

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Friday, August 11, 2023

Jr. Dale Earnhardt

Jeff Burton

Steve Letarte

Townsend Bell

James Hinchcliffe

Press Conference



a lot of anticipation on my mind. Look forward to getting the weekend started.

JEFF BURTON: Yeah, it's always an honor to roll through the tunnel here. Always feel like a guest. Open-wheel racing and INDYCAR racing built this racetrack, and NASCAR here, in my opinion we're always here as a guest of that. It's a privilege to be here, an honor to be here.

The doubleheader makes it even that much more special. The racing, obviously we focus on the NASCAR stuff, but the INDYCAR stuff has been really good this year, fun to watch. NASCAR stuff has been crazy. Been really good racing.

The main thing is I think we're in store for three really good races. It's fun to be here with these guys, INDYCAR crowd. It's just a fun energy, a different energy than what we normally have. It's just a lot of fun, a lot of anticipation for the weekend.

STEVE LETARTE: Yeah, it's great to be back. I was here for a couple weeks in May for the Indy 500. I've been fortunate enough to be a part of that for a few years now. Really spectacular.

You talk about the ratings, I look at global motorsports, it seems like the interest in every series by all the different fans is growing. I think we have that same sort of feeling in the Cup Series, for sure, with so many international entries.

It's just a full, great weekend of racing. If you love racing, three races here, one over at the little track, so much to do. It's a great benefit for the race fan to get a lot of racing in under one trip or one ticket.

TOWNSEND BELL: For me, I just love the contrast of the two sports coming together. I like looking across the aisle at all the different stuff. I feel like in the NASCAR world, when I walk down Gasoline Alley and look over to the Cup Series garages, I almost smirk because I love how efficient it appears in terms of just the handful of people preparing the cars. I know that it's just the tip of the spear, that back in Charlotte or wherever their team is, there's a massive amount of resources and infrastructure, where on the INDYCAR side a lot of our stuff is all with us all the time on

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us for the NBC Sports NASCAR/INDYCAR press event here at IMS.

We're joined by race analysts from our NBC Sports NASCAR and INDYCAR broadcast teams: Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jeff Burton, Steve Letarte, Townsend Bell and James Hinchcliffe.

We're excited to be presenting roughly 20 hours of live coverage surrounding the races this weekend across NBC, USA Network and Peacock. Viewership has been strong this season for coverage year-to-date. Our most watched Cup Series season since 2019. INDYCAR side most watched INDYCAR season since 2016.

What we'll do is begin with opening remarks from each of our analysts, then open it up to some questions. I'll turn it over to the group for some brief opening remarks about the weekend.

Dale Earnhardt Jr.

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Well, it's great to be back at Indy. Obviously always amazing to be able to come to this racetrack, a weekend where INDYCAR and NASCAR share such a historic event. It's such an historic racetrack. As always, going to be a lot of fun.

We get to see some old friends on the INDYCAR side. We all get to enjoy a little bit about each other's discipline. So I'm looking forward to it. Should be a lot of fun.

Got a lot of cool drivers in the field for the Cup race. It's going to be exciting seeing how some of them do. There's



display.

Same thing in the booth. These guys have bigger call boxes than we do, and I can't quite figure out which one is better. You're thinking, Is his call box better? Why is his cough button bigger than mine (smiling)? Fun to compare and contrast.

On the Cup side, it's really exciting to see guys like SVG come back and race again on a road course after such an impressive performance in Chicago. I was teammates with him on the Lexus racing team. I'm not surprised he's doing well. It's pretty incredible how well he's doing. All that kind of stuff is just fun to see up close on the same weekend.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It's not the size of the cough button, Townsend, it's how you press it (smiling).

For me, there's not a lot I can add. These guys all summed it up pretty nicely. This event is awesome. I think for a long time I always wanted to see NASCAR and INDYCAR run together on the same weekend. It might not have been the greatest circumstances that forced it to happen the first time, but I think it's been a huge success.

Hopefully it's something, whether here or somewhere else, that can continue. Ultimately it's about the fans, right? That's why we all do this. I think it's a great opportunity for fans to get to see the two best series in North America run together. Pretty international flair across both championships, pretty international grids this year.

As a fan of the sport, I love this weekend. I'm excited to watch both of these races and excited to be a part of both of them as well. Looking forward to it.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take some questions.

Q. Looking at the schedule for next year, unlikely INDYCAR is going to be racing here on the road course at this time of the year. NASCAR is more than likely going to be going back to the oval. How do you feel about that? What would you like to see going forward to try to preserve this?

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Well, I think that everything has to work for it to continue. Obviously if the schedules don't align, then it won't happen next year. I don't think that's because the right people in the right places don't want it to continue. If they do want it to continue, which it should, they'll work together to find those opportunities in the future.

I think that everyone's learned and experienced over the last several years that the two series, to Townsend's point,

are so unique to each other and so different, that when we do come together, they're both better off for it.

Although there's some changes in the schedule for NASCAR, at least I can speak on that, that may make it difficult to happen next year, I'm certain that the conversation about how to continue it beyond that is happening - at least I hope it would be because it's a great experience for motorsports fans in general to have the two series in the same place at least once a year.

Q. Dale and Jeff, to my knowledge it's only the third time in the colorful and long history of NASCAR that a German driver is taking part in a Cup race. Will you include this in your coverage, that a German driver will race here in Cup?

JEFF BURTON: 100%. I mean, that's one of the coolest things about this weekend, is the nationalities that are racing in the Cup Series. It's really fun. It's fun to see, exciting to see, people coming from all over the world to run in the Cup Series.

This car has changed a great deal in the sport. There's a window, there's a window that these guys are trying to take advantage of where the Cup drivers are trying to learn this car that is very similar to what other cars are around the world.

This is an opportunity for guys to jump in here and take advantage. The way SVG did, he took advantage of a street course, he's extremely fast race car driver, it was not a major advantage in the cars being completely unique. Cup cars in the past were unique animals. That's opened the door for people from all over the country to come. It's fun to cover that.

And our guys, they got to step it up. I mean, he showed them that. Like, they need to be better. It's going to be fun to see them step up.

But without a doubt, we're going to praise the fact we have so many nationalities in this race.

Q. Dale, your love of motorsports and knowledge goes from short dirt tracks to Talladega. You've been broadcasting the Indy 500 the last few years. What have you learned about open-wheel racing you didn't know before?

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Oh, my God (smiling).

Well, everything. There's a lot of things about just the Indy 500 itself, I can't even compare it to anything in motorsports that I've ever witnessed.



But just watching how I had grew up my entire life watching Indy and the Indy 500 on television. Being that far removed from it, I had no real understanding of the aerodynamic and mechanical challenges that are the cars are going through and the drivers are dealing with in the race. You thought they just hold them wide open. If they can't hold it wide open, they put more wing in it, then they hold it open.

When I came to came down there to sit on the pit box the end of turn one, watched them start practicing, heard the exhaust pops, all those things, Wow, they're really challenged to try to make the cars handle. I was taken aback by how much discrepancy there was in the field in terms of a great-driving car and a bad-driving car. Never really had been faced with that reality before in any television broadcast that I'd watched as a kid and a teenager growing up. That was pretty interesting.

That was probably the first thing I learned right away, is there's a lot more to it than just pure speed and stacking all the downforce in it you can, going around there as fast as you can, drafting and passing. I mean, it's a handful for the drivers. Then also throwing the wind in there, how that can affect a car. It's a little bit unique to INDYCAR versus what we know in NASCAR.

I mean, everything. Just standing there and looking at the cars going through tech, it was like standing next to a spaceship. It was fascinating.

STEVE LETARTE: For me it was not what was unique, but what was most similar. I have been able to cover IMSA, NASCAR, INDYCAR, even Supercross. While everything Dale described is 100% accurate, the cars are totally different, how they drive, what tools you have to turn.

In the end there's this common thread from Ricky Carmichael to Dale to Townsend to Hinch, there's a start line, a finish line, a distance, who gets there first wins. While that sounds really simple, that's like the common thread. I think that's what makes us all race fans.

I think back to your original question about crossover weekend, that's what makes a race fan a race fan, right? They might like a series or a star or a car better than the other because of their personal experiences, but the concept...

We get lumped together like stick-and-ball sports. There's a big variety in stick-and-ball sports where if you put a circle around racing, while the venues or the vehicles or even the competitors may vary, the concept is very, very similar. The thread of the garages or the paddocks or

whatever you want to refer to it as, is very, very similar. That's probably the coolest thing I've seen going from series to series.

Q. Steve and Townsend, how do you sell it to the fans? Some of our race fans can be a little territorial. How do you get people to embrace the bigger picture? Still four tires, racing each other. How do you get them to catch on to that?

TOWNSEND BELL: I'd say hopefully it's selling itself. At least I'm not up there thinking about selling anybody other than trying to embrace and evangelize the great action that's on the track, having been there and lived it as a driver. Just try to let the fans, as best way can, into the stories of the drivers, the paddock, and also what's going on behind the wheel in real-time.

It's great to have Hinch coming fresh out of the cockpit over the last several seasons, into the NBC booth. I think the world's getting maybe a little bit smaller in that way, in that we're going to see Kyle Larson come over next year and do the 500, we've seen Kurt Busch come over and do really well, Jimmie do his things in the last couple years.

I think in this era it's a little less rare than it used to be to see that crossover. I'm still waiting for the first NASCAR, INDYCAR driver to go race Supercross. I haven't seen that yet, but I'm holding out hope as a Supercross enthusiast. I do think that world is getting smaller.

On the NBC side, I think it's a lot of fun that one of the common voices you hear in the NBC Sports world is Lee Diffey. In the paddock earlier to day, a fan stopped, introduced himself to Lee, wanted his photo with Lee, said, I am such a big - and I thought the guy was going to say Supercross or sports car fan - he said, I am such a big track and field fan. I've discovered INDYCAR because of you, Lee, and your voice.

I think as much as our NASCAR colleagues have bled over onto the INDYCAR side or the IMSA broadcast at Daytona, I think it makes it for the casual viewer that might have only been in one specific motorsport, it's a little maybe less I wouldn't call it intimidating, but it's a little easier to make the leap as a fan. Hearing Dale Jr.'s voice at Daytona, what is this all about? I want to learn more.

STEVE LETARTE: I think it's exactly that. I don't think it's our job to sell it. We're analysts. We're going to cover what's happening, making sure we're doing it in a very welcoming fashion. If you want to turn in, we're thankful you're here, we'll explain it from all levels. For our hardcore fans, they need to leave the broadcast feeling they were explained a why or how they didn't see. To a



brand-new novice fan, we don't want them to think we're not including them in the broadcast as well.

That's the biggest challenge, you are inclusive to anyone that is willing to commit their time to watch one of our broadcasts.

Q. New Zealand, we have more New Zealand drivers in INDYCAR than we have Brazilians. New Zealander comes in, wins a Cup race. Have you looked at that? Where is that coming from? Why are they so good right now?

TOWNSEND BELL: Ever been to New Zealand?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It's a tough question to answer because it's a country that has a pretty small population for the number of top-level racing drivers they've produced.

They have a pretty rich history in it going back to Bruce McLaren, that probably got one generation of drivers going, got the next generation of drivers going. You talk to Shane or Scott McLaughlin, they tell you that Scott Dixon was a huge reason they got into motorsports.

Because it's a small country, successful sports people from that country get celebrated in a pretty big way. Guys like Scott Dixon would have been celebrated more even over there than as a six-time champion, Indy 500 winner, he probably is over here. That helps influence the young generation.

Australia has a huge racing culture, close to them. There's a nice pathway to Europe for Australians. An indirect way. It's impressive. A country with so few people in the grand scheme of things can produce this many top-level racing drivers.

Q. James, as it's referenced, the next time the INDYCAR SERIES is back here, Kyle Larson will be in a car. Hasn't done any testing yet. What has he got ahead of him in the coming months to be not just a part of the field but to be good and competitive? For Steve, Rick Hendrick is behind this. Kyle has done a lot of the sprint car racing. If you're his crew chief knowing the challenges and demands he's facing, what are your expectations?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: From the driving side, he's got the advantage of time. I've never seen a 500 deal done 500 days before the race happens. He's got that certainly on his side, which means he'll be able to prepare I think better than anyone else in the history of, like, the crossover I guess you could say.

I know he's going to be on a simulator, he's going to get a test at some point. That's a driver that's so used to jumping into different equipment, getting up to speed pretty quickly.

I was on hand when Kurt came and ran with us. He was a teammate of mine at Andretti Autosport. It was impressive to see how quickly he adapted, the questions he asked, how much of a student of the craft he became. I expect nothing less of Kyle.

He's surrounded by an incredible group at McLaren. He's got a lot of great teammates that are going to be helping him. Having T.K. on staff over there is going to be a huge asset as well.

Then honestly he's looking forward to one of the most exciting and one of the most terrifying I think experiences of his life. It's going to be a blast. I think everyone in this room is super excited to speak to him or hear from him after that first run in practice, after that first quallie simulator maybe on Fast Friday, then certainly after the race.

I'm looking forward to a good show from him.

STEVE LETARTE: If I was his crew chief, I would tell him we need to get a hot start so we can enjoy the month of May. In the NASCAR world if you win, you're basically in the Playoffs.

To James' point about 500 days to prepare, another huge thing in his corner is that his Cup Series owner is part of it as well. I don't believe he's going to have to make the tough decisions on where should I be, Cup practice or INDYCAR prep or whatever. There's going to be these decisions in the two weeks leading up to the 500.

If I was his crew chief, my goal would be to make it where those decisions are really easy. You only get to run your first Indy 500 once. I would try to get us in Victory Lane very, very early so my owner and my driver cannot just take part in the Indy 500 but really absorb it.

To do that, I think you do have to commit some time and energy. That would be my goal. Then I'd convince him to take me with him if we win so I can hang out and check it out, too.

Q. This is likely going to be the last time that we'll see INDYCAR and NASCAR at the same track the same weekend. How much do you believe we need more of that? How disappointed are you to see the possibility of that go away next year?

JEFF BURTON: I don't know if it's going away or not. I do believe we just talked about the opportunity for Kyle Larson to run both races. I remember when John Andretti did it. The buzz that that created was great for motorsports in general. We are seeing a worldwide excitement about motorsports now. When you get one of our biggest drivers driving in their biggest race, that's great. That's great for all of us. Anything we can do.

You're right, race fans are very territorial. Anything we can do to expose NASCAR to INDYCAR fans and vice versa, it only helps all of us.

An INDYCAR fan is not going to say, Wow, I like NASCAR now so I'm not going to watch INDYCAR. It's great racing. It's important for us to find ways and be innovative. To be honest with you, one of the coolest things about him announcing so early is they have to make the schedules work. You got to make schedules work.

There was a period of time where the times didn't work out. You couldn't have gotten from here to there to do it. When John did it, his dad, I remember his dad walking up to John and saying, That's pretty cool, something to that extent.

So here you took one of our greatest drivers ever and certainly the hero of the time, and he thought it was great for motorsports. I'll never forget that.

Anything we can do like that is good for all of us. Doubleheader or whatever it happens to be is good for motorsports and it's good for each individual series.

STEVE LETARTE: I'll just add that while a double-header is great, I don't think it's the only option. I think the way that the series interact with one another within their schedules, within the series, within circuits, all of that adds value as well.

He brings up the schedule for the Indy 500. It's more than just that. It's what would the Rolex be if it was up against the Indy 500 or the Daytona 500, right? It's more than just where you're at on the same weekend, it's what your global footprint looks like from January to November.

I think it's stars willing to come to a NASCAR race or Kyle Larson coming for an INDYCAR race. I really hope there are weekends somewhere that whoever, Pato wants to come and run, whoever. You hope their time allows it.

I just think these stars don't really control a lot of their time. You just hope the people that do and the series that do, hope that is in some sort of consideration.

Q. James, Graham Rahal was in here and he brought

up your name as an example of somebody could be crushed by this place one year and be on the pole for the Indy 500 the next year. To see what he's been able to do since he got bumped out of the Indy 500 this year, now back on the pole?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, took me 12 months to do that. He did it in a couple months. Experienced kind of both ends of that in this place.

Incredible turnaround. Shows you how unpredictable this series can be, how competitive it is. A guy that's at the bottom of the barrel in May is sitting in the top of the pile here in August. Huge congrats to that team and to Graham for the effort they put forth.

Like I said, I've been there. I know how tough May was that for that group. To be only a few months removed from that, but having him on pole, Christian up there in the front row, Jack up there before the penalty, is a huge result for them.

Q. James, a technical question for you. NASCAR is running on Goodyear, INDYCAR on Firestone. Do you think there would be a bit of grip rise?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Normally different manufacturer rubber isn't very compatible with any other manufacturer rubber.

I suspect, as they saw last year, there will be a little bit of an issue after the Xfinity cars run or Cup practice or whatever. But we're used to that. For a long time the junior categories have had different rubber. Even though a Cooper rubber versus Firestone, versus Goodyear, act differently, nothing they haven't dealt with in the past. These guys are pros. They'll figure it out.

Q. On this weekend, are you surprised we haven't seen more crossover, INDYCAR driver running a NASCAR driver or vice versa? That was part of the allure of this weekend?

TOWNSEND BELL: I'm not that surprised. I think it takes a lot from a planning standpoint. It's tough to bounce back and forth between cars like that.

I think you've seen that with some of the greatest drivers in the world coming to the Indy 500 with months of planning and preparation, and all the testing that's available to you for Indy. You see Alonso come over, Kurt Busch, they've done well, but they'd be a lot better with three or four attempts, you know?

I think vice versa: for an INDYCAR driver to just hop in,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

maybe save for Scott McLaughlin, he's got a pretty good bedrock of experience that obviously with SVG's performance could transfer, but difficult to hop in on a spontaneous basis. I think so much planning goes into making these things happen, it's prohibitive against spontaneity.

Q. Dale, sorry to put you on the spot. Two seaters are around right now. Have you ever gotten a chance to drive one of those?

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: No.

Q. If you did have a chance, who would you want to give a ride to?

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Probably wouldn't want anybody to be in there with me the first time (smiling).

I mean, I think that ship sailed. I missed some opportunities to drive a INDYCAR around here. I probably should have done it. Be a regret of mine for a long time.

I rode with Mario. That was cool. I couldn't see anything. Just riding with him was great in any kind of car.

But, yeah, if I was going to take a lap in a car around here, in an INDYCAR, probably wouldn't be the two seater. I would be want to be full on, strap a bunch of downforce to it, make it pretty easy. I'd want it to be the real thing (laughter).

Q. Nobody you want to pick out there to scare a little bit?

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: No, I'd be scared enough. Wouldn't be room for anyone else (smiling).

Q. (No microphone.)

TOWNSEND BELL: I mean, the thought crossed my mind the moment I saw the track on your broadcast, Rick, because it looked like a great setup. Obviously I wasn't there. Forget where we were Chicago weekend, somewhere. Mid-Ohio.

It looked fantastic. Turned out to be a great race. There was a lot of skepticism I know leading up to it on a number of fronts in terms of how it would work out.

It seemed to race well. It was super entertaining from where I was sitting watching the race. Save for paddock and pit space, that's usually the issue, right? When we go to St. Pete or when we're in Nashville, you're just always space constrained within the INDYCAR, INDY NXT, our

other support series, SRO that might be running, even an IMSA combined weekend like what we see at Long Beach. It was one of my first thoughts, that could be a great possibility.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you all.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports