

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Thursday, May 18, 2023

Kyle Larson

Jeff Gordon

Gavin Ward

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. Before we know it, we're all going to be looking ahead to 2024 and the 108th running of the Indy 500 Presented by Gainbridge. For Arrow McLaren it will include a special, for some, I'm thinking about our late pal Robin Miller, a long-awaited shot at the Indianapolis 500 for Kyle Larson.

2021 NASCAR Cup Series champion expected to make his debut in a partnership with Hendrick Motorsports and Arrow McLaren.

Joining us this morning, the future driver for Arrow McLaren INDYCAR team, Kyle Larson.

Also joining us, Jeff Gordon, kind of knows his place around the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Now the vice chairman of Hendrick Motorsports.

To the left, Gavin Ward, the racing director at Arrow McLaren.

Kyle, we'll start with you. Certainly you're no stranger to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, or central Indiana, but how excited are you a year from now you'll be going for your first Indianapolis 500, qualifying first, right?

KYLE LARSON: Yeah, no, it's obviously very exciting. It's been something that I've wanted to do for a very long time. I wanted to be patient and kind of wait for the timing to feel right. It feels right. Having Hendrick Motorsports be extremely supportive of it, supporting the efforts with Arrow McLaren, it's something that I'm extremely excited about.

To have Rick and Jeff Gordon involved. Jeff kind of told me that I get to live out a dream of his. That's really special also to me.

I've obviously come here a lot in a stockcar. I lived in the area for a couple years. So this place for a long time felt

like home or a second home to me.

In my opinion, this is the biggest race in the world, so you want to be a part of the big ones. Hopefully someday be a winner of a big event.

Look forward to it. Happy to be here today. Look forward to kind of taking in as much knowledge as I possibly can in a single day, just trying to better prepare myself for whenever I get behind the wheel.

THE MODERATOR: Jeff, Kyle alluded to it. Perhaps no one is more excited about this opportunity than yourself to check things out firsthand and get this perspective on everything. What do you hope to get out of today?

JEFF GORDON: First of all, we are excited to be here and be a part of this. It's been a lot of fun working with Arrow McLaren, Zak Brown, Gavin, his whole team to pull this off.

I'm kind of glad that Kyle said, This is something I'd really like to do one day. Do you think this is something that Mr. Hendrick and Hendrick Cars would want to support?

We're happy that that's all going to come true in 2024.

I think for today, it's such a different world, right? This car. I think as a driver, driving a race car is sort of natural of what you need to go fast, to compete. But you're talking about Indianapolis at 230-plus miles per hour, what it takes to get comfortable, what kind of language there is for a driver of the types of things that they're talking about versus a stockcar or a sprint car.

For us, I think on the Hendrick Motorsports side, it's building this relationship with Arrow McLaren so that next year we can do everything we can to maximize its full potential, get Kyle everything he needs, to get Arrow McLaren everything they need, to make sure that this effort goes as smooth as possible and gives them the best opportunity to get a great result.

THE MODERATOR: Gavin, your thoughts? Kyle is known as a guy that can drive anything on four wheels. You have an opportunity to mold that here for what we think is the greatest race in the world.



GAVIN WARD: Yeah, what better fit for a team like McLaren that's taken to racing in a lot of different forms to have a driver like Kyle who has shown such versatility.

I think just for the team to build this relationship with Hendrick Motorsports, Hendrick Cars, is great. I think one of the best racing teams in the world, racing organizations in the world. Fun to kind of get that together.

Yeah, having this little bit of time to try to introduce Indianapolis Motor Speedway racing with INDYCAR to Kyle, get ahead of it here and show him a bit how we work, what's involved. I think it's a great opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Kyle, in many ways there's been a lot of people in the area trying to help promote this for a long time. Do you feel this has been really 10 years in the making?

KYLE LARSON: For me to run this event?

