

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Jimmie Johnson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: The 2022 NTT INDYCAR SERIES season continues this coming weekend with the XPEL 375 at Texas Motor Speedway. Our guest today knows a thing or two about winning there. Jimmie Johnson seven-time winner in Texas. He's also led the most laps there during his NASCAR days. We counted them up, 1,152 laps led, but for our purposes, he's making his INDYCAR SERIES oval debut when he drives No. 48 Carvana Chip Ganassi Racing Honda. Jimmy joins us this morning on vacation Wi-Fi issues but we're glad you still phoned in. I guess the anticipation is building. How are you handling the countdown for the week?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Excited for it. I do feel a little...we were supposed to test there a week or so ago, certainly wish we were able to get on track. Excited as I am to be on an oval, I still haven't been in traffic in an INDYCAR. I still have plenty to learn coming to a track I know and love. Really excited to get there and work.

THE MODERATOR: Is it somewhat appropriate you're making your oval debut at a place you have so many fond memories, and Victory Lane is named after you there?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, that doesn't hurt a bit. It does feel really good to come back to a familiar track, certainly a place I have so many great feelings for.

THE MODERATOR: General crossover from stockcars to INDYCARs at a place like Texas, you tested there late last year, will there be some old habits to break or crossovers?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I think there's a bit of both. I did find that the line is a little different in the INDYCAR. Just the potential of the car's cornering ability allows you to run a little narrower entry and exit. With that you don't have to flirt with the transitions of the corners in and off as much.

Speed was up tremendously. Also a slight adjustment in my line. But as the test session went on, I was really excited to see how many similarities there were from my NASCAR driving experience and car setup to what we had going on with the INDYCAR.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. I would think since they named Victory Lane after you at Texas Motor Speedway, it would be in your Carvana contract you would have to end up there on Sunday.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I don't need any pressure like that, man (laughter).

Q. Oval racing is a rhythm exercise that the driver gets to feel, is it more of an entry and exit issue? If not, how have the entry points and exit points changed in the faster car than the way they felt in the heavy stockcar?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I really believe all tracks have their own rhythm to them. Ovals are a little easier to find in some respects, maybe come quicker just because the lap is shorter. It's easier to pick up the rhythm of a track with four corners versus one with 17 or something like that.

There is a rhythm to Texas. It is much different than what I have felt in the Cup car. But where it is similar is just how aggressive you can be in turns three and four, then really how cautious you need to be turn one, kind of getting the car pointed and heading off the back straightaway for turn two.

It's a lap where you start tiptoeing, making sure you really hit your marks, to then really moving down the back straightaway and throwing all the aggression you can at turns three and four.

Q. From a business standpoint, how important is this for Carvana for you to be a full-season participant? We're going to get a chance to see the real Jimmie Johnson that everybody saw from 2002 to 2021, also the fact they rolled out this video docuseries on YouTube earlier this week about your decision why you came here? How important is this weekend for Carvana?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It's really important for Carvana, myself, Chip Ganassi Racing, American Legion, all the partners that are involved and onboard. I'm very thankful



that they've all wanted to help tell the story. Certainly Carvana stepping up to the level that they have, their interest in documenting my journey.

From day one Ernie Garcia has believed in this crossover and the journey that I'm trying to make moving from stockcars to INDYCAR. They've just liked to tell the story. I think my story relates with many people in life that are looking for career change, that 2.0 moment. They've loved to be on this journey with me. I'm very thankful.

I certainly do have higher expectations of myself moving on to the ovals. Excited to get there, get going and see where I stack up.

Q. What is your expectation level for this weekend?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I really feel like I need to be further up in the field or would like to be further up in the field. I certainly feel like qualifying, having the opportunity to qualify on the oval this weekend, in the equipment I'll be in, I should be able to have a career-best starting position, then look forward from there, try to understand traffic, race my way into the top 10, top 5 if possible.

Q. How many times have you tested on an oval?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: You were breaking up.

Q. How many times have you tested on an oval? I know you were at Texas and Indy.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yes, that's it, just those two days.

