

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Wednesday, May 26, 2021

Leigh Diffey
Townsend Bell
Paul Tracy
Sam Flood
Press Conference



CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you and good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for our NBC Sports Indianapolis 500 conference call. In a moment we'll be joined by our lead INDYCAR team of Leigh Diffey, Townsend Bell and Paul Tracy, as well as NBC Sports executive producer Sam Flood.

Sunday's race will be NBC Sports' third broadcast of the Indy 500 and will feature roughly eight hours of coverage. Pre-race coverage begins at 9 a.m. eastern on NBCSN, followed by more pre-race coverage at 11 a.m. eastern on NBC. There will also be an hour-long post-race show roughly 4 p.m. eastern.

We will begin with some opening comments. First up is NBC Sports executive producer Sam Flood.

SAM FLOOD: We're really excited to be covering this spectacle, the biggest crowd we've had in this country since COVID started, probably the biggest crowd ever assembled since of COVID crisis got going. To get the sports world looking full with folks in the stands celebrating this great American tradition on Memorial Day weekend, we couldn't be prouder to bring that to America.

Our producer Rene Hatlelid is really on top of this, has mapped out great content through the whole day starting at 9 a.m. on NBCSN, 11:00 on Big Bird NBC. They've got a drone flying around for us getting the great shots. The only thing faster than the drone is Jimmie Johnson, our new guest analyst for the show. Jimmie was really engaged this past weekend, hard working, showing his personality. Gets to work with Danica, Mike Tirico and the rest of the crew.

We couldn't be happier and more excited about an event like this on a beautiful weekend coming up, Indianapolis,

as the world reopens particularly with an event with this many folks celebrating.

With that I hand it off to the man who calls anything that is a race, announced that Leigh Diffey is the play-by-play voice of track and field in the Olympics, but is home now calling INDYCAR and the Indy 500 for the third time.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Good afternoon, everyone. I was reminded just so harshly the other day how fast and exciting these cars are when I came in for the final couple of days of practice. I drove through the turn two tunnel, I stopped my rental car, got out near the museum there, watching the cars go through one, down the short chute to two. It was such a wonderful reminder of how extraordinary this place is with those cars.

We've been here for the last two weeks. But from watching them go around the Grand Prix circuit, standing there and watching the brutal speed and sound, then to look up and see some people sitting in the turn one grandstands, it just kind of felt right. It felt fantastic. To see the hubbub in the garage area, Gasoline Alley, the concession area, to see people back, people happy to be back.

I think I'm more excited and looking forward to this one perhaps even more so than our maiden one in 2019. We're back on Memorial Day weekend. The fans are back. We get this unbelievable gift of calling the biggest race in the world when the championship and the series is arguably at its strongest point. Five different winners in five races.

You have the superstar veteran names blended with these exciting new young guys who aren't afraid to do anything. I just think we have this amazing gift right now and we're not going to squander it, we're going to cherish it, give you guys and all of our viewers a fabulous Sunday afternoon of INDYCAR racing.

Townsend, you're ready to roll, mate. Take it away.

TOWNSEND BELL: I'm glad you mentioned speed because over the last few years I've been encouraging INDYCAR to continue to push the limits. Ever since I was a kid 11 years old, 1986, going to the Indy 500, the Greatest Spectacle in Racing was built on one single ethos, which is how fast can the cars go, how fast can



these drivers push these cars, what kind of limits can they break with new track records.

I'm pleased that this year is the fastest field in Indy 500 history, at over 230 miles an hour average for the entire field from qualifying. It was an electric day on Pole Day there at Indianapolis with the Fast Nine shootout. Scott Dixon getting his first pole position in two years.

So exciting, as Leigh said, to see this wave of new young talent that has come in with incredible skill, bravery, and an amazing ability at such a young age to kind of guide these missiles to record speed.

To see VeeKay go out and do what he did in Chevrolet, Colton Herta answer him. VeeKay is 20 years old. Colton Herta is 21 years old. You thought when Colton ran, what a magic lap that was, hanging it out there. We all thought at that time it was probably pole. Lo and behold, here comes Scott Dixon at 40 plus years of age, the veteran with all the experience, but still all of the courage to put it on the line was a great story.

