

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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George Levy

Ryan Marine

John Morton

Pete Lyons

Press Conference



the world. The Motorsports Hall of Fame of America is the hall of fame of all motorsports. We honor every kind of motorized competition: Cars, trucks, boats, planes and motorcycles. Because of that, that also makes us the most exclusive, the most difficult to get into because we honor just one person from each category each year, one person from sports cars, one person from media, one person from drag racing and so on.

THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. On behalf of the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America, we welcome you once again this year to another special announcement, this time involving the induction of the 2026 class. This is our third year of hosting this announcement here at the Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach, and certainly we appreciate the opportunity everyone here at INDYCAR to be a part of this announcement for another incredible Motorsports Hall of Fame class next year.

Before we get to that, we also want to welcome those of you joining us on Zoom.

Joining us today, on the far right side, your left, from nearby El Segundo, really an ageless sports car driver and winner, and a little INDYCAR racing in the mix, as well, he also was a driver in the inaugural Grand Prix of Long Beach in 1975 and may join, among others, Mario Andretti, who raced here back in '75 and once again joining us back here 50 years later this week, please welcome John Morton. John, thank you for being here.

Joining us also, right at home here in the Dan Gurney Media Center at the Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach, one of the top motorsports journalists of all time, Pete Lyons.

We'll start with George Levy, the president of the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America, here to announce the 2026 induction class. George, it's all yours.

GEORGE LEVY: Thank you, Dave, and thank you to our friends at Acura and everyone, the great team that puts on this fantastic Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach.

If you've never been to the Motorsports Hall of Fame, we are based at Daytona International Speedway. Our museum there greets about 150,000 visitors from all over

Induction is decided by a straight vote among 200 voters. Half of them are authors and journalists like yourselves, and if any of you here are not voters and would be interested in becoming one of our voters, please come up and see me after our remarks here.

The other half are inductees themselves. I don't vote. Our staff doesn't vote. When people like John and Peter and the rest of the people that we're going to announce in a minute are voted in, it's because people like our three honorees last night at the RRDC, Mario and Brian Redman and Al Unser, Jr., on and on, Richard Petty, Chip Ganassi, Don Garlits, Freddie Spencer, Hurley Haywood. These are all regular voters for this honor. Danny Sullivan, Helio Castroneves.

Once again, they have chosen an outstanding group of individuals, and we invite everyone to be part of their induction next March 9 and 10 in Daytona Beach. Without further ado, here is the class of 2026.

In the stock cars category, two-time Daytona 500 champion and winner of 15 straight NASCAR most popular driver awards, Dale Earnhardt Jr.

In the drag racing category, beloved NHRA competition director, foundational figure in NHRA for many, many years, Steve Gibbs.

In the motorcycles category, 2000 MotoGP world champion and son of another world champion, Kenny Roberts, Jr.

In open wheel category, one of the big three of modern winged sprint car racing, Slammin' Sammy Swindell.

And in the power boats category, simply the winningest driver in unlimited hydroplane history, Dave Villwock.



And of course, the two members of the class with us here this morning, Pete Lyons, and John, one of the most accomplished sports car racers in history, from the Trans Am champion, IMSA GTP winner, SCCA national champion and on and on. That's our class.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations. That's awesome. Very nice.

Obviously we're going to hear from John and Pete shortly. I'm going to turn things over for the Q&A to someone I know is a friend of motorsports in general, certainly INDYCAR racing and certainly the Hall of Fame of America, as well. Please welcome Ryan Marine. Ryan, it's all yours, buddy.

RYAN MARINE: Great to be here and honor some of the legends of the sport, that's for sure. We'll start with you, John, if you don't mind. We heard earlier that you were here for the inaugural running of this Grand Prix here at Long Beach. If you could reflect a little bit on that first race at Long Beach and could you have imagined at the time what this event would have grown into 50 years later?

JOHN MORTON: No, back then we had a rough weekend because we had just prepared a car converted from basically an unsuccessful car to a 332 Lola, and I managed to have the throttle stick and stuffed it into the tire bank leaving the pits. This is when the track was substantially different and bumpier and the whole town was different.

But we worked all night, and we got it going, and we competed in the race. Somewhat unsuccessfully because we had to make a pit stop for losing oil.

But it's a wonderful venue, and it's now -- I think it's considered, outside of the Indy 500, the race that the drivers want to win the most, absolutely the star of the INDYCAR Series.

