

# NTT INDYCAR SERIES

## News Conference

Thursday, September 23, 2021

**Alex Palou**

**Pato O'Ward**

**Josef Newgarden**

Press Conference



with us this afternoon.

Let's start with Alex. It's really been a dream season for you, Alex, and really right out of the gate. You go back to Barber Motorsports Park picking up your first win back then, which seems like a long time ago but maybe it hasn't been that long ago. How did that win set the stage for what has been a tremendous season for you here in 2021?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, it's been a good season so far. Enjoyed a lot since the first time I met all the guys at Chip Ganassi Racing. Yeah, it's been a great ride, like eight podiums. You said that Barber feels like a long time ago, but it feels like yesterday.

Yeah, I think we had some success, some bad moments, as everybody here in this table, but yeah, looking forward to this weekend. New track, new championship fight, but I think it's going to be a good one.

THE MODERATOR: No question about it.

Pato O'Ward also picked up his first career win this season and no better place to have that than your home state of Texas to kind of kick off the month of May. It's really been a series of top-10 finishes ever since then. How big of a step has this season been for your career?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, I think it was really cool. I think we broke through one of the biggest walls that you go through whenever you're not a race winner yet, I guess you could say. I feel like the team and I have grown a lot. We haven't had the most perfect season. No season will be perfect, but I think we've maximized the package that we have in very multiple occasions.

Long Beach is cool, man. We'll see what we can pull off this weekend.

THE MODERATOR: We wrap things up with the two-time NTT INDYCAR Series champion Josef Newgarden. Interesting year for you. Once you got past some of the bad luck, things picked up for you this season. The way this team and you fought out of that hole you guys were in early on, what does that say about this team?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I think there was definitely a

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Once again, welcome. It's great to be back on the Streets of Long Beach and certainly the Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach 2021 version here in September. Welcome to our 2021 NTT INDYCAR Series championship contender press conference.

It's been a remarkable year certainly for the 2021 INDYCAR Series championship journey that started all the way back at Barber Motorsports Park back in April and concludes here on the historic Streets of Long Beach on Sunday. It's the 16th consecutive season in which the NTT INDYCAR Series title will be decided in the final race. Remarkable.

Three remain in contention for the Astor Challenge Cup.

(Video shown.)

Who's ready to go? I know you guys are ready to go come Sunday and certainly when practice starts tomorrow.

Joining us today, he is a three-time race winner in 2021 with eight podium finishes. He has a 35-point advantage in the 2021 championship, driver of the No. 10 NTT Data Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing, in the middle, please welcome Alex Palou.

Also joining us, a two-time race winner here in 2021, also a three-time pole winner this season who's racked up five podiums. He sits second in points, the driver of the No. 5 Arrow McLaren SP Chevrolet. We say hello to Pato O'Ward.

On the far end, he is a two-time NTT INDYCAR Series champion, a winner at Mid-Ohio and Worldwide Technology Raceway this season, racking up five podiums in 2021, driving the No. 2 Hitachi Team Penske Chevrolet. He sits third in points. Great to have Josef Newgarden



... when all is said, we're done.®

lot of hullabaloo about our performance in the beginning of the season, just Team Penske in general, what were we doing, what were we. I felt like we had good performance throughout, but when you look at the last couple week, we definitely got ourselves in a kerfuffle with the qualifying sessions.

We've got to figure out how to be stronger this weekend; I think in qualifying it's going to start. But happy to be here. It's been a real pleasure driving with these guys. They're incredibly talented, and I love to see that coming into the INDYCAR Series.

There's a great deal of pride amongst all of us that we have such amazing talent in this championship. It makes it more meaningful I think when you do a good job, so these guys should be really proud of what they've done, and to be here at the finale and still have somehow an opportunity, I think it's almost an impossible opportunity, but to be in the fight is really cool.

THE MODERATOR: So we've had hullabaloo and kerfuffle.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: It may or may not be part of a game, but those got worked in.

THE MODERATOR: You take a look at the Astor Challenge Cup, and certainly Josef, you've been a part of that thing. Do you allow yourself to think about taking that home this weekend, any of you, Pato, Alex?

ALEX PALOU: Well, obviously, right? That's why we all are here. Yeah, would be cool for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Do you have a spot for that somewhere, Pato?

PATO O'WARD: I'd make a spot. Yeah, it's a nice Cup. You have two at home, Josef?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I've got a couple of them.

PATO O'WARD: Yeah? Where are they sitting?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: They're in my office, right above me where I sit. Just trying to feed off the energy of them. They didn't really work this year.

PATO O'WARD: Don't put it in your room because then the feng shui is not very good because of, what is it, iron, titanium? What is it made out of?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: They're definitely not iron. I'm pretty positive.

PATO O'WARD: Seriously, good question. Actual question, what is it made out of?

THE MODERATOR: Silver.

PATO O'WARD: Yes. No good in your room, but in your office is okay.

THE MODERATOR: The mind games have started here, I think.

**Q. Josef, on the kerfuffle and hullabaloo, you joked it's all part of the game. I just want to clarify, what mind games are we talking about?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Oh, a hundred percent mind games, you know, a hundred percent. There's also \$20 on the line for those two right there. Pretty happy about that.

**Q. You got \$20?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Potentially. Potentially, yeah.

**Q. Can you give us anything more?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I've just got to clear the transaction and then I'll have realized that victory.

**Q. There is a mental element towards winning a championship that you have gone through many times. You've won two championships. Neither of you have won major championships at this level, and yet you look at other series like Max Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton today were playing mind games with each other. You two are not. I don't know how serious your mind games really are, but I'm wondering what's the difference with you guys and how are you approaching this from the mental point of approaching a championship?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: You know, I think it's a very respectful championship when you look at it, which is I think the beauty in INDYCAR racing. You have such a fierce environment where you have the best of the best in my opinion from around the world that want to compete every weekend, want to be the best and be on top. But we do it in such a respectful way. You have great drivers that I think they push to the limit, but they don't try and go over it, certainly not purposely.

Mind games are part of that. Obviously we're going to try and -- I always try and project my strengths, but at the same time I always want to win fairly.

I think what I'm trying to get at, though, is why you don't see a lot of that mess in our series is just because it's a really respectful group of people that are here to work hard and let that really shine through at the end of the day. The hardest working group and the group that gets it right is the group that's going to be victorious, and that's what we all focus on. It's a really pleasant environment to be in. You can see that as evidence with Romain.

It's one thing I love about this championship and being a part of it. It's a real pleasure.

**Q. Josef, you used to be the young guy battling the veteran for the championship; now you're the veteran with two young guys going after you. What's it like to see that dynamic shift?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I've got to tell you, I didn't think I was going to get any questions during this press conference, so I'm happy to answer them, though, and speak about these fantastically talented guys. This is really the fight right here without a doubt. If an act of God happens and somehow we win this thing, great.

But these two -- I don't want to call them youngsters because I'm not that much older than them. I feel like I'm in the weird middle position right now in the championship where I'm not the old guy but I'm not the young guy. It's fun competing against these two because this championship you want to compete against the best from around the world, and to see what Pato is doing with the contingent from México and to see how invigorated Spain is becoming and his fellow countrymen from Alex is just what this championship is about. You want the best from around the world competing and trying to showcase their abilities.

I'm excited to compete against them. I'm disappointed we're not in a better position. I wish this was more of a true fight here for this final round and we could be closer, but we fought hard and I think we fought against the best this year. Whoever comes out on top I think is a very deserving winner between those guys.

**Q. For Alex and Pato, it's Pato's second year that he's been involved in the late stage championship fight, it's your first, but in a lot of ways when you're that young and you're in a fight for a championship, is it new, fresh, exciting, and it's almost like you don't know what you don't know so you just have at it?**

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, obviously it's my first time fighting for a championship since -- well, I was fighting a bit in Super Formula but not this way, and it feels good. But yeah, never did a press conference talking about the

championship, so just discovering new stuff, and I think it's been great.

I'm having fun. I have the luxury of asking questions to Jimmie and Dixon that's been in these type of scenarios like for 10 years, so it's been good, and just enjoying every little moment of the opportunity I've been given this year of fighting for an INDYCAR championship.

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, it's a really cool opportunity, I guess, that we have, and yeah, last time in the position to fight for a championship was in 2018, but nowhere near the magnitude of what this championship would mean to me, the team and my family and everybody around.

Yeah, like I said, it would be cool if it was maybe a little bit tighter, kind of in the same boat where Josef is at. I know he's a little further. But yeah, all I can do is just try and maximize what I can out of the car that I'm given and then see where everything else falls, I guess.

**Q. Could you talk about the mental approach, Pato?**

PATO O'WARD: For me, I'm just really trying to enjoy it because I feel like I'm up against very -- these guys have a good head on their shoulders, and I wish I could say that from everyone, but some guys just don't.

It's nice to fight against people that you can respect and that you can -- you can really trust whenever you're racing at 100 something miles an hour heading into a corner where things can go sideways very badly. But you can just compete against them fairly.

I feel like it's a little bit of what Josef said. I just think the respect, at least from all of us that have been in the fight all year, is strong. I hope they feel the same from me because I always try and be fair.

It's a lot more enjoyable when you can actually compete against someone and not always have to give in because you know that they're just going to stick their nose in and ship you into the wall if you don't give them their way.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I agree with both. Well, there's some drivers that you cannot really trust in first corners, but not you. We have some drivers -- but I think it's good. I would say 90 percent of the grid you can trust, and it's super fun, and just before getting into this room we were talking about supermarket experiences with Pato, and I think that's what separates this series to another series. Like I've been lucky to race in Europe and experience in Europe, and the atmosphere with the drivers, it's nowhere near to what we have here.

It's not like, oh, we are super friends and we're just having a good weekend. No, we are fighting on track and we are not friends anymore on track, but out of it we respect all each other. So yeah, it's a good stuff.

**Q. Alex, you had never been to Portland before, sat on the pole and won the race. You talked about preparation as far as talking to your teammates like Jimmie and Scott. Can you expand on the preparation coming here into the Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach, because again, you've never been here before. What have you done specifically to get ready to get after that championship here this weekend?**

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, for this weekend it's been a bit more preparation than Portland. Portland we were lucky enough to test there before. Yeah, never raced in Portland before the race but I was lucky enough to test a couple of months before. So that was quite easy to go to Portland.

But yeah, coming here there's no way to test. Did lots of simulator at home before going to the HPD simulator, and then I saw as many onboard cameras and talked to Dario and all the guys at the team to just get as much experience as we can, because yeah, we're going to have two practices, which seems like a lot this year, but it's not much compared to what they used to have in INDYCAR.

Yeah, should be good. I know we had good cars in the past here. I think '19 Scott finished on the podium and was quite competitive.

Yeah, I think it's going to be about getting up to speed and having enough confidence during practice one and practice two. But yeah, I was happy with the performance we did at Detroit. I think Detroit it's a bit more difficult than what you get here, more corners and a lot more bumpy, and we did a good job there, so should be good here.

**Q. Can you also talk about your track walk this afternoon; what did you learn from that?**

ALEX PALOU: I learned that it's pretty similar to the simulator. I have to say the simulators nowadays, they are really close, so yeah, I could see some curves, bumps, walls, but it's not that you learn a lot during the track walks.

You normally check for the curbs if they change or not, what can you use, what can you not, the big bumps, and obviously changes a lot from year to year, but I had nothing to compare it to. I was just comparing to the simulator and the onboards we had from '19.

The good stuff is that all the walls are in the same place, at least the big ones, and the curbs, too. Yeah, I think we should be prepared.

THE MODERATOR: Did you go back to Indianapolis in between Laguna and here?

ALEX PALOU: In between Portland and Laguna but not Laguna and here.

THE MODERATOR: So you have done the simulator back in Indianapolis after Portland?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah.

**Q. Josef, two years ago you mentioned after winning the second championship you mentioned it was probably toughest and most draining race you ever won. Should you be in a situation Sunday where you pull off this title, number three in five years, would it be probably the most fulfilling in that regard?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I think they're all special. I don't know that it would be -- it's hard to say. I don't know how I'd feel about it. I think I'd be in shock if we won it. Like I say, that would be the most shocking without a doubt.

After that, I don't know. I'd probably have to sit on it a little bit and see how it feels, but yeah, they're all difficult. They're all difficult to win. Something as improbable as this one would be very shocking. That's the only way I can put it.

I don't think we're in the best position, but just to even be in the conversation still is still a task in itself. It's very hard to get to this point in the year and still be in the fight. We're not where we want to be, but we're in the fight nonetheless.

But yeah, I don't know, the second one was very, very fulfilling. Very, very fulfilling. I don't know that that would be the same answer for this one. This would be just shocking.

**Q. As far as both Alex and Pato, of course in 2019 both of you had different career trajectories. Did you ever think you would now be in this position fighting for a championship?**

PATO O'WARD: Not at all, no. If you told me in 2019 I'd be fighting for the INDYCAR championship in 2021 I'd probably tell you, wow. Yeah, probably not.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I remember in '19 we were both in Japan. I was doing a full season there and he was just, yeah, jumping around the world. I asked him after a race, I don't know it was, it was Indy, I think -- yeah, because you had the hard crash.



PATO O'WARD: Yeah.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, so I was already interested a lot in INDYCAR, and I saw Pato there in Japan and I was like, okay I'll talk to Pato. So I asked him, hey, how was INDYCAR, and he's yeah, it's cool, man, but it hurts. He's like, man, it hurts a lot.

Yeah, if in that moment somebody told me -- I don't know him, but if they told me I would be in INDYCAR, I would be surprised, and if somebody told me that we would be both fighting for the championship, I would be, yeah, pretty impressed or shocked, yeah, as well.

**Q. Pato, you've been on both sides of a championship battle before. In 2016 Indy Pro 2000 you were on the losing side and then in Indy Lights and in IMSA WeatherTech you were on the winning side. Is it difficult to be on the bottom half trying to get on top this time, or are you just looking at it like you did a few years ago in Indy Pro?**

PATO O'WARD: I feel like all you can do is just try and maximize what you can control because I can't control where Josef finishes, I can't control where Alex finishes, I can't control anything else that's kind of out of my hands. I can just try and maximize what I can do and then let everything else fall where it will fall.

But yeah, I don't know, man. Obviously it's better to be on the other end of it because you've got some breathing room, but I'm not angry about the position that I'm in. I'm very proud of what we've been able to accomplish as a team this year. So yeah, we're just treating it as another weekend and trying to maximize and end the year in a strong note.

**Q. There are several drivers here that are trying to secure their seats for 2022 and a good finish would really help them out. When you're battling with those drivers, is there any additional worry that they might try and do something crazy to try and improve their position for next year, or do you race everyone the same?**

PATO O'WARD: I feel like it's best to just kind of know who you're racing against. I feel like by now we know who -- at least I do. I know who I can get close with or who it's just like, oh, this is just going to be hell. Yeah, just be mindful of who you're fighting against, I guess.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I think it's always good to have just awareness. All of us need to have awareness as drivers on the track for what's taking place around you.

Putting it simply, we should race each other the same at all points, with just enough respect and fairness, racing hard, but to where there's never an issue that comes up. Of course it's impossible in racing. Sometimes you make a mistake or you miscalculate something or you just get something wrong.

But if I was on the other end of it, it's easy to say beforehand, but I would be aware of what people in a championship that are fighting in a final round, I would be aware of what they're doing on the day. Not that I have to completely compromise my day for those people, but I think just being aware of how you race them or what you're doing around them is important.

That's what I would do as a competitor. I can't speak for everybody. But you should always, I think, race everybody with enough respect to keep it clean.

**Q. Alex, if you win the championship without winning the race, are you still getting fried chicken afterwards?**

ALEX PALOU: Of course, even more. Why not, right? Yeah, maybe we could change the rules and we could add the championship, winning the championship in there. Yeah, obviously I think we'll try and go for the win. Obviously it's going to be super hard just because not knowing the track we're going to be one step down or far from other guys, but yeah, we should try and go for the win and be careful, obviously, of other drivers, from your other question.

**Q. Alex and Pato, you guys were talking a few minutes ago about the couple races where your paths in racing crossed in 2019 in Super Formula. Can you maybe -- if you can remember, can you guys give us an idea of maybe your first impression of each other as a driver out on track when you guys first got to know each other a little bit?**

PATO O'WARD: Well, I wasn't near Alex, honestly. He was usually near the front. I was more struggling in the middle of the pack. Yeah, I felt like my life in Japan was like getting thrown into like a platoon of crocodiles, and it was like, okay, survive, not knowing anyone, no car, no test, no nothing. I barely knew the team. For me I didn't really have as many encounters with Alex on the track. Just a little bit outside of the car because we were the both that spoke Spanish.

I think I went to him and asked, what do you have for breakfast, because -- I loved the food in Japan, but the breakfasts are horrendous. I went, man, what do you do. So he told me a tip: Go to a grocery store, get some cereal.

ALEX PALOU: That took me two years. It took me two years to realize what was the way to avoid -- what do they have, like fish? But it's dried fish sometimes, so they have fish and rice, which at 7:30 a.m., maybe it's not my thing. Maybe at 8:00 p.m. it can be my thing but not that early.

I knew that -- well, I discovered I could go to a 7-Eleven and just pick up some cereal and yogurt, and it was happy times.

**Q. Alex, I know you were on the cusp of a potential championship there in Super Formula in 2019. You started on pole there at Suzuka and that race didn't go your way, kind of out of your control. What did you take from that experience, coming so close to a championship early in your career? I know you said you haven't won a single series championship yet. You had a really great opportunity there that just didn't go your way. What did you learn that day?**

ALEX PALOU: I learned that it's super hard to fight for a championship, and it's super hard to win it: I think that just by having the opportunity now same as when I had it in Super Formula, it's amazing to have an opportunity like that. It means that you've been able together with your team to be up front during the whole season, and on that occasion I was more like on Josef's place where I had to pull, win and do everything I could, and we were going to do it, but yeah, after that pit stop...

Yeah, I think you just learn that these opportunities are not always coming to you, and as soon as you get it, you need to try and -- obviously I think everybody gives 100 percent every day, but you have to try and go for it because you don't know if next year you're going to have the same opportunity again.

**Q. Just a follow-up question on something that you mentioned last Sunday at Laguna Seca. You mentioned you had like a two-week notice from Dale finding out about your INDYCAR test in the summer of 2019. How did you find out? Do you remember? Was it a phone call from Dale or someone else that you found out you were having the opportunity to test in INDYCAR?**

ALEX PALOU: I think it was on WhatsApp when I woke up. Roger sent me a message and said, hey, just book your flights because you're coming to America, and I was like, yeah.

**Q. Josef, how have you seen these kind of situations with them but also with Takuma sometimes and with the Brazilian drivers? How do you feel about that?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: This? I love it, actually it's beautiful. I was thinking while watching them, I'm like, man, I really should just take Spanish again because it's so cool to be able to know that. I wish I was bilingual or something, but I'm not.

PATO O'WARD: Josef is that guy that comes up to you and be like, I took Spanish in high school. Do you know any Spanish? Eh, poquito.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I don't know none of it, but I wish I did. I love it. I think it's great. Obviously we're a domestic championship, but I always tell people because I've always had the question how do you feel about being American in the championship and succeeding, but I've always loved that -- and I harp on this a lot, but I love that we have the best talent from around the world, and I'd love to see more of it.

Certainly interacting with the fans from different areas of the world, like the Japanese fans are some of the coolest fans I've ever met in my life, and the Mexican fans actually seem incredible now, having witnessed them from Pato. I think we should welcome it and we should do more for sure.

PATO O'WARD: We need to go to México in a race. We need to go.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, exactly. That would be good.

**Q. Josef, have you located which Port-a-Potty you're going to put Palou in so that he doesn't actually start because I think that's the only way you're going to win this, right? Where are you going to put Alex so that he can't start the race to give you a chance to win?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Are you guys staying at the Hyatt?

ALEX PALOU: Nope.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: What hotel are you at?

ALEX PALOU: I don't know.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, we're talking about it. I'm going to stop before I get in trouble.

I don't know, it's going to take a crazy act for sure.

PATO O'WARD: I'm at the Hyatt; do you want to come join?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: It's getting weird now.



**Q. Josef, do you feel any obligation to kind of help Pato a little bit out of loyalty to Team Chevy?**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: No. No. Unless -- well, seriously, we're not in a position where we can help Pato. We're in the fight ourselves, so we have to look out for our own position. I would love to see it in the Chevy camp this championship, whether it's me or Pato. But we're not in a position, I think, to say -- I don't even know how we would help him, to be quite honest with you. I'm not sure that we would do anything that would be overt to clearly help him somehow win the championship. So no.

**Q. Alex, obviously you had the grid penalty at Nashville and then you had two DNFs. Can you believe that you're arrived at a finale with a 35-point lead in the championship, that you're in this happy position of knowing that you only need to finish 11th to clinch a title?**

ALEX PALOU: Well, yeah, I think we did the work that I wanted to do before being here at Long Beach. I knew that we had an opportunity at Portland and Laguna because we tested there because they were road courses, and I'm more of a road course driver. But yeah, we did the work. We need to finish it out.

It's not going to be easy. It's 28 drivers. You said I only need to finish 11th, but to finish 11th in INDYCAR, it's not that easy nowadays. We'll do our best. We're not going to focus on that 11th place because I saw so many races, including last weekend, where somebody that is outside of top 10 on the last stint can finish in the top 3.

We just need to do the best we can. Hopefully we can fight for the win. I strongly believe that we are really good on the races with strategies, pit stops, fuel and tire management. Hopefully we can get a win there.

Yeah, did I think that we would be P1 with 35 points lead after those three weekends? Probably not.

**Q. Chip used to be a race car driver himself. Obviously you can talk with Scott and Dario and Jimmie about situations like this. Obviously Chip has seen a lot of champions go through it process of coming to the finale with a chance at a title. Has he offered you any specific advice?**

ALEX PALOU: He always tells me to do the obvious things right. I think there's no better thing that he can tell me or tell the drivers. That's what we have to do, and that's what we're going to do on Sunday.

**Q. Just wondered if you'd considered the implications of double points at the Indy 500 on the championship for the second year in a row, given it's kind of cost you a lot of points.**

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, it has, but you know, we know the rules and the points table going into the season. We have to account for the fact that Indy is double points. We know qualifying is important there. Both of those went against us for sure. We'd be in a different position if we had a better event, but that's something that we've got to control.

Yeah, I'm still not a fan of it. Even if this was a different situation -- I think it's good we've dropped the double points in the finale. I was never a fan of that, and I'm still not quite a fan of the double points at Indy. But like I said, we know the rules, we know the landscape going in, so I don't think we can fall back on that. It would be an endless discussion of saying if this went different or that went different, I could go down the road and cite a lot of examples, but we always end up where we are, and unfortunately we're a little bit short this year.

