

IndyCar Media Conference

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Josef Newgarden Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the IndyCar media teleconference. As we approach the 2017 Verizon IndyCar Series season finale, we are joined by Josef Newgarden.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously not quite the kind of result you wanted on Sunday at Watkins Glen, but yet you still lead the points heading into Sonoma. Does that 18th-place finish change your mindset or your approach at all heading into Sonoma?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I don't think it will change our mindset or the way that we attack the season finale, but it does create less opportunity for error on the event. I think with the cushion we had before, it did create more of an open opportunity for some error during the event, and now it's less. I think the good thing about it is we can control our own destiny, and if we win the race, then that basically secures the championship. So it's in our hands to make it happen, other than us having to go there and rely on other people finishing in a certain position.

So that's the most comforting thing to me is we can control our own destiny, so we'll focus on going out, being fast, solving problems, and trying to win another IndyCar race.

Q. Each of your closest three competitors, they've all won at Sonoma before. Your previous best finish has been sixth place. What for you are the keys to performing well at Sonoma, to improve and get a better finish and lock up that championship?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I think qualifying will be good. You know, it's one of the first things that we need to focus on for the weekend. It's not the end-all-be-all to start up front, but I think it certainly makes your job a lot easier during the weekend when you start towards the front, if not at the very front, on the first row leading the race. That's going to be our main focus to start with, and after that we need to make sure we stay out of any mayhem, settle into the race. Like any weekend, you never know what can happen at the starts of races, and we want to make sure we get out comfortably at the start of the race and not get involved in any problems early on, and then after that I think it's about maximizing race pace, which is always difficult at Sonoma, just because of the tire degradation. It's

probably the most difficult track we go to for looking out for the tires during a race stint. So being able to do that well over multiple stints will probably be the final key for us and hopefully helping us secure the championship.

Q. When you look at this race, this is a track where Penske has been traditionally pretty good in the past. How confident are you in being able to use their setups for the first time as opposed to coming in from a previous team standpoint at this race?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I'm happy about the fact that we have a good amount of testing. We'll be testing there this week, and then we have the test on Thursday, which everyone will be a part of. So there's a lot of time. Hopefully that just means that we have more time to sort through it.

Last time I can remember I was having that right before a race weekend is really Barber, at least specifically for a road course, where we had a test to go through things that had worked previously for Team Penske, and then I'd have to feel it myself and work on it for a day before we went to the race, and it worked out really well for us in that race. I think all year long, we've been trying to understand, at least me personally, I've been trying to understand what Penske has done in the past and how I fit into that equation, and I feel like we've been very good about figuring that out for the most part. Sometimes I've been a little bit behind to start a weekend, but for the most part we've been able to catch up when needed, and we're there in the end.

I feel good about that, and I definitely feel good about Penske's tradition there, or at least their historical data from there. They seem to have a fairly good idea of what works around there and what doesn't, and hopefully that at least makes our problem solving a little bit easier when we show up.

Q. I have two questions for you, and the first one is a segue off your answer and Penske's experience at Sonoma. You're going there and basically -- I guess it looks like a winner-take-all scenario, and two of your three competitors are Penske teammates with experience there. What is your understanding -- I know that Penske has been in this position before where more than one driver has raced each other for the title, but as the newcomer, what is your understanding of how it's going to work at Sonoma with three drivers in championship contention?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I'm sure we'll have some final instructions as we get near to the race weekend. We haven't had those talks yet, but normally we get to talk with Tim and Roger before the race, and we have an understanding of where everything is at and how it's transpired up to the race. So once we get deeper into the weekend, I'm sure we'll have a conversation as a group and everyone will have an understanding of what's expected and what they'd like to see take place.

But everything that I've seen, having been involved in the organization just for a short time this season, is that it's pretty simple. We're there as a team. We're there as a unit. It doesn't matter who wins the championship. It doesn't matter who wins the race. It just needs to be a Penske car. We work as a team, and so if one of us succeeds, we all succeed. So I'm sure the rules will be take care of each other, make sure you're looking after one another on the racetrack. You're allowed to fight hard, fight fair, and get the job done. That's normally what the MO is. I don't expect it to be very different, but I'm sure we'll have another talk, like I said, as we get deeper into the weekend.

Q. So in the waning laps, are you as aggressive as you are at Gateway if it's one of your teammates or both of your teammates there and you can go for the championship?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I mean, it's impossible to tell right now because I just (indiscernible) how strong I feel like I am inside the car, how strong I feel like we are as a group on the 2 car, how that relates to the other guys, how strong they've been in the race. Normally you sort of decide how aggressive you want to be depending on how it's unfolding for the race, and it's been different for me for different races this year. Pocono and Gateway are the two examples I think I can bring up where my aggression has changed, and I've chosen different aggression levels.

I think it will really just depend on how the race is unfolding. Hopefully there's not that scenario where we have to decide on being aggressive or not aggressive. I hope that we're just out front leading and we don't have to have that decision. But when it comes down to it if you have a fast car and we're racing our teammates then I'm going to race them very hard and I expect them to race me very hard because we're all going for the championship. I just want them to be fair and clean about it.

Q. After Sunday at Watkins Glen, your error, what is that like -- what happened that made your major points cushion slip away? Are you hard on yourself after that? Is that something that's hard to swallow? How do you process that?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, whenever I make an error, it's always difficult for me. I feel like I'm sure a lot of drivers are their own worst critics. But I never like making a mistake, and so whenever I make a personal mistake that was just on my own doing, it's always

hard, and I'm always hard on myself for a while. It takes a couple days for me to get over those type of things.

The good thing is that the normally get focused forward pretty quick. Like today I felt like I had a great day with my engineer just focusing on Sonoma and we've got a good amount of time to try and work through that and get ourselves in a good place. Yeah, I try and move forward pretty quick, but it's always tough. I hate making personal errors and doing that to the team. It's tough, but hey, you've got to move on pretty fast, and we've got to do it quickly here because the final race is coming up.

Q. Josef, looking at how you've been setting up your cars this year, you say that you've had times when you and Brian have been kind of like talking about the kind of like hybrid setups sometimes with the Penske setup and some of the things that you bring to the table; now, you've had, I think, two, maybe three front row starts at Sonoma before when you raced for Ed Carpenter Racing and Sarah Fisher, and you were the main threat to Penske. Does the fact that you have a test with Penske this week and also you have the open test on Thursday, does that give you enough time to come up with the ultimate setup combination between what you bring to the table and also what Penske already know about Sonoma?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I think so. I really think with the amount of time we have -- like I was saying before, the last time we had that opportunity I think was Barber, and I got to pretty much start on what they've used in the past, and I worked on some things that worked for me in the past, and we worked that into the setup. For the most part, it just didn't translate, so we used some loans up before the race weekend and then we could kind of just keep going through various types of setup work to find something perfect for me. I think we'll be able to do that at Sonoma. I think what's worked best for me is working historically on what Penske has done. I think if I look at their data and look at their experience over weekends with each specific guy and what they did that worked and what they did that didn't work, I think going through all that and understanding it and just trying to acquire it has been what's been most successful for me. Yeah, just working with their experience has generally been the best thing for me this year, and that's probably what we'll do going into Sonoma.

Q. Should you be able to go off successfully win the championship and defeat Scott Dixon, who's become a master of winning championships in this generation, how extra gratifying will that be, because he really is one of the all-time greats?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Oh, yeah. I mean, I think it would be hugely successful if we're able to beat Scott. You've got to feel good about that with how high of a caliber he is. He's just one of the best. You know, on

that same token, I feel like we have some of the best with Simon and Will and Helio, too.

You know, it'll be very gratifying hopefully beating Scott, and then I think the same thing with the other guys in the fight. There's a lot of good guys that you're going up against, so I don't think it's just limited to Scott, but for sure trying to beat all those guys, and hopefully if we're able to do it, it's going to feel great. It's going to be a huge accomplishment for us on the 2 car side.

Q. Josef, I'm wondering in what ways do you think you've evolved as a driver this year? What steps have you taken to put yourself in position to be a champion?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Hmm. Well, you know, you're always learning, as evidenced by Watkins Glen. Hopefully that turns into a learning experience for me and not just an error. So I think you're always trying to evolve on what did you do well, what did you not do well, what would you do differently, and hopefully I'm not leaving Sonoma saying, well, I wish I could have done this differently and more just I'm happy with how we executed and how we handled things.

You know, I think for me personally, just being more adaptive is what's been my biggest growth point this year, being able to adapt to a different environment that works differently than I've experienced in the past, being able to adapt to different setups that aren't necessarily in my comfort window. Not something that I've had my personal touch on right from the beginning, which is what I've been used to in the past with the teams I've worked with in the past. So I think just being able to adapt throughout the year has been probably my biggest strength and growth, and I'm hoping that we continue to grow in that department and are able to use that going into next year after Sonoma this season.

Q. Is it an advantage or a disadvantage that your closest competitors for the championship are also your teammates?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Hmm, that's a great question. I don't know. I don't actually know to be honest with you. I feel like with the way Team Penske operates, you know, it sort of doesn't really matter. I think if anything, you've got to feel that it's maybe more of an advantage because you're going to race your teammates hard. I know they're going to race me very hard, but they're going to try to be as fair as possible with it, so I expect very hard racing from my teammates. They're going to try and beat me just as bad as I'm going to try and beat them, but there's a little bit in the back of the head there that they want to be as fair as possible. It doesn't mean they're not going to be hard with the way they race, but you've got to think there's got to be a little bit of fairness with it, too. I would say maybe that leans more toward the favorable side, but at the same time, I don't know that it really changes much at the end of the day.

Q. Let's be honest, you're looking at about three points here, whether it's a single points paying race or a double points paying race. It seems to me that having the rest of the field that's in contention be pretty much your teammates, that a dog pack mentality might be something you need to negotiate. Given that it's Sonoma and you're good on roads, do you think you might be talking to Helio and Simon?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: You know, I think honestly one of the greatest things about Team Penske is they let us race. They obviously want us to work together. We'll be working together to make the fastest race cars possible. That's kind of our first goal when we show up testing this week and when we show up next weekend is just to work together and make faster cars than everybody. If we have the fastest cars in the field, it makes our job way easier when we get to race day because if we're just faster than everybody, we don't have to worry about them as much. So we're going to work together as a cohesive unit to start with to try and get there. I think it's great for the fans. I think it's great for the integrity of motorsports that they let their guys race. Sometimes it hasn't worked out in a championship for their team because they do that, but you know, to me, it's the coolest situation in motorsports that you have such a powerhouse team that has the best of the best working together and they let them go at it and try and get it done on the racetrack. A lot of times it works out and there's a couple times it hasn't. But I like their approach to that, and I think it's cool that that's the way they operate.

Q. What would it mean for you to not only beat Scott Dixon, who's been arguably the best driver of the last 15 years, but what would it also mean to be the top dog at Team Penske, which has historically been the most dominant team this year?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, you cut out a little bit at the end of that question, but I think for us if we were able to be the champion this year, champions, with the No. 2 car specifically, you know, it feels a little different at Team Penske just having seen the inner workings of the team and how it operates. It seems like it's a line that we put out all the time, but it's really true, when one car wins, we kind of all win, and yeah, some on the 2 car, and we have specific guys that work on that and fill pit stops for a race weekend, but all four cars, they all work together. All the other guys from the other cars, they work on my car and vice versa, so everyone in the shop feels like we won when one of the cars does win, whether it's your car specifically or not.

I think we'll all feel good about it. I would feel very good about it just having been my first year on the team, and I didn't know how that was going to go. I obviously hoped that we'd be in this position and I hope that we're able to win the championship. But I also knew maybe that might not be possible with the first year and what we need to go through and learn

together. I'll feel very good about it personally. I'll be really happy for everyone involved and being able to beat all the guys around us. They're some of the best in the world, so it's always gratifying when you're able to be on the top of that.

Q. I know you've been with this situation a couple years with ECR, but now you've got Tim Cindric on your pit box. Going into Sonoma how big is that for you as far as your confidence and mentality knowing Tim is calling your shots and he's been in this situation before?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: You know, Tim gives me confidence every weekend. I feel like I'm always learning something with him around. You know, it's made me up my game as a driver, probably just as a person in motorsports. He had so much experience, and he brings so much comfort to any group, I think, because you feel like he has his hand on the pulse, like he knows what to do, he's been there before. He's always thinking about how situations can evolve, how they can change, what answers you're going to need to have before you actually get into certain situations. You know, he brings just enormous comfort and confidence, I think. Even at Watkins Glen when it went kind of sideways with me making my error on the pit exit, it's just like, he's so calm about it and he's not bashing on me.