Q. Yes.

KYLE LARSON: I don't know. I mean, maybe a little bit. I think when I was with Chip Ganassi Racing in the NASCAR stuff, I think a lot of people, maybe myself at times, thought that I would go immediately to try to compete in the Indy 500 for Chip.

I wasn't as accomplished yet in the NASCAR stuff. I wanted to be able to not feel like I was taking a ton away from that stuff. Now I've been able to accomplish a lot in the NASCAR stuff. Hendrick is obviously always a consistent frontrunner. I thought you could take a little bit of focus away from that to run the Indy 500.

I don't want to do this to just do it. I want to do it, take it serious, feel like I'm prepared enough to win.

Yeah, I feel like I'm surrounded by great people and looking forward for the opportunity. I've got 300 some odd days to try to get ready.

Q. Mr. Brickyard, Jeff Gordon, you're a legend of the Speedway already, but it was in the Brickyard 400. You drove the Indy 500 pace car one year. Your friend Jimmie Johnson competed last year. Kyle runs next year. How much do you miss the fact you didn't get a chance to run here in this race?

JEFF GORDON: Like Kyle said, it's true, I did say to him he's going to be able to live out a dream of mine. I go back to the mid to late '80s when I was living here in Indiana,

raced all around here. Every race car driver's dream, if you race around Indianapolis, is to get here, to compete at this facility.

I watched guys like Rich Vogler, a few other competitors I raced with, come over here and do that. Certainly it was on my radar. But NASCAR came calling. Once that happened, I kind of shifted my focus to that.

I don't know if really the right opportunity or it ever became serious enough after that to become a reality. So to me, this is equally as exciting because, one, I sure as heck right now don't want to drive into turn one at 238 miles, whatever they're running (smiling), but Kyle does. Kyle is capable of it.

The fact that Rick has never been to the Indy 500, we're going to go to Le Mans this year, next year he's going to come to the Indy 500, that's extremely exciting for our organization, as well as the things we can learn from Arrow McLaren in what they do here to compete for this event. I think there's crossover we can learn from one another.

Super excited. Excited for Kyle. As well as he has the ability. When he has the equipment and the resources, the people surrounding him, he has the ability to go do extraordinary things. We've seen him do it in other cars. I have no doubt that he'll be able to do that in the Indy 500 next year, as well.

Q. Jeff, you mentioned Le Mans. Rick has not been here. Do you foresee Hendrick five or 10 years down the road being a NTT INDYCAR SERIES team, partner?

JEFF GORDON: I know what Rick's answer would be if he was sitting here. It would be an absolute no (smiling).

He loves racing. He loves cars. When he comes here next year, he might change his mind a little bit. NASCAR is always going to be our primary focus, where our history, our legacy lies.

I will say that if you want to run a good business, you have to diversify yourself. We've seen ourselves get into GM defense manufacturing, we're seeing ourselves go to Le Mans. We've dabbled a little bit in IMSA. We have a great relationship with Chevrolet and our friends at GM.

If there's something that makes sense for us as a company, as Hendrick Motorsports, then we're certainly going to look at it, look at whether or not it makes sense for us or not.

Q. Obviously we're talking next year, but was there any hesitation after what happened with Alex and

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Chase that maybe we need to pause this thing? How much has the philosophy changed behind the scenes at Hendrick Motorsports to let Kyle race outside of NASCAR?

JEFF GORDON: I think our approach is that we want to support these guys in things that they want to take on. I mean, with Kyle, we've had this conversation a lot. He feels like that type of racing actually helps him get prepared and be sharp on Sunday in the Cup car. We've actually seen the results of that.

They have to make good, smart decisions, be in good equipment, not take too much risk when they're involved in that, whether it's racing or other things.

I can tell you I did a lot of extracurricular activities, even if it wasn't in other race cars, throughout my entire career, and see the benefits of it.

We're going to support our guys to do the same. We're going to encourage them to really weigh out the risk versus the reward and make sure they're in the best equipment with the best team and the best opportunity to go out there and make the experience a good one. That's the way we look at this.

Q. The preparation you've been able to do so far, it's not ideal that you can't actually get on the track, but the stuff you've been able to do off track, can you walk us through what you've been able to do so far?

KYLE LARSON: Not a ton. I went to their race shop a couple weeks ago to get the first initial kind of seat insert formed to me. Still have to finish that whole process.

They gave me a big packet of stuff to look at, notes and dash displays, emailed me some onboard footage. I watched all of that. Kind of got a sense of just nice to see the onboard, see shifting, adjusting, all the cockpit adjustable things that they have, just seeing how the flow of the race kind of goes, how they position themselves behind people in traffic, stuff like that. Restart procedures, all of that. Pit stops, pulling into your pit sign, all of that.

But I don't know when I'm testing yet. I don't want to, like, pick people's brains yet, other drivers' brains too early on, then have to go to them in a few months and ask the same questions over again. I want to wait a little bit to pick their brains some. I definitely want to talk to guys who are familiar with stockcars and INDYCARs, Jimmie, Kurt, guys who have done this more recently.

Again, I don't want to do it too early yet and get on their nerves when I go to ask them again later on (smiling).

Q. Gavin, any chance you might use a test day to get Kyle out before the open test next year or is the plan to wait until then?

GAVIN WARD: We're looking at all options really to get as much track testing or readiness. We're evaluating all that.

But, yeah, we're keen. So simulator running, as well.

Q. How much do you think Kyle can learn from the simulator?

GAVIN WARD: I think it's more about probably some of the basic stuff, just getting familiarized with the steering wheel, the adjustments in the cockpit, all that sort of stuff. Gives you a heads up on some seat fit work.

Realistically you have to run these things, run them in traffic. That's what everyone is doing out here. That's the most important side of it.

But I do think the program we're running with Tony Kanaan this year, his involvement with the team, it sets us up in a good way to help. Tony and Kyle have raced together before. That's a good relationship. I think he's a good reference here to try and help Kyle learn the ropes here.

Q. Kyle, of course you've driven a lot of multiple disciplines. It's a year from now. What kind of preparations do you have to go into that might be different than what you've done in the past?

KYLE LARSON: Yeah, I mean, I would say everything that I race is much more simple than an INDYCAR. The only kind of thing I feel like that I have to judge off of that was new to me, not overwhelming but just stressful, was when I did the Rolex for the few years that we did. Obviously different cars, but a lot more total different kind of foreign style racing to me, which I feel like INDYCAR stuff would be a little bit that way, with just race procedure stuff, the cockpits are way more in-depth than what I'm used to in anything that I race.

In a stockcar, I'm worried about turning on brake fans. If I don't, it's really not a big deal. Sprint car I have a wing valve. Late models nothing. Midgets nothing. In an INDYCAR, you got I don't even know. You could probably tell me everything (smiling). You have boost, weight jackers, bars, all sorts of stuff that I want to be ready for and know when they tell me to do this or do that, I can be quick to it, not hesitate and give up something that might be crucial for the end of the race.

As far as the driving, the driving part of it I think, hopefully

that all will come naturally. I don't really know. I don't have any experience yet to even have an opinion on what it could relate to or if it is totally just different than anything I've been in.

I feel like our NASCAR racing has trended a little bit closer to INDYCAR style of strategy, with fuel savings, stuff like that. I think I have more experience now than I would have had three years ago on that side of things.

There's going to be a lot to soak in over the next year, and I look forward to the challenge. I love racing new vehicles to challenge myself and learn something new. I feel like ultimately it makes me a better race car driver.

I think no matter the result throughout this whole experience, I think I'm going to become a better race car driver from it. So I'm excited about all that.

Q. Kyle, when you're doing the 500 next year, does it mean you do it at the same time as the Charlotte race as well?

KYLE LARSON: The what?

THE MODERATOR: Charlotte race.

KYLE LARSON: Yes. It will be crazy.