**Q. Pato, just wondered if you felt you're kind of at a disadvantage this weekend given the fact you're going up against two bigger teams with more teammates to hold you up over the course of the weekend?**

PATO O'WARD: I mean, yeah, they have more cars, I guess, but at the end of the day I feel like we're racing against -- I think the bigger thing is that we're racing against teams that have won multiple championships, talking about Ganassi and Penske, and yeah, I think that's our biggest battle right now. I think the guys in the series are respectful and they know -- at least kind of what Josef said, if I was in a position to screw someone up that's fighting for a championship, I would get out of the way because I wouldn't because fighting for a championship is pretty big, and if I was in that position I wouldn't want someone to get in the way forcefully. I hope everybody plays clean, I guess. I don't know what to expect.

**Q. Alex, a lot of people have talked about the Dixon, Dario and Jimmie factor, but one of the questions I've got for you is is it a great thing having a crew chief like Ricky Davis in your back pocket, as well?**

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, for sure, big time. I think it's more of obviously he has a lot of experience in INDYCAR, fighting for championships, but it's more the relationship I have with him than the experience that he brings me. I don't know, I feel like every time I can count on him, and the relationship goes off track and off racing. Yeah, I would say our relationship, it's been pushing me a lot this year.

**Q. Alex, I understand you had your first helmet swap and you brought it in; you weren't really sure of all the protocols. How did that go?**

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I did my first one with Jimmie. Apparently everybody has Jimmie's helmet now. But I couldn't say no. I had to take it. I wanted to be the only one, but yeah, apparently it's everybody. It's okay. It's okay.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: It's getting to that point where it's like, a Jimmie; everyone has got a Jimmie.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, that's the thing. It's okay, I need to speak with him to stop it. It's like, come on, Jimmie -- I think I don't have that many helmets since I started to the ones he traded this year, but yeah.

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, I feel like he has like 20 to give away.

ALEX PALOU: Oh, more. More. I think he told me he used already like 18 or something like that, this year.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: On a serious note it would be really cool to get a Jimmie Johnson helmet.

PATO O'WARD: There's so many people I want to do a helmet swap with, but the problem is I don't have enough helmets, sadly. Maybe we talk to --

ALEX PALOU: You did a special at Nashville and everything.

PATO O'WARD: No, those are for me. Those are for my wall.

**Q. Did he come to you or did you go to him?**

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, he came to me. Yeah, he did. But we share trucks. I showed him I think the first one he -- I don't remember now, but when I saw the first swap he did, I was like, Jimmie, why you didn't tell me, so then he offered. So yeah, maybe it was me. I don't know.

**Q. Alex, in working with Dario this year, having the ability to drive the No. 10 he drove during his tenure with Chip Ganassi Racing and all the things he accomplished during that couple years that he spent there at the end of his career, have you gotten any sense of what it would mean to him through conversations or just getting to know him, getting to put that No. 10 back on the top of the championship podium on Sunday if you were able to close things**

**out?**

ALEX PALOU: It's been great to work with him. I think I'm really fortunate to have him. I think he's on the best moment of being a race car driver not long ago and seeing everything that I see and everything that the engineer sees, so he is a bit of a -- yeah, he's in between us, and he can just tell me stuff from a driver's perspective that's been helping me a lot.

I think he really likes to see that No. 10 again up front. He was super happy at Barber and then all throughout the season. We didn't really speak much after Sunday if we can get that No. 10 as a champion, but I think he would be really, really proud because he's a big part of it.

**Q. Alex, what is your first memory of getting a chance to watch INDYCAR races growing up? Did you have a favorite driver while you were growing up? How did you interact with the series when you were younger?**

ALEX PALOU: I don't really remember the first time or the first race that I watched, but I remember I saw Tony and I saw Dixon. I think that year Dixon was P1 in the championship, so I started cheering for him, which yeah, it's a bit crazy to think about it now. But yeah, I don't remember to be honest when was the first moment.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, guys, for your time this afternoon. So many storylines coming into this finale. Best of luck in this championship race, the 2021 NTT INDYCAR Series championship.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports