

# NTT INDYCAR SERIES

## News Conference

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

**Mark Miles**

**Jay Frye**

**Townsend Bell**

**Don Cusick**

Press Conference



The Rogers family has been phenomenal to commit and to work through how this can be a good thing for them and the members of their club, as well as INDYCAR, and especially our teams.

I'm excited to see this format. I've never been to a heat race before or an all-star race of this type. I think it's just going to be sensational to see what happens.

We appreciate NBC saying, listen, let's see what we can do with this. For Peacock to be with us until Sunday and then on Sunday to have the race live on NBC is terrific. Fans everywhere in this country will be able to see it.

THE MODERATOR: Jay, smooth segue from Mark talking about heat racing. First heat racing and really an INDYCAR SERIES exhibition in over a decade. This will be all-out sprint racing. From the competition side, really how did it all come together?

JAY FRYE: It was a huge effort by a lot of people, and Townsend was actually a big proponent of something like this, and he and I talked about this a couple of years ago. If this goes bad, we're going to blame it all on him. I'll put that out there right now.

Like Mark mentioned, we always want to try something different. We had a great test at Thermal last year. NBC had a broadcast window, which created this opportunity. The Rogers family, the members, our teams have all embraced this challenge. It's going to be a little unique, but really it's very simple.

You have basic qualifying on Saturday afternoon, two groups, 12 minutes. It's going to be the same thing we've done in the past, so there's nothing different there. Then the two heat races on Sunday morning. Basically two different groups, two different heat races, top six advance. Then we'll have a 12-car 20-lap shoot-out with a halftime for a lot of money. What's not to like? It's going to be great.

THE MODERATOR: Jay, stand by. Don, great to see you again. Can you give us the members' perspective? You are already out there. How excited are they to share the club with a nationally televised audience like this?

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Thanks for joining us today. As the countdown to The Thermal Club \$1 Million Challenge continues, wanted to offer up an opportunity to hear from several stakeholders today.

Joining us, Mark Miles, president and CEO of Penske Entertainment Corp. Thank you for joining us today.

Jay Frye, president of INDYCAR, is also with us. Thanks, Jay.

Don Cusick this May will enter the Indy 500 with Dreyer & Reinbold and Cusick Motorsports but also a Thermal Club member, firsthand knowledge of the facility. He joins us as well. Don, thank you.

And from NBC Sports, long-time analyst and former INDYCAR SERIES driver, Townsend Bell.

Thank you all.

Mark, let's go ahead and start with you. Ever since this nationally televised exhibition was announced last fall, there's been a buzz about it. What does something like this mean for the series?

MARK MILES: Well, I think we and INDYCAR fans are really excited about getting out to California, getting into the desert, getting to this phenomenal facility at Thermal and mixing it up and doing something a little bit different.

We had an opportunity, let's say, on the calendar in the spring, and Thermal had the kind of climate that seemed like it could work. We had a great experience. I think all the teams had a great experience there for our first visit last year. So it seemed like it just made sense.



DON CUSICK: I think we're all super excited. After last year, everybody got a taste of what INDYCAR racing is really about. We are really happy to hear you guys are coming back, and the excitement has been building. Here we are. Yeah, we're ready for you. We kind of set the bar high last year, so let's see what happens this year.

THE MODERATOR: We can see over your shoulder the weather should be good for us this weekend.

DON CUSICK: I'll tell you what, we drove in in a rainstorm, the likes of which I haven't seen in a long time, last night. It's clear and sunny and 80 degrees. According to the weatherman, that's the way it's going to be the rest of the week. So, yeah, get you guys out of that cold weather and into some of this nice sunshine.

MARK MILES: Amen.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Don. Stand by. Townsend, as Jay alluded to, you know Thermal pretty well. I know you're excited about the weekend. How will NBC plan to translate the excitement of this format to the viewers and the nationally televised audience come Sunday afternoon, and Sunday morning if you are on the West Coast?

TOWNSEND BELL: I think first it's important to clarify to Jay that failure is an orphan. Success has many fathers. Let's see where we stand on Monday.

JAY FRYE: Deal.

TOWNSEND BELL: This is an exciting opportunity for INDYCAR. I think it's an exciting opportunity for Thermal. From an NBC perspective, we had a few production calls this morning, and I think our goal is to keep it simple in that, hey, we're racing Indy cars at a brand-new super exclusive facility. And what makes this, I think, format different and unique and exciting is big money on the line, no points can be lost.

It's a go-for-it kind of approach I think for the drivers. We'll have the two heat races live on big NBC on Sunday morning starting at I think 9:30 out on the West Coast, 12:30 Eastern.

For me, in between the heat races and the main event, we want to tell the story of this great facility. You know, this is -- as a California native, I can tell you that new, cool ideas are almost always answered with a "No" in California and followed up with a whole bunch of reasons why something cannot happen. This is a great example of innovators and industry leaders coming together and doing something cool despite lots of people telling them no.

I remember 14 years ago walking into a sales office in La Quinta before Thermal owned land. It was nothing more than an idea. It's pretty awesome to see.

For those of you that are in the media that haven't been out to this facility, it is mind-blowing what you'll find there. Absolutely -- it's what any car racing enthusiast would want if we achieved the success that a lot of the Thermal members have achieved.

To me this is a celebration of American innovation and can-do attitude, and I think INDYCAR is doing the same with this exciting format. We're looking forward to telling the story on NBC.

THE MODERATOR: As mentioned, that kind of helped set the stage. We'll go ahead and open it up for questions.

**Q. I like the looks of that weather behind you, Don. This one is for you. Obviously, we talked a lot about the on-track side of this event, but there's going to be an off-track portion with your members. How important do you think an opportunity it is for the INDYCAR teams to possibly meet potential partners, people like yourself who want to get into racing?**

DON CUSICK: I think it's super important. Last year when we were putting together the deal with Dreyer & Reinbold, the spring practice was here, and so a lot of our members got to see it, kind of get immersed in it a little bit. Out of that we picked up a half a dozen new sponsors. So I think it's super important.

It lets them know that the teams are accessible, the drivers are accessible, and it's a pretty cool sport. Yeah, I think it's tremendously important that the members get to interact with the teams.

**Q. And maybe, Jay and Mark, go over in a little bit more detail how the members are going to be involved with the teams.**

JAY FRYE: Thanks. There will be a draw party on Thursday night, so the members will draw. There will be a random draw based off -- they'll line the cars up for qualifying, but it will also pair the members with -- embed the members with the driver. That will be their first chance to meet.

Then for the weekend they'll be embedded like a VIP with the team.

MARK MILES: I'll add to that, more generally, years ago at the 500 we brought, I don't know, 12 or 14 working



members of the media from a particular different broadcaster and embedded them with teams at the 500 that race weekend.

It was phenomenal. We made more fans with them that weekend than we probably had with them for many years.

I think it's going to be a fabulous experience for the members, and we'll see how it pays dividends in the future.

**Q. I have a couple of questions for all of you. I will start with some racing-specific ones, maybe best fit for Jay. Jay, I know, thinking back to last year's tests, one of the reactions from a lot of drivers was that this track really ate up those tires and there was a high level of degradation. I know the car is somewhat different from what it was a year ago, and I know, from what it sounds like, Firestone's tires that they might have made for this event may not be -- may not have been made with not having the hybrid in the car in mind. How do you anticipate the tire wear given whatever compounds Firestone is going to be running and how that can impact this event on Saturday and Sunday?**

JAY FRYE: Well, again, it's a short heat kind of race, that type thing, so the tire degradation should be less than what we saw there last year. Like you mentioned about the hybrid, so the tires are a little different because of that. Instead of having more weight, we'll have less weight, 25 pounds less than we ran there last year at Thermal.

Degradation should be a little less than it was before.

