

Tony Stewart Racing

Thursday, October 14, 2021

Tony Stewart

Leah Pruett

Matt Hagan

Glen Cromwell

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Everyone. Thank you very much for joining us here at Charlotte Motor Speedway and zMAX Dragway. I want to thank everyone in attendance today. I appreciate you coming out. It's actually great to see everyone. I can't remember the last time we were able to do an honest-to-God press conference. It's great to get back to that. I also want to say hello to Tony Stewart Nation watching on Tony's YouTube channel and Facebook page.

We've got a big announcement today, and you can probably put it together now that you see some familiar faces up here on the dais. I'm going to introduce Tony Stewart, the man behind Tony Stewart Racing, to talk about what's going on.

Tony, you've become a regular in the NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series. I think it's time to set up permanent camp maybe?

TONY STEWART: Yeah, definitely. I guess this started back in 2009 when I had the honor to meet Don Schumacher and Tony Schumacher because of a mutual partner we had in motorsports together and got invited to go to the U.S. Nationals, and Tony ended up winning the Nationals that year, but that kind of got the bug set a little bit.

But then obviously last year when Leah and I started dating and Don gave me the opportunity through a tough time of COVID, a lot of restrictions in policies, to not only be at the racetrack but to be around the crew guys and the team and to be behind the scenes with Leah, I got to learn a lot.

That definitely set the hook, and over the last year and a half I've learned a lot about the sport, learned a lot about the economics of the sport, and definitely, like I said, set the hook with me and created a lot more interest in just -- I'm not a very good spectator in any format of motorsports,

as you guys know, so to have the opportunity to be engrossed in NHRA drag racing over the last year and a half has created a lot of interest for me to do more than just stand and be a trophy wife to stand beside Leah.

Being able to have this opportunity to go from 2009 all the way to 2021 and sit up here today and announce that we're having the opportunity to start a TSR drag racing team with Leah driving the Top Fuel car and Matt in the Funny Car is something I'm truly excited about. This has been something that we've been working on for a while, and over the course of 2021 it's been a lot of work to get to this point, but we've got great people behind us. We've already got some partners that are on board, and we'll announce other partners down the road.

The good thing is that I'm really excited about this. It's not going to take away from anything that I'm doing with our other forms of motorsports, and as you guys know, with having Eldora Speedway and the All-Star Circuit of Champions, the four Cup teams and Xfinity team, we're used to juggling a lot of balls and having a lot of balls in the air. Adding this to the portfolio is not anything that's going to take away from what we currently have. If anything, it's going to enhance it with a lot of our partners.

So I think it's a great opportunity. It's something that obviously you guys have seen that I've had the opportunity to do some testing in Don's cars and Leah's car, not only here at zMAX but at the drag strip in Las Vegas, as well.

It's something I'm passionate about, and I feel like I've got a great opportunity with two great drivers to have a lot of fun, win a lot of races and hopefully win a lot of championships down the road.

THE MODERATOR: Up here on the dais, Tony already has mentioned it, Leah Pruett, nine-time Top Fuel winner; Matt Hagan, 39-time winner and also the three-time and reigning Funny Car champion; and Glen Cromwell, president of the NHRA.

Leah, I'll bring it back to you. Believe it or not, this is your 25th consecutive season in the NHRA, so yes, that means

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she started racing when she was eight years old.

Talk about this next step in your racing career.

LEAH PRUETT: Sure, absolutely. Thank you. And thank you, everybody, for being here.

I do consider NHRA my home. I love it, the entire sport all together. This opportunity right here is really I've been modifying my home and giving it upgrades, and wonderful people, organizations that I've been able to work with, but then you also at some point in your life also have an opportunity to build, and that's exactly what this is, an opportunity for us here together to build TSR an NHRA championship-caliber multiple teams, so the excitement behind it, you can hear it in my voice right now, is just astonishing.

To be able to move forward with my future husband, championship-caliber teammate continuing with my teammate Matt Hagan, and to get back to the absolutely fundamentals and basics from what I have known, mixing in talent bases and highs and lows, then with what Tony is able to bring from all his expertise and his entire portfolio of entities, really undeniably is going to make for exactly what the NHRA needs: Another very strong-suited team on the track, personalities in a space, abilities to bring in new partners. I'm excited to get to race with my husband, future husband, and really get back on the track in a way that I will truly enjoy racing and very much looking forward to it.

