

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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Sam Flood

Mike Tirico

Danica Patrick

Leigh Diffey

Townsend Bell

Paul Tracy

INDY 500 Preview

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Welcome to our conference call today to preview NBC Sports' coverage of the 104th Indianapolis 500. This will be NBC Sports' second consecutive year broadcasting the race, although it's certain to be an Indy 500 unlike any other. Joining us on today's call will be NBC Sports executive producer Sam Flood, our event host Mike Tirico, our guest studio analyst Danica Patrick, and our race team of Leigh Diffey, Townsend Bell and Paul Tracy. In a moment we'll hear opening remarks from each of our speakers followed by questions and answers.

Let's begin with opening remarks starting with Sam Flood.

SAM FLOOD: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining us. We're really excited about doing this race. We had the opportunity to work out of the Brickyard for the first race weekend back where there was a double-header of INDYCAR and NASCAR so got a sense of how to work in the new normal and thought it was a great warmup for this huge race coming up this weekend.

We made some decisions on how we're going to socially distance and work through our new plan based on the structure involved in the new system, and one of those is we've got one production team that's going to produce the pre-race and the race. It just became a simpler way to execute it, and so one team starts the show and goes from on-air all the way through the checkers and the post-race show.

We're also working with the talent differently. We're separating them around the track. Leigh and Townsend



will be in the Pagoda and as we saw during qualifying the position for Paul Tracy outside Turn 2 add a great new element to the telecast and some more energy and a different view of the track which we think enhanced the show over the weekend, which obviously had a great story out of it with the pole sitter and what that means.

Danica and Mike will be our team hosts to give us a sense of place and what the stories are. Doing an event with no fans is different, but Rutledge Wood will engage those fans at home and let them feel like they're a part of this event because it is such a great gathering and such a passionate fan base, and for some it's the one race of the year they will watch. We hope they will watch a lot more, but let's make sure we welcome all these fans in to this great story, the tradition, the rituals that make the Indy 500 one of the great slices of Americana.

So we hope to build that sense, that feel and that energy that comes from being in this hallowed grounds for this huge event. We know the time is different when Mike Tirico is getting ready for a combination of events that throws first with the Indy 500, soon thereafter he's got the Kentucky Derby on that traditional first Saturday in September followed by the NFL kickoff followed by the Sunday Night Football season and the U.S. Open. First let's hit the Indy 500. Mike, I will throw it your way.

MIKE TIRICO: Thanks, Sam. It is nice to be out with everyone here. I'll just keep this brief so we can hear from the folks that cover the sport on a week-in, week-out basis and are part of it. But I can't thank Leigh, Townsend, Paul and the entire INDYCAR production team and Danica for making me feel so welcome. I was a rookie at the 500 last year, and I think we're all taking different stock of the things that we do professionally and personally, and the chance to sit there right on the track with Danica and have the 33 cars behind us and 300,000 people around us, it's one of the coolest experiences I've ever had, and we will miss those fans and that experience incredibly on Sunday.

But the Indy 500 is the Indy 500, and it's going to be a piece of history, and there's never been a 500 like this ever. I'm looking forward to the opportunity for all of us to document that story, this little bit of history in this piece of Americana and share it with the fans at home.

I had the chance to be at Indy a couple times with



Pagenaud and Rossi before Memorial Day as we set the broadcast to re-air last year's 500. It took us back to how darned cool that was, what an incredible day that was, and hopefully we'll have a race like that because of so many story lines. I was there, as Sam said, for the INDYCAR-NASCAR double-header on the fourth of July. Hopefully that keeps going because that was really neat.

But this is the 500. This is the race that made this place famous and the people around it, and we are absolutely thrilled to be a part of it. I know Danica and I have been texting back and forth here a little bit over the last couple of months, missed being together in May but super excited that we get the chance to do this again here in August, so I'll turn it over to somebody who knows Indianapolis pretty well. Danica?

DANICA PATRICK: Thanks, Mike. It was really fun last year, and for a moment I thought I wasn't going to be able to do the broadcast with you again this year due to other commitments in May, but so grateful that it opened up. I guess if there's one thing to be grateful for in 2020 it's that (laughing). It's been such a year.

But I guess from my perspective, I obviously, having been in the race like of course Townsend and Paul have, too, which they're going to be able to, along with Leigh, give you that blow-by-blow, play-by-play of the race and really take you there, and at the end of the day that's what people come for; people come to watch the race.

While it is sad that there won't be that energy and ambience that we're so used to with the Indianapolis 500 and with the parades and with all the pomp and circumstance that really goes with it and really bringing the energy up as it does before the race -- I mean, being a driver you know that there's the cannon, there's all the song and dance, there's so many people flooding in and navigating spaces is hard, and we've been laughing that we won't have to drive in super early to the track now, we won't probably need an escort to get anywhere. That will feel different.

So I think it's our responsibility behind the camera holding the microphone to really bring that energy and educate the viewer. And I'll say, most of the viewers are going to be at home, so we're still taking it to the people, to the majority of the people that watch. You can't get millions of fans at the track, but there will be millions of people and have always been watching the broadcast.

It'll be our job to really educate that viewer really well on the things that are going on, what the drivers can expect, what the cars have been like, what some of the story lines have been like so far, both at the track for these two weeks

and away from it for the year because there's been changes there, too.

It'll be our job to really engage the viewer so they're prepared for the race and they're not distracted by the fact that it looks different, they're invested in the race itself and how it feels and what's going on and being on the lookout for certain things during it.

I think that we have the opportunity to still deliver just as good if not better of a broadcast just because the emphasis will be so focused on helping really, really elevate some of those story lines and educate the viewer. So I'm excited about that. I'm excited to be back. I'm grateful to be back. I'm grateful to be with Mike, and thank you, Sam, for having me back. Let's bring the energy. I guess that's the main thing. We just need to bring the energy. I'll make sure to have six cups of coffee before we start.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: We'll go now to Leigh.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining us. I'm really excited and grateful that this is actually happening. This is the race that the pandemic isn't going to stop because INDYCAR was one of the first sports to come back globally, from the motorsports side. Obviously NASCAR came back, but on NBC, Supercross and INDYCAR came back. It's been a long road since we did a six-race virtual series with iRacing. So for the Indy 500 to happen this year I think is just reward for the series and our production group that people you will never know their names or faces have worked so hard throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period to make things happen in very unusual circumstances, so I think it's a reward for everybody involved.

For the times that we have been at the Speedway through the double-header weekend with NASCAR and INDYCAR and then of course all the practice sessions last week in qualifying, it is weird, just plain and simple, it is odd not having the fans there. You know, you can have a meal, but it doesn't taste as good with the accoutrements, so it's kind of like that this weekend. We're going to have a race and it'll be great, but it won't be as good.

But I have to say from our broadcast position, when Paul and Townsend and myself and Marty and Kevin and Kelly, we're all in the mode, it doesn't feel any different because what we were treated to last week with that incredible qualifying, both days, Saturday and Sunday, there was -- Danica speaks about energy. There was enormous energy because there was a tremendous story line and story lines, plural.

I think as sad as we all are that we won't see the fans that



lift this sport up so high and have carried it for so many years, I think we're still going to have a tremendous broadcast, a fun weekend and bring some enjoyment to people who are having hard times around the country, whether that be with health or unemployment or what have you, and that's our responsibility, to bring some light to it, have some fun and hopefully this team of some history-making like we've seen in qualifying continues throughout the race, whatever that may be.

I think for whoever you're reporting for, writing for and conveying our message is that we are super passionate, equally as passionate as what we were last year and ready for it to happen. Wish today were Sunday. Down to you, Townsend.

TOWNSEND BELL: Thanks, Leigh and everyone. I know it's August but it sure felt like May to me last weekend because of the exhilaration and the adrenaline that I think links all of us together and connects all of us during these troubled times, which is the purity of an INDYCAR circulating IMS on the absolute razor's edge, and I think back to a week ago -- not even that long, three days ago when I was sitting there Sunday with Leigh and Paul over in Turn 2 and we were counting up the speed of rookie Alex Palou, who made the Fast Nine, hitting 240 miles an hour on the front straight, turning into Turn 1, a 90-degree corner, with his foot to the floor, and I can't help but think back to what that moment was like for me for many years in qualifying. That's what we live for as racing drivers. That's what we live for as commentators, and I hope and certainly felt like even though we didn't have any fans there that everybody that was watching us, we're all connected by that pure love of speed, and no place celebrates speed like Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

I can't wait for this weekend. Very therapeutic, I think, for all of us in that regard and so many great stories from that qualifying weekend, two of the most impressive rookies that I can remember that took to the track with remarkable technique and confidence, and then there was the Andretti story, which I'm sure we'll talk about.

But some of you might have seen all of the INDYCAR drivers come and congratulate Marco Andretti on his historic pole position, probably the biggest moment of his career, and I think that was even more than an Andretti congratulations, that was a moment to recognize Marco individually, and I felt like he stepped out of the shadow in a big way in very difficult qualifying conditions, beating the best in the business Scott Dixon for pole position.

As we look to the race this weekend, the conditions will be challenging again. The aeroscreen is producing a lot of turbulent air for trailing cars. It's going to put increased

demands on the drivers for starts and restarts to make positions and the crew on pit lane, and I think the fact that Team Penske had one of the toughest qualifying weekends in a long time will be a fascinating story to watch on race day as those four Penske drivers have to figure out how to work their way to the front because expectations will be high for sure.

Anyway, very much looking forward to being in Indy this weekend and appreciate you all joining us today, and let's throw over to Paul Tracy.

PAUL TRACY: Hey, guys. Hard to top all these wonderful comments and story lines, but I've got to tell you that the excitement level that I felt throughout the weekend going up to qualifying and then on pole day is really something that was very special. And we all want fans there, but in this time it's going to take a little while.

I've just got to say that after qualifying, seeing the reaction of the teams and seeing the reaction of the Penske drivers, I have been completely flooded with text messages and calls and messages on social media from people just thanking us and NBC as a team and as a broadcast group for bringing such a great moment in sports. To see Marco and the Andretti family and the excitement leading up to that and the drama and the speeds being faster than they've been in many years, it's almost like -- there's moments in sports where things get corrected like Dale Earnhardt Sr. winning the Daytona 500, so for the Andrettis to qualify one of their own on pole, it's like bringing the world back on to the right axis. We're in a strange time right now, and things just seem off, but with what happened on Sunday, it just seemed to correct things, and going forward I think we're all going in the right direction.

INDYCAR is going in the right direction. NBC has got a fantastic team, the whole group, the production, the cameramen, the sound people, everything, everything is pointed in the right direction to have an unbelievable event for TV even if there are no fans in the stands.

Q. Sam, looking at the start times of the Indy 500, it looks like the finish of the race is going to overlap with the start of the NASCAR race. Curious if that is a concern, about splintering a viewing audience, and what went into the decision to start the Indy 500 then and maybe not move it up so as to avoid an overlap?

SAM FLOOD: I think with the way races go today and the way weather is today, I think we've got the right windows for both races. A double-header weekend in Dover, so we've got races on both days. I feel great about that, and we're going to be pushing audiences back and forth.



What we cared most about is telling the great story of the Indy 500 and motorsports fans will come to Indy 500, and when that ends they'll go over and watch the race from Dover. It's all about total eyeballs for all forms of racing, and the Indy 500 is the peak event, the big event of the weekend, and we look forward to showcasing that.

Q. Danica, what did you learn last year from your first Indy 500 broadcast, and do you think that can be applied this year? Were there mistakes that you made or little things that you wanted to correct maybe in the moment and didn't have a chance to that you'll have another opportunity to do now your second time around?

DANICA PATRICK: You know, I mean, I learned a lot from Mike, and Mike is like the ultimate pro. There's more of a dance to the flow of the pre-race show and the bridging from one topic to another or location. You know, it's not just -- there's more to it. It's not just fly by the seat of your pants. You really do prepare.

And while there is definitely the race is much more of that fly by the seat of your pants, of course, the pre-race has much more like intention behind it and making sure -- it's kind of like when I would do interviews before -- when I would do an interview on TV like Today show or something like that you'd do a pre-call and they filter out the best of the best from your 20, 30 minutes with them and then you're on air for four minutes with somebody. It's kind of like that. You really want to get the best of the best. There's an incredible team to put that together and for me to chime in about here and there.

But then the race itself, I mean, the boys in the booth do such a good job. But I would say that just chiming in and if I have something to say -- I didn't really know or feel as confident to just push the button and say, "I've got something to say." I think this year I'll be a little bit more brave to chime in about things going on, to add sort of color to the commentary and to add some different perspective from time to time.

Q. Obviously this is the first time in a couple of decades that there won't be a female driver at the Indy 500. Do you think the sport needs to do more to make this more inclusive for women, or does something need to change that this doesn't happen again?

DANICA PATRICK: Well, you know, I was asked that last week, and what rolls right off my tongue was the fact that it's a story that there isn't one is more surprising because the story always used to be that there is one, that there is a female in the race. I think the story is actually that there's a story there isn't one, if that makes sense. It's much more

normal, obviously, to have females in the race, plural or singular, so I think that we're taking score too soon. We need to look at the macro of it and look at the last -- instead of looking at this year compared to last year or the last 10, let's just look at the arc of it over the last 50 years, and then you'll see that, my goodness, just because there's one that doesn't go so well, it's like, just because 2020 is not going so well it doesn't mean this whole decade is garbage. So we need to look at the bigger version to understand that it's far, far more normal now to have females in the race and that the fact that there is a story about there not being one is the story.

Q. A production question for Sam. Sam, I know you said you guys were having the same crew produce the pre-show as well as the race. Any other details in terms of how production has changed as a result of the current situation, and I know NASCAR a lot of it is being produced out of Charlotte. Is that a similar workflow for Indy, or is everything on-site?

SAM FLOOD: Everything is on-site. We're really focused on executing out of the building. Remember, it's the home facility for IMS Productions, so it makes it very simple to execute out of that facility. Some added work is happening from people's homes, but the majority of the content will be generated from there.

The big difference is everyone is usually in a packed compound with hundreds of people eating under a tent together. Now everyone is taking their boxed lunch and going their separate ways, and it's a real separation of people following all the rules, and that's the biggest change.

Q. Danica and Townsend, for many sports fans, even for many NASCAR fans, this will be the only INDYCAR race they watch all year. How does that influence your approach to what you say for the race?

TOWNSEND BELL: I can jump in on that. I think it's a great question because we transitioned last week from practice through qualifying weekend through kind of three different audiences. Our NBC Sports Gold app, which is the subscription streaming service that is a fantastic way to catch all of the action, but when we're speaking to that audience, by and large we know that a lot of those folks that are listening are going to follow the INDYCAR Series with greater regularity, and then we go to our NBC Sports broadcast and that opens up tremendously, and then to your point, big NBC and the Indy 500 audience, which is our biggest audience of the year.

I always look to the way that Cris Collinsworth delivers his color commentary on Sunday Night Football because what

I always have liked as an NFL fan and a Sunday Night Football fan is that while Cris is addressing the largest live sports audience on television, period, every Sunday night, I never feel like he's candy-coating it too much or assuming that I don't know what he's talking about. He sort of delivers in a way that challenges me to listen closely and try to figure out the point or the detail or the analysis that he's providing, but I never feel talked down to as an uninformed football fan, and that's a delicate dance and an intangible that I've always really enjoyed about his delivery.

While we're speaking to an audience that may not follow the rest of the INDYCAR Series that closely, I do my best to try to emulate that delivery that Collinsworth does so well on NFL and occasionally I'll go too deep into a hole and my producers at NBC are quick to chime in my ear, hey, explain that a little bit or remind people what that means.

It's a delicate dance as we move across those different audiences over the course of the season, but I try to provide the detail, but at the same time not go too far down into the minutiae as a full insider. If we do I want to make sure we explain the stories behind that detail.

To answer your question, I guess, simply, it's a very delicate dance, but we know this is our biggest audience of the year.

DANICA PATRICK: Wow, thanks, Townsend. Impressive.

From my perspective, I am not the most technical person. There's a lot about the cars that I don't understand, so I actually think it's hard for me to speak over anybody's head. What I have to offer is the direct experience. It's the recent experience now, and then of course it's about telling stories and relating it to what someone might be doing, whether it be a correlation to something that -- another sport or an experience or a mindset or something you can visualize, it's about being able to take the viewer and put them into as similar of a situation as you can possibly do so that they can feel a part of it and understand it better.

But I think that's the best thing you can do to help educate the fan and not -- as Townsend said, not make them feel uneducated, to really make them feel like they are, to get them to relate to it, because unlike so many other sports, most people don't try racing. Everybody tries to throw a football; everybody has tried to shoot a basketball; most people have tried to hurdle something. Like there's a lot of things that people have tried to do, but racing is not one of them.

Putting into a context that they can understand I think is the most important part for especially an audience that is as

big as it's going to be for the Indy 500 and generally as many casual fans as there are for the Indy 500.

PAUL TRACY: I'm going to jump in on this one, as well. I'm usually lost at Townsend's hello, so him and I are like Felix and Oscar. He's a yin and I'm yang, and I've usually got to fact-check him. My style is just to try to keep it like Danica said, keep it real simple, explain it real simple so people that are sitting there that are not really car people and don't really have a technical aspect can kind of understand it and break it down in simple terms. Townsend gets a little bit more technical than I do with weight jackers and cross weights and things like that. But I try to break things down simple. I think him and I play pretty well off of each other.

Q. Mr. Flood, we're all aware of the in-person streaks that are going to come to an end of people who actually have attended the Indianapolis 500 in person, some as many as 75 straight years. So in a sense that they may witness an Indy 500 on television for the first time in their lives, what type of impression do you want to give them to what the TV broadcast will be all about, and how much of that feel do you want to keep in the broadcast for those people who have gone all those years to the race but this year can't go?

SAM FLOOD: Well, if you can't be at the racetrack, who would you rather hang out with to watch the race, Mike Tirico and Danica Patrick or a great combination of people to welcome you into the racetrack and have some fun with? And then once the green flag falls, I couldn't imagine a better group to listen to than Leigh, Paul and Townsend and then all the information that's going to be gleaned from pit road from the amazing team down there. It couldn't be a better setup to be at home. I'm almost convincing people they shouldn't come anymore, it should be an empty racetrack from now on because they're going to have a better experience hanging out with our group. Who else would you rather have a beer with and watch a race with than the people I just mentioned? So it really is the perfect scenario. If you can't be there, let's hang with the best group to watch a race with you could ever assemble.

Q. For Danica, Marco was your teammate when you were at Andretti Green Racing, as it was known back then before it became Andretti Autosport, and two things, your feelings for -- he's kind of taken some lumps throughout his career and how big that moment was for him on Sunday, and also if you could touch on your thoughts on the aeroscreen and whether you would have liked it when you were driving.

DANICA PATRICK: I'm super happy for Marco. Yeah, I mean, he has had his ups and downs, but there's one

place that he's generally been up, and I know he had a struggle last year, but that's at Indy. There's barely a year that goes by that he isn't in the mix, that he isn't fast at least some points during the month, or the shortened abbreviated month or the month that's not May anymore, so he always does really well. So I just think what that shows is that his confidence at the Speedway kind of transcends a little bit the car and what happens. That's hard. It's hard to be confident all the time, but I think it really comes through for him at Indy, and he does have a little something special.

You know, maybe the Andretti name sort of transitions into good luck with him, I don't know. Maybe we look at it different after this year, who knows. It's obviously going well for him so far.

What was the second part of your question?

Q. The aeroscreen, whether you would have liked it when you raced.

DANICA PATRICK: From the time I started racing at 10 years old, my dad always made sure that he got the most safe helmet possible, the safest gear. It didn't matter how much it was. It didn't matter what it looked like. It was all about having the best equipment that was the safest. So at any point in my career, absolutely if I could go back and put something on that was safer, I would have taken it, of course, but that's the nature of the sport is it's always evolving, and I'm glad that I came out unscathed and was safe in my career, but for me it's just good to see that the sport is still evolving and still adapting to things as important, of course, as safety. So yes, I would have taken it.

Q. This is for Mike and Leigh. Can you discuss the takeaways from your initial 500 last year and how they'll help or play a part in hosting or commentating this time around?

LEIGH DIFFEY: Oh, I think there's no more kind of unknowns. You always wonder what it's going to be like to call your first Indianapolis 500, and there's a tinge of anxiety and wonder and curiosity, so I think those unknowns have been taken away and we can just build on it, and I think as I mentioned at the top of the call we have a tremendous platform to build on from what we had last week.

I think of all the races that Townsend, Paul and myself have called together, I think probably I'm more excited about this weekend than any other race based on what happened last weekend, and I think just from a purely call, from a commentary position, I think last weekend's Fast

Nine Shootout day was perhaps the best call that Townsend, Paul and myself have ever had, and it was exhilarating, it was edge-of-your-seat stuff, it was legitimate and real enthusiasm. So I'm looking forward to what we learnt from last year.

That's the main takeaway is purely experience, so you build on that experience and you challenge yourself as Sam does as our leader. Sam always says, Be great, be better. So we put that pressure on ourselves to be better again, which I think we can, and when it's somewhat easier or more exciting to be better again when you have the stories that we've been delivered this year.

For me, just double thumbs up, pure enthusiasm and looking forward to it, and I know, Mike, you're the same for everything that you do as our broadcast leader. I know I could see the genuine enthusiasm that you had last year, mate, and I know that's there again.

MIKE TIRICO: Yeah, I watched you guys -- I blew off one of the last outdoor summer weekends that I had lined up for a while and was inside watching you guys. My wife said, what are you doing, why do you keep going inside. I said, this Fast Nine is really good, the qualifying is awesome. You all crushed it last week.

From my perspective, and I would say that I think we're all taking stock of the things that we do in life a little bit differently now, I am so darned thankful that I had the experience that we had last year. The lap around the track on race morning with Danica driving, getting a sense of what the drivers see, being, as I said, on the track in front of the grid and all you could see are people everywhere. I've never experienced anything like that. I've been to every sporting event that we have in the U.S. I've been very, very blessed professionally. There's nothing like it.

Every bit of buildup for the 500 was huge and it over-delivered for me as a sports fan and as a broadcaster.

So I'm so glad that I had that experience because I can now parallel that with what we're about to experience again, and I think the other thing that helps me in this role is we've done several broadcasts from the sixth floor and the Pagoda, and you just have a sense of where it is, not just in the geography but also what the background is like, what the feel is like for an event that's about to happen without the normal buildup from the fans being present. So that will, I think, serve us hopefully well in that part of the broadcast.

So I think all those experiences like every other story we all covered as reporters and journalists makes us better for the next story, so I think all of those experiences will kind of all come together.

And since Sam said that, who would you rather sit down and have a beer with than all of us, I think we should be able to open a cold one on the set if it's going to be a hot afternoon. Let's just take off our tie, open a cold one and enjoy the race. I'm looking forward to doing that at some point now that the boss has given me permission.

DANICA PATRICK: Guys, I have a lot of rosé, a lot, a lot of rosé that I can provide.

Q. I was wondering what the expectations are in terms of television ratings. Obviously I think when it comes to pretty much any sport at this point, NBA, NHL, the real goal is just to get the event in and the ratings are probably less of a concern, but obviously you don't have the Memorial Day weekend, you don't have the typical lead-up, and you do have a lot of competition that you might not have had in an ordinary year. Is there any thought that perhaps you might be looking at an unusually low number? Are you thinking that maybe the numbers might actually be higher than usual? I'm curious.

SAM FLOOD: All I can say is the beauty of our jobs and the talent's job on this call is we're the content part of the business, so we're ready to put on a great show, incredible experience for the fans, and the viewership can be for the commerce people to worry about. We're just worried about having a great show, and that's the plan, and that's what this group is going to execute.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Well, thank you, everyone, for joining us today. Again, there will be a transcript available of this call in a few hours on NBCSportsGroupPressbox.com, and please tune in Sunday for the Indy 500 on NBC. Thank you.

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