

NASCAR Media Conference

Press Conference

Saturday, April 25, 2026

An Interview with:

Jim France

Steve O'Donnell

Ben Kennedy



THE MODERATOR: I'd like to bring up NASCAR chairman Jim France and executive vice president Lesa Kennedy for some opening remarks.

JIM FRANCE: I'm a little embarrassed by the video because it's difficult to take credit for other people's hard work. I happened to be lucky to be part of a great team called NASCAR. We got over 1,400 employees. I go back to the day when we probably had 14 employees. I was real young then.

I've been fortunate enough to see the growth of our sport and the caliber of folks that we've had involved in developing the sport, starting with my father and mother and brother.

I think I can speak with some real experience here that I believe we have the finest team of people working and running NASCAR that we've ever had in our entire history.

It's going to be my honor here in just a few moments to turn this over to NASCAR's CEO Steve O'Donnell.

I want to make a comment about what Steve and Ben did starting in March of 2020 when we were all sent home and told that we were unessential. We had a lot of people figuring out how they were going to put beans on their table.

Steve and Ben went to work putting together the plan and getting our industry together that got us back to the racetrack, led the way for a lot of major sports getting back in business, and the first to bring their fans back.

We got a great team and they're going to take this thing even farther.

So Steve, you got the wheel, partner.

THE MODERATOR: I think we'll start with some opening remarks from NASCAR's new CEO, Steve O'Donnell.

STEVE O'DONNELL: Thank you. First I want to start and say that Jim's been an incredible friend and mentor to me, along with a number of other folks in the France family. I am incredibly honored to be in this position and continue working with the France family.

When we're at our best as a sport, the teams, the tracks, manufacturers, television partners, OEMs, drivers, we're all working together and we're aligned to make each other better.

The first goal that we've got is to really unite our industry. I want to create a culture where there's collaboration, a genuine collaboration, where everybody wins.

The great news I think for us is we're not starting from scratch. We're close to 80 years of building a foundation. We've got racing series, not just Cup, but a portfolio of racing series that's unrivaled in all of motorsports.

We have a solid charter foundation, a great broadcast agreement. We have tracks who are putting on the best fan experiences in the world. A schedule led by Ben that continues to evolve. An incredible amount of talented people within NASCAR.

Then when you look at our team ownership group, you have racers, you have titans of business, and you --

(Temporary loss of PressPass)

STEVE O'DONNELL: --drivers, tracks, manufacturers, OEMs, and probably most importantly for us, too, all of the talented employees we have at NASCAR. Not just the leadership team, but those who are out selling the tickets, interacting with the fans and can tell you what's really happening, where we need the sport to go.

I know there's a number of areas that we need to address and we're going to move with urgency. What we're going to need from this industry, and I'm talking to everyone in this industry now, is their collective intelligence. We have some of the brightest minds in all of motorsports each and every weekend in the garage. We have to tap into that, be united and work together.

Last couple things I'll say is NASCAR has always been an



American original. My job, our job, I think all of our jobs, is to make sure that the next generation of fans, wherever they grow up, whatever they do, wherever they come from, whatever makes them unique, knows that this sport belongs to them, not because we changed who we are but because new fans recognize what our core fans have known all along: that we're a bad-ass American sport.

Jim, Mike, Lesa, many others at NASCAR who have mentored me, I want to continue to do the same. My teammate Ben, in his new role as COO, I think all of you that know Ben know he's demonstrated an incredible ability. He's a humble guy who works hard, has great new ideas. I couldn't be more excited to work with Ben and elevate the sport and continue to work with a community that I love.

Ben, congrats. I'll throw it over to you.

BEN KENNEDY: Thank you. I'd say firstly thank you to Jim. He's been a great leader, mentor to me. To my mom Lesa, to Steve obviously, to Mike Helton, the entire board for believing in us, believing in the vision that we have, and doubling down on the sport.

Jim mentioned a story that we had during COVID. I think we both remember it vividly, of us going into the office every single day unsure of what was going to happen. It was a leadership team. A lot of the folks that are in the room today, a lot of new folks that we've brought in since then, have helped take this sport to the next level.

You think about everything this sport has accomplished over the last several years, going to new locations from a schedule perspective, all the work that John Probst and the team have done on the competition side, bringing new cars, thinking about our race portfolio, what the future that is going to bring to the table.

I've really enjoyed working with the events and venues team. I think it's neat to be able to somewhat follow in my mom's footsteps. She was always on the track side of the business, working with International Speedway Corporation.

Our events are critical to us. For me this comes a bit full circle. I've always been a competitor at heart. Had a chance to drive for 11 years. I raced out here at Talladega a couple times. Had a couple good and bad finishes along the way (smiling).

I love the racing aspect of the business. My first job coming at NASCAR was working with John Probst and the competition team. Looking forward to working with them and the rest of the leadership team.

Steve said it before that we have an incredible leadership team, not only at NASCAR, but our industry partners, broadcast partners, teams, tracks, drivers, OEMs. You can go down to the list.

We have a great group of people that are second to none in this industry. I think it's rare that you find people that are truly passionate and care about this sport. We have a lot of that.

Look forward to the new challenge, rolling up our sleeves and getting back to work.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take some questions.

Q. The first thing you said in your opening was uniting the industry, everybody. You made similar comments back when the Chase was reintroduced on working on relationships in the garage, everybody getting off their own islands. Can you share have you already been in the garage? That seems like a big focus for you.

STEVE O'DONNELL: Yeah, no, that's a really great question.

Yes, I think the Chase is an example of when we are at our best. Everyone contributed to that idea. Tim Clark led that for us. We had every stakeholder in the industry weighing in on what this could be.

You can see when we do those things, we don't always agree on exactly what comes out, but everybody has had input. The results are usually pretty fantastic.

That's probably an example of yes, that's a start. We need that tenfold, creating new businesses, what is the future product we're going to race, just getting ahead of it.

I think we do the day to day well, but where do we want to be five years from now. Working closely with Ben on that, setting a plan. If you were going to go interview any driver or track - what is the plan for the next five years, where do you want to be - they could all answer that somewhat similarly. That's the goal.

Q. Almost sounded like a call to action, unite the industry, listen to everybody, address matters with urgency. Is that an accurate assessment of this is not just swapping titles?

STEVE O'DONNELL: We're going to get to work. We've already been at work. The big thing, twofold, we're going to make some moves and have some fun. I think we lost that over the last couple years.



It is an unbelievable privilege to be in this position. My wife reminded me today that people would kill to be doing what you're doing. That's not lost on me.

It's a privilege to do it, but it's also fun, what we get to do each and every day. The race you just saw was unbelievable, the enthusiasm from the drivers. We got to showcase that, be proud of that, proud of who we are. I think you'll see more of that.

Ben brings a lot of that for us. The younger generation reminding us of, Hey, you can't take months and months to make a decision. TikTok, whatever it is, you got to be quick, but you got to be smart about it. I think he's pushing for that, which is great.

Q. Steve, you said you wanted the industry to be somewhat united. Where do you want this to be in five years?

STEVE O'DONNELL: Five years from now, if we're clicking on all cylinders, you'll see the sport be a must-have from TV partners, whatever the media may be. More and more sponsors activating across drivers. I think you'll see drivers that are crossover superstars outside of racing. You're seeing that happen more and more. Value of teams continue to increase.

Really the alignment is what is going to do it, bringing in new fans, but really being proud of who we are. I think we've got the opportunity. I go back to the foundation that the family has built. All those that have passed before us, regardless of where you were in the industry, built an incredible sport. We sometimes forget that.

So we're building off of a foundation that is incredibly strong. We just got to do the right things to keep that growing.

Q. Ben, I know over the past few years you've been viewed as the architect of the schedule. You will still oversee that process. Will there have to be adjustments made with the other added responsibilities that you have?

BEN KENNEDY: Yeah, a little bit. Recently Julie Giese, who you guys know, she's been the president of Phoenix and headed up the Chicago Street Course for the past few years. She's now leading all of our scheduling efforts.

She's done a tremendous job already helping us build out the 2027 schedule. We're actually leaving after this to sit down and talk with a few drivers about it.

We have a great team on the event and venues team, whether it's the racetracks, folks are thinking about hospitality, food and beverage at our tracks. We have six or seven verticals that live within our team today. Then we get to add in John Probst and the competition folks together.

I think it's neat that we get to bring competition and our tracks kind of closer together. Granted, we'll be working with the rest of the leadership team.

If you think about some of the most important parts of our business and our DNA, when I think about it, it's our events, it's our venues and the cars we put on track. I think putting that team together in one department is going to be a neat opportunity.

Q. Ben, you mentioned talking about getting back into the competition side of things. How has your background as a former racer served you as you relate to the current crop of drivers?

BEN KENNEDY: Yeah, it's helpful. I didn't realize when I was a driver, I didn't think to realize how much it would help me coming to the business side of the sport.

Being a driver, going to the race shop every Tuesday and Wednesday, spending time with the team on the weekend, then being a team owner as well. We still have a late model team out at Daytona.

I think it's also created a level of empathy in the garage area. More important than anything is the relationships I built being a driver and being a team owner. I think it's really neat.

We had dinner with the champions in Phoenix after the race last year. To look around and see crew chiefs and drivers and engineers, folks that are Cup, O'Reilly and Truck champions that were my crew chiefs back in the day or my competitors. I think it's really neat to think about that 10 years ago that they are now sitting on the stage celebrating their wins.

The relationships are critical in this business. I think just having a perspective and a competitive background just makes it a little bit easier.

STEVE O'DONNELL: If I could add to that. I'll brag on Ben a bit.

Coming up through the ranks, a young driver is going to move to the competition portion of the business, John and I are like, Ben is coming in, he is going to work on the Truck Series. What does that mean? We sat down and said we



have some relationship challenges, we need to go out and talk to some of the owners.

Natural question in this room or any one of us is he can do whatever he wants in the world. What's going to happen? What's going to be the drive?

Within three days we had a report from 36 team owners. He had met with every single team owner, had ideas where we could go.

In addition to the experience, I think he puts in the work. That's respected by every one of our people at NASCAR. I think you see that in the garage, too, which is welcomed. It's awesome.

Q. Can you talk about the importance of the fan input as you go forward, things where fans can really feel as if they are having a say, I don't know if that is the right expression but...

STEVE O'DONNELL: We're the one sport which is awesome in the fact that they are the most passionate fans and you know where they stand.

I think with that passion, we lost a little bit of fans feeling like this was their sport. You're seeing that come back. The 'Hell Yeah!' campaign is all about that.

But as we go forward, it's taking their input and making some moves. The Chase was part of that. The Chase was making that move to go back.

I think there are a lot of other ideas that are out there that the fans go as what they see the drivers do, adding horsepower, doing some things this year that we're going to continue to make those moves, hopefully in the right direction, that our fans embrace. Hopefully see that throughout this year.

With that, our fans are the best salespeople in the sports world, right? They love NASCAR. If we can get anyone here to the infield of Talladega, they're going to be coming back. That's the goal, is showcase to everyone what we love about this sport.

Q. Steve, Mike Helton, even though titles were a little bit different, he pretty much ran things for a few years in the early 2000s. I'm curious, what did you see him do as a non-France family member in running the sport and/or what advice has he given you that you've taken to heart about running the France's sport?

STEVE O'DONNELL: Mike Helton is the most respected guy I've seen in the industry. What I would say that Mike

Helton has given to me, two things. He's given me a ton. Two things that always stick out are: Whatever decision you make, who needs to know about what you just did? We have so many stakeholders to make sure that you over-communicate.

The other thing I know about Mike, he does not brag or talk about this. That guy is calling everybody on Christmas Day. He's talking to the drivers. He's talking to crew chiefs.

Everybody has a story about Mike Helton, how he's reached out, how he's been always door's open. Never changed the cell phone number in the entire time he's been here. Why? He wants everyone to have access, be able to talk to him.

The lesson I've learned is you better be accessible. You can't always agree, but you better listen. You better go back and talk to people. If you're going to go left or right, you decide to go left, you better explain why you didn't go right. As long as you have a good reason, everything will work out.

The last thing I'd say is if I could have a quarter of the respect that Mike garnered in this industry, I think it would be a pretty successful run.

Q. Ben, he's sitting right next to you, try to be as honest as possible, but a lot has been made about Steve being a non-France family member to ascend into this role. Maybe it will be your job one day. Why haven't you taken it already? Can you explain why Steve is the guy for the role, why you're not there already, and the fact that he is a non-France family member.

BEN KENNEDY: Yeah, Steve talked a lot about Mike. I would almost make some analogies to stuff as well. I feel like Mike was a mentor to Steve, and Steve has been a big mentor to me. He was the first person I called when I said, Hey, I want to take the job at NASCAR, come and work for you guys. We had a lot of conversations over the off-season before I did that.

I think with him and Mike having a competition lens and a competition background is really helpful in the industry. I think it's given him the credibility and respect in the garage area that Steve has built over his 30-plus years at NASCAR.

Being able to know all the different stakeholders in the industry, whether it's teams, drivers, a lot of our partners, he's built that and fostered those relationships over a long period of time. I think that is what has helped make him so

successful, our sport so successful from that perspective.

The other thing I appreciate about Steve is his honesty and transparency. You see it through the hallways, any time we're in a meeting, he's straight up with you. He'll tell you how it is, whether it's good, bad or indifferent. I appreciate that about him.

I look forward to working alongside him and seeing some more success.

THE MODERATOR: Ben, can you tell the story about you guys and the L.A. Memorial Coliseum, how that happened.

BEN KENNEDY: Yeah, so Steve and I were I think it was 2019 he texted me and said, We need to start working on our schedule. 2020 schedule, made some big moves. Wanted to work on the '21 schedule. It was an opportunity for us to start thinking bigger and bolder.

We went on a world tour in the fall of '19. Went to Chicago. That was the first meeting we had over lunch.

STEVE O'DONNELL: Soldier Field, forgot that it was a little small.

BEN KENNEDY: We tried Soldier Field. That didn't work.

That was when we first sat down and talked about the street course. Then we shortly went to L.A. after. We were driving all around southern California. We know how many fans we have in that region. We went to four or five different pit stops of different potential locations we could go to.

Driving down the highway, I remember seeing the L.A. Coliseum we were driving by. Man, that place is cool. I think they had some Super Bowls there, big events in the past. It would be wild if you could actually pull off an event. This is right after the Soldier Field conversation.

I think we went to the website, found the general manager's email address, shot him a note. About a month later we went and sat down with them. That was the genesis of what led to the Clash at the Coliseum.

THE MODERATOR: All from the rental car (smiling).

Q. Steve, you talked about expanding the fan base. For years, as long as I've been involved with the sport, the 18 to 39s have been the elusive Holy Grail. How do you attract those new fans and still maintain the core base that you've got?

STEVE O'DONNELL: I think you're seeing it. The first

part I would address the core.

As the core got older, it's important for us to make sure that their kids understand what was so cool about NASCAR. As they're coming back, which they are, that's great for us, you bring that generation.

On the newer fans or the younger fans, you've seen us make some really bold moves, new television agreement. Having someone like Amazon come in, the demo got much younger already, we can see that. Some of the events that Ben talked about, younger fans are coming to those races.

When you look at the marketing campaign, what we're doing socially and digitally, those numbers have been through the roof this year. We're seeing a lot younger engagement. We're actually doing less in terms of what we posted. The quality of what Jeff Smith is putting out is incredible. People are engaging.

I judge by my kids on whether or not we're cool or they're pointing out stuff that I haven't pointed out that is cool. I know we're onto a good thing.

A lot of work still to be done. You're seeing that come in and seeing it be done being proud of who we are. We chased some things that may not have worked, but we're being way more authentic now and it's working.

THE MODERATOR: I think that will wrap it up for us. Appreciate you being here. Thank you, gentlemen, for sharing time with us.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