THE MODERATOR: Leah touched on it. Matt, you're joining Tony Stewart Racing. In addition to being the three-time and reigning champion, you are currently leading the championship standings in Funny Car, three races remaining. Obviously you're focused on the present, but how helpful is it to have your future secure as you go for another title?

MATT HAGAN: You know, Tony, he's the man, honestly. Super excited to be partnering with him as far as driving a race car for him. That takes so much stress off of you when you can focus on driving a race car. Tony with his relationships and his sponsorships and everything else that he has, I have no doubt that this is going to be a big splash in NHRA.

I want to take just a second, I know I'm moving to a new team owner with Tony Stewart, take a second to just thank Don Schumacher for what he's allowed me to do, allowed me to be a part of a great group that we've won multiple championships, lots of trophies, set lots of world records. A big part of the reason I'm up here today is because we've been so successful and we've done so well as a team, as a collective group in NHRA under Don Schumacher. He's

been really gracious and great to me, allowing me to have the opportunity.

But that being said, I am pumped up to be part of Tony Stewart Racing. I think this guy has got it together. He gets under my car and pumps me up, and it's like you don't even own the team yet, man, and you're already my biggest cheerleader. I'm super excited. Just the energy, the charisma, the chemistry that we're going to have as a team is going to be amazing.

For me it's super exciting. I'm probably having the most fun I've ever had driving a fuel car knowing the new steps I'm going to take to be over here at Tony Stewart Racing, and we're going to do everything with our partners on and off the track to continue to win.

We have a championship team right now that we're focused on winning the championship. We have a 30-point lead coming into these next three races, and I don't know, it's never been easy in drag racing, so why should it be easy now. We've got a lot of work still ahead of us to do, but I just can't say how excited I am to be a part of this, making history, Tony, his first time ever owning an NHRA team, so it's really going to be great to be a part of this new era of history for Tony and ourselves, and looking forward to doing great big things out here in the future.

THE MODERATOR: We'll bring it back to you, Glen. You've been a part of the NHRA for a long time, started in 1997, been president since 2018. You've seen a lot of milestones, particularly when it comes to the NHRA's growth. Describe this moment for the NHRA where stone Tony Stewart, a NASCAR Hall-of-Famer, championship-winning team owner, from a very different racing background coming to straight-line racing and adding that to his portfolio.

GLEN CROMWELL: Well, welcome, everyone. Yeah, this is big news today. On behalf of NHRA, our track partners, Greg Walter and Marcus Smith and all of our millions of fans, Camping World, Marcus Lemonis, FOX - Frank and Peter are here today - this is a big deal, and we're extremely excited to have Tony and the team that he's developed here.

It's interesting, we've always termed in the NHRA multi-car team and mega teams, and I look at this team up here, and to me this is a team of superheroes. You really look at it, it starts with Tony Stewart. To me, he's the Superman of motorsports. He's touched every piece of it, excelled at it, and I don't expect -- I do expect he will do the same in NHRA in the Camping World Drag Racing Series.

Next to him you've got Wonder Woman, who really grew up



in the sport of NHRA, in the Junior Drag Racing League and touch a little Pro Mod racing, Factory Stock Showdown champion, and many event champions. Really we don't talk enough about it, but Leah is a great ambassador to the sport from a marketing standpoint. She really knows how to promote herself, her team, her crew. She's out in Havasu waterskiing, she's very active, and I think it just brings a whole new eyeballs to our sport, so she does a tremendous job.

Next to her you have Hulk Hagan, who yes, it's a play off superheroes for all of you, and the Legion of Doom over there on the right of me is the NHRA tech guys over there with their hands crossed (laughter). But you have the Hulk Hagan over there who's leading the points right now in Funny Car, three-time champion, and also a great ambassador of the sport.

We're excited about it. As Matt said, Don Schumacher has done a lot for our sport and he's taught -- I know Tony has talked to him a lot over the last year and a half, and the two racers up here have learned a lot through Don Schumacher and we thank him for that.

No, this is a big day for the sport of NHRA and the NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series. I know Tony is going to come in, he's quite the competitor as I learned last year in Dallas. He told me not to tell this story but I have to tell the story.

Brad Gerber, VP of new business, myself and Ned Walliser met with Brett Froad who's here, and glad he's here. He's a great leader of your company, and Brad and I were sitting there and talking to Brett on the business side, and you can only imagine Tony Stewart has got Ned Walliser, who's in charge of our tech up in the corner, finger in his chest telling him, hey, we need to do this, we've got to go faster, we're going to win championships, many championships, in 2022 and beyond.

I love that you're in the sport and we're looking forward to working with you and your team for many years.

Q. Tony, you've taken some test runs in an NHRA car. Can we expect to see you compete in a race?

TONY STEWART: No. Not right now. I've made 10 runs in Leah's car, and trust me, that's not even near enough to get close to being ready to compete at this level that these two are at. It's been an honor and it's been a lot of fun to do that, but I'm sure now that I get to pay the bills on the car next year, I can probably have the ability to go test a little more if I want.

So that part will be fun. I do anticipate practicing more, but

it's a little early to try to make that big step. I mean, anybody that thinks these cars are easy to drive is extremely way off center if they think these cars are easy. There's a lot of very small details that you have to do correct and you have to do it the same every time, and it's a very different discipline than what I'm used to.

But I'm more excited about having two drivers that I know can go out each week and have the ability to go out and win races.

Q. Where is this team going to be located, as well?

TONY STEWART: In Brownsburg at TSR where we have our Sprint cars, so all the teams will be under the same roof in the same building just like what we do at SHR. I'm very passionate about making sure that all of our teams are in the same room working together with each other. It creates a good atmosphere and camaraderie, and a culture that we believe is successful.

Q. Leah Pruett, you're a very strong woman, very good at what you do. Tony Stewart is in the picture now, and he becomes the team owner. What have you seen in Tony that you think he can lend to your team, and what do you see of the ownership side of Tony as you look ahead to driving for him and also being married to him?

LEAH PRUETT: Well, I appreciate that. I think the word that stands out for me 100 percent is "stability" on multiple levels, from the competition standpoint, knowing that TSR is going to provide both teams with what they need to be able to compete going to every race with adequate people in place, and on the other side of that is the emotional stability. The logic is what has really been paramount in what Tony has brought.

In the last two years of us being together, watching him coordinate people, entities, portfolios, through COVID and then after, and the number one thing was his appreciation for his people and looking out for their best interests, and so for me personally, you take that in within our relationship. But that's what gives me the confidence in being a driver for him and a part of this organization is how he's going to continue just as he has with everything else in the top tier first-class operations.

For me it definitely comes down to he is a man of his word. Not everybody likes all the words that he has to say, but he says them with conviction, and it has reasoning behind it, and that is definitely something that I've learned from and grown as an individual, as a racer, as a competitor. All of the things really -- it's clearly very bright in here and it's exciting to bring, though, all of this hard work that we've

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been putting in for the last couple of months and the discussions for years really here today to be able to share with you guys.

Tony, as Matt said, is the man, my man, and our team's man, and really has everything that we need from the inside out to be able to lead our teams to where they need to be.

Q. Tony, will you be getting your equipment from Don Schumacher, or how will that team be set up, and are you already in that process?

TONY STEWART: We're in that process, and I do want to mention, Matt mentioned it earlier, and I didn't mention it initially. None of this would be possible without Don Schumacher. His support of what we're doing has been through the roof. He's done an amazing job of helping me understand the sport, all the nuances of the sport, how to take care of the partners and how to make the whole program work. So he's spent a lot of time with me to help us understand what it takes to be successful at this level.

Acquiring the pieces and parts and equipment from him has been a huge part of us being able to be up here today, so without Don, we wouldn't be here, so I really appreciate Don and his work and diligence.

There's been a lot of people at DSR that have spent a lot of time with me explaining to me everything that it takes to do this and do it the right way. Don has been the leader in that and been a huge part in helping us get here today.

Q. Leah's knowledge of Top Fuel, you can't touch it. She's been racing so long. She gave you the insight to Top Fuel. Matt, how much did you and Tony talk and all to give the two of you insight to each other and the Funny Car?

MATT HAGAN: Well, I've been trying to get him in a Funny Car. It's one of those things, he's already drove a dragster, but I said, man, if you can drive one of those, then things fly up like a kite, you can definitely drive a Funny Car.

I think Tony brings a lot to the table, just on the business side of things, but also the driving side of things. His mentality is what I really appreciate about Tony. He's one of those guys that is going to pump you up and pump your team up, and it starts from the top. It starts from the team leader and trickles down through -- no different than a football team, a quarterback and into the linemen and all that kind of stuff.

That's what I really see about Tony that he's going to bring to the table for our team is that you've got a guy in your

corner and he's fighting for you and he's going to do whatever it takes to win. The guy is super competitive, and I love that because I'm super competitive. We wouldn't have won three championships and all the stuff that we've done if we were just out there to be out there.

That's what I told Tony. I said, look, man, the days of me just trying to drive a Funny Car to have fun to drive a Funny Car are over; let's do this and put this program together to win and become super competitive and win championships. He was like, man, I'm way past you; you know what I mean? He was like, we're going to do this all-in-or-nothing kind of thing, and that mentality I think carries over into so many things.

Even when your team is down, that brings you back up. You get in a rut sometimes, and these cars are so unforgiving that basically you can do it all right as a driver and as a crew chief and these guys that sweat so much every day putting these cars together and driving the rigs, you're still at the mercy of the parts and pieces and you can get in that rut and get down and stuff not working, but you have a guy like that in your corner and you know it's going to be all right, and you know he's going to bring the team back up, and then it just kind of trickles down to me; you know what I mean?

I'm learning from Tony to put my pompons on and root for everybody and do what we need to do to keep winning these races and winning championships.

Q. The manufacturer will remain in place; you're going to go the course with that?

TONY STEWART: We haven't announced anything on -- we'll announce in the future what our partners are going to look like and stuff, but right now it's just about getting pieces and parts and equipment together right now, and hopefully later on we'll have another press conference to announce our partners. That's something that we have some in place already, we just don't have contracts signed yet, and we have a lot of interest from a lot of companies, but we have a lot of inventory to sell in these cars, too, so it's important for everybody to know that we are looking for good solid strong partners that believe in this program and believe in the people.

Q. As far as the management team, because you're going to have three balls going in the air between Sprint cars and NASCAR and NHRA, have you picked out your management team for the NHRA team, as well?

TONY STEWART: Three balls, that's it? I had three balls in the air in 2001. (Laughter.) We've got multiple.



But I've got a great staff, and Brett and Jared Frood have been amazing in this process of helping out, and both of those guys, as you know, carry a big load. They have multiple balls in the air daily. Brett is very active in the owners' council and Jared was instrumental in getting SRX up and going last year.

Having those guys -- I've got a good support system and a good management group, and we've got a good system in place. We've got good people that we're hiring, and we've got a couple good people already hired, but we've got some that we're in the middle of negotiating with right now, so we're putting together a really solid, strong group of people that have the same values and beliefs in how to do things, so I'm excited about the group of people that we're working on.

Q. Tony, when did you first come up with this idea? When did it first pop into your head amidst all the other things that you're doing, and do you get bored easily where you've got to have a lot of stuff going on?

TONY STEWART: I'm starting to question my sanity at this point, I'll say that. I guess honestly, the first race I got to go to with Leah last year was at what they called Indy 1 because of COVID, and Don was only at the track for an hour, and Leah goes, hey, Don is here but he's not going to be here very long, you need to go say hi.

So I went out and shook Don's hand, and he goes, hey do you want to buy a team? I looked at him funny, and I knew it was a joke, but it did get me thinking, and just because of the fact that I've been involved in so many forms of motorsports that it did make me sit there and think, what's it take to do this, and just out of curiosity, and as time went on, like I said, after she was a big part of setting the hook in my lip about being interested in this sport, then those questions and the knowledge that we had learned together made the wheels start turning in my head. I do get bored easy. You know that. You've known me forever.

But this is a sport that is so different from anything else that we've been a part of in motorsports. It's off on its own island, and it deserves to be off on its own island. It's that unique and that special.

To be able to do something different like this is something that has really been energizing to me as a car owner and as a fan of motorsports in general. This is a project that I've really, since we started talking about it and seriously talking about it, I've been really energized about it.

Q. You mentioned just all of the series that you'll be running in next season. You've got SRX still starting

up. How do you sort of foresee splitting your time? What's the schedule going to look like? I believe NHRA's season and NASCAR's season pretty much perfectly overlap, right?

TONY STEWART: Yeah, they're getting really good at this cloning thing. They've been working on it for years, so we're going to really look into the cloning side and make about four of me to do all this.

No, we'll be strategic, obviously. It would be great to be able to go to all the races with all the different entities that we have, but like I said, I've been a car owner since 2001, and I've been able to juggle the schedule as a driver, as an owner, as a series owner. We're used to that. We'll have a very busy schedule next year.

I hope Leah understands after we get married that we will not have any off weekends because I'll always be at a racetrack, so our weekends will be during the week.

We'll figure it out. We always have, and we always will.

GLEN CROMWELL: We hope for the NHRA that about 90 percent of his time will be at our races.

Q. Tony, you've raced just about everything, INDYCAR, Sprints, Midgets, Silver Crown, Daytona Prototypes. What's the biggest challenge you've faced in racing, whether it was Top Fuel car or a Quarter Midget?

TONY STEWART: I think it's really understanding what the car wants. I mean, no matter what type of race car I've been in and driven, it's not about necessarily your driving style as much as it's understanding what that car requires and what it wants and the information -- the car will tell you what it wants and what it likes and what it doesn't like with what you're doing input-wise with steering wheel and pedals.

The thing about NHRA is when that light turns, there's no rolling in the throttle, there's no finesse; it's stab the gas and hang on. But in the process of that, then there's the things that are unexpected of cylinders going out, if you get in wheel spin and the car stands up. There's a lot of things that you have to do as a driver to catch that that are way outside of what I'm used to.

So that's why practice is key of getting to understand these cars more. That's why I have such a great appreciation for what Leah and Matt do and how their split-second reactions are so different from what we have in NASCAR and Sprint car racing and INDYCAR racing. It is definitely a unique skill set that they have to do what they do each

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week. That's one of the nuances that has really made me that interested in this sport is watching these guys sit there and be able to feel when the car is getting ready to get out from underneath them and know how to react that fast.

MATT HAGAN: He's kinda made drag racing look easy, though. You pretty much got in the car and was a natural, so it was like, this guy can drive anything.

LEAH PRUETT: What about his teacher, Matt? Come on.

MATT HAGAN: She's taken wild rides and done everything, but it all comes from the top down, the teacher, you know. But doing great.

Q. Tony, with all the things that you're doing, how much racing are you still going to be looking at doing next year, and does this cut back on some of the Sprint car stuff that you'll do?

TONY STEWART: Yeah, I'd say it will probably cut my schedule back a little bit, but I still plan on doing some racing. I'm not ready to hang the helmet up yet. My dad is 83 years old and still runs a Three-Quarter Midget. I would say our genetics are strong, and I'm not about to hang a helmet up yet by any means. It might cut my schedule back, but it won't stop it altogether.

Q. For a competitor, even with all the experience and success that you've had, when you don't race as much, some of the skills don't catch up with what everybody is doing all the time, so what kind of a challenge is that for you as a champion and somebody who's had the success -- I would suspect it would make it a little bit harder. Does that make it less fun and more frustrating then? Why still continue to do that?

TONY STEWART: I think it's always been a challenge doing that, but even the 20 years I was in NASCAR I was still going and running Sprint car races but I wasn't running full-time with the guys I was competing against, so it's always been a challenge from that standpoint. But that's part of the fun of it. It's fun to sit there and go and know you're racing with a guy that's already ran three nights that week and you're showing up and running at a track that he runs every week and trying to figure out how to beat him still. That's part of the challenge and that's part of the fun of it.

It is difficult. Motorsports as a whole, it doesn't matter whether it's Quarter Midgets, go-karts, all the way up to NHRA drag racing, INDYCAR, Formula 1, NASCAR; the competition getting closer and closer and tighter and tighter, and you have to be on your game.

That's why we do this. If it was -- like Matt said, if it was easy, none of us would want to do it. It wouldn't be gratifying to us. That's why the group of people that are up here, that's why we do what we do in our respective roles is that challenge of trying to figure out how to do it better than everybody else.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone. We will have each one of these folks available for one-on-ones. Tony will be right over here, Leah and then Matt. Glen will be right here, as well. Thank you very much for your time. You'll see these guys at Thunder Valley this weekend for the third-to-last race of the NHRA season.

Thank you very much for joining us, especially all those watching on YouTube and Facebook. We'll see you again.

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