



2019 Open-Wheels.com 500 Mile Race

Press Conference

Sunday, November 3, 2019

Michele Costantini

Driver, No. 66 Apex Racing Team with Indy 500 Group Dallara IR-18 Chevrolet

Tanner Watkins

President, Open-Wheels.com 500 Mile Race

MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us for Opening Day of the inaugural Open-Wheels.com 500 Mile Race presented by Mitchell Transmissions. Today's press conference will open festivities for this month's race, which will be held on Sunday, November 17 – live on RaceSpot TV at 11:15 AM Eastern time.

Our guests today include Tanner Watkins, owner/editor of Open-Wheels.com and the president of the Open-Wheels.com 500 Mile Race presented by Mitchell Transmissions, and Michele Costantini, driver of the No. 66 Apex Racing Team with Indy 500 Group Dallara IR-18 Honda.

Tanner, we'll begin with you. Could you shed some light on the origin of the Open-Wheels 500 and how this event came together?

WATKINS: Yeah, thanks for joining us today Austin, Michele, and anybody else that's listening along. You know, to have today finally arrive and reach Opening Day for the inaugural Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race this is a big milestone for us. We are happy to have all of our drivers – 104 drivers in total – and all of our preferred sponsors and partners. To have everybody who's played a part in the event to this point to make it here today, it's a very special day for us so I am very proud of that.

The Open-Wheels 500 as a whole kind of came together, not just from ideas that popped into my head this year, but just from being an observer

and participant in sim racing for the last few years. This is more so, over time we've been able to recognize some things in the sim racing community – both with the way that iRacing runs their Indianapolis 500 event, as well as the more or less lack thereof of sim racing buy-in from IndyCar itself.

So especially after this past year at the Indianapolis 500, I was happy to cover the race in real life. And I've learned a lot of things from being a media member at that event that I thought I could bring to a sim racing event, and create something that was interesting and compelling and exciting for our drivers in the iRacing IndyCar community. And so after a couple of weeks of planning, I decided that I would have a November event – which, coincidentally, is six months in between not only the real life Indy 500 each year but also the iRacing Indy 500 each year. I don't want to create an event that is competition with our iRacing Indy 500, but I do want to give something to the sim racing community for the drivers on iRacing that is unique and different than anything that iRacing puts on as one of their official sessions.

That's one of the reasons why we have implemented a lot of the special traditions and unique procedures that we'll talk about in a little bit that iRacing just simply doesn't offer. So I'm really excited to bring that to the sim racing community. Again, today is the culmination of a



ton of work that I'm very happy to present to the sim racing community, and hopefully our readers on Open-Wheels.com that follow our real-life IndyCar coverage can appreciate a lot of what we're doing here. So again, today is incredibly exciting and we're just ready to get going.

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MODERATOR: Tanner, you mentioned how this event is kind of different. What makes this event special or unique to the other 500-mile races at Indianapolis on the iRacing platform?

WATKINS: Yeah, one thing that we're doing is obviously one of the most recognizable features of the Indianapolis 500 in real life – that is the three-wide start. Using iRacing's software in normal circumstances, you can't replicate a three-wide start, and they don't do that in the iRacing Indy 500. So we're excited to bring a three-wide start to this year's Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race. We will have a pace car driven by a special pace car driver, which we will announce later on this week, but we will command our own start, and that will allow us to do a three-wide start – which is very important to us because we want to honor the traditions of the real life Indy 500. (The start) one thing that is unmistakable with the real life '500' is that three-wide start.

We're also giving away some awesome prizes to our not only our race winner, but drivers as a whole. You know, we'll have a winner's wreath available and a milk bottle with the 2019 Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race logo etched into the glass itself that the winner will earn. So those are some cool things that we're giving away, along with cash payouts to every driver that qualifies for the race.

That's something that's unique because the iRacing Indy 500 doesn't offer that, and it's also unique because with a lot of cash payout events on iRacing first and foremost require you to pay an entry fee. That was one thing that we wanted to avoid with this year's race was charging an

entry fee, because I felt that that deters a lot of participants from taking aim at a certain event.

I wanted all drivers to be able to come in and take a shot at qualifying for the race, regardless of whether or not they had to pay. And so that's one reason why throughout the entire summer I was pounding pavement and trying to raise money for these drivers and have an impressive prize pool in our first year that would not only bring in the most exciting group of drivers, but create the highest amount of competition. We've seen that with 104 drivers on the entry list. But more or less, just to offer these guys something really cool and unique that we haven't enjoyed for quite some time in the iRacing IndyCar community.

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MODERATOR: You mentioned 104 drivers – talk about the competition that they're going to bring.

WATKINS: It's an absolutely fantastic group of drivers on this year's entry list. I think we've got 10 former iRacing Indy 500 winners in the field, which is just a remarkable show of talent and past success with drivers on this year's entry list.

We've got six drivers with win in the iRacing Indianapolis 500 broadcasted race – we call those 'feature' wins in my month of May guide for the iRacing Indy 500. So yeah we've got overall 45 guys with top split iRacing Indy 500 experience and starts under the belt, not to mention the winners.

And we've also got a really good crop of rookie drivers – which rookies by this standard are drivers who have not started a top split iRacing Indy 500 before. But that includes a lot of talented drivers that that we'll be looking at. Guys like Zac Campbell, who hasn't made a top split '500' start yet, I don't believe, so he'll definitely be a favorite for that that Rookie of the Year award. And we've also got a couple of guys like Braden Eves and Flinn Lazier who have raced in real life in the Road to Indy. Eves is this year's USF 2000 champion and Flinn Lazier won



this year's SCCA Formula Atlantic National Championship, so to have those guys also take part in our event... that's pretty cool. It's something unique to our race that you don't get all the time in these kind of one-off events. So I'm very excited about that.

And then of course I think the big bombshell that dropped on the day that we released the entry list for this year's Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race was having Yang Ou on there, and to have a driver of his stature and caliber with the success that he had in the early part of this decade.. to come out of retirement essentially and want to compete in our race was very, very big for me. It just shows, I think, the respect that this this race has garnered in the iRacing IndyCar community.

And again he's just one of the many talented drivers that will be out there, and I'm looking forward to qualifying as much as anything because that's going to be an action-packed weekend which will be very exciting with only 33 spots up for grabs and 104 drivers in contention. It's certainly going to be wild, and that's just the halfway mark in the event as well.

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MODERATOR: Could you give us a bit of a schedule rundown for the next two weeks of action and where can we get coverage of this year's race?

WATKINS: So obviously today we're opening up the first day of official on-track activities with a 12-hour practice. All of our practice sessions - except for our session on the Day Before the 500 - will be 12 hours in length. Today we have practice and then we'll have practice on Tuesday and Thursday of this week - that is November the 5th and 7th - and then we'll have fast Friday practice on November the 8th. Those are also all 12-hour practices. Then on Saturday and Sunday - the 9th and 10th of November - we will have days 1 and 2 of qualifications for AG Trucking Qualifications Weekend where we will whittle that field of 104 drivers on the entry list down to

the 33 that will start the race. On each of those days, RaceSpot TV (our official broadcast partner) will be providing final-hour coverage of both Pole Day and Bump Day, so make sure you guys tune in for those (at 5:00 PM ET).

Then we'll be back at it with practice on November 12th and the 14th. Those are also Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12 hours each, and then we get going with final practice on the 16th of November. That's a Saturday on the day before the Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race where we will also have the Veterans 100 and the Pit Stop Competition presented by The Pit Window.

And then of course on Sunday, November the 17th we will have the inaugural Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race presented by Mitchell Transmissions. The race will be broadcast live by RaceSpot TV at 11:15 AM Eastern - that's when they will go on air.

I'd also like to note that we will have a special evening show called *Today the 500 presented by Through Kaiser's Visor*, and that show will be aired pretty much every day that we have practice activity from 8:00 to 9:00 PM Eastern. It'll be streaming online, and the link is provided in our Discord as well as the iRacing forums and the Bulletin that we send out each day.

Today at the 500 will essentially be a show for the drivers, about the drivers, will interview drivers during practice hours. We'll recap some of the latest events in the Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race, and we'll also talk to some sponsors. So we will have that show on each of the practice days that I've mentioned previously, as well as a special two-hour pre-race edition from 9:00 to 11:00 AM Eastern on race day, Sunday, November 17th.

That's where you'll be able to find all of the special pre-race festivities such as the singing of 'Back Home Again in Indiana,' the National Anthem, Taps the rifle volley all of those good things that make the Indy 500 such a special event. We'll have those live on *Today at the 500*, so make sure you guys tune into that.



MODERATOR: Thank you, Tanner. We're going to move on to our second guest here today, Michele Costantini. You've run in some large-scale events and important races on iRacing. Why did you decide to take on the Open-Wheels 500?

COSTANTINI: Good afternoon everyone. Yes, of course, Tanner and Open-Wheels.com have made an incredible job with this race. The level of professionalism I've seen in the scheduling of this event, I've probably never seen anywhere else in iRacing in any sim racing event that I've taken part in. So that of course plays a big role in my decision of taking part in this race.

Also, how the race is so similar to real life, of course, because as you said previously the iRacing Indy 500 is a little bit different to this one. The qualifying format is different, and the start as Tanner mentioned earlier. So yeah those are all big parts of my decision of why I've decided to take part in this race.

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MODERATOR: You're part of the experienced and talented alliance between Apex Racing Team, Indy 500 Group, and Broken Aero. Could you just talk about the team's chemistry and how that relationship has developed so far?

COSTANTINI: Yeah. We started working together - these three teams - for the iRacing Indy 500 this year, and we've actually been a very good group. I would say we got along pretty well quite quickly, and the results have also really shown in the iRacing Indy 500 as well. I think we had four out of the top five cars in that race - the broadcasted feature race - so that was a pretty good result for the team. We've also shown pretty good results in some of the other IndyCar leagues. So I would say all of the guys have really got along well in the team and that's just positive for this race. Hopefully we can do as well in this race as well.

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MODERATOR: Michele, speaking of this year's iRacing Indianapolis 500 feature race that was

broadcast by RaceSpot TV, you finished fourth in that race. How do you continue to incrementally build towards a victory in a major 500-mile race at Indianapolis, and when are you expecting a breakthrough?

COSTANTINI: Well of course the preparation is a big part of it. Not only on-track preparation but also mental preparation for a race that long is extremely important. You need to have race craft that allows you to know when to pass people when to stay behind, and what to do in every single part of the race. Strategy plays a big role as well, and the competition is always extremely, extremely tough. So it will be difficult but I will try my best. We got close in May, so let's hope we can get the can get the win in November.

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MODERATOR: Michele, what will you be working on today for the first day of practice, and in the end, what would be a success for you and your team for this year's Open-Wheels 500 Mile Race?

COSTANTINI: Today's practice will probably be more concentrated about race pace and running in traffic. Because, of course, in practice sessions you really want to try the car out in traffic as you have a lot of cars around. That's the best chance to try and get the feel for the car in traffic, of course. And about the race, a good result for the team I would say would probably be... Well of course our aim is to put the car in victory lane, of course. So basically that is the that is the goal, but a good showing (would) maybe be two cars in the top-five if the performances is good enough.

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All right. Well seeing as there are no further questions for our guests today, we will conclude today's press conference. Thank you, gentlemen, for attending today and we will see you all later this afternoon.