Q. In those two days, were you able to feel more comfortable in the INDYCAR (indiscernible)?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: You broke up again, but I think I got most of it.

Definitely more comfortable in my few days on an oval than I've really been on a street or road course yet. That experience certainly gives me a ton of optimism.

Obviously the fact that things felt more familiar between the Cup car and an INDYCAR on an oval, that just helped build my confidence and really kind of the feel needed.

Again, I have not been in traffic yet, so I know I still have a huge hurdle there with race craft, getting into things. For qualifying I feel more optimistic than I have for any oval qualifying session. I haven't been in an oval qualifying session yet.

Q. Based on your success at Texas, based on what

outsiders think, do people think you should go to Texas and win on Sunday?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I don't think that's realistic. Some people may have that expectation and that's fine. I would love that to be the case.

Whenever you enter the new series, you're with the regulars, they're so good at what they do. We have seen it when drivers try to cross over from various series.

I certainly have higher expectations for myself, but I'm not thinking I'm going to show up, qualify on pole, lead the most laps and win the race.

Q. You mentioned you were hoping to be able to have that test last week. What were you hoping to have been able to get out of that test?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: There's certainly more things about single car running that would have been helpful. I ran in August at Texas when we went to the Speedway not long after for the rookie orientation. Rookie orientation, sure I got some laps at an oval, but running at a reduced speed, not at the edge of what the car is capable of. We really didn't adjust the car to fit my senses, to help me understand what changes do to the car on that ragged edge.

I'm thankful for every lap that I have had so far, but I still have plenty to learn in single car running. I've still not been in traffic, as I mentioned. These cars are much more sensitive in traffic than what I anticipated from watching. I've watched every video as humanly possible. I'm still surprised how big of a tow these cars receive exiting turn two to turn one, how much distance you can close. Working on the timing of that.

It was something I was hopeful to experience at a test session, get a sense of closing rate, get a sense of how the turbulent air affects the car in turns one and two, how to set up a pass. I'll have to use the two hours of practice we have to maximize that, get a sense of it, so I can have the best race craft possible heading into the event.

Q. Would you think you'll maybe focus more on your qualifying efforts for the first practice on Saturday morning, then look more towards that pack running experience in the late Saturday practice? How will you divy up those things you want to accomplish?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, that's definitely the thought process. The other element that we have to factor in is tire wear and how many sets of tires we get for a weekend.

Although the track will be open for two hours, I don't have enough sets of tires to run for the two hours. We'll be strategic. We'll try to maximize new tires in the first practice session and get me ready for qualifying, give me some reps at what stickers feel like, fuel, all the bells and whistles that go with Q trim.

We'll work through it the best that we can, but again somewhat limited time, but more so limited tires.

Q. You mentioned having higher expectations in terms of where you finish Saturday and Sunday. Does going into this race weekend feel different, more excitement, more pressure, the idea you might be able to be more competitive?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, my excitement is definitely higher. That's hard to say because I've been really excited about everything that I've done so far.

Hopefully I can get in the car and have my experience on ovals carry over, make me more confident, be on pace sooner, just ride the wave of what being comfortable and confident in an INDYCAR can provide.

Optimistic, excited. I guess I'm probably more optimistic, if I had to pick. Excitement has been really high being a competitor in the NTT INDYCAR SERIES. I think my optimism for my results are higher this weekend than I've experienced so far.

Q. I know you're not necessarily the most reflective guy. Not many guys don't have seven victories at Texas in Cup. Any memory you're going to think about going into Texas this weekend?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: No. I mean, I did reflect, looking at the plaques in Victory Lane when we were there for the test, took pictures. That's one of my favorite battles in a Cup car against Matt Kenseth. We had an epic side-by-side battle late in the race for the win. That was really special for me.

Most of my wins came on the old configuration of the track. I have one win there on the newer configuration. I do miss it, how many lanes, especially in a Cup car, how many lanes there were to find a place to run, get your car to work.

Coming back, I have been told by all the traction compound that is down for the Cup cars just doesn't interact the same way with the INDYCARs. Everyone has me pretty fearful of those darker lanes higher on the racetrack. I think I'll be pretty focused on chasing that white line as much as possible.

Q. That was your first win in 2007 with Matt Kenseth. Do you remember something clicking that night?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: What I remember is every spring race there we generally struggled, but we'd come back in the fall race and just had great success.

Honestly, it was one of my, from a pure driving standpoint, favorite mile-and-a-halfs we competed on. There's just so many lanes, so many options, big bumps, lots of character in the track.

I don't remember a ton specifically from that year, that night. I do recall, it was late in the year, championship points, we were in a really good spot. I remember the mental kind of awareness I had. Certainly some of the mental coaching I did to myself to really try to finish that pass off with Matt, knowing it was Matt, he raced me clean is really what allowed me to get in there and race that hard that late in the season.

Q. In the docuseries, T.K. after St. Pete is trying to pump you up. You said to T.K., I'm glad it looked like that on the outside because on the inside I felt twice as good as I did at Long Beach. Is it different this year than last year? What is it like for you trying to pump yourself up, I'm doing the right thing, where I'm sure it's different when you're resting on the laurels of seven championships, instead of running 22nd or 23rd at St. Pete?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I guess what I was speaking to then I guess was shown in kind of the race itself. When the race started, that first stint, being competitive in the mix, we worked through our pit stops and sets of tires. I ended up on my blacks to close out the race. I'm not on the same straightaway with anyone. What in the world happened?

It took some time to reflect after the race that the end of the second stint for me on reds, we had a left front tire coming apart. The fact that I had to nurse it, I just lost so much time.

I knew the start of the race went really well, then I was scrambling to know where it went. I'm running with cars putting passes together, running ahead of Conor Daly, trying to pass Takuma Sato. On the straightaway I wasn't with anyone. That was kind of the realization or the learning.

Tony was sharing with me what he saw, what was going on. I was telling him how much better I felt in the car. I was kind of perplexed where everybody went.

Q. I don't know if you've watched the videos full length. They have a segment where a fan was adamant about, I don't want to see Jimmie racing an INDYCAR. Does that hurt at all for you? Does it matter? I'm doing this because I want to do it?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I'm human. I don't like negative feedback if it's from one of my fans or a hater for that matter. I'm human. I don't care for that stuff.

I certainly hope people can identify with where I am in life, what I'm trying to do. If it's a younger fan, maybe they haven't been in their 40s yet, experienced one career, looking forward to a second career, something different.

But I do find that the majority of the people, including my partners that are involved, really do identify with the path and journey I'm on, are honored and happy to be a part of this journey and help tell the story and support this dream that I have to be an INDYCAR racer.

THE MODERATOR: I absolutely agree, the video series is tremendous. Anybody here that has not seen it yet, I would highly recommend it.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Thank you.

Q. I wanted to ask, back when you were in NASCAR, obviously you were almost expected to win. Anytime there was a DNF, you always had the consolation of saying, Hell, I can win the next one. In your case, win the next five. In INDYCAR your realistic ambitions from (indiscernible) contend for podium or better. Does that add additional mental pressure for you?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think ultimately it will. I still have so many unknowns with this first race that I've given myself a break. Certainly I'm a racer. I want to win. That's ultimately why I'm out there. I'm just trying to be realistic with this journey, how different it is, how tough the competition is, all those elements that play into it.

Ultimately that's why I want to do this, I want to win. I want to be on the podium at a minimum, if not win. Know that ovals are the best opportunity for myself.

The way you started your question, something ran through my mind. That is, I have lived that racer dream for a period of time. I feel so lucky to have had the confidence you spoke about, driving for Hendrick Motorsports, all the years, success we did. Not many racers get to experience that. Very thankful I was able to live that in my life.

Q. Do you draw any inspiration from Scott McLaughlin's success? He was beating himself up

from the last part of last year. He was struggling to make a real impression on the team, was expected to win. Obviously now he's broken through. He had a similar lack of open-wheel background. Do you see yourself being able to make something of that breakthrough, something similar to that, at some point this year?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I certainly hope so. He's been able to inspire my golf game and break through to that next level. Hopefully his on-track performance will pull me forward as well (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Are you saying McLoughlin has gotten you a couple times on the golf course?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: He has. I've been able to draw a little blood myself recently. I was really happy with that.

