

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Rick Hendrick

Zak Brown

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: After a thrilling weekend of qualifying, the countdown to the 108th running of the Indianapolis 500 presented by Gainbridge is now on in earnest. Sunday Kyle Larson, driver of the No. 17 Hendrickcars.com Arrow McLaren Chevrolet will start fifth. That's in the middle of row No. 2 at the first half of the Hendrick 1100 with Kyle also competing later that afternoon and evening in the Coca-Cola 600 down at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Joining us this morning and for more on this very unique partnership, Zak Brown, McLaren Racing CEO, and Rick Hendrick, Hendrick Motorsports founder and owners and the winningest owner in NASCAR Cup Series history.

Gentlemen, let's start by talking about this partnership, Zak and Mr. H. How did it start and how do you feel like it's working out so far?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, it couldn't have gone any better. I got a call from Zak. Everybody knew that Kyle wanted to run the Indy 500, and so started talking to Zak, Jeff Gordon did and I did, and we put a deal together. I never thought I'd get to have an entry in the Indy 500 in my life.

I just really appreciate the effort that Zak and his crowd have put together. It's been an amazing effort, and the teams have been flawless working together.

It's been amazing to see a car be able to qualify in the top 5. Nervous as I've ever been watching qualifying. But Zak and his whole group have just done an amazing job, and we're very fortunate to be partners with him and his team.

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, it's been awesome from day one. Mr. H and his entire organization are absolutely legendary in motorsports, not only in NASCAR but in GTP. I remember the Corvette program which I was very fond of. Racing through and through.

Obviously Jeff is a great friend and a legend of the sport,

and Kyle Larson is as great of a racing driver as they get. The opportunity to partner with all three and the entire organization has been an absolute privilege and comes with a lot of pressure because we're all here to win. We know how difficult that is. We know how difficult it is for a driver to change disciplines, and the collective effort everyone has put forward has just been amazing, exceeded expectations.

If you would have said when this got started what does success look like, at least up to qualifying, I would have said front half of the field would have been an awesome result. I wouldn't have had much money on qualifying fifth. I think that's a testament to Kyle's ability and the collective effort of both teams to give him a race car and an environment to compete at the front.

Now couldn't be more excited for race day.

THE MODERATOR: To your point, I think Kyle's performance is living up to maybe even his own lofty expectations. Rick, Zak, what did qualifying weekend mean to you as you watched it play out Saturday and Sunday?

RICK HENDRICK: It's nerves. I mean, once we got into the final 12, then you've got a sigh of relief. But I'm not used to watching a car go in the corner at 241. I was concerned about -- I knew Kyle was going to push it. So I just wanted to get it over with.

But it was an amazing effort. He gets out of the car and I ask him a question, like you'd think he would be excited or -- and he's just kind of like, that's what I do.

But Gavin Ward and the whole McLaren crew, just amazing. I get to watch teams a lot. We went to -- I've been very fortunate to go to and watch Garage 56 run this year, last year, and watch organizations work. The whole group there with Gavin, our guys meshed, and we're proud to wear their colors, they're proud to wear ours. It's just been amazing.

The pressure running four laps is something I'm not used to. One lap maybe at Daytona or two. It's just biting your fingernails.

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Then I watched guys trying to make the field, and I remember what that feels like. A lot of nerves for a couple of days there.

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, the qualifying format, I wish it was just four laps once, but the more competitive you are, you've got to do it a couple more times. So it's a bit of a nail biter, not just the first time, and then you get in. I think what was awesome about Kyle, this wasn't for him just about, well, let's get in and be happy with that. It was let's go for it. He certainly did that.

His teammates are very much enjoying racing with him. The atmosphere, which is what I think is important in any racing team and environment for everyone to operate at the highest level, is just awesome. It feels like one big racing team.

Very excited for the fans. At the end of the day, we're all racers, and we want to go win, but I think the big winners out of this are the fans of motorsports. It's a great privilege to be able to put on this show for them.

THE MODERATOR: Rick, looks like Kyle's 5 crew is coming up for Carb Day. This is more than just about Kyle. The team as a whole has really embraced this very unique opportunity.

RICK HENDRICK: Our whole organization, not just the 5 team. This is a big day for everyone there. For the team to go up and watch that and be a part of just standing there, involved in that, they deserve that. They're all excited. They've worked hard. They want to see Kyle do well. They feel like we're representing NASCAR when we go to Indy, and they want us to do good.

They work so hard to get the car ready with Kevin Harvick and then switch it over for Kyle and then go run the All-Star Race. We saw the fans go nuts when the helicopter came in, and I was watching my watch. But no, I think it's going to be a great day for our organization to be able to be there and experience Indy. It's well-deserved.

Q. Kyle said before leaving for Wilkesboro Sunday that he was really surprised by how smoothly and efficiently everything had gone so far. Do you guys feel the same way aside from the hiccup Thursday with the engine change taking longer? And aside from the rain, has this gone a lot better than could have been expected through one week?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, just from my side, I was awful nervous Thursday when they had to do the engine change that morning and weren't able to get back out and get

enough laps. I wanted to see Kyle get more laps. He wanted more laps. Instead of getting a lot of running, we just had to get ready to start getting up to speed to qualify.

But he adapted so fast, and then the input from Tony and everybody there working with him to be able to make the adjustments in the car that he did and feel the car with no more experience than he had, I was amazed.

Tremendous pressure. I texted Gavin and I said, man, are we going to be okay? I wanted to make the race. That was the first thing I thought about. I've got to make the race first. And he said, not to worry, we're going to be good. And they were.

It was a little nerve-racking on Thursday.

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I think that's what great teams and great drivers are made of when the pressure is on. You can't let the pressure get to you. But make no mistake about it, you may not see us sweating, but you're sweating.

You've got to say Chevrolet has done a fantastic job the whole month of May. You look at the qualifying results, they've done an awesome job. They were right there in the trenches with us to make sure we could get Kyle out, and when it was time to go, everyone was ready and got the job done.

Q. Rick, Kyle has said he doesn't want to do this once; he said he would like to come back and do it again next year. From what I understand you guys have a multiyear deal with options. Are you waiting to determine if you'd want to do this again until after the race and see how it goes, or are you already starting to talk about 2025?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, haven't had enough time to talk about '25 yet, but I know Zak and I have talked about it before, so we'll see how this goes, and then I've got to see if Zak wants to do it again.

ZAK BROWN: I already know the answer to that. As I started at the top, the opportunity to work with Mr. H and this entire organization, I think we collectively have a big passion for racing and road cars. Certainly when we got started, the intent was let's see where this partnership can grow because I think we all like to be at the racetrack as many weekends as possible. I think it's super cool to have some papaya on the NASCAR, so certainly we've got to focus right now on Sunday and then turn our attention to the future.

But we've known each other a long time and would certainly love to continue working together.

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Q. Rick, your name is on both cars. Your name is on the team for the stock car team. Are you the one making the decision if there is rain or if he wins on whether he gets to the 600 on time?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, that's a tough question because we've talked about it many times, and we know we need to be at Charlotte for the points. We're just going to let it play out, and then Kyle and myself and Jeff Gordon, we have Andrews, we'll make that decision Sunday.

Q. How hard would it be, if there are some delays, to pull him out of the 500?

RICK HENDRICK: It would be very hard. It would be very tough. Would be very disappointing because of all the effort that everyone has put in, from Arrow McLaren to Zak and the crowd, our marketing people. We've got a tremendous amount of folks there at Indy, and he's in such a good position, it would be extremely hard.

Q. How are you feeling, and are you ready to get to the racetrack?

RICK HENDRICK: Yes, sir. This knee replacement has been a bigger problem than I thought, but I'll be there Sunday, and I'll be in Charlotte for the 600. Looking forward to getting back.

Q. 40 years you've had terminology like "splitters" and "roof flaps" and "air dams," but I bet Saturday was the first time you've ever experienced a plenum event.

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I've had things similar to that before, but that was a little nervous when all that was coming down. But knowing Chevrolet and their capability, their talent, I knew that was something that would get sorted out. Didn't have any real issues after that first problem.

But listening to the engineers and knowing what they were doing, felt 100 percent sure they'd figure it out.

Q. Kyle seems to be perhaps the least pretentious racing superstar you could ever imagine. He looks just like the kid you could be having a cheeseburger with at the counter next to you. What is it about his personality that makes him so perfect to be able to get through this sea of noise and not have it distract him?

RICK HENDRICK: You know, he's always felt like super confident. If he's nervous, he doesn't show it too much. He just believes in his ability.

Once he gets in the car and gets comfortable, he wants to race. When I was watching practice, and I don't remember who it was going -- he got a run going into 1, and it looked like he was going to the outside, and I thought, oh, man, don't try that. But that's the racer in him.

He's calm, cool, focused. He doesn't let the outside noise get to him. Even though he said he'd never signed as many autographs as he did up at Indy, you could see the crowd the way they reacted when he was on the track and out of the car.

But he doesn't get involved in that. He's just a die-hard racer. He races in this race just like he would when he goes -- flies somewhere and gets in a sprint car or a midget. He just wants to get in the car and race.

I think all the racing he's done has kind of built his confidence so much that he believes in himself and he believes in the team and what the team tells him the car will do, and then he figures it out on his own, and he's off to the races.

Q. You've walked on the starting grid of the Daytona 500 40 times. It's Hendrick Motorsports' 40th anniversary. You've been on the starting grid at Le Mans. Sunday you're going to be on the starting grid of the Indianapolis 500, and for you to be in racing as long as you have, just how excited are you going to be?

RICK HENDRICK: I'm going to be -- I think it's going to feel like the first time I went to Daytona, when I walked in and I looked at Junior Johnson and Petty and all those guys. Now I'm really telling my age. I thought, man, I shouldn't be here.

When I walk in Sunday morning and we look at all those cars and the crowd and the people and the legends of INDYCAR racing, Penske and Andretti and all the folks that are going to be lined up, I think I'll be a little bit intimidated. But knowing who's driving the car and Arrow McLaren behind it, I hope we can finish, and I hope the race finishes. I think we'll have a good day.

Super excited. The Le Mans experience was unreal. This is going to be unreal. I'm getting to do a few bucket list things here in my old age.

THE MODERATOR: We're kind of bullish on the start of the Indianapolis 500. It's going to be pretty cool, and to have a Rick a part of that is pretty nice.

ZAK BROWN: I'm very excited. I think it's a privilege to work for McLaren and to go racing with Mr. H, Kyle and the

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Indy 500. It's a dream come true, so it's definitely going to be a pinch-me moment. I'm looking forward to it.

Q. I just wanted to ask if you recall anyone in the Formula 1 paddock over the last few months asking you about Kyle. I know he's not as familiar to some people in the Formula 1 paddock or people in the Formula 1 paddock are familiar with how good Kyle is. Have you had any big names coming up to you and asking you how he's getting on?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, absolutely. I think the racing community is big and small, and they all pay attention to the various forms of racing and have a lot of respect for all the different disciplines.

In Monaco, once that race is over, the world of Formula 1 will turn their attention to the Indy 500, and they'll have one of their teams in the race partnering with one of the most if not the most legendary team in motorsports with a world champion driver if you like, and it's going to be exciting, and everyone is tuned in and everyone is curious to see how we're collectively going to get on. There will be a lot of eyes glued to the TV and certainly wouldn't be surprised if that included all 20 Formula 1 drivers.

Q. I know Gavin says Kyle is one of the best drivers he's ever worked with. What do you feed back to some of the people who ask you about Kyle and aren't as familiar with what he's doing and what he's achieved? I'm interested in your take on how he's done and how you portray that to people you're talking to because it's quite an interesting situation where you've got a driver this good who isn't as well-known in other parts of the motorsports world.

ZAK BROWN: I think drivers realize how difficult hopping into other disciplines are. We've seen Formula 1 drivers coming to NASCAR and win Formula 1 races and struggle in NASCAR. Juan Pablo Montoya, who's an awesome racing driver, and Dario Franchitti, et cetera, so I think everyone has a tremendous amount of respect for how difficult other championships are. Everyone understands how difficult Indianapolis is and how a small mistake can have big consequences at the speed you're traveling. You're not just locking a left front brake and going a little bit wide into Turn 1.

For Kyle to have not put a wheel wrong, yet explore the limits of the race car and the racetrack, as Mr. H said going into Turn 1 -- it's the same thing I saw when Fernando Alonso came over. What I've found about these great drivers is they can compartmentalize -- they know where they're trying to get to on race day, but they then know on day one they're trying to accomplish a certain thing, day

two, day three. They don't get ahead of themselves.

I think what you've seen out of Kyle, which is what makes him a championship-caliber driver, is his preparation going into the race. I think he now knows what the high line is like, the low line, traffic, dirty air, wind direction change, and he's been exploring that within his own comfort zone, even though from the outside sometimes people like myself and Mr. H were a little bit less comfortable watching. It's the same thing we saw with Fernando Alonso when we raced with Andretti. Mario was like, he's going to get himself in trouble, and Fernando came in and was like I'm just trying to kind of figure it out, and he was well within his comfort zone.

I think everyone recognizes the talent it takes to go out and qualify fifth in your first Indy 500 when you've never raced an INDYCAR, and so a huge admiration for him.

Q. Rick, it's one thing to take just in your Indy 500 for the first time and everything that comes with that experience with a race fan, but Bruce kind of talked about this earlier, just the surrealness of it all. Your name is on the car. You have a race team in Charlotte that's racing that night. Just how do you plan on taking this whole thing in with all these different things going on in your mind when it comes to not just the business side but trying to be a race fan and enjoy the moment with the fact that your driver, with your name on the car, is starting in the second row of the Indianapolis 500?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I want to get that car back in the museum, so I hope it comes to a finish.

But no, the pressure of being in the race and starting with a great starting spot and knowing we've got the World 600 to run, it's going to be pressure all day. How does the race go? Is it going to rain? What time do we have to leave to get back to Charlotte? This is going to be a tremendous amount of pressure, but we signed up for it.

We're in the race. We qualified race. Kyle is a heck of a talent. I just hope that the weather cooperates and we get to finish the race.

But I don't think -- well, the whole organization has been super nervous, and we know there's a huge -- there's a lot on the line, and the amount of fans from both sides that are now engaged in this and want to see it. Like Zak said, we've gotten to this step, now we've got to get through Sunday.

I'm telling you, from 11:00 on Sunday morning until 11:30 probably Sunday night, it's going to be tremendous stress,

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but once he buckled into that Cup car in Charlotte, I'll take a big sigh of relief.

Q. Back to just the Indy 500, what are you looking forward to the most about attending your first Indy 500? There's so many traditions that come with it, just the whole experience itself is super, duper cool. What are you looking forward to the most about attending your first Indy 500?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I think, number one, again, I can't enough about Arrow McLaren and Zak for what they've brought to the table. I've always dreamed of watching that race but never thought I'd have a car in the race, and our sponsor, our company is going to be there, a lot of people. We've got so many people I don't know how we're going to get everybody home. I think we have five airplanes up there.

But the pageantry, to see the legends of the sport, to see Zak's cars and our car sitting there and the effort that they've put in, I can't believe the speeds that they're going to be racing at. But the pageantry and the pressure, again, I can't say enough about Arrow McLaren and the effort they've put into this car and the relationship we've built.

Zak and I have been friends forever. We're not going to tell everybody how many years that's been. But I'm excited, I'm nervous, and can't wait to pull the trigger.

Q. Rick, obviously what Kyle has done so far is remarkable. Do you think you could take any one of the top four or five NASCAR drivers and plug them into this situation and get a similar result, or is Kyle sort of an outlier here?

RICK HENDRICK: Well, I heard Denny Hamlin say on TV the other day, he didn't want any part of that program. I think it takes a unique guy that's driven a lot of different cars, race cars.

I think Kyle is exceptional, and I think his confidence and ability -- you never know, do you put one of them in there. I know Kyle Busch has wanted to do it. I know none of my guys have mentioned it other than Kyle, but I think his experience in every kind of car he's been in gives him the confidence that he can do it, and he wants to do it, and it's something he's dreamed about.

I think when you put the talent and the desire and all that together, I think that's what's driving him, and I do think he's one of the greatest drivers that I've ever been with.

Q. How do you think Gordon would have done in this situation?

RICK HENDRICK: I think Jeff would have done well. I really do. I asked him the other day, do you want to do this? He said no.

THE MODERATOR: Zak, I know it's been fun to have a guy like Jeff Gordon hanging out with the team --

ZAK BROWN: Totally. Jeff is a legend, a great guy, a proper racer. I think he would have done a hell of a job in his day if he wanted to give it a go. Jeff has been very much a key ingredient in bringing this all together. Very appreciative. A long-term friend and awesome guy.

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