

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Saturday April 13, 2019

Zak Brown, CEO - McLaren Racing

Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach



The transcript below is from an NTT IndyCar Series media availability with Zak Brown of McLaren Racing. It took place at the Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach in Long Beach, California.

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. I'd like to welcome everyone to our first NTT IndyCar Series media availability of the day. Like to welcome to the podium Zak Brown, the chief executive of McLaren Racing. Thanks for taking some time with us this morning.

ZAK BROWN: Good to be here.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously you guys have been pretty busy. I'm sure you're here mainly to talk about the Indianapolis 500 program. I know there was a test at Texas Motor Speedway on Tuesday with Fernando. Give us an idea of how things are progressing.

ZAK BROWN: Things are progressing well. We were in, as you mentioned, Texas on I think it was Tuesday, and we now have both cars built. One we built at the McLaren Technology Center and the other in the States. We got 105 laps in, accomplished what we wanted to accomplish. Was a successful shakedown. It was the first time the whole team had come together, so while we've got a very experienced team, it's the first time they've been on the racetrack together, and so we wanted to make sure we got Fernando comfortable, that the car worked, which it did. We got into some setup, so it wasn't just purely a shakedown but also some learning, and we walked away with a good list of follow-ups, which is what you would expect.

And so now Bob is in Indianapolis. We'll kind of be based there now up to the race. Gil is in China, but as soon as he comes back from China, he'll then start focusing on Indianapolis. Fernando is excited. We're all excited. You know, it's going to be a big task. It's unbelievably competitive and going to be a big entry, and I think going there as a one-car new team is a challenge, but we're up for that challenge.

THE MODERATOR: If you can go into that; how different is this challenge compared to two years ago when you came here but you partnered with Andretti Autosport?

ZAK BROWN: 2017 was easy because Michael did the

majority of the work and has got a lot of experience, and we knew we'd be putting Fernando into a great race car. And it was in a short period of time.

So this time is a totally different experience. This is a full McLaren effort. We're getting some assistance from Carlin, but that is more operational, giving Fernando some teammates, some data sharing, things of that nature, which is good, because being a one-car team, you can get lost around Indianapolis. We need some kind of support and some element of having some teammates come the month of May. So this is a big undertaking.

We announced it in I think it was October, and it seems like time has flown, and we've needed every single one of those days because we're still working very hard and just keeping our head down, getting ready for April 24th, and just going to try and kind of creep up on it.

THE MODERATOR: And I believe if I'm correct that the Indianapolis stuff on April 24th, the Open Test, will be the first time the car that was prepared over in England will be on track.

ZAK BROWN: Yes, correct, so that's all been prepared and ready, so we need to go through the shakedown process there and then make sure we get both cars dialed in, get Fernando back up to speed around Indianapolis. That should take him approximately one lap. That will take us longer as a racing team than one lap, I can assure you of that. And just make sure -- you've got to have massive respect for the speedway. It can bite you quickly. I've seen some great teams struggle there, so we need to make sure that the two most important days are qualifying and race day, so we need to build up to that and not try and have April 24th be qualifying day because it's not.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously McLaren has a tremendous racing legacy, and you're utilizing a lot of that with this program, bringing back the papaya orange livery, the No. 66. If you can go into the reasoning for doing that.

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, we've got a great history at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. It's a lot of fond memories. We've got guys at the race shop that were a part of the team then and then, of course, we've got Johnny Rutherford who joined us in Texas and will be around with us in the month of May, and I think we've got a great history and something that we want to

recognize and celebrate. You know, the Teddy Mayers, the Tyler Alexanders, who all were a big part of our Indianapolis success, so to have the numbers, the papaya orange, and really be able to build our brand further in North America. We've got such a great history, that's where we should pick it back up from.

North America is a very important market for McLaren, our businesses, our automotive business, our technology business, and then for our sponsoring partners, and so everyone is very excited.

Q. You just mentioned Lone Star J.R. as part of the program. What specifically is he bringing to the team? How is he going to be representing?

ZAK BROWN: Lots of experience. Fernando is someone who loves information and recognizes when he lacks experience in a certain area, so I think he's a lot more comfortable this time around, but Fernando will never leave anything on the table if he feels it will help him, and Indianapolis is such a unique circuit when you get into wind direction and cloud cover and things of that nature and that type of experience Johnny has, so Johnny, outside of helping just represent the McLaren brand, technically I think he can convey his experiences to Fernando, which Fernando very much welcomes.

Q. Two questions if I may: First question, you mentioned the difficulty of doing a one-car effort at Indy. Did you consider two cars?

ZAK BROWN: No, we never really considered two cars. That's one of the reasons why we've created an association with Carlin. As we know, one car, you just have one data point, and now we'll have three or four data points. So we haven't considered one car for this year -- or two cars I should say. We knew one car was going to be a big enough of a task, and so we wanted to focus on that.

Q. You mentioned how important the North American market is to McLaren. I know there's been some discussion, some consideration for doing a full-time INDYCAR effort at some point in time. Where are you with that, and what time frame do you think you'd make a decision one way or another for say next year?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, so (NTT) IndyCar (Series), we're a big fan of the racing series. I think Mark Miles and team have done an excellent job. The racing is outstanding. Great teams, great drivers, great venues. So it's a place that McLaren would like to race. We've been very focused on Formula 1, and we remain very focused on Formula 1, but I've now completed the hiring of the balance of the leadership for the Formula 1 team now that James Key has started as technical director and Andreas Seidl is the managing director of the Formula 1 team. He'll join next month, and so we really needed to get that completed. And so going ahead and getting the equipment, making the investment in doing Indianapolis this year in the way

we are is another step in that direction.

There is no doubt that the shareholders at McLaren would like to be in INDYCAR. I think it's more of a when than an if, and if we were to do it for 2020, I think you'd need to make that decision in the summer in order to be properly prepared. So it's nothing that we've ruled out for 2020, and that decision will come sometime in the summer, and if not then, then we'll look towards 2021.

Q. You mentioned how you have a lot of partners in the United States. Could you elaborate more about what running the Indy 500 means for your stakeholders at McLaren? And just kind of a follow up to that, what would a full-time INDYCAR program bring for McLaren's stakeholders?

ZAK BROWN: So we've got a variety of different stakeholders, so to start with the shareholders, they would like to see McLaren Racing built, and that's my job is to build the McLaren Racing brand. Obviously, McLaren Formula 1 is first and foremost priority. You see in sports cars, we've got a great GT program with GT3s, GT4s, and Le Mans and their new rules around Hypercar is something that is under review and makes a lot of sense for our automotive business, and then if you look at Formula 1, it doesn't deliver yet in North America the exposure that we all hope that it will in time, and INDYCAR does that very well.

And so our automotive business in North America is very important. It's one of the biggest markets. Our technology business, North America is one of the biggest markets, and then if you look at our other stakeholders, which would be our sponsoring partners, I'd say seven or eight out of ten companies, North America is if not the most important market, one of their most important markets, and because Formula 1 doesn't yet really penetrate North America in a way that we hope it will, INDYCAR is very complementary. So when the Dell Technologies of the world or the BATs or these global entities would like a racing relationship that touches on all various parts of the globe, INDYCAR delivers in spades. So if you look at the partners that we have on our Indy 500 effort, it's a great mix of some of our Formula 1 partners, Dell Technologies and BAT, we've brought in some new partners to McLaren Racing such as MindMaze, and then we've got companies like Auto Nation who are already great supporters of the (NTT) IndyCar Series that have joined.

So I think that's been a good proof point that there's a lot of commercial support for McLaren in INDYCAR.

Q. Apart from keeping an eye on the Indy car racing, you're racing here yourself in the historic. Meanwhile the same weekend there's also the 1,000th world championship race in Formula 1. Was it clear in the early stages you'd be here instead of Shanghai?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I made the decision to come to Long Beach as soon as I entered my race car. No, that wasn't the reason why. (Laughter.)

I made that decision -- when we made the decision to go to Indianapolis, I thought it was going to be very important for me to get to an INDYCAR race early just to see all of you and kind of get current with what was going on this year, new car, things of that nature that I had not seen before. So I put my calendar together late last year, and Long Beach was on it right away. I've got a special double triple top secret laptop that allows me to effectively be on the pit wall in China, so I'm lacking sleep from following everything that's going on in China, so I feel like I'm able to be very dialed into the activities here while accomplishing what I need to accomplish here while getting a little bit of playing in.

Q. Building one car at MTC, what logistical challenges did McLaren face being kind of removed from the INDYCAR hub here in the States?

ZAK BROWN: Well, fortunately, a lot of the people that helped us build it were individuals that have built these Indy cars before, so we had a lot of experience on the car. We've got a lot of resources at McLaren's facility to build the car. It was more logistics around timing and shipping stuff around and parts availability, but we ordered our car early. Dallara has been very good. Chevrolet has been outstanding to work with, so it was well mapped out, so we didn't really run into any issues, but that was one of the reasons why we took an early decision in October is once we took the decision we had our car order in 24 hours later.

Q. With all the boxes that you guys ticked before April 24th, what percentage of boxes have you got ticked?

ZAK BROWN: So far every one, but it's a list that when you tick stuff off the list, you're always filling it back up, so it's alive and growing list. But I wouldn't say there was anything that when we went to Texas wasn't ready. But you do walk away and certain things didn't fit as well or things didn't work as well, but I think that's all part of the shakedown. So we came into Texas with a list of what we wanted to tick, and we did, but you inevitably walk away from that shakedown with a variety of other items. So there is quite a laundry list of little items, but especially at the speedway, little of the speed that you're traveling ends up being big items. So we've got a lot of work to do ahead of us but nothing that we feel that we're behind on or we can't get to.

Q. The other question is can you compare your excitement with two years ago being at Indianapolis with your effort this year? How excited is McLaren? Is it more excited this year than it was a couple years ago?

ZAK BROWN: I don't think one was more exciting than another. They're different. You know, in '17 I think we surprised everyone when we made the announcement.

That was fun because all of you are pretty good at finding out our surprises before we surprise you, and fortunately, we were able to pull that off, so that was pretty exciting.

You know, this year it feels like a lot more work because we're going about it as McLaren Racing. So maybe the nerves are a little bit higher because you knew with Michael you were going to have an outstanding proven race car and racing team, and so I think that this effort comes with some higher risk, but then also potentially has higher reward.

Going racing is all about risk-reward, and so we're excited, but maybe the nerves are a little bit higher this time around.

Q. I know you were jokingly saying getting behind the wheel this weekend, it's obviously enjoyment, having management get behind the wheel and enjoy racing. Is this going to be just one event, or do you have any other events planned throughout the year where you're going to drive some cars?

ZAK BROWN: I wish I could do more, but my day job is all-consuming, and I'm just happy the race today is at 5:00 when I'm done working. I try and get out as often as I can. Unfortunately, that ends up being about two or three times a year I have to fit it in to when it doesn't disrupt my job. But it is good fun. It's good stress relief for me, and I've always loved driving, so it's a lot of fun being out there and a privilege to be able to go from when I used to buy the 1/18 models to having the full size now that I can barely fit in, and it is good fun, but no, I'm not able to do it very much, unfortunately.

Q. How impressed are you by teams like Carlin that are coming into the series and doing it fully independently from the start?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, Carlin is a great team. We've known them for quite some time. They ran Lando Norris, won on their debut. Trevor used to race back when I was doing Formula 3, so they're a very good team. All the teams here are really good. You look at the grid, I think it's the second cover in the top 15 cars. I didn't look at the last session, but I think what's great about Indy car racing is you show up at a race like this, there's probably 10 people that can win, and I hope Formula 1 can be as competitive and have as deep a field as (NTT) IndyCar (Series) has. But it's great teams and great drivers. The Scott Dixons and the Josef Newgardens are awesome. I think very worthy of being in a Formula 1 car, and then you look at people like Colton Herta and O'Ward, these guys are the new up-and-comers that seem equally as fast and impressive, so I'm looking forward to watching the race on Sunday.

Q. Your driver is not bad, either.

ZAK BROWN: Fernando? Yeah, he's pretty good. (Laughter.)

Q. As a follow-up to my previous question about 2020 or 2021, whenever, is it safe to assume you'd do at least a two-car team or would you consider a one-car team?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I think if we come into Indy car racing, it would definitely be a two-car team, that's for sure.