Super pumped to get back there. Glad the cars are breaking records. When you talk about one INDYCAR by itself, it's something special to see it and feel it, like Leigh pulling over and watching and listening. We have to remember this is the only race in the world in terms of the top level where you're going to grid three-wide, 11 rows deep, fire it off into turn one at these incredible speeds.

Super pumped to get out there. As long as Paul Tracy doesn't interrupt me, we should be great. Paul, over to you.

PAUL TRACY: You stole all my talking points that I was going to talk about.

TOWNSEND BELL: Right (laughter).

PAUL TRACY: I have to reiterate everything that Townsend just said. We truly last weekend had a treat of seeing the fastest field ever assembled. I think lost in that, in all the excitement of that, we had a David versus Goliath monumental battle between Penske Racing and A.J. Foyt and R.C. Enerson, the lone one-car team, trying to topple the giant of Penske Racing and force them out of the field. It was truly something to watch.

It just shows now how competitive this field has become and how important it is to have every I dotted and every T crossed when you come to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. If you even just hiccup, you're not going to make the field.

When you look at a guy like Will Power, who is arguably one of the fastest INDYCAR drivers that has ever sat in an INDYCAR, just look at the amount of pole positions he has scored over his career and wins, championships. For him to be hanging it out there, banging into the wall trying to out-qualify R.C. Enerson was a sight to behold. It was truly nothing like I've seen him have to go through because it always comes so easy for him to score these poles. It just seemed so effortless.

For the race what I'm looking at is Scott Dixon is obviously the man to beat. He's the odds-on favorite to win the race. Clearly he has shown that. But he's got a tightrope to walk. He's got a seventh championship on the line. Is he willing, a double points race, to put it all on the line for an Indy 500 win and forego the championship points lead if he gets into a wreck with somebody or gets into a situation? He is so good at managing his overall year-long program. Is he willing to put it all on the line for the 500. He hasn't delivered a 500 in many years, but he certainly delivered a lot of championships in between.

When it comes down to it, there's guys like Rossi, Hunter-Reay, they're ready to kill themselves for a race win. When it comes down to it, is Dixon willing to do that. I feel Rossi and Hunter-Reay are ready to do it.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: We will now take questions from the press.

Q. Sam, not the easiest question. I'm going to try to ask it in a way I might be able to get an answer from you. It is a contract year with NBC Sports and INDYCAR. There has been different reports and speculation out there that says NBC Sports is out of the running on this. I'm wondering what you can or cannot say. Does NBC Sports want to be back with INDYCAR?

SAM FLOOD: We love INDYCAR. We love the Indy 500. We love the partnership we have. We hope we can continue that partnership. So whatever reports are out there, all I know is we are fans on this relationship and want it to continue. I'm on the content side of the business, and the commerce side of the business has to navigate that side of the equation.

As partnership and as the growth we've meant to the sport, working with the team at INDYCAR, we're really proud of all that's been accomplished over these years and hope it continues in the future. That's the way we proceed into this season, planning on being partners for a long time to come.

Q. I know all three of you love the series. I know what

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

it means to you, that you take great care in presenting the series professionally and respectfully, showing it for the strong series it is. What does it mean for the three of you to be part of this series and to be the storytellers of the series?

LEIGH DIFFEY: That's a great question. To me I came to America for INDYCAR, so it means everything to me. To use the old adage: I'm living the dream.

The team that Sam and his staff have put together for us to blend, one of the most common statements made to us by fans or even people within the industry, they say, Sounds like you guys are having a lot of fun. It's true, we are. It's not manufactured. We treat the environment that we work in seriously but with flashes of humor. That comes throughout on the air and through our delivery.

We take it seriously because it is serious, but we're also in the entertainment business. I'm pretty sure you're going to get a similar answer from Townsend and Paul. It means the world to us.

TOWNSEND BELL: It's a privilege. The privilege is no greater than when we go to Indy this weekend to cover this race. I didn't know what to expect back in 2019 when we had a chance to call our first Indy 500. What I realized in that moment is that the race and our job to tell the stories is one of celebrating I think the passion that not only the three of us have in the booth for the sport, but the 250,000, 300,000 fans that gather with us there.

I've always felt like Indy is just that one big celebration where, sure, there's fans that are rooting for different drivers, but I think it's different than a Super Bowl or a national championship college football game where you're either a red team or a blue team. At Indy it just feels like it's more of a religious experience where everybody is celebrating speed and the glory of going after the biggest prize in racing.

It's a tremendous honor. I think we all bring something pretty unique to the table. I think even our opening remarks, just look at the insight that Paul brings. He just brought up something about Scott Dixon that I hadn't thought about. Paul has said that on the broadcast, said, Hey, think about Dixon racing for points versus an overall Indy 500 win. That's something that we could debate whether that's the case, would he go down that path. I think people enjoy the different perspectives there.

I enjoy the fact that I hear about these things and am surprised by some of those insights as they're happening in real-time. It's not like we rehearsed this out. It's a stream of consciousness that we're proud to deliver, hope we get

to do for many years to come.

PAUL TRACY: I guess when I stopped driving and I wasn't around for a while, I didn't realize that once I got back into the sport with NBC when they had me come onboard with them, I didn't realize how much I missed the camaraderie that I had with the drivers. I didn't have a lot of that when I was racing because I was so competitive and I was so fiery. I kind of kept guys as an enemy.

But as I've grown into this broadcasting role, I've become very good friends with a lot of the drivers. They'll express to me a side of things that they typically wouldn't say to a journalist or a pit reporter, will talk about things. They let me on the inside of things. Some things I can't say on air and some things they're okay with me saying on air. I really enjoy that part of it.

Also being around the fans. When Townsend and I walk around the paddock together, go to lunch, the amount of people that come up to us, DiffeY as well, say, Man, you guys are the best, the best team ever that's been calling races. We hear that at every single race that we go to, every single market.

Sam has put together a fantastic team of people that are all really good friends. I think we do an amazing job at putting out a product, putting people on the inside of the product and giving them the information that they typically wouldn't get anywhere else in any other sport, I believe.

Q. Do you think anybody could do a better job than the job NBC Sports is doing with INDYCAR?

SAM FLOOD: The bar is very, very, very, very high.

Q. Mr. Flood, to have the race from a TV standpoint back on its traditional date, how important is that rating-wise? I know there was a little bit of disappointment with the ratings from last August, the fact that maybe a lot of casual sports viewers didn't realize the Indy 500 was happening that weekend.

SAM FLOOD: I don't think that's specific just to the Indy 500. It's the way the mismatch of the sports calendar last year was very different. The Kentucky Derby was run on a different day, the NBA Finals, the Stanley Cup Finals different days. All these sports had different time frames. The comparatives aren't real.

We don't worry about that. We worry about what's in front of us, which is the time to have an incredible Indy 500 with the world coming back to normal, fans in the stands, and the story of the race is great. Even better yet might be the story of the people that finally get to get back into that



environment and celebrate this great American tradition.

Q. Have you seen a realignment of data from what you saw with this year's Kentucky Derby? Did it compare favorably to other May Derbys and expect the same thing for the Indy 500?

SAM FLOOD: I can say the Kentucky Derby number was up dramatically. Obviously 2019 for the Derby is tough to compare because it has the controversial finish that extended the drama for 22 minutes after the finish as they decided to throw a horse out of the race for the first time and forever. For that reason the number was exceptionally high. But our Derby number from the first Saturday in May was up in that stratosphere.

History tells us that there are good numbers out there. As we all know, there are a million factors coming into ratings. Weather is a big part of it.

Q. You're in the storytelling business. You brought in some additional storytellers to tell the story this weekend. Jimmie Johnson is an INDYCAR rookie, but of course he's a seven-time NASCAR champion. You have Steve Letarte, Dale Jr. is going to be back, Danica. Do you believe having a broad-based group of storytellers from the INDYCAR side, the NASCAR side, helps bring in a bigger audience?

SAM FLOOD: Our goal is to serve the fans, and we've got a group of talent that serves the fans exceptionally well.

The one thing I'll tell you is the three gentlemen on the phone with us right now call the race and have exceptional ability to see what's happening before it happens and tell you why it matters. Then we're going to add context with a group of talent we have in and around them.

Nothing at NBC Sports is a bigger message that it's a big event than Mike Tirico as the host. That lets the world know this is big-time. Mike is going to have some fun people to play with and work with over the weekend. We're thrilled.

Our lineup tells you how important it is to us and this company.

Q. Sam, obviously you produced the show last year without any fans in the stands. You're coming back to full stands. How will the fans play a role from the actual visual part of the broadcast after not being there since 2019?

SAM FLOOD: You obviously shoot the race a little bit differently. The spectacle is back. Last year empty stands

all around the racetrack is a very different visual. You could have the greatest football game or the greatest basketball game, if there are empty seats, it's not an event, it's a game.

When you have a packed house or a very full house at a car race, it becomes an event again. It's more than a race. Our job is to lean into that, celebrate that. Some of the content in the pre-race show is going to be looking at the people who are so passionate about this event that aren't necessarily sitting in a driver's seat, but their passion is sitting in the stands outside turn two, or down the backstretch, wherever they might be, what is their preferred angle of watching this race. We're going to tell that story and show how special it is to be back home.

Q. Do you know the applications of where that drone will be and how much that drone will add to the broadcast this year?

SAM FLOOD: It's always a process. We've had great success with drones on other events. Sean Owens is this exceptional young director. He's got great ideas. He's going to work it in and make sure the camera has the quality and the look that takes us to the next level.

The one hard part about drones is they're not up in the air for a very long time, so they're up in spurts. He's got a time when he wants to do it. Does he want to do it for a restart? Does he want to do it for pit stops? When do you want to utilize it? They're up, then got to come down and re-power before they go up again.

It's a bit of a math equation. No one said the directors have to know math, but Sean is going to have to know some math on Sunday to know how he wants to deploy it the right time in the race.

It certainly is going to be beneficial building the hype.

Q. What would a Scott Dixon win this weekend do to further cement his legacy?

LEIGH DIFFEY: I think that it adds to the story, like it adds to his incredible story. He was so mad last year with the way that the race finished, that he was denied a chance to beat Sato and get his second win.

Across the spectrum of his career, he doesn't rate last year when he won his sixth championship as his best year clearly because he didn't win the Indy 500. He rates 2008 as his best career year. That's how much it means to him.

I think it just elevates him further in the sport's history. I think it would be appropriate if he won. He's such a good



steward of the sport. He's such a great ambassador of the sport. In my opinion, he deserves to be a multi-time 500 winner.

TOWNSEND BELL: I'll add to that and say I think if you look at the multi-time winners at Indy, Foyt, Mears, Unser, Castroneves, et cetera, Dario, Dixon with one, that doesn't seem fair or appropriate when positioned next to his six championships and potentially a seventh this year where he's well on his way at least in terms of the first five races.

I go back to Paul's point earlier. I think it's going to be fascinating to see how he decides down the stretch of the Indy 500 to play his hand. Last year the strong indication was that you obviously had to make your move early, like Sato did. It wasn't going to be a last-lap thing.

Based on what we've seen in practice, it seems like that is still going to be the case. INDYCAR has increased the race-ability of the car with some of the aero changes. But the last 10 or 15 laps in a tire stint are difficult, the field tends to spread out. If there's a restart in the last 20 or 30 laps, it's going to create huge urgency to make moves. There's going to be some guys willing to take some huge risks.

How big of a risk is Scott willing to take, knowing what he learned last year, a painful lesson about Sato making the move early enough, Scott just couldn't really counter, couldn't get close enough to respond before the final caution, versus wanting to drive for championship points, extend his current lead in the championship. I think that will be fascinating to watch.

No question the lessons from last year, what all the drivers have learned this year in practice so far, is going to put a huge priority on those first probably five laps on a restart. That creates a lot of drama and a lot of high risk for the drivers. That's where it's fun to watch.

PAUL TRACY: I'm thinking of how to put my answer to that. A second Indy 500, a seventh championship, what it does to change his status in the sport. I don't really think it changes too much, other than he's going for these individual glories as a driver and competitor. There's no denying his level of talent, his level of commitment, his level of fitness.

But does it change his perspective from the outside looking in? I don't know. He's the type of character, and this is no disrespect to Scott, I think he is one of the most talented race drivers that has ever sat in a race car, but if you sent him out in downtown at any race we go to, people don't really recognize him out on the street because he's so understated, mellow, not controversial. He blends into the

crowd.

From a sporting perspective, from a general public perspective, I don't know how much it changes if he wins another Indy 500 and another championship. Certainly within the sport there's no denying that he is going to go down as one of the greatest drivers of all time. Whether that resonates with the casual fan, I don't know.

Q. Do you think there are any concerns with Team Penske thus far this season? What are your expectations for the team on Sunday?

TOWNSEND BELL: Yeah, I think there are concerns. Team Penske has not won a race in the first five races of this season. The last time that happened was 2013. 18 Indy 500 wins, they're head and shoulders above any other team in the sport. The qualifying performance was a shock to everyone, including their drivers, and I'm sure ownership as well.

The crazy thing about the last week is that if you watched Peacock in the 40-some hours that we broadcast live during the week, for each practice day, certainly Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of practice, with a ton of laps run, a bunch of group running and race simulation running from the field, I would say 60% of our praise was heaped on how strong the Team Penske cars were in race configuration, how excellent the balance looked, how close their drivers could trail another car in turbulent air. We were surprised as anybody to see them struggle in qualifying trim.

But, boy, doesn't that train up for an unbelievable Indy 500 to have the most successful team in the history of the race starting mid to deep in the pack with four drivers and four cars that in practice look to be better than anybody.

It's almost like an accidental reverse grid or something in that there's these incredible race cars that are going to be fun to watch. They certainly don't appear like they're going to finish anywhere near mid to tail end of the pack. They have a lot of great cars and drivers to pass. The excitement will be there from the very beginning with those four drivers.

I think we're in for a real treat. I hate to say it, but I think we're lucky to have them struggle in qualifying because they're going forward, for sure.

LEIGH DIFFEY: I think the interesting thing, too, is when was the last time you saw Will Power have that look of shock and disbelief. He's normally got those piercing eyes on his target. He looked like a deer in the headlights. He was seriously concerned, knew the threat was real he

wasn't going to make the field. That's one side of it.

The other side, too, is their qualifying performance this year very much mirrored what occurred last year. Josef Newgarden was not far away from those top four in last year's race. Have Dixon and Sato swapping for the lead, Rahal right behind them, Santino Ferrucci. The next one in the field was Josef Newgarden.

Townsend's point is very accurate. I think it's going to be spectacular to watch and come through.

PAUL TRACY: I agree with both of these guys. I think Penske's cars in race trim are fine. I think they have good handling cars. For whatever reason they're lacking the qualifying speed. That really all just comes down to it's not one thing you're going to put on the car that's going to fix everything. It's a hundred little things, minute things that make the difference.

Certainly in this field, in a 500-mile race, you can win from anywhere in the field. To give you an example, I started 32nd in '02. Guys have started from the back and won 500-mile races before. But it certainly doesn't make your job easier.

You kind of put yourself in the danger zone we call it, Townsend and I, where the things that happen in the back of the field, you get caught up in other people's mistakes, the things that happen. The guys in the back, the middle to the back of the field, actually race you harder and are more aggressive than the guys who are running inside the top five.

You'll see the top three or four runners, there's give-and-take, they're kind of letting each other go, shuffle back and forth. When you get back 10th on back, those guys are not willing to give up a position to anybody. They'll run you into the pit wall if they have to.

Like I said, the guys in the middle and the back of the field get really aggressive and territorial about their running position, and do not want to give up a position at all.

Coming through from the back of the field is extremely difficult. You've got to take risks, big risks, to make it happen, and also take big risks on your strategy and do something different than the leaders are doing which can either hurt you or help you when it comes down to the end of the race, whether it turns into any type of a fuel mileage race. You can either be on the good end of it if everything goes right, or you could be speckled at the front and be light on fuel, have to save fuel to make it to the end when other guys don't.

It's a juggling act. It's a three-hour, five-balls-in-the-air juggling act to win a 500-mile race.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thanks, everybody, for joining us today. Thank you to our speakers. Again, NBC Sports' coverage of the Indianapolis 500 begins at Sunday at 9 a.m. eastern on NBCSN, followed by coverage at 11 a.m. eastern on NBC.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports