

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday May 13, 2016

Roger Penske

Mark Reuss

Press Conference



DOUG BOLES: Thank you for coming this morning as we get ready for the Grand Prix of Indianapolis. I'm Doug Boles with the Speedway. We're going to twist this press conference up a little bit. On the front end, I'm going to throw up some fun rules. We're not going to do some Q&As today, because we're going to let some important people in the room ask some questions. The questions will come from the dignitaries in the front row. Helio is already trying to figure out what he's going to ask. Our questions will come from the drivers instead of the rest of us who are normally asking.

What is cool about this from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway is the important relationship we have across the board is our relationship with Chevrolet. It goes all the way back to the beginning of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. We love the partnership we have with them. The cars that come here are beautiful. We have the opportunity to drive those cars throughout the year. But their brand is like our brand, iconic across the U.S. and across the globe. Couldn't be a better partnership.

When you think about an owner, there's not a more important owner than Roger Penske. To have an opportunity to have Roger Penske running the pace car for the hundredth running of the Indianapolis 500, we have Mark Reuss, who is director of product develop for GM today. Roger came out, I got the pleasure of getting to take several laps with Roger at faster than highway speeds, which was fun. It's the 50th anniversary of the Chevrolet Camaro. A beautiful car. After this, we'll get a picture with Roger and Mark in the plaza.

I wanted to kick things off. You have a racing connection that goes back to the Speedway, together many years. This is sort of a unique moment for you guys to get together and celebrate your history here, Roger, but also the history of Chevrolet here, especially this beautiful Camaro.

Mark, do you want to talk about how the relationship came about, where the roots are, and how you made the invitation to ask Roger to drive the pace car.

MARK REUSS: This is an emotional topic for me a little bit because the first Indy 500 that I went to was with my dad in the early '70s. We sat in turn one. At that time we had a stock box from Chevrolet and Buick. We had Cosworths, all sorts of different engine entries in it. My dad, I can remember this like it was yesterday, he could tell by the sound of those engines which one was going to go by.

For me, that year I met Roger Penske at Indy, for me that was really the moment. I loved cars, I've loved cars my whole life, but that moment, I said, I really got to be part of this somehow. If I can just be an engineer on one of these cars, be part of this, go to this race, this is what I want to do.

It goes all the way back to that.

In that timeframe, Roger and my dad are very good friends. But there was an engine deal cut that was very special during that time with Ilmor and Chevrolet. A lot of you will remember that.

But that engine deal was incredible for Chevrolet but also I think, I'm speaking for Roger a little bit, but it was the first time that we really came together to beat everybody at Indy, and we had a great engine, we had great drivers, we had a great team.

Very historic from the standpoint in my mind. Some fun things around that really were Roger's wife, I always looked a little bit older than I was, but at that time I looked a little older. So I could always get into the pits a little bit before everybody else could at that time. So I have every one of those pit passes from the Speedway.

Those times my dad would take me to Roger's area where his team was, then where they were serving lunch. Roger's wife always took care of me because I was always the youngest person in there. This was an adult deal. It was racing, big-time. That part of that was very special.

We've done so many great things together here over the years. But this place is spiritual, it's special. It goes all the way back. I couldn't be happier sitting here next to the person that's going to be driving our pace

car.

How I asked him? Someone gave me some words to say. I thought I'm not an English major, but I'm an engineer, I have passion around what this is. I asked him if he would be willing to drive the car for the 50th on an email. Terry and Jim and the whole GM and Chevrolet Motorsports team was like, Well, if you do this, we have a good shot, otherwise I'm not sure he's going to say yes.

I said, I don't know about that. He's pretty passionate about Chevrolet and Indianapolis. I'm more than happy to do that.

I wrote a pretty passionate email to you and I couldn't be happier with the response, so...

DOUG BOLES: I'm going to continue with the story. Roger, you get that email. What's going through your head? You're a strategist. We know how important this race is to you. How long did it take you to decide you were going to accept Mark's offer?

ROGER PENSKE: Probably about one minute. It was an amazing ask. Then I started wondering, How could we use this as an advantage? That was my next thought (laughter). Do I tap the brakes or what do I do (laughter)?

On a serious note, you think about when Mark and I met in the '70s, and I came here with my dad in '51, the first race. I guess at that time it got in my blood that I wanted to be in the car business, racing, do something.

It's ironic that in '65 I became a Chevrolet dealer. My first business. Then that's really been the backbone. Then, of course, you think about Camaros. The best we ever raced where the Z-28s in '68 when we won the championship. That was hard-fought. We have a lot of history with Camaro. The fact that I can drive one this year is amazing.

The '88 race when we won with a Chevy, when Mark's dad, I said, Look, we have a program, it's going to take us so long. But when we were able to go through -- I'll back up a little bit.

The Tigers, if you can believe this, the Detroit Tigers, were in the World Series or the pennant. I was in the GM building. It was 4:00, started getting dark. Finally the ballgame was over. We signed up to be able to do that.

MARK REUSS: I didn't hear that story.

ROGER PENSKE: We saw the lights go on and off in the stadium. That was the part of our relationship, with

Ilmor and the engine. We've never looked back.

The commitment that has been made, certainly as we look from an IndyCar standpoint, I went to Mark and I said, There's a real opportunity here now for Chevy to come back in the series and be one of the marquee suppliers. We put that together. I think you've seen the success we've had.

To date, certainly our team this year has been on top. But lots of competition. I think this is going to be one of the greatest races. For me personally, to be able to pace the field, may have to wait 100 years to do it again, so I think I have a pretty unique situation.

DOUG BOLES: I'll ask one more question. Mark, the Camaro, it's the 50th anniversary, 2017 Camaro, beautiful car. What goes into the thinking on the car that you choose, that this is the one we want to pace the 500? Talk about what it means to have the Chevrolet lead the field down for the hundredth running of the Indy 500.

MARK REUSS: My first car was a '67 Camaro. My dad wouldn't let me have a high horsepower one because I was 16.

Also in the Chevrolet brand, we've got great competition in that segment, as you know, with primarily Ford and the Mustang. We feel we have a car that we've taken 200 pounds to 300 pounds out of the car. We have something that goes beyond what was traditionally a muscle car.

It's built in Lansing, Michigan. We're very excited about that.

The car itself is iconic here. If you look back to the most iconic one that people remember was the orange and white '69. That was really the iconic one.

ROGER PENSKE: Yeah.

MARK REUSS: But a couple years before that, I think it was '67, if I remember right, was a blue and white Camaro. Again, my first one was a '67. It means a lot to me. The means an awful lot that it means a lot for the hundredth running of the Indianapolis 500.

Those first races were Louis Chevrolet. That's a big deal for us. For us to say we're going to have a Camaro in this driven by a person who is iconic in the business but also iconic at the Speedway who has a great, rich history, particularly in the Trans-Am years, I think this car is everything and more.

I'm just so happy to have Roger driving it. But this one was very carefully thought out. The 50th anniversary is

actually going to be a more shark colored car that people buy. The car you'll see on the Speedway today is one of one or two. The color is very special. I'm personally very, very excited about the car, but more excited about the driver.

ROGER PENSKE: I also understand this is a production car that came right off the assembly line, too. Typically the cars that have been pacing this race have been set up special. So this is a car, maybe other than the color, is a car you can buy in the showroom, which is amazing when you think about that. It's a great point.

MARK REUSS: Yes.

DOUG BOLES: We'll turn it over to our reporters for the day.

Q. (Helio) Can you explain to us, Roger, how you're going to cut me out of the pits or the pace lap, how you're going to do to come back to my pit lane? He's my strategy guy. I want to know how you're going to do it to call my race after that.

