

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Alexander Rossi

Andretti Autosport

Pato O'Ward

Arrow McLaren SP

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Alexander Rossi. Alex, please tell us about your qualifying run.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: It was great to be back in competition settings here in Barber. This track is pretty wild now that they did the repave. A lot of grip.

Yeah, it started out of the pretty strong this morning. We were happy with the starting balance of the car. Then practice two was messy, just a lot of red flags. We were able to get a lap in.

Yeah, I mean, it's tough to come up short, as short as we did, in qualifying because you can think about a couple of areas through the lap where you made mistakes, maybe could have made a difference.

Ultimately it's much better than we've ever had around Barber. I think our best starting spot in years past was eight. A big step up. We have a good shot at it tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Alex.

Q. From years past here, some changes to the track. How important is it to start out front? This is one of those tracks where it means a lot to be starting near the front of the pack.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, for sure, especially with the repave as I mentioned. The lap times are a lot faster. What that usually does is means there's less tire deg, the braking zones are shorter. It's just harder to overtake people.

It's always been a qualifying kind of heavy track. I think it's even more so this year. Yeah, I mean, it's good we were able to get it done. Obviously the general pace of the car is there. We'll just have to get a good start, keep our nose

clean, see how it unfolds.

It's going to be a long race, going to be a little bit warmer tomorrow. That may play a factor in car balance and how the tires are working. Same for everyone. We'll just do the best we can to finish where we started.

Q. Alex, you talked entering this race about the importance of getting off to a fast start, how the team certainly had that in mind. How important is that going to be? All the team drivers, to be able to bring it home, avoid a lot of what happened last year?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Well, it will probably be an easier question to answer tomorrow once we get it done, right?

As I said, I think the team has done a really good job with making sure that we're prepared to have limited practice, making sure that we have all our ducks in a row coming to the event. I think today was a solid representation of that. It's day one of a really long year. We just have to keep chipping away at it and keep improving.

Yeah, ultimately a really great day for all of Andretti Autosport and the 27 NAPA AutoNation car specifically.

Q. They repaved this track since the last time INDYCAR ran here. How much better of a track will it be? The speeds are up. How about the race-ability of the new surface?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I don't know. Like I said before, when you have faster laps, it makes it harder to pass. If there's tire deg with the warmer temps tomorrow, maybe it will be better to years past. We'll have to wait and see till tomorrow.

Q. Do you feel with all this track conditions that have changed, do you think it could improve the racing show for tomorrow?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I don't know. It's tough to say. Yeah, I don't know. It's always been tough to pass around here. I don't think this year's necessarily any exception. It's good that we qualified up front.

Q. Last season was not so well. You started off the

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season pretty strong so far. Here we go. Are you feeling more confident in testing? Last year you turned things around so well. How confident are you feeling coming in, with strategy, with the team? Everyone is rooting for you. Let's be honest.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, I think the tests went really well this year. We were trying to prove out some there's in the testing. Most of those science experiments, if you will, were more or less correct. I think that was kind of a big confidence boost to the engineering department.

Yeah, I mean, I think the whole team was working at a really good pace at the end of last year. We all had the kind of confidence that we had found a little bit of our rhythm back at the end of 2020.

It's good to start here. Barber hasn't really been a good track for us before. This was always going to be a little bit of a question mark, like are we still going to be able to be okay here. It's definitely better, right?

We'll have a long think about it overnight and make sure we have a good race car and fight for the win tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: We'll let Alex prepare for tomorrow's race. Alex, thanks for joining us.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Thanks, guys.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by our NTT P1 award winner, Pato O'Ward, driver of the No. 5 Arrow McLaren SP Chevrolet.

Tell us about your awesome day.

PATO O'WARD: It was a good day. Practice one and two were really messy. Got really dicey there with the traffic and people being on different laps into the sequence.

We didn't quite get an idea of what real pace we had. But I knew exactly what I needed to go faster. My engineer put his magic to work. We had a really, really quick car in reds. We maintained our very good pace in blacks that we had in practice two.

It was good, man. It feels really good to be on pole for the first qualifying session of the NTT INDYCAR Series 2021. These Arrow McLaren SP people have been working really hard. They deserve this. We've got a job to finish off tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: You have been close to getting a win here, last year in 2020. Excited to see what happens. We'll open it up to the media for questions.

Q. We heard from Juan Pablo Montoya recently on a call. He said he was surprised by your data, how much steering input you have in the car. It's obvious watching from trackside and video how spectacular your style can be. Is that something that gives you a bit of an advantage or not so different to some other drivers in the paddock?

PATO O'WARD: Maybe (laughter). I definitely have heard from my engineer and just from other people that have been in the seat before know what it is. They tell me I don't have a problem going sideways. I think that's true. I like to hustle the car around. I think I'm very aggressive with input.

But in order to do so, you need a car that will give you the support in order to really attack the corners. That's honestly what we were looking for for qualifying. In practice two we didn't quite get the right balance. We made a few changes. We hit the spot right on for qualifying, especially for reds.

Q. What have you learned from today? Looks like it's a big gap when the black tire comes in and how quick the red comes in. Do you think strategy is going to be a big part of tomorrow?

PATO O'WARD: I think deg shouldn't be as big as it has been in the past. There will for sure be some deg. It's going to be interesting tomorrow in warmup who runs in blacks and reds, and see the falloff. The reds are obviously the softer compound. We don't know how much they might last. A stint around here is usually as short as 12 laps but as long as 25.

I think tomorrow warmup is going to be the key to trying to get the optimized strategy for the race, to see if it's going to be a black race or a red race.

Q. They said a few times on the broadcast that you want to cause headaches this year. What does that mean?

PATO O'WARD: Cause headaches? I want to win races. I want to challenge for the championship the whole year. We want to constantly be at the top. Not just myself, but the whole team. We want to give these vets like Newgarden and Dixon that already have multiple championships under their belt something to think of, a little bit of more stress than what they might have the past few years.

Yeah, just have fun with it. Enjoy it, that's the most important thing. Whenever we have to go to work,



execute. I have lots of faith in the team. The Chevy power was great today. Got to give thanks to them. We're just ready. We're ready to go. We're ready to battle it out.

Q. How close are you to winning races and challenging for the championship? How do you go about doing it?

PATO O'WARD: Last year, I mean, we were close to winning four races at least. We either had the last pit stop gone wrong or we got jumped by one time Dixon, another time Newgarden. Sometimes it was not so much the pit stop but the tire life, just taking care of that.

I think this year we just have to arrive with a very similar mentality. I'm really happy with what we got to achieve last year. But we just need to take that next step. We need to achieve wins and we need to just score as much points as we can every single weekend.

At the end of the year, every point is gold. Whenever we can take a second, we take a second. When we can take a fifth, we take a fifth. But when we can win the race and take a pole, then we go for it.

Q. When people talk about championship contenders, do you think they overlook you?

PATO O'WARD: I feel like going into this year, I don't feel like such an underdog like last year. I feel like people know that we are true competitors at any type of racecourse that we go to.

It's been really nice to feel the respect from Dixon, Newgarden, Rossi, the guys that have been leading the NTT INDYCAR Series for the past few years, guys like Will Power. The list goes on.

I feel like I have earned my spot in the grid as one of the guys to challenge for podiums and wins. Hopefully we can take that next step tomorrow and get the job done.

Q. One of the things that Zak Brown says is we're ready to be the big four, not to challenge the big three, we want to be the big four. Do you believe Arrow McLaren SP now can be called the big four in INDYCAR?

PATO O'WARD: That's what we've been working for all off-season. I feel like last year we had a little glimpse of joining the Penskes, Ganassis, Andrettis, really challenging them to win races and challenge them for podiums.

I think this is a great step into making that a reality and truly show people that we are one of the big four in

INDYCAR. I have so much faith in these guys. There's a lot of, lot of smart people behind the scenes in the UK, in Indianapolis, the engineers, the guys that work on the dampers.

Everybody says, It's a spec series. But there's so much that goes into the cars to make them faster. That's where the top teams really excel.

I feel like we've just gotten better and better and better. We've created a package that has been very solid everywhere we go. I'm very excited for this year, man. I truly feel like we can make the statement this year.

Q. With the track being repaved, Alexander Rossi says it may be difficult to pass because the speeds are up. That's why it's important to start up front. How important do you feel this pole is strategically?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, I think starting at the front is definitely going to be better than starting mid pack or in the back. Something I learned last year is you make your life a lot easier when you start up at the front.

With the new pavement, it's going to be interesting to see what the deg is going to be like, what the pace difference is going to be with blacks and reds. If the pace from one to another isn't that big, then the overtakes are going to be even more difficult than what they have been in the past.

I think it will play into the hands of a good strategy tomorrow for sure. But you're going to have to have pace in order to stay up front. But I think we can do so.

Q. It's not a race win, but how bad do you want to finish this weekend off with a W?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, don't even get me started (laughter). After St. Pete, not only did it leave me hungry, but it left everyone, every single member of the team so hungry for that first victory.

We truly feel like we've got a great package this year to take opportunities into our own hands and execute. We're all rowing towards the same side. I think that's very important in a series like this. It's so, so competitive.

The times you saw today, you don't see times that tight anywhere else in the world. It just shows how competitive it is. It shows how the drivers have to be absolutely perfect in order for them to start up front.

In the race tomorrow, it also plays into the hands of the mechanics, the guys in the pit stops, the strategists. It's up to the driver to keep it on the black stuff and just not get



overtaken (smiling).

Q. You mentioned how competitive the series is, how close lap times are. Today during quallie, there was a lot of commitment from a lot of drivers. You had a massive save in the final sector. Were you having to build into your push laps today or just full send after your tire prep?

PATO O'WARD: Usually whenever you feel the tires go, you just got to send it and hope that it's going to hang on to you. By Q3, I knew what to expect. In Q1, I was like, Well, we didn't really get to try them in practice two because we had such a messy run. We didn't really get the peak out of it.

I said, Let's just ship it and see where it takes us. We pulled out a great lap time. I think we were first in that one, as well. We transferred. We didn't make much changes. I was really happy with the car. It was behaving well. I felt confident to attack corners. This is a car that has to get hustled if you want to start at the front. So that's what we did.

Q. How much confidence does this give you going into the start of the race this weekend, but also looking forward into St. Pete next week as well?

PATO O'WARD: It's a great start to qualifying this year, but we've got a job to finish tomorrow. The race is very long. We can't get too ahead of ourselves. We need to execute. Everybody has to do their job. I think we're going to be just fine at the end of the race.

We just need to watch our back in certain yellows that might put you in a difficult position, just pace it out, throw down some good laps. We're going to have clean air in front of us for at least the first part of the race. But we've got a quick car. We've got a quick car. Lots of smart guys are going to be finding the optimum strategy, just everything with tires and everything.

I think we've got a good shot to do it tomorrow. I love this place. It's a great track. Especially in qualifying, it's mega. When you lay down a lap, it's really cool. It would be really cool to win here because I've had some good success here in Indy Lights and Indy Pro 2000. I'd like to close it out in INDYCAR, as well.

Q. How much of an advantage is it to you starting up front, being at the front of the field tomorrow, given it's quite a tight and twisty circuit?

PATO O'WARD: Like I said, last year I found out not the hard way, I found out many times, many different

situations, many different circuits, that when you start seventh or eighth or further back, it is tougher. It's tougher, just like in a superspeedway as well. If you're behind 10 cars or two cars, it makes a big difference. Those wings like clean air.

We have the best view into turn one tomorrow. We're just going to be going for the win for sure. Should be good, man. I'm excited. I'm excited. I'm going to get some good rest today and we'll be ready to give it all tomorrow.

Q. I was watching the behind-the-scenes Indy 500 video did. You had an Indianapolis Colts player with you. Looked like he was on the pit stand behind you?

PATO O'WARD: Kenny Moore, baby (laughter).

Q. Tell me the backstory of how that happened. How has it been getting to know him?

PATO O'WARD: This is his first experience in motorsports in general. Great guy. He's been super supportive. It's great to have him here. Great to have him here. Hopefully I get to go to one of his games whenever he starts the season.

Q. He's going to be in the fastest seat in sports tomorrow. Awesome you're going to be P1, right behind him. You can't give him a little love tap, but you might have to go say hi.

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, he'll be watching mirrors. Oh, nice car (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone, for joining us.

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