**Q. Another reaction from drivers after testing there last year when they were maybe thinking ahead to what a race might look like -- again, I know this was before this event and this format were formally announced, but a lot of them maybe struggled to think of where passing opportunities might be if we do happen to have -- or if we did happen to have a race. Where do you envision, from looking at the track map, where the best passing opportunities might be, and how do you anticipate racing might be different knowing this may be a track where there may not be an abundance of passing opportunities and just ten laps per segment in order to get those passing opportunities in?**

JAY FRYE: I guess the way I look at this is we're dealing with some of the greatest race car drivers in the world. They're going for a whole bunch of money, so they'll certainly get it all figured out where the best passing places are.

It's funny, sometimes we anticipate or what we think is

actually going to happen, the complete opposite happens from that. I would envision something like that. They'll have a couple of days to test. We'll have the qualifying session. I'm sure they'll learn some things in the heat race, and then for the main it will be quite spectacular.

Again, we're going to let them have push-to-pass. Push-to-pass will be on for the Practice 4, it will be on for qualifying, it will be on for the heat races, and it will be on for the feature race too.

They'll have 40 seconds. If you are in the feature, there will be 40 seconds in the first ten laps. It will reset for the next ten laps too. We're going to give them every opportunity and every tool at their disposal to create some great racing.

**Q. My last racing-specific question, Jay, what safety additions do you know of that the track has made over the last 12 months? I know that was another driver concern, what the venue might be like when you actually had drivers racing. What things notably have changed from the last 12 months heading into this weekend.**

JAY FRYE: Mainly just tire packs and run-offs, things like that. They're basically an FIA Grade 2 facility at this point. The guys at Thermal have done a great job getting the facility ready.

Tony Cotman is actually out there today, and has been out there many, many times, and he's an FIA-certified inspector. The track will be in great shape. They've done everything we've asked them to do, and safety is obviously paramount in everything that we do.

**Q. Mark, a question for you, how will you and Penske Entertainment officials at large determine whether this weekend was a success or not and decide whether or not you would want to do something like this again in the future?**

MARK MILES: That's a great question. I think we will have our ear to the ground with our key stakeholders. First of all, I think the Rogers have to like it. It has to be a good experience for them as the owners of the club, and I'm sure that the club members' attitudes will be reflected in Tim Rogers' attitude. That's an important fundamental thing.

I think we'll see how fans react. And you know, because you do it all the time, that you'll have a good sense from social media on the fan reaction to the racing.

There will be some of our sponsors out there. Teams obviously. Team owners will be out there. We'll just take

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

everybody's temperature after the fact.

Listen, I just know the temperature is really in a good place after the test last year. People really enjoyed being there. Maybe raised some of the questions you asked about racing. I hope we've addressed them, and we expect to have a really good weekend that people enjoy.

**Q. My last question is for Don. Don, I know the way INDYCAR had framed this event originally back when it was announced in September was that there would be some level of buy-in from members from a financial perspective that would then allow them to potentially reap some financial rewards in case the driver that they were paired with finished in the top five in the main event. We know that that's not happening anymore. The way I understand it, it sounded like there just maybe weren't enough members that were interested in participating in that. Can you give any sort of perspective on maybe where that disconnect was? I know you sound positive that there are a lot of members that are excited for this, but just I would be interested to know what perspective you can share on that on why that portion of --**

DON CUSICK: Sure. I think it's a combination of things, but I think ultimately it just came down to we've got a lot of amateur racers out here, not a lot of professional racers. I think people just weren't quite certain that they were at the level required to compete as would be expected for that kind of prize money.

We're kind of talking through that as members and as a club. We'll see where that leads. But I think for this year it might just have been a little bit overwhelming and they didn't quite know what to expect, and that's a part of it.

I did want to comment on your question about where you pass on this track. I can tell you, I've been passed everywhere on this track. There's lots of opportunities. That's for sure.

Then, as far as changes, we did make a few changes to some of the apexes in the turns and made it a little more friendly, I think, for the cars to race on. At least that's from the members' feedback so far.

**Q. I know next to nothing about this track. What kind of peak speeds are you anticipating there?**

DON CUSICK: Down the main straightaway, which is on the north part of the track, I'm guessing they're going to get probably close to 200 miles an hour. In a GT3 Porsche Cup car, a 991 Cup car, we're doing 160 at the end of that straightaway. So I'm guessing they're going to be upwards

of 180 to 200 miles an hour.

