

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

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An Interview with:

Ben Kennedy

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us today to discuss the 2026 NASCAR Championship Weekend. We're first joined by Ben Kennedy, Executive Vice President and Chief Venue and Racing Innovation Officer.

Ben, as we get started, can you walk through today's 2026 NASCAR Championship Weekend announcement.

BEN KENNEDY: Good morning, afternoon, depending on where everyone is at today. Appreciate it, Brent. Appreciate all of you taking the time to cover this story and be with us today.

This has been a long time coming that we are proud to announce that the 2026 Championship is going to go to Homestead-Miami Speedway. It's been since 2019 that we've had the championship there.

We've moved it over to Phoenix for the past several years, which has been great on so many levels for us, and we're excited to be able to say that that is going to continue to stay in a prominent position in the playoffs in the Round of 8, but also a huge opportunity for us to move the championship to Homestead-Miami Speedway and also kick off a rotation as well.

Looking forward to having the news out to the world and talking with you guys about it today.

Q. Ben, obviously NASCAR has gone through a lot of changes throughout the year. It's always been evolving, but certainly I'd say in the last decade or so we've seen a lot more changes. I'm just curious from your perspective, as somebody who's making the decisions on the changes that have taken place in the past and even today's announcement and will make the decisions, be involved in the decision-making in the future, what's kind of the guiding principle to making some of these decisions and moving forward other than it's better for the sport? I'm sure there's more that goes into it than something as simple as that.

BEN KENNEDY: It's a handful of considerations that we



take a look at, especially as we think about moving a championship. I would say, first and foremost, it's fan feedback, and fans ranked Homestead-Miami Speedway as number one on the list of where they'd like to see a championship in the future. From what you guys may have seen and some of the fan sentiment so far, it leans very positive, which is great to see.

So we listen to our fans. All of our partners who are broadcast partners, our teams, our drivers have input to where they'd like to see the championship in the future, a lot of industry stakeholders we'll collaborate with.

I would say, on top of that, as you think about a championship race, ideally a warm weather kind of climate location. You can't race everywhere in the world, especially in early November, so there's a handful of venues and properties that we tend to gravitate towards.

Thirdly, we want to make sure it's marketed and promoted the right way.

Fourthly, Phoenix is a great example of this. You saw the kind of \$100 million project we put into the reimagine of Phoenix Raceway. Homestead isn't a Phoenix Raceway, and it probably won't be to that level when we come for the championship next year, but we are going to be putting some capital in that facility to make sure it is a championship caliber property when we show up to it next year.

Then overall, racing product. I think this is another part of the discussion that we've had. We've been at Phoenix for a number of years. You guys have seen we've made some changes in the playoffs. We haven't made wholesale changes, but a few kind of minor changes to the playoffs to keep that level of unpredictability and parity through it.

Things like moving Talladega, as an example, to the Round of 8 this year was kind of a story line and is going to challenge the teams and drivers in a new and unexpected way.

We have a lot of confidence, when we go to Homestead-Miami Speedway, it's going to deliver from a racing product perspective. It's also going to create a good amount of unpredictability for many of our fans that come to that race or tune in on TV just going to a different



championship venue and having it on the line. We're excited to see all that.

A lot of collaboration internally, a lot of collaboration with all of our partners. We've been sitting on this one for a while. I'm glad we're able to finally press the button on it and send it out to the rest of the world.

Q. Quick question. What are the products you're looking at or the improvement you're looking at making for Homestead, maybe if not ready for next year, but certainly in the next few years to make it a championship quality venue as part of this rotation?

BEN KENNEDY: I'd say the biggest thing really to focus on is a lot of the surveys that we have post race from our fans of, hey, what's working and where are some of our challenges?

We have a long menu list. It's several pages long of things that we'd like to do at Homestead. To your point, I don't think we're going to be able to check everything off of the list prior to November of '26, but there are a number of things that we could do. Talk about ingress, egress, paint on the walls is a huge part of it. A lot of our hospitality offerings, audio, the infield experience for our fans.

A lot of things we have on the list right now, we're working through what that's going to look like. As we get into the fall of this year and spring of next year, we'll start to see a lot of these things in motion.

Q. Way back in February, Steve O'Donnell said part of this rotation process would involve finding places that can have that championship atmosphere. I was curious how much of a role did that play in keeping Phoenix on the schedule? Obviously that city goes all out every time that NASCAR heads there.

BEN KENNEDY: It's a good question. Phoenix is a great case study of it. It's a beautiful track, it's a beautiful facility, and it's a great market that really embraces us. I think we do a good job of doing a number of activations in events in and around the market in the Phoenix area. It is a championship caliber market. It's a championship caliber city. And we'll be bringing the championship back to Phoenix sometime in the future.

Miami and Homestead is the same way. We want to find ways to partner up with the city, to partner up with the county, and not just have this be two or three days at the racetrack, but really turn this into more of a longer weekend long event where we have a number of activations in and around the city and really paint the town, so to speak, to make sure that anyone that is in Miami that

weekend knows that NASCAR is in town with their championship.

Q. This is huge. It's a big deal. We know obviously that Phoenix is going to get in the rotation. You've got Homestead. You touched on the requirements that you want for other tracks in the rotation. Do we expect a list, sort of, where we say, okay, we're going to choose the championship between these certain amount of tracks, and giving those cities an opportunity to vie for it? Kind of like they do the Super Bowl now, where you can talk them into coming, because that's a huge impact on whatever city you go to. Will we see a list like that, or is it going to kind of remain, quote, unquote, secret until the schedule is announced?

BEN KENNEDY: It's a fair question. It remains to be seen. We have a group that's been working on our longer term strategy of the championship locations for quite a while now, and we have discussed all sorts of variations of options. To your point, the economic impact and I think the story we're able to tell, not only at the track, but a lot of community involvement that we're able to create at Phoenix and that we're going to see at Homestead-Miami Speedway is a big part of this as well.

We want to make sure -- and we say this all the time as it related to the schedule. We want to make sure we're in the right markets at the right time and we're doing it with the right partners and right stakeholders.

We're going to be very strategic and thoughtful about this process, about the markets and tracks that we either have conversations with or potentially ask to see proposals from. We'll have more to share on that, I would say, in the coming months and later this summer.

Q. You mentioned all the factors that go into hosting a Championship Weekend, including but not limited to, the climate, the market, the product on track, the infrastructure at that racetrack. Might be addressing an elephant in the room, but Vegas has all that. It's obviously not a NASCAR owned track. What's the thought process from NASCAR's perspective in including that racetrack in the future conversations to host this Championship Weekend being that it's not a NASCAR facility.

BEN KENNEDY: I think anything is on the table at this point, to be honest, whether it's NASCAR property or elsewhere. The great part about it is we have a good relationship with Speedway Motorsports, and they have many prominent events in the playoffs, cutoff races at the Charlotte oval and Bristol and a handful of others.



Nothing to report today on exactly where we would be considering or where those properties might be, but I think all cards are on the table at this point.

Q. You talk about the championship race or the championship race rotation, but the form that that's going to take is still to be decided. You guys have that Championship Playoff Committee that's meeting periodically. Have you guys internally at NASCAR set a deadline for when you want that group to be done with its work and when the championship format could be announced alongside the race next year?

BEN KENNEDY: We don't have a firm deadline per se, but I'd say at some point in the next few months, I think we'll have more to be able to share on what that looks like.

I would say it's been a very collaborative process. Tim Clark and the team have led it, and we had a great meeting in Daytona with many stakeholders across the entire industry, whether it was teams, drivers, broadcast partners, people that are looking at data from what our fans are saying. So it was a really collaborative process.

We've taken a few steps since then, and I know there's going to be many more meetings on it. Again, nothing to report today, but I would assume sometime this year, we'll have more to share.

Q. In the years that Homestead or any other track that has one Cup Day that is part of the rotation, would you expect the race to still be part of the playoffs, or could Homestead be November next year and then regular season in 2027?

BEN KENNEDY: That's a good question. What we've talked about is trying -- and I think this kind of leads to the date move in Phoenix a little bit of trying to keep it in a strong position in the playoffs but also have a good amount of date equity tied to that weekend as well. A lot of our fans in the Phoenix area, they're accustomed to the second Phoenix date falling somewhere in the October to November time frame.

I think it's going to be important for us, if it's a non-championship venue but it is in the rotation for that season, that we try to have as much date equity as we can.

We're really going to be focused on that. We're not going to be able to deliver it every year, but ideally, if it is a championship venue but not the championship that year, we'll have it somewhere in the playoffs.

Q. When you're talking about the venues what fits,

obviously the Daytona International Speedway kind of fits those things too. Does Daytona qualify with the style of racing and all that, or is that a no-no? Assuming that is a championship spot, how untouchable is the Daytona 500 in its current spot, Super Bowl opening race?

BEN KENNEDY: I did forget to mention that, and it's a good call out. That was another variable that we discussed is what's on the table and what's off the table for a championship location.

Never say never, but I think we've unanimously agreed that it needs to look and feel like what we would expect traditional NASCAR racing to look and feel like. Short tracks, intermediate tracks, mile tracks are all on the board. Superspeedways, I think we all feel like right now we wouldn't consider that as a championship venue, not that Daytona isn't a championship caliber venue.

There are a lot of story lines that come out of those events, and we want to make sure that, when we go to Homestead, Miami, or Phoenix or wherever it might be in the future, that there is a lot of strategy and that a lot of our championship drivers are also contending for the victory at the end of that race.

We talked about that. We've talked about road courses as well. Again, never say never, but road courses are probably lower on the list as we think about championship venues. So we're really going to hone in on short tracks and I would say mile-and-a-halves for now.

Q. Awesome. Just following up with all the changes that have come in the schedule, how untouchable do you think the 500 in its current spot is to the opener of the season?

BEN KENNEDY: We would like to continue to see it as our opener. I think we'll continue to have the Clash prior to the 500. It's a great opportunity for us to build up some momentum in anticipation for our biggest event of the year, the Daytona 500, and the new season ahead. We'll continue to keep it in that spot.

We ran a survey a couple years ago, and it was over 95 percent of our fan base wants to see their first points race be the Daytona 500. That was a statistic that was strong enough for us to say we're not even going to explore that for now. We'll continue to have that exhibition race prior to it and plan to have Daytona 500 as a first points race.

Q. Appreciate your time today. You mentioned getting feedback from drivers and teams on where they'd like the championship to be. In regard to having it at

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Homestead, what was some of that feedback into why for those that you did speak to?

BEN KENNEDY: I would say from the conversations that we had, a lot of it had to do with the racing product. Homestead has put on some of the most phenomenal finishes, especially when we had the championship there, but even since then, and we've crowned so many legends and Hall of Famers over the past 15 years when we did have the championship at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

So competition is a part of it, variability, and I think diversity in where you're crowning the champion was another consideration.

Then the third part is being in a big market where they feel like either the teams or partners or drivers can activate as well. Phoenix is great at that, and they're great at hosting and hospitality and being able to have events in Avondale or Scottsdale or Phoenix area.

The great part about Miami is whether it's Homestead, Miami, north of that, or anywhere in between, there are so many areas that we can have a lot of activations and really bring a lot of our partners to a city that they would be proud to call a championship location.

I'd say those are probably the three biggest considerations that they had.

Q. You were talking about the importance that the climate of the area has for whether a venue would be the championship race, and I'm curious, does that mean that certain tracks that fit the criteria of being the type of track that you were talking about, the mile-and-a-half and the short track, but maybe are a little farther north like a Michigan or a Loudon, are those nonstarters for hosting a Championship Weekend, or is that something that could be on the table if there were a way to make that work?

BEN KENNEDY: I don't think anything is a nonstarter per se at this point. We do want to make sure we're trying to avoid severe wet weather disruptions on the event weekend. If it is as far north as a New Hampshire or a Michigan, as an example, we're going to look at over 30 years of past weather history on that date and that weekend to make sure that we're limiting our risks because a lot of fans will come and camp out for that entire weekend, a lot of fans that will drive to see the race, and then many fans that will tune in on TV as well.

If we have snow on the ground or it's below freezing temperature, fans don't want to come out for a weekend to a championship venue, and it's a bit of an issue. We're

going to be thoughtful about that. I don't think it rules out any venues or tracks per se, but it is part of our consideration set.

Q. In terms of the rotation, how far advanced do you want to get? Is it the hope that at some point you're announcing 27, 28, and 29 at the same time, or is it one year at a time and do it ahead of the schedule and make it its own thing, kind of like what the NFL does with all its little special, different games and stuff like that?

BEN KENNEDY: We would prefer to -- I would say two parts to this. We'd prefer to announce it sooner and then also have it be annual and as a separate kind of standalone announcement as well.

Our goal is to move up the announcement of the 2026 schedule for this year. I think our goal is also to move up the announcement of where the championship location is going to be for 2027 and have its own moment in the spotlight and in the sun as Homestead-Miami does today.

I think that gives us the ability -- there's a lot of content, a lot of story lines that are coming out today about the championship race moving down to Homestead-Miami Speedway. There are going to be a lot of other moments that we're going to have from now until November of '26 of the logo unveil, the entertainment, everything else that's going to happen and transpire around that weekend, and really reimagining what the Championship Event looks like at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

I want to move up the announcement of the championship location, still have it as a standalone announcement, and then I think also, to answer your question, is have this be annually instead of announcing two or three or four at once.

Q. Also, just since we have a chance to talk to you, the status of the Clash. Last time you left obviously very happy with Bowman Gray. A lot of talk about international. Now that we're a few months past, I know things will happen quickly. Is international something that could still be on table for the Clash, or have you narrowed it down and it's going to have to remain in the United States for next year?

BEN KENNEDY: I think as far as next year goes, more than likely it will stay domestic here in the United States. I wouldn't ever rule out international in the future, though. We have thoughts about a lot of it being prior to the season, in the off-season, an exhibition race. It's a great opportunity for us to bring NASCAR racing to other parts of the world.



I think it's going to be something that we'll continue to consider, but at least for now we'll more than likely keep it domestic.

Q. Quick question. How much weight do you put on the teams -- and I include the drivers in the teams -- we've heard a lot from drivers what they prefer competition-wise. How much weight, since you started out with the fans, do you put on the teams part of it and what they would like? Thanks a lot for today.

BEN KENNEDY: Absolutely. We do put a good amount of weight on it, and we have a small committee of folks from the team side that we've had a couple of conversations with about the championship location. Not only venues that they would consider, but what are you looking for as you think about a championship market and a championship caliber facility?

They all have different parameters that they're looking for. Whether you're a big team, a middle team, a small team, a championship contender, a non-championship contender, everyone has their own wants and wishes, which is great. We're not going to be able to appease to everyone, but Homestead does check a lot of those boxes.

Teams and drivers certainly have a large voice, and I think for us it's a matter of sitting down and disseminating all those voices, what does it look like strategically, what's it look like financially, what are we hearing from our industry stakeholders, and then making the best decision that we believe that will set up the sport for the future.

Q. Then real quick, like the fans, are they weighted on whether they think their driver is good at Homestead and could win a championship there? I know the teams and drivers might be weighted a little, and you've got to take that into consideration.

BEN KENNEDY: It's a good question. We don't ask the fans who their favorite drivers are. It's a very generic where would you like to see the championship race in the future, and Homestead-Miami is No. 1.

We don't double click into any other data sets of their favorite team or favorite driver after that.

Q. Two quick questions. One, to what extent did you talk to the broadcast partners about this? Do they have favorites or really much input in this decision?

BEN KENNEDY: They do. They have another very strong voice as well. We had quite a few conversations with NBC about where they would like to see the championship

venue in the future. They are supportive of this move. They've seen the championship there in the past. They certainly have a good, strong voice. It was great to have them on board for this process.

Q. A lot of us down here have followed your driving career from Orlando Speed World up to the big tracks. I was just curious if you ever feel like getting back behind the wheel, and if so, what are you going to do about it?

BEN KENNEDY: That's my favorite question of the day. No, I love talking about the championship.

I had the opportunity to jump in a Super Late Model a year and a half ago for a test session at New Smyrna Speedway. That was the first time since Homestead, Homestead-Miami of 2017, that I have been in a car. I haven't raced since, but I did one test session, and I told them that I'm just going to step away from it for now because I could easily see myself getting back into it.

THE MODERATOR: Ben, thanks for the time today, and thanks for all the media for their many questions on the 2026 NASCAR Championship Weekend.

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