THE MODERATOR: Rivalry off the track.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah.

Q. We saw how good the rookie class of last year did in St. Pete. Do you measure yourself against the rookie class that you came in with, Scott and Romain, or is it your teammates? What motivates you going into a weekend that you're chasing?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I've (indiscernible) around at anyone and everyone to measure myself against. I looked at my rookie class coming in, Romain's single seater experience certainly shined last year. Wow, another example of how when you grow up in a certain car, certain tracks, you're more refined, you're on point. He did a phenomenal job last year.

I thought Scott did a great job, although I know he publicly mentioned he was frustrated with different elements of it. Certainly this year he's come out and nailed it.

I do have a chance obviously to look at the data from my teammates. For myself, living day to day with this journey and challenge I have of being an INDYCAR driver, that's who I look at the most and study the most, try to close the gap to. I talk to my other three teammates, their engineers, try to refine my craft and be as good as I can.

I do look around at others, but it's easiest to look inside the team with the data, friendships and relationships I have with my teammates.

Q. How important is it, especially with shorter weekends, less practice, to nail the setup right off the truck? How much do you lean on your teammates?

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Do you feel you can land it closer to a race-winning car off the truck than you would the previous 13 races?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think directionally ovals, this weekend, really works in my favor. When you go to a road or street course and the track is so long, it takes a long time for rubber to go down, the grip level changes on the racetrack, the balance changes in the car. You have this moving target. Especially on a street course where you only race on it once a year from lap one to the last lap of the race, the track change so much. I don't have any experience with that.

When we unload with a setup, I form an opinion, that session is over, the next day we get one more session, the track has changed again, I'm trying to chase that target. It's an environment that experience really does pay off in.

I think there's less of that on ovals. You'll have all the cars on track straight away. It is a shorter lap, rubber goes down quicker. You create a more stable environment for me to learn in and adjust the race car to.

Q. How important is it that you have one tire, not alternating between blacks or reds?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I would say certainly for qualifying it's nice to have that variable out of the mix. This year the red is a little softer than it was last. At St. Pete I just did a poor job of challenging the tire and the grip level that I had. I was really disappointed with the qualifying effort I had there.

To take that out is nice. It's just one element, all the laps that you get in practice, directly correlate to qualifying in the race.

What caught me out the most in St. Pete is when we put our reds on in practice, there ended up being a red flag on track. I never got a lap to sense or feel what that was like. Again, another variable that will be taken out this weekend, a more consistent environment for me.

Q. No matter how the results are on the track, how is this chapter of your racing career? What has it been like to share with your wife and daughters the environment of INDYCAR?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: We've really enjoyed it. We had an amazing experience and time in NASCAR, met so many great people. It's not that we're saying this is better than or taking anything away from that experience. But it is nice to have new experiences.

I do feel like the fewer races in the INDYCAR SERIES

creates a little more casual environment. It is neat to go to all these new racetracks, especially the street circuits, stay in a hotel down the street, walk with my family on the crossover bridge to a practice or race. We are really enjoying it.

Big thanks to the INDYCAR community in welcoming myself and my family. The paddock is full of a bunch of wonderful people and we've really enjoyed our experience.

Q. We spoke in St. Pete about the race coming up in Texas. You were saying about your expectations. What would be a good result for you come Sunday evening? Would it be top 5 or top 10?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I mean, any of those situations would be a big step up for performance and results for me, which I'd be really happy to have.

Ultimately I want to run every lap of the race. So new into my INDYCAR experience, starting all over on ovals, every lap is going to be a marked amount of experience gained.

We're trying to build up for the Indy 500. Everyone knows how special the Indy 500 is. It's the second oval on the schedule. Every lap I make will be very beneficial and hopeful running into the month of May.

Q. In terms of having Scott as your teammate, how beneficial is that to you to be able to be part of his team, lean on his experience in Texas? Does that complement each other?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: It does. Obviously we'll know more after the weekend is over. Scott has been a great teammate, a great friend. I had Scott, Dario and Tony both at the August test session at Texas. Certainly wish could have gotten on track last week to trail behind Scott, to talk more in detail about technique, setups, adjustments during a stint with the weight jackers, bars, all those little details that come along.

I'll just have to lean on Scott and my teammates as much as possible in the transporter on Saturday.

Knowing the team has a strong starting spot, Scott's success there for a while, gives the team a ton of confidence coming in that it's really about the details. We're not taking a broad stroke at speed. It's really about getting the details right.

Q. Last year at Long Beach you mentioned the INDYCAR has so much more power than the Cup car with an itty-bitty sweet spot. Is your experience on ovals going to increase your ability to find that sweet



spot and bring you more success?

THE MODERATOR: We lost Jimmie. But a great question (laughter).

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I'm back.

I do feel like the ovals reduce the amount of variables, really can be less things to have to worry about and focus about, if that's tire grip on a red or a black, track evolution, all these different elements that really do take some subtle driving differences to exploit the most out of them. It really does remove a lot of that and I can get into a rhythm sooner, I can sense and feel the car sooner.

As I mentioned, I still have a lot to figure out in traffic. I feel like it will get into much more of a familiar cadence for me than what I experienced on street and road courses.

Q. Last year you got to remove the rookie sticker from the back of the car. There is not an oval rookie sticker, is there?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I think there is at the 500. I've already seen a gearbox with a yellow, neon, plate on the back of it. I was pretty bummed to see that. Have to work through my rookie status one more time (laughter).

Q. Knowing you've been at Texas Motor Speedway many times, can you give us a comparison from the Tex-Mex burrito and the carne asada burrito from home?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: There's no place like home. I will take that carne asada burrito from home anytime of the week.

Q. You've done a lot of testing over the winter. Any extra nerves coming into this weekend knowing all the work you've done now matters?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: There's always that pressure throughout the season. The team is always bringing new technology, new ideas are worked on in the winter is important, but it's one block in the foundation that's building towards the end of the year.

Ultimately the technology and the team's progression, you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and evolving. It's hard to relax on what was learned last year, what was learned in the winter.

Last time I was an oval was in August at Texas. I know things are much different, the rules are quite different from an aerodynamic standpoint as we head into this weekend's race, the downforce on the cars than what I tested in

August, the implications of that, how the team exploits that. Hopefully we'll have the same advantage that Ganassi has been able to experience over the years.

Yeah, in some ways you find it comforting. I guess it relies on your mindset. You can talk yourself into being comfortable and relaxed or freak yourself out.

Q. Do you think this weekend will give you an idea of where you stand in the pecking order coming into Indy, whether you'll be at the front, mid pack, or having to fight your way on Bump Day?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I think it will. I'm not sure it will have a lot to do with Bump Day. I think that's more team focused. I do feel like my race craft this weekend will give us all a good indication of what might be in May.

THE MODERATOR: We will go to Asher. Asher, what do you have for us this morning?

Q. As a former NASCAR driver that raced almost every week, how are you feeling about these three-week breaks between races? Do you enjoy it or...

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I enjoy it, Asher. Great to hear your voice. You ask so many great questions.

For me, where I am in life, I'm enjoying the time in between races. In fact, I was able to spend yesterday swimming with my kids in the ocean, we happen to be on vacation for spring break, which is something I wouldn't have a chance to do in my NASCAR days. If I did, it would be only for a couple quick days and I would have to head out to a race. I'm enjoying it at this stage of life.

Q. What are your expectations going to be like in terms of you're going to be running on the Firestones?

JIMMIE JOHNSON: I don't have a great sense of just the tire because the car is so different. When I look at the August oval test, Texas versus my years of racing at Texas, very similar tire trends. The track rubbers in, the grip level comes up. Although all that happens, still an abrasive track with tire wear and deg. From a trim standpoint, they seemed to have very similar trends.

Again, the car differences are so great I can't really single out those tire nuances just yet.

THE MODERATOR: We'll wrap things up there. Jimmie, enjoy the rest of your spring break.

JIMMIE JOHNSON: Appreciate it. Thank you, everyone. See you in a few days.



