

## MOTOR SPORTS

## IndyCar courts Black fans, drivers in push to diversify

BY DAN GELSTON

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Rod Reid ran a program full of young, Black kart racers locked out of a venue because of the pandemic and needed a track to race.

Indianapolis Motor Speedway had spent millions on upgrades on the historic property at the same time last year when the coronavirus had a steely grip on the nation. There was no guarantee — even if gates were open — that there would be room for NXG Youth Motorsports' usual spot teaching kids STEM classes in a makeshift classroom in the paddock or for their drivers to race around the cone-lined course in a parking lot.

The suggestion was made to Reid: Why not dial up the new boss at IMS?

His plea for help last June to Roger Penske — Reid noted the 2,300 kids from 11 to 15 years old who have passed through the school over 15 years looking for a path into motorsports — turned instead into a startling revelation for the Captain.

Yes, the NXG kids needed a place to learn and hone their craft. But the blossoming drivers also represented a rare chance for a minority group severely underrepresented in racing to feel at home inside the sprawling, 111-year-old speedway.

"We told him what we were about and he was really surprised," Reid said. "The reason we started, especially the idea of exposing the Black community to Indianapolis Motor Speedway, surprised him because he said he couldn't believe people don't feel welcome here. I told him, you're talking years and years and years back to when a person of color couldn't even go to the speedway."

The 84-year-old Penske offered NXG space at IMS to resume the program and, essentially, a new start. He helped NXG start a working relationship with Chevrolet, and the program secured loans to purchase a truck for its trailer. The talks with Penske happened to come not long after the death of George Floyd, a catalyst that in part led to IndyCar's "Race for Equality and Change" initiative supporting diversity and inclusivity across the industry.

IndyCar moved to create a more diverse workforce throughout all levels of a series that has had just two Black



Darron Cummings/AP file

**Mario Andretti, left, talks to retired racecar driver Willy T. Ribbs before the Formula One U.S. Grand Prix at the Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas, in 2012. Ribbs and George Mack are the only two drivers to ever start an Indianapolis 500.**

drivers race in the Indy 500, its showcase annual event that dates to 1911. Willy T. Ribbs became the first Black driver to start the race in 1991 (and again in 1993) and George Mack in 2002 are it.

The 66-year-old Ribbs said he never cared much for his role as Indy 500 trailblazer.

"I didn't care about it," he said. "Still don't. It meant nothing. I was focused on going fast and trying to win. If you focused on anything other than that when you were there, you were going to get hurt or get killed."

Programs launched over the last several months are designed to reach far beyond the cockpit, but an anchor of IndyCar's plan was the creation of Force Indy, an all-Black race team led by Reid that competes in the IndyCar ladder USF2000 Series. Force Indy hired and developed Black mechanics, engineers and drivers throughout its entire team. Myles Rowe, who turns 21 in June, drives for the team and has been pegged as a potential Indy 500 driver.

Jimmie McMillian, chief diversity officer for Penske Entertainment, is the architect intent on designing a new era in the open wheel series.

"We want to make sure our paddock represents the fan base that we hope to have," McMillian said. "My No. 1 goal, I feel every day, is to get rid of the con-

cept that this is a white sport and that people are not welcome here."

Years before Penske assumed stewardship of the series, IndyCar had a diversity committee that worked on recruitment and retainment for both the series and IMS. While McMillian viewed the number of women involved on the corporate side as a positive for the series — roughly 35% to 40% of the workforce are women — the minority makeup "was where we probably struggled."

IndyCar's solution was an attempt to become more aggressive and creative in its outreach efforts — how does it find the best and brightest in urban communities and persuade them to seek a career inside the paddock.

With few exceptions for drivers born into legacy families, pursuing a career in racing is as much about sponsorship, cash and connections as talent, and the hustle is part of the job. IndyCar took a deeper look at identifying businesses willing to support developmental teams or help in securing equipment for up-and-coming programs.

That also means developing a career path in racing for women and minorities in a variety of jobs outside the cockpit ranging from race engineers to public relations and sponsorship selling and beyond.

"Someone has to take that first step," Penske said. "I think in the position

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— Rod Reid, owner of Force Indy, an all-Black race team

we're in, we can be leaders in that area. We're going to continue to do it. We're looking at the people we do business with. The people that we hire. We have a much deeper focus. We have that within our company. But I think from a racing perspective, I think we have that responsibility."

IndyCar created incentives for teams and track promoters that pushed diversity efforts. NXG students will race karts in Detroit as part of a pilot program that could lead to a full-season schedule in 2022 and expansion of the program is planned across the country.

NXG, funded in part through Lucas Oil sponsorship, has yet to send a student to IndyCar, though there may be no better time for kids to feel like they can succeed in some capacity at IMS.

Look around IMS and tangible culture change is happening now. USF2000, the first rung on the road to IndyCar, raced at IMS during the IndyCar Grand Prix weekend, and more Black fans seemed to visit the track and watch the race than McMillian could remember.

"They said, 'I didn't know so many Black people came to races,'" he said. "The narrative now is: there are a lot of Black people here. We have to make sure all the folks in our community, for one reason or another can say, 'I've been to the track.'"

## Indy 500

Continued from B1

Through vaccinations, more than 90,000 done at the speedway, Penske got the clearance to at last permit 40% attendance.

"The good news is, it's started to roll here and I think with opening America we can be the premiere event," he said. "It's an honor for us to even be in a position to execute something like that. We're going to continue to fine tune it. I would do the same transaction again. I just see the benefits on a longer term basis. I really want to run as big as my anticipation and not my exception."

And so it is with expectation and not anticipation that six-time IndyCar champion Scott Dixon starts from the pole Sunday for the fourth time at the Indy 500. Dixon is considered the best driver of his generation and trails Mario Andretti by only one victory for second on IndyCar's all-time wins list. He has just one Indy 500 victory, in 2008, and three runner-up finishes.

"It's the biggest race in the world and the most diffi-

cult race in the world. I feel very lucky and privileged to have won it once but that also drives you into a deeper will to want to win it again," Dixon said. "Would I trade some championships for 500 wins? Maybe. I don't know. I feel like there's a lot of emphasis on IndyCar championships but the Indy 500 is the Indy 500."

Dixon and the four Chip Ganassi Racing entries are the most consistent at Indianapolis leading into the 500. The group includes Tony Kanaan, who at 46 is the oldest driver in the field, and Alex Palou, who wrecked in Saturday qualifying but rebounded Sunday to qualify sixth alongside Kanaan.

This season has seen a changing of the guard with five different winners through the first five races of the season, four of them 24 years or younger. Three are first time winners and Dixon is the only veteran so far to represent in the win column.

He starts on the front row alongside Colton Herta, a 21-year-old four-race winner who earlier this month earned a two-year contract extension from Andretti Autosport, and

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— Scott Dixon, IndyCar driver

Rinus VeeKay, at 20 the youngest front-row starter in race history.

"We grew up in the computer era, the digital era," VeeKay said. "That helps the simulators are very normal to us, help us feel comfortable in the simulator. That maybe translates to better results."

The impressive youth group includes Pato O'Ward, the 22-year-old Mexican who has shot to popularity with Arrow McLaren SP and is teammates

in the 500 with two-time race winner Juan Pablo Montoya. McLaren brought Montoya back to the race for the first time since 2017 and isn't overly concerned with this crop of young kids.

"At the end of the day you look at how many young guys have won the 500 the last few years?" Montoya said. "Do they have a shot? For sure, no question. I think Pato and Herta and all those kids, they've got a lot of talent and everything. You've got to make it to 200 laps, you know? So we'll see."

Marco Andretti, last year's pole-sitter, is back for the only race on his IndyCar calendar and hated his car the entire week. A change made right after qualifying last Sunday settled him down and now he thinks he might have a shot to win from 25th.

Andretti is one of six Andretti Autosport entries but Herta has become the star. Alexander Rossi, winner of the 100th running back in 2016 as a 24-year-old rookie, is closing in on a two years without an IndyCar Series win. He was second in the 500 in 2019, fourth in 2018 and still try-

ing to recapture the joy of that surprise victory.

The race includes nine former winners, including two-time and reigning race winner Takuma Sato of Rahal Letterman Lanigan. But so many young new drivers plan to contend Sunday and Dixon cautions against getting too confident at one of the most daunting tracks in the world.

There's a difference, Dixon noted, between champions and race winners and Josef Newgarden said it took him several seasons to figure that out. Newgarden is now a two-time IndyCar champion but still seeking his first Indy 500 victory.

"There are guys who are fast and have elements of the whole package, but they don't have everything," Newgarden said. "There's a difference between someone who is really good and flashy and entertaining and wins races and never wins a championship."

"When you look at the 500 and what it requires, versus what the championship requires, they are different. There's an argument of which would you prefer. And that's a very different question."

## Blazers

Continued from B1

C.J. McCollum added 21 points for the sixth-seeded Trail Blazers. The series shifts to Game 5 on Tuesday night in Denver.

Nikola Jokic finished with 16 points and nine rebounds for third-seeded Denver before sitting out the final quarter. He was the Nuggets' top scorer.

Lillard was 1 for 10 from the field but finished with 10 points, 10 assists and eight rebounds. He also sat for the final quarter after the Blazers led by as many as 33 points in the third.

"If you would have told me going in that game that Lillard's going to be 1 for 10 from the field and we're going to get blown out, I would've probably had a hard time believing that," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said. "So, I have to be

## Next up

Portland at Denver

When: 6 p.m.

Tuesday

TV: NBCSNW



a lot better and the urgency has to be there. Maybe this could be a wake up call for our starting group, just to play harder. Good things happen when you play hard, and we didn't play anywhere close to hard enough tonight."

The Nuggets downed the Blazers 120-115 at the Moda Center on Thursday night. In that game, Denver had 20 3-pointers and got a boost from four straight 3s from Austin Rivers during a key stretch in the fourth quarter. On Saturday, Rivers had eight points.

It was imperative for Portland that big man Jusuf Nurkic — probably Portland's best defense against Jokic — stay



Steve Dykes/AP

**Portland Trail Blazers' Norman Powell, left, drives to the basket on Denver Nuggets' Nikola Jokic, right, during Game 4 of a first-round playoff series in Portland on Saturday. Powell had a game-high 29 points.**

out of trouble after fouling out in the previous two games. Portland's bench, with the exception of Carmelo Anthony, had also been struggling, outscored in Game 3 24-19 by Denver.

Nurkic finished with 17 points, and Anthony had 12 — on his 37th birthday — to lead the bench.

"We got our butts whooped tonight so that should be all the motivation we need," Den-

ver's JaMychal Green said. "I mean it was embarrassing. So when we go home we gotta be the aggressors."

## Inspiration?

Nurkic said took issue with what he claimed analyst Kendrick Perkins said about his defense after Game 3.

"I guess in this league today, he'd be a mascot," Nurkic said. "I don't know why he claimed the things like that, and I like him as a person, too."

## Tip-ins

**Nuggets:** Will Barton remained out for the Nuggets with a hamstring injury.

**Trail Blazers:** With his start Saturday, Lillard matched Kevin Duckworth atop Portland's career list with 59 playoff starts. ... Zach Collins, who has been out with a fractured left foot, put up shots before the game. There was no word on his return.

## Novak Djokovic wins in Serbia in tuneup for French Open

Novak Djokovic warmed up for the French Open by beating Alex Molcan 6-4, 6-3 to take his 83rd career title Saturday on home soil at the Belgrade Open.

Top-ranked Djokovic struggled to serve in the first set as he was broken three times by his Slovakian opponent. Djokovic was also broken once in the second set by Molcan, the 255th-ranked qualifier playing his first tour-level final, but was reliably able to dominate Molcan's serve for a total of six breaks in the match.

It's the third career title for Djokovic in his home nation after he won the Serbia Open, a different tournament in the same city, in 2009 and 2011.

— Associated Press

## French Open

Continued from B1

When his favorite tournament starts Sunday — in May, not September, as it did last year because of the pandemic, and with crowds numbering more than 5,000 on-site daily at the start and 10,000 or more by the end, not merely 1,000, like last year — Nadal will be pursuing a 14th championship in at Roland Garros.

That would break his own record that he keeps breaking and, of even more historic heft, go alongside four triumphs at the U.S. Opens, two at Wimbledon and one at the Australian Open to give the indefatigable lefty from Spain a total of 21 Grand Slam titles in all, which would break the men's mark he shares with Roger Federer.

There are, certainly, other stories to follow over the 15 days of play in Paris.

Federer's return after 15 months away from the Grand Slam stage because of two operations on his right knee. No. 1-ranked Novak Djokovic's attempt to close within one major title of his rivals by getting his 19th, while also becoming the first man in the professional era to win each Slam tournament twice. Members of the younger set, such as Stefanos Tsitsipas and Alexander Zverev, are still trying to get a first, meanwhile.

Serena Williams, owner of 23 Slam singles trophies, is participating in the last French Open of her 30s. Naomi Osaka, who's won four majors on hard courts, is trying to get past the third round at Roland Garros for the first time — after declaring she won't speak to the media during the tournament.

Two women can say they are defending French Open titles: 2020 champion Iga Swiatek, of course, but also 2019 champion Ash Barty, who did not enter the event last year because of the pandemic.

Osaka, who opens the proceedings at Court Philippe Chatrier against Patricia Maria Tig of Romania, is among a half-dozen major champions on the Day One schedule.

Nadal's reign is so remarkable, so unprecedented, a 10-foot statue was unveiled in his honor at the place this week — a rare tribute to an active athlete.

"It's true that I did something very special here in this event," said Nadal, who turns 35 on Thursday.

He is 100-2 for his career at the French Open, 459-42 overall (.916 winning percentage) on clay, with 62 of his 88 titles on the surface, including 12 at Barcelona, 11 at Monte Carlo and 10 at Rome.

Over the years, Nadal's infrequent losses on clay have become far more newsworthy than his victories.

What hasn't changed from May 2005 to May 2021: As the French Open gets underway, the man from Mallorca is the man to beat.

"I play with passion, with clear goals and with love for the game, no? So that's the main issues that I have been working on in my tennis career, no?" Nadal said. "Just keep playing with the right intensity and at the same time have enough passion to go on court every day and try to be better player. That's the whole thing."