

Indianapolis Motor Speedway Media Conference

Monday, December 7, 2020

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Donald Davidson

Press Conference

PAUL KELLY: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this Indianapolis Motor Speedway teleconference. Our guest is IMS historian Donald Davidson. As you saw announced about 2:00, about an hour and a half ago, Donald has decided to step back and retire effective December 31st.

I'll give you a little background on Donald. He's incomparable. I feel sort of sheepish, but some background here:

Donald first visited IMS in May of 1964, fulfilling a dream of his fascination with the Greatest Spectacle in Racing since his teenage years when he grew up in Salisbury, England. He returned to the States in 1965 and began to work for USAC as a statistician and many other roles. Also his role in chronicling the history of the Greatest Spectacle in Racing.

He had a brief spell at Telex in 1997, that is now know as IMS Productions. Then he was hired as the IMS historian in 1998.

Donald, as everyone knows, has done countless public speaking, promotional opportunities for the Speedway. He's been featured in every form of media promoting the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the Indianapolis 500. He's beloved by race fans worldwide for not only his encyclopedic knowledge of the track and the race, which never, never cease to amaze, but also just for his kindness and his geniality. Anyone on this call who has met Donald, and I bet most of you have, know that he is just a gem of a human being.

Donald, before I open the call, I personally want to say thank you. It's been a great honor to work with you. We know this is a new phase of your life, you're not going to disappear, I'm very grateful for that. I think on behalf of everyone at IMS, I just want to thank you and wish you all the best.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Thank you. It's a pleasure to work with you. I've known you, what, I don't know, 20 years or



something. We've done a ton of things together.

Just in setting up what we're doing here, I've been working on this for some time, and I am just amazed that we've been able to do this without anybody calling me and saying, Hey, I'm hearing a rumor about you.

So I think we can put this right up there with the Penske pushrod engine as just an amazing secret. As more people knew that we were going to do this in the last few days and weeks, I thought somebody's going to get wind of it and say, I've heard a rumor about you.

Anyway, Paul, it's been a pleasure to work with you. I hope that we can continue to do that. I'm not going anywhere. I'm just going to step back a little bit and not do as much as I have been (laughter).

PAUL KELLY: Take us through the thought process, the decision, of how this came about.

DONALD DAVIDSON: I've been doing this a long time. I've only actually worked for the track since 1998. That's only 22 years. I did a long stint at USAC. I was basically sort of associated with the Speedway, I suppose. I mean, USAC was just across the street. You could walk back and forth to the old little museum building on the corner there of what used to be 16th and Georgetown.

The fact that Sid Collins befriended me from the time I showed up, Tony Hulman. I was over at the track back and forth quite a bit on behalf of USAC, so on and so forth.

As far as to where we are now, I lived the dream. There were some sad times with all of it. But, I mean, basically I was just living the dream. Had this ability to memorize stuff, which is kind of a mystery because I was terrible at schoolwork, but I was able to memorize 500 facts.

Anyway, I never expected to be able to do this as long as I did. As I sort of became a senior citizen, I began to think about a lot of other things I would like to do really locally just around the house. I don't want to go to every baseball park or any Formula 1 Grand Prix, anything like that. There's just a lot of stuff. I bought a lot of books I never read, movies that I've never watched. I've been thinking about it for a while.

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Especially in the last several months, when we had to work from home, that's okay for me except I'm technically challenged. As my friends will tell you, I'm not really computer savvy. I was using a computer, but I had to do a lot of things. I also did a lot of phone interviews, talking with fans and people with questions.

So as I'm lying there on the divan talking to people all over the country, I'm looking up at my shelves, I'm thinking, Golly, I haven't watched these movies yet, all these books. There's things that I would like to do.

I've just been thinking that I don't want to stop but I just thought I would like to be able to do just what I want to do. There's a lot of little things that I'd like to do, straighten the place up, just sort of take care of things around the house, sort my stuff.

I like to do silly little statistical projects just for myself. Nothing really special. But just still do some of the things that I'd done, but not have the obligation, if you like, of just working every day because just a lot of things have changed.

