

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday September 15, 2017

Josef Newgarden Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Joined now by Josef Newgarden, the championship points leader heading into this weekend's GoPro Grand Prix of Sonoma. Josef also was fastest in today's practice session and under his teammate Simon Pagenaud's track record set last year. Not officially a new track record yet until we get into qualifying, but Josef, it's very clear that you have some speed heading into this weekend. Your thoughts on how today's practice sessions went and if you learned anything heading into qualifying.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I think it was a good session for us, good two sessions really. I feel like the Penske cars are fast. We've had obviously a lot of test time, more than others recently. We had last week and then the Thursday, as well. So it's plenty of track time hopefully for us to sort out our stuff, and I feel like we've done a pretty good job with that, and I think that reflected in the times today from the whole team. We're all pretty close and have a good handle, I think, on what we want. It's a matter of putting that together tomorrow. I think we've done most of the hard part figuring out what we need, now we just have to try and put it together when it counts.

THE MODERATOR: It seems like this entire week leading up to this race, you haven't seemed fazed at all, you haven't really seemed like any pressure, at least outwardly, is getting to you. What do you feel like being in this situation heading into Sunday's race?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I think it would be a great weekend to have an awesome weekend. If we happen to have very fast cars and do a great job, this is the weekend to do it. That's what we're working on. You know, other than just trying to focus on it as another weekend, I don't think we can really do much different. We're just trying to make it like any other weekend this year where we've tried to make fast cars, make good decisions and win races, and if we win the race this weekend, we know we win the championship, so we're trying to keep it simple, I think.

Q. Josef, were you trying to make a statement today that said, I want this bad?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: No, I love to lead all practice sessions if possible, so it just worked out that we happened to lead two today. That's good, and that's a great start. We've got to try and keep that up. But we try and lead every session if possible, and it just so happened today we got a couple under the bag so far.

Q. Did you ever consider -- coming into the season did you consider this as a real option for you to be coming in and going into the final race leading the points?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I hoped it. I thought about it. I wasn't sure if it would happen. But I definitely hoped that would be the case. I think any time you come into a new team, you hope to hit the ground running. I was definitely nervous and somewhat cautious about it. I felt like we would need some learning time and some gelling period, and we've needed that. At times we've not been as strong as I think we could have been, but there's also been a lot of times where we have been strong and we've not needed as much learning time together, and that's been really great for us. I think either way this works out, I'm going to be really proud of the season we've had. But I certainly hoped we'd be in this position. I didn't know it would happen, but I hoped it was possible.

Q. Explain to me why everybody is waiting so long to go run these sessions, just to save tires?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, Sonoma is different than anywhere else. You get a couple laps on them to get the optimum time. Other tracks you might be able to go quicker on a second run. Here the only way you're going to go quicker on a second run is if you brutally mess up the first run. You'd have to be real bad on the first run to be better on the second. So everyone sort of saves their tires. You only get a couple laps generally in a run. You could probably stretch it to three, maybe four, but you're generally only getting a couple laps, so there's no reason to go out early and try and use that up. It's real short blasts on track, and that doesn't take very long, so we don't want to go out too early, and that's why I think a lot of people have done that.

Q. The tires are real peaky?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Very peaky. They've always been peaky here. Like I think qualifying will be lap 1, maybe lap 2, but a lot of times it's been lap 1 here, so it's super peaky around this place, absolutely.

Q. To follow up on that, this year -- last year's black is now a red tire. You have a new black tire. How much different is it than the tire you raced here last year?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: You know, we've gotten used to the new primary, the black tire, so going back to last

year's black tire, which is now our red, I don't really know how different that feels to last year. It feels similar, I guess, but I don't have a great read because we've gotten used to this new tire that we have. So for us, I don't think it's much different. If you look at the time sheets, the overall performance doesn't look much different from a lap time standpoint. I feel like degradation wise the tires are very similar. You're going to see the same drop-off that we've had last year. That's the nature of this track. It's very abrasive. It's very tough on tires.

So it's our job to make them last as long as possible. We always have great tires from Firestone, but this track normally puts a beating on them, more than anywhere else we go to, so you're going to see that exact same thing. To me it hasn't felt much different than last year to be honest with you, so I think you'll see very similar performance.

Q. About your lack of nerves and your calmness in general, does that surprise you? Coming into this weekend were you going into it, think, uh-oh, man, I wonder if I'm going to have to deal with that, and now you don't?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I'll be honest with you, if I drop the ball and totally ball it up this weekend, I'm still going to be pretty happy with this year. That's not to say that I'm going to settle for that or that I'm looking to settle for something like that.

But the only way I think you can approach this and get the most out of it and try and treat it like any other weekend. The moment you think, hey, this is championship week, you mess it up, you're not the champion, then I think that can put you in a wrong place mentally.

Every weekend we go into, like I was saying before, we try and win the race. We try and make fast cars and make good decisions; that's really all we can focus on. And if it works out, I'm going to be really happy for our whole group. It's something that Roger and Tim are making a priority right now. They want one of our cars to win the championship. But like I said, at the same time, I've also thought about it the other way; if I mess it up or we have a bad day from a luck standpoint, maybe something out of our control, I'm still proud of this year. It's still going to be a learning year in a way that we can apply to hopefully future years, so either way it works out, I'm pretty happy with it. We'd love to win the championship, but it's been a great year for us all around, I think. That's probably why I've been a little bit relaxed.

Q. Would you say a key theme for the championship this year and especially this race is being better than the best?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Do I think it's a key theme? Well, you know, yeah, I think you're seeing some of the best definitely at the top right now when you look at

Scott Dixon, he's going to be very tough to beat. Any moment you think Scott's not in the mix, he's right in the mix, so you can't ever discount him. He's gotten it done four times in championship form. I don't underestimate my teammates. Actually I probably fear my teammates more because I actually get to see what they do. I know what they're capable of. I know what setups they have on the car. I know how fast their cars are. So I very much respect my teammates, as well. Yeah, you've got to try and be the best of some of the guys that I think are the best in the world. I respect everyone that is around me, including my teammates, and I know how good they are, and to beat them is not going to be easy.

Q. This track is often described as a driver's track, a very technical track. What do you like about it and what do you find challenging about this specific track?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I would definitely call it a technical track. To me, yeah, it's a driver's track, but I think a place like Road America or Watkins Glen is more of a driver's track. That's what -- you ask drivers, they say they really just love the flowing nature, the really high-speed nature of those tracks, whereas Sonoma it's very technical. I'd put it more in just that category. You have to get the car right. You do have to drive well. I mean, it's not an easy place to figure out how to drive the race car fast. But if the car is off just a little bit from a setup standpoint technically, it's very difficult to produce lap times. I find it to be the most technically difficult track we go to. It's a road course that acts like a street course, even though that's not what it is. It's difficult to find a setup around this place.

Q. Josef, the one difference between you and your other three teammates is you have Tim Cindric at your strategist, and I think sometimes he tends to maybe take a little risk and gamble sometimes. I've heard Helio say that. Are you worried during the race about staying ahead of an unlucky caution?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: You know, I think Tim is pretty calculated. He definitely takes risks, just like me in the race car; there's times I take risks and times I don't, and I feel like Tim is very similar on the stand. He definitely gives me a lot of confidence and comfort. He's been around the block in IndyCar racing. He knows how this works. He's been in this position many times. That brings me some comfort that he knows how to handle this situation.

The yellow deal is difficult to predict. You know, it's just the nature of IndyCar racing. Sometimes it bites you, sometimes it helps you. Hopefully it doesn't bite us this weekend, but I don't really think we can do much to prevent that. We just can react to everyone around us and try and cover our bases if everyone is pitting early. But other than that, if a handful of us get caught out, then we get caught out, and there's really nothing we can do about that, so hopefully we don't have to deal

with it.

Q. Since Toronto you've seemed pretty dominant. Is it all about confidence, or have you found something in Toronto with your team to make your car more competitive?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, we definitely weren't dominant at Watkins Glen. We kind of broke our momentum, if you will, at that place. I broke it for sure, literally and figuratively. I feel like we're getting better as the year goes on. When I talk about joining the team and trying to understand where we would or wouldn't be at, I think we've needed time, and you know, the good news is that we didn't take too much time. I felt like at the beginning of the year we were less competitive, but being less competitive we were still on the podium or very close to winning races, and it didn't take us long to get to that very competitive point, which is where I think we're at now at the end of the season.

I really think that's more attributed to just the evolution of us learning together. The more time, the more weekends we've gotten together, the better we seem to have gotten, and I think that's a result of what you're seeing towards the end of the year.

Q. Since you brought it up, can you explain kind of what happened at Watkins Glen? Did the car just get away from you when you were leaving the pits?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I mean, it was just a simple error to be honest with you. I might have gotten a little distracted by Will when we were coming out of the pits, but you know, it wouldn't be a good excuse. It's just an error. It's one of those things. It was a cold weekend. I think it was easy to make that error. I shouldn't do it. I should know better. But it was one of those weekends where it was a slippery corner, low track temps, low tire temp coming out of the pits, and I just messed up plain and simple.

We can't have many of those. We haven't had too many this year. There's been a couple times where I've had some mistakes, Texas is another one, but I feel like we've been pretty good about minimizing them, so this is the weekend to definitely not have any of that.