**Q. Jay, what about -- Nathan asked about safety modifications. Are there SAFER barriers, or are they needed there?**

JAY FRYE: No. This being a road course, there are no SAFER barriers. There's ample run-offs, there's tire packs that are conveyed throughout the facility. They've done everything that they needed to do to upgrade it to an FIA Grade 2 facility. But no SAFER barriers, no.

**Q. Last thing for Mark. The timing of the race on Sunday and talking with NBC about that, you're going up against NCAA basketball. Was there a lot of discussion about when to start on Sunday?**

MARK MILES: I think it was pretty typical. We're hoping to get a broadcast network window. There's a lot going on in American sports this weekend and this time of year. So you kind of work for what you think gives you your best opportunity both from the point of view of the teams and the fans who will be there and the television audience.

12:30 Eastern, again, there's going to be a lot of competition for eyes in U.S. viewership. The 12:30 Eastern is a pretty good time. We do things like the Indy 500 around that time and get a pretty big number.

**Q. Last thing, is this a ticketed event?**

MARK MILES: I can try that. We never thought of it as let's see how many people we can sell tickets to to be there for this. It's normally a private facility. It was meant to be a kind of high-end hospitality offering. So it's a little pricey. Pricing changed, but it's still kind of pricey. But we think, and I'm sure the Rogers think, that this is the right way to put it forward to get a good number, but a manageable number of fans to the track.

**Q. Jay, this is for you. I don't fully understand this, but you're about to help me out here. What happens to things like engine life for the teams in terms of the series? Does it impact them later on by running at a non-championship event?**

JAY FRYE: No. It's accounted for in the 2500 -- they get four engines at 2500 miles apiece, so this is accounted for within the full season. So it will not get them out of their allotted amount of miles, no.

**Q. So it won't -- effectively, then, doesn't impact on the championship scenarios at all in that sense, does it?**

JAY FRYE: No, sir. No.



**Q. That's awesome. That makes the scenario of racing at Thermal even more enticing for the teams, then, doesn't it?**

JAY FRYE: Yes, sir.

**Q. I don't know who this question is for. I wanted to go back to Don mentioning that some of the members weren't comfortable racing. I had never heard it explained that the members would actually be in the INDYCAR race. Was that always the plan? I know they have their own race. I thought the buy-in was just a pairing that embedded them.**

DON CUSICK: I can take it, if you would like.

MARK MILES: Go ahead, Don.

DON CUSICK: Yeah, so I'm sorry if I confused you on that. Originally they were going to pair a member and they were going to drive a BMW M2 comp car in the race. And so the members would have their own race, and depending upon where they finished, they would be paired with an INDYCAR driver. And depending upon where they finished, they would combine those points, and then the members would also share in part of the prize package.

But I think part of the problem became were there enough M2s and were there enough experienced drivers in those M2 cars to actually make this happen.

I think that we just didn't quite have enough time to prepare either the cars or the people for 27 individual race car drivers and race cars to drive in. So that kind of led to some of the issues.

I think if we go forward and this works and everybody wants to, I think next year we might revisit that and see how that goes.

**Q. The members, though, still do have their own race this weekend?**

DON CUSICK: The members are not going to race this weekend. We are going to try to put together an exhibition race featuring the Hendrick Motorsports Track Attack cars. Those are converted Gen 6 NASCARs. But that would just be a demonstration, kind of fun race for the members to participate in, and just be maybe a little ten-lap thing or something like that, something kind of fun just to fill in the space in between.

We're not sure yet. We're going to have to kind of see how it goes. But that's what we're thinking. Just so they can

get a feel of what it's actually like to be out there in a competitive environment with all the INDYCAR teams around and things like that nature.

**Q. Just, first of all, for Jay, in the all-star race, we have that little halftime segment, a ten-minute segment. I just wanted to know the thinking behind that. Is it so we can have closer racing the entire 20-lap race, or are there other reasons why you decided to go for that halftime segment?**

JAY FRYE: A couple of different reasons. One, we wanted it to be a no-holds-barred race. So we're going to let them come in and get -- put on -- take fuel. So we'll make sure, when the cars leave for the first ten laps, they'll be full of fuel. They'll come in at the halftime, we'll make sure they're full of fuel.

There will be no fuel savings. It's no holds barred, go get 'em, push-to-pass, that type thing. So it should create a great racing environment. That's really the biggest thing.

When they come in halftime, they can't -- they will add fuel, they can adjust the wings, tire pressure, take care of the driver. But no tires. We want to see the tires, the deg. The last ten laps will be pretty interesting. Full of fuel with ten-lap tires on it and 40 seconds more push-to-pass.

**Q. Maybe Mark or Jay. Obviously you're televising the practice test sessions over the week. Is that to build up hype for the event? Is there any other significant reason why nine hours of practice is being televised compared to what we've seen before historically?**

JAY FRYE: Last year we did a two-day open test during February. So this is something that we always do in the preseason. We just really moved that to this weekend. The teams are still going to get their two-day open test. Then, at the end of the second day, we're going to do the qualifying piece with the two groups, and then we'll have the race on Sunday.

Again, we are fortunate to have an NBC window. We've had this idea about doing something different with an all-star kind of race. It all fit into the weekend where we can do everything all at once. So that's what we're going to do.

**Q. Just for Townsend, sort of on a driver's perspective on this track, what sort of challenges might the drivers face compared to other weekends? Will the attitude change, racing for money instead of championship points? Is there any other circuits this might compare to, any other challenges that drivers might find similar to other tracks?**

TOWNSEND BELL: Yeah, I think Barber Motorsports Park comes to mind in that you have quite a few corners on the circuit. Different with Thermal is that there is some really good brake zones from high speed, in-line straight brake zones that you don't have as much at Barber.

The teams have all tested there. Not every driver in the series has tested there before, so I think that's going to be fun to watch some of the rookies get accustomed to the facility.

At the end of the day, having no points to win means no points to lose. And I'm not sure in the current era we've ever seen what happens in that format. That's the curiosity I think for all of us.

None of us, as we sit here right now, can tell you with any certainty exactly how this will play out from a racing standpoint, but I also think that's the reason that so many are curious to watch, along with me, and see what the results are.

You dangle cold hard cash in front of just about anybody in a competitive environment, whether that's Mike Tyson boxing again at age 58 or 27 INDYCAR drivers with no points to lose, I think we're going to see some interesting dynamics play out. INDYCAR never disappoints.

I think, back to your earlier question, all of the testing and all of the coverage we'll have on Peacock is everybody watching from afar an opportunity to learn about the facility. It's a lot like Augusta in the Masters, right? I'll probably never have a chance to go to the Masters, but I get to tune in once a year and watch, or I live close here to Riviera Country Club and the L.A. Open. These are really, really special places that this kind of event presents a unique opportunity for everyone around the world to get a peek into a pretty magic place.

This is the kind of facility that I think Carl Fisher would build if he was alive today. It's a clean slate. It's a big vision. I think, most importantly, it's not an idea anymore. They are making it happen out there in spectacular fashion. That's why you should watch. There's just a lot of curiosity to be satisfied.

**Q. A couple of questions for Mark and Jay. How big of an opportunity is this to showcase INDYCAR as a product for, like, maybe future teams or future commercial partners?**

MARK MILES: My take would be we don't know exactly what will be harvested from it, but as Don has said, others have said, it's a great connection to the members, which

we'll see what comes of that. It's on national television, so we have a chance to get maybe some new eyes looking at INDYCAR that might not have absent the kind of unique format for this.

I think people want to see us innovate. To do it in this way without the points on the line to us made sense. We're excited to see what comes of it.

**Q. Jay, in terms of attracting potential new teams, do you think that if this happens next year, would you open the door up for maybe one-off entries?**

JAY FRYE: That's a good question. Probably not because, again, when we do an open test, it's about the current full-time teams. They're required to come to open tests. The open test is basically an INDYCAR-sanctioned event. So we want that to be kind of special and kind of unique.

Obviously having -- last year was a record having 27 full-time entries for an entire season. We have 27 again this year. So it's back-to-back years of that. That's a really good thing.

We also have -- there's quite a bit of interest right now from some new teams to come in, which is great. Again, it's just kind of managing how it's all going to look for the future.

**Q. Don, finally for yourself, as a member, how excited are you to have INDYCAR and for you guys to showcase Thermal for what it is with the track itself?**

DON CUSICK: Yeah, well, if I was a dog, my tail would be wagging really hard. I can tell you that. It's really fun. We've been looking forward to it pretty much from the day that INDYCAR left last year in February until now.

Yeah, it's a huge event, and it's super exciting, and it's fun to be here and see it all happen. I'm looking forward to hosting people and showing them the track and being a part of this event. It's really a cool deal.

**Q. This question is probably best served for Mark. I know we still have to have the event, so we can't get too far ahead of ourselves, but I think that just assuming that this goes exceptionally well for all parties involved, what do you see as maybe the potential that can come out of this from could we have this race? Would this race potentially become a points race? Could you see a scenario where this opens up beyond made for TV? What things could be in play there?**

MARK MILES: The scenario you hypothesize, we hope



accurately, was that this is phenomenally successful this weekend. I hope that's the case. Kind of expect that to be the case.

Then we'll just sit down and work through it. The last part of your question was sort of about the gate, the crowd. We really have to do some thinking about that. The club wasn't built for, pick a number, 20,000 spectators at an event.

What we do know is that the paddock, the teams, and the drivers love it, so I think there will be interest in being there. Exactly in what form going forward is something we have to analyze and discuss amongst ourselves and with the Rogers and perhaps input from the members after this weekend.

**Q. I think it this question is mainly for Mark, maybe Jay, whoever can really answer this. You guys just touched upon it a little bit, but I think with the possible TV contract coming up, a bunch of unknowns. Obviously we didn't even have the race this weekend yet, but with The Thermal Club, all the hype that's been surrounding it so far, would you say that it's a guarantee for The Thermal Club to come back on the INDYCAR schedule in any capacity, points race, exhibition 2025, or is this it?**

MARK MILES: I don't think we make hypothetical guarantees. I pretty much said what I think about it, which is I think our competitors, our team owners love being there. I expect that will be the case maybe even more so this weekend. We'll get feedback from NBC, and we'll see what the fans think.

We appreciate the work that's been done to upgrade to F2 to the track itself and posting of the resources to make this possible. I'll be real surprised if the drivers aren't happy to race for this money, as Townsend has said, and we'll see how all those ingredients come together after this weekend.

THE MODERATOR: Appreciate everybody joining us. Townsend, any closing thoughts here from our friends at NBC?

TOWNSEND BELL: Just look forward to having everybody tune in and watch. We will do our very best to satisfy all of your curiosities. If you're not there and you're watching from afar, don't be afraid to hit us up on Twitter, let us know what you want to see. I'm going to take the viewers around in between the heat races to some of these amazing -- Don, how many facilities are there now in terms of private residences? It has to be close to 100.

DON CUSICK: We have close to 100 houses. We've got

a dozen or so commercial buildings that members own. Obviously you're welcome to come by and look at mine. I just bought it. Yeah, yeah, it's going to be fun.

There's going to be a party, and I can show you where the house is that it's going to be.

TOWNSEND BELL: Look forward to sharing it with you all. It's going to be a blast. In fact, my 2016 Indy 500 car is hiding in one of those complexes out there, so I'll be checking in on that and making sure it's still there. I know Don tried to slide in for a few laps a couple of weeks ago. Always got to keep an eye on the members.

THE MODERATOR: Just give us the gate code. That would be great.

DON CUSICK: No problem, no problem.

THE MODERATOR: We'll leave it there for now. Our thanks to, again, Mark, Jay, Don, Townsend. Appreciate everyone's time today. See you at the Thermal Club.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

