

IndyCar Media Conference

Monday September 11, 2017

Mike Hull

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everybody, to today's IndyCar media teleconference. Our guests today will play a key role in this week's Verizon IndyCar Series championship deciding race at Sonoma Raceway.

Joining us first is Mike Hull, managing director of Chip Ganassi Racing.

Mike, as I mentioned, is the managing director of Chip Ganassi Racing which fields entries for four-time Verizon IndyCar Series champion Scott Dixon, Tony Kanaan, Charlie Kimball and Max Chilton. Dixon trails Josef Newgarden by three points entering this week's race. Since Mike joined the team in 1996, he has overseen the organization's 11 IndyCar titles, four in Champ Car with Jimmy Vasser, Alex Zanardi and Juan Pablo Montoya, and seven in IndyCar with Scott Dixon and Dario Franchitti. Mike is also the race strategist for Scott Dixon's No. 9 car.

Thanks for joining us in what has to be a very busy week for you.

MIKE HULL: Yeah, it's been busy. It's good to be working getting ready for Sonoma. I actually started working for Chip in 1992. Been a long time with Chip. It's been wonderful.

THE MODERATOR: I read earlier today that Scott says he's not approaching this race any different than the other 16 races that have happened this season. Is that the approach you kind of preached to the entire team, knowing what's on the line on Sunday?

MIKE HULL: I think when you won as many races as Scott has won and championships, and big races, that he's learned to exhale. And I think he's the kind of person that works hard for getting the best result from today.

So, yeah, there's a lot of gravity going on here when we race at Sonoma, and it is going to be different. But we approach the way that we prepare and how we race in the same manner that we have with Scott for a long, long time.

THE MODERATOR: You've been part of these calls that we have with the race strategists before the championship event. I've asked this question of you a number of times over the years. But it always seems like it's Chip Ganassi Racing and Team Penske in this

position at this time of the year. What is it about your organization at Chip Ganassi Racing that keeps putting drivers in position to win the IndyCar title?

MIKE HULL: I think we try to win every day. When you add all those wins up, I'm talking about what we do in the building, what we do at the racetrack, what we do with our partners, it's the whole thing. It's the culture of who we are. And I think what winning organizations, sport organizations do, I think it's not just in motorsports, it's any sports organization you see, they work to find new ways to win because the competition, what they do is they -- in order to beat you, they normally have to copy you first. You have to be very, very cognizant of that as a team, as an organization. You have to find new ways to keep everybody engaged in the process, in this case at Chip Ganassi Racing.

So I think it's important to be prepared to come back to the building, like we do, and realize seriously it could be the last race we ever won unless we find a new way to win. So I think that's how we look at it.

THE MODERATOR: Scott is the longest tenured driver at Chip Ganassi Racing. A win for him would put him in some rarefied company with five championships. Chip's A.J. Foyt has won only more. If he was able to come up with his third title in the last five years, where do you think that would rank him in terms of the championship drivers you've worked with?

MIKE HULL: I think the way you need to look at race drivers is how they raced against their peer group at the time they raced. I don't know that it's a fair comparison necessarily to compare Scott Dixon to Dario or to Alex Zanardi or Jimmy Vasser or Juan Montoya or any other champion we've run at our race team. I think it's more important to look at how he's done lineage-wise for the number of years, in this case maybe the decades he raced, it will be decades of IndyCar racing, and who he raced against, how he compared to those drivers.

If you do that, and you look at his winning record, how he's won races, how he's represented himself, that stands him apart. I think that stands him in equal presence to the people that he's starting to pass on that list. Because that's what those drivers did while they were racing IndyCars. They conducted themselves in the same way that Scott is now doing that.

I think he will go down as one of the best of all time, from a comparative standpoint.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions for Mike Hull.

Q. I realize how professional a Team Penske racing is. They have four drivers going for the championship. You have one. A lot of people try to make a case out of that being a big disadvantage because Scott doesn't really have any wing men to speak of. What is it when you're racing against the numbers like that that you're looking at? I'm not going to say that Penske drivers aren't going to do anything over the line, but is it situations where maybe they drive Scott a little bit deeper into the corner than they normally would? What are the things that concern you when you're going up against a team with four drivers to your one?

MIKE HULL: It's a good question. Certainly we think about it. But I think we race our race. And we have good teammates here at Chip Ganassi Racing. They pull for each other. And they race clean, they race fair. I think at the end of the day that's how you're judged.

I would hope that everybody that races in this race will be judged as a result of racing in a very fair and a manner that's driven by integrity.

Q. If you go back to the 2015 playbook in the final race where Scott won the championship that day after Juan Pablo Montoya had led after every race that season, do you pretty much use the same playbook: go for the pole, lead the most laps, win the race?

MIKE HULL: Well, certainly the easiest way to win the championship is to win the race. But I think that you accept what's given to you on, in this case, race day at Sonoma. We're going to race to win. If we can't win, we're going to finish second. If we can't finish second, we're going to finish third. That's how we've always raced here. We're going to just stay after it.

Q. Could you give me a little scouting report on Josef Newgarden. What has he done this year, what do you sort of think of him as a driver?

MIKE HULL: I have a lot of respect for him, number one. And I think what he represents is the generation that's coming next in IndyCar racing. There's a great young generation of drivers that are coming along in IndyCar racing that are going to set themselves apart as they go through their career, or respective careers.

He's got amazing ability. He's got a great mind. He thinks his way through. He represents everything that's good about IndyCar racing in terms of ladder system drivers making it into probably one of the best arenas there is to race in the world. A great degree of respect for who he is.

Q. How difficult is Sonoma of a track to chase in

terms of it being so low gripped? Scott kind of touched on that last week in a teleconference call.

MIKE HULL: Being what? I'm sorry.

Q. It's a very low grip track. How do you kind of chase that from a setup standpoint?

MIKE HULL: Yeah, he's right. It is a very low-grip circuit. For the ultimate lap time, number one, the tires stay underneath you for a full run, but speed is not your friend there for a length of time on the tires, either reds or blacks.

But what you do is you work really, really hard on the mechanical aspect of the car, try to balance it with the aero. But the mechanical part of the car, having all four tires work with a full contact patch there is the key to that.

Then the second thing that does happen there is the track really changes. It's the vineyard owner's friend, but the race driver's adversary because the wind there comes from one direction in the morning, and in the afternoon goes the other direction. There's a lot of grit and sand in the air. I think that causes a lot of problems there, particularly in the afternoon when we race, or even when we qualify. So you have to be cognizant of that and work hard on that.

Q. How impressed have you been with Scott's approach this season with the new Honda engine? How do you think that's going to work this weekend in Sonoma?

MIKE HULL: Well, I've been impressed with Scott Dixon for a long time, whatever he's done. If you study his career, I would say there's five, maybe six legitimate changes in the IndyCar formula over his career span. He continues to run at the front.

Any time you have a formula change, which we're going to have again next year, a driver has to step outside himself or herself and realize that they've got to change their drive style pretty significantly if they're going to run at the front.

What we did this year was we changed to Honda. That included the aero kit and the engine package. So Scott had to adapt himself once again to a changing formula. He still manages to be one of the best.

So for us on the inside here at Chip Ganassi Racing, watching him and being up close to him, seeing what he does, and the determination that he has to get the most out of the car every day, it's pretty special.

Q. The other thing that plays into this is that Firestone loves to play with the compounds and change them up. It's my understanding from also a previous conference call, that adds a significant new wrinkle to what's going to go on this next weekend. What do you see, what have you learned about the change in the nature of the compounds

of the tires, and what are you I guess anticipating?

MIKE HULL: We see that all the time. It sometimes throws us for a loop, and sometimes we get it right.

We have the technical data from Firestone, and our engineers have gone through it pretty extensively. In fact, I was in a meeting about that earlier today. We haven't run at Sonoma this year on this tire. We'll run there on Thursday for the open test day for the first time. We'll work pretty hard to work on two things. One is understanding the mechanical aspect of the car, and the second one is to understand the durability of the tire for a full run. That's really the key to go IndyCar racing or any other kind, is to understand how track position is created. Track position is created by a driver who is able to keep the tires underneath him or her for the full length of a run, not just for five to ten laps, to create an ultimate lap time.

I think that's the key to success with Firestone tires. The product in itself has been extraordinary for many, many years. It will continue to be that way. Sonoma is a terrific place, so it's a great combination.

Q. Firestone seems to be shifting things up, meaning that the red tire of last year is the black tire of this year. Do you see that as being an overall advantage from the two years, assuming all other things equal?

MIKE HULL: I think I'd be able to answer that question maybe on Friday afternoon (laughter), to be very honest about it. We try really, really hard not to box ourselves in with preconceived notions about what's going to happen with the setup before we get there.

Q. We saw Honda teams testing before the season here in Sonoma. How are you planning to use that test to your advantage in the final race for Honda?

MIKE HULL: How are we planning to use the open test? Was that the question?

Q. Yes. How is that going to help you to win the championship next week after testing in Sonoma previously because Chevy hasn't done that?

MIKE HULL: I know that. Penske was out there last week. Sounds like they had a good test out there. We haven't actually been on the racetrack on this tire yet this year. We'll use Thursday as a full evaluation, like we would any other open test or private test, for that matter.

Come Friday morning, when everybody's there officially, I think we'll be in good stead to run well there.

THE MODERATOR: Since we have no more questions for Mike, we will thank him for his time. We wish you and Scott Dixon the best luck at Sonoma.

MIKE HULL: Thank you. Thanks to everybody.