Q. Gavin, how much simulator preparation will you prepare for Kyle to get used to INDYCAR?

GAVIN WARD: I think we'll start simple, then we'll see how useful we think it is and go from there.

The good news is the simulator we use is around the corner down by Hendrick. It's pretty convenient.

Q. Gavin, a lot of pressure. People are very excited about Kyle Larson. You have a year to prepare for him. What does it mean to have this responsibility, to have Kyle Larson in the team?

GAVIN WARD: Yeah, I mean, I think of it as a privilege, honestly. Actually early on in the conversations about this is a possibility, and really just the concept of running an extra car regularly at the 500, Well, if you gave me Kyle Larson to put in it, I'd definitely want to do it is kind of my answer (laughter). Little did I know that was even a possibility.

Q. You were just joking?

GAVIN WARD: Yeah, just joking. We'll find a way to make it happen if you can do that. Lo and behold (smiling).

As I said, I think we're kind of proving the model here with Tony and getting that crew, which a lot of that crew is existing, so there's a bit of a mix there. We get to prove that sort of model of the extra car.

Having this extra time to get ahead of it is a real advantage I think. We have to be realistic about what you can really achieve. Yeah, no, I feel pretty good about it.

Q. Kyle, your racing schedule is packed. With this program where you've known a year in advance you're doing all this preparation for one single race, how is this different from a preparation standpoint, having so much lead time for one single race than what you typically do?

KYLE LARSON: I mean, I don't know. I feel like I prepare well for every event, but that's leading up. Usually I've got a couple days to prepare before it.

I think having this much time, knowing that I'm racing next year, I'm definitely going to pay more attention to all these days than I would have in the past, kind of see how that all goes, just to be really just more prepared for how the couple weeks of on-track time goes for next year, just to not be surprised by anything.

It's been nice even being here the short amount of time we've been here today to see how they have things laid out. The hospitality, where the teams eat, engineering room, stuff like that. I didn't know any of that before I got here today.

This is the only day I'm going to be able to come this year. Even just getting to get eyes on all that I think will help, little things like that, for next year.

Then, yeah, paying just closer attention to everything than I would have in the past. Me just being a fan in other years, you might just overlook things. You're probably just looking at the quality of racing and stuff like that, where now I'll be more in-depth in watching the race, watching what they do in practices. Then being able to listen to communication today is awesome as well.

I don't know. I think there's going to be a lot of stuff that comes up, too, throughout the next year that's going to help prepare me.

Q. Gavin, Kyle Busch recently said that Kyle Larson stole his ride at the Indy 500. Any truth to that? Comments or negotiations?

GAVIN WARD: Nothing that I'm aware of on that

(laughter).

Yeah, I mean, it's nice to hear that we got a few people that wanted to be in that seat. We're happy with our lot right now, but that's good.

Q. Kyle, from where you come up, growing up in California, you'll be 31 next year, how humbling of an experience is it to know where you started to running the double next year, which very few people have done?

KYLE LARSON: It is. It is a lot. Growing up with dreams -- I don't even know what my dreams were racing in California. I think I would have been happy to make a living as a race car driver, whether that be on the local level or national level like I am now.

Yeah, to be able to accomplish things I've accomplished in the relatively short career I guess you want to call it, I'm only 30 currently, hopefully I have a long ways to go. All the opportunities I've had to this point, being with Rick Hendrick and Jeff Gordon, everything they've been able to do for me the last few years has been spectacular.

I think, too, being able to compete in this event, I think it really more than anybody makes my dad really proud. That's something that's special to me. There's definitely no bigger race to him than Indy 500. I know he's wanted me to do it for a very long time. It's going to be really special to see him kind of see me during driver introductions and stuff like that.

He's a crier, so he'll probably not even be able to watch the race because he'll have tears in his eyes the whole time. That's the thing that's most special to me at this point, knowing I'm in the Indy 500 is making him proud.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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