

IndyCar Media Conference

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Sam Schmidt Mario Andretti Doug Boles

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: I'm Doug Boles with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the two guys to my right don't need a lot of introduction, our 1969 Indy 500 winner Mario Andretti, who still competes in the two-seater out here, and I think if we needed somebody to fill in, Mario could probably go just about as fast as some of these guys out here. And to his right, Sam Schmidt, who has done some incredible things with the folks at Arrow in the Chevy Corvette, started out as a crazy idea I think to get Sam out here in a semi-autonomous car to run around the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and achieve 100 miles an hour, which you did a couple years ago, and you came back last year, and on a qualifying day, ran four qualifying laps. I think your top speed was a little over 150. Average speed was in the 115-mile-an-hour range.

I got a note from Sam sometime last fall, early winter, saying, 'Hey, I'd like to do a head-to-head race next May against Mario Andretti,' and I thought he was crazy, but I thought Mario might be even crazier, and I didn't know that you could actually convince Mario to do that, so Mario actually agreed. We announced this at Long Beach this year, and I'm going to be interested how this press conference goes, because the Long Beach press conference was almost like a sparring match between two title fighters who are going to compete for the heavyweight title, and in fact there was a wager put on the table which was that if Mario beat Sam, Sam would give Mario a ride in one of the Schmidt cars for the Indy 500 in 2018, and I think that's agreed upon, so I'm hoping Mario wins so we can have Mario in our field driving for Sam. But I have a feeling after watching practice yesterday, Sam is pretty darned good in that car, as he's run the speedway, I think you were closing in on 150 miles an hour down the front stretch.

Sam, why don't you just kick this off and talk a little bit about the relationship with Arrow, the work that's gone in over the last three years to take the technology to a level that I don't know that anybody thought you could get to so quickly and what it's like to run 150 miles an hour down in Turn 1 at the speedway on the road course.

SAM SCHMIDT: Well, thank you for that introduction,

Doug. It's been a God send. I never thought after getting that call three and a half years ago that I'd be sitting here today doing what we're doing tomorrow. It really speaks to a not-typical \$26 million dollar, Fortune 110 company. I don't know if Mike Long is actually here. He's the owner (of Arrow Electronics). The CEO is actually here. He's so into this now. He bought a motor home, he's in the infield and he's here all three weekends this month. It starts at the top. He has said that we are going to be unselfish, we are going to create this type of technology, we're going to invest the money on our own. We're not going to ask partners to pay for it, and when it's all done, guess what, we're not going to patent it, anybody can come to them and get this technology and help people in their daily living, improve their lives, allow for people with disabilities to have jobs with this type of technology. That resonates throughout the whole company. It's an unbelievable atmosphere.

It's also truly a team effort. I think we have the whole engineering team here. They work on this thing nonstop. I really relish the fact that I've become a driver again in the sense of I don't have to find the money, I don't have to find the people, I show up, helmet on, let's go drive, and it's like, hey, this is pretty cool. So kind of double duty this weekend, practicing and driving and getting to race tomorrow, and then also having to run the team, as well, is a lot of work, but that Arrow team, Pikes Peak really exemplified how much trust we have in the car and then adding Robby to the team last year was a God send because really helped me develop the car and take it to another level and build a seat and now even with the helmets and we were out here yesterday asking ourselves, shouldn't the helmets have come before Pikes Peak? It's just been a great relationship, and it resonates that now we're to the point where we can safely go I like to call it almost head-to-head because that's what it is, with two cars.

Although I've got to say, practice yesterday, I've been thinking for 15 hours how I think he's sandbagging. I think he's pulling an Al Unser or a Bobby Unser-type era thing where he's like, oh, I'm so slow, give me my hands back. I'm so slow, give me my feet back. You know what, let me forget the controls, let me drive the car, because I don't want to be last. That's all he said was, don't lap me. I'm thinking all night, he's just playing us, right?

DOUG BOLES: You're talking about Mario, and I know for you, Sam, it was a big deal for you to get to

compete against Mario, but when you start thinking about versatile drivers, in the history of motor sport there was no one more versatile at the top level in everything he got in, when you think about that, so this is sort of one discipline, Mario, that you've never driven in, you tested in the parking lot, you did apologize to me for almost running over some yellow shirts you shouldn't have been mean to. We got you out on the racetrack. What was it like, and do you still -- are you feeling as good today as you were feeling at Long Beach when you made this announcement?

MARIO ANDRETTI: I've never been so nervous in my life. I haven't had any sleep the last two nights, and I'm not going to have any sleep tonight. I know how good it is. I mean, it's crazy, yesterday was the first time I had a test to get out on the track, and so I'm going out of the pit, and I look out there, and the natural thing for me to do, I think, instead of just going from the pits right on the track the way the normal -- I think I'm going to go right on the track and just get into Turn 1, and the natural thing is to turn and see whether Sam was coming, and I was going right for the wall. Like I said, there's a learning curve, and talk about versatility, I've never faced anything like this.

But again, when the idea came to us, you know, the approach -- Patty Reid, my publicist, she said, 'Mario, I've got you in' -- I said, 'Whoa, whoa, wait a minute.' She said, 'Well, and she explained to me first of all about what Arrow technology and the fact that it's not a proprietary thing.' I've been following this program obviously from the very beginning, watching Sam doing his thing the first year, and just to see what Arrow is doing and allowing anyone that's interested to come in and to hand over the technology if they want to obviously pursue it and go further with it, I think it's great of Arrow to do that. I must say that.

Having said that and knowing that, now I can't back out of it. Now I've got to do it.

So it's easy in the sense that if you can keep the concentration and the technology that you have at your hands, it'll do exactly what they say it does. You move your hand a little bit, and it does exactly, but you have to not forget now, you have to remember not to look at your rear view mirror. You look at your rear view mirror, you're just going in the grandstands. It's all that sort of thing. You have to be really, really on it, and again, I admire what he's doing and what they're doing at Pikes Peak. I cannot even believe it because the way Arrow has made progress. You've got to really trust what they have there, and again, it's just amazing what is available, and I'm just so happy that this thing is essentially getting the exposure that is needed because it's something that globally can be useful for individuals like Sam that obviously have had the misfortune, but now there's obviously a real life and a way -- this is something so positive, and I just hope I don't screw up so much. I begged him not to lap me

because it's true. When I heard him yesterday accelerate down the straightaway, I said, oh, my God.

This is the first time in my racing career that I'm not asking for more horsepower. I'm truly scared, but I trust it.

DOUG BOLES: I still haven't heard what the wager is.

SAM SCHMIDT: 2018 Indy 500, bring it on. I think this guy can compete with the best of them for sure. I tried to get him in the Indy 500 this year, but he said he was busy, I don't know. Yeah, it's just fantastic. I can't say enough how much I appreciate your help, Doug, and we did go 152 -- let's not go back to Indy. That's getting a little old. But it is the place of innovation, so now that there's a race, why not come back here and do it and do it on the road course, and a phenomenal road course. Yesterday was my first time on that as well, wide track, smooth track, curves, small curves, big curves, it's really challenging, decreasing radius corners, all that stuff I'm excited about again as a driver, and we're really pushing the envelope of the car, and we're not doubling up with Indy cars, so it's exciting for me from that standpoint to go fast again.

Q. Sam, you said earlier you developed a car and took it to the next level. Can you give some more details the kind of development? Was it electronic stuff or suspension stuff?

SAM SCHMIDT: It's a team effort. As I mentioned before these guys in Colorado have a full shop and they're going at it every day and they're doing stuff on simulators. Really the biggest thing has just been the evolution of the controls. Everything we use as a company is sort of off the shelf available products from our suppliers and vendors, it's just never been configured this way. So it's totally reliable, it's totally -- but now it's become so intuitive. Everything is a convenience. It's programmable. I can program the radius of the corners if I'm out here on a Superspeedway. If you want a slower ratio of turning, no problem, a few key stroke adjustments on the computer and there you go. Maybe now it's even more automatic than that. But now for a road course when I turn my head, I can do a hair pin, I can do donuts, I can do whatever I want. It's all programmable and it just gives you a total comfort level. Like Mario said, even though I've doing this for four years, I constantly have to catch myself not looking at those side mirrors. You have to untrain all of those type of things, but once you do it, we can, as Robby will say -- God bless Robby because I would never do what he's doing. As a race car driver, there he is over there, sitting to the right side, letting somebody else have the controls, I can't even fathom -- I can count on one hand the number of times I let somebody else drive when I was capable of driving. I didn't like it at all, and what we're doing out there is pretty crazy. From a team point it's just -- like everything, technology has advanced in the last three years, this car has done the same thing, and the team

at Arrow has brought that to life.

DOUG BOLES: Drake isn't here, who's riding with Mario, and Robby, who's riding with Sam. If you have a few minutes, Robby has some unbelievable stories about going over some hills at Pikes Peak and the things you had to do to make sure that Sam's head wasn't moving around when you were landing to make sure that car stayed on track, so the bravest two guys in the room are not these two, it is Robby and Drake, so thank you guys for helping these guys make this happen.

SAM SCHMIDT: With Robby it's not a few minutes, it's a few hours and a six-pack of beer.

MARIO ANDRETTI: The guy who's really in trouble is Drake. That's why he's not here.

Q. Mario, I want to ask you if you can imagine a life without driving, whether it's on or off the track, and Sam, you had this unfortunate disability, but can you maybe explain the difference it's made in you psychologically just to have the ability to drive again and what it means to you?

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, as far as for me, like I said, the toughest part is to erase all of my natural instincts, but it's a matter of just practice, practice, practice. Next time they ask me to do this, I'm going to have to have a month to practice. It's one of those things. But after a while, I remember when I just did it just going around the grounds here two days ago, on the way back to the hotel, I was doing the same thing in my rental car, because you could see all of a sudden you start thinking about that. I don't think it would take that much longer for me to really feel comfortable. It's just that right now I'm quite nervous, because again, I just have a tendency to -- I hope nobody waves in the grandstands or in the bleachers because you have a tendency to look over, hey, and all of a sudden you're right there next to them in the bleachers with that car. I don't want to be that guy. So that's what makes me nervous. But at the same time, like I said, I could see just this technology, what it means to someone like Sam, and to me, that's fantastic. That's all I can say.

SAM SCHMIDT: It's pretty much indescribable. I wouldn't wish the situation on anybody, but because of it, we have been able to help hundreds of thousands of people through our foundation, through everything that we're doing, and I think to be able to come back as a team owner and compete on the top level for all of us is fantastic after what happened. I don't know, I kind of -- when I look back, I had gotten a little stale with a few things as far as what is happening with our own spinal cord research and everything else, and this project has really sort of re-motivated me, re-inspired me, re-everything. But if you put -- if you find the right organization and you put the right resources behind it and get the right group of people, you can do anything.

From concept to the first time we were on the simulator, it was three months, and first time we drove the car was six months. It was amazing what you were able to do if you got the right package and the right engineers and everything. I'm totally just re-motivated by that whole situation, and I think that can translate to any industry and any medical issue and everything else, just kind of put the right team together and fund it, which Arrow has done.

Q. Doug, this is probably more a question to you, but the technology for autonomous vehicles is developing every day; you as a promoter, this is a race about man versus machine, so how big of a balancing act is that, that the technology doesn't get to a point where it would replace the drivers that all of a sudden you're trying to sell tickets to something without heroes in the cars?

DOUG BOLES: It's a great question, and if you rewind 108 years, this place has always been about innovation, so this is that next step of innovation, and the Indy cars at some level have continued to be that innovation. Nothing as dramatic as this. As the world changes and as consumers change and what they're looking for in cars and as Bruno (ph) is out there doing their autonomous vehicles, getting folks around, it's definitely something we paid attention to. But what has historically been the connecting point from our fan to this event are people like Mario Andretti, people like Sam Schmidt, and without those personalities that do amazing things in race cars, I think it's harder to sell.

As the world changes, maybe the mindset changes. But right now, as a promoter, I'm going to take a Sam Schmidt or Mario Andretti in a semi-autonomous vehicle every day over just some remote control car or something else, and again, it is a balancing act, but this one to me is all about two guys with great big hearts and Sam Schmidt who's got the team through Arrow that has a dream of really doing something that nobody thought was possible, nobody thought could be done, and you look at what we've done in the last three years, and emotionally, the reason this means something to me, and you saw it last year when Sam did his lap, there's an emotional connection with our fans, and for Sam, it was an emotional connection to everybody that had driven for him, everybody that had worked for him. When he came in from his qualifying run, literally everyone in our paddock walked out to the middle of pit lane to cheer him on when he came. The photo of all the drivers that had driven for Sam with Sam, that's what this event is about. This event is about how people feel about the facility the first time walking in with their dad, and so while this is really cool from a technology standpoint, I think we're years away from the point that we could really be successful without those connections to superstars like the guys to my right.

You guys have the final mark with each other. Mario,

you can go first.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Like I said, all I want to do is not -- please don't lap me because there's no Lucky Dog rule here, so I can't get back on the lead lap, so that's all I ask. And I'm not actually -- I'm not kidding, by the way.

SAM SCHMIDT: Well, I honestly don't think I'll lap him. I think the weather tomorrow is going to be fantastic. It's going to be a packed place, so I'm just really looking forward to the opportunity to race a legend of this nature. We're going to have some fun. I think -- I'm certainly not underestimating what he's capable of doing in the car. Yeah, just -- I think we are going give him some blinders like a racehorse so he keeps his head focused straight ahead, not looking at some pretty girls in the stands or anything like that.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Like he said, you picked an easy --

SAM SCHMIDT: Just take it easy on me.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Take it easy on me.