

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA



Takuma Sato

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing
Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Takuma Sato, 2020 Indianapolis 500 winner. This is his second win. He is the only Japanese driver to ever win the Indianapolis 500. And he is the 20th driver to win multiple times.

Tell us about your wonderful day.

TAKUMA SATO: Simply an amazing day. I just can't put words for it. Big thank you to everyone. Obviously the Speedway, Roger Penske, and the Hulman-George family. To get this race going this year, I know it's a lot of people's commitment. But we really appreciate it. So happy to be part of this organization.

First of all, I mean, what an amazing team, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing is. I know it's everything a team and a driver can dream winning the 500. Achieving one and three in this fashion is simply amazing. Thanks Bobby, Mike Lanigan, and of course David Letterman. The entire team, especially the 30 boys, my Panasonic Peopleready Honda was extremely strong and competitive.

It was a little bit fast on the last few laps. Before getting the yellow because we (indiscernible) the race a little too long, then we had to drive into the pit one lap before Scott. That put us a lot of difficulty in terms of the fuel mileage. I wanted to go to the full power, which Honda and HPD give us incredible performance, but still I have to save the fuel. I was back and forth. Best power when Dixie is coming.

Pull off that way, it is simply amazing. I want to say thank you so much for everyone who support.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take some questions for Takuma.

Q. Because of what we're living with with COVID, the fact there were no fans in the stands, where did you get the energy that empowered you to win today?

TAKUMA SATO: It's tough on everyone, not only for us,

everyone fighting with the COVID-19. It was just fortunate, so fortunate, to be able to perform as a sport, be able to show millions of people to watching TV today at home, get some energy on it.

I think I'm very proud to be a part of it. Obviously to get motivation out, there's no question, I mean, it is Indy 500. Yes, there's no spectators. If you go through Gasoline Alley each morning, there's no energy on it. It was a little sad. But we all understood. Also this wasn't the first race we had no spectator. We have been no spectator entire season, which we never want to get used to, but something that we have to do. There is no question.

However, like driver introduction, go to the walk, I love the atmosphere with 300,000 people, the energy, how can I say, the power, the voice, that's amazing, which we don't have today. But we still head down, do our job, know millions people watching on TV.

When you're driving, too, obviously we concentrating on what's happening on the track, but we see the grandstand all the time. Every driver, every single lap, every single corner, we watch the flag because of the wind direction, extremely important. Every time we watch the flag, just the gray grandstand. That was a little bit sad.

Once again, we raced for the fans, we raced for the team. For that moment I have no question, I know I can give the 100% commitment.

Q. I want an insight on what Dixon said. He thought you were running low on fuel by the end of the race. How was it from your end? When did you realize you have a shot at Dixon?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, I mean, we all knew, we all observed Scott. Scott was probably the best competitor entire really two weeks to be honest, from practice to qualifying. He showed speed. Even the Carb Day, with very tricky conditions, three of us actually struggled a lot. Ganassi and Dixie did a phenomenal job to put that car in the competitive situation.

Look today, he led the start, then he just disappear. I was able to hanging on. At that time I was playing with mixtures, also how much we can get the fuel mileage out of it.

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Even Ryan actually call to us. Basically I wanted to see how the traffic, with single-car traffic, double traffic. I know we practice, but in the race situation, the same age of the tire, with mixture setting, I just wanted to learn it on that point.

First hundred lap, you want to be top three, top five. That was always my thought coming to this race. If I have opportunity, yes, you want to lead it, but you use too much fuel. That was my strategy.

Then after a hundred, I had opportunity to come around again with Scott. I just went to leading the race, see how it goes. So that moment I realize, yes, we have a very competitive package. Of course, every single pit stop we come in, we make some changes, just a back and forth, back and forth because we go too much greedy, then conservative, too much greedy again. Finally for the last three stints I was able to happy with the car, particularly second half of every stint I was very strong.

I knew towards the end of the stint I have a very good speed of it. However, after the restart, when I got lead, yeah, I got a voice from the pit basically using too much fuel. I had to back off with leaner mixture, which you can see immediately Scott caught me and tried to give it a go. At that point I had to switch back to the maximum power. He was three cars, four cars behind, I go with the leaner mixture. We were close. Even without it, I was hitting a number. If you scan my radio, we were on the number. Even we gone through the entire green, I think we be okay.

However, still I think I will be threatened from Dixie from the last few laps where he will be probably 100% to power, which I had some of that in the pocket, but otherwise it was very, very close.

Q. Does the 2012 race come into your mind when you're getting down toward the end of a race?

TAKUMA SATO: Indy 500 you never know till the last lap of the last corner. When you feel the acceleration coming out of turn four, that's the time you realize you're going to go for the win. Today, of course, under the yellow. It was a different circumstance.

Once again, the guy who listen to my radio, make sure the oil temperature, oil pressure, gearbox temperature was okay. I just telling myself to just calm down, do what I have to do. Radio tell me exact information I needed.

I know fans wanted to see checkered flag battling for the win. Sometimes happen. Really, how can I say, feel glad that my teammate Spencer got out of the car. Looked

really bad angle, I was a little worried about it. Once again, improvement for the safety of INDYCAR, INDYCAR did a phenomenal job. Aeroscreen, we now feel so much protection. I think they done a fantastic job.

So that's what I felt today. I think big congrats to everyone who make this happen.

Q. You won this race in 2017 after coming close so many times. What does a second Indy 500 title do for you and your legacy in INDYCAR?

TAKUMA SATO: I mean, how many times you participate Indy 500, I think it never get old, never get bored, absolutely not. You always hungry to win the race, no matter who you are, how many races. You look at Helio. I mean, he won three times. He's still as hungry as the first one. We had a good chat before the race in the green room. He said, Wait, Taku, I'm going to catch you up.

There's just an energy that is Indy 500, how special is. Always the same. Of course, after my 2012, okay, whatever the reason, obviously didn't happen to me, I lost it. But then '17 Michael Andretti gave me a fantastic opportunity, seven cars, six cars, I don't remember, so many teammates, the cars we had, clearly we had advantage. There was a matter of who going to go to the win entire team?

We had advantage. Of course, in Indy 500, you never know who is going to get the best out of it in the end. This year, to be honest, I don't think nobody had advantage. We are very close each other. The first time with Aeroscreen, which made it quite challenging in terms of the engineering.

Also look at the speed we achieved in qualifying. Of course, obviously we had a higher boost. But that's made it so much challenging. Everyone was on a clean sheet of paper again. We didn't see any one car just outstanding. It was just all very competitive. It's like the name of INDYCAR, such a tight competition.

Then in working on everything, every tiny detail working for the very last stint, that is the key. We were fortunate. We made everything out of it. I think that was the key.

I feel very lucky to be able to driving for my No. 30 Panasonic Peopleready Honda car, because the boys done phenomenal job. Entire team. I just want to thank them for the team.

Q. You're one of just 20 two-time winners. How does it feel to be amongst such elite company?



TAKUMA SATO: Just amazing, amazing feeling. I don't know. I just don't feel yet. I think it's coming later on. Exactly same happening in '17. I think I was just too excited for the first one. Now, of course I realize what's coming.

I just so glad to be part of this organization. Once again, thank you for all the owners and the boys and the sponsors and fans that make me happen, still driving in very competitive manner.

No, I just feel so lucky.

Q. You said you had enough on power to compete with Scott towards the end. If Scott had gotten past, do you think you would have had enough on tires to keep up with him or compete with him?

TAKUMA SATO: Absolutely. That is exactly thing we were working on. The first four stint was a little bit tough for me. Let's say first one was obviously a little bit conservative. Towards the end it wasn't completely the stint because the yellow, but towards the end we were too good. We tried to be a little bit earlier in that stint. The next stint was too good in the beginning, then we basically, how can I say, degradate too much on the second stint. I think Alex was similar. Very competitive first few laps, then struggled.

I think everyone was trying to where you putting on a peak in a stint. We working on it, working on it. Obviously what we can do is very limited. You can have only tire pressure and front wing. Extreme case you can do rear wing, too, but I don't think anybody did.

Once you got a new tire, then how you use that tire, use your tool to make the peak where you want it to go. That's why when I overtake Scott, basically what I did is just save my resource. Of course, go fast as possible, but save my resource. That was a key.

Even we didn't have a yellow in the end, even maybe he caught me, perhaps he overtake me, but I'm confident I'll be fight back to him. In the end, going to the white flag, I don't know which one was leading the race, but at that point I was only hope my fuel was good, which I was told that the fuel number is good.

I'm confident we had enough max power, how can I say, the mixture, as well as my tire, Firestone tire, absolutely superb for the last few laps of the stint. I was fortunate.

Q. You've raced in some prestigious series, Formula 1, Monaco Grand Prix, a long time. Did you ever think you would be a two-time Indy 500 winner?

TAKUMA SATO: No way. No way. I never, never even imagine the situation like today. Look, after 40 years old, still driving, that is just living in a dream. People say 2012 was probably my peak and the best shot. Well, we'll see. We kept on going.

We had a second chance in life. I say just keep challenging, keep open the door, then you will get eventually the chance. But if you are in that chance, you have to grab it. It's always living on edge is my kind of lifestyle, to be honest. Hopefully I can compete a little bit more longer.

I've been so fortunate. Obviously I wasn't born in racing family, so many people obviously know by this stage or might not, but I start racing when I was 20. Before that I only had steel frame pedal bike, that was my only race car in life.

I never dream even get to the Formula 1. I was so lucky I went to the Honda racing school, got scholarship. I was fortunate enough to compete British Formula 3. That eventually made me happen to the Formula 1. I was so lucky to be very competitive organization, it was difficult times. Formula 1 was beautiful, great memory.

Then of course after that I had golden opportunity to come to the States, do INDYCAR. I never thought my racing life going on any longer than Formula 1. Now I'm competing here more than 10 years. That's just simply amazing support from the fans, sponsors, and the team owner gave me fantastic opportunity.

Answer your question, no, never thought I would be winning a 500, but twice. Crazy. No.

Q. A lot has been made about not having fans because of the atmosphere. Did it actually affect the driving experience? Does it seem even bigger without having the fans when you're turning laps?

TAKUMA SATO: We just simply experience at the moment without fans at IMS, which clearly sad. I mean, it's not a happy place, of course not. But at least racing I don't think any matter with or without fans in terms of competition level. The people, drivers' and teams' determination to win this race is no matter where you are, this is Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

I know, like, yesterday was fantastic. I think they did a great job in terms of delivering stuff, how do you say, souvenirs to the fans, long-time ticket holder. They were almost just crying. When we went to the Main Street, so many fans are cheering. A bit like parade in downtown



Indianapolis. I was pleasantly surprised with that support.

A guy, 1964 he said he came here simply because he wanted to address Speedway and Indianapolis in his life. How this guy's commitment make this happen. Therefore, he said tomorrow, which is today, he will pull the chair out at the garden and watch the TV and actually physically he can hear from Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He's happy.

Of course, he wanted to come, but he's happy. It's great to see that. Therefore, even we don't have a fan here physically, we know their heart is here. I think every driver did 100% the commitment, and this was the result of a great race, I believe.

Q. NBC did a great job with the milk messages in a bottle. Could you share with us what yours is?

TAKUMA SATO: Oh, yes, it was great, for the time capsule stuff.

Of course, I race for every children who had a difficulty in their lives, whether that was in my case in Japan (indiscernible), worst-case scenario lost a parent. It's just difficult and tragic things, 10 years ago. Also worldwide now having so many difficulty. Sometimes war, obviously COVID-19.

The kids have rights to have their dream on it. We cannot be taken off because of sudden reason. I can do very little things. I can just pounding around on this Indianapolis Motor Speedway flat out, that's all I can do. If that gives the children some little passion where I was when I was 10 years old, my dad took me to Suzuka for the Formula 1. I got a passion from then.

Hopefully the children who have a difficulty have got some passion from our series, particularly for the Indy 500. That was my dream. So I raced for the children.

Q. Whether you rejoined Rahal Letterman Lanigan, you told me you really wanted to make up for the 2012 finish, you wanted to give Bobby, Mike Lanigan and David Letterman that Indy 500 win. Why was that so important to you?

TAKUMA SATO: Just a mission completed. My personal ambition was achieved in 2017 with Michael. Of course, you have something back your mind is always pulled in that way. You got to get it right in 2012. You got to fix it. I messed up, whatever. Whatever there is, there is a lot of science behind why I can win, but it's no point to talking about that. Now I know how to do it, right?

I just wanted to have Bobby and Mike, because Mike

helped me a lot, of course David as well, that I just wanted to give them back what they have and they felt on that particular moment. I disappointed them.

I just wanted to fix it. It took eight years, to be honest. I couldn't believe still I drive. I just simply wanted to appreciate the team owners' commitment they put me in are a No. 30 car. I know they wanted Graham to win so badly. I'm pleased today the team did 1-3. I'm sorry for Graham I won today. But I still feel this is the moment mission completed that I really wanted, waiting for eight years for my team owners to give it back.

Q. Your best racing kind of started when you turned 40.

TAKUMA SATO: True. I don't know why. Look, Helio is still on the game. Tony is still on the game. I think this sport, just name of the sport, Olympic athletic things have to be premium ages, 20s, 30s, but in motor racing, as long as you're fit enough to drive the car, why not? My boss was driving in 50s, Mario was driving that age, too. The I know the car is different today, but 43 to me is just only number.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everyone, for joining us today for our post race press conferences.

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