I mean, this is not a recent thing. This year, of course it's been challenging for everybody. As I tell people, I'm outgoing, I'm good with people, but I'm actually a private individual. We're a private family. I shake hands with everybody. I hug people. I get hugs. Drivers' wives, even the drivers themselves, I get hugs. We can't do that any more. It's just changed a lot of things. I don't know how long we will have to do this. I thought that maybe this is a sign to me that being at home is okay.

Really that's it. There's nothing to read between the lines. It is my decision. Those quotes I wrote myself. I would like to still come around. I hope they let me in. Probably still do with the Radio Network, stuff like that. Just not to the extent I've been doing it.

So forgive me. As you know, I don't do short answers (laughter).

PAUL KELLY: I think it's pretty safe to say you won't have to buy a ticket to get into IMS any time soon.

A question I have before I open it up. You came here in 1964. Came back in '65. You've been here ever since. When you were growing up in England, we didn't have that thing called the Internet where you could look up and find information about any race, anyplace. What piqued your curiosity as a kid growing up in England in the United States racing scene, especially the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the Indy 500?

DONALD DAVIDSON: It's hard to do the short version.

The first time I think I was really aware of it, I was always aware of motor racing. The Brits embraced motorsport. The country is not very big. You would hear the drivers' names all the time. I'd heard of Stirling Moss, Mike Hawthorn, Alberto Ascari, names that you would hear all the time.

I had just entered my teens, so I knew about racing. I would get Dinky toy racing cars in my Christmas stocking, things like that. Then somebody gave me a magazine, an auto sport magazine that was a couple of years old, had no cover on it, but it had the report of the Spanish Grand Prix, which was the last Formula race of 1954. It wasn't 1954 when I was looking at this, it was a couple of years after that.

Anyway, because it was the last race, and I loved the way that the grid was printed out on the page, the stats and everything, then it had a table to show the points accrued for the World Championship, because that was the final race of the year.

You have the Belgian Grand Prix, the Argentine, the Swiss, German, Italian Grand Prix. All of the same names showed up. There's this thing called Indianapolis. How do you pronounce that? What is that?

When I looked at the names of the people that accrued points, it was Vukovich and McGrath and Rutman and Carter and Nazaruk. I thought, Who are they? Dunlop had a promotional thing that you could send away for. They sent you this little booklet which had the map of all the main Grand Prix circuits. Indianapolis was in there.

Well, the Nurburgring had 176 turns per lap, and this thing was all just left hand. I asked my dad about it. He knew what Indianapolis was. A lot of people at that time did not. So it just started from there. One thing led to another. I wanted to know more about it.

Eventually in probably late '56 there was a review in Motorsport Magazine for the Indianapolis 500 yearbook. My mother got me that for Christmas. When I got my first 500 yearbook, 1956, just a whole new world opened up for me. The pictures of the cars, they were so beautifully done, so shiny. The car names, the John's (indiscernible) Special, all of this.

In 1957 and '58, Monza in Italy had a high-speed section for record breaking. This is a great story, try to boil it down. The Americans went over there to race the Europeans. When they showed up there, I mean, these amazing cars that were just so beautiful, paint jobs,

pinstriping, everything like that, I just hooked onto that and started memorizing results.

Over a period of the next few years, I saved up the money. I mean, I didn't know about charge cards and all this other stuff. I actually saved up the money from zero to enough to be able to come. I almost came in 1963. That didn't quite work out. But then '64 was when I made the debut, or at least my first appearance.

There was a lady named Miss Frances Derr, who was the director of ticket sales. We struck up a correspondence. Sorry, I'm giving the long version here. But when it finally came time for me to come, I bought a ticket, which was like a week salary for the ticket. Sort of the final note, she told me how to get accommodations. I stayed with a family right outside of turn three, which I got through. It was the Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Bureau, which is Visit Indy now.

She said, Because you're coming from overseas, we'll furnish you with a bronze badge which will get you in the garage area. I thought, You're kidding me? I didn't even have to ask for this.

Things happened in a hurry. I showed up. I got the bronze. Within a very short time I met Sid Collins. He gave me a little card so that I could get into the pit area. Within less than 24 hours, I already had a silver.

I just had this fantastic three weeks at the track. I thought that I've got to pursue this further. I came back the next year on a Green Card, was hired by a very dear man named Henry Banks who hired me at USAC. I started there.

Sid Collins put me on the Radio Network. I was actually a guest. Then I came back the next year and I've been on the network ever since. I think of all the people, and there's so many people to thank, I have so many wonderful relationships, so many people to thank, but I think Sid Collins and Henry Banks are the two that I would probably put above everybody because Sid put me on Broadway and Henry Banks was like an uncle to me.

He hired me at USAC so I actually had a job, working for USAC. The drivers were coming in there all the time. Rutherford, Mario in a T-shirt, Roger McCluskey. I just was living the dream.

PAUL KELLY: Thank you, Donald. Appreciate you sharing that.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Sorry, I can't do short answers (laughter).

PAUL KELLY: That's fine.

We'll open it up for media questions.

Q. Once the news was released today that you were choosing to move on from this position, I had lots of my Twitter followers writing in saying the race isn't going to be the same without you. How does that make you feel inside and if you have a message for those fans?

DONALD DAVIDSON: Oh, bless their hearts. I've been getting these compliments throughout my adult life. Just today, golly, I had like 25 emails right away. I'm really, really blessed.

I don't know what to say because I'm an enthusiast. I love the thing. It's about the drivers, it's about the participants. I'm just a guy sitting there watching. I don't know. I've had all kinds of amazing compliments over the years, and today they're just pouring in.

One fellow said it's like Johnny Carson leaving NBC. I thought, Whoa, c'mon (laughter). Well, I'm really, really blessed and very grateful to those people.

I'm not going away, I'm just not doing this as my full-time vocation.

Q. Generally your time there with the 500 also coincides with a lot of people in auto racing consider the golden age of the Indy 500. The sport every year got bigger and bigger. They put it on first closed circuit TV, later it was on ABC's Wide World of Sports. It was when the world discovered what the Indy 500 really was. What was it about that that really made it the golden age of the 500 and your role in that?

DONALD DAVIDSON: Well, I didn't have a role in it. I just happened to be on the radio broadcast. Radio was king. The broadcast, there had been radio going back to the '20s, but it just exploded in the mid '50s. I don't know. Closed circuit TV certainly. The Radio Network.

I think the claim was that the race could be held in every country where English was spoken except behind the Iron Curtain or something like that.

As far as it being the golden age, I think different people have their version of the golden age. I think I'm not really answering your question, but I think when you ask a lot of people, no matter what the sport is, it happens in baseball a lot, when people say, My favorite era was such and such. Normally that's when they first discovered it and got into it.



You sort of accept everything that's going on now and what's gone before. You have your heroes. As the new people come along that may be even greater, I think you tend to not hold them in the same esteem as the people when you first got interested.

It was very, very exciting times. I mean, I remember I had been around for a few years, this had to be probably '74, '75 or something, and I was standing with some people the day before the race just talking, media, people outside the old press room. A guy came by. He said, Excuse me, are you Donald Davidson?

I said, Yes, sir.

He said, I recognized your voice.

I said, Are you from around here?

He said, No, I'm from Sydney, Australia, this is my first visit. I listen to the broadcast and I recognized your voice.

That just give me goosebumps. It was also a lesson to be aware that when you're talking, any comment that you make, anything you say, you never know who you may be affecting that's a kid that will come up to you years later and say, Hey, I remember when you did this, that or the next thing.

I remember that. It was stunning. Again, I don't think that really answers your question, but thank you Sid Collins. What a thrill to be part of the Radio Network for all those years.

Q. What is your first recollection of Roger Penske? Did you have any idea just how far this man's career would go with the Indianapolis 500? Now he owns the place.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Boy, I don't know how to answer that. I knew who he was before I came. I read about sports cars and stuff. I knew that he was the 1962 USAC road racing champion, stuff like that.

I didn't actually meet him, although they showed up in 1969, until 1978. Why that was, I don't know. I knew a lot of people. His accomplishment is just extraordinary. Having the all front row in '88. But Lou Moore had the record for the most number of victories, which was five. Penske, I think he had a three-year plan to win and it took four. It took quite a few more years before they had the second win. Eventually they got to where he got to five to tie the record, then he beat it, by which time I knew him. Then he doubled it, tripled it. Not too far from quadrupling

it.

The Penske organization, I don't know that you can put words to it. It's just mind boggling what they've done. But they work at it. It's been said that Penske surrounds himself by overachievers. Everything they do was first rate. There were always people polishing the wheels. They were practicing for the pit stop contest.

They won a lot because they worked at it.

Q. I hope all this really means is all of us are able to have more time just chatting with you as opposed to you having to run off to take care of business because your stories are always some of the highlights of running into you at the Speedway. That's what I wanted to ask you. I know this is almost an impossible question, but could you think of one story, one fact, one moment in time as you look back on everything that you discovered, because you've had an opportunity to go deeper into the archives than any of us ever will, is there something that jumps out at you that when you think of the Speedway, you think of this particular moment in time or happening, and you think that this is what makes this place so special?

DONALD DAVIDSON: Oh, I couldn't do one, no. I don't know how I would answer that.

Q. How about an example, if not just one?

DONALD DAVIDSON: Well, I tell you what, Foyt winning for the fourth time and taking the pace car ride with Tony Hulman sitting up on the back. That wasn't about 200 something miles an hour. Tony would often get into the pace car, but Foyt said, No, up on the back with me.

The fact that we finally had a four-time winner, then Tony Hulman, they took that post race victory lap, if you like. Must have taken about 20, 25 minutes because the fans were running out on the track, not to disrupt the thing, but just to show their appreciation and admiration.

Just the two of them, two of the most iconic figures in the history of the track. Then of course was melancholy because Tony Hulman passed away later that year. But that stands out to me as an amazing moment.

It's not all about the Indianapolis 500. I mean, I don't know how many people don't want to hear this, but Tony Stewart's two victories in the Brickyard 400, they were hugely emotional moments.

Golly, there's been so many great, great moments. Great trivia. To me, the most amazing piece of trivia about the

whole place that gets people, because this is general interest, we are now up to the total number of drivers that have driven in the Indianapolis 500 is 785, I believe is the number. I might be corrected. 782. It's right at that. I think it was 777. Now it would be 782 have driven in the Indianapolis 500. How many with the surname of Smith? None. There's never been a Smith driving the Indianapolis 500. How can that be? I just love stuff like that (laughter).

But the iconic moments? Well, there's been a bunch of them. I can't put one above them all.

Q. I wanted to ask you about going forward. You mentioned that you're not going away. Do you know what your involvement is going to be with radio in the coming year or two?

DONALD DAVIDSON: Well, not really. I'm not going to be at the museum every day. I'm out talking to the people, but I was doing a lot of stuff with the museum, a lot of proofreading and stuff that doesn't come as easily to me.

No, I think I'm just going to do what I want to do. I'm just not going to be there every day. I think I'm still going to be on the Radio Network.

Really, you know what, I'll just go over there and hang out, have a good time. Probably maybe I'll get into some storytelling sessions and hope that the laughter and noise doesn't disrupt the people that are trying to work up on the fourth floor.

No, I really don't have any plans. I just want to kick back a little bit, not have to face deadlines, so on, so forth. I'm probably not explaining this very well.

Q. You haven't gotten there yet, so maybe you'll figure it out.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Yeah, no, I don't have any great plans. I mean, I'm not going to write a novel or anything like that.

Q. If you were able to have any car in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum, what one would you take home and put in your garage?

DONALD DAVIDSON: Well, I wouldn't put it in the garage. No, I don't have to think very long about that. It would be the Belond Exhaust Special, the Sam Hanks, Jimmy Bryan winner. Very special to me. That's the one I would take.

Q. Your departure is right up there with a lot of the important events that have happened in the last 13 months, I think.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Well, don't look at it as a departure. I'm just kicking back.

Q. I hope that's true. I hope I can still give you a call from time to time.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Absolutely.

Q. Ask you about people like Harry Hartz, that sort of thing.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Harry Hartz was a special guy. He was the only person runner-up three times and never won.

Q. Your first race here was in '64. What was your impression being in the Promised Land at last and seeing a 500? What did you go away thinking about of the spectacle, the drivers?

DONALD DAVIDSON: Oh, I wouldn't know how to answer that one because, I mean, I wasn't there for the entire three weeks. I was there for both qualifying weekends, the race. I did a side trip to Chicago because I had relatives up there.

No, just to meet all of the people. I mean, I met, golly, I think it was like 80 drivers that were current and past. I mean, I met so many participants, mechanics, so on and so forth.

I don't know what I would say is the impression because obviously there was the terrible accident. I met Eddie Sachs. Golly, I don't know what. So many things happened to me. I mean, I struck up the friendship with Sid. A.J. Watson offered me a job for the race. When I met Watson and I did his career for him, all of his crew who are really a close-knit bunch of guys. Five guys named George, they all had nicknames (laughter).

Anyway, when I finished with Watson, doing his career year by year, he said, Can you change a wheel? I almost started laughing. Basically he said, We're going to run four cars. We have the two rear-engine cars for Rodger Ward and Don Branson. We have the roadsters if the rear-engine cars didn't work out. So we're going to run the roadsters. We need people. Do you want to help with timing and scoring or something?

I didn't do that. I sort of regretted it ever since because I thought, Golly, I could have had a leader car T-shirt, been in the qual shots and everything.

Golly, I met the drivers, I met Ray Harroun, Ed Sullivan. I mean, I went home and it was a whirlwind.



My impression was that I got to get back here as quick as I can. I immediately set about trying to -- sorry, this is about me. It was supposed to be about the event. But I immediately set up trying to be able to come back and emigrate, if you like. I got a Green Card. I was thinking about coming back for the Hoosiers 100 even. I'll just get something. I can be a stooge, flip burgers or something.

When I came back, then I was hired by Henry Banks. As with these previous questions, I didn't give you a very good answer because I went off on all of these tangents.

So my impression was, I hate to get into anything controversial, but obviously when that accident happened, I shouldn't even get into this. But I just thought, Did I come for this, saved up, realize my dream, and now something happens with the future of the race? What's just happened here?

Sorry, that's why I have to be very careful with interviews because I try to keep them bright and breezy and stay away from the controversy. There was great concern about the future of racing. Fortunately everybody came together and there were was a lot of safety.

In those days there was a huge, huge advancement being made in safety. United States Auto Club, Indianapolis, was leading the world. When the Europeans came over, they were astonished at the safety.

Watch the films starting in around '60, '61. A car would spin in practice, hit the wall, slide down. Here is the emergency crew arriving before the thing has even come to a stop.

PAUL KELLY: Donald, I feel very privileged to have witnessed your debut at the Speedway in 1964 and have felt a closeness to you through the years. It's really been great. Since you are going to hang around a little bit from time to time, I'm certain I'll be in touch with you. Thanks a lot.

DONALD DAVIDSON: That will be fine. I'm not going away. I'm just going to slow down and not do as much.

PAUL KELLY: Ladies and gentlemen, that's about all the time we have today. Thank you very, very much for coming onboard on a special day for Donald and really a big day for the Speedway.

Donald, again, on behalf of everyone on this call and everyone at IMS, thank you so much for all you've done, for just who you are. You are a true treasure, my friend. Thanks again.

DONALD DAVIDSON: Thank you, Paul. Thank you to everybody. Thank you to all of the management and the superiors that I've had. But the participants, what they shared with me, the individuals and the families, the relationships, the rapport with the media, the fans. Golly, just the greatest, most loyal fans you could have anywhere. I'm just very, very grateful to everybody.

Again, I'm not stopping. I'm not going away. I'm just going to sit back and put my feet up and not work so hard, or hopefully not.

PAUL KELLY: Donald, you've earned that. Thank you again. We look forward to seeing you soon.

DONALD DAVIDSON: All right. Thank you, everybody.

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