RYAN MARINE: You mentioned the troubles that you had throughout the course of that weekend. I think you started 28th, pretty much at the back of the field that day but did manage to get inside the top 10 at the end of it. What reflections do you have on either the race itself or the atmosphere surrounding that event? I'm sure there was quite a bit of curiosity about having these Formula 5000 cars going around the port city here in Long Beach.

JOHN MORTON: It was. The track was, as I say, substantially different, substantially bumpier, and considerably more dangerous. But it was kind of the awakening of street racing in America. This was 1975, and I think the -- one of the outstanding features of that

particular weekend is they couldn't stay on schedule because the track wasn't finished yet. We didn't even run on the first day of official practice. But as it turned out, it's turned out to be what it is today, and the town looks a lot different. We don't have any bars, girlie bars on the main street.

As we went down Ocean Boulevard and passed all the bums we didn't think much of it, but you don't have to do that anymore.

RYAN MARINE: Well, you're well known, as well, for the time you spent racing in IMSA and in the GTP class, the original version of the GTP class. Now we have GTP back, of course, with his second GTP age at IMSA. But in your career you got to drive some of the top cars of that era, the Jag, the Porsche, and of course the Nissan, as well. What are your reflections of taking part in that golden era of the first GTP era in IMSA?

JOHN MORTON: Well, you know, I just wanted to not be known as just a Datsun driver. So being in the GTP category and some of the other categories, the GT cars, meant a lot to me, and IMSA was a big part of my life. I drove with some great co-drivers like Jeff Brabham and Steve Millen, and I look back on it thinking how lucky I was because racing was different back then, and I maybe shouldn't say this, but I think it was better, more exciting. It was for me anyway because I was doing it.

I'm overwhelmed that I'm being inducted into Hall of Fame. I never felt I was Hall-of-Fame material.

RYAN MARINE: Over 200 of your peers would disagree with that. Congratulations on your induction.

JOHN MORTON: Thank you.

RYAN MARINE: Pete, we'll transition to you. We've had Robin Miller, we've had Denise McCluggage, all nominated and inducted into Hall of Fame from the ranks of the media. You become the third to join that illustrious company as well as many of the peers that you covered over the course of your career. How special is this achievement?

PETE LYONS: When I started out at the age of 18, quite a while ago, there's no way to foresee anything like this happening, so it's all a surprise. Anything that has happened to me, I wanted to do it, but every time I got to a new step, I thought, good Lord, how did this happen. Okay, let's go.

RYAN MARINE: It's appropriate that we're here in the Dan Gurney Media Center because he was one of the many



luminaries that you had the privilege of covering in your career. What are some of the names that stand out, though, people who told the best stories or were the most enjoyable to spend time with maybe outside of a professional capacity as well as in your career as a journalist?

PETE LYONS: Could we book the room for the rest of the day?

RYAN MARINE: Yeah, we could.

PETE LYONS: Mario for sure, Jackie Stewart, Denny Holm, Bruce McLaren. I never met Jimmy Clark but he was incredible. I only once in my life saw Fangio, but he was incredible. I grew up revering Fangio but then it went on to other people, as well. I've left out 895 other people that I should name, but it's just phenomenal.

RYAN MARINE: The career that you put together in journalism covering this sport, is there a moment or two that stands out as achievements or moments that you're most proud of?

PETE LYONS: Aside from this you mean?

RYAN MARINE: Yeah.

PETE LYONS: I think the very first time I had a photograph printed, it was 1958, and I was in Lime Rock, Connecticut, and there was a 10-hour Le Mans race for small sedans, and there was a particular incident that happened, and I happened to be in the right place, and I remember this is a photo opportunity, and I prepared and adjusted and framed just -- and I snapped at the exact same instant to see a Volvo on the track passing another one, a teammate that was at the side of the road with the driver underneath it, and he was draining the water out of his gas tank because somebody put water in the gas tank at the last refueling stop.

So I snapped that picture, and in my dad's darkroom I made a print and mailed it to Autosport that my dad was associated with, and they published it. I'm 18 years old and I had a published picture in Autosport. I read Autosport all the time, so that was a highlight.

RYAN MARINE: Congratulations, as well, on your induction. Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to go ahead and open it up to questions in the room.

Q. Pete, when you covered Formula 1, I seem to recall you imported a Corvette to drive around in Europe. I wonder if you can share some memories of driving a rare large American car around Europe and maybe

how the Corvette has evolved into a real sports car now.

PETE LYONS: Well, it didn't make any sense, but I did it anyway. When I got the assignment to cover Formula 1 in 1973 for both Autosport and Auto Week, it gave me enough income to live decently. I didn't have to sleep in the back of a van or a station wagon like I had been.

So I thought, what's the most outrageous car I could take to Europe, and I thought how about a new Corvette. The plan was to simply use it for a while, show it off to all the rich playboys in Europe and then sell it to them for a handsome profit.

The thing I didn't look forward -- the thing I didn't anticipate was falling in love with the damn thing. I just could not part with that car. I started calling it "Mademoiselle Vette" because it was such a gas to drive in Europe. It was the torque partly, that you could just come out of a roundabout or out of a 90-degree corner and just ease on the gas and just -- that was great. I loved that.

It attracted attention in Europe. However, there were other Corvettes in Europe. Simon Taylor, who was editor/publisher at Auto Sport, he had a '72 Corvette. Mine was a '73, bright red, Targa Red they called it, and it had Targa roof panels on it, so I thought it was appropriate to take it to the Targa Florio, which I did.

And that means leaving Rotterdam and Holland, going to Belgium for the Spa 1000 Kilometer Race, then all the way down across the Alps and down the entire boot of Italy and across Sicily to get to the Targa Florio. And then right away turning around and going back up the same place to another race in Belgium.

So I put, I don't know, 3,000, 4,000 miles on it in the first two weeks, and I thought, I can't give this up. I love this car so much.

When I left Sicily I kept driving and driving and driving, and in one day, 18 hours, I went from Sicily all the way up into the foothills the Alps. I didn't want to stop. I think the car must have been comfortable and it sure was a joy to drive.

Q. Pete, as a young journalist myself, third year working in the industry, what's something that worked for you when you were younger that you've carried throughout your career that's made you successful to the point where you're at right now?

PETE LYONS: Well, as much as none of this was ever planned out or there was no roadmap I followed, it's hard to say. I think that the key thing is the enthusiasm. You don't

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

do this as a job. There are jobs that pay far better and are more stable and let you have a home life.

Being an itinerant journalist, you don't have some of those things.

I used to basically live -- I guess I estimated 200 nights a year on the road and probably 40,000 miles of driving across the United States doing Can-Am and other races and then in the four races in Europe, I don't remember the mileage, and we traveled by different means, as well.

But you're basically rootless. You have no home. A lot of people get fed up with that a lot sooner than I did.

But just because I didn't want to do anything else, I think that's the key to it. That and keeping a diary. Just write and write and write. If you see something that interests you, write about it. That kind of trains you to -- then it becomes easier on those long, endless Sunday nights when you just have to keep your eyes open and typing. It becomes easier, I think. My theory.

Q. What memories do you have of Long Beach, and from your experience, how have you seen the evolution of the category?

JOHN MORTON: Well, I think I kind of went into it earlier. You've got these fabulous hotels that we had a wonderful party at last night, and we had -- subsequently when it started for many years, and the first race when I ran, the first race like 50 years ago, if you didn't want to sit in a bar and hustle -- we didn't do this, but that's what that front straightaway was. It was -- I don't want to say important. I don't think it was exactly that, but bums and titty bars and stuff.

But now it's what it is. It's what it is today. It's 180 degrees different, and it has an aura about it now. And it had an aura about it then, but it was different.

It started out as a 5000 race because we had to have a race prior to a Formula 1 race, and then it was Formula 1 for a number of years until '84, and then it became Indy, which it is today, and I was fortunate enough to run in the first INDYCAR race in '84, and I did just about as well as I did in the first 5000 race.

GEORGE LEVY: In the '84 race, Leigh Buttera is in the room. I think you were driving a car her dad worked on.

JOHN MORTON: Her dad took care of it, yeah. He was a wonderful man. I didn't know him before I was to drive that car, and I really enjoyed that short period of my life, even though it was not 100 percent successful. It was my first

shot in an INDYCAR.

Leigh got me -- she was just a little kid back then, but she had an arrangement with Simpson helmets and got me a free helmet.

Q. Pete, real quick, your reflections on the evolution of this event?

PETE LYONS: When you ask me that, I'm thinking about 1980-81 when I was the editor of a magazine up in west LA, I guess, called Race Car, and I had a 10-year-old nephew and he was living in Arizona then so I asked him to come with me to the Long Beach Grand Prix. So I picked him up at the airport and we got up at 0-dark-30 that morning, Saturday morning to take him to the track, and all the way down the freeway to Long Beach he's kind of glum. He's thinking, I bet I'm the only kid not home watching cartoons on television.

We got to the track and I could see him sort of blossom. It was something that living in Tucson, Arizona, you don't often see, I guess. He ended up really being enthusiastic. We crossed the track at one point and people were yelling at me from the crowd because my face was known to them, so I guess that impressed him.

But I wanted to show him how when we walked across the black rubber marks coming out of a hairpin or something, I said, Tommy, move your shoes, see how sticky it is, that's why these cars go so fast, the rubber is sticking. Yeah, Uncle Pete. Then another time one of the corners, cars came through, and to me -- not jaded but very, very used to cars going like this, Tommy hadn't seen that before because you don't watch street traffic all the time. A car did that, and I wouldn't have thought anything of it except Tommy said, Uncle Pete, he almost wiped out. But he was so enthusiastic, and taking a 10-year-old to protectively an important race where there's some atmosphere and sparkle and tension and huge crowds and enthusiasm, and Long Beach has always had fantastic weather. Has there ever been a year when it was bad weather? I don't remember.

I mean, it was because of Tommy's enthusiasm, it made me appreciate what I was doing. That's basically my answer to that.

Q. Mr. Lyons, obviously now it's more easy with the internet and the social networks. Talk a little bit about it, please.

PETE LYONS: Are you asking me the difference between writing for print and being an internet reporter? Is that your question?

Q. Yes, of course.

PETE LYONS: Well, I'm not an internet reporter, so I can't say. But it is very, very different. I used to revel in having not unlimited but lots of room to tell stories, and typically a Grand Prix report for me was like 6,000, 7,000, 8,000 words for Autosport, less for Auto Week, but when you read an online race report now, it's that long because honestly, that's my attention span.

When I'm reading online, I think, okay, okay, then I go on to the next thing. But when you sit down with a printed document in your hand, you're sort of thinking, I have got some free time here, I'm going to enjoy this, and you read all of it, and that's the difference. That's why people still buy print magazines and print books rather than going online.

Mind you, I go online all the time. I live online. But that's the big difference today. Writing today, I don't know any people who are doing -- I've done almost anybody in the room, but I would imagine you're under tight deadline pressure, and you have very little space relatively to tell your story and you must leave out 99 percent of what you wish you had written. Is that accurate?

Q. Mr. Morton, apparently today now it's more important to have the latest electronic update, for example, a vaccine with the tetanus because a long time ago was -- the majority of the car was steel.

JOHN MORTON: Well, I think the difference is massive or extreme between, let's say, a modern Formula 1 car and the stuff we drove back in the '70s and '80s, and I don't think the high level of technology has made the racing any better. I think it's maybe made it a little closer.

But when I was racing in the beginning of my racing, there wasn't any technology. You bought a car or had a car and you just drove it. One of the most famous teams in American history is the Shelby team, and it was play it by ear. They didn't have -- I remember the first time when I was driving for Nissan and one of the crew guys hooked a computer up to the car, and I thought, what the hell is that for. He was tuning the engine with a computer.

That just wasn't the world I'd been living in. I don't think it made it better. I think it made it easier for the mechanics to pinpoint problems and that sort of thing. But ultimately, maybe because I'm so old myself, I like the earlier -- some of the earlier stuff.

If you watched the Formula 1 race last week, you saw a race that when the green flag -- or the light went out, the

positions virtually didn't change for the win, and it wasn't very exciting. I think high technology is the reason for that.

It didn't used to be like that, and you didn't used to have half a second between the -- maybe a second between the pole and the last guy. It just changed the whole nature of racing.

If you're a young guy like people ask me -- I ask if they knew Paul Newman. They said, you mean the salad dressing guy? They haven't made the -- there was no transition. They don't know what happened back then. It's kind of sad, and I'm glad that there's a Hall of Fame because I get to be in it.

But people that go back to the beginning know what the beginning was like, but people now don't know what the beginning was like.

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