

IndyCar Media Conference

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Tim Cindric

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are now pleased to be joined by Tim Cindric, the president of Team Penske. Tim in his tenure at Team Penske has led the team to five IndyCar titles in 2000, 2001 with Gil de Ferran, 2006 with Sam Hornish Jr., 2014 with Will Power, and 2016 with Simon Pagenaud. The team has also won six Indy 500s, most recently with Juan Pablo Montoya in 2015. He is also the race strategist for Josef Newgarden, the current IndyCar Series points leader, one of the seven drivers eligible for the championship.

For the 12th straight year, the Verizon IndyCar Series championship will be decided in the final race of the season. Obviously, Tim, Josef leads by three points over Scott Dixon. He has three other teammates in the mix as well. What does that say about Team Penske that all four of your drivers are in contention for the title?

TIM CINDRIC: Thanks for having me.

Certainly going into the last race, we have multiple opportunities. We've been there before. Sometimes we've capitalized, sometimes we haven't. But it certainly shows kind of the depth of our organization and really how hard our guys compete with each other and with everyone else.

We're fortunate to be in that position, for sure. But, yeah, as you know, with double points, a lot of different things can happen there at Sonoma.

THE MODERATOR: You did mention that you've been there before. The team has had a driver in contention for 10 of the last 11 years that the series has gone down to the finale. You've been in this position before, specifically with Will and Helio. What approach do you bring to a driver like Josef, who is in this position for the first time, both with the team and in his career?

TIM CINDRIC: Well, I think we try and go about it business as usual. Certainly, he's someone that has shown speed there at Sonoma. Yeah, he hasn't won the race there yet, but he's been knocking on the door. I think to do much differently in terms of our approach or whatever else might not be the right thing to do. I think as Mike alluded to, you have to take one day at a time there and try and understand what your realistic situation is come Sunday.

THE MODERATOR: Before the season started, you

chose to move to Josef's car to help him with his adaptation to the team. When you did it, did you envision that he'd be a guy who would win four races and be in position to win a title right out of the gate?

TIM CINDRIC: Well, it's something that we looked at as a team collectively. It wasn't necessarily my decision to stay or move or what have you. I spent years and years with Helio. The team asked me to move and look after Will Power after, I don't know, 11 years or so with Helio. We had some successes and built a great relationship there, as I did with Will.

It's always difficult when kind of your comfort zone is what you know, but as we -- I think it's pretty well-documented when Simon came across to the team in his first season, he finished 11th with our organization, which honestly, we felt as though we let him down. We had the opportunity to bring Josef onboard. As Mike said, he's kind of the next generation in IndyCar, or one of them.

For us, we didn't want to go through the same process we did before. I'm not saying that in terms of I would be the difference, but I think the way we looked at it is that we felt as though Will's team was the most experienced in virtually every position.

The team in which Josef was coming into, it was a bit of a different situation because Simon came into a completely new team that didn't exist, whereas Josef came into a team that had existed under Montoya.

We felt like, if I were in that pit, at least if things weren't going as I guess we expected them to or needed them to, that me being there firsthand was going to be the biggest advantage. It wasn't really a matter of who was calling his strategy or what have you, it was more about just understanding the process in which we needed to go to make things better for him would be more immediate, obviously with the position that I'm in.

Yeah, we've continued to build on our relationship, and build on trying to understand what Josef needs to be successful. I think that momentum has built throughout the year.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions for Tim Cindric.

Q. Regarding your pit lane assignments, you're going to be right behind Mike Hull, the main enemy,

if you like, as far as the championship is concerned. Is there an advantage or disadvantage from your point of view in being able to see what Mike is doing with the No. 9 car, or would you rather be able to keep what you're doing with the No. 2 car away from his eyes?

TIM CINDRIC: Yeah, I think it all depends where you're running that particular day. Honestly, I'm not sure if it makes a whole lot of difference. I think in either case, you can't hide -- we can't hide from each other.

So I think where we are, you know, certainly it will be no different than any other time we've raced against each other. It's something that, you know, that competitiveness and the things that we've done throughout the years competing, the way in which we compete, we enjoy. We enjoy the competition. It's not only Josef that's in contention, I feel as though Helio and Simon, they're in a position where if they win that race, I think they've got a really good shot at the championship as well.

It's really more than Josef and where he's pitted relative to Scott. I think as we go forward, as I said, you really can't hide from each other.

Q. Mike has one driver going against four that you have going in the championship. How is that a major advantage in your quest? I know a lot of times people try to make a bigger deal about the numbers than what there necessarily is. What is the real outlook from your point of view of having four drivers eligible to their one?

TIM CINDRIC: Yeah, I think if it wasn't Scott Dixon, I would say that our odds are really good. When you look at the fact that Scott has been there, done that, executed really more than all of our guys combined, I would have to do the math, but he's been the guy to beat when it comes to championships. He's been solid everywhere. You don't see him make any mistakes. He's as solid as they come.

Essentially, when you look at a three-point advantage, the way the points structure is, you essentially say he and Josef are tied, aside from one beats the other one.

I feel as though our guys are maybe a bit more complex in terms of the situation we're in. I wouldn't trade it. At the same time it's pretty simple from his perspective. He has four cars out there, but he has one that they really need to focus on. You can put all your energy into that.

But it has a lot more to do in our minds with how we ensure that our guys are able to race for the championship and have a fair shot at it, but at the same time we keep in mind that we need to ensure that one of those guys is able to end up on the top step at the end of the day.

Again, it's probably not a simple answer to your

question, but certainly like the fact that at least three of our guys have a really good shot, and mathematically four.

But I just wish it was somebody else we were racing against in terms when you look at the statistics and you look at the way in which he approaches things. He's solid as they come.

Q. I guess you knew what you were getting when you hired Josef, but how has he been different than the person that you hired? In what ways has he surprised you or been a change from what you thought you might have been getting?

TIM CINDRIC: That's a good question because honestly I didn't really know Josef very well aside from afar really until he came into our team. He had shown us that obviously he was quick in all the ladder series. He showed us he was a winner. He showed us really after the accident that he had in Texas how quickly he came back from that, what his toughness was.

But Josef as a person, we only knew him really as much as maybe a lot of people on this call do. A lot of people on this call probably knew him a lot better than we did.

But throughout the year I think the thing that, you know, has been remarkable to me is his poise. Really haven't seen him at the point of panic or I guess I should say he controls his emotions very well.

I see that quality in a lot of really successful drivers. I think if you look at NASCAR, Jimmie Johnson is really the guy that you would say is the epitome of cool and collected. He's shown that he's able to keep it under control under the most difficult circumstances.

Josef, although very outspoken and very outgoing, he's quite humble at the end of the day. I think that takes him a long way. He's able to look at himself, and he's hard on himself at the right times, and he's very honest with himself and those around him.

I think when you have that kind of atmosphere, you typically succeed at a quicker rate because it's not a matter of defining where the issues are, or debating them, it's a matter of how to fix them. It's been a pleasure working with him on those fronts. I think he and I and really that whole group are very honest with each other in terms of where we think we need to improve.

Q. Obviously, you moved off Will's box this year. How do you think he goes into this week with his psyche because he's not really out of the championship but he's not as close as the other guys? You've been with him when he's won a championship and lost a couple. What do you think his mentality will be for the weekend and what role do you think he'll play in the proceedings?

TIM CINDRIC: I think he'll probably go into it a bit more relaxed than other years. He's certainly got nothing to lose. I think he knows realistically it would have to be a really, really odd day in IndyCar racing for him to have a realistic shot at the championship. So I think he understands that.

Obviously, he'd rather it be a different way. He'd rather be in the fight overall. But I do think he understands how important it is to the team, and he understands that he's been in that position before. I'm sure he'll be in that position again.

Yeah, it's unfortunate because I think he fought his way throughout the year to get back in that position, and he just finally got to that, then things didn't go the right way, fell back out of that realistic opportunity. I think he's obviously bummed about that.

But, yeah, I think he'll be doing everything he can to win the race.

Q. Recently Helio kind of mentioned having a handshake agreement with you and Roger about his future. I don't know if you can or want to provide any insight into that. If you could, maybe talk about how Helio has handled this year sort of balancing the speculation about his future while trying to win his first championship.

TIM CINDRIC: Yeah, no, I think he's always been a professional. He's a guy that there's a reason why he's got the longest tenure with our organization and with Roger. He defines team player really at the end of the day. He's been through some good times and some bad times. We've supported him. He's supported us, vice versa. Me personally, I've been through a lot with him. I couldn't ask for a better guy to work with.

When you look at it, it's always amazing, we always tell him, you know, in a lot of ways he's still a 14-year-old kid. As he continues to grow a year older at a time, he still has the pace. He's one of those guys that I think he gives hope to all the other drivers around him that, you know, you can still be competitive and still be there when you get into your 40s.

Yeah, he's always been a pleasure to work with. He wears it on his sleeves some days. But I know how focused he is on being that close to the championship. He's been there many times. When you look at the history of how many times he's gone into the final race with the opportunity to win a championship, he's there again this year. It would be a no better story than Helio winning the championship this year.

Q. Have you talked to the drivers at all about this weekend? Have you issued any instructions to them at all? Is it just the case of go out and race, don't bring the cars back in bits?

TIM CINDRIC: Yeah, well, that's the simple thing to say, for sure. We've been there, and typically I think if

you look back a couple years ago, Will and Juan got into each other, it wasn't as simple as, Hey, this one guy is trying to pass another guy in a typical racing situation. I think they both surprised each other on a restart in terms of how that all played out. It was just unfortunate circumstances in a lot of ways. You look at both of them and you go, OK, that wasn't supposed to happen, but it's hard to place blame on either one with how it played out that particular day.

The answer to your question is, I think it really has to do a lot with how the weekend goes. But we have to be realistic with each other once Sunday starts. How it looks at the beginning of the race might be different than how it looks at the end of the race. Typically in Sonoma, where you're making three pit stops, things are somewhat wide open as far as when the cautions fall, with this closed pits issue, usually throws things in a whole different way, different than what it looked like prior to a caution coming out, opportune or inopportune times.

For us, the mentality is, Let's be sure that Team Penske does its best to execute. If Scott goes out there and sits on the pole and wins the race, hey, you got to hand it to him. He deserves it. You have to look at each other and say, You know what, we weren't good enough throughout the year.

But you'd much rather be in that position than look at each other and say, What did we do that for?

Q. People ask drivers what they think about the different tracks. Scott Dixon mentioned that Sonoma is probably one of the toughest circuits to get right. They ask the drivers this because they're the ones that experience the track. The team captain also has their view of the different tracks. What is your view of Sonoma? What do you see that you have to bring to the party for the driver when the setup comes?

TIM CINDRIC: Yeah, for me, I'm not the guy that makes the cars go fast. I'm pretty distant from that honestly. The race engineers, they spend their time getting everything right. I guess my role is really to have a veto vote on what they want to do or try and make whatever they want to do a reality in some ways or help the team execute. That's really what my role is.

Sonoma itself is unique, obviously not only in the layout but also with the way the track conditions change throughout the day even in terms of ambient but also the way in which the wind works almost through a valley. The car can change quite a lot. Really all that changes is the conditions, not really the setup on the car.

It's very easy to kind of lose yourself there. The ones that have experience there typically have a more predictable weekend in terms of the car's performance. But when you look at race in which there's pretty big

fuel windows, depending on your economy, how hard you run, how you race, you really have to try and understand what your risk and reward is during the race itself. You've seen it many times there where the guy that's the fastest car doesn't necessarily win.

I think you have to be guarded on that and understand the situation that you're in at the time.

Q. I guess Sonoma to you, being a team leader, is more just being in the process as opposed to how difficult it might be as opposed to other tracks?

TIM CINDRIC: I guess I don't really understand the question. I think it's a difficult place, but it's unique in itself. It's hard to relate it to any other type of track. But as a permanent road circuit, it's typically difficult to pass. It's a high-risk maneuver most of the time when you do go to pass. You have to look at the race and almost play it backwards in some ways. But in other ways you have to try and understand really who you're racing and when you're racing them.

It's strategic, for sure, but sometimes at that particular event, because it is advantageous a lot of times to go further or to save fuel, but sometimes in doing that you get caught out by a caution that then puts you back in the middle of the field which obviously puts you at higher risk and less odds of winning.

It's a difficult one, and not everything there is under your control. You don't control your own destiny as much as maybe you do at some of the ovals.

Q. You've been on both sides of the championship equation in the past with Will. This is Josef's first. Go a little bit deeper about how you're navigating him or managing him through this process, especially this weekend, because it's going to be pretty emotional for him.

TIM CINDRIC: Yeah, I think it is. But I think everybody reacts to it different. I think if we can go through, we had a good test there this past week, so I think we were able to at least take things in or out of our equation as far as what our toolbox is from a technical perspective, how we approach the weekend. By the time Thursday is over, we will have run probably another six hours of testing on Thursday. It should give us somewhat relativity between the other competitors. Then with the knock-out qualifying and so forth, you can still sometimes have a guy with the fastest car not quite make it.

I think the approach with him, I don't know how else to say it, but business as usual. You try and go through each session and build on the last session. It's just typically what he responds to. If things don't work out well, and we don't end up toward the front, the guy's really, really good at making the most out of a situation.

You see how determined he is. I think he's also a driver that understands that this isn't his last chance, this isn't

the only chance he's going to have at a championship. That kid is going to be there every year in the fight. He's well-rounded. When you look at the different tracks that we run on, I can't say that there's one of those particular tracks that's necessarily a weakness, which isn't something that I really knew or understood before the year. I think he dominated Iowa last year, and you saw where he was quick at certain places, but it was difficult in the team that he was in in terms of how he related to his teammates because there typically wasn't a season-long teammate, sometimes they varied, so it was difficult to compare.

But now that we've seen him with our guys, and the guys that have been with us for a while, he typically doesn't have a weakness aside from I guess you could look at it and say that he hasn't had a pole yet this year. That's something I know he's had the fastest car in practice, and what whatever reason we haven't been able to capitalize in P1. We've been on the front row a few times. I would say that's something that would go a long way for where we start the race. I think he's qualified second there and third there in the past two or three years. So he's shown the speed. I know he's confident in terms of his capability. He also understands that a lot of different things can play out at that event.

Q. Being with Will through this process before, now being with Josef through this process, is there a lot of characteristics they share? Completely different going through this championship process? How do they stack up with each other?

TIM CINDRIC: I guess it's difficult to answer the question without having been through the final race with Josef. Throughout the year, I think they're both very competitive. They're very different people in terms of obviously their personalities. You have one that's quite outspoken. They're almost opposites in some ways, depending on the situation. I think Josef is a very outgoing guy. He's a guy that is very engaging to the media in some ways. Will is a very technical guy, and one that's very focused on the racetrack and what's going on with his particular car.

I think during the race themselves, if you listen to our radio, there's not a lot to listen to. Both of them are pretty much very kind of trusting in their approach. They approach it with whatever situation they're given, they respond to it.

I guess from a personality standpoint, yeah, they're quite a bit different. When things don't go well, I think they both respond to it sometimes in a different way. You've seen where Will is quite emotional sometimes. My job has been to get him back in the game. Then there's other times where things go wrong and Will's quite calm and collected and understands the next step and is on to the next lap.

Josef I'll say is, at this point in time, very levelheaded,

very matter of fact, good or bad. I don't know if that answers your question, but I tried.

Q. Obviously Josef made a mistake at Watkins Glen. Have you had to deal with that differently with him than you have with Will when he's made mistakes in championship contention before? It's hard on the team when all the other guys are in championship contention, he doesn't really have anyone to talk to, does he?

TIM CINDRIC: Well, I hope that he feels he can talk to any of us. I think the drivers themselves have all been through different scenarios. Josef may not have been in an IndyCar championship race to this extent or this close to it, but he's obviously shown that he can handle the pressure at different levels.

To be an Indy Lights champion and some of the other things that he's done, he understands what it is to win a championship. You just keep going up those different stages.

I think that certainly the circumstances there at Watkins Glen were somewhat under our control and some weren't. You can't control the fact there's somebody behind him. If he doesn't get hit from behind there, we go on and finish the race pretty much where we were running because the extent of the damage we had really had more to do with the car hitting us from behind than what occurred before that, so... Not that that was anybody always fault behind, it was just part of the circumstances.

But Josef throughout that process, you know, if he was over the top upset about it, he's not pushing the button to tell us. He's just going on about trying to make the most of it. For us it was really unfortunate, but at the same time the good news was we still control our own destiny in terms of leading the points at the end of that race.

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as we have no more questions for Tim, we will thank him for joining us today and wish him and all of Team Penske the best of luck at Sonoma.

TIM CINDRIC: Thank you. Thanks, everyone, for taking the time to call in.