

# IndyCar Media Conference

Wednesday April 4, 2018

## Mario Andretti Jimmy Vasser

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to the INDYCAR media teleconference. This week's race is the Desert Diamond West Valley Casino Phoenix Grand Prix Saturday night at ISM Raceway. In conjunction with that race, it's also serving as a celebration for the 25th anniversary of Mario Andretti's 52nd and final Indy car win at the Phoenix track in 1993. As a matter of fact, that victory happened 25 years ago today.

On the call today to help us talk about that historic event, we're honored to have Mario Andretti, as well as Jimmy Vasser, who drove in that race and finished in third place.

Welcome to the call today, Mario and Jimmy.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Thank you. I didn't know it was the anniversary to this day. It's interesting.

THE MODERATOR: April 4th. Congratulations.

MARIO ANDRETTI: You picked a good one (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Just lucky today.

Mario, a couple of quick questions for you. Obviously you've been honored a number of times throughout your career and since your retirement. I'm sure you have to feel honored to have basically an entire race weekend with many events surrounding the race that are going to commemorate and honor you for that victory 25 years ago. I'm sure you feel quite honored.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Oh, my God. I mean, humbled and totally flattered, I assure you. It's so incredible that the whole promotion for this race surrounds something that happened 25 years ago.

When I start looking back at how meaningful Phoenix was to my career, I said it a few times, but the team that I was fortunate to join as a rookie in 1964 was based right there in Phoenix, on 7th and Glendale. Clint Brawner, of course, was a Phoenix native, and Jim McGee. At that time we were part of the Firestone development group. We were the Firestone teams during the so-called Tire War with Goodyear. There was a tremendous amount of development going on. Because of the weather, of course, off-season,

Phoenix, that was the theater for us to be at.

I used to spend weeks and weeks at a time testing. Again, I was able to really put that to my most advantage as far as honing my skills on the ovals and so forth. Started with the roadster in '64, of course moved on to the rear engine.

Again, you can see the span. I was there for 30 years as a driver, as an active driver. Phoenix as a track, probably one of the most important parts of my career, quite honestly.

THE MODERATOR: Absolutely. Like you said, it spanned 30 years at that track in particular. What do you recall about that 1993 race that you won?

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, I recall it was a little bit of a nice little gift to some degree because I was probably at that point running third. It seemed like the Penske -- I think I started on pole in that race, I think. I led at the beginning a little bit, but then the Penske cars seemed to be on a planet of their own. They were running 1-2.

First Paul Tracy crashed, which was unusual, out of the lead. But 10 laps later, Emerson Fittipaldi did the same thing. All of a sudden here I'm leading the race. I figure how sweet this is. I saw both guys walk away. That was it.

But it was certainly welcomed, as you can imagine, so...

THE MODERATOR: Jimmy, as I said earlier, you finished third in that race. That was your second season driving Indy cars. I think you were driving for Simon at that time. That was your first career podium. What do you remember about that race in 1993?

JIMMY VASSER: Very much like Mario, but I was involved in the Tracy crash. I recently watched a video as I know you can do with all the Twitter guys that put things up. I remember both Tracy and Roger kind of blaming me on national TV. I was a young buck just coming in. It wasn't even my first full season. I had done a few races the year before as a rookie. I was kind of embarrassed they would call me out, that I caused the wreck.

I look back at the video now. It was completely Tracy's fault. He had a two lap lead on just about everybody, had plenty of room down there, kind of lost it. Like

Mario said, Emerson crashed out on the restart basically. I think he cut a tire in the debris from Tracy's crash. He crashed upper turn three right after the restart.

Like Mario said, the guys are okay, but it was a gift to me as well.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Jimmy and I felt really bad (laughter).

JIMMY VASSER: Imagine me, young guy, my first podium.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Jimmy and I felt bad for about a minute (laughter).

JIMMY VASSER: I remember I qualified ninth, was having a decent run, but certainly not a podium car. I remember, man, for me, being up on the podium with Mario Andretti, are you kidding me, I was pinching myself. Paul Newman was up there. I was star struck really to have that situation. Up there with Miss Valvoline 200, too. I had to give her a little hug (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: That leads into my next question, Jimmy. You raced with Mario for three seasons, but I'm sure you followed him for years and years before then. What do you remember most or admire most about Mario as an Indy car driver?

JIMMY VASSER: Wow. I mean, we don't have enough time, right, to talk about all the things. He was just cool. To me, he was the epitome of a cool dude. Obviously the race wins and the championships, but he was just the coolest, even so much, Mario doesn't know this, I did the historic race at Indy last year, where they have the Trans-Am car, kind of Father's Day weekend, I bought an old Hinchman suit that's a replica of Mario's Indy 500 win.

Everybody looks up to Mario. The biggest thing, he's the king of cool, like Steve McQueen or something for me.

THE MODERATOR: At this time we'll open it up to questions from the media.

**Q. Mario, this weekend being a full throwback for Marco your grandson, knowing what he's been going through over the last six or seven years since his last win, if he were to get in Victory Lane this weekend, talk about what that would mean to you, the celebration that may come afterward.**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Oh, gosh, I mean, you can imagine that would culminate this celebration this whole weekend in a way that I'm not sure I could even describe at this moment. If he can do it, it won't be from lack of trying. He really feels up for it. I feel it's very special that they're doing this throwback livery on the

car, then he's going to have a suit, a helmet, everything. That's going to bring back memories obviously.

But again, it's something I don't know even how to describe it. It's so incredible, you know, special. He doesn't need to have any extra pressure for this. All he has to do is do the things he knows what to do, and it could just come to him.

I even changed my flight, made sure I don't have to leave earlier. After I do my two-seater start, I'm going to stay there till the end to see if it all can happen.

**Q. Jimmy, your team did what they did in St. Pete, taking the win. Talk about a chance to maybe continue that momentum this weekend on an oval with Sebastien.**

JIMMY VASSER: Yeah, that was fantastic coming back and having an opportunity with Dale Coyne and Sebastien to work again, take a victory.

But, you know, Phoenix is a whole different animal. Really it's a short oval is like a black heart. It's very, very difficult to get the car right to be able to win. Nowadays, closing the pits and all that, you need a little bit of luck with how the yellows fall.

It's always a great possibility. Sebastien is a great driver. But Phoenix is a real tough place, so you just never know what you're going to get.

**Q. Mario, when your career came to an end '93, '94, there was a transition or changing of the guard with guys like Jimmy, Zanardi, others came to the fore. INDYCAR is at a similar point now where there's another young wave of new drivers. How do you think INDYCAR is prepared to handle, kind of promote these new guys to where they're kind of at the level that you guys were back in the '80s and '90s?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, to me, when you see the cycle of new talent coming on, it's something extremely positive. But let's remember that the so-called veterans in INDYCAR right now are still very young. That's what I think makes the series so very rich, in my opinion. I always keep saying, when you have the product, then I think you can feel very positive for the future.

I think INDYCAR is exactly at that point right now. I think the strength of the teams that you have in place, seeing that you have teams -- I mean, there's no weakness out there. Some what are considered smaller teams, in the past, didn't seem like they had a chance of winning, but we've seen it different just starting with St. Pete. With the new car, all of a sudden, I mean, we've seen rookies showing the way.

As Jimmy said, when it comes to the oval, Phoenix is going to be a different animal, for sure. At the same time, I mean, that's I think what we're going to see

during the season.

As far as the new talent that's coming on, they're already making their mark, they're making their noise. It's something that just has to happen and they have to earn it. When these guys are up front, their names are going to be mentioned over and over. That's how you develop the personality. You can spin this thing until the cows come home, but at the same time it's all about being up there and getting some results.

I think the series has really begun to do a really good job of exposing our guys. I've seen even after the championship with Josef Newgarden how much time he spent on the road, how much visibility he's been getting in the off-season. All this needs to be done so the fans can start really gravitating to their favorite driver. That's how you build a solid fan base.

As you know, INDYCAR had to do a lot of reconstruction after the disaster of the mid 90s. It's in a good path right now. I personally feel very positive that a lot of the good things that need to be done are being done right now.

JIMMY VASSER: I don't really have anything to add. Mario really ticked all the boxes there. I would echo everything he says. In addition, I think the new television contract starting in '19, on one network. These young drivers nowadays are so into social media, and they're not shy. These guys are out there producing their own short films about themselves. I think that's great. They're very articulate, very talented, fast.

You got a good mix of foreign drivers with more Americans now I think than there has been in a long time, which was something that people would always kind of be a point of discussion, was the lack of Americans. That's not the case.

We got drivers to root for from many nationalities. With the upswing, the new car, the TV contract, the racing at St. Pete, it's competitive. I know some of the guys are complaining about Phoenix from the test, the car, maybe a lack of downforce. But the thing still has four thousand pounds. Mario, there's plenty of downforce there. I think it's just going to make the racing better.

Back in the day, you used to see the cars fall off a bit and be a little tougher to drive in the second half of the stint. I'm looking forward to maybe seeing some of that this coming weekend.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Just to add a little bit, the character of our drivers. Great sense of humor, they present themselves well. Like I said, I don't think we could hope for a better crop of talent than that's existing right now.

Again, you know, we have reason to really feel very

good about what's going on and what we're looking forward to in the future here in INDYCAR.

**Q. Mario, you pointed out a lot of things that the series has going for it in its current era. As you're reflecting on all of these memories, looking back to 1993, do you feel if you just had to put a label on it in regards to the state of the series, is it improved over 1993 or has it stayed the seem or do you feel it's gotten a little bit worse? What are your thoughts on how it compares to that time when you were racing?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: I think in so many ways it's better because you have a much more level playing field right now because of the rules and the way things have evolved over the years. I think obviously technology has taken over, and we're right up to date with everything. From that standpoint, you know, we're where we need to be, where we're expected to be.

Again, I think the biggest thing that you see, in my opinion, is that plus the fact today the way the rules are, the way the engines are supposed to be, last at least a couple thousand miles, you don't have that attrition that we used to have in those years. Almost every race you have 99% of the field finishing. You have a lot more action throughout the races any more right to the end.

If anything, I think things are better today.

**Q. Do you think you'd enjoy driving the new 2018 car, do you think you'd enjoy driving it around ISM Raceway?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Absolutely. Always look forward, never look back. I always look forward to the next car, the next evolution. I always embrace, as I said, the technology.

Yes, if my son was crazy enough to give me a ride, I'd probably be in it Sunday. But I'll have to do with that two-seater, which I'm enjoying very much by the way. Quite satisfied with that.

Again, I'm up to speed on what's going on. I have the appreciation of what the drivers are dealing with today. I know what's going on because I've done some high-speed testing for Michael that nobody knows about. I have an appreciation for what's going on today firsthand. That's why I'm very bullish about what INDYCAR is experiencing right now.

**Q. We know about the high-speed testing now. Do you want to elaborate on that a little bit?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Nothing to elaborate. They're using me for me experience in some ways. I'm a cheap driver besides.

**Q. Jimmy, from your standpoint as an owner in the series now, and having seen it as a driver, we asked Mario about the state of the sport, how do**

**you see the state of the sport, how things have changed from when you were driving in the series to now being a co-owner, some of the positives going on in the series?**

JIMMY VASSER: Well, obviously it's well-documented, and Mario touched on the rollercoaster ride that INDYCAR has gone through over the last 20 years or more, 30 years really, 25 years. So I think we learned some lessons. We've come through the valley is what I feel. We're on the upswing again.

Not to repeat myself, but the new TV contract, the stability in the rules with the new aero package. I think the leadership at INDYCAR with Mark Miles and Jay Frye and their teams, with a vision of what INDYCAR should be, to give the teams something that everybody can compete with competitively, both Honda and Chevrolet, their commitment as manufacturers, and Firestone tires, they're just second to none, you can trust them, they never let you down like the problems they have in NASCAR losing tires and such.

I think the future is all right in front of us and on the upswing. Car count is good. We're starting to see some excitement that the car count's going to be up at Indy for the first time in many years. Have some bumping again.

I'm just feeling fortunate to be back in full-time. I was off last year. I realized it's such a big part of my life, I better get back on the train or I'm going to miss it, it's leaving the station. I think it's going in the right way.

**Q. What was that feeling like when you were away last year, having to sit and watch what was going on? Was it always the plan to be back in like this, just a matter of timing to find the right opportunity?**

JIMMY VASSER: Not really because you never really know what's going to happen, right? Just trying to be proactive and working on things. I had some phone calls for some opportunities in different roles, but trying to see what might be the right fit, or just going to sit on the hill and watch the grapes grow. But that gets a little bit slow at times. We kind of get used to being on the road, racing, competing. It was just definitely something that seemed like a void.

I watched the races on TV for the first time really, if it wasn't a rebroadcast. So I got a little critical of some of the broadcasts, like a lot of people, but I really am excited about the new TV thing. I keep repeating myself, but I think that's going to be critical and key moving forward.

**Q. There have been a lot of fans who have been loud about the state of the sport. What do you say to the fans who may have been negative or had a lot of things to say? I hear all this positivity about where INDYCAR is headed.**

MARIO ANDRETTI: It's very simple. Come visit us and see what we're all about, and I think you're going to like

it. That's the only thing. I mean, the proof is in the pudding always. You can spin this thing any way you want, but it's what's happening, the excitement that's going on, as I say, appreciating the talent and the mix.

As Jimmy said, the mix is perfect now. There's been some criticism, They didn't have enough American drivers. Well, we got the American drivers going up against the rest of the world type of thing. Nothing is better than that as far as the competitive spirit, feeling like you're not just racing parochially. You're racing against individuals from South America, from Europe, Asia, all of that. That international aspect I think has got to have a lot of commercial value as well.

As I said, the mix is there. The players are there. The teams are solid. As I say, we had the best car count for the series and even coming up for Indy that we've had in years. Again, new car, new things to look forward to. I mean, tell you what, I tell these fans that have left us to come visit us again, you're going to like it. I promise you.

**Q. Mr. Andretti, a little more than two handfuls of drivers have won Phoenix from the pole, you of course being one of those, even fewer to win in the desert and go on to win the Indy 500, again you being one of those. How important is it reaching success at this race for today's Indy car driver looking towards the rest of this season?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Let's face it, Phoenix is probably one of the toughest ovals because it's so fast. We've seen with some of the changes they made to accommodate the stockcars, it made it even faster than what we experienced. That means the faster the corner in speed, the tougher it is to have any passing.

But, like, I said, the series has reacted with the new aero kit. These drivers today, obviously if they can master Phoenix, you're going to master any of the other ovals. Quite honestly, I think Phoenix would be more difficult to drive than Indianapolis. Again, you can measure yourself your own way by how you feel, how comfortable you feel, if you have your arms around it right here in Phoenix.

I think it's a very key event in my opinion. It's the only oval before Indianapolis. I guarantee you it's on all the drivers' minds and the teams to say how well they will fair this weekend.

**Q. Mr. Vasser, we talked about great positives with INDYCAR at the present evolution. Is there still anything you would like to see change or continue to evolve in the future of the sport?**

JIMMY VASSER: I was going to say one thing. I'd like to see one more engine manufacturer really. I mean, we touched on a lot of positive things. I think one more engine manufacturer to take the load off of Honda and Chevy, to have that different angle of competition, I would like to see that.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Yeah, because it's not only the fact that you're taking the load, you have more to cheer for to some degree, but also the strength of any series at this level is manufacturers being part of it. We always would welcome that with open arms. I know there's a lot of effort going on to try to encourage another manufacturer to come in.

Like I said, there's always something you can do better. I always personally say that. I don't criticize. But I say that I like to see the season going to October, November, rather than ending September. That's been my pet peeve. But it is what it is.

All in all, however, things are improving, improving from the point that is very, very important. The sponsors always look at the TV coverage. Starting next year when we have one network involved, you have continuity. I think the continuity aspect, to me it's all important. It's what the fans can recognize and look forward to, the storylines will be a continuous situation. You got to look at all these things that are coming on that are good.

But we don't rest on that. You don't rest to your laurels. You're always going to try to improve. When it comes to the technical side, there's always going to be the technical part of INDYCAR, it will always be a reassessing situation as we go on. If we can do some things better aerodynamically, engine size, 'push to pass' on the ovals, who knows. It's an ongoing thing. As long as you have that frame of mind that you're always looking trying to improve what you have, you're going to be doing okay.

**Q. Mr. Andretti, with the success and critical acclaim of Ron Howard's movie which chronicled the rivalry between James Hunt and Niki Lauda, where do you think your own rivalry with A.J. Foyt fits with the annals of racing history? Could we see your battles on the Speedway on film?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: I don't know if we'll see it on film. I'm calling him BFF now. At first he didn't know what that was. We're good buddies.

When I look back on the times we had together, obviously I felt those things were precious to me because of he was setting the standard at the time. He was five years ahead of me in the series. I was a bit of a thorn on his side, which was good for me, not so good for him.

But all in all over the years with became good friends, I'd like to think. Certainly a lot of respect, me for him. My career probably I could not call it as complete or as satisfying if A.J. for one was not there.

**Q. The comments about going to October or November, is there a venue in California that you'd like to see return?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Obviously I can't think that Laguna Seca could not be one. Then potentially there's Florida.

Again, if there's a will, there's a way. The U.S. is a country that can host events like that year-round. You do want to have an off-season, for sure. There are ways there could be a street race somewhere, like Long Beach. It could be done. It can happen.

JIMMY VASSER: I would agree with Mario. I think Laguna could, but not late in the season like Mario is mentioning, we want to move into October sometime, even early November, with it being so close to Sonoma regionally, it kind of rules it out unless they're going to change up the schedule a bit.

But, you know, there's new tracks popping up all the time. I know the league is always exploring new places and venues, old ones to bring back.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Could be some international events somewhere.

**Q. How about Fontana? Is that on your radar?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Why not?

JIMMY VASSER: Yeah, absolutely.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Yeah, why not? I'd love to go back to Fontana.

JIMMY VASSER: 500 milers, we used to have a couple, three at times. I think another 500 miler would be welcome, for sure.

MARIO ANDRETTI: It would be awesome, yeah.

**Q. Mr. Andretti, what is your opinion on the new aero kit? You talked about Indy going international. What do you think about a race in Mexico?**

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, first of all, the aero kit aspect is something that is a result of a lot of discussions in the past couple of years about downforce, what it does as far as bringing more action on the track. It's all about the fan base, they're more demanding more and more, they want to see action, they want to see overtaking. I think by taking some downforce away, I think it makes the cars more difficult to drive. So because of that, you're going to have, you know, some more differences out there as far as, you know, the different drivers being able to deal with the situation better than others. You need some of that to have some movement on the track. The more difficult the cars are to drive, the more you're going to have action on the track. That's really what the series is trying to achieve.

Nobody has the magic wand. But I think with everything that we know at the moment, this definitely seems to be the right direction.

At the end of the season, obviously we'll be able to reassess what possibly would have to be changed or whatever. But being around as long as I have, I have no doubt in my mind that they've done the right thing so far. I think we're going to benefit from that as a result. We've seen that at St. Pete already.

Again, as far as races internationally, I think we've been international when CART was in its glory days. We had a very strong international presence. I think there's more and more talk about that. I'm sure everybody is open to that aspect. If it makes sense, Mexico is definitely part of the conversation. I have a feeling that could be probably the next move. I hope it happens. I think that's a healthy situation for the series.

THE MODERATOR: At the top of the call you thought you might have been on the pole in the 1993 race, Mario. I did a bit of checking. According to my records, Scott Goodyear.

MARIO ANDRETTI: I was second. You're right, you're right. I don't want to take anything away from Scott Goodyear.

THE MODERATOR: You wouldn't 67 poles, give one to Scott.

Mario and Jimmy, we'd like to thank you very much for participating in today's call.

MARIO ANDRETTI: My pleasure.

JIMMY VASSER: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: There is a special celebration event going on in Phoenix tomorrow night to kick off the weekend to honor Mario. The main program will stream live on IndyCar.com starting at approximately 10:30 p.m. eastern time on Thursday. It will feature Mario and many of the drivers that were in that race with him as well as some other special guests.