Behind the Wheels Podcast Transcription
Season 2, Bonus Episode 1
In Our Wheel House: Chatting With The Pros At Daimler Trucks North America

ANNOUNCER
You're listening to Behind the Wheels with Doug Mason, Dave Walters, and Mike Yagley. This is a show where we talk about heavy truck and medium duty axle ends. Doug, Dave, and Mike bring close to 100 years of experience and expertise in the transportation business.

Join us once a month to learn new things about axle ends. Sponsored by Alcoa® Wheels, the global leader in aluminum wheel innovation.

MIKE YAGLEY
Welcome to another episode of Behind the Wheels. I'm Mike Yagley.

DOUG MASON
And I'm Doug Mason.

DAVE WALTERS
And I'm Dave Walters.

MIKE YAGLEY
So every week, once a month, I should say, once a month, Dave, myself, and Doug get together and we talk about axle ends and what's happening in the industry. Today we are very honored to have some friends from Daimler joining us. We have Ryan Major, Alexander Lee and Joseph Ryan, why don't you introduce yourself.

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, sure can. Yeah. Thanks for having us on and excited to be here. And excited about the topics we have coming up. My group, we're responsible for the marketing in the on-highway segment, mostly focused on the Cascadia model for Freightliner, as well as the M2 for the on-highway applications. And so, we get into a variety of technologies. As you can imagine, customers are asking us for different solutions for a lot of different things. So, yeah.

MIKE YAGLEY
Okay. Joe?

JOSEPH KIDD
Hey. Yeah, I'm Joe Kidd. I manage our marketing fleet for the on-highway segment. So, we have quite a few Cascadias and M2s in the fleet. A lot of them are equipped with Alcoa wheels and wheel ends. So yeah. Excited to be on the conversation today.

MIKE YAGLEY
We love to hear that part. Alex?

ALEXANDER LEE
Yeah. Thank you for having me on. Not much to add to what Ryan and Joe said. Again, been with the trucking industry and Freightliner for 16 years. So, I've seen the changes over the years from steel wheels to aluminum and Alcoa's been a big part of that. And like Joe said, we love putting them on our trucks and having them displayed on our vehicles.

MIKE YAGLEY
Oh, fantastic. Thank you guys. So today, we wanted to have you in, and I really appreciate you guys making the time to join us, to talk a little bit about the trends and the technology in wheel ends. As we've said, this conversation that we have going on here is really focused on what's happening on the wheel ends. And I wanted to talk a little bit about what you see, from an OEM perspective, what is it that you guys see coming down the tracks into the wheel end that our listeners might be interested in?

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, sure. Yeah. I think one of the things that we're looking at as an OEM is trying to figure out where we can improve fuel economy where possible. So, we've, over the last, gosh, at least decade, we've been working very hard at trying to squeeze out every fuel economy improvement that we can. And so, I would say we've whittled away at the big stuff, and we're still looking at everything to see where there's ways to improve and improve efficiency. And so a lot of those end up leading to the wheel end. As you know, tires are a major contributor to fuel economy. And so, we're looking at working with tire suppliers and partners to improve tire technology, tire monitoring, and also, even on the brake side. And we'll talk a little bit about it later, but we have aerodynamic wheel covers that we're offering too. So, fleets are looking at, and customers are looking at a number of different technologies to improve efficiency, and yes, it just so happens a lot of those are right at the wheel end.

MIKE YAGLEY
So Ryan, I mean, I've heard different numbers for the percentage contribution for fuel efficiency that tires contribute. I've heard numbers, pretty big numbers. Do you have that off the top of your head?

RYAN MAJOR
[crosstalk 00:04:19] Yeah, I think it-

MIKE YAGLEY
Is it like 30% or something?

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, that's generally what I've heard. I think TMC had published a number right around that 30 to 40% of fuel usage is required to basically turn that wheel and tire assembly. So yeah, so it's a big amount. And then I think, obviously what ends up happening is that's at the ideal state, so if the pressure in the tire starts dropping, or whoever the operator or whoever's managing the truck is not keeping an eye on the pressure, that's when you're going to start to see even a more impact to your fuel economy.

MIKE YAGLEY
Right. So what's the ... The tire pressure monitoring systems are really getting into getting the most out of your tires from a fuel efficiency standpoint. Reducing the rolling resistance, I'm assuming, is really what you're looking to be doing there.

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, exactly. Yeah. We are heavily recommending customers look at using some type of tire pressure monitoring system for a number of different reasons. One is the fuel economy aspect of it, just keeping an eye on that pressure and keeping it at a consistent pace definitely helps the tires live longer and get you that fuel economy or maintain the fuel economy, I should say. And then the other benefit, I would say, is on the safety side. If for some reason there is, you catch a nail or the tire happens to get cut somehow from debris, the driver can see that, and see that warning pop up before he gets to a state where it's completely out of pressure or completely flat. And then he's trying to battle getting off the road and trying to figure out what what's going on with that tire. So, I think that's one of the big benefits too, is the safety side of it. So, it's not just fuel economy, but safety as well.

DOUG MASON
I'm sorry, go ahead.

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, go ahead.

DOUG MASON
I would just say, just to have a question, you said you try, you encourage that to your customer. Do you find a lot of pull or is it a push from your side? What is the acceptance out in the industry right now? And what is the feeling for the need for tire pressure monitoring sensors amongst the majority of your customers?

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, I would say it's growing as far as interest goes. Right now, we, out of our factory, we do have a factory installed option and that, we've seen about a 10% take rate on, but we have found that a number of customers are installing these systems in the aftermarket as well. And so that, I guess that's my big point to take away for customers is that even if you don't install it with us, we still are recommending you look at some kind of aftermarket solution. And so there's a number of different technologies out there, but I would say it's coming more to the forefront now.

MIKE YAGLEY
What are you hearing in the field when it comes to tire pressure monitoring systems?

RYAN MAJOR
I can, I might be able to take that if you'd like, but I'd say that I think that the big or the first thing customers ask us or want to look into when looking at these systems is the maintenance and the upkeep of them. So that's always the big question. And that's what a fleet needs to look at when they're looking at these systems is because every customer has a different tire vendor they may be partnered with, or a maintenance company that they're working with, or it may be sporadic. They may be running all over the country and their tires could see a different technician week-to-week. So I think that that plays a big factor in which system that they want to go with. Because that's always the big fear is that you take your truck into a shop and let's say you're having a tire replaced and the technician ignores or forgets to re-install the tire pressure sensor, and then you've defeated the whole system or the purpose of it. So that's always the big question.

MIKE YAGLEY
So one of the things that ... I mean, you brought up a great point, the maintenance component of these TPMS, the tire pressure monitoring systems. Are you guys hearing anything in the field or is anybody on the panel here hearing anything in the field where we're introducing any maintenance issues?

DAVE WALTERS
One of the things I wanted to add was us in the Daimler really to kind of help with the tire maintenance program and the TPMS, we actually created a wheel that has two valve holes. So a lot of the systems can use the one valve hole for the TPMS monitoring and the other one with the actual air gauge. So, I mean, we had a mutual big customer and they requested that. And I really got to thank Daimler for saying, "Hey, I see a need for that. And they put that in their data book and it's been a really great program. The fleet that runs, it just says, it's lovely to be able to use different options. So, as we get into this discussion about TPMS, both of us is actually seeing the need of it and the customer's need, and actually did that. That really requires less maintenance, instead of having that big sensor on top of a valve stem to create its own whole has been a really a great thing in the field.

MIKE YAGLEY
I've seen quite a few different systems out there. Of course, I've seen the valve mounted systems that, where it sits in the valve in the tire chamber. We've seen, going back years, I think the first TPMS system I saw was on a Corvette years and years ago, that was a band mounted in the drop well. And you'll see that occasionally, even today. And then of course, like Dave mentioned, the third system that's somewhat popular out there is the stem mounted one where they have the, it just attaches. It just goes right onto the valve stem. Are there any other ones that I'm not thinking of Ryan that you've seen, or Doug, anybody that systems that I'm not remembering at the moment?

DOUG MASON
And they have some that are starting to come out that they're actually a part of the tire. I don't know Ryan, if you've seen it or not. That's a system that's starting to, I don't know how prevalent it is in the field, but I've seen a literature and work on that. And there's some, I know there's two, I think, systems like that. One in Europe, maybe both of them are here now. I'm not sure. That would be the other one that I've seen

MIKE YAGLEY
That was what I was just exactly going to mention. Yeah. There's …

RYAN MAJOR
The one we use from our factory is we partner with Bendix on it and it uses a clamp man that goes inside the wheel. So, the advantages, you don't have a sensor on the outside, but some customers don't like that because they want to be able to see the sensor, check it out if they prefer to do it that way. So yeah, it just all depends on what the customer prefers, I guess.

MIKE YAGLEY
Like Dave mentioned, we do have the dual valve system that's out there. I don't know how prevalent that is. I know we get a few orders here and there, but again, thanks to Daimler for helping to promote that. That is something I have heard about for many years where customers were looking for that. They were looking for that second valve hole to help with the TPMS management for the air pressure management. I'm so glad that we have a partner, an OEM partner who's willing to work with us on that.

DOUG MASON
I got another quick question that goes along this line, Ryan. Obviously when you get into the trailers and you have active systems, there doesn't seem to be the same need for the tire pressure monitoring set up. Do you see that eventually getting into the drives as well, that type of a system?

RYAN MAJOR
That's a great question. Yeah, we we've been looking at those technologies over the years. The difficulty is trying to figure out the pathway to the wheel in on the drive axles, and that's always been the challenge. Yeah. On the trailer axles is definitely easy. Meritor has, and a couple of other companies out there, have systems that easily basically use the trailer axle itself as a pathway for air, but it's definitely more difficult on the drive axle, whether you go inside the axle itself or on the outside, but we have not. I would say there's nothing close to market that we would have offered from the factory, but that is something we continue to look at.

MIKE YAGLEY
We have been talking a lot about tire pressure monitoring systems and honestly, one of the great things … Of course safety, but the day in, day out, when we talked to the fleets, of course, they're interested in safety, but they're also interested in saving some money. I'm looking at these other technologies that are happening in the wheel end that also are similar, where they deliver meaningful financial results for the customer, like wide base, for example. What do you see happening in wide base, Ryan?

RYAN MAJOR
I would say it it's a market we thought was going to keep growing there for a long time. But honestly, a lot of the tire manufacturers really started putting a lot of research and development into their dual tires. And so, in terms of rolling resistance, they have really made a lot of progress with dual tires. So, and I know that wide base will probably still beat out a dual tire in most cases, but I would say the dual tire technology has definitely caught up with wide base as far as fuel economy goes, or rolling resistance. But wide base still remains a great and easy solution for weight sensitive customers. And that's who we've seen really keep and maintain using wide based tires.

MIKE YAGLEY
We're seeing the same thing. Dave, do you see anything happening in the field with wide base?

DAVE WALTERS
Right now, the tire costs are going up, the price of rubber's going up, and really, the fleets know what kind of fuel economy they get. And because of the cost of the tire, a lot of fleets have been shifting back to duals. And unless you're really in a where you can gain the weight savings is such a big savings. One time, a lot was running wide base for fuel economy, but I see a trend that they're really shifting back off of that, but the weight advantage is still there and alive and well, but the cost of the tires is something that they antiquated in their data. And so, a lot of them are shifting back to duals now.

MIKE YAGLEY
I'm always amazed at how sophisticated our customers are when it comes to the way these different technologies play out, both from a safety perspective and also from a financial perspective, just how detailed their studies are. It's amazing how just a little modification to the technology will flip them one way or another. Six by two is another thing that's coming. How do you see that playing out with wide base and tires in general, Ryan?

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, I think about the same as what we previously mentioned. I think it'll be definitely keep on being used by weight sensitive customers. But as we start to see more six by two technology out in the market, it's possible down the road, we might see some customers look at that wide based technology again. Like I said, the tire technology, it's amazing. Still to this day, they're able to keep improving designs, and coming out with a better tires every year. It really blows me away from a techie side of things. And so, we see that continuing to happen, especially as like I mentioned earlier, we're really, every company is looking at ways to gain efficiency and tires continue to be a one pathway for us.

MIKE YAGLEY
We talk a little bit about tire balancing, for example. Historically, here in North America, we haven't seen a whole lot of … I'm familiar with getting tire balancing, that's we get a little bit more push for tire balancing in Europe or in Asia where they have the cab over designs. Not so much here in North America, Dave, or Doug, or does anybody on the panel here, have any comments on tire balancing? Anything that you're seeing?

DAVE WALTERS
Tire balancing, when I first got in the industry, was quite prevalent. Now, again, we were back in the bias tire days, but as the tires as they head closer to zero and as closer, like an aluminum wheels, that is close to zero as you can get, as we become closer and closer to zero, it is really because we're so much more efficient at making our products closer to zero balance that you really don't see a need at the fleet level that you once did. Some of them still balance the steer tires, but most of them's gone away from the drives, and that's really became a non-issue where one time it used to be.

MIKE YAGLEY
Yeah, that's pretty much what I've been seeing also. Doug, did you say that there was a study once? I thought you and I were having a discussion about the fuel efficiency, benefits of tire balancing?

DOUG MASON
Yeah. There's been a study and it's been published by TMC, I don't know, probably about maybe five Dave, five or six years ago, where if on a complete a tractor trailer unit, you were to fully balance and keep your tire wheel assembly balanced, that you could achieve a little over a 2% fuel savings, which would seem quite significant. One thing I don't know for sure about that study, if it was done with a steel wheel or an aluminum wheel set up. So, from the baseline to the fully balanced, what the differential was. What Dave is saying that so you can get to fully balanced or efficiencies you're going to gain and the better fuel mileage ultimately you're going to achieve. So it's really your base starting point is going to give you the amount you're going to save.

MIKE YAGLEY
I mentioned earlier, we don't see a whole lot of big push for balancing here in North America. It is something certainly that we moved from a wheel end perspective. We're always talking about it, but at least here in North America, I'm not seeing the big push.

DOUG MASON
Just I'll just add maybe on the balancing as well. And Dave, I think you can weigh in on this, balanced weights have a tendency to come off, or if you balanced at one point and then you get any type of tire movement or rotation. And as the tire wears, you're going to get a different pattern and is the balance going to stay the same? So there's a lot of questions along those lines as to the long-term benefit of balancing, at least in my mind.

DAVE WALTERS
The clip on style balance weights really, again, some States have outlawed lead weights. So that's an issue. The clip-on balanced weight, technically because radials have such a big flux in the sidewalls, to get them properly seated, you almost have to deflate the air by half and beat them on and air them back up, and there's more maintenance. So, they really don't like those anymore. The great thing about what I've learned in my years of being with the fleets is if they can get a tire wheel assembly that's less than 10 ounces, it's good to go, and they don't see a big advantage of doing another step in the process. So, I guess as you make your products more and more efficient, it really cuts a maintenance step out for them.

MIKE YAGLEY
When we talk about things that are changing in the axle end, the type of stuff that we're seeing, another big area that we're seeing things changing is disc brakes, that move to disc brakes. Something that we talk a lot about, at least that we participate in SAE, we participate in TMC, and then almost all of those forums we are hearing about disc brakes. Ryan, what do you see with disc brakes?

RYAN MAJOR
Oh man, I'll tell you what? I am super excited about disc brakes. That's one product I've been passionate about, and it's super excited to see the customer take rates going up on this. It's technology that's been around for a long time, and it's definitely improved over ever since they were first introduced years ago, but we're really starting to see a movement and more usage of disc brakes. I was just checking some numbers the other day, and just about almost half of all of our Cascadias are built with disc brakes now, which is, in my opinion, awesome, that it's definitely keeps moving upwards.

RYAN MAJOR
And initially what we saw was when customers started specking disc brakes was they wanted it because of the safety and the stopping distance aspect of it. And now what we're seeing is more of a trend of fleets are coming back to look at it as a way to simplify their maintenance, just the overall maintenance of a disc set up versus a drum is much more simple. And if fleets have been having trouble with brake violations during inspections, I think that's also where we're starting to see more interest in disc-break technology too because you know, fleets are trying to watch their scores and make sure that they're not getting dinged for a lot of that stuff. And so that's definitely helped driving more interest in disc.

MIKE YAGLEY
We've had a lot of discussions on the podcast about the CVSA, about inspections, about the way that whole process works. It's really eye-opening when you start looking at it and the importance of keeping yourself off the radar of those inspectors. And disc brakes, if that's going to be one less thing you have to worry about, that certainly has value. There's a lot of value to keep yourself, keep the vehicle safe. The stopping distances, of course, are greatly improved, but like you mentioned, the importance of staying off, quickly managing that through the CVSA is fantastic. Alex, you got anything going on over there? Any comments?

ALEXANDER LEE
Yeah. Absolutely, Mike. If I could just add one thing, we definitely see that the take rate and acceptance more on the class eight, especially the heavy duty on highway side with the Cascadia, but even more so now, there's a lot more discussions on the medium duty side, even down to class six. And again, it goes back to what Ryan mentioned earlier, not so much about the stopping distances and the safety as well, of course, but on the maintenance side, even some of the major fleets that not only run highway tractors, but also has a P&D type application with an empty box truck, they're also starting to migrate a few into the disc brake side as well. So we're starting to see that in the class six, seven medium duty market as well.

MIKE YAGLEY
I have to say, I'm sort of surprised that you're seeing that in class six, seven. That's, at least my impression of those, of the class six seven market was that they tend to be fleets that are … Well, they tend to be an afterthought. At least that's my impression and maybe I'm wrong, but the class eight is typically where all the attention is in the industry. When I go to an industry meeting, there's a lot of attention on what's happening in the class eight world and the smaller, those class six, class seven, I'm surprised that they're getting to that level now.

ALEXANDER LEE
It's definitely a smaller portion of the population, but for the maintenance reasons, the safety reasons, it's starting to trickle down into the lower weights.

MIKE YAGLEY
That's great. Great to hear. What are the options you see with disc brakes? What's the different variables that customers should be looking at?

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah. One, you got me thinking about it when we were talking about medium duty and the class six and seven market, is we do offer a hydraulic disc brakes, and I probably that's what I would attribute some of the interests in the class six and seven market is at a lot of those customers, and may have their own heavy-duty truck, Chevy, Ford, Dodge, and obviously who have been using disc brakes forever. So, the question is, "Oh, why can I just get this brakes on my larger truck?" And any other avenue is … sorry, I lost my train of thought there. Oh yeah. Other types of disc brakes. So, when those customers are graduating class six and seven trucks, it's an easy crossover. And then we do offer air disc brakes. That's mainly, what's used on, or all that we really use on the class eight side of things.

RYAN MAJOR
And so we offer three of the different vendors out there. We offer Meritor, Bendix, and Wabco disc brakes. So, it can be overwhelming sometimes for a customer, if they're first looking at it, when we tell a customer, "Hey, you've got … Yeah, well, you can have disc brakes and, but you've got three options, which one you want?" And so what I always recommend is have that customer go research and talk to those vendors, those representatives from those vendors, and find out what would be a better fit for them. And I think one of the neat, I don't know if I'd call it an option, but basically a feature of these disc brakes is that they're very easy to inspect. And a lot of times there's different components of them can be used to inspect the amount of pad width left or the amount of the rotor left. And so that makes it very quick and easy without having to have special tools.

MIKE YAGLEY
Right. So, let's finish off our discussion about what's happening with the axle end just touching on the Arrow Wheel covers. I remember when the deflector came out, which I think was the first Arrow wheel cover about, I don't know, maybe 10 years ago. And I'll be frank, just my perspective on it, back in those days was that I was not it to really be able to deliver much of a savings, but I was proven wrong. And I don't mind being proven wrong, especially when it comes to the value-add technology. What are you seeing today for Arrow Technologies?

RYAN MAJOR
We continue to see a lot of interest in wheel covers. We have found, in our own testing, that it does play a key part in it. And yeah, I've been excited at the take rates and the continued usage by our customers. There's been a lot of good feedback that we've gotten on the covers that we're using. So today, we're partnered with FlowBelow, who makes a composite wheel cover, and it's very easy to pull off. So that as far as maintenance goes, it's very easy to remove and take a look at things. And, but it also has an aesthetic appeal to it. It looks nice. It looks clean. You can get those in different colors. You can get them in chrome or brushed nickel or whatever you prefer.

RYAN MAJOR
But yeah, we're finding that's a big piece to this Arrow puzzle that we've been trying to put together over the years. And so, we continue to recommend it and find that the technology is working and in the field, it's been doing well too. We've gotten requests from customers to put locks on them now because there was always a fear of, "Hey, somebody is going to walk off with my cover" or "A technician's going to forget to put it on" or something like that. And so we've actually introduced a simple lock mechanism just this year to the FlowBelow covers to make it easy.

MIKE YAGLEY
The FlowBelow axle end, or let's call it the FlowBelow cover, actually it's part of a full system. Isn't it? It's more than just the wheel cover, right?

RYAN MAJOR
Yes. That's true. Yeah. Great point. Yeah. So, we've done a lot of wind tunnel testing to make sure that our chassis pairings ended up sending that air down the chassis in the right way and to make sure that these, the wheel covers reflect that air the way we want it to go. And we also … Oh gosh, I think it's been at least five years now. We introduced drive wheel fairings, so actually fairings that would go, one in between a tandem set, if it was a six by four, and then a rear fairing, if it right at the end there, connected to the mud flap bracket.

RYAN MAJOR
And so we've been trying to basically get that flow, airflow to happen naturally around the trailer. So even if you don't have trailer, chassis skirts on your trailer, you're still getting a decent air flow coming off the tractor. We still recommend your trailer chassis skirts. If you happen to have a trailer, doesn't have it, it's still not as bad as a hit, if you have the drive wheel fairings.

DOUG MASON
Just out of curiosity, what other aerodynamic devices for the tracker have been put in place, or do you see coming down the line? I know there there's gap closure things and there's other little things that people have been looking at. Are any of those coming down the line in your opinion?

RYAN MAJOR
Yeah, we … Let's see just at the end of 2019, we introduced basically our next round of aerodynamic improvements. And part of that was a newer, lower ground clearance bumper. So it's the flexible bumper. So, it can take quite a bit of damage before it gets its final separation.

DOUG MASON
Yeah.

RYAN MAJOR
So it can take some abuse. We've also, at that same time, we introduced deflectors right at the A-pillars. So, you'll actually see fins right there on the either side of the windshield. We also introduced a longer side-extenders. So, our big seller was 20-inch side extenders. We've now increased that to 24-inch, trying to close that gap more.

DOUG MASON
Right.

RYAN MAJOR
And at that same time, we also introduced a more extended roof spoiler too. So, if you take a look at some of the roof spoilers on those, you'll see it goes up quite a bit further. We also went as far as to move our condenser for our parked HVAC system. We moved it to the driver's side in hopes that we could move the trailer closer to the back of the tractor and not have trailer swing issues. So, I guess that's a good example of how far we've gone to try to improve that trailer gap.

DOUG MASON
What would you, just out of just rough estimate, a tractor now that you, in 2019, that you've put out, or 2020, what type of efficiencies do you think you have gained in the last three, five years?

RYAN MAJOR
Three, five years, I would say we will usually average about 5%.

DOUG MASON
Okay.

RYAN MAJOR
So our goal, as a company, is to improve our fuel economy by 5%, at least every couple years.

DOUG MASON
Okay.

RYAN MAJOR
So it actually could be more in some cases, dependent on obviously what you're coming out of. But yeah, I would say that 5% range is typically where we're going to be at. And I think that's the big question a lot of customers ask us is, is it worth it for me to get a new truck at this point? And so, if they are running older trucks, it most likely would, even with lower diesel prices right now, it's still probably will make business sense in most cases to upgrade.

DOUG MASON
Very good. Thank you. Interesting.

MIKE YAGLEY
I think that about covers everything that we had on our agenda. Hey, I want to, once again, thank our, everybody from Daimler, who participated in this Ryan, Joe, and Alex, really enjoyed having you on the show. I want to say thanks to all our listeners for tuning in, we, of course, welcome your comments and questions. You can reach us at alcoawheels.com/podcast. There's a pick right there if you have any comments or questions. So, we really would love to hear from you. I think that wraps it up. So, for myself and the rest of the team here at Alcoa Wheels, thanks for listening. See you next time.

ANNOUNCER
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