

IndyCar Media Conference

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Zak Brown

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's INDYCAR media teleconference.

Sunday will be one of the biggest days in worldwide motorsports with the 101st running of the Indianapolis 500 Presented by PennGrade Motor Oil, the Formula One Monaco Grand Prix, and the NASCAR 600-mile race in Charlotte, North Carolina.

We're pleased to be joined today by a man who will oversee his team's performance in two of those races, Zak Brown, the executive director of the McLaren Technology Group.

Zak, welcome to the call.

ZAK BROWN: Thank you for having me.

THE MODERATOR: McLaren Honda racecars will compete in Indianapolis with Fernando Alonso, and in Monaco with Stoffel Vandoorne and Jenson Button.

Zak, we've seen how Fernando has done here in Indianapolis. What have your impressions been of your experience with the Verizon IndyCar Series and Fernando's performance to date?

ZAK BROWN: It's been fantastic. The team has done, both McLaren and Andretti Autosport, an outstanding job. They have had, so far, kind of a textbook month of May. Obviously, the race is the hardest part and the longest part.

We got to get through it and get through it successfully. But so far the welcoming that we've had, the competitive nature in which we're executing, has been great. It's been a great experience.

THE MODERATOR: Your team, McLaren, has dubbed this weekend A Race of Two Worlds. What will Sunday be like for you? Where will you actually be watching the races?

ZAK BROWN: So I am going to Monaco tomorrow morning, and then will be the last plane out of Nice at 10:45, which will get me to Indianapolis about 3:20 a.m., according to my itinerary, Sunday morning. I'll go for a quick shower and a change of uniform, go to the racetrack nice and early, take it all in and enjoy it, then go to sleep.



THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

We'll open it up for questions for Zak Brown.

Q. I'm wondering from a marketing perspective, is there any chance at all that Alonso is overshadowing other elements of the race or other participants?

ZAK BROWN: No, I don't think so. I think clearly he's getting the most awareness right now. But he's getting awareness not just for himself but for Indianapolis, for INDYCAR, for Formula One. I bet there's more people that know Scott Dixon today than before pole internationally. Obviously, Scott is a superstar, but this will have only exposed more people to him. So, I think there's an upside for all the competitors.

I think it's a good story. It's a huge story. Might be the dominant story, but I think it's good for everybody.

Q. My son goes to school over near the Speedway, a few blocks away. Fernando is over at his school this morning with a couple other drivers. They were playing with LEGOs, doing science projects with the kids. We can see how he's doing on the track, but how he is reacting to the off-track demands of the Indy 500?

ZAK BROWN: That's a great question and brings a smile to my face like it does Fernando, because I was actually sent a video from Sylvia, who is someone on our media team, the video of him doing school, which I hadn't yet seen. My comment, and Fernando's, was, Welcome to INDYCAR, with a big smile.

To answer your question, he loves it. He has been, from the moment we landed in Indianapolis for the test, and fans waiting outside the FBO, to visiting schools, I think it's a breath of fresh air for him.

He is enjoying it. He's doing all of it. He wants to do it. He feels very welcomed by the INDYCAR club. I think he's enjoying the good nature and how much support everyone is giving him. It's great to see.

It certainly is substantially more work than he's accustomed to for a race weekend.

Q. Now that from a competitive standpoint you've had a few weeks to take in the whole INDYCAR experience, how has that changed your perspective on INDYCAR? What are the chances that we will see McLaren back on the INDYCAR grid

full-time?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, so it's been a great experience so far. Everyone at McLaren is enjoying this, has enjoyed it. The ExCom, as we call them, our Executive Committee, (indiscernible) Roger, and Sheik Mohammed, and some board members, were out for qualifying. They enjoyed it. They have been around motor racing their whole life, Tony George, Roger, Michael, Mario, et cetera.

North America is an important, very important, market for us. We're a racing team, but also have other businesses. Our criteria for competing outside of Formula One is that it has to be commercially viable, we have to feel we can be competitive, it fits our brand, and it doesn't detract from our Formula One efforts, which is our primary effort.

Indy 500 and INDYCAR ticks those boxes. So, it is something we're definitely considering. We want to get through the month. We feel good right now, but we know Indianapolis is a tough race. I hope we have the same level of enthusiasm that we do right now, which I'm sure we will regardless of outcome. It's been a great experience.

I think it's something that we're definitely going to discuss and are discussing internally and have met with INDYCAR, and are certainly, you know, interested in competing in some way, shape or form in the not-too-distant future.

Q. What is your overall take on the health of the IndyCar Series from your perspective?

ZAK BROWN: It looks really healthy to me. There's 33 cars. I know it's always tough to get those last few out. But they've got full grids and have for a long time.

I think it shows how competitive INDYCAR is. Fernando has some teammates in front of him and some teammates behind him. Certainly, not a walk in the park. I think the quality of the talent, the teams and drivers, is outstanding, world class.

They're putting out a lot of cars. I know that their ratings now, I believe, are flat-ish for the year. I would hope and think they will be up for the 500.

Verizon is a great title sponsor. Obviously, I'm well aware of that sponsorship from my old days. You've got a great partner there. So overall I think INDYCAR is healthy. Mark Miles is doing the right things. It was great to see how quickly, as an example, he jumped on our opportunity, and how he's to credit, at least part of the credit, for how much publicity this has generated. Mark definitely threw his weight behind this the moment it happened.

Q. Even though you're in F1 now, you know INDYCAR well. With so little turnover in the series, what does INDYCAR have to do to recruit new

owners? Where is it going to get young drivers to eventually replace the aging veterans?

ZAK BROWN: I mean, both good questions. I think not just INDYCAR has that challenge. Formula One does. All racing. None of the grids are as healthy as you want, so you need to always be recruiting.

The more economically viable motor racing is, the easier it is to find them. Not a small number are -- it's vanity sponsorship, so your sell has to be more business opportunity than vanity. But there are some wealthy people out there that enjoy the racing, subsidize it, have very successful racing teams.

The more commercially viable, the easier. I think you have to look around at other series, as well, who might want to come Indy car racing. Unfortunately, that might be to the detriment of another series, but that's how the world works.

Then, you know, drivers, I think that same question was probably asked 20 years ago. Unfortunately, it's a sport that is a blend of talent and economics. We all know lots of drivers that shouldn't have made it because they didn't have the economics, and then we've seen some drivers not make it and be successful, but get into the big leagues, maybe their commercial acumen was better than their driving talent.

I don't think I have a silver bullet other than to keep trying hard. The series I think is doing well and just needs to be a focus. But I don't think I have a magic solution.

Q. I thought it was mentioned or reported that McLaren was going to bring some expertise over, some talent over, to work on the Alonso team here in Indy. Can you share with us, did that happen? Are they changing tires? Are they engineers? What kind of personnel from F1 is working on his INDYCAR effort?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, we did bring some people over, both that have been there permanently from day one, and then others that have gone in and out, and then some - more than some - lots of communication back with home base, the MTC, and not really involved in the physical elements, i.e., having anyone over the wall.

It's been more around strategy, aero, some data analysis, where we've got people on our team with Indy car experience, people that were involved with the chassis when it was designed.

It was a blend of people that already knew the series and the car, and some of our F1 resources. I'd like to think we helped. Obviously Andretti, all their cars are strong. That's been the areas of focus.

Q. Fernando seems to be very happy. He's smiling a lot. His car seems to be handling really well. I saw

him making passes in the short chute on Monday. He looks very confident. What's he saying to you? Has he said, Hey, I want to do this again? Is he just focusing on this year, not really looking at a future shot at it?

ZAK BROWN: We've not spoken about anything other than the race. He's a very, very, very focused racing driver, more than I've seen or been around. I've been around a lot in various capacities. So he's very focused. He wouldn't want to be distracted by thinking about next year.

He loves it. It's every bit as cool, if not probably cooler, than he thought it was going to be. It's totally different. He very much enjoys it. He feels he's very good around the Speedway. He's very confident, but he's not cocky or arrogant at all. He knows Indy can bite at any moment. So he's very respectful.

But he knows he's got a good racecar. He knows he's fast. He has been aggressive in passing, which obviously it's one thing to be good by yourself, good in traffic, and be able to get around traffic. His race craft in Formula One is arguably the best.

So he's excited, because I think he has a shot. I think he has a shot, so does he, of having a great result. I think there's 12 to 15 drivers that can win. I think there's five or six that are the fastest. I think there are another five that are pretty darn close. With a little bit of strategy, they could win it. Then there's probably another three or four that if it was a bit of a wild race could win it.

I have Fernando, in my opinion, in that top five, six that are capable of winning the race on outright speed. But it's a competitive field. That's what he's looking forward to, is he knows he has a chance, but he knows so do a lot of other people, and he just wants to race them.

Q. For the past few years, you and your family have resided in the UK, a place near and dear to your heart, includes the headquarters for your United Autosports which will be making its Le Mans debut next month. What has it been like for you to be back? You spent the better part of 20 years living in the greater Indianapolis area. What is it like being back in your old stomping grounds?

ZAK BROWN: Great questions.

Starting with the last question, it feels great, and it feels different. It feels different because it's the first time I've walked down Gasoline Alley and felt like I was part of the show. Obviously doing the sponsorships over the year, you're contributing, you're kind of part of the show, but you're not part of the show everyone's coming to watch.

Walking down Gasoline Alley in my McLaren Honda Andretti gear was special. The fans have been so gracious, hollering, and for the first time not bad

hollering at me (laughter).

The fans are everything from, Welcome back, to, This is going to be the greatest race ever, to, This is what I've been dreaming I would see. Very, very welcoming.

I actually went for a two-seater ride with Mario (Andretti). That was terrifying. He's an impressive 77-year-old. I think probably as fast as anyone. I think I'll run him in a McLaren next year (laughter).

What it also gave me an appreciation for, because I've actually never been around the track, other than on a bus, which is different than Mario in the two-seater. Just in awe of Indianapolis. Very, very special moment that will probably be hard to ever replicate again how cool this is.

It's also a great blend personally of my favorite parts of motorsport, which is Formula One, World Champions, Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and INDYCAR. So to blend that all together, at least my 25 years in the business, is kind of a dream come true.

Then, yeah, we've got Monaco this weekend, then my other racing team, United Autosports. I was actually out goofing around today. Truth be known, this is my first day off in about six weeks, some of my old historic cars at Snetteton, with United Autosports, going to Le Mans after this, so I feel I'm pretty blessed and pretty lucky being able to participate at Le Mans, Indy, and Monaco all in the same year. There must be some sort of trophy for that. I don't know what it is. It's usually driver-related.

Q. Do you think this will spur any interest for a future return of Formula One to IMS?

ZAK BROWN: I am of the opinion that Formula One at IMS works. I think they've changed the configuration of the track a little bit. I think it makes sense for Formula One to be at the world's greatest racetrack. I think the city of Indianapolis is well catered to take care of Formula One, just like it did in the past, and Super Bowl.

I think the drivers like it. I think Indianapolis is easy to get to geographically. I realize it may not have the glamour of some of the other markets that are being spoken about, but it's here, it's ready to go.

I think economically, given that Liberty is taking a different view on some of their future partnerships, I think there is an opportunity there. Personally I'd like to see it happen.

Q. How do you see Alonso's motivation at Indy? How can this be transferred to Formula One and how can this benefit your partnership this year?

ZAK BROWN: Well, I think, one, and Fernando's commented on this, I think it's only going to make him a better, more complete driver, which is hard to imagine

because he's about as good as you get, a 9.9 out of 10.

But I do believe, having driven myself, having some experience, driving different disciplines makes you a better overall driver. I think he will have learned some stuff here, that like we saw Jacques Villeneuve pass Schumacher around the outside, Villeneuve kind of called his shot, I think he said that was based on his oval experience. I think he'll take away some learnings.

Obviously he has had a frustrating two years, as we all have, with our lack of competitiveness. That can get you down after a while. I think he is enjoying this so much that I think it's going to keep a smile on his face for a while. We're working hard on giving him a better racecar in Formula One. I hope this was a good experience for him that puts him in a very happy mood.

He really likes how McLaren goes racing. This wasn't just a brave decision by Fernando to do the 500, this was a brave decision by the owners of McLaren to get behind this project. So I think he likes that environment. I know he likes that environment.

As you saw in Spain, we had an improvement that was even bigger than we anticipated. So we may not be that competitive in the next coming races, but as long as Fernando comes back, feels he's driving great, he's enjoying it, the car is getting better, he loves his work environment, I think it is very healthy for everyone's part of the relationship.

Q. Please tell me that McLaren is considering getting into the mix of chassis manufacturers for INDYCAR, that hopefully there will be a mix of chassis manufacturers for INDYCAR.

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, so personally, and I think it would be good for the sport, also with my viewer's hat on, I think a couple different chassis manufacturers, as long as you can economically make it work, that's usually why going to a single ends up happening. But if you look back at the kind of late '80s, early '90s when Indy car was nipping at the heels of Formula One as far as popularity, it had a mix of a few chassis, had a mix of a few engines. I'd love to see that happen again.

We tend to, outside of obviously our automotive business, historically not be into mass production of anything. Everything has been very bespoke. We have our electronics business, we're involved with INDYCAR, NASCAR, other forms of series.

So we literally spoke about it for the first time last week. No one internally kind of commented yet, so I think it's on the to-discuss list. But we don't have any view yet whether McLaren would participate in that scenario or not.

Q. Glad to hear it's under consideration. I totally agree with you that it brings interest to the sport.

Things haven't gotten any cheaper with the one-make series.

ZAK BROWN: No, no.

Q. (Alexander) Rossi is showing outright speed this year, which surprises me. Has that come from hanging out with Fernando or from the insight McLaren has been able to give to the Andretti team? Has he better taken advantage of it than some of the other drivers in the team?

ZAK BROWN: Well, I don't know why specifically Rossi. What I can tell you is, without getting into too much detail, some stuff that Fernando has learned about the car has been transferred to the other cars. Of course, vice versa. Fernando and McLaren, we've learned more from Andretti and the drivers than they've learned from us. But there has been areas. We've operated as one team. So happy to share information because it goes both ways.

I think Andretti obviously has won the race many times. I think you never know with these drivers what gets them to step up. I have no doubt that the other 32 drivers, as much as they admire Fernando, really want to beat him. That can be a motivating factor with some drivers. But Rossi has been - really the whole lineup - impressively quick.

Q. You're a little over a month into this undertaking. What has been the most impressive part of the process for you, some of the biggest takeaways from the whole experience?

ZAK BROWN: The part that's impressed me the most is that it has all gone so well so far, which is all the credit to the people at McLaren, the people at Andretti, and the people at INDYCAR.

You say we've been here a month. It feels like we've crammed about 12 months of planning successfully into one month. Usually that's a recipe for disaster. The willingness, contribution, collaboration between those three entities has been outstanding, on and off the track. That's why I think everything's gone so well, is everyone has played their part.

It might have been my wild and crazy idea, but it took the bravery of my bosses to say yes, it took Fernando wanting to do it. Once you got past the deal's done, everyone at McLaren Honda, we've probably got 30 people that are contributing to the Indianapolis 500 project in one way, shape or form.

Then, of course, Andretti's team and INDYCAR's team. Whether it's been a press conference or a test or qualifying, partner activation, everything has just gone really well, which is making me nervous for the race (laughter).

Q. You're coming over for the race. Are there any other McLaren brass coming over, management, with you on that flight?

ZAK BROWN: On this particular flight, no. We will have lots of people there. It was very important. They flew out last weekend and spent two days. We had dinner at Mark's house with Michael and Fernando. They took in the whole weekend. They thought about it. They wanted to be here.

But it's also very important that they show support to our Formula One team because everything is going swimmingly on the INDYCAR side, and Formula One's tough. They wanted to show their support to both. Fortunately INDYCAR is two weekends. I'm the only lunatic that's flying overnight to do both.

Q. Back to the question that was asked earlier about F1 coming back to Indianapolis Speedway. There's no secret that the INDYCAR Grand Prix has somewhat struggled with crowd count on a Saturday event. F1 started to struggle there for a while, and that's why they're gone now. What do you think about the idea of having a doubleheader weekend, a Saturday and Sunday race, INDYCAR on Saturday, F1 on Sunday, back at the Speedway, to generate interest from both camps? You may even have some crossover, some drivers doing both races. What do you think about that idea?

ZAK BROWN: The crossover part I think would probably be a bit tricky. That aside, I like the idea. I think, personally speaking, going to a race weekend, the more exciting racing the better. An INDYCAR, Formula One doubleheader sounds cool. I don't know why that would be any more or less feasible than doing them individually. So why not?

Q. Have you changed your approach towards the race in terms of your expectations following Fernando's fantastic performance in qualifying? Is there anything you have learnt from your experience in INDYCAR that you can bring back to Formula One, kind of tell those guys, Maybe we could do this, in terms of fan engagement, like the way Fernando is at the elementary school today? Do you think there's anything F1 can learn from INDYCAR? I'm looking at your expectations towards the race on Sunday.

ZAK BROWN: Our approach, and Fernando's approach, is to just keep doing what he's doing, which is head down, very focused, one day at a time. You set out goals for that day. So far we've hit those individual kind of daily goals.

Now he's got to get through the race. He was a little disappointed in qualifying, which is good. It shows how much he wants to be at the front. I think he believes he could have been the front row. We had done an engine change in the morning, and there's some tuning that needed to be done during qualifying. He's going out there trying to win the race.

I think you can only set your expectations after you've seen how the first week has gone. Because it's gone

as well as it has, and he's clearly very fast, has a great car, we're going in trying to get a great result. We're going for the win, just like 32 other drivers are.

I think, because things have gone well, we've got a good chance. But, as we discussed earlier, so do a dozen other drivers. So we're going to go in. He's going to race hard. He's going to go for it. I think at Indianapolis anything can happen.

Then as far as your second question, learnings from Formula One. I think Sean Bratches, Ross Brawn and Chase Carey, the leadership of Formula One, are all over identifying and bringing more fan engagement to Formula One. So I think, of course, there's stuff they can learn from all sports. The good news is they want to see it.

I share information with them. They are thirsty for information and ideas. I think the way the test was covered was outstanding. INDYCAR did an excellent job there. That shows how engaged our great fan base is, that if we can communicate with them through things like social media, you can feel a real interaction with the fans, because they tell you real-time via Twitter, Facebook, websites, how you're doing, what they think. The more you can have a two-way conversation, the better.

We know that's not been a strength of Formula One. But we also know that times are changing, and we're already seeing that impact by Liberty. I think there's things they can learn, but I think there's a willingness from them.

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as we have no further questions for Zak, we will thank him for his time this afternoon and wish McLaren the best of luck in both Monaco and Indianapolis this weekend.

ZAK BROWN: Thank you very much. Thank you, everyone.