

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Tuesday, June 21, 2022

Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Jeff Burton

Steve Letarte

Dale Jarrett

Sam Flood

Press Conference



We're glad we have the playoffs. We're glad we've got the race to the playoffs. Excited about that.

Going to have some more fun with drones and Bat Cam. We're going to have a new robotic camera on the pace car that's going to be a part of every Cup race where we've got a new home on USA, and can't wait to be a part of the USA/NBC world.

A lot of excitement and energy coming to USA, and they've already rolled out some shoulder programming, which we're thrilled that they're doing.

It's part of making USA the home of NASCAR for the second half of the season with a great plan and a great partnership there.

I think most of you want to hear from the next guy up on this call, who's just back from his wild European adventure. So Mr. World Traveler, Dale Jr., take it away.

DALE EARNHARDT JR: Thanks. Definitely excited to be on our way back to the racetrack. We've seen a pretty incredible season play out so far. This first half of the year has been, I think, some of the most compelling story lines and some really positive momentum with the Next Gen car.

It's been a lot to absorb for everyone, and I feel like we've got a great understanding of what kind of product that Fox is handing off to us as we begin our part of the season.

I'm looking forward to getting back in the booth and talking about racing. It's a very, very fun job. I've certainly missed it. So getting to do that one off with Fox earlier this year was a great experience to just kind of -- I think there's a little -- there's a lot to understand about the Next Gen car across the board for everybody in the industry, and to be able to actually go into the booth and kind of work a race was a really nice thing for me.

So I really appreciate that opportunity and got me even more excited to once again be with my booth mates for this part of the year.

The year is pretty compelling because we have kind of this new crop of drivers coming in, a lot of new names that are rising up the board, and this is pushing some of those veterans down the board. I think there's a compelling story

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you so much, everyone, for joining us today. In just a moment, we're going to be joined by NBC SPORTS executive producer Sam Flood, and our NASCAR analysts Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jeff Burton, Steve Letarte, and Dale Jarrett.

NBC SPORTS takes over the second half of the NASCAR season this weekend in Nashville, return to Nashville. Coverage of the Cup series begins at 5:00 p.m. eastern on Sunday at NBC and peacock.

Let's get our call started right now. We'll take opening remarks, beginning with Sam Flood.

SAM FLOOD: Thanks, Chris. Thanks everyone for joining us.

We are really excited to get going with our half of the NASCAR season. It was fun to watch the Fox team put on the first half of the season, including having Junior join their group for Talladega. Great to see the audiences.

I went out to the race in Los Angeles before our Super Bowl and really loved the scene there and the idea of bringing NASCAR out to the fans in new ways, which is one of the things we're going to be doing this year. We're going to be really reaching into the fans.

Rutledge has a new city view camera where he's going to be able to go around to new places. For this race he'll be down on Broadway in Nashville telling stories and getting a different view of the race world and welcoming the audience to the various cities and locations in and around the tracks that makes NASCAR so special.



line there in how those drivers are -- those new drivers are starting to take some root in the sport, gaining some real traction.

Also, some of the driver etiquette, the way that guys expect to be raced, the way that some of these younger guys are racing some of the veterans is certainly creating a lot of conversation every week.

This has been going on all year long, and I think it will continue to rise in intensity as we go to the playoffs and into the playoffs when there's more on the line.

The playoffs always seem to bring -- I wouldn't say the worst out in the drivers, but it certainly makes them do things that make them uncomfortable, and I feel like this year will be no different, and it will maybe even be more significant than we've ever seen.

It's going to be a fun ride. I'm going to pass it on to probably absolutely, without question, my favorite of the three guys I get to work with in the booth, Jeff Burton.

JEFF BURTON: You're making my life hard. I think the one thing that you'll hear from all of us is the excitement to get back. We genuinely have a great time doing this. It's a privilege to do it. We all work really hard, we all try really hard to do a good job. We all love our job. It's just so much fun.

The quality of racing makes it even better. When you look at -- if you quite simply think about NBC coming this weekend, we're going to immediately start talking about the playoffs because it's real.

If you look at who -- Blaney, Truex, Emerald, Harvick, Reddick, it is a heavyweight fight to see who can make these playoffs.

Every stage matters, every race finish matters, and it's all happening at the same time you have this incredible change in the sport with this new car and the quality of racing through the roof.

The intensity and aggressiveness that Junior just talked about is through the roof, and it just makes everything that much more important. So I can't wait to get there.

We went to Nashville last year. There were a ton of questions. This is going to be a single-groove track. There's not going to be any passing. That's all we heard, and we had an unbelievable race.

NASCAR this year is doing the same thing to the track. They're even actually widening it out a little bit with the

resin, so that's encouraging to see even better races.

Just a lot of excitement on our side. Can't wait to get going. I'm going to roll it over to Mr. Letarte.

STEVE LETARTE: Thanks, Jeff. There's zero doubt the drivers are going to have everything on the track covered. I'm just really excited, and I've been working hard the first half of the year to understand the car and the nuances that makes one fast and one slow; what mechanical gremlins the crew chiefs are concerned about; what's keeping them up at night.

The story lines that everyone said are just truly abundant with all of the variety, the new teams, the success on and off the racetrack.

Pit stops look different, sound different. There's just so many different aspects, both technical and personal, that I think are making this year fascinating. I agree with everyone. I think Fox did us a nice job getting us going, but now it's time to run to the playoffs. I can't think of a better ten weeks to kick off with than 12 winners and the seats at the table slowly dwindling for everyone else, not to mention some of the biggest names with champions being Truex and Harvick without wins.

Truly to go to Nashville, I'm not sure if anything would surprise us at this point. We could get new winners. We could get a dominant veteran. There's just so many possibilities. I think the unknown and the endless possibilities make any live sporting event exciting. That's what we're going to see.

Not to mention going to a town that loves NASCAR. The fans came out last year in droves. We spent some time with the track president on Motormouths this week, and Eric told is about all the upgrades to the facility from lessons learned in year one.

He got me truly excited to visit it a second time because it was great in year one, and just the list of upgrades and accommodations they plan for the fans really got me excited to see another great crowd and another great event. Excited to see the season get kicked off.

I'll hand it over to our buddy, D.J.

DALE JARRETT: Thanks. I think as a group at NBC SPORTS, we couldn't ask for a better handoff and better scenario to be literally put there right in front of us with everything, the excitement about the sport right now, the new car which has far exceeded any expectations I may have had of the car.



So I applaud NASCAR and everyone who helped design and make this car what it is. It's just incredible, the racing we've seen. The new drivers that we see up front, the teams that are having success that we haven't seen as much in the past, and others trying to find their way to basically keep up with what's going on.

I think that's going to make these next ten races very compelling for us to see who is actually going to make the playoffs and get themselves in a position to do that.

So I'm really excited about this. The amount of commitment and how these drivers have to really, by what they're telling me, force themselves to overdrive these race cars to get the speed and make the cars actually work properly, it's just incredible to me.

You can tell I'm excited about it. I'm looking forward to it, and no better place to kick it off than Nashville. So I'm really looking forward to the weekend.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you everybody for your opening remarks. We can now open it up for questions from the press.

Q. This is for Dale Jr. and Jeff Burton or really anybody who'd like to answer it. I just wondered, you all mentioned it, but I just wondered what your take is on the competition and quality of racing with the Next Gen car that you've seen so far this season compared to maybe what, if any, expectations you had entering the year?

DALE EARNHARDT JR: Well, I'll go first. I think that the car has been a positive, pleasant surprise for me in how it's raced and how some of the races have looked.

There were some moments where there's some concern or some intrigue. Certainly we know at the tire tests at Martinsville now and the short track and that package at Martinsville and getting it right so it puts on the race we anticipate or expect is important, and I think they're putting a lot of effort in to try to make sure they can improve there.

I'll be honest, it's been a way more entertaining car than I expected at the mile and a half, and there have just been some really awesome moments. The way the drivers are able to race around each other, I think, is much better than I anticipated.

I expected with this new car and so many new variables with the way the underbody is and the way the car -- the way the tail is more centered up, I expected this to have -- you know, come with a steep learning curve and a lot of continued collaboration with NASCAR and the teams to

continue to evolve this car, but it's actually been really good right out of the gate.

So we hope that continues. I think also what plays into that is there's some new names in the mix, so that's also helping the story lines a little bit and keeping interest high.

You know, TrackHouse and what they're doing this year is pretty incredible. That's compelling for viewers, I think. That's got people excited about it.

There's never going to be the perfect scenario. There's always going to be things that we want to change or people have opinions about how they want this to look or that to look or what race was good or bad.

We're always going to have that, but I think that NASCAR and the sport in general is more open minded now towards making adjustments and changes than they've ever been.

So I don't feel like there's going to be any roadblocks to gaining what we're wanting to gain in situations like we had at Martinsville and so forth.

JEFF BURTON: I think that -- when I go back and think about all of the preseason testing and all the work that was going on, there were so many unknowns. I don't know at any point in this sport that I was involved there were so many unknowns going into a year.

Looking back to see where we are now and the quality of races that we've seen is amazing. D.J. mentioned it a minute ago, we're seeing guys spinout all by themselves. We're seeing that you're rewarded for really pushing the limit of this car. If you're not willing to push the limit of the car, you probably can't go fast enough. And if you are willing to push the limit of the car, you're probably going to wreck every now and then.

It reminds me a little bit of how it was in the late '90s. I remember giving myself three or four wrecks a year where it was okay. If I drive in the corner and just overstepped my bounds I was going to wreck, and I knew I had to do that if I was going to make enough pace, and we're back to that. That had gone away from the sport.

Not that we want to see drivers just wrecking. We want to see drivers put in a situation where it's really difficult. There's no possible way that anybody could look at this car and say that we're not there. There's certainly some things that could be better, as Junior mentioned, on the short tracks, and I know that NASCAR is working hard on that.

To bring a brand new car in this sport -- when I say brand new, it's all brand new, and to have the racing that we've

had and the competition we've had, I just don't know how it's anything but a success. It's been so much fun to watch.

I've been to most every race watching from the grandstands, and I'm telling you, man, they are racing all over the place. It's thrilling to watch, and I know talking to the drivers, they're all tested and it's pushing their limits as far as crossing that line and getting in wrecks and stuff, but ultimately that's what racing is.

You have to take that vehicle and put it on its edge, and we're seeing that every week.

Q. This question is for anyone. As the first Mexican-born driver to win a cup race, what does Danny Suarez's victory mean for the sport?

DALE EARNHARDT JR: So I think that for me personally, I've always wanted the sport to be more appreciated globally. So for it to have a global following, we have to have a more diverse group of drivers competing from all over the world.

So I always get real excited -- like when Pablo Montoya came to race with us, that was a huge -- not only for me as a driver to be able to compete with him, but that was a massive thing for our sport to have his following, his fan base tune in, learn about our sport, and create new fans and create new interest outside the U.S.

I think that you could see there was a lot of excitement, a lot of interest, and a lot of support for Daniel as he's trying to win that race, as he's closing in on the final laps. You could see that emotion in his voice in his post-race interview about the difficult, challenging journey that he's had, and we all are aware of that as it's happened over the last several years.

Aside from the fact that he's just a great guy and a really nice guy and a person to be around, but he's just got a really amazing story. So he's a great person to cheer for and a good dude to support, but just globally the sport needs international flair and different drivers from different parts of the world competing and being successful.

For me, it was a great day for Daniel for sure, but it was also a big step forward in trying to kind of grow the popularity and awareness of our sport outside of its current bubble.

STEVE LETARTE: I'll add to Dale. What Dale is saying is exactly right. As I've always said, I feel like NASCAR is the best stockcar drivers in the world, much like Formula One is the best open-wheel drivers in the world. And NASCAR's international efforts in the Mexican Series, they

have had a Pinty's Series up in Canada, the European Series.

Hopefully Daniel's win is -- like we've seen Juan Pablo come back, but he had so much success in other series. Daniel, his path here was through stockcars, and now we see an internationally born driver find success, I truly hope that pathway and that dream just becomes brighter and brighter and brighter to every other stockcar driver around the world who feels they can compete on this level.

I think NASCAR is a spectacular sport, and when I look out the window of the booth and watch the race, I want to believe I'm watching the best 40 in the world compete in the stockcar.

I think Daniel just gives me even more belief that we have seen that for a long time, but now we're going to see, as Dale put it, that international flair. I think we're going to see a wider array of drivers in the next years and decades, and I think we'll come back and see that Daniel's success is going to be a big opportunity presented to a lot of other drivers.

Q. I have a couple first for Dale, Jr. Following up on Suarez, I think he was a guy who missed the Daytona 500 driving for an underfunded team, and then kind of has this new life with TrackHouse. Just speaking from perspective, just how -- when you see guys driving for Gaunt Brothers, an underfunded team, doesn't make the Daytona 500, is it hard to envision him where he is now? I would say maybe the only other guy you might look at is like a Bowman who is driving for underfunded teams and kind of found his way back into the Cup Series and an elite ride.

DALE EARNHARDT JR: I think that Daniel's -- it's hard to find any real comparisons because that's -- I think a lot of us thought that his career was nearly over. There's a point in a driver's career where they are relegated down into lesser equipment.

Once that happens, not many of them turn the corner and go back the other way and find their way back into competitive cars.

So Daniel's story is descriptive of a Hollywood movie. It really is a compelling thing that he was able to not only get -- he ends up going to TrackHouse, which none of us thought was going to work right out of the gate. Nobody expected -- basically TrackHouse was purchasing all the assets of Ganassi, which was a team that was somewhat in a struggle to perform. So a lot of uncertainty around just that whole program.

So Daniel just going to that team wasn't -- didn't raise any flags to me like, oh, well, this is the opportunity he's been looking for. I didn't see what Daniel saw or what Justin Marks knew.

I don't think any of us expected that performance out of that team across the board with both cars, with Ross and Daniel. It's amazing. It's really been quite fascinating, to be honest with you, about just how much pace they've had.

Daniel should have won at COTA. I mean, he had the fastest car. There's been other opportunities where he's been quick. I think, even though he's been a champion in our Xfinity Series, I think that when you move up to the Cup Series you have to have those fast cars several times before you figure out how to get them to victory lane.

I think the more TrackHouse shows up with pace and speed, the more potential for Daniel, and obviously Ross, to go to victory lane. That gets better and better because they're going to start to get confidence in themselves, they belong up front, they know how to get to victory lane, they know how to finish these races out.

So the results should continue to improve and the story will remain fascinating on through the rest of the year.

Q. And for Steve, with the extreme heat predicted for this weekend, what parts of the car will you be looking at, or what mechanically would you be looking at to be potential areas that could be impacted the most?

STEVE LETARTE: That's a good question. The heat is going to be a big story both for the competitors and the vehicles, specifically the car. It has been relatively solid. A few minor issues early in the season, but it seems those have been resolved.

If I have my crew chief, I have a concern over things that temperature can easily affect, so that would be the drive lines specifically, the gear box. Xtrac has done a nice job. I'm having no issues, but cooling it is a concern when the ambient is so high, and especially when drivers are shifting more than they ever have, the gear box is being utilized.

Nashville also is a very awkward track when it comes to braking, how much brake coolant you need. At the track we have seen brake issues at, kind of like Kentucky. You wouldn't think of those as short tracks, but when you approach a short track, sometimes you know that brakes are going to be used, so therefore you're on the defense and you are cooling them appropriately.

So when you go to a place like Nashville, the big concerns are your gear box and your braking, and those would be

the two. Engine temperature, it's hard to adjust throughout the course of the day. So while you're not allowed to add tape to the grille, you can restrict some air flow downstream, and it will be interesting to see if all of the teams and manufacturers understand the efficiencies they have in actually cooling the engine.

So I do, I have a lot of question marks. Now, this is what has become a unique weekend, because we'll have more practice than what we have had on most weekends, so I think that will help combat some of the temperature issues.

I think teams will be proactively monitoring those and adjusting as needed.

Q. Dale, you kind of talked about TrackHouse's success this year and obviously Ross and Daniel and what they're doing. I'm curious to get your take on Ross' situation a few weeks ago with Denny and Chase. Obviously, just kind of curious if you remember when you were a young driver trying to make your name in the sport and coming up and if you can remember anything like that unfolding with you where you got into somebody once or twice or three times and then they kind of gave it to you back on the track. Just was kind of curious, you've kind of been on both sides of that, been in the sport for so long. Have you ever had anything like that happen to you when you were young? And kind of what you thought of Ross' apology afterwards.

DALE EARNHARDT JR: There's a lot there. Ross is -- this is not a new thing to see Ross experience. We've raced against him and watched him race in the Xfinity Series, and he ran hard and aggressive with no apology, and that was always fun to watch, unless he was running hard and aggressive with the cars that you owned.

There was an interesting thing for me. I would have weekends where I was frustrated with Ross. Now, Ross used to rent from me. I own some rental properties in town, so I always felt like Ross and I had this good friendship. He was close by in proximity as he was trying to get some traction in the sport, so I always kind of felt like I've known him for a really long time.

There would be weekends when I would be so frustrated with him, but then the very following weekend he would drive the same way but at least it wasn't against my cars and I would love it.

I thought, man, that's exactly what we need. I need some Ross drama in this race, and he would often deliver. So watching what's going on with him throughout the year, and especially at St. Louis, I thought -- now, he made some

mistakes. I don't want Ross going out there and wandering into the side of every car on the racetrack.

But honestly, man, I think that story line dominated a majority of that race, and it made it very compelling, fun to watch what was going to happen. It was comical at times what was going on with Ross and Denny.

So I hope that Ross doesn't change, and I hope that Ross -- now, he's going to polish and improve his craft, but I hope that he doesn't lose that raw ambition that he has when he goes down into the corner on the inside of somebody.

It doesn't seem like it's going anywhere because it's kind of been that way, and I think as he gets higher up in status as he's gotten to the point to where he is in his career, he seems to gain more ambition, more confidence. No one's going to push me around. I'm going to show you.

The apology, I don't know whether I buy it or not. I don't know, to be honest with you. He laid it on pretty thick after the race. But I know he understands that he's got to clean it up a little bit, but I still think that there's a part of him that's like, I'm not going to back down and I'm not dialing it back. I'm not changing my effort or the amount of risk I'm willing to take.

So hopefully for us as viewers going forward he continues to put on a show. He's one of the best things going right now for the sport in terms of entertainment. He's got a little personality to him, which is always important. I hope for our sake that he continues all of his ambitious moments going forward, and especially once we get into the playoffs and it really starts to count and matter.

I can't wait to see what he's willing to try or what he's willing to try to accomplish and do in those moments when his season is on the line, when it's now or never and this next corner he has to make something happen. I think it will be compelling for sure.

Q. This question is for either Jeff or Junior. The first time drivers went to Atlanta this year; it was a gigantic question mark; no one knew what was going to happen. But what is your outlook now that they've had multiple Superspeedway races and they've had more experience in the Next Gen cars overall?

JEFF BURTON: When I talk to the drivers and crew chiefs they feel like Atlanta is going to look the same as it looked in the spring. I question that.

It's going to be really hot, and I know that it's new asphalt and I know that it's all those things, but I still question with

that extreme heat we will probably see if we don't end up with some handling issues ultimately at the end of the day.

The drivers are drinking through a funnel, as far as the information with this new car, and they and the teams are learning like so rapidly. It's going to be interesting to see going back to racing the second time if the same people have success.

I mean, we'll go to a race and we'll see the Fords run just incredibly well, and the next week they don't run well at all. That's fair to say about every manufacturer and every team.

It's just such an unknown year and it changes every week. I do think they're learning quickly, but they've gotten better and better understanding these cars at Daytona and Talladega, and they're trying to lump all that into Atlanta.

But I can't get away from thinking the more they feel like it's going to be another race like it was in the spring, the more they're going to compromise the cars to try to make them low drag, low downforce. Then you add that heat to that, I just think panelling could become an issue.

I hope it is. I think it will make the race that much even more compelling. You get a guy who's running 10th in row 5, and he's having to lift because his stuff's not handling well, that's going to completely change the fabric of that race, and I think it would actually even make it better.

Yeah, I know what they're telling me, but my experience tells me that we could see something different than they're expecting.

DALE EARNHARDT JR: I think just right on. We have an NBC fantasy group of all of the talent, and I completely dominated them last year, and this year I can't seem to make any right picks because you can't -- it's so hard to tell like who's going to run well each week.

To Jeff's point, what they've learned in this time frame since the last time they raced Atlanta or any racetrack, there's been so much new information and new understanding about how this car works that I think the race and the contenders in the race will look completely different at most, if not every racetrack we go to.

There's going to be a lot of shift and ebb and flow of teams in terms of performance over the next couple of years, just because this car is so new and they're still really trying to figure out what makes it work.

And I think that that track, that was the very first race on that new surface. I know that we haven't seen tracks age

very quickly and lose a lot of grip in a very short period of time. Over the last several years we've had many repaves that seemed to be so durable, but they paved this track in such a way that they're hoping that it quickly advances that aging of the track and that loss of grip or lack of grip.

With Jeff talking about the heat, I think there will be a little less grip in the track itself, and the heat as well is going to take the grip out.

I just don't think these guys are going to have the same experience from inside the cockpit in terms of comfort and stability when they go back to Atlanta.

Q. This one is for Dale Jarrett. There was a lot of fanfare about NASCAR returning to Nashville last year. Did last year's race meet your expectations?

DALE JARRETT: Yeah, I would have to say that, when you look at the whole scope of everything involved with the outside activities that were available, the race itself, I think, was a good barometer of what this track can do.

I really expect the racing to be even better on the track with these Next Gen cars this year, but the level of excitement was almost unmatched from the fan side of it, and even from the competitors, for being able to go to a new venue.

And I think what the drivers learned throughout that race will only help to make this weekend's race even better yet. So I think the full experience is something that we have to look at, and the racing will take care of itself. It hasn't disappointed anywhere this year, and I don't think it will this weekend either.

I believe everything they know about the cars and the track now will provide us with another great race.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you so much for participating. Again, NBC SPORTS' coverage of the second half of the NASCAR season begins this weekend from Nashville. Anyone interested in a transcript can reach out to our communications department or find it at our media dedicated website, NBCsportsgroup@pressbox.com.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports