

IndyCar Media Days

Tuesday November 8, 2016

Ed Carpenter

JR Hildebrand

Media Day Presser



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media teleconference. Last Friday Ed Carpenter Racing announced it would welcome back driver JR Hildebrand as the full-time driver of the No. 21 Chevrolet beginning in 2017.

We are happy to be joined today by JR Hildebrand and team owner Ed Carpenter, who will drive the No. 20 entry on the oval courses in 2017.

Welcome to the call, guys.

JR, congratulations on last week's news, your recent wedding. It's been a few years since you've had a chance to be a full-time driver in the Verizon IndyCar Series. How satisfying is it to you to know you have a ride for 2017?

JR HILDEBRAND: It's great, man. It's obviously exciting to be back full-time first and foremost. But to be back here with this team and to get it done this early in the off-season so that we can kind of get the program ready for next year is all just great.

I mean, obviously working with ECR over the last three seasons now, it doesn't feel like a new home necessarily, it feels like somewhere that I've been for quite a while now.

I think with that, we'll be able to just jump in and get with the program.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned the last three years working with ECR, primarily at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. You had a chance to test at Road America and Iowa when Josef was injured last year. What have you learned about the team that made it the ride that you really needed and wanted for 2017?

JR HILDEBRAND: I wouldn't say necessarily it told me anything new about being here. It was more just, I mean -- I'll back up by saying this is where I've wanted to be since my first go-around with them. It's definitely been my primary focus, to create a home for myself here, do the things sort of necessary to be in that position.

But being able to get a little bit more seat time this year during the season in that role, you know, filling in for Josef, knowing that mattered for him, mattered for the team, that it wasn't just some sort of off-season program, it was very specific around goals they were trying to achieve in the middle of the year, our ability to work together, the ease of being able to kind of jump into that and play that role, be around during the race weekends, being a little bit more involved throughout that process I think just fired me up about the opportunity to be doing that myself on a more full-time basis.

I think that really gave me a lot of energy to sort of sit there and go, Yes, I want to be back here doing this, not just because I feel like I've got unfinished business, but because I really want to be here. I really enjoy it. I sort of am ready to take advantage of that type of opportunity.

That was a great experience to have over the course of the season, getting a little more seat time than expected. It's great to be able to just build from that as we get prepared for next year.

THE MODERATOR: Ed, putting your team owner's hat on real quick, how important is it to ECR to have a driver you have worked with, built chemistry with, and who fits with the team when you knew what drivers were available out there on the market for the 21 team?

ED CARPENTER: I think it's really important. I think the chemistry of the team, the cohesion that we already have I think is going to accelerate this and make it less of a rebuild, but more of a continuation of what we had been than if we had gone a different direction.

There were a lot of conversations that were had. We talked to quite a few people. But JR was always at the top of the list of someone we wanted to work with. JR and I have been talking about this before he ever ran a car for us at Indy for the first time.

It took us a little longer than I think any of us initially thought it would to get to this point. But JR has done a good job for us, has been patient with me as an owner and us as a team getting here. But every time we've had him in a car, at the Speedway, different races,

different tests, even outside of last year, JR has always done everything that we've asked and then some. It gave us a lot of confidence that it didn't need to be a difficult process, really we didn't need to make it any more difficult than necessary, because the guy we needed was sitting right in front of us.

THE MODERATOR: From the driver's standpoint, what kind of teammate is he? How does he help both programs for ECR?

ED CARPENTER: JR and I, we haven't worked together as teammates prior to the 2014 500. I think we hit it off right away. We've had similar likes in the car for the most part each and every year we've worked together. I think that success has showed with some of the cars we've had, the consistency that we've had at the Speedway over that time.

It will be nice just to be able to have that on a larger scale now.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions for JR Hildebrand and Ed Carpenter.

Q. I've talked to you before about time away from the track. I'm wondering, how difficult has that been to not have a ride? You've been part of it, but not part of it. What has constituted a good day away from the track?

JR HILDEBRAND: It was especially hard at first just because you work so hard for a long time, pretty singularly focused putting yourself in a position where you have a full-time ride. Then to sort of get to that level and be doing that, then suddenly not be doing it anymore, you know, that's definitely a tricky thing to sort out. What should I be spending working my time on here?

You talk to some people, and they think you should just be at the track every weekend, banging on everybody's door, bugging people to the point of it being uncomfortable.

You talk to other guys that think you should be doing the opposite, then everything in between. Start going to all the sports car races. Maybe you should hunt something down in NASCAR land, whatever.

For me, that was sort of a difficult thing to figure out what to do. But I guess in the end, I very quickly sort of deduced that there was a couple of really specific situations that I wanted to try to put myself in. One of them was here at ECR, to be able to grow our relationship and hopefully eventually, however long it took, get to a point where whether it was teaming up with Ed in the 20 car or otherwise, to see where that could progress and grow.

I mean, we all know how volatile racing is, both from a sponsorship perspective and from an opportunity perspective for drivers. I guess I early on took the stance that just playing the field wasn't something that I was even interested potentially in some of the feasible outcomes of that process, and that it might not be something that puts me in a position where I end up with any really, really high-quality opportunity at any point.

Ed was one of the first guys that called. We went and had a beer not long after everything went down at Panther. Had a very early version of this type of conversation, that we would work together to try to make something happen, whatever that would be.

That really became my focus from a driving perspective, was just to make good on that and try to cultivate that relationship.

Outside of that, there's not really a good template for what to do. You can pursue other drives, other places. You could go driver coach, whatever else. I sort of took the stance that I wanted to find something that I could sort of leverage my experience in racing towards something that I found maybe a different type of purpose in doing.

I've focused a lot of my time not spent at the track or sort of pursuing an IndyCar gig, working in education. I've been working at Stanford this last year, kind of involved in the emerging automotive space which has been super interesting, stimulating, exciting.

Over the past couple years it's been difficult because there's not necessarily a path to follow. There's no obvious way that this all works out well. But I've managed to find other things that sort of supplement my interest in doing this, and that's kept my sanity intact.

I think a lot of those things end up just providing great perspective for me to have this opportunity now and really make the most of it.

Q. What's been your best race, JR?

JR HILDEBRAND: What's been my best race? I don't know. I guess that's sort of a subjective question.

I would honestly say, just in terms of how I felt about my own performance, this is not to blow smoke up Ed's rear-end since he's standing here, but the last three 500s I've raced in have been when I felt most prepared and best about, like, my execution when it mattered.

I felt like the environment here at ECR has been a big part of that. I think my just maturation and sort of

recognition of the things that really matter have also played a role in that as that's developed over the last few years.

Q. Ed, why have you always been sold on JR?

ED CARPENTER: I mean, I think when the conversation first started in 2013, when he was all of a sudden sitting on the sidelines, it was more of me reaching out just to kind of offer some encouragement because I'd been in similar situations, similar levels of uncertainty, and understood kind of what that can do to your psyche and confidence levels.

When we first got together back then, it was more just like, Hey, don't let this affect you. You can do this. You've proven that you can do this. Let's see if we can maybe make something happen down the road.

I didn't really know at that point, but I'd seen him around, seen him in Lights, then in a few IndyCar races with Dreyer & Reinbold. Then when we worked together the first May, I think it became more clear getting that firsthand experience working with him, and over the subsequent years kind of getting more of a sampling of just his talent, his teamwork, the type of guy he is. He's always had the talent to be in IndyCar even though he hasn't been full-time in a little while. But that doesn't mean that he still doesn't deserve to be here as much as anyone else.

Really just feel like when you look at all the things that we look at, from strengths and weaknesses, personality, that's why we feel good about where we are today getting ready for the 2017 season.

Q. JR, obviously you're very familiar with this team and its possibilities. I know you want to win everywhere. What are the sort of realistic expectations you have going into next year?

JR HILDEBRAND: I mean, I guess I think my personal expectations and I'm sure our expectations as a team are pretty high just given the success the team has had over the last couple of seasons. I think my expectation certainly is the places where I've been involved and we've worked together already, the Speedway being sort of the centerpiece of that program, but that certainly translates to a lot of the other oval circuits that we're in contention to win right away at those types of places.

My personal expectation on the road and street courses is we can continue to build from what Josef was able to do here. He proved to be a threat at those places more often than not. That's a challenge that I'm really looking forward to sort of tackling over the off-season and into the year to make sure that we're equally competitive at those events, as well.

I think the expectation is that, kind of as Ed mentioned earlier in the call, that we continue to build from where the team is right now. I think we can hit the ground running. I think a big part of the focus for me is being totally prepared to be able to do that right from St. Pete, have there not be a period of sort of layoff and using the first few races to get back in the swing of things. I'll be highly focused on being totally prepared to really hit the ground running when the season kicks off.

Q. Ed, I wanted to ask you about the schedule. What is your perspective on how the schedule looks next season? Are there places you'd like to go that are not on the schedule and could be?

ED CARPENTER: I think we always have a wish list. Yeah, I really like what IndyCar, Mark Miles, Jay, the entire team, what they've been doing with the schedule. Really it was a change of pace a little bit when we condensed things and took that approach. But I think it is paying off. We're getting more continuity with our dates and events, and adding venues that seem committed and want to be with us.

I like the approach. Obviously Phoenix coming back last year was really nice. It's a racetrack that everyone loves going to. We're excited about St. Louis coming on. I think it's going to be a really fun race. It's a great track to drive. Kentucky was a place that I always enjoyed going to. It's been repaved. It will be interesting to see what we look like there now. Milwaukee is always interesting. It's sad that it's not there. I guess there's reasons for that.

I think Chicago would be a fun place to go. Laguna gets talked about. Watkins Glen was a great add, with what happened with Boston last year. I think Watkins will be a stronger event than Boston probably ever would have been. That's one that we're happy to see wasn't just kind of a one-year fix.

I think the big thing is having that continuity and building the events we have, making those strong, and then selectively looking at how to expand the schedule and make it even stronger.

I think the team at IndyCar is doing a really nice job.

Q. JR, obviously other drivers are outside the cockpit for a couple years. Not often do you get the chance to come back and have a second full-time shot. We saw Pagenaud do that and win the championship this year. Have there been any other drivers you've talked to about how you stay race-ready when you're on the sidelines and get prepared to come back full-time?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, to some degree. I

think in the end, every situation like this is sort of different in terms of what the requirements are for, A, just getting back in a position to be full-time, and B, what you maybe need to bring to the table in that situation.

That makes it a little bit difficult to compare and contrast against other drivers in similar situations just because I think every individual situation is fairly different. You definitely appreciate sort of the words of encouragement from different guys. Obviously nothing really replaces being around and being present, hunting for those opportunities along the way to continue to show that not only do you still have it, but you care enough to pursue the opportunities that are there.

I think in some ways that's kind of all you can do. I mean, you can stress out a lot about whether or not it's going to end up working out. In the end, you know, you got to kind of just have faith that you're pursuing something that you really have a lot of drive to do, and rely on that to hopefully mean something.

I tried to remain sort of objective about what the likely opportunities were, how probable they might be to actually pan out. Now that I've sort of gotten this opportunity, there were definitely be some time spent trying to make sure that I sort of maximize the chance.

Q. Ed, do you know when JR's first test will be? Are you hoping to get out before the end of the year, or 2017?

ED CARPENTER: We have a test penciled in in early December to get on track. It will be here sooner than you may think. We're excited to get started.

I think one of the luxuries that we have, kind of going along with your last question to JR, I think even though he's just run the races in May with us the past two years, in our mind he's been a part of the team beyond that. Especially with the added testing last year at Road America and Iowa, he's somewhat been dialed in with what we've been working on, at least what it was in '16.

That will make it a lot easier to get fully up to speed and integrated into what we're focusing on getting ready for 2017, whether it's continuing to find a way to win the Indy 500, and along the same lines improving in other areas where we need to improve to better ourselves to win more races and to be in a better position to compete for the championship at the end of the year.

Q. JR, is it fair when you think about how you came up through the ranks, you won in every category,

much like Dan Wheldon, there was something at Panther, I remember talking to him about it, suddenly the expertise you had as a road racer vanished. When you get your chance with Ed, you were up to fifth in the Indy Grand Prix. Is it fair to say getting a second chance like this, it's all about chemistry and how you work with people? Is that too harsh, maybe it wasn't the right chemistry at Panther and maybe it is with Ed?

JR HILDEBRAND: I guess in today's version of going IndyCar racing, so much of it comes down to how efficient you can be with what you're trying to achieve and how you're going about doing that, whether that's what you spend your time and resources on in the off-season, or literally just the processes that are in place to accomplish your goals during the year, from practice one, practice two, qualifying, to the race on a given race weekend.

I think that's something here at ECR that I've really grown to appreciate just in terms of how that process works. Also then being able to be sort of reflective about how can I be best prepared to be as complementary and sort of involved in making sure that process continues to go in the right direction, and I'm learning what I need to in terms of where we're going.

So I guess looking back at my days at Panther, as a one-car team, I was a rookie there, there were a lot of responsibilities, responsibilities that I sort of enjoyed on the sponsorship side and all that kind of stuff with the National Guard. But in the end, still a lot to kind of be responsible for.

