other key members on the team, and led by Coach Rod Reid, who is driving this African American-led ownership group who has an eye on one day soon competing in the NTT INDYCAR SERIES.

After a very successful first season as a team, including a win at New Jersey Motorsports Park, it is time now for the next step.

In 2022, an upgrade in class as Force Indy will compete in the Indy Lights Presented by Cooper Tires championship, and it will do with Haitian-American Ernie Francis Jr. as the driver. All this as the season certainly quickly approaches.



why you're ready for this next step.

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: This last year was a lot of different formula racing, Trans-Am, diving into the SRX series, trying out some dirt ovals, some short ovals there. Then my first race was in open wheel racing in the FR America Series. I really got my feet wet in all different kinds of racing and was lucky enough to win a race in every series I competed in last year.

We've done a lot of testing now. Feeling pretty ready for this Indy Lights Series. Really pretty prepped for the season, think we'll be competitive, looking forward to having some good results out there.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, young man.

Mark, certainly another step in the evolution of Race for Equality & Change, an exciting step as INDYCAR also takes over and assumes operational control of the Indy Lights Series as a whole. Momentum building towards next month.

MARK MILES: Let me start by saying congratulations to Coach Reid, a person we've gotten to know, have respect for, the whole Force Indy team.

I think this is a big step to go from USF2000 and be in Lights one year later. We all know, it's been said, the next step is really the big one. You guys are doing great work to position yourselves to get to that.

Ernie, we're delighted to get to know you and you'll have this opportunity in Lights. Hopefully it means another year or two you'll be right out there for the Indianapolis 500.

It's exciting for us. It was July of '20 when we announced what was coined the Race for Equality & Change. We wanted folks to know for us it wasn't a thing, it was a constant thing, it was the way we want to be as an organization, as a group that can foster and celebrate diversity in our businesses and in racing and our communities in general.

A lot has been done. A lot of, most all of it, under the leadership of Jimmie McMillan in this time period. You see us working hard as an employer, full-time people, seasonal people, yellow shirts out here that everybody knows, all the other people that make the Indy 500 happen. There's a big effort to recruit diverse people into that workforce.

In our procurement, the people we do business with as a business in helping try to support your efforts with Next Gen racing, that great avenue to get kids exposed to racing.

So many things are going on. We're always impatient. We need to do more faster. But I do think we're making progress. I think the thing the outside world sees is Force Indy and Beth Paretta's efforts last year as well I would say.

For you all to be moving up, to know this is really a sustainable program you've built, a great foundation for, is exciting for us.

For it to be a special way I think to focus attention on Indy Lights Presented by Cooper Tires this coming season is just super.

I want to congratulate Levi for joining us, getting his hands around this all. Jay and his team at INDYCAR for really adapting Lights. No doubt it's going to meet our objectives immediately of making the Indy Lights team experience, the driving experience, really closer to INDYCAR so that it's that much more of a valuable step on the ladder to get to the show and INDYCAR.

Congrats to everybody involved in Lights. We're looking forward to a big season there.

THE MODERATOR: Jimmie McMillan, he's dying to chime in on that. You were able to see firsthand last year the impact that Force Indy had as a program, now elevating to Indy Lights. What does it mean for the growth and development of the program here for Penske Entertainment?

JIMMIE McMILLAN: It's absolutely moving every time I'm in the room with Coach Reid to know that for over 16 years and beyond, but for 16 years he's committed himself to creating this environment where I look out upon a team of young men and women who have expressed an interest in motorsports, expressed an interest in engineering, in driving. Through his passion and dedication, he's created a way first with Myles Rowe last year who became the first African American to win an INDYCAR-sanctioned event and Rod to become the first African American owner to win an INDYCAR SERIES event.

Now with Ernie, all his accolades, the championships he's won, to take this team in Indy Lights to the next level, it is personally inspiring.

I can't say enough about the pipeline that's being created and the things that people don't see. While we've created Force Indy, I think what will live with me the most is on Indy 500 Sunday last year, as I walked up and down the pits, I saw members of the Force Indy team who were working in the pits on other teams who were in the 500. These are

folks who started out in NXG Youth Motorsports as go-kart racers, learned STEM concepts, at one time weren't considered for the teams, now are working in the pits.

Force Indy is one pipeline but we need a lot more. As I talk to Jay, he's working from the INDYCAR side to bring people through his pipeline on INDYCAR through internships and other opportunities. We talk to other teams, they reach out and express interest. It's exciting we're here having this conversation. I think it bodes well. It's thanks to Roger Penske and all the things he's done to make this happen.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Ernie, has it sunk in that you're one step away from driving around this track in an INDYCAR?

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: It definitely has sunk in a little bit. Every time I come to this place, it's just so incredible driving through the gates. You see the pagoda, the grandstands. To think that there's a shot that I could race out there one day, that it could be a reality, is really incredible.

I'm just so excited to get out there on track, see how we go, take it from there.

Q. Coach Reid, last year when we talked about this, it was about getting more visibility in the black and brown community. When you've been out in the Indianapolis community, have you noticed a difference in what racing means? Have you noticed a difference in the attitude towards racing?

ROD REID: I certainly have. I think for us, especially when we came last year as Force Indy for the first time running in a large event, we had people who came out with us. I think we had about 80 to a hundred people that supported us, not only from my NXG program, but others in the community. People contacted us via our social media. So we're certainly getting the word out. I think that's a big part of what we're doing, is awareness. It starts with things like this, telling people we're here, come on out, follow us.

I think the bigger thing for us, why I'm so excited about the Indy Lights program, now we're going to be on a stage where we can expose our communities, plural, to all of the racing, not just Indy Lights, but also INDYCAR so they can start to learn.

I think it's a win-win for everybody.

Q. I noticed a couple guys that have been here with the teams. What have you had to do to the

organization to step up to the next level?

ROD REID: Surprisingly very little (smiling). I think these young men, you see them here, especially Stu, Derrick, we've added Sidney Gomez as well as Chrishawn Hall to our crew. They were ready last year. These are young men that had experience long before they came to Force Indy. We just were able to hone that with the relationship and the mentoring from Team Penske.

I think we're ready. This was our plan from the very beginning, to move up the ladder. We're on the way.

Q. Ernie, regarding your SRX experience, a chance to share some knowledge with guys who have raced in INDYCAR, what was your takeaway from being around that group of racers?

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: That group was absolutely amazing to be around. You get to the racetrack there, we'd have two motorhomes. There would be six drivers in one, six drivers in the other. I remember one of the races I was out there, I had Helio, I had Tony Kanaan, Paul Tracy, I had Bill Elliott and I had Tony Stewart in mine that I was with. It was so cool to hear their stories, talk to them about everything they've been through. Helio was sitting there passing around his rings, showing everybody all of his hardware there, which was really cool.

Just to talk with them about the experiences they've had throughout their lives, things that they've been through to get to where they are. Then advice that they've given me over the course of those six weeks in SRX was truly awesome. I'm excited to hopefully implement some of that stuff they told me, get to the next level.

Q. Ernie, I know a lot of people get into racing because they love it. Is it lost on you or not lost on you that you are going to be a symbol for other people to look up to? I don't know if you've had people look up to you, but has it dawned on you what you might mean for someone else?

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: It definitely has a little bit. Growing up racing out here, I've always been a younger kid. Being from a Haitian-American background, I look different than most of the other race car drivers out there. I notice that when I go to the racetrack. Kids will naturally want to come talk to me, see me at the racetrack. They always want to know how I got started. I really enjoy talking to kids about that. I'll have their parents messaging me on Instagram just trying to find out more information.

I send them pictures, send them out stuff. I understand that the younger generation definitely looks up to me as a

driver. I'm ready for that and looking forward to that.

Q. Ron, you also made waves during the first round with Indy Force. You've also become this figure in showing minority communities what's attainable. How does that weigh on you or sit on you even more to know you have an even bigger job to do?

ROD REID: I think it happens that we've been doing this a long time. As we say, no one gets into racing, even though it may seem like the first time. I started when I was in my 20s, like most young people do.

Since that time I've had to address the idea of potentially being the first or the only. I think it comes down to two things: integrity and performance. That's what I try to instill in our team, that we've got to perform well anyway.

We want to win races. I want to make sure everybody understands that as we sit here and we talk about programs for diversity and inclusion, that's a goal. But that's right along with us performing well and winning races.

I think if we do that, then we become role models for all.

Q. Coach Reid and Ernie, what do you expect to slot in in the order this year given the fact that you've missed a few test sessions?

ROD REID: I think we don't have any illusions about the fact that the learning curve is great for us as a team. It was the same way last year.

Our goal is to, as I just said, perform to the ability that we have, and do the best we can. We think that when we go out there, it's going to be super competitive. We had an opportunity to do some testing with other teams, teams that have been around for quite a while.

I think at one time at the Chris Griffith test, they were about a second and a half between the quickest and the least quick. That's pretty tight when you think about here in Indianapolis going on the road course.

It's going to be competitive. All we can do is the best we can. Hopefully we run up front.

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: I'm a very competitive person, winning a lot of races in my past. I don't like going out there and losing.

I think we'll be fairly quick. We haven't had as much testing as some of the other teams have had in this off-season. I think that we'll pick it up every race we go out there. We're

going to try our best every event. I think we can all expect to have our best results in the second half of the year and really be pretty strong by then.

Q. Coach Reid, are there any plans for expansion of the Force Indy ladder system?

ROD REID: At this point our concentration is obviously on the Indy Lights program. We want to do well at every step that we take on the Road to Indy.

I think in the future certainly when we talk about developing talent, when we talk about talent, as Jimmie McMillan said, we're talking across the board, whether it's mechanics, engineers, et cetera. Having opportunities for those to work up and down the ladder system would be great.

I think it's important to note that we want to concentrate on the things we have in front of us. To go beyond that at this point probably wouldn't be very wise. Who knows what the future will hold.

Q. Ernie, when you look at the Indy Lights machine, how does that compare to some of the other cars that you've driven? Also INDYCAR's goal of bringing the performance level more in tune with what the INDYCAR is, that thing could end up being a beast for you.

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: Yeah, definitely the Indy Lights car is a lot different than anything else I've driven. Luckily I've driven a Lights car before. 2015 I did a test in one. I had a little bit of experience in it before I hopped in it for the first time at the Chris Griffith's test.

It's a lot faster than the FR car I raced last year. The power feels similar to our Trans-Am cars. The biggest thing to get adjusted to was just the downforce levels, being able to trust that the downforce is going to hold the car to the track, being able to trust that without seeing it happen. That was the biggest challenge that I've had to overcome in the testing that we've been doing.

I adapted to the car pretty well now. I think I got a good feel for it.

Q. This is a question for you and also for Rod and for Jimmie. Your victory in SRX coming on national TV, how much do you think that raised your awareness level? A lot of people in racing knew who you were, but the general audience probably didn't. Now all of a sudden Ernie Francis Jr. was a name people had seen win a race on national TV. How important was that in maybe helping develop your career and for the other two gentlemen to discuss considering you for this

opportunity?

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: Yeah, no, I think that SRX win was a huge boost for me. To run out there with the level of guys that were competing in the series, the championships and wins behind those guys. So to get a win out there was really a big boost for me.

I think that's what really helped me get this opportunity. So I'm just so grateful for being able to race in SRX last year.

It's so crazy. After the end of the SRX series last year, I didn't think open-wheel is where I was going to end up going. I thought after that they were going to put me in something in stockcar racing. When this opportunity came up, I jumped right on it because I've always had dreams of racing at the 500, have dreams of racing at these big open-wheel races. To be able to do it is truly incredible.

ROD REID: I would say without question, noticing Ernie after he won that race, did a lot for me and for the team to take a look at our future.

After we decided we were going to go to Indy Lights we knew we had to find someone that could step up to that level. Ernie had actually been on our list of drivers at the very beginning. I knew of him. I had never met him, but knew of his accomplishments in Trans-Am. When we started the program, we looked around at various drivers. As he said, he wasn't in open-wheel, so we thought, Well, maybe that's not a place to start.

This opportunity I think is a perfect one with his background and experience.

JIMMIE McMILLAN: I think Rod summed it up earlier when he said that our goal is not just to be present but to win. That's one thing that Ernie brings to the table, is known for, is winning. Thanks to his win in SRX, but also the rest of his career, I think he's one of the most known drivers of color that is out there.

Particularly his age, being younger, I think he presents a great opportunity towards us not only to just be present as a team that represents a team of color, but to also be competitive and win in what is a really condensed time frame, right?

I think there's people who are going to be shocked that we're going to Indy Lights. When you put Ernie in the car, you look at what the team was able to accomplish last year, you take Rod's experience, you start saying, Whoa, these guys can really go out and make some noise this year. That gets people excited. That's what we want.

I'm personally looking forward to every race this year, watching Ernie compete, taking the success he had last year, bringing it over to Indy Lights, really showing what we can do.

Q. Ernie, how has this deal come together for you? Did Coach Reid approach you sort of out of the blue or did you approach him?

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: I actually was in Brainerd, Minnesota, getting ready to load into a Trans-Am race. My phone rang. It was a Michigan phone number. It was Roger Penske on the phone. That's something that was quite a shock. He introduced himself. I kind of didn't say anything for the first 10 seconds. I thought it was a joke at first (laughter).

After we talked for a few minutes, he invited me out to Indianapolis to meet with him and meet with Rod, then the rest of his team. We sat down and talked about a few things there. Things started to get put together from there.

Q. Ernie, will you be doing other racing outside of Indy Lights this season?

ERNIE FRANCIS JR.: Right now my primary focus is the Indy Lights Series. I want to make sure that we can be competitive out there, get the results we want. This will be my primary focus. If I do any other races, it will have to be well in advance and figure out the schedule between what I'm doing with Indy Lights.

Q. Coach Reid, making this step up from USF2000, will you be working with any other teams to get up to speed on the driver side, like sharing data at all?

ROD REID: Well, as you can imagine, there's a lot of information that we need to have. As we did last year, we actually work with a couple of teams to help create sort of a technical alliance with us.

We don't have a formal one right now, but we have been talking to -- everybody has been very supportive throughout the paddock at the Indy Lights level.

The answer is yes. It's going to be an ongoing sort of fluid relationship, not one singular relationship. We expect to have those alliances throughout the season.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go ahead and break, bundle up, and please join us down at victory podium.

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