
PODCAST

ABB Decoded

Making a big noise about the world's quietest motorsport: ABB Formula E

Jeff Dodds, CEO of Formula E talks about his new role, his goal to make lots and lots of noise around a series powered by quiet electric motors and how he plans to do just that.

Anthony Rowlinson: Hello and welcome to ABB Decoded, the podcast that tries to press pause on our fast-moving lives and make sense of the technology and trends that are shaping our world. I'm your host, Anthony Rowlinson. And we're joined for this episode by Jeff Dodds, who is the new CEO of Formula E. Jeff began his role last May and quickly set about raising the profile of the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship, which is the world's only all-electric single-seat motor racing series. And with the championship about to begin its 10th season, Jeff outlines his vision for its future, and explains why electric motorsport has never been more relevant to the global e-mobility transition. The goal, he says, is to make lots and lots of noise around a series powered by quiet electric motors. Let's hear how he plans to do just that.

All right, Jeff, thank you very much for joining this episode of ABB Decoded.

Jeff Dodds: You're very welcome.

AR: If we can start with the obvious question if you could just say, who you are, and what it is you do.

JD: So Jeff Dodds, I'm the newly-minted, I guess you'd, say five-months-in Chief Exec of Formula E.

AR: Excellent. Well, we'll start there actually, the fact that you're new to the job. I had six months, but it's five. So what have you learned in that time?

JD: It's five months, but they're like dog years. So the five months feels like about 10 years, I think. What have I learned in five months? Well, so I've been very lucky. So I started before the season ended. We're at the off season at the moment. So we've finished season nine, back in July, we'll start the next season, Season 10 in January. But I started in June. So I was lucky enough to get to some races. I went to Indonesia, to Jakarta, I went to Portland, in the US, to Rome and to London.

So I was lucky enough to get a flavor of the product, have met all of our partners, all of our manufacturers, all of our teams, all of our sponsors, multiple opportunities to meet up and speak to the team – 250-odd people work at Formula E. So I would say it's been a blend of being curious, trying to understand how the business works, a little bit about the background of the business, where we are, the existing plans, get a flavor from people about what they think goes really well at the moment and where they think we can make improvements.

But then, of course, you've got a day job as well. You've got to run a business. So I'm being curious trying to learn at the same time as getting stuck into making the day to day decisions set us up for Season 10. So it's been pretty full on. I think also I've spent, I dread to think what my Avios points look like, over the last five months. But there's a lot of our partners, as you know, in Europe, they're around the world. We're racing in Tokyo next year. We're racing in China. So I'm on a plane quite a bit meeting our partners and, understanding a bit more about them as well.

AR: And you mentioned balancing learning with running the business, how have you managed to do that? How do you get that balance?

JD: Well you can't avoid running the business. So every day, you know, there are there are priorities and decisions we have to take. I think the two go hand in hand, don't they? So there's some things that are more formal learning. So spending the time to talk to partners about the history with the brand, finding about the sporting regulations. So how does the race series actually run? And what are the differences between Formula E and other motorsports and understanding the product really well. So they're, I guess they're more formal, but most of it happens on the job. So when we're talking about calendar, for example, we're making decisions on what calendar do we submit to the FIA, and to try and get them to approve it and working with that board. So I guess I'm learning that process as I go. So learning by doing.

AR: And what was your brief on day one, or I guess, you know, in the build up to taking the job, what was what were you told to do?

JD: Don't screw it up! That was kind of the brief. So the brief was really good. So the brief was, first of all, take the time, you need to fully understand the business properly. So don't feel the need to rush in and make any decisions quickly. Take the time you need. But take the time you need to be able to set this business up for exponential and continued growth. So we are a business that's nine years old. We're nine years old in an industry where most of our peers or competitors are 70 to 100 years old. If you compare, you know, Formula One and Moto GP and IndyCar and NASCAR, or World Endurance Championship.

So we're in our infancy, which means we hopefully have many, many, many years of growth ahead of us. So get stuck in, learn the business, meet the people, understand the business, establish a foundation or a strong platform to make sure we max out our growth potential and that's been the brief.

AR: And it is growth rather than thriving as it were, so there is room to grow to grow the brand?

JD: Yeah. I have a simple... in my experience of business. There are two types of business. There are those that are spiraling up, and those that are spiraling down, and anyone that's standing still was just about to start spiraling down normally. So, no, I think I want to work in a growth business. We're nine years old, we've got some fantastic investors that sit behind us... very big, we may talk about that later, very big investors. They're interested in they think this is a growth industry, they think we're a growth business, and therefore, the remit is very clearly to grow.

AR: Excellent. And it's a very simple question, but probably a very hard answer. And how do you grow the business?

JD: Oh, well. Well, it's a complicated answer. Because there are many ways to grow a business. The beauty of a business that's nine years old, is that very few of the growth levers have been pulled, because you're establishing yourself. So if I look at our business, you know, we're a world championship, but we only race in 11, or 12 different parts of the world. So one way you can grow is to have more races in more different places. The technology of our racing series is, is on a very steep curve in terms of innovation. So another way you can grow is by product improvement. Well, our product is getting faster every year, and the range of the battery is extending rapidly as well. So the product is getting better. You can grow through media coverage. So we have media relationships, but we, you know, we're a nine-year-old business, so we don't have media relationships all around the world. So we can do that.

We saw with Formula One, the incredible bounce, they got off of things like Drive to Survive on Netflix. We haven't launched a global streaming product yet. So we don't have a product out there to attract a different type of customer base or audience. So we can do that.

Bring on more sponsors, more partners. Everywhere I look, there's opportunities for growth. I think it's picking the right ones, because we are a 200 and, I think I said, roughly 250-person organization. So we don't have the number of people to rush off and pull all those growth levers at once. And if they did, we couldn't cope with that. So it's picking which ones to pull first and making sure we do that, to the best of our ability.

AR: And you mentioned earlier that one of the things you've tasked yourself with is finding Formula E's points of difference. What do you think those are? What are what is its point of difference? What are the ,points of difference?

JD: Anthony there are so many. And I think so I'm a motorsport fan. So I have been all my life love automotive, love motorsports. And I'd watched Formula E. So you know, I was familiar with the product, I'd been with my son to watch races, we've been to New York to watch races. So I followed it, and I follow Formula One, and I follow Moto GP and I you know, I love motorsport.

But it's only really when you get deep into it, that you really understand just how many differences there are. So, you know, for a start, the races are much shorter. They're between 45 minutes and an hour or so. So they're shorter races. And obviously, the cars are all electric. And so there's zero emission. So we've been net zero, from day zero.

There are funky things we do during the race. So things like we have attack zones, where you can drive through it and get an incremental boost on the power of the car, 50 kilowatt boost in power, which strategically makes it much more different. We race on a mixture of street circuits and some fixed circuits, but we largely take the circus to town. So we turn up in a location. So Tokyo next year, great example, will be the first race series has ever raced in the city center of Tokyo. We turn up there, we build a racetrack, you know, we build a racetrack, there's roughly two kilometers in length in the middle of a metropolitan area, in the middle of a city, so that we can expose the product to new people.

So whilst it's a car, and it's an incredible racing driver driving that car, it's over a shorter track for a shorter period, often in a street, generating zero emissions. So it's a very different product.

AR: And you mentioned obviously, the all-electric nature of the car and the series, is that e-mobility connection still fundamental the championship and as relevant as ever to the communications around the championship?

JD: I would say not only as relevant as ever but growing in relevance every day. And the reason I say that is if you...I'll get the numbers slightly wrong here...so I hope nobody goes and fact-checks me perfectly, but when the founder of the series, a gentleman called Alejandro Agag, conceived the idea for Formula E and launched it. I think that year there were probably 300,000 electric vehicles sold around the

world. If my maths are right, I think last year there were about 10 million electric vehicles sold around the world and it's growing by roughly 20% a year. So, you know, we are on a very steep growth curve for electrification. Now, I know some countries are changing their timing... we're sitting here doing this podcast in the UK and they've changed the timing I think from 2030 to 2035 in terms of the phasing out of, of non-electric vehicles for the sale of new cars.

But largely over the next decade all cars sold around the world will move away from internal combustion engine to alternative fuel and predominantly electric.

So this is our time. So the window is wide open, you know, we have this tailwind of electrification that's driving us along. And we have to make the most of it. And so when I look at that, you know, we've scratched the surface of electrification on vehicles so far, the next 10 years are incredibly exciting. So the relevance of e-mobility is getting stronger and stronger.

AR: And do you have to change the approach slightly? Because perhaps at the start, it was about convincing people that electric vehicles just viable? Now, probably that argument's already been concluded, because clearly they are. But where do you shift the focus? What's the sort of drive that you make through the perception of the championship? What are you trying to show people now?

JD: I think it's a great question. And they're different things. So I think, for people wanting to watch the racing, that's different. So I think there are many people that have come in to watch electric racing, and just love it for what it is, the sport. So the sport of electric racing, is if you looked at us and compared us to other series, so highly competitive. So at the end of the last season, on the very last day, as we went into London, I think there were still four drivers, conceivably, that could win the Drivers' Championship. So it's highly competitive racing. But it's not internal combustion engine. And there are motorsports fans out there that have grown up on Formula One and, and the roar of the loud engine car and the smell of that. And they love it. So not everybody will be convinced that watching electric cars race is for them. My view on that, by the way, is there's so many new people coming into racing that don't really know any different, we focus on them. So we focus on providing a compelling racing series for them. So the first people we have to convince is come and watch the race, because when you watch it, you'll be super impressed. These cars are lightning fast, they're producing zero emissions, you can bring your family because it's nice and quiet, you can talk to each other and you can hear stuff, you don't always leave with a headache.

And you're gonna see some amazingly competitive racing with some of the best drivers on the planet racing those cars.

Then I think the other point you make is about perhaps what used to be a skepticism around the technology of electrification. And remember, there are many, many people that still haven't personally driven an electric vehicle, because they

haven't had that opportunity. I've driven an electric vehicle for a very long time. And I still remember that first wave of 'hang on a minute, (a) this is really fast. So that surprises me. And it's really comfortable, it's really quiet. And any range anxiety I might have had disappears quite quickly, when I realized I could almost do an entire week on one charge going to and from work. And then the process of re-charging it is actually very, very straightforward. And I think what our racing series does is not only provides people with some amazing entertainment to watch cars racing, but it's also providing the reassurance because what they get to see is electric-only technology propelling incredibly fast cars silently, and they're able to race at those speeds for nearly an hour. So then when you jump in your own electric car, and you're worried about I'm gonna go and see my parents this weekend that might be 'how am I going to get there and back'. And I think it removes a lot of the anxiety because that reassurance level is there and watching these cars race at the absolute optimum level.

AR: Is it important, therefore, that you have partners like ABB, if I can if I can just throw that one in, who are deeply involved in electrification. And that's fundamental to our business.

JD: Yeah, I think ABB obviously, the clue's in the title, you know, we're the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship so they are our title partner. And we love having them involved for a number of reasons. But if you look at the alignment of the purpose of the two businesses, when you start to read about ABB as an organization, and you realize that they're focused on sustainability, electrification, innovation, e-mobility, amongst many other things. That's what we live for, you know, we live to, to showcase the power of electric racing. To drive and increase the speed of electrification around the world of automotive mobility. So there is such a direct link between the two businesses that I think for us, it's great because we get to partner with somebody who's I was gonna say on the hook, and that maybe that's not a fair term, but you know, is driving the infrastructure development around the electrification making, making sure that as these cars grow and grow and grow, the number on the roads grow and grow and grow, there's the right infrastructure levels there that exist to be able to charge those cars effectively at scale.

And at the same token, you know, we get to mutually benefit from a growing sport that now has around 350 million fans around the world that are showing more and more interest every year in in e-mobility.

AR: I'd just like to take a tangent from there if you don't mind. Can I ask you about your work as a non-executive director for the Department for Levelling Up? That's very unusual.

JD: That is a tangent, I thought you'd have a private investigator on me, then you're going to dig out all those things about me.

AR: Nothing like that.

JD: Yeah. So I guess my day job is to run Formula E. And I'm very proud to have that job. But I have two additional things I do. So one of the things I do is as a non-exec for the UK Government, and I'm aligned to the Department of Levelling up Housing and Communities, and I will answer your question. The other thing I do is, I'm a chair of a charity called the Valuable 500, which is a Global Disability charity.

Three, three things incredibly close to my heart. So, you know, commerce, business, sustainability, very close to my heart, and I get to push all those buttons every day at Formula E.

I'm incredibly curious about politics, and the role of politics and the influence it can have on the lives of all of us every day. So about three years ago, I was asked whether I would join as a non-exec for UK Government aligned to that department. And because of my interest in equity, and the process of levelling up. That was a, that was a brilliant opportunity for me. So I took it and I've had three years of learning a lot more about how government works, how complex government is, and the complexity of decision-making and government, but also to see the benefits of some of those decisions and how it really impacts people, particularly in local areas through impact on housing, community feeling, and this process of levelling up. Trying to level up across the United Kingdom to make sure that, you know, there's a more equitable approach to investment. So I've absolutely loved that.

And it keeps me busy at times. Because there's, as you can imagine, there's a lot of stuff going on, in government all the time. So it keeps me very busy, I get to work with some other brilliant colleagues who, who come from very different backgrounds to me. So we're all there for different reasons. But yeah, so I have those three different prongs, I guess, to my time and love them all, for different reasons.

AR: Does that work with governments help with some of the conversations you have with, you know, city mayors, for example?

JD: No. They're completely independent things, actually. And if you think about that, well, when you say 'does it help', so I think it helps me personally, not because there's introductions, or, you know, I get to leverage that in any way at all. What it helps me with is that I just have a better understanding of how decisions get made within this government. And of course, we race all over the world. So it's very different. So, you know, the way that the UK government might make a decision would be very different to perhaps the US government, or perhaps the Indonesian government for racing in Jakarta, or, you know, the Tokyo government for the Tokyo race. But I think having a deeper appreciation of, of what's important to governments, so if we go into a city, and we're asking them, if we can race in their city and asking for their support to put that race on, I think it helps me to understand some of the KPIs that they might be focused on where we can support that. So whether that's education around sustainability, or climate change, whether that's

driving an economic value through the local area in the region, introducing the sport to more people from different backgrounds, engaging the community more openly. We have we have a policy, wherever we go, we leave a legacy. So we'd like to leave a positive social legacy where we race, so being able to understand knowing how important that is to local government. So I think it's helped me to have a better appreciation of what they might be looking for. But nothing other than that. They're very different roles for me.

AR: And you mentioned earlier, the opportunities for growth that the championship has, and yeah, and all the things you say about it, they're positive. Do you think the championship still has some weaknesses that you need to address?

JD: Of course, I mean, we're a nine-year-old business. So I think any, any business that's nine years old, and in its growth phase, has challenges, challenges of scale. I also think we're a nine-year-old business that's largely an event and entertainment business that had two years of lockdown and COVID, just at the point it was at the peak of its growth. So we've had to recover from COVID. And fortunately we have and we're back on that growth trajectory. But that was a very difficult period for the business.

And none of us can ignore the fact that we, fortunately, I think we might be coming out the other side, but we've been in a period of economic downturn. So you know, it's been a difficult period for sponsorship and partnership and raising investment out there. I say, fortunately, I get the feeling that we're starting to come out of that.

And global conflicts, never help in terms of giving people confidence for investment, you know, there are other things that people are focused on. So I think we, you know, we do have challenges. I often say when I'm asked a question, Anthony, you know, when I turned up on day one here, and I came out of Telco media that I've been in that firm for many years, and I walked into the office here and I sat down in the chair, and I'm kind of starting to get myself up to speed with the business. There were two piles. There was the pile of opportunities, and here are all the things that we haven't done yet that we think we could. And they're really cool. And then there's the pile over here are some of the challenges we're facing into that we need to fix. The opportunity pile was materially higher than the challenge pile. And for a chief executive coming into a new business, that's a really wonderful feeling. Because we all have challenges. And I've come from very mature, established industries where sometimes the challenges outweigh the opportunities, but fortunately not here.

AR: You mentioned your background. If I understand correctly, you spent quite a bit of time in the in the car business. And then latterly, in the sort of media as a media exec in telecoms.

JD: Yeah.

AR: So can you tell me a bit about those two things and what you learned there? How that informs what your role is now?

JD: Yeah, so I had about half of my career in automotive. I worked for Volvo when they were owned by Ford Motor Company. And then I subsequently worked for Honda. And Honda, obviously, the giant Japanese auto manufacturer, and I was lucky enough in that business to work across all of their products effectively. So whether that was a car, power boats, marine engines, generators, lawnmowers. But also they were, you know, they were a very, very active business in motorsport. So they had a Formula One team with BAR-Honda. Jenson Button, Rubens Barrichello, were the drivers at the time. Moto GP teams, World Superbike teams, Formula Four stroke powerboat teams. They were in everything, which was amazing for me, because I'm a motorsport nut. So in terms of what grounding did that give me? Well, working in automotive and working around motorsport for a long time, is a fantastic grounding for working in a business like Formula E.

And then latterly, yeah, media and Telco. So I worked for Virgin for a very long time. So for Virgin Media, I joined there just after the business had been formed. I was there through to the point, we sold that business to a big American company called Liberty Global, who are our largest shareholder, incidentally, in Formula E. And I was there when we merge that business with O2 in the UK, so part of the Telefonica organization now, a 50-50 JV with Telefonica and Liberty Global. And so over that period of time, you know, I did a lot of work around media generating noise. So in the media industry, it's all about fanbase, growth in audience, generating, when I say generating noise, I mean kind of noise, an interest in the business, all of that incredibly helpful for a sports entertainment business like ours.

But also, they're highly commercial businesses. So just the rigor of understanding how businesses are funded, the importance of revenue growth, cost management, all of the discipline you get of running a big business is incredibly important here, because cost discipline and growth in revenue is very important for the oxygen of a small business. And hopefully, in time we go from being a small business to a big one. And that all stays relevant. So yeah, I, I guess you could say, almost a perfect grounding for this role, you know, working in entertainment, working in media, working in automotive, huge sport fan, very focused on sustainability and equity. So yeah, this felt like, this one had been written for me, I think.

AR: Nice. And obviously, as CEO you're in a leadership position. What does leadership mean to you?

JD: Yeah, that is, that's a quite...we talk a lot about leadership now, don't we? There are lots of people were telling us how we should lead and how we shouldn't lead. The so the first thing I would say is, for me, leadership is incredibly, it's an authentic thing. So there are lots of people talking about how leaders should lead and how they shouldn't lead. But for me, it's really important, you lead in an

authentic way, which means I don't expect to be different in this building, talking to my team here, versus talking to our partners, versus walking home in the evening through the door and how I interact with my family. I don't want to be multiple people. So leadership, for me is a very authentic thing. The two facets of leadership that are incredibly important to me, the first is for the 250 people that work here, or our broader ecosystem that work with us, is trying to create an environment here where everyone can realize their potential, whatever that is. So whatever their potential allows them to do, and whatever their ambition is, to try and provide a supportive environment where (a) people feel they can turn up, and they belong, and (b) that they're in an environment where they can realize their ambitions. So that's really important for me. And then from a personal perspective, I'm at my best when I'm learning new things.

And now, I have the privilege of having been here for not very long, so every day is a school day for me. But I think leadership for me is about curiosity. It's about listening a lot. It's about learning a lot. And, and understanding how to make the right decision for the business which rarely come from one person. They come from the broader business, the best decisions come from the business. So it's that balance for me of making sure I'm somewhere where I can listen and learn and making sure I can help create an environment where people can thrive. That's what it is for me.

AR: Okay, great. And last question – it really is.

JD: Yeah, that's fine. Go as long as you like.

AR: Where do you see the championship in five years?

JD: Well bigger. Bigger, better faster. So when I arrived, Anthony, we very quickly I went through with the team here in my leadership team, what are our top priorities to grow the business? So how will we in five years' time when we look back on our tenure, how will we judge whether we've done a good job or a poor job. And we identified five strategic territories here, and the territories were and I'll, I'll probably forget them as I go now don't have them in front of me. But the territories were: to be the noisiest. So to create more noise, more social noise, more digital noise, just to be very noisy from an interest point of view people talking about us; to be the fastest now, partly to have the fastest cars. So the fastest accelerating cars in motorsport, but also to be the fastest growing. So in terms of fan base growth and audience growth; to be the most sustainable, we're net zero from day zero, we wear that crown incredibly proudly rated the number one sport for ESG in the world, that's not something we want to give up. But it's also not something we take for granted. So even though we do a good job for sustainability, we want to lead the way and continually challenge ourselves to get better and better and better; the most exciting. So in motorsport, you can have everything. But if the racing is not exciting, it puts your audience at jeopardy, because people turn up to our sport, because there's lots of jeopardy. And it's compelling. And the results are

unknown. And there's high drama. And if you haven't got that, I think it's difficult to grow the business. So we want to be the most exciting, the most innovative as well. So we're on a technology curve and ABB are part of that as well and working very closely with us in your own technology curve that we're in a growth technology industry, which is electrification. And E mobility is a technology that's developing rapidly. And therefore, we want to be at the cutting edge of technology. And my hope is that when you add all those things together, we become the most valuable, which is the fastest growing motor sport or you could argue any sport, and if it wasn't for those pesky sports like padel and, and pickleball making it difficult for us, but you know, the fastest growing in value in terms of sports around the world.

If you looked at what that means in numbers, so, you know, I would want I don't know, four out of 10 people in the world to know who we are and to understand what Formula E is. I'll want to over half a billion fans around the world. I'll want to be second only to Formula One in terms of fan base and reach. So we have we have aggressive ambitions. But there's nothing I've seen or not seen since I arrived here five months ago that would lead me to believe those ambitions however lofty they are, are not within our grasp.

AR: That's brilliant. Thank you very much.

JD: No, my absolute pleasure. Thanks for coming to talk to me.

AR: Thanks for such an open conversation. That was really good fun.

JD: Thanks Anthony.

And with those lofty ambitions top of mind, that's where we'll leave this episode of ABB Decoded. But if you're keen to find out more about the championship, you can follow this season online, across social media and on broadcast TV. To learn more about ABB, electrification and our sustainability goals, go to new.abb.com. If you've enjoyed the conversation, don't forget to like, share and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Until next time.