

# NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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**Mike Tirico**

**Danica Patrick**

**Dale Earnhardt Jr.**

**Leigh Diffey**

**James Hinchcliffe**

**Townsend Bell**

Press Conference



I'm sure they're going to be for the experts.

With that, I'll kick it over to Danica.

DANICA PATRICK: Thanks, Mike.

Well, great to be back with you, Mike, Dale, the whole crew that does the whole season. I have so much fun when I do this race. I'm already back in Indianapolis as of yesterday. Just driving around, seeing all the checkered flags, Indianapolis Motor Speedway flags out in front of houses, the city is in the spirit.

Even better of course everyone that wants to come can come to the race as we have full grandstands for the first time in a couple years.

On track, it's one of the most exciting years. The story line of the young guns, then the old guard, is still going. Even more dramatic sense right now with the polesitter of Scott being the fastest qualifier in history. But then, of course, the young guys are right there. It's going to be another super exciting Indy 500 I'm sure.

Can Helio get his fifth? Obviously that would be dramatic. Being there for when he won his fourth, it was a really fun experience. It was cool to be able to watch that happen. He's such a good guy.

There's just lots that's ready to unfold. What I've always loved about the Indy 500 is that there are so many opportunities for different endings. That's why, from a driver's perspective, it's such an alluring race, so sought after. There's so many drivers that can walk away and say, It could have been me if it had just gone this way. It's the longest, most amount of pit stops, most amount of things happen.

We'll all be ready to report on it and get that to the fans. Just happy to be back. I think from here, turning it over to Dale.

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Yeah, I'm excited to get the ask from NBC to return to Indy and work the race. It's hard to explain to anybody what it's like to be there in person on that day. I've watched that race my whole life, and most of the time was watching it from the garage at Charlotte Motor Speedway, like the rest of the NASCAR industry. We all

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for joining us today for our media conference call to preview Sunday's 106th running of the Indianapolis 500. Joining us today is host Mike Tirico and guest analysts Danica Patrick and Dale Earnhardt Jr., as well as our lead INDYCAR race team of Leigh Diffey, Townsend Bell and James Hinchcliffe.

We'll begin with opening remarks. We'll start with Mike Tirico.

MIKE TIRICO: Good afternoon, everyone. Great to be on the call, and great to be with our INDYCAR group one more time. It has been three wonderful experiences for me. I'm looking forward to the fourth for me personally. The entirety of NBC Sports, it's so great to bookend the month of May with two of the biggest races in America, the Kentucky Derby at the start of the month, then the Indianapolis 500 at the end of the month. These massive crowds, traditions that are over a century long in our country.

For me personally, it's great to be back working with Danica and Dale, Jr. I've had a chance to do this a few times. It will be nice to enjoy the weekend at the Brickyard, back to the way it was the first time there in 2019 with a full crowd.

Obviously no one there in 2020. Limited crowd in '21. To be back to full steam like we've seen at other events adds to the ambience, experience and the television broadcast as well. Looking forward to being with everyone and being back at the Brickyard. Happy to answer any questions, but



stopped everything we were doing in that moment and tried to get every minute of viewership we could to see how that was going to play out.

I'd always grown up in the stockcar world; that world had captured my heart. When I went to the Indy 500 for the very first time, it's not even close what that race is like in person compared to anything I had ever experienced in my career.

I'm bringing my wife this year. I just cannot wait for her to see the size of this event, to feel the tradition that you feel, as the pre-race is sort of playing itself out, it's so special.

I'm so thankful to be asked to come back. Traditionally in these type of events I would be working with Rut during the pre-race, but I learned I'll be on the pit box for the pre-race show with Townsend. I've really enjoyed working alongside him. It's going to be fun to do that again.

During the race, I'll be up there with Danica and Mike, like I've done in the past. That will be a lot of fun when they drop in to get our take on what we're watching. That's such a great location, if it's in the same location, I believe it is, on pit road. You really get a sense of the speed and the energy. You're in great proximity to the crowd itself. You're taking all the things that are happening at the racetrack during the event. You're in close proximity to everything. You really get pretty fired up. Just really makes for an enthusiastic show.

I'm excited to get into town. It's going to be an awesome week. Can't wait to see Diffey and Townsend and everybody. Haven't seen some of these folks in quite a while.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Dale, you speak about the feeling, you're bringing Amy this year, what she's going to experience. There are so many great story lines throughout the field, which we could point to in any direction. But I want to bring everybody back to the fans.

We experienced the most bizarre race and sporting event ever in 2020 with nobody here. This year there's going to be in excess of 300,000 people here. It's the biggest sporting day, single-day crowd, in the world. We cannot lose sight of that because having done Olympic Summer Games, Olympic Winter Games, I went to Super Bowl 50. Everybody on this call has their favorite or a meaningful sporting event. We cannot lose sight of the fact this is the biggest single-day sporting crowd in the world. Nowhere assembles a crowd like Indianapolis.

The other day our new teammate and our buddy James Hinchcliffe and I experienced this, on qualifying weekend,

trying to walk from the pagoda to Gasoline Alley was a challenge. There were that many people there on qualifying day, which has not been a rich tradition for a number of years. It used to be back in the day.

For some reason, maybe people are just enjoying going to live sporting events again. We're back. The world is back. I know there's still some health challenges. But the feeling this year just seems something different. It's awesome. We had a terrific GMR Grand Prix of Indy. We had the most mesmerizing qualifying weekend with the fastest ever qualifying field in more than a hundred years. There's so many special elements to this weekend that we should and rightfully so be excited about.

T-Bell?

TOWNSEND BELL: Thanks, Diff. Great opening remarks by everyone. To drill down even further on the energy and the excitement and the size of the crowd, as you guys were speaking, I was thinking to myself, Why is that? Why is this the biggest live sporting event in the world? It's called the greatest spectacle of racing for a reason.

Ever since I was 11 years old and came to this race in 1986, the spectacle was twofold: it was the foundation of insane, regard-breaking speeds, then competition on race day. People showed up for really I think those two reasons, in addition to being an amazing celebration of our country, Memorial Day weekend.

For many years it felt like the first part of that equation, the speed part, kind of flat lined. I think that Diff's observation of the crowd this past weekend, they're back because, yes, things are opening up again, everybody wants to get out, but they're back for a reason. They're back to seeing speeds that are really pushing the limit again. That is the bedrock for me of the Indy 500.

Conor Daly clocked a back straightaway speed in practice on Friday touching on 245 miles an hour, which is just awesome. You think about Scott Dixon's qualifying run, the fastest polesitter we've ever had, at an average speed -- average speed -- of 234 miles an hour.

The energy for me, the passion, is just at an all-time high. I just cannot wait for this weekend because the cars are going faster, and that matters. Then the competition side of that, this weekend, on Sunday, I think we can expect a huge amount of urgency from some of the cars that didn't qualify as well as they wanted because I just get the sense you can't afford to sit and ride around this year like you have in years past.

If you're somebody like Josef Newgarden or Scott



McLaughlin, with fast race cars, but maybe not the fastest qualifying car, I think you're going to see some urgency in the beginning. It should just be a fantastic race right from the get-go.

Thrilled to be back. Excited for that foundation and that core attribute of speed to really be back in our sport in a fantastic way. Also love having James as part of the team. It gives us really current experience and a lot of key insights that I'm thankful for.

James, take it away.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Thank you, Townsend.

For me, it's obviously a huge honor and a privilege to be asked to be part of the NBC team for this event. Bit of a different seat for me from the last few years. That transition so far this year has been very smooth, been a lot of fun. Such a great team with us at the racetrack, back at Stamford that makes this all happen. It's been a real joy to be part of that team.

For me, the month of May, specifically race day at the Indy 500, no doubt some of the most special memories of my career and of my life. But also some of the most stressful times you're ever going to spend behind the wheel of a race car or getting ready to get into a car.

I'm so excited to kind of see from this new perspective now with the knowledge that I have from the last 10 or so years of being in the sport. Now getting not to just witness it from the outside but share that experience with so many people.

One of my favorite things has always been educating people about INDYCAR racing and what we do. Now we have this phenomenal platform to tell the world what they're watching these drivers do. An incredible feat that every one of these 34 drivers is taking on Sunday. Just trying to make sure we get that point across to the viewers is an important one.

Like I said, just really happy to be part of the team. Really appreciate the opportunity. Can't wait to follow along on all the story lines that were touched on, talked about, see how this plays out.

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

**Q. Dale, it seems like some of your best Dale Jr. Download interviews where are when you get together with INDYCAR drivers and legends, seems like you get immersed into their story. As a fellow racer, you're able to appreciate what they've done and how they do**

**it. How much has your Dale Jr. Download, along with your curiosity about the Indianapolis 500 as a youngster, really helped you get immersed for this role to be part of the telecast?**

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Well, I think doing the podcast and the show gave me a little bit more confidence as I do it, as an interviewer, challenged me to sort of get outside of that comfort zone and interview not only non-NASCAR drivers and individuals, but non-racing, non-sports individuals.

We have had a lot of fun talking to a lot of the INDYCAR drivers because each driver's path to where they are and where they will be this Sunday is so unique to themselves. In other forms of motorsport or in stockcars, the paths are maybe not predictable, but unremarkable. That's not the case with a lot of these INDYCAR drivers.

Their route, there's never one the same, no two are the same. They travel all across the world seeking opportunities in racing in different countries to eventually somehow find their way here, end up here, with this opportunity to race in INDYCAR and in the Indy 500. It's really compelling to hear how they made those decisions.

I think INDYCAR has some of the most interesting and entertaining, fun personalities in the drivers. And they are different than what I'm used to experiencing.

There's a difference in approach to being accessible that these drivers have; the way that they need to be accessible in their series, at the racetrack, to the fans; the way I think the INDYCAR drivers all seem to recognize the importance of that and all seem to work together to push not only themselves but the organization, their sport, forward.

It's a fun thing to be around. Yeah, we have a lot of fun when we get those guys in the room. Certainly makes us much bigger fans of not only the series but the drivers individually. It's pretty cool to get to know some of them.

Can't wait to run into a couple of those guys this weekend.

**Q. How excited have you been watching your former Hendrick teammate do so well this month?**

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: I've been really excited for Jimmie. I was talking about that today on the podcast. I'm a little bit nervous because he seems to be pushing to the max. Every time he's on the track, it's like he is on the edge. Nobody's going to reach out and tell a seven-time champion, with all the success he's had in his career, what to do, how to drive, how to approach anything.



I just want him to -- I'm just pulling for him to have a great experience in the race and have a result that he can be happy with and smile about in the end.

I am full of anxiety that he's going to push, push, push too hard, and somehow that might put him in a bad situation. He's gotten so, so close a few times already this month to some bad situations. But he's a pro. You trust that he knows what he's out there doing, understanding the limits of the car.

**Q. Leigh, given Formula 1's growth in the United States, I'm curious what opportunities and challenges you see for INDYCAR moving forward.**

LEIGH DIFFEY: Thanks for being on and thanks for the question.

Look, I think it's a massive positive just for the sport. We are super proud of the production values and the product that we put out for the Indy 500. Actually, frankly, for the entire NTT INDYCAR SERIES.

Part of the family is Sky Sports, right, under the umbrella of Comcast. What Sky does for Formula 1 is very good. It's a great product. Then you go to more poignantly about your point, sport, Formula 1, its success, which the explosion here in the U.S. can be pretty much directly attributed to the Netflix Drive to Survive multiple episodes and series.

I like the fact that it has been able to attract not necessarily motorsports fans to the sport. We don't need to really dig into F1 or INDYCAR or NASCAR, whatever it might be. It's just the sport holistically, people are interested in. We're seeing that. Our ratings are up on INDYCAR. The beginning of the year with FOX for NASCAR before we take over, ratings are up. Formula 1 is enjoying a really good team. The IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar series, which we air on NBC Sports, is enjoying a terrific year.

I don't know why, but if it is attributable to Formula 1, let's ride off it, let's enjoy it. Right now the sport of motorsport is enjoying a really positive time. As I said in my opening remarks, just the crowd at Indy here for qualifying weekend was fantastic.

People are jacked. People are engaged. People are enjoying the sport of motorsports. While we're in this, because people are all too quick to talk about the glory days, the golden days, back when, blah, blah, blah, maybe the glory days and golden days are just now, so let's enjoy this moment.

**Q. Townsend, James and Danica. As the three on the**

**call who have competed in this race, we saw some of the fastest qualifying speeds in history last week, last weekend. How do you think that affects what we might see in the race? Do you think it favors a specific team, veterans over rookies? What do you think on that end?**

TOWNSEND BELL: Yeah, it was awesome to see the speeds up. I don't know that I could put my finger on any one reason why it's just a little bit quicker this year. The car obviously has evolved, the engine manufacturers between Chevy and Honda are in a fierce competition.

But mainly I think it's the track penetrant has also made a little bit of a difference. The biggest thing I think it leads to is on race day maybe we'll see some fuel consumption that is a little bit more aggressive than we have had in years past. Anytime you're going faster, you're burning more fuel. Potentially it's going to shorten up the stints a little bit and open up the strategies just a little bit more.

Maybe some teams are going to elect to make one extra pit stop than we have seen historically. I'm not exactly sure the reason why, but I'm happy the speeds are up, I think it's that much more exciting.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I'll jump in here and say I agree with Townsend. It's hard to put your finger on what's causing those speeds. I don't really mind why it is, I just love that it's happening.

For the race itself, I think when we went back to race running on Monday, the pace that we saw from cars running up front was probably a lot closer to what we saw in race trim last year compared to the gap that we're seeing in qualifying trim.

My hope is that, as Townsend alluded to the penetrant, maybe it is adding a little more grip. Maybe that makes following a little bit easier, which hopefully will make passing a little more frequent. Either way, with the fastest field in history, you know it's a close competition guys fighting out there to make up every spot every chance they get.

I think the race is going to be just as exciting as what we've seen the last few seasons.

DANICA PATRICK: From my perspective, I mean, I think it's just really mostly exciting from a fan perspective. It adds drama and excitement to know that we have essentially, like you say, I don't know if it's considered the fastest field in history, but we have at least the fastest qualifier. I think that's just great to tell the fans.





Speed is exciting to people.

As far as what it means inside the car, I mean, we've been creeping around these speeds for a while. It's kind of just a little bit more. So I think probably the guys had a better perspective on that, having been more in the thick of it this year, having obviously been recently in the car.

I mean, fuel could be a thing, sure. I remember driving at 230-some miles an hour versus 200 miles an hour, you got to turn the wheel a little bit slower. Just that little bit could make it a little bit more exciting for the drivers. By 'exciting', I mean a handful.

**Q. Townsend, James and Danica, as the three folks that have raced with Scott at different portions of his career, can you give any sort of perspective of what you feel like finally being able to break through and get that notorious second win at the Indy 500 after 14 years might mean for him.**

TOWNSEND BELL: Thanks for the question.

Yeah, I raced against Scott starting in 2000 I think was my first year in Indy Lights. It was clear back then that Scott was special in a number of ways, particularly his race craft, his ability to compartmentalize what would normally be a range of emotions that I think any human would normally go through during a race, whether that's exhilaration or frustration or anything in between, he seemed to really manage that well.

When I think about what it takes to be successful at Indianapolis, being able to compartmentalize emotion throughout the race is really important. He's done it better than anyone. That's why he's a six-time champion.

Sure he has one Indy 500 win, but I would put that mostly down to circumstantial. He's been in the hunt so many times. He's been at the front so many times. I think we ran the stats the other day. The Andretti family, with Mario, Michael and Marco, 70 total starts, one win. We're talking about a group of names there that have always been competitive at the Speedway.

I'm going to put it down mostly to circumstance.

Now, if there was ever a year that I think Scott has a better chance than others, it might be this year. His team, Chip Ganassi Racing, all month or all week, if you will, practice and qualifying, we have circled those cars as standouts in terms of their balance, speed, how they handle dirty air, all of that.

They seem to be a cut above everyone. Scott, on that

team, is the strongest driver at Indianapolis. He's got a great shot this year.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Kind of following up on Townsend's point there, it wouldn't surprise me to learn deep down part of what motivates Scott to still be an INDYCAR driver, other than the obvious, is that second win at the 500. Six championships in, I know how much a second win would mean to women. I can't help but think that's part of the reason he's still doing this full-time and why the drivers push yourself to be competitive exists.

The big challenge this year, as Townsend said, are his teammates. I think in years past, Scott has kind of always been the clear favorite on the team, the clear fastest on the team. This year has been a little bit more of a struggle for him. Even the start of the month of May wasn't as smooth as we're used to seeing. It wasn't really until Saturday morning where we saw the unbelievable pace. Sunday morning actually where we saw the big pace come out of the 9 car.

While I agree that he has a tremendous shot because of the dominance we've seen of the team so far, his biggest competitors unfortunately are in the same stable. You look at what Alex Palou did last year, Tony Kanaan, Marcus Ericsson has been quick, then of course Jimmie having run more 500-mile races than the rest of the 32 drivers he's racing against Sunday combined have done.

We'll see what plays out. But he is definitely going to be one to watch.

DANICA PATRICK: Yeah, James, I think that's a really good point, just the struggles that he's had. He hasn't had the best start to the season this year.

What I find just so impressive and admirable and rare is how long he's been at it and how good he is, how much passion. I think that's a part that's amazing, just the real passion and drive for it after that much time.

To be struggling, then to sort of end up in the place right now where he's the fastest qualifier, that drive is still there. I think that's just rare. It's exciting to watch that.

As you guys have pointed out, he's been in the mix so many times, like it just seemed like a clear favorite to win so many times, leading so many laps. I would be really curious to ask him, like, what fuels him, what motivates him. There's clearly some magic there because he just keeps coming (laughter).

**Q. Danica, obviously as the pioneer for females in auto racing, then last year you had Simona De**

**Silvestro run the Indy 500, and it was announced earlier that an all-female INDYCAR team led by Beth Paretta with Simona as the driver is going to compete in three races this year. Danica, having run your last Indy 500 a couple years ago, where is your evaluation of auto racing as far as accessibility for drivers, owners, pit crew members? How much ground has been made, and what ground is yet to be made up?**

DANICA PATRICK: Thanks for your question.

Just something unique about me, I'm just not one of those girl athletes that is trying to point out all the girl athlete stuff. I competed against the guys, and I used my femininity to my comfort level, to the extent it helps me in my career with sponsors and really just, honestly, express that side of me.

So I'm not here to, like, dwell on -- I'm not here to try to - how do I say it - trying to promote it. But I think if there are women drivers and pit crew and engineers and personnel that are qualified for the job, they sure as heck should be doing it.

So I think there are more opportunities than ever, to be honest. I don't think it's less. I don't think it's harder. I think it's easier, as those that came before me, and then myself, and so on. It clears the path.

Also it makes people want to find something rare again. Women are still not common. So, yeah, I mean, I think there are probably some aspects within a full women's team of physically it's going to be hard to be as fast as guys on a pit stop, things like that. I think like pure physicality does play into it.

The car was an extension of me, but it wasn't just me. So I think that kind of bridged the gap between the difference. But all in all there are more opportunities I think now than ever. It will be interesting to see how they do. I hope they're competitive.

**Q. Dale Jr., just as sort of a crossover with NASCAR fans, like everyone wants your opinion on things. If you could make a prediction for who you think will win Sunday's race?**

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Oh, my gosh.

Well, I think as some people on this call said before, the Ganassi car has a lot of speed. Dixon being fast, being smart, being such a great talent, probably is putting himself in that conversation as one of the favorites.

Honestly, though, I think Jimmie could surprise a lot of

people. I think that he made a good accounting of himself at Texas. This whole month, he was able to have so much time with the car and the team at the facility, sort of move beyond the enormity of the moment. I know that's going to be nearly impossible when he walks out on the grid for the race to sort of be beyond the enormity of the moment or the weight of it.

I really think Jimmie could do really, really well, so...

Outside of that, the one thing that I kind of like about this race and where the series is, where the pace is throughout the field, it's really anybody's race. At some point somebody could be there that maybe surprises us a little bit or somebody we might not tend to expect to be there. The potential for that shocker is always there.

I guess it depends on how the pace goes for the race, how hard these guys run. If fuel mileage is not an issue or if there's guys that are trying to work themselves into a certain pit strategy where they have to run a certain pace, we've seen that in the past. We've seen other teams run hard all day long, not worry about fuel mileage, dictate from the front of the race what's going on.

It will be interesting to see how they approach it, how the different teams approach it, how the drivers approach it as far as that goes.

I don't know. I would probably put my money on Dixon if it was me. I'd have a little bit on Jimmie, as well.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Dale, it just blows me away that more people aren't talking about what Jimmie Johnson has already accomplished. So this Sunday he has the opportunity to become just the third person ever -- ever -- to win the Daytona 500 and the Indianapolis 500, along with A.J. Foyt and Mario Andretti.

People are, Oh, yeah, Jimmie is in the field... They should be talking about him. He qualified in the Fast 12. He had the most miraculous save in qualifying that you're ever going to see at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He doesn't need to do this, he wants to do this.

His results on the road and street courses have not been what he wants. They've been pretty disappointing in his own words. But on the oval he has done more 500-mile races than the entire field put together. It staggers me why more people aren't talking about Jimmie. That's to his benefit. If he sneaks in there and does this, we're all going to witness a special piece of history.

I think we should all acknowledge what he is doing and what he's done, what he continues to do when he doesn't

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

need to do it. He could be sitting on a beach somewhere, but he's not. He wants to do this because it was his childhood dream to be an INDYCAR driver. His hero, Rick Mears, and his dirt bike heroes, Ricky Johnson, have motivated him to get to this point.

People talk with such reverence about Dale Earnhardt Sr. and Richard Petty, and Jimmie has the same amount of NASCAR championships.

We shouldn't forget this moment in motorsports history of what he is doing. Shouldn't be so blasé about the fact that he's in the field. This is a guy in his mid 40s and didn't need to do this, but he is doing it. On the ovals, he's excelling. He blew past Scott Dixon at Texas Motor Speedway to go into the top five. The team called him back because he had some fuel issues so he finished sixth. He went past a six-time champion and a guy who has excelled at Texas Motor Speedway and the guy who sits on pole position for this weekend.

We have to take the blinkers off and acknowledge what this quietly spoken hero has achieved already.

**Q. Mike, Danica and Dale. Could you expand on how you view your respective roles on the broadcast this weekend?**

MIKE TIRICO: I'll be happy to start. It's the same thing like any other event that I have the pleasure of hosting. I think it is to welcome us on the air, set the scene, big-picture perspective of what's going on, some resets within the broadcast. Also all the buildup.

I've been lucky enough to cover about everything here in sports in the last few years. I can't think of a more tradition-filled, dynamic buildup to an event than what we have at Indy. To be right there on the track as all of that is building up, moving around that area with the driver introductions, back home again in Indiana, national anthem, all of that, especially on Memorial Day weekend, it's part of the essence and great tradition that everyone has been talking about.

My job is pretty simple: to set up those moments and our analysts who are with us, elicit the information that lets the person who is watching feel a little bit more close to the event and a little bit more knowledgeable about what's going on.

Once the race starts, sit with Dale and Danica and get their responses to what they're seeing from our perspective.

DANICA PATRICK: Mike, I don't know if it's a simple job, my friend. You make it look simple, but you have a big job

to carry the broadcast and build the excitement up.

I feel like my role is to help give some perspective from what it would be like if you were a driver, the whole experience of the Indy 500, what it's like, the ambience, what it's like the night before, the morning of, going to intros, being on the track, what are you thinking about, what kind of things can occur in the race, what is your perspective. Just everything from a driver's perspective is really what I'm there to help educate the fans on.

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: I think for me, I have motorsports knowledge, but not a ton of understanding -- I don't go to every single INDYCAR race. I didn't grow up going to those races. A lot of things that I'm seeing, questions are instantly popping into your head about why did this happen this way, why did they choose to do this. Maybe I'm seeing or triggered by things or excited by something that someone who's there every single day may take for granted.

I think just being curious and tapping into that curiosity, saying, Why did this happen? How come this was the decision made? A lot of times you end up asking the question that the viewer at home has in their own head. That's kind of fun for me.

You got to embrace the fact that you're not an expert. You do have questions and you would love to have some answers. I kind of enjoy that role, to be honest with you. When I'm put in these positions, it's kind of fun. I'm there as a fan, there experiencing it as a fan. I'm sitting around people who have all these answers to the questions that are popping up into my head. I enjoy it. It's a great way to see the race.

MIKE TIRICO: If I could tailgate on that answer for a second.

It's a good point because events like the Kentucky Derby might be the only horse race people watch all year. The Indy 500 might be one of the few, if any, INDYCAR races that you watch all year. There are a lot of fans who are not the hardcores, who are week in, week out watching.

To have us on the show, the pre-race show, some perspective, it's welcoming to the viewers because, my goodness, Diff and Hinch, Hinch isn't a rookie. If you watch any of the qualifying or practice, he's awesome. Townsend, the rest of the crew. Renée, the producer, does such an incredible job. That group does terrific work.

If you watched the qualifying over the weekend, or even the practice show yesterday, such captivating stuff. Hopefully we can just add to it a little bit and help fill out the

largesse of a show like this around our team that week in, week out is at the top of their game.

