

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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J.R. Hildebrand

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. Announced earlier today, big news from AJ Foyt Racing as J.R. Hildebrand returns to the team. It will be his 13th year of competition in the NTT INDYCAR Series as J.R. will compete on the ovals driving the No. 11 Rokit Chevrolet for AJ Foyt Racing. Completing the season for the No. 11 is, of course, Tatiana Calderon will compete on the road and street courses for AJ Foyt Racing this year.

J.R.'s first race, no time like the present, comes up next Sunday in the XPEL 375 at Texas Motor Speedway, first of five ovals which of course will include the Indianapolis 500 presented by Gainbridge. We counted up that. That will be his 12th Indianapolis 500. We'll look forward to that.

J.R. joins us this morning.

J.R., congratulations, back in the seat, and an expanded role for AJ Foyt Racing this year. How excited are you for this?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I'm excited to be back with this group. I think on paper maybe our May last year didn't look super special, but I just really enjoyed it. It was a great -- sometimes you're getting thrown into a new team and you don't really know how things are going to go, and as an extra car last year it felt sort of last minute. But really clicked with the guys and appreciated the work and kind of just the process of working through things. I felt like we as a group didn't feel like we rolled off the truck great necessarily, and within a couple of days it worked into the window, and I had the best race car, best feeling car I've had at the speedway in a long time last year, just within a couple of days.

I think that particularly like at this point in my career, that really -- that matters a lot. Like that registers to you when you can make that type of progress really quickly, and so I'm excited to be back with them and doing more racing.

For me that's exciting to be doing more of the races on the schedule. I really like the oval schedule that the series has right now. It's such a mixed bag of different even like oval

racing disciplines. Texas is totally different, we don't go to any other mile-and-a-halfs now. It's a hard place. Iowa, a place that I've had a lot of success at in the past and always enjoyed, like that's been a track that for me I've just known what I needed there from the race car from the first time I rolled up, and more often than not have been able to find it with the teams.

Gateway, too, I think the awesome thing about INDYCAR racing generally right now, but particularly the oval racing, is that there's nowhere that's easy anymore. There's no flat-out, you're pinned for the entire race kind of places. You've really got to drive, you've got to work with the team to get the cars hooked up, and I'm looking forward to that challenge.

THE MODERATOR: This is your first expanded role in the series in several years. Do you approach this differently? How do you approach this differently than maybe just doing the one-off for the 500?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, definitely. I guess a couple of things.

One for sure is that I've been preparing alongside, or remotely, I guess, alongside all the full-time guys, same workout program and trainer as Josef Newgarden and a handful of the other, Jack Harvey and a bunch of those guys. With this potentially being what I was going to be doing this year for a few months now, I definitely kind of turned the wick up in the off-season and made sure just physically and mentally I'm going to be ready to go whenever it happens. Whether it happens, whenever it happens, being totally prepared for it from that perspective, which has been a nice kind of shift in the off-season.

Last few off-seasons I've kind of known that it's just going to be the 500, so you can -- not that I wouldn't be any less prepared for showing up at Indy, but you just kind of -- your timetable is different. The kind of amount of commitment from a scheduling perspective is totally different.

I've had my head in the game a little bit more, I feel like, over this off-season just on the training side, and in terms of working with the team even, it's just -- when you're going to do all the ovals or you're going to do multiple races, there's a lot of differences in terms of how you show up to



run at Texas than you do on basically a two-day weekend, than you do to run at the Speedway.

The things that matter are much more kind of specific. You don't have time to run through a bunch of stuff. You're not developing a multi-day-long program to figure out how to get the car sorted, to get comfortable, all that kind of stuff. Even just pushing to get in the car to help shakedown Kyle Kirkwood's car last week was part of that. If I can get like five laps and do one in-and-out lap, that's really helpful showing up at Texas because I'm not going to get 50 reps over the course of practice like you do at Indy.

Just being a little bit more assertive, I think, in some of those situations, knowing that there's a chance to be doing more racing, and I'm feeling ready to rock and roll.

THE MODERATOR: Last season joining AJ Foyt Racing, I think you still finished a team-high 15th at the 500. What did you learn about the program that you can maybe build on for this five-race run here in 2022?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I think outside -- when you're kind of looking at the teams maybe outside of the obvious like Penske, Ganassi, Andretti, ECR is always fast at the speedway in particular, right, like you're kind of uncertain about how do we kind of extract that level of performance, like where is that going to come from, particularly at the Speedway.

I think kind of to an earlier point that I made, when I showed up there and we got going, we didn't have time to prep as long as maybe those teams do. The chassis that I was running last year was new in the shop in like April, like it wasn't an off-season's worth of development to rub on it and get it all nice and cozy.

I was really fortunate that over the course of my career I've kind of -- there's a handful of guys out and about that when my programs come together they'll jump on board to run the car, so I felt like I had a really good crew for sort of a one-off scenario that particularly in that instance came together sort of late.

I guess what I'm really -- what you're looking for as a driver is just in those kind of situations to feel like you could roll into race day with a puncher's chance at it. The way we got through those handful of days, the way that the whole engineering group worked together across four cars, it felt like at multiple times throughout the day, we were just operating as one -- as if there was just one car, as if it was all by committee.

There was no egos getting in the way on the driver or the engineering side, and we just got down to business, and

like I said, were able to figure a lot of things out and get the cars to where it's like, man, if I'm -- if we can manage to work the strategy and get up into the top 10, no doubt I'm going to stay there, and I've probably got a shot at picking guys off even once we're there.

The race for us last year didn't really turn out that way, but I think that just gave me -- as soon as the race was over last year after going through qualifying, I felt like we had really squeezed everything there was. Given kind of where we were at and where the program was at, we did an awesome -- everybody did an awesome job executing there to be totally safe after our first run, and then the same on race day.

As soon as Memorial Day weekend was up, I was already working on just getting started out for this year because I felt like if we kind of get it rolling in the right direction, this is a group that can achieve at a high level. That definitely -- that's been my MO since last year, and I think same with the team, and now finally we're able to announce it officially.

Q. How beneficial is it to you going into Texas having been with the team in St. Pete kind of from the start of the season so you've been working with Kyle and Dalton and even Tatiana, as well, from the start of the year?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, it's good. I think that it's an easy group just to kind of slot into, and I've been at the shop since May last year. I talked to the team manager, Scott Harner, and Kyle Kirkwood's engineer, Mike Colliver, who was my engineer last year. He's sort of, I don't know, default technical director for the team this year. He and I are on the phone every couple weeks about all kinds of different stuff.

As much as it's not been as much in person interaction and maybe I've not been in the car, my engineer Daniele, we've been chatting all the time. It's an easy group to be in contact with, talk through things.

So I feel like we're sort of as prepared as we can be. There's no doubt that it's a little bit of a -- it's just going to be a grind at times this year. I mean, there's no question about that. Like I mentioned earlier, all the oval tracks, none of them are easy anymore, so it's kind of like if you do end up rolling off the truck and you're just not super competitive right away, you don't have a lot of time to figure that out at anywhere other than Indy, and now even at Indy you get a rain day or whatever before qualifying, and suddenly your back is against the wall a little bit.

But like I said, I think what's encouraging to me and what's



exciting about doing this program this year with these guys is for where we're at, I think everybody is prepared maybe for it to be kind of a grind, and along with that, ready to do whatever we can to work together to dig our way up through the field, through weekends.

I think we're sort of anticipating rolling off the truck and having a little bit of work to do, and that's part of why we sign up to do this, why you do it year in and year out, and I just really like the attitude that everybody is bringing to it to dig our heels in and get with the program.

Q. From your own perspective, in terms of your confidence levels going into the month of May and Indy, having done the race in Texas, is that going to play into your hands in terms of like getting the car set up and stuff, given that you'll have already been on a superspeedway?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, it's hard to say how much the setups really translate these days, and frankly having not been at Texas over the last couple years, I don't really have a good feel for that. I feel like typically Indy is just kind of its own thing, and now Texas is kind of its own thing.

But there will definitely be some insights that you glean just about how the car interacts with different types of setup changes, and I think for me, I've never felt like I had any trouble just getting with it at the speedway. I've always been frankly kind of annoyed that I have to do refreshers and stuff every year, but that being said, just doing a bunch of in and out laps and having to do hot stops and working with the same core group of guys is going to be a little bit of a different mixture of crew and personnel than I've been used to working with.

Even if it's just -- we're not treating Texas like a warm-up for the 500, we're treating Texas like a race that we're there to go compete at. But it does function a little bit like that in a way that you get used to how each other talks over the radio. You get used to that communication with the strategist and the engineering group, and I think in some ways having to do that in a little bit more of a quick-fire sort of environment where at Texas you don't really have a lot of time, you've got to figure a lot of things out while you're sitting on the pit lane in one-hour practice sessions, that does accelerate that process a little bit before you show up at Indy.

Q. I wanted to ask you about working with Kyle basically because you were obviously leading the team at the 500 in terms of that development you were talking about, in terms of not quite rolling off the truck exactly as you wanted but you were able to develop

through the month of May. How much are you kind of looking forward to giving that advice to Kyle and working with him, as someone who's a bit more experienced, and seeing how he works as a rookie coming through like you were once?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, I think it was interesting actually being at the Texas test, at his rookie test, whatever, last week. I got in, shook the car down, and it was just kind of funny, I think my first -- it wasn't the first time that I had driven an INDYCAR on an oval but my first test with Panther Racing in 2011 season in my rookie season was at Texas, as well, and just kind of thinking, like, yeah, I didn't really have anybody around to let me know what was going on.

So it was kind of fun to have to sit there and think like what -- looking back at it now, what do I sort of -- what was I ready to hear from somebody, what was going to be like an overwhelming amount of information, trying to kind of distill down what are those three or four things that would have been nice to just have crystallized in my head, like yes, this is definitely something you should start doing and then kind of evolve on your own and get a feel for it. No, you should not tolerate the car being like this no matter what anybody says, those types of things.

It was kind of fun to work through that process a little bit with Kyle. He's obviously really good. There's no question about that. Once he got comfortable and got a feel for things, he was out there in traffic running just like anybody else would be.

But he's also fresh, and I think that there's a part of that when you've got somebody who's clearly a very good driver, who clearly has a good feel just kind of innately for the car, that actually can be quite an asset within a team, to just know that you're going to get a really clean, unbiased, unadulterated, unfiltered perspective on what the car is doing, and I think he'll be trustworthy right away. I don't expect we'll be on completely different pages.

He's come up very much the same way that I did, so his background coming into the INDYCAR Series is similar, albeit in a weird way -- he's done less oval racing. He's done a little bit more of it maybe in the Junior, Junior categories because I didn't do any of that in F2000 or whatever, but in Indy Lights championship when I raced Indy Lights, it was more stacked with ovals than it is now. We had run at Indy -- it was funny talking to him that they haven't even done the Freedom 100.

Even showing up at the speedway, it'll be a little bit more of a new thing for him than it maybe was for me at the time, but I'm looking forward to it. I am kind of ready to put my



faith and trust in him to be a functional and valuable part of the process of figuring the car out and all of that stuff right away, even if it's just by knowing that if the car can do whatever you think it needs to do that he'll be able to do it or not, and that all by itself a lot of times is as much information as you need when you're going through the checklist.

But yeah, I'm definitely excited. Excited for him to be able to have the opportunity that he's got.

THE MODERATOR: J.R., when you're young like that, you've got to have a certain amount of maturity to be able to check your ego at the door, right, in a situation like that?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Put yourself in his shoes or any young person's shoes; did you have that kind of mentality? Could you do that when you were that young?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: I think so. I don't know, maybe I'm not the right person to ask.

You know, when I was a rookie, there was obviously -- running the National Guard car, that was sort of a big deal. I felt like it was, to be driving that car. The team had obviously had a lot of success, particularly at these types of tracks.

The team environment that I was working at, Dave Cripps was my engineer and we had a lot of really good people, and they were good at I think kind of reducing the pressure to a degree, keeping the mood kind of light, but that year outside of Indy where I had Buddy Rice as a teammate, I just didn't have a -- looking back, I didn't think about this a lot of the time. Like at the time I just thought, well, I'm here to go race and I'm the Indy Lights champ and I'm good, I'm going to go out and do this and I'll figure it out or whatever.

You know, you do -- in hindsight you do realize the value of having some veterans around who are willing to share a little bit of just kind of their perspective on stuff, and then as a young drivers you've got to just be able to kind of filter that for yourself, like all right, I'm going to also go out and just feel the car for myself and figure out what I think I need, and if some of that -- if that matches up right away, then right, then that's something that I can just log in the back of my mind, that this is -- I've kind of been told this is what you should be expecting and whatever, and now I can attach my own feeling to that, so that's something that I can kind of skip over having to figure out on my own now.

I think there's definitely some advice I got early in my career as I started to do more 500s and more races, I kind

of realized maybe that wasn't -- maybe I shouldn't be quite so attached to that.

I think Kyle is in a place right now where he just seems to have like that natural knack for knowing what he's looking for and knowing what he's got when he's got it.

So I guess my feeling with him is, whether it's Sebastien at St. Pete working with him, Seb can be a little long-winded and full of information, which is awesome, but sometimes maybe a little bit hard to figure out how much of this do I need to know right now, how much do I just need to focus on what I'm doing. I'm probably a little bit the same way.

But I think Kyle is more than capable of kind of working through that. I'm hopeful that I can be helpful to him over the course of this year and particularly these first couple of races to help him feel comfy getting up to speed.

Q. I wanted to ask a bit more about Iowa and how much testing or how much iRacing you get to do on places that obviously you don't get anything like as much practice time as you will do at Indy. Is there anything you can do to prepare for somewhere as unique as Iowa Speedway or Gateway? Will you be testing there?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: I think we've got a test day schedule for one of the two later on. I want to say we're planning on testing Iowa off the top of my head, but those things can always change.

Yeah, I guess fortunately those are both places like I've had good cars and know what that feels like, so I think that that -- for me at least, like my confidence level showing up at those places, I kind of feel like I already have a good sense of the team's perspective on setups and all that kind of stuff. I don't expect to be like way outside the window at those places when we get there later in the year.

Then on top of that, Iowa is a place in particular that I've gone through that process a couple of times with totally different versions of the INDYCAR. Even my rookie year with the old car. We were not awesome rolling off the truck, and at that point it wasn't because I really knew what I was looking for, it was just I had kind of a hunch that I wanted the car to do something a little different, and Crippsy was awesome about just, boom, a couple of changes all at once, threw a different package out on the track and the thing ripped.

When you have those experiences, especially like early in your career where you go from being a little uncertain to then really feeling like, oh, man, okay, this thing is on rails now, that's really sticky in your mind, like okay, yeah, that

was how that all changed, at first it felt like this and then it felt like that and we hauled ass.

I'm sort of cautiously optimistic with those events later in the year. I like the short track racing, short ovals. Those are both places that are very driver and engineering dependent. It doesn't really matter how much development you've done or how much prep goes into the car at those kinds of tracks. The handling of the car and being aligned with that in terms of what you're doing in the seat are the things that matter the most.

But to your point, I mean, same is true for everybody else, and there's a lot of teams and drivers that have been competitive at those tracks over the years. We've got to throw everything at it we can, and as a driver, you're kind of looking for all the ways that are possible.

If we can get in the simulator, if we can get -- like you said, even just doing some iRacing just to kind of be maybe that little bit more ready to go and having a couple little things, all right, the way that you bend into the corner, some of that kind of stuff, just refreshed for when you show up, it's definitely pulling out all the stops.

Q. Does it feel strange for you to have done -- you're like a seasoned veteran now. You've done this for -- well, you made your debut in 2010, right? You got fastest lap on your debut, which is kind of cool. But obviously you've already done 65 races, so you're a seasoned veteran but you haven't gone the same experience as someone that's been solidly in the series for all that time. Does it feel weird to have young guys kind of tap you looking for experience and the sage old man advice?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I'm going to have to shave and start getting a little bit of like a younger look going here soon.

You know, yes and no. I mean, I guess I feel like I've learned -- even when I've been out of the car, I feel like I've learned a lot about -- and that's just -- it's interesting to me, right. Like it's always something, even from the outside, I've always taken an interest kind of in the engineering side of things, so you're always just kind of wondering about and curious about it, what are guys doing and how does Dixon manage to do that, or how does Will Power just suddenly go to the top of the sheets. Like some of those things, even when it's watching on TV or whatever, but certainly when you're at the track -- I worked with AJ Foyt Racing last year a little bit kind of in a driver-coach capacity.

I've just always found what's going on on track interesting,

and part of that's for me to kind of figure out, okay, if I get this opportunity, if I'm jumping back in the car, how do I manage to evolve my thinking even though I've not just been doing the reps.

You know, I think particularly when it comes to oval racing, it makes you kind of -- I've done the same number of Indy 500s at least over my career as anybody else has because I've done them all consecutively since my rookie year.

You know, frankly, it's sort of a little bit flattering when you have guys that are coming up -- even though I know that my results have not all been stellar there, and I know that that's for all kinds of different reasons, but when either as team personnel or when I put my 500 deals together, I get like a whole bunch of really good guys that want to come and work on that program, that were planning on just hanging out on the sidelines otherwise. Like they don't need to work; they don't need to do it.

Those kinds of things, the team having the confidence in you to plug you in to just random short situations, and then even working with guys like Kyle, who kind of right away just assume that I know what I'm talking about and am ready to provide some good advice. You know, at this point in my career, I'll take that. I'm happy to do that and happy to be on my side of things like honest about what I feel that I really strongly do have a valuable opinion about and what maybe I don't and what guys should just go kind of figure out on their own.

THE MODERATOR: You know you've been around a while when the younger guys come up to you and say, hey, I remember watching you as a kid.

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, right? I know. It's like I see the dates, like the years that a lot of these guys were born, and it's just like, man, I am getting old; what the hell?

Q. Obviously the continuity is important, but you talked about being part of this program kind of there or thereabouts since May. Kirkwood talked a little bit to me a few weeks ago about how he's seen a lot of positivity over the off-season. I'm kind of curious when you look at this program at AJ Foyt, what kind of changes have you seen since you've been there that really seem to make it feel like this program has elevated itself for this season?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: I mean, I guess to me, the thing that I like about the squad is just there's kind of like a grittiness to the attitude that the team has, that it's not -- there's not like an expectation internally for this year that we are going to be operating in every way like Penske or Ganassi or something.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

I think that there's like a bit of an honesty about, all right, we've got to kind of like make up for the fact that maybe we don't have those kinds of budgets and are not able to tap into these kinds of resources. We're not doing a ton of days in the wind tunnel and all that kind of stuff. But the team has done an awesome job even with a little bit of certainty in terms of how things are going to end up working out for the year, without having quite the same access or whatever, without having the same in-house resources as some of the bigger teams, they've done a really awesome job at just figuring out ways to account for that basically and figuring out -- I don't want to say it's like scrappy, but it's just I'd say intelligent ways of accounting for some of those differences, and just having sort of a head-down mentality about working through stuff and being able to do that development in their own way and showing up and being ready to rock and roll.

Kyle has been super impressed with the car on road and street circuits so far through the testing, and I think that's a testament not only to his ability to be able to just get in and get there, but at some point the car -- when you're racing against Scott Dixon and Alex Palou and Josef Newgarden and Rossi and Herta and whatever, you've got to -- the car has to be there, also, to be able to compete with those guys on those teams.

Kyle I think still knows that he's got room to grow and improve and get better just as a driver. He's got some headroom still from that perspective.

I think that to me just points to the fact that a lot of the things that the team is doing, the way that they have started to find ways of developing the car through the off-season are working and that they've got like a really high degree of efficiency from that perspective, and like I said, I think one of the things that really stood out to me about this group is just the overall attitude kind of from the top down about what we're here to do. Like this is a team that I think understands kind of where we're at and has -- their expectations are not like out of control from that perspective, but we're here to show up and win.

I think like at the 500 last year, we just got to work. Like there wasn't anything that -- there was no screwing around. There was no, like, being downtrodden about where we were at. It was like, this is just a process, and if we keep executing together and we keep talking and we keep doing the things you know you have to do as a group to get competitive, whether you're at the top of the sheets or the bottom or whatever, we just went out and did it. There was in a weird way like an ease to it like I've not experienced at every team that I've been to, certainly kind of like jumping into a new group of people.

I think that's some of what Kyle has experienced, and it feels like a team that's on its way up. They're getting things figured out in a way that are going to scale over the course of the year, over the course of the next couple of years, and that's a fun thing to be a part of.

Q. You've run a couple of fun throwback liveries at the Indy 500 the last few years. I look at that Rokit all-black at Texas last week, and it brings me back to some Foyt liveries from yesteryear. Do you have something planned for this month of May?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: I don't know. I've been lucky that I don't always have a lot to do with the liveries, and somehow I just end up, like last year was sort of an awesome surprise to be in that car.

So I don't know what the plan is for Indy this year. Yeah, there's definitely some of the old Copenhagen black-and-orange cars and that kind of stuff. I think we'll have ABC back on board it sounds like this year in a pretty big way, so we'll see what the team has up their sleeve.

THE MODERATOR: It's one thing to have those liveries but it's another thing to appreciate it. You're a student of the game so you can appreciate it. That's important.

Q. You've mentioned "team" quite a lot. This is the first time, Dave mentioned earlier, since 2017 you've kind of got a team for a season. I know you're not full-time but this car is full-time. How does it feel to be part of the team aspect again, knowing when you leave Indy that you still have more races coming, this car is going to be on track every race. Is it feeling different being part of the team persona again per se?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, it's good. I like having teammates. I didn't for a long time. I mean, I've had -- I've kind of been in these -- when I was doing the one-offs with ECR for a couple of years, it was Josef and Ed and myself, it was three of us, but for the most part the max I've ever had around was one other driver, and for a lot of my career I've just been kind of flying solo, or at least the beginning of my career that's definitely how it was.

So I think on the driver side even it's awesome to have some different people, working with different engineers. You do for sure get a lot more information flowing. You get a lot more different thoughts, and as long as that's not confusing to everybody, which the way that drivers are sometimes it can be, I guess, but it's just a good vibe.

I think that with this particular group, not only the guys on the car but the guys in the engineering staff, it's a lot of

people that -- it's one benefit, I guess, to have been around for a while. There's a lot of people that I've worked with at some point in my career already, so there's a lot of benefits to that, and definitely something I'm looking forward to.

Q. It seems like ovals seem to benefit veterans. What have you learned now in 12 years of doing this? Last year as an example the Fast Nine had five of the nine drivers in their 40s and you've got 46-year-old Helio winning. Do you feel there's an advantage that as the series gets younger but the veterans still stand on ovals? Is there any kind of an advantage over these younger guys on these ovals this year?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: You know, I think it's just for the oval racing, there's definitely a degree of just understanding the patience required, and there are a lot of little things that you manage to do over time that in my opinion just having a lot of reps in a lot of different -- slightly different situations, you do kind of build up just that bank of knowledge that matters a lot. It's why you see guys like Helio and Scott and Tony. They're always kind of there.

Even if they're not there on race day, they're contributing a lot to their team and their programs to make sure that they're kind of heading the right direction.

I think that there's no question that experience matters, I guess, and so from that perspective, just the more you've clicked off -- I've been fortunate, there's only been -- I think I've only been in one 500 that I didn't complete all the laps, so that's a lot of miles that are all -- there's a little learning experience in every one of them.

Q. It's kind of been touched on in this Zoom call a couple of times but not in just this way. You've had an interesting arc in your career and you show up each year with another, say, modified version of the INDYCAR chassis and aerodynamics and so on. You're entering into a year now with multiple races. What gives you the confidence about this year over, say, some of the previous year's experiences with this chassis?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I think that one of the things to me is this year -- I'd say since 2018 with the universal kit and then with the aeroscreen in 2020, that the cars have just gotten, and not in a bad way, the cars have just gotten harder to drive. They've got less downforce. The tracks have lost grip over time and haven't had repaves, any of the ovals that we're going to in particular.

I think that alone just kind of makes me feel like, all right, like I'm definitely confident in my own sort of ability to show up at these places and both understand pretty quickly, and

now that I've raced a bunch of different versions of this car, kind of like you said, have a pretty good feel for what I think we can extract out of it and what we can actually get it to do from a setup perspective.

Then once if we can get it in that window, to go kind of maximize what I can get out of it as a driver. I feel like one of the things that I've kind of prided myself on road courses, street courses, oval racing, whatever, is just when it comes down to it, being willing to commit at that sort of maximum level. If there's a corner that we think is possible to do flat-out, like I will definitely be the guy that at least gives it a try.

That's sort of served me well, I guess, over my career and definitely matters at this point because there's a lot more oval corners that are more on that borderline than there used to be, and so I'm looking forward to it.

I'm ready for the sort of challenge of it and am excited about that, and I think with this group, I have confidence that we can figure it out.

Q. Being part of a group and then the arc of your experience and then knowing the different chassis, like you said, when to go for it in those questionable corners, it's that kind of advice that can really lend to the experience to the whole team. Is that what you see as your role, as well?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, I guess I feel like I'm here to help steer the direction of -- almost a little bit like being an extra engineer or something in those discussions at least, just kind of trying to -- if it's relevant or it's necessary, trying to kind of help bridge the gap between what are we all feeling with the car and what's really possible to get out of it, and so trying to kind of filter that information a little bit, because that is something that I feel like I walk into these places with a pretty good feel for, like what are we going to have to tolerate in terms of the car not being perfect, like what's just a car thing, like we're not going to get over that hump, so we need to focus our energy somewhere else versus, okay, this is actually a problem that we need to deal with like right now and we need to fix it.

I think that's a little bit of just the experience that I've had on a lot of different oval tracks in a lot of different scenarios, like you said, with different chassis, with different kind of configurations over the years, being able to help add some context to that discussion.

Then ultimately if I'm the one that's going to have to go out and do all the qualification simulation work or whatever to figure that out, I'm certainly not disappointed or scared of

being in that situation.

I think at the end of the day, it's probably -- I guess from the team's perspective it's probably nice to have somebody who's willing to go off and do that, and if that ends up being me, that's totally fine. I'll take that on.

Q. Now that you have these races set up on the ovals, where is the mindset at right now because there's some drivers that get those part-time opportunities hoping they turn into a full-time deal in the future. Where is your mindset on that? Are you more or less focused on what's ahead or hoping that what's ahead can lead to more greater things in the long haul?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: That's a good question. For sure right now my head is just totally strictly focused on showing up to Texas and being as ready for that as we can be and going out and performing. For me that's certainly on behalf of the team, to take it to -- to be able to take advantage of this opportunity and them choosing me to be the guy for this role.

Honestly, like it's as much just for myself to go out there and continue to work on my craft. You have to kind of go out with the intention to execute in every little facet of what you do, whether it's in-and-out laps in practice, I mean, every little thing.

I think for me it's one of the things that I've learned over the course of my career, that you can kind of attach yourself a little bit too much to results or even just like goals from a performance perspective, and at the end of the day what really keeps you going and keeps you wanting to do this, and for me it's been -- I've had like a revived feeling of that energy over the last few years because I've been able to change my mindset a little bit, is just as a driver you do really know when you just get everything out of it, even in those little small micro experiences over the course of a weekend, and then you start to know if I just start stacking these little things up, kind of regardless of where I end up finishing because sometimes there's aspects of that that are not in your control, whether because strategy doesn't work or we didn't have the car that you needed to do this or that or whatever, that you can still come out the other side of those weekends feeling like you accomplished something, and then kind of know you have a more fundamental sense of where you can get better.

That's what I'm after in this is can we go to Texas, learn something, come out the other side of it feeling like we're better for it, better for having been there that weekend, and hopefully feeling as a group that we executed when we had the chance when it mattered. Wherever we end up is where we end up, and at the end of the season however

that manifests itself in terms of doing more or not or whatever, that to me is like a totally secondary concern.

Q. Going back to the time in 2012, it was the first time you drove a Chevy engine car. It was the year with your best results and at Texas was the fifth position, and it was the year when you got the best finish overall in the standings at the 11th position. 10 years later, quite an anniversary, this time I know it's different circumstances. Now that you've got the opportunity again, have you thought about the chance of running another remarkable season again like in 2012?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: I guess I haven't really thought about it in quite that context. I think about that race at Texas a lot, though, because that was like one of those Texas races where five or six cars finished on the lead lap, I think. Like it was super hard.

We were desperately trying to make sure that it wasn't going to be a pack race, and it turned into a thousand percent the opposite of a pack race.

I remember being crossed up and sideways coming off of Turn 4 a bunch of laps in a row and thinking that surely we were just going to be awful in that event and then kind of discovering that we were going to run in the top 5 at the end of it.

I think in some ways that's probably one of the more similar experiences just in terms of like, okay, this is going to be a long race that you've got to just be there at the end. There's going to be points where you've got to just kind of buckle down and be ready for everything to feel terrible, and your tolerance for that is going to be a big part of what decides where you end up at the end of the race.

I mean, I guess I come into every -- I try to learn a little bit from everything that I do, right, and watching a lot of what other guys are doing. I've been watching the races from Texas last year just kind of trying to pick out some of those little things, like Pato made his way to the front, Graham Rahal was really good, what do their cars look like, what can they do that the other cars can't do, trying to reverse engineer a little bit of how do I get there, also, so that I can do those things.

You know, I guess I think that this is in a more general sense, this is for a lot of reasons a good opportunity just to work with a good group of guys, and hopefully, yeah, like you said, hopefully have another one of those years where things just kind of click at the right times and at the right places, and then I can go out and do my job.

Like I feel way more confident in my ability to go out and

get the most out of my part of things now than I probably ever did when I was younger. When I was younger it was a lot more -- there was a lot more uncertainty in terms of what that even means at certain places. You're showing up to these tracks in that type of scenario with a car that's like that with the regs being that way. You don't know what to expect, you're just kind of out there figuring it out on the fly.

You know, I feel very prepared and just ready to go.

Q. I saw when you were talking about the five ovals, I wasn't sure exactly whether this was a full-year commitment for you with Foyt that would have you at the other races as like an advisor, test driver, whatever you want to say, so could you clarify that perhaps?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: You mean for the road course races? Like to be around -- so I'll be driving all the ovals, and then yeah, it's a discussion that we've had about being around for a little bit more of what's going on.

The team actually has like a really great group of kind of former drivers and people that have been around, so I guess I would say I think that's something that the team is, I think, having a lot of discussion around, just the value of having other drivers that have like a reasonable opinion, I guess, about what's happening.

But no solid commitments on my end for that one way or the other.

Q. When the car switches to the oval, obviously it's either a different car or a totally different setup. Does the team switch? Is there staffing changes?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: No.

Q. Everybody stays with that car?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, yeah, everybody will just cross over.

Q. I noticed the world "old" came up. I'm not exactly the youngest guy on the planet myself. You're the seasoned journeyman. That to me sounds a lot sweeter.

J.R. HILDEBRAND: I'll take that.

Q. Keep in mind that the guy that won the Indy 500 last year was 12 years your senior.

J.R. HILDEBRAND: As long as Helio and Scott and Tony are still doing it, I'm not feeling old at all compared to those

guys.

Q. You talked a lot about the team and about how do you grow up in all this time. One thing I have in mind is as you think about a mentor driver, is it a change in your mind to decide going out to race the car and now to try to build up the development of your teammates that you are trying to help?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, it's a little bit different, but it's -- I guess it's something that I really welcome. It's I think kind of a healthy attitude to have within a team, just to be working alongside and a little bit even on behalf of the rest of the squad.

I think when you're younger earlier in your career, when you've got teammates you feel like it's very competitive against your teammates, and in certain circumstances that's also healthy and warranted and that kind of elevates the competition level of the team.

I think particularly when it comes to oval racing, though, there's so much -- like for me you're just running your own race, and so there's a lot of value in being able to be object the same page with the rest of your teammates, to create that sort of evolution of the car over the course of the weekend and be as on the same page and open and honest and transparent about where you're at and where you think it needs to go relative to what everybody else does because there's, at least in my experience, there's a little bit more of a direct correlation between making the car better for one person and making the car better for everybody.

I think particularly with Kyle, he and I thus far have seen sort of eye to eye, and he seems -- he's very confident but not arrogant at all. I'm just looking forward to working with him. I haven't had that many opportunities to work with teammates, like I've said before, over the course of my career, and certainly not in a capacity like this. It's just something that I think I'm looking forward to, and I think we'll -- I see the benefit for all of us if we can manage to get on the same page like that.

Q. Just a silly question: I want to know if in your podcast there will be a chance for Marcus to raid your race this time.

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I'll have to have him fill in for my rating over the course of the year. I think that would be fair.

Q. After a few years of not racing at all of these tracks, which oval are you most looking forward to?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: That's a great question. I think Iowa. Iowa is a place that -- I'm looking forward to all of them, but Iowa is definitely a place, especially since it's a double-header, that I feel like we've got a really good chance of showing up there, even if it's just over the course of a couple of days. By the time we get to the second race, having things pretty figured out. It's a track that I've liked in the past. It's really fast for a short oval. Hopefully we get a couple of different lanes working so that the racing is kind of particularly fun there when that ends up being the case.

Yeah, just a fun place to go racing.

Q. Are you planning on driving your car Rosy, whatever you call it, to the 500 again?

J.R. HILDEBRAND: I'm not sure. It'll depend a little bit on the weather this year. That was quite the haul last year. But I'll definitely drive something out to Indy from here in Colorado, so we'll have to wait and see.

THE MODERATOR: J.R., pace yourself. We've got a ways to go before we get to Iowa.

We'll wrap things up here. Congratulations, J.R. We'll see you in Texas next week.

J.R. HILDEBRAND: Thank you.

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