ROGER PENSKE: I'll call up Chitwood and say how I can come down to pit lane and spin it right in front of your pit. They'll open the door, I'll jump out. That's my plan (laughter).

Q. (Simon) Business yes, Roger. When you got your first dealership, did you envision what Penske has become and did you envision as well the race team and all the partners involved?

ROGER PENSKE: That's a good question. Interesting. I was a racer myself back at that point. I was involved in the sports car club in Philadelphia. A fellow named George McKean was the treasurer. He asked me if I would take over that job. He lost his son tragically. He said, Would you come and work for me as the general manager? I said I'd come, but I wanted to have the opportunity to buy the business. That was in August of 1963. At that point I went to work. He said okay in '65, I'd have the opportunity to buy it.

I remember going to see the folks at General Motors. I had a relationship with them because of the Corvair and other things we've been involved with. Chevrolet said that I couldn't be a Chevrolet dealer if I was a race driver.

So Jim Rathman, who was another one that raced here, had been successful. That was very easy for me, I gave up. I tell the story about my dad. I needed \$50,000 to get this deal done. I remember we drove to Pittsburgh. He took \$50,000 out of his retirement account. He said, Roger, if you lose this, I'll go back to work.

That's how we got started. I never realized what would happen. But from Philadelphia to Southfield, Michigan, where we had a great store, these were the really early days. We built the whole business, quite honestly, from that first platform.

Q. (Juan Pablo) The passion you have for racing, do you miss that none of your kids race, or do you prefer it that way?

ROGER PENSKE: My son Roger raced a little bit, I'm not sure, a little less than the Indy cars. I had them pretty busy in business early on. They were in athletics. I had a garage, in college I spent more time in my garage than I did in the classroom. I had them going to college. A little different discipline.

They're all involved, very interested in the sport. Never really wanted to do that. I have one grandson who is driving some go-karts now. We'll see what happens.

Q. (Will) You talk about you're a pretty good racecar driver, a fast one. You would have had a lot of passion for driving. Over those years, you obviously created the team, were in big business, did you really miss driving and kind of wish you were out there competing?

ROGER PENSKE: Everybody asks that question.

I had accomplished enough at that point. I had the opportunity, and Mark knows this, the Chaparral was a vision done by Frank Winchell and Jim Hall. I had a chance in my last year of racing to win almost everything with that car. Then the call said I wanted to be a businessman or a manager. I had the opportunity to come here and do my test. My job, I couldn't get off. Andretti took it. He obviously went in one direction, I went in the other. So I think the story is pretty complete.

Q. (Rick) Mark and Roger, I want to thank you for that partnership. It was obviously very beneficial for me. Question-wise, Roger, I know you're a long-term thinker. You've always amazed me on how much further down the road you are on things than I'm thinking about. When your father brought you here for that first race, did you already have this in mind?

ROGER PENSKE: The only thing I knew, we got here. He worked for an aluminum company. I guess those days you could buy a pace lap. There was a prize, \$200, \$300 if you led a lap. This company had a couple laps in the program. We have parties for our guest. We're invited to go to someone's house. Got here late, went to the house. A show car back in '51. I remember sitting in that car, putting the helmet on. That may have been the starting of my time.

I never thought I would be sitting here. But it's because of you guys, the people who have been here to help us. I think each one of you know how important each person is in our business.

Mark, over 600 years of experience in the pits, in the garage during the month of May. I think that continuity, low turnover, you see our drivers most times like to stay with us. They're family. They don't buy a ride. They're here to be part of it. We do what we can to support them.

Like I said, we can't give you the best car, you go someplace else. I think that's the relationship we had with everyone. When Rick came to me at Elkhart Lake, I don't remember what year it was, he said, I don't have it in my belly anymore that I want to run as hard as these young guys. He said, You should look at some of the young guys, take a look at Tracy.

A lot of things have manifested themselves from the racing. It's a common thread to our business. No question it's been a competitive advantage.

DOUG BOLES: Thank you, everybody.