We company talk about sort of chemistry, what we were focused on, whether or not that was right or wrong in different situations or whatever, but I think even just for me as a driver, it was difficult sometimes just to even sort through and kind of sift out, What do I need to be focused on here in terms of what we're trying to achieve on a weekend-to-weekend basis.

I think with time to be a little bit retrospective about it, I bring a different perspective to how I intend to personally improve. I think this is the environment and a team that's incredibly well-equipped to sort of facilitate that as we move forward.

Q. It's also interesting to me that you're an American that's been hired twice to drive an IndyCar. That's pretty rare these days.

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, like unicorn status.

It's been great. I think a lot of that has been -- like I said, I spent a year between Indy Lights and being at Panther to kind of be in that situation. I didn't get that

ride right away.

At that time there were some similarities just in terms of I viewed that not only maybe being the most probable place to end up, but really the place as a young American guy that I wanted to be. This has been, from that perspective, the very same type of journey for me. I've been very fortunate to sort of make good on being in that position.

Q. Ed, will your car be the Fuzzy's car and JR the Preferred Freezer?

ED CARPENTER: We have things to work out. For sure I'll be in Fuzzy's Vodka colors when I'm in the car, and you'll see JR in a couple different liveries, as Josef was. We'll have some more details on that here down the road. For sure, it will look similar in a lot of ways to what it did last year.

Q. Ed, of all the things that you've seen JR perform, then you talked to various other drivers before making this decision, what personal assets do you feel he brings to the team that others may not? I know he helped with the setup of the car when the other driver was injured.

ED CARPENTER: I'm glad I'm not the only one that forgot the other driver's name already.

Q. Newgarden.

ED CARPENTER: I'm just kidding (laughter).

You know, it's interesting talking to different people. In this sport there's a lot of guys that are capable of doing this job and, quite frankly, deserve opportunities. As simple as decisions can be, they can be complicated, too, just because there's always more people available to drive these cars than there are seats.

For JR, I think what we've seen from our personal experience with him, it gave us the comfort level that it was going to position our team in the best way to continue on the path that we'd been on, improving year in and year out, raising the bar each and every year. It was the right choice.

Whether it's the races we've actually done or the time we've spent together away from the track, with our partners, with our engineers, there was a level of comfort there I think for both of us. We're all happy that it played out.

It's hard, though, to just straight up compare different things. You can look at results from one team or the other, whatever it may be. But I put a lot of value on our own personal experiences relative to people's results at a different time and place, or another driver's results from a different time and place.

Our experience and comfort level with JR went a long way.

Q. JR, this is going to be your first full session with ECR. What is your mindset now, how is it differing from the other years you've gone into IndyCar racing?

JR HILDEBRAND: Obviously over the last few years it's not been going in in a full-time capacity. I think it's been continuing to improve. There's always a little bit in the back of your mind that the priorities maybe are a little bit different because you do only have a couple of opportunities during the year, or a single opportunity during the year at Indy, whatever it ends up being, to sort of prove your value.

This I think will be a little bit more focused just on the total process of, What do we need to do throughout the year to improve and really generate an understanding for what's working and how do we kind of take maximum advantage of those assets and those things that we learn about over the course of the season.

I think for me it's definitely just a little bit of a reboot, not only of my sort of IndyCar career, but just of how I look at what we're trying to achieve and how we're going to do that and what role I play as part of the team to sort of get the most out of it.

It's something I'm really looking forward to. We've talked already about how great it is from that perspective to have a full off-season to work together and get on the same page and make sure that we're all tracking in the same direction. I think that will go a long way once the season actually gets rolling.

Q. JR, can you talk a little bit about your academic involvement with Stanford and how it came about. Coming out of high school, you thought you were destined for MIT. How does this work into your racing involvement and how does this benefit your racing?

JR HILDEBRAND: It's interesting. It all started a little over a year ago now. I was invited by Road & track magazine to be the man in the man-versus-machine battle in the Audi of Europe's self-driving RS7. They did that out at Sonoma, which is my home track. I went out there to sort of discuss what I felt like the autonomously driving vehicle was doing, what it was doing differently than what I might be doing, then in the end set a benchmark lap time to compare against the car.

Stanford works closely kind of in parallel with Audi of Europe on a like minded program or similarly focused program that they run up at Thunder Hill once a month

in northern California.

Through that process, I got to know the guys at Stanford. I think they recognized the value that a high-performing sort of contemporary human driver has in possibly being able to articulate what the self-driving car is doing in a way that the data might not, like, jump off the page. That was sort of my introduction to that program. I went up and spent a couple of days with them when they were testing.

Then earlier this year I was appointed as an adjunct lecturer to continue that process basically, so they would kind of have access to me, I guess, and I would have access on campus to talk maybe in more general terms with vehicle dynamics programs and things of that nature.

But in the end most specifically to work with the autonomous vehicle programs that they're developing with their graduate students there. That's kind of what my role is, in essence.

It's been sort of supremely interesting. Like, just to be in a racing environment, a performance environment, with absolutely the most cutting-edge version of autonomous vehicle technology is just really a cool cross-section to be able to work within.

While I think I've brought, you know, definitely a different way of thinking and sort of another layer of complexity maybe to how the graduate students in those programs look at their continued task. I mean, we're talking about a car that is on a 2:15 lap like a second off of my lap time. It's incredibly highly developed.

As we know in motorsports, just getting that last little bit out of it sometimes takes 10X what it takes to get to that point.

I've probably brought some value in terms how they look at their continued development. In essence, sort of driver coaching a machine has definitely been insightful for me. It's just in terms of, wow, like seeing how well it does things. It's doing certain things way better than I could ever hope to do them. So that does definitely lend a different perspective to how deep you could go looking at certain types of criteria and data, the value that that might be able to add by spending a little more time focusing on it.

It's been a really cool thing to be involved in. I'm lucky to be able to continue to be involved in that in a reduced role, going back racing full-time. But a really interesting area to work in while I've worked on getting back to racing full-time.

**Q. How much time does this involve on your part?
Once a week or...**

JR HILDEBRAND: It's not been significant. I sort of work remotely just in terms of sort of giving feedback, maybe ideas here and there. That's not a significant time commitment.

The teams that I work with, they test basically once a month. When I'm available and it's not overlapping with my sort of racing endeavors, I'll go and be present while they're actually doing on-track testing, go through that process to continually reset the sort of human benchmark, then be able to give feedback as it's happening just on the developments of the autonomous vehicle programming.

It's been a very manageable balance. There's not been an incredibly high expectation for my time commitment kind of just knowing what other things I have going on.

I expect to be able to continue to manage that into the next season.

Q. JR, can you describe the mental sensation of driving absolutely at the limit in an IndyCar on an oval particularly when you're in the zone, you can let your natural ability just flood out.

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, when you're really in the moment, when you really feel at your best, it's a very sort of almost subconscious experience. You're just allowing your natural instincts to sort of take over and react to the situation.

If you are really thinking about what's going on, you know, you feel like you're thinking several corners ahead at that point, thinking to the corner that you're approaching almost like the next lap around, applying a little bit of that forethought to what you're doing on that lap.

So I think you seek to be in that sort of moment of total control. Like not only physically that you're under control, but you have a complete and sort of comprehensive grasp of all the variables that are at play, and you're sort of reacting to those little changes and those little differences.

It's a big part of I think why all of us continue to strive to do this at a high level, is because that's just a feeling, when you sort of overlay the speed, the sort of element of risk, the feeling that's hard to replicate that somewhere else. It's certainly something that I've been missing on a more frequent basis in my life. So looking forward to getting back after it this year.

Q. How close have you been to that sensation

during the Indy 500 itself, especially your debut in 2011?

JR HILDEBRAND: Over the last few years, definitely I can remember very specific instances. At Indy in particular a lot of it is sort of understanding the dynamic of how your car is affected by the cars in front of you, sort of mapping out how you're going to pick guys off, make your way up through the field to the front of the pack, how to do that sort of just with whatever. You get off sequence, whatever. Have had to do that a few times over the last few years.

When you kind of find that rhythm, find the things that are working, can just execute, that's definitely that little tinge of adrenaline that gets pumped into your veins that you remember afterwards. I think I've had that more over the last to you years in the sort of string of top 10s I've had with Ed, frankly, than I did when I was a rookie.

As a rookie, I found myself being much more sort of just really consciously aware of what was happening. A lot of it still at that point is kind of new. So even if it's just paying attention to the fuel economy, making sure you don't screw up getting into the pits, whatever, you don't quite have the muscle memory for how it's all going to work.

It's been great to be in a position to sort of have that feeling of, like, I'm about to go to the front, over the last few years, and have the equipment underneath me to do that.

We'll be looking to having that feeling on a regular basis this year.

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as we have no further questions for JR or Ed, we thank them for their time today and wrap up today's IndyCar media teleconference.