

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Tuesday, July 20, 2021

Alex Palou

Dario Franchitti

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone.

Great to be joined by a couple of members of Chip Ganassi Racing. One is the current points leader in the NTT INDYCAR SERIES. He has two wins coming off a top-three finish at Mid-Ohio, driver of the No. 10 NTT DATA Honda, Alex Palou. The other is the former driver of the No. 10 car for Chip Ganassi Racing, winner of four INDYCAR SERIES championships, and earlier this morning newly named the grand marshal of the Big Machine Music City Grand Prix, which of course comes up Sunday, August 8th, in the streets of Nashville. He gets to give the command. Good morning to Dario Franchitti.

D.F., congratulations on the official role at Nashville. How much are you looking forward to that inaugural race in a couple weeks?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I think it's going to be phenomenal. We had some great races out on the oval for years at Nashville. To bring it downtown, a lot of people have been trying for a long time to make it happen.

Yeah, it's going to be really exciting. When Scott Borchetta called me, said, Would you be the grand marshal?

I said, Absolutely.

I think it's terrific to do that, to bring INDYCAR to Tennessee, back to Nashville. Downtown location. Yeah, it's going to be a lot of fun. Obviously still got my job with Chip Ganassi Racing to do over the weekend as well.

Yeah, I'm excited. Excited to go to Nashville, excited to get the second half of the season going.

THE MODERATOR: Sitting on a 39-point lead, six races remaining on the calendar, Alex, how proud are you of the first half of the season you've been able to put together?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, it's been super fun joining Chip

Ganassi Racing. I think we had a good season so far, fighting for the races almost every weekend I would say, having some good results. So, yeah, it's been super fun working with Dario, as well.

Can't wait for this couple of races that we have. There's going to be, like, three tracks that I don't know yet, but it's going to be fun, challenging. Yeah, looking forward.

THE MODERATOR: No one knows Nashville, so you got that.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, that's true.

THE MODERATOR: One of the many benefits of joining Chip's team is the ability to have Dario around, a mentor, a coach. How much has he helped you this season?

ALEX PALOU: A benefit, yeah, that's what I was going to say. He's like all the time telling me the bad stuff I'm doing (laughter).

No, to be honest it's super good, like having somebody that's been so successful, that he's able to see what the drivers feel and also what the engineers need to know from the driver. It's amazing having somebody up there like he is able to go to the corners, he's able to see the data, tell me, Hey, this is the difference between Scott and you or Marcus and you, even Jimmie.

It's been good fun, a big help. Yeah, I'm just learning a lot from all these guys.

THE MODERATOR: Dario, clearly you take a little ownership in the fact that Alex is leading the points standings?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I'd love to, but I think he's worked so hard, him, the whole 10 car team. They've just really worked hard from the first race. One of our first conversations, Alex and I, Listen now, you're now in a team that in the pit stops and the strategy, they're going to help you to win races so you don't have to worry about driving 105%. If you get in position to win a race, et cetera, et cetera. He shows up in Barber and wins. I'm like, Hmm, okay, he got that message loud and clear straightaway. He's a fast learner.



We thought he was good when we signed him. He's even better than that. He's a hard worker. Behind that very nice, polite exterior, he's just tough as anything, man. His recovery in Indy after the crash, the way he came back from that, he's impressive.

We, me, all of us at Chip Ganassi Racing, are delighted he's driving the No. 10 car.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go ahead and open it up for questions.

Q. Alex, this morning INDYCAR and NBC announced an extension of their broadcast deal. Part of that involves Telemundo Deportes showing the season opening, season finale and Indy 500 races live in the future. As a native of Spain, what kind of impact that can do for Spanish speakers here in the United States?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I saw that. That's amazing for both Pato and I, all the Hispanic drivers I think. We're going to get more people looking at the races. There's a lot of people that would be (indiscernible). I think we saw that with Pato especially because he has so many followers from Mexico.

I think giving more people the opportunity to watch the races live, and the big races. I mean, even if you're not super into racing, you want to see the first race, the 500, the season finale. I think it's a good combo to start. I would like to see in the future, like, that everybody is able to watch all the races.

But it's a really good thing for me and good thing for the sport, I think.

Q. Dario, the excitement that's around the Nashville street race. As a person who lived in the suburbs of Nashville for several years, what do you feel the city of Nashville brings to the table?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I think Nashville's changed a lot since I lived there. It's grown incredibly. When I was there earlier this year, I was shocked. From the moment you get to the airport, just the suburbs going out has become a much bigger city. It's got a big passion for cars.

I think you tie those two together, it's become a destination as well. All kinds of weekend things. From all over the world, Hey, we're going to go to Nashville for a week, for our bachelor party, all that sort of stuff. It's become that destination as well.

When you tie in the music side of things, which I think Scott

Borchetta is able to do better than anybody because he's a racing nut, obviously he's got massive horsepower in the music business, when you tie those things together, it's just a win-win. I think it's going to be a tremendous event.

Q. In your driving career you were around when street racing was in Sao Paulo, Houston, Baltimore. They all fell off in the last decade. What do you remember about some of those races that fell off near the end of your career? Anything you remember about the race weekends, why those events might not have worked out?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I don't remember too much about Houston, to be honest.

When I first came to the series a long time ago, I don't know if Alex was actually born, but there was Surfers Paradise, Long Beach, Toronto, Vancouver. They were big events. For us they were obviously very serious, but for fans they were three-day parties. There was always something going on on and off the track.

I really think that's something that Nashville will bring. You've got to have that. It's going to be right close to downtown, as well. Again, I think it's a great addition to the calendar, to INDYCAR. It's a win-win.

Q. Dario, Nashville has enjoyed such a racing rebirth, renaissance, NASCAR, the SRX race. When you lived there were you aware there was this untapped potential?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Yeah, absolutely. You had the speedway out there. That was that kind of thing, good INDYCAR date. Didn't race terribly well because of the shape of the track but it was well-supported. If they could just get a Cup date, that would really lift the speedway out there.

I used to go to Cars and Coffee events all the time out there. You could see the passion for all types of cars and types of racing. So, yeah, definitely was on tap. Like I said, the city has grown massively since I was there pretty much a decade ago. It's nice to see that sort of untapped potential being realized.

I think, as I say, a cracking event as in a race, but I think off track, too, there's going to be a lot of stuff going on which I think is equally going to make for the longevity of the event.

Q. As a driver, Dario, what makes a great street course circuit? What about this track works well?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I think for me bumps, multiple



surfaces, all different types of corner. I think those are some of the things. Nashville has got all of those. You don't want something that's super smooth. Part of the challenge is how to get over those bumps quickly, how to get round those particular corners, the compromise that's involved in that.

We talk about that sort of thing. That's why my head goes into not the entertainment, what's good for the event, it about how to win, what we need as a team at Chip Ganassi Racing. I almost shift gears a little bit from, This is what is going to work for excitement level, I then become more interested in this is what's going to work for us to win.

Q. What do you think of the bridge?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I think it's cool. It's nice to have a signature for the circuit. That's going to be Nashville's signature, is that bridge.

Q. Alex, what do you like about street course racing, what Nashville provides, and your thoughts on going over that bridge?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I think it's going to be a great event, as Dario said, not only on track but also looks like they're going to do a lot of activities off track, which is important for the fans.

About street courses, I think every street course is unique. I'm not really experienced on street courses yet because junior series in Europe you don't race street courses. I'm getting up to speed with that.

You go to Detroit, you have to look those big bumps. St. Petersburg, it's not so bumpy but you have really high-speed corners. It makes it tough having the walls there.

Yeah, I'm enjoying the street racing. I think it's a bit crazier than the road courses. You see different strategies always. You see there's a lot more yellows. There's a lot more things that doesn't go, like, smooth, which is good for the show.

About the bridge, I think it's going to be cool. At the end of the day it's just a straight over the water. It's going to be a bit bumpy just because of those connections. I don't know how you say 'the connections'.

But, yeah, it's going to be fun. It's a long straight for what I saw. It's going to be challenging to get to the corner and be brave enough to brake super late and try to overtake some cars. I think it's going to be cool. It's going to be a nice, nice track.

Q. Josef Newgarden joked they're going to have divers when you go over the bridge. Did you have any concerns about the fencing?

ALEX PALOU: At the end of the day it's the same. We didn't go to St. Petersburg or to Detroit thinking we're going to jump so high or so bad. I mean, can happen. I guess so, right? I don't know. If that happens I'm sure it's going to be fine. It's going to be a good show.

No, I don't think that's going to happen. The tracks nowadays, they are super safe. In the past we saw some bigger crash, some cars going over the fence. Nowadays you look at the crash from Felix at Detroit. That was one of the biggest crash we saw lately. He was okay. The fence was okay, as well.

I think they are really safe nowadays. They think about everything. It will be fine.

Q. Alex, Nashville is the home and birthplace of hot fried chicken.

ALEX PALOU: That's perfect. We know what we have to do then (smiling).

Q. Dario is nodding his head. Is that accurate?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Yeah. I could recommend a few joints, too. Alex, if you win, I'll even buy you fried chicken.

ALEX PALOU: You should (laughter).

We have to win first to be able to get some fried chicken. First win and then Dario is going to buy some fried chicken.

Q. Dario, when you heard there was going to be a bridge on this road course, did you originally think you'd gotten the script of 'Driven'?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: It's one of those things, it's a signature thing that everybody thinks about. Like Alex just said, as a driver you don't even think about it. You build a track downtown, you want to use this road, there's a bridge there. Whatever. They did it in the Singapore race in F1 forever.

I would try to distance INDYCAR as much as possible from 'Driven', as you know, Bruce.

Q. With all your involvement in Formula E throughout the years, we know Alex competed in that, were you involved in telling Chip, Hey, this guy is really good, a guy we need to get on this team sometime?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: No, Alex, if I'm right in saying, tested in Formula E.

ALEX PALOU: I tested but didn't race.

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Didn't race.

Really it was Indy last year. I'd watched Alex in the early races, but at Indianapolis, it was the first race I'd been at in person last year. I watched what was going on, as I do in practice. I thought, Okay, he's pretty good.

I went up and said hello to Alex in the paddock. He was walking out of Gasoline Alley. I was walking in. Great job, keep it up. He said something like, I hope one day I do a good enough job that I can drive for Chip Ganassi Racing.

I spoke to Mike Hull, I said, This kid's really, really good, man.

He said, I think so, too.

The next day Alex said something to Chip, introduced himself to Chip.

When the opportunity came up for somebody to go in the 10 car when Felix decided to go to McLaren, it was like, Oh, he's our guy.

Yeah, it was watching him at Indy, then watching what he did throughout the rest of the season that convinced me, but more importantly convinced Chip, Mike and the engineers.

Q. Alex is the leader of the standings, six races yet. He's the guy sitting in the dunk tank with everybody throwing their best shot at him trying to get him off the top. How do you teach a young driver how to handle that pressure?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I'm not going to tell you that, am I, Bruce?

No, honestly, you can't teach that. You can help with experience and what works for you. I can help, Okay, for me this worked. You have to have that mental toughness. Alex has got it.

We'll see every race what we need to do going into it. We've already had discussions about championships, how you run for them. But he's got the mental toughness. That's step one. I'm not sure you can really teach that either.

As Chip calls it: You're either a Sunday driver or your not. I think with Alex we have a Sunday driver.

Q. Alex, how do you learn how to handle the pressure being in a championship?

ALEX PALOU: I don't know. Like, yeah, I don't know. I think it's easier when you have a good team around you and you can just focus on every session, each session, doing the best you can, focusing on obviously getting as many points as possible.

Yeah, I think at the end of the day if you're having good races and you are able to fight for them, score podiums, then score wins, you know you're going to fight for the championship and you really don't have to think about anything else. You don't have to think about the points or positions. Just because you're doing so good, you don't have to think about that.

If you're not having the opportunity to fight for the race, you don't even have to think about points because, yeah, if you're not scoring points, you don't have to think about the championship.

I think it's quite easy to have a good mindset when everything's going good, like we have now. We're going to the weekends, we're trying the best we can. Mid-Ohio was a weekend that was not a super weekend for us, but we still managed to get a podium, which was good for the championship.

We were not thinking about the championship, we were thinking about maximizing the results on the races, and then it help for the championship.

We keep doing what we doing and hopefully we can still score some more wins and more podiums.

Q. Dario, somebody asked about Baltimore, the other street races, they all had a lot of high hopes and expectations. Do you think Nashville has all the ingredients of becoming the next St. Pete or even the next Long Beach?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Yeah, I mean, those are big shoes to fill, big races to follow. But yes, absolutely. You got to look at the people that are involved in the organization of it, putting it together. I really do think that. I think the location is, again, fabulous for that.

Yeah, let's see what the race is like. I think it's going to be a good race. I'm back in the UK right now. All I'm hearing at the moment is, I cannot believe how incredible INDYCAR is to watch this year especially, the battles, the

field, how much the drivers are hustling the cars. This is from people that are used to watching Formula 1.

I'm loving the good momentum that INDYCAR's got. I think this is another good step towards that.

Q. Dario, in terms of Nashville being a new track to everyone, how beneficial is it to the team to have four drivers in the lineup, getting the setup for the street course given it's a brand-new track?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: You're absolutely right. Having four drivers really, really helps. Four that work together so well. That's really a big bonus to gather information as quickly as possible in the limited practice you get.

I definitely feel good about that, working with the guys on that, whether it's Alex in his first year, Marcus with a bit more experience, Scott who has been a long time, won everything, got so much experience in everything that he does in an INDYCAR, including how he runs practice sessions. Then you have Jimmie Johnson, his first year as an INDYCAR driver, but think of the experience he brings and how he deals with new circuits as well.

Yeah, there's a lot of multi-car teams out there, so we have to figure out how to be better and faster than the others.

Q. How do you feel Jimmie is getting on in his transition?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: He's doing really well. He had a lot of spins, and that's because of what was happening there. His bravery was going up during the tire run during the race, as the tire grip wear was going down, as they wore. Those two are the going in the opposite direction from each other.

That's why these spins happen, he's constantly pushing the limits, pushing himself. His ultimate lap time is right there. We're getting up to speed a bit more, what happens when the tires go off, how to continue to drive quickly.

He's not only learning, he's trying to forget two decades of how to drive a stockcar. As I found out when I went to drive a stockcar, what works in INDYCAR doesn't work in a stockcar and vice versa.

Yeah, he's got a very difficult job, but he's made massive progress. Yeah, I think he's going to continue. Obviously he's going to continue to get better, to start scoring more and more better results.

Q. Have you compared notes, you going to stockcar, him coming to INDYCAR? Very similar, right?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Every week. Every week. We actually haven't spoken in about a week. He's up in the mountains of Colorado. He's getting away. Otherwise, honestly it's every day.

We have Scott Pruett onboard as well. Scott is the voice of Jimmie, in the strategy. He's working one-on-one. Every day, every couple of days. He wants knowledge, wants to learn all the time and push himself.

He's a special individual. As a friend he's a great guy. As a competitor he's a special individual having in a race team.

Q. Alex, how excited are you to be heading to Nashville with it being a new track? How are you going to try to defend your lead in the championship?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, super excited. The event looks amazing. As I said, it looks like we're going to have lots of activities not only for the drivers but for everybody. Yeah, I'm really looking forward to the race.

I think it's good also that it's a new track for me but it's a new track for everybody. This year I've been going to the new tracks for me, but it was, like, known tracks for everybody. I was like, Oh, man, I need another session.

Here we'll all be on even circumstances, and I think it's going to be great.

About defending the championship, yeah, as I said, we try to maximize results. If we can have a shot to win, we'll try and get some more wins. We need to win some more. I don't think nobody won a championship only winning two races, so we need to win some more races and score some more podiums.

I'm looking forward to the races we have now. I think we have really good tracks with Nashville. I'm really looking forward to Laguna. I've been there on testing, but never race there. Long Beach, as well.

Yeah, I'm looking forward to the end of the season.

Q. Dario, what are the actions that you do with Alex in order to improve his skills?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I'm not sure I improve his skills. I think Alex would have a better, from his side, what I do there.

I think I try to help and focus maybe the direction sometimes he's going, pick out some of the areas to try

and improve, whether it's the car or maybe a little different technique in a corner, that kind of thing. Just help with his inexperience in certain areas, help to shortcut that, I would say.

Even Scott sometimes, as successful as Scott has been, there's things I see and I would make a suggestion, Have you tried this? Have you thought about that?

It's not a case of telling Alex what to do. I think with all the drivers I work with and worked with, you make suggestions, Have you thought about this? Have you tried that? That could be a driving technique, a setup change, it could be a mental thing of some drivers sometimes struggle mentally with getting the best performance, whatever.

Each driver's different. Each week's a little bit different. That's part of the excitement I guess of the job.

Q. One of the things we saw on broadcasting was the time in qualifying when Alex was joking, Yeah, it's okay. We hear you say, No, no, no, it's not okay. Is that kind of putting him in perfect direction?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Maybe sometimes. I keep giving him a hard time.

The car feels pretty good.

No, what's wrong with the car? How do we make it better? 'Good' is not going to make us faster.

He's such a positive person, that's his automatic mindset. Sometimes he'll come in and say, The car is pretty good, I need to think about how to drive the perfect lap, but the car is good.

He's getting more and more confident in himself, what he needs to do. It's really cool to watch. In this new job of mine, when I watch someone of his talent, his ability, his mental strength, just watching how he deals with stuff, it's very cool.

Q. Obviously in the British Grand Prix we saw two championship leaders clash. I think it's safe to say that Hamilton wouldn't have attempted that maneuver if Verstappen wasn't the championship leader. Alex, you are now the target, man with the target on his back, everyone is trying to beat you. Are you expecting any hard fights such as that? What would you do in the Verstappen circumstances if you saw your primary championship challenger coming up on your inside?

ALEX PALOU: I think in INDYCAR it's always like that. In Mid-Ohio, every race, we touch with other guys. All the overtakes are on the limit. Man, this guy has something on me. But, no, the racing in INDYCAR is like that. I think it's the beauty of the championship as well and these cars that allows you to have some contact.

Do I expect some drivers to be more aggressive on me? I don't think so. Maybe the guys we are fighting more, like let's say Pato, Josef, Scott, Marcus. Man, I think everybody fight super hard with each other here in INDYCAR.

In Road America with Newgarden, we were not even knowing how we were on the championship, let's say. We were fighting super hard, touching wheel-to-wheel. He was not being super hard on me, I wasn't being super hard on him. I wouldn't change my mindset on him now. Maybe he would be more aggressive on me now, but I don't know.

Yeah, I think here in INDYCAR for sure when you say that Hamilton went on that aggressive move, having only little bit of space, for sure it was because it was Verstappen. If it was another guy, that wouldn't have happened just because you are fighting for the championship.

I expect things like that to happen. What would I do if that were to happen? I don't know. For sure I wouldn't take it easy on Hamilton. If I was Hamilton, I would have gone for it.

My opinion, they both did what I would do on their places. Maybe obviously now that you see the consequences, you are Verstappen, you say, Okay, let pass. But you cannot just let somebody pass on racing.

Q. Dario, what would be your take? How would you advise Alex in that situation if Josef or Pato came flying up his inside trying to make room?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Well, the problem is you got to make decisions in the blink of an eye. The decision, it's not something you can teach. The instinct has got to be there for that.

I think Alex is right: he's going to race people the way he's raced them all season. Don't forget what has gotten you here. This is what got you here driving a certain way, not being crazy aggressive, keeping a good balance at all times. I think he's done that.

Yeah, just continue to race the way you have. Yeah, it's worked so far.

Q. Obviously as a four-time champion, it's safe to say

you knew exactly when to push, when to say, Okay, today is a third-place or second-place day. Is that something that was instilled in you before you arrived at Ganassi? Obviously Chip is that guy that always says, If you can't finish first, finish second, if you can't finish second, finish third.

DARIO FRANCHITTI: I certainly learned through my career. I certainly learned especially when I first came to INDYCAR. That was my advice with Alex. I talked about it earlier in the car. There was a time I had a third-place car, I pushed for a second-place car and crashed, or second-place result.

I think it's something I learned from making mistakes, knowing when to go. What is that saying: Know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em. I think I learned that with experience.

Q. Alex, there's a philosophy to be the crazy man you have to be crazier than he is. This year to beat Scott Dixon, are you being more Dixon (indiscernible)? You're going to meet Helio Castroneves in Nashville. Are you trying to think of having dinner with him to see if he finally tells you the secrets about Indianapolis?

ALEX PALOU: I'm trying to learn as much as possible from the best guys we have now in the series. My teammate Scott, as Dario said, he's the best at practices, he's the best at qualifying, he's really good on the races. Trying to learn as much as possible from him. Still a long way to go.

DARIO FRANCHITTI: Alex, can I interrupt?

ALEX PALOU: No (laughter).

DARIO FRANCHITTI: One thing Alex does, he comes into the truck, says, Scott, come here. How do you do that? He's dead straight up. He's not trying to get information by stealth, he just asks him, and he's really good at it.

Sorry, Alex.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, the good thing is that Scott, he's always answering. If I have any doubt on what's the best way to save some fuel at Mid-Ohio, he's going to say, Hey, this is how I do it, this is what I'm going to do on the race.

He's been a really good help for me this year.

About Helio? No, I'm not going to have dinner with him. I have no issues with him. I'm going to concentrate on Nashville. I already revealed I don't know how many times I know what I'm going to do next time I'm in that position.

Yeah, I'm okay with Helio. I'm not going to ask him what he did or the secrets.

Q. Dario, can you tell us when you left, you left some kind of curse on car 10 and how Alex is ending it?

DARIO FRANCHITTI: It's great to see the 10 car having success again. It's a lot of the same crew when we won our last championship in 2011, our last 500 in 2012. It's nice to see them having that success again, the smile on their face.

It was a tough time. A lot of the guys, whether Tony or Felix, it was tough to go up against Scott. Again, I know how difficult it is going up against Scott.

I think Alex has done a tremendous job this year with that. We haven't really talked about Marcus either. Marcus has done a phenomenal job, winning his first INDYCAR race. He almost won again at Mid-Ohio. He's done a phenomenal job.

Nice to see all the cars getting results.

THE MODERATOR: We'll wrap-up with Asher.

Q. Alex, before Nashville I saw that you are getting ready to test in Portland in about 10 days. How are you preparing to test at Portland?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I'm really looking forward to get back in the car. It's been a long wait.

Portland, it's a track I don't know, so the test is going to be to learn the track and also to prepare for Nashville and the last couple of races. We don't really get that much testing nowadays in INDYCAR. When we get one day, it's just amazing for the driver and for the team.

It's more for the driver because the engineers, they get so excited that they have, like, a day of testing that they come up with long list of testing. You're like, Hey, guys, we only have one day, only four or five sets of tires, so we cannot test that. It's going to be super interesting.

But, yeah, I'm just preparing with some videos about Portland from the past just because I've never been there and preparing with some ideas to push the engineers and get even faster cars for the end of the season.

Thank you, Asher.

THE MODERATOR: We'll leave it there for now. Our thanks to Alex Palou and Dario.