We've seen that the last three years during the 500. We're excited we get to hang with our group, to be with Diff and everybody else who is the regular INDYCAR group for NBC, to get to work together.

It's a fun experience for all of us, for sure.

**Q. Danica, Townsend, Dale, about the record speeds this week, I'm kind of curious really in general how fast is too fast? I understand 230 in today's car is different than 230 ten years ago. How do you weigh the record speeds versus the safety of the cars, being able to put up a banner saying record speeds? I bring in Dale also because I know he witnessed as a teenager NASCAR going through something similar with Bill Elliott doing 200-something miles an hour at Talladega.**

TOWNSEND BELL: I can jump in.

I think it's a great question, and the simple answer is: I don't know, but I want to find out. I think that's really the story of Indianapolis for over a hundred years, is just that question: How fast can they go? How much faster can they go? Where is the limit?

Whether that's Indianapolis or chasing the speed of sound back in the '50s and '60s, that curiosity I think is the reason I fell in love with this race in the first place. It was mind-bending as a kid to go to Indianapolis and just couldn't imagine these cars going over 200 miles an hour. When you see it in person or on TV, it really brings that fundamental question up.

I will say years ago we started to flirt with the physical -- driver's physical limit at a race in Texas where there was a lot more banking on a shorter course, really high speeds. We started to get to a G-force level where the driver's physical well-being was compromised a bit in terms of blackout and vertigo.

At Indianapolis there's less banking in the corners. Right now, from a pure G-force standpoint, we are well below that threshold. I think there's room to go there, and I'm fascinated to find out what that limit might be, and that's why I watch, why I'm so curious.

DANICA PATRICK: I mean, of course I agree with Townsend. I don't know. But I do know that the safety team and everybody that works hard on making sure that the cars are as safe as possible, there's a meeting where we go over what has been done in the off-season to prepare for the next, what updates and tweaks are they

making to make it more safe.

Of course, you've seen -- obviously INDYCARs now have a windshield, which is something we never had for all of history until a couple of years ago. They're always making improvements.

They would know from a technical standpoint, like, what speed does it take flight, when the car gets to a certain angle. They would know all that information.

What I guess I hope this would do, just the topic of it being the fastest qualifier in history at Indy, it was just like everybody out there racing is reminded of the sheer speed that's out there.

Look, you can have a big crash at 100, 150, 200, 245. You can have tragic accidents. But let's hope it's at least a little bit of a reminder of how fast they're going out there and to respect each other, not do silly things.

We want an exciting race, but you can do that without touching wheels.

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Townsend had some really, really great points.

I think a couple boxes need to always remain checked. A few of those being the safety of the fans attending the race. I think outside of making sure there's no danger to people that are there to attend, things like that, I mean, there is no 'too fast'.

As long as the cars are somewhat relatable in terms of how they perform, what makes them work, how drivers drive them. As long as the fans can kind of somewhat relate to what's out there on the racetrack and what's making that car go fast, they will always be kind of compelled to watch it. They'll always be impressed with the speed.

^ Jaime start like you talked about, Bill Elliott's run, even watching the cars at Indy this week, it's incredible. We can relate to these cars. They've evolved, but they are generally -- the idea and the basic makeup of the machine is the same.

So as long as we can kind of maintain that connection, these things will always be amazing, and we will always be excited to watch them try to push them further and make them go faster.

**Q. Dale, now that you've been to an Indy 500, is there any part of you that wishes maybe 15 or 20 years ago you could have found a way to run one?**



DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Of course. Without a doubt there are regrets that I didn't maybe try to figure out a way to be able to experience that once in my life.

So, yeah, when you're watching a guy like Kyle Larson talk about it and consider it, you're encouraged because you want to see him go out there and do it. Having my own experience, my own regret, I certainly think that a guy like Kyle Larson would have the same regrets if he doesn't ever give it a shot.

I love the crossover. I love seeing other drivers from other disciplines go and try other things. My favorite crossover is absolutely Cup and INDYCAR, the Daytona 500 and the Indy 500. Watching the drivers move back and forth between disciplines is pretty incredible.

But that ship has sailed. I'm 47. I'll always wonder, I guess, what might have been, what I could have had the opportunity to do.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you so much. We really appreciate all of our speakers for taking part and all of the press for all of your questions. Thank you so much, everybody.

Again, Indy 500 on NBC, Peacock and Universal, Sunday, 11 a.m. Eastern.

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