

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Pato O'Ward

Arrow McLaren SP
Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Pato, welcome. Thanks for joining us. Driver of the No. 5 Arrow McLaren SP Chevrolet. Had a great season last year.

Pato, you really established yourself last year as a star in this series. You were in contention right up there for the title. What are the expectations for 2021, and how is the preparation going for the season?

PATO O'WARD: Man, I think it's hard to put expectations, certain expectations down, but I think it's nothing hidden. We want to win races. We want to win races. We want to be consistently fighting for podiums, and we want to be there. We want to be contenders every single race weekend.

I think in doing so, that'll put us in a position at the end of the year to fight for the championship. That is the goal. I want to get to Long Beach having a possibility to win the championship. That's why we do this, man. We do this to win races, win championships. The team has been working really, really hard to just make everything that we had last year better.

Me as a driver, I'm just trying to do everything I can to be better physically, mentally, preparation-wise, honestly anything I can do that will make my life and the team's life easier at the race weekend, I'm all for it.

Q. You look at a lot of the guys who you're battling on track, and maybe for the championship, and there's a lot of -- Will Power, Scott Dixon, Ryan Hunter-Reay, Taku, Seb Bourdais, these guys are in their 40s and have been racing in INDYCAR for a decade or in some cases two decades. How do guys like you and Colton accelerate the wisdom curve or the learning curve to try and keep up with these guys?

PATO O'WARD: I mean, I can't talk on behalf of Colton because I'm not him, but from just being teammates with him and just knowing myself, we like to win. We do this to

be competitive. We don't do this to be fifth and tenth and 15th. No, we want to do this and actually win races, be on the podium, be contenders.

The reason why race teams and race drivers do this is because that high and that feeling that you get when you win is unlike anything else I have ever experienced. There's a lot more lows than highs in racing usually, but you keep going because of those highs, of just that feeling of winning.

Me as a person, I like to win. I'm very competitive in everything that I do. I ask a lot from myself, that being, you've got to be competitive, man. If I'm not in contention or if I'm not on the pace, I won't be happy. That's just something that's how I naturally am. That's how the team is, as well. We all want to win.

What's nice is that every single member of the team has their job, but everyone is pushing and rowing towards the same goal, and that is winning races or challenging for championships.

Q. I wanted to ask, obviously I don't think anyone could help but just layer praise on you for how your campaign went last year. We would suggest there's not a whole lot you need to do better. But I would assume you've identified places where you can improve. Can you give us some idea where those areas are?

PATO O'WARD: Man, I rewatched every race where we were in contention, both Iowa races, both Gateway races, Road America. Just from things that I learned last year, you qualify up front, you make your life so much easier.

Another thing is that pit stops are huge in INDYCAR racing. I lost a lot of my race wins because we didn't execute in the pits, and that's huge. I feel like our pace was very, very strong. I think we were very strong in many places that we went to all year.

But where we need to push this year, and we may need to make sure if we have a mistake it has to be minimized, is in the pits, and me as a driver just do my job. I know that if we can accomplish that, we will get race wins because if the pace is there, just like last year but maybe even a little

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bit better, qualifying further up front should make it easier on us, every single pit stop, execute, execute, execute. I think that's what's going to make us be in contention by the end of the year.

Last year getting to St. Pete, I think second was the best we could have done. But we want to get to Long Beach knowing that there is a possibility of being able to win the championship. That is the goal.

We set a bar very high last year. I agree. I looked back and I said, That's a mega year. My first full year in INDYCAR and I even exceeded my expectations. But that put a very high bar, and now we want to make that better.

Is it going to be easy? No, it's going to be ridiculously hard. But I think if we just take everything step by step and everyone does their job, minimize mistakes, we should be in the fight in the end.

Q. There's an old saying that in order to be the best you've got to beat the best. At a time when from top to bottom the series is probably as great as it's ever been in history, to be this competitive against this type of competition, how good does that make you feel?

PATO O'WARD: Man, obviously it makes you feel good, but something that I feel like we naturally just do is that we always want more. Last year going into the season we didn't really have any expectations, we just wanted to try and do our best, and we set the bar really high.

Now that is the low point of what we want to accomplish this season. I mean, we want to do that or better, and we always strive for more.

I feel like last year we left a lot of unfinished business. We were close to winning four races, and we didn't get it done. We didn't get it done. There were tough pills to swallow, and I felt like that left everyone in the team so hungry. I can see it from the off-season, just how much work has been put into the development of trying to make the cars go faster at the speedway and road courses.

Me as a driver, I truly don't think I've ever been fitter, more ready to try and win the thing. I have lots of faith in the team. I have lots of faith in what we can accomplish as a group. It's going to be ridiculously hard, but it is possible.

I have lots of faith that we can make some great stuff happen this year.

Q. How much do you believe this is your time?

PATO O'WARD: Man, I go into every year thinking that

this is the time to do it. You have to -- I mean, at least this is how I approach it. You have to approach every single weekend, whether you're racing with Scott Dixon or Lewis Hamilton, you have to get there every race weekend and you have to believe as a group, not as a driver but as a group, that you can beat them. You have to believe that you can beat the best. If not, you're always going to be a step behind, and you don't want to be a step behind. You want to compete against them.

I think this year we just have to take everything step by step and not get ahead of ourselves. But I think if we follow our mentality of what we did last year, be consistent and just all the results, just one-up them, every single place, that should put us in very good position.

Q. With the goals that you and your team have set up for the season, does the fact that there are lots of good Mexican drivers this year, does that add some pressure or is it just extra motivation to get the results?

PATO O'WARD: Man, I get that question so many times, like, Hey, do you feel the pressure? Man, pressure is whenever you go into a race weekend and you have no idea what's going to happen with the rest of your career. That's pressure.

I feel so fortunate to be in a position and so grateful for the opportunity that Sam, Rick, Zach gave me starting last year. As a driver, I feel honestly the least pressure I've ever felt in my whole life because you know what you're going to do. You have something to look forward to. You know that what you're doing is to improve on whether it is INDYCAR or whatever it may be, but there is something to look forward to.

It's really hard whenever there isn't much to look forward to and you're just in the waiting room seeing what's going to happen. To me that is pressure. This to me is just, man, enjoy and love what you do.

I love what I do. I wouldn't change it for anything in the world. I love my team. I love where I'm at. Great group of people. Lots of very, very smart people. I have so much faith that we can get some really good stuff done this year.

I don't think pressure is the right way to say it, but I just think there is expectation and there is the will and the determination to get things done.

Q. How was working with Juan Montoya earlier this week in the Laguna test?

PATO O'WARD: Mega, man. This guy is a legend. I had



so much fun with him.

I think Juan, Felix and I, I feel like all three of us make a really good team because you've got Juan Montoya, 45, got all the experience in the world. Then you've got Felix turning 30 this year, driven so many different series, so many different cars. Then you've got the young one, me. I just feel like we all make a good combo.

I think we're all willing to work together to create a very strong package wherever it may be, and I think that's going to be so valuable, especially at the 500. Montoya has won the thing twice, so he knows what it takes to have a winning car there, so I want to learn as much as I can from him.

Q. The continuous piece of the team in terms of the drivers for the season, how much do you feel like the team can step forward with the kind of unique format that you have with the kind of people back at McLaren's place in the UK and obviously none of the other INDYCAR teams kind of working in the same way? How much benefit do you see that being this season with having a year of that under the team's belt and kind of learning where all these pieces fit?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, man, thanks for the question. I think -- good question. I think the best way I can explain it is that last year was such an odd year, not just for motorsports but just in life in general. You had to be very flexible with schedules.

Last year was actually the first year, especially McLaren, had an insight of what INDYCAR is like and where you can gain or lose a lot of time. I think that's where I hope this year we see some big improvements, because to be completely honest with you guys, last year we raced with 2019 cars. There was nothing different. It was identical to what the team had learned in 2019.

I think having a year under our belts and the engineers knowing what I like and how I go about things, I think that just helps everyone work better and more efficient. I have lots of faith that all those small guys behind the computer doing all the analysis and the developments of either it can be a road course, street course, superspeedway for drag, aero, whatever it may be, I feel like in this off-season they had a direction and they had more of a clear picture of where they had to work, to work at or see where there was massive improvements to be made.

Hopefully this year we're going to see it, man. I don't know what to say because I don't see all the stuff that goes behind the scenes. But I know there has been a lot of just hard work, hard work and trying to find anything that they

can to make the cars go better, make my life easier, and then it's my turn to return it in results this year.

Q. You've kind of talked about personally trying to get in a better position to win races, but are there any certain tracks you feel like you could improve on?

PATO O'WARD: I think I'm still a long ways to learn in superspeedways because it's new to me. You just don't learn it from one night to another or from one race to the other. So I think that's where I can see myself improving. I want to improve, and just I want to be better in just knowing what to expect a little bit more.

Heading into one of those races, for example the 500 for Iowa, it was like driving into a black hole. It's just like, let's see what this has for us. I think that is somewhere where I think I can improve on, and I will be working hard to try and learn as much as I can.

I think it's just a learning process. You don't learn it all in one year or two years. It can take 10 years. But I just think the more you can learn, the faster, the better you're going to be off in your career.

Man, in certain other tracks, for starters, Mid-Ohio, don't crash in practice. Man, I think we had the pace in many places, we just didn't either take advantage of the qualifying or there was an issue with the car and we couldn't really extract everything that we could have. I think those little details of just making sure everything is good and ready to go is going to pay off in the end.

Man, starting up front, if you're starting within the first two or three lanes compared to if you're starting like 12th, 14th, man, the difference that it makes for how the car feels, strategy, fuel saving, your windows just open up so much more when you're up front.

It's crucial. It's crucial. Qualifying is really important to have a good race day.

Q. You mentioned 2019 cars you guys were using last year. Will these be 2021 brand-new cars you guys are going to use this year?

PATO O'WARD: No, the same ones that we used last year. We're just going to start improving on what we want to improve on in certain circuits. It can be entry, exit, depends on the track.

I just think the issue that we run into now is that testing was so limited that it doesn't really give you a lot of time to test different items, and you can't fully rely on simulators because they're just -- frankly, it's just not the real car.

There is some sort of like risk versus reward when you go into a completely different philosophy when you arrive to a weekend. It can either be a hit or it can be terrible. That's where having two or three cars comes into play, where one of them can try it. If it works, great. If it doesn't, you just go back to what the other two cars have and the other guys can give you kind of like a reference idea of where the car is at.

I think just in that sense it's difficult to see where all the improvements have to be made. You just have to wait until you get there and you test it all out, feel it out.

THE MODERATOR: Pato, we appreciate your time. Best of luck to you this season. Enjoy the rest of Content Day.

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