

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Tuesday, February 22, 2022

Helio Castroneves

Will Power

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Great to see everyone here today. As you know, it's race week for the NTT INDYCAR Series. Sunday the season opener on the streets of St. Petersburg for the Firestone Grand Prix of St. Pete presented by RP Funding.

Our two guests today know a thing or two about winning at St. Pete. Great to be joined by Helio Castroneves who will drive the No. 06 Auto Nation Sirius XM Honda for Meyer Shank Racing. Helio not only enjoying the fact that he is a four-time Indianapolis 500 champion, but also a three-time winner in St. Pete, the most since the race was first run down there in 2003.

Also joining us, Will Power, who will be in the No. 12 Verizon 5G Team Penske Chevrolet. Power won at St. Pete back in 2014, but also a remarkable nine-time pole winner on the street layout, and it is great to have Will with us, as well.

Helio, off-season finally over. You're back full time. How much are you looking forward to this weekend?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Oh, Dave, I'm looking forward so much for this weekend. Super excited about St. Pete finally is here. The last three years I actually was going to St. Pete just to watch it, and now finally I'll be back to be in action.

It's great. It's great that we're here. Championship is starting, and for sure with Auto Nation Sirius XM Arctic Wolf we're really looking forward to a great result. Again, we know the competition is going to be hard; however, we feel that we're right up there.

THE MODERATOR: Will, same question for you. The wait is over. How much do you look forward to going back to St. Pete for the opener?

WILL POWER: Yeah, very much looking forward to it. I've been training very hard in the off-season. I reckon the

team has found some pretty good stuff, so has Chevy, so it's a track I love.

I didn't have a very good qualifying there last year, so looking to make it to that Firestone Fast Six and more so looking to contend for the win.

THE MODERATOR: I'm assuming that is a treasured item behind you; is that the St. Pete surfboard you've got there?

WILL POWER: Yes, it is. It's right there. I want to get another one. Helio has got three of them, if you can believe it. And he's got four 500s. Just between them, three of them and four 500s.

THE MODERATOR: Wait, he's got a -- I didn't know that.

WILL POWER: He's still going, still going. It's unbelievable, man.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, with that hair that you have, man, you're going to get there, too. I love that hair. New style, right?

WILL POWER: You don't like it? It's a new style. I was mad because my wife, she books the haircuts and she just decides when I need one, and I was like, man, it's too short.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Looks good. Slick.

WILL POWER: Do you like my teeth?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, you've got new teeth, too, man. You're awesome.

WILL POWER: No, I got my braces off.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I know, I remember. That's what I was saying. Now it's all organized all in the same place. Good for you.

WILL POWER: They're straight, man, they're straight.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: That's nice. You're going to be biting better now.



WILL POWER: Yeah. Still yellow, but that's fine.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: That's not the issue. That's okay.

Q. Obviously being such longtime teammates, still competing, eyeing records, Helio at Indy, Will the all-time pole record in the NTT INDYCAR Series, do you guys ever get nostalgic about the way your careers have gone and continued to go?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: You know, the way I see, Dave, I'll tell you, when you have passion, you love what you do, you're going to keep as long as you want to do it. Obviously Will and I worked together for so many years I have so much respect for him. I know how incredible, not only fast, but an incredible person and driver as well.

So it's always great to be surrounded by -- competing, as well, not only surrounded, but competing with those great drivers. That's another thing that keeps me going, because drivers like Will and the other ones in the NTT INDYCAR Series. It's so competitive that you want to go out there and say, hey, still got it, you know, and that's one of the things I love it.

WILL POWER: Yeah, I look back on my career and I just feel so blessed and lucky to have had a career in INDYCAR and have been successful. And to be with the team, with Penske for this long, yeah, I look back and feel like, man, it's just very, very fortunate.

And also to have raced and been teammates with guys like Helio who will be regarded as one of the all-time greats, four Indy 500 wins, and he taught me a lot. I always say it, when he left Penske, he was the quickest I had ever seen him.

When I first came there I was very fast, and Helio kept getting quicker and quicker and quicker and I couldn't match him when he was at his best. Yep, cool for him to be back full time. I think it's great at his age. I think that is just so awesome that he's still performing at this level.

THE MODERATOR: Man, I just heard the phrase "at his age", Helio. Just sayin'.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: He'll get there.

WILL POWER: I think it's great for anyone in their 40s. If Helio is still as fast as he is, I have zero, he, no excuses, no excuses.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I want to see if his hair is going to be like that when he's my age, so let's see how it goes.

WILL POWER: Look, man, I'm getting the same thing you've got.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I saw your father and he's bald, so, you know.

WILL POWER: I haven't had to start dying it yet though. That's good. The gray has kept away. Just the gray here (indicates beard.)

HELIO CASTRONEVES: It will come, buddy, don't worry about it. It's coming.

Q. Helio, it's been a while since you've been on the streets of St. Pete in an INDYCAR race. In a lot of ways you can return to Indy and you know that place better than anybody, but what is it like going to a street course that you haven't been on for a few years?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: It's always a challenge every time you go into a place. However, the place is the same, obviously. They might have some new patches here and there, but at the end of the day, the layout is the same.

I do believe the experience that I have there will still apply, even though I haven't been there for three years, three or four years. At the end of the day a racetrack is a racetrack. As long as you're comfortable with the race car, that won't be an issue.

Q. When you won your first Indianapolis 500 back in 2001 when everybody was out there taking pictures at the Yard of Bricks there's this three-year-old kid that about knocked over the Borg-Warner Trophy. Turns out this three-year-old won the Daytona 500 Sunday night. You've seen this kid grow up. What were you thinking when you saw this guy win the Daytona 500?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I was so happy for Austin. Obviously as you mentioned, I've seen this kid grow since I've been at Team Penske, and all of a sudden seeing that kid becoming the Daytona 500 champion, it makes me realize that, wow, I'm getting up there in age, because when you see kids like that, then all of a sudden they're drivers.

But I was so happy for him, for Tim Cindric that obviously kind of like became a good friend of mine, and Megan Cindric, all of them, all of the Cindric family. It was really, really nice to see that result finally coming over, paying off.

I'll tell you what, it's funny because it's easy to say I knew it, but I remember talking to Will and talking to all the drivers at Team Penske. I was like, Watch out, man, that



kid is going to end up taking places in the NASCAR program, and look what's happening.

So good for him. Good for Tim Cindric. Good for Team Penske.

Q. To be able to start the season the week after the Daytona 500, it kind of adds a little momentum for the INDYCAR start because the two big races in the same state separated a week apart. What do you think of having it like that from here on out?

WILL POWER: Yeah, I didn't even -- yeah, okay. Yeah, usually we're a week or two later than this.

Q. Sometimes even later.

WILL POWER: Yeah, it's good. I think now that NASCAR and INDYCAR has collaborated a little bit with the INDYCAR road course race, there's a little bit of crossover there with the fans.

Hopefully that brings more viewers and more spectators to the track. Yeah, it's good for motorsport as a whole. The more popular motorsport becomes, the better it is for all of us, not matter the series.

Yep, hoping to see a full crowd there, full capacity. It's been a couple years. I think it'll be a great weekend.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, having Roger, you know, everybody respects Roger. And now no question the series, it does help a lot with other series, NASCAR and INDYCAR, as Will alluded to, being collaborative with dates, and I do feel it's going to be a crossover with the fans. Just the Daytona 500 happened Sunday, and now we're right getting ready for the opening of the season.

Look, it's different fans, but it's still pretty much the same type of racing, right? Everybody loves the competition. Everybody loves the drivers. It's just different styles, but at the end of the day still very similar crowd.

Q. Helio, I wanted to follow up on something you said a minute ago. You said you went to the last couple of Grand Prixes in St. Pete as a spectator. What was that experience like for you? What did you think?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Horrible. It was absolutely horrible. I remember after the first year in '18 Will and everyone when I was the grand marshal, man, you should be here. I was like, yeah, thanks, that doesn't help.

But now we're back, so that's why it's so amazing after three years all of a sudden. It's not that I've been just

sitting on the couch. I've been obviously racing IMSA and learning from other series, but it would be great. It would be great to go back, and that feeling that I always had is still there, and I can't wait. Honestly, St. Pete is also my favorite place. Really looking forward to this for this Sunday.

Q. Will, obviously you've been extremely successful at St. Pete. What do you put that down to?

WILL POWER: Yeah, you can never put it down to just one thing. I'd say there's been -- I've raced there in many different styles of cars, as INDYCAR has evolved and changed over the years. The setups have been quite different. It's a technical track, but you know, it's like any other track. You've got to get all the little bits right, all the sectors right, and obviously the setup right. Then it's up to you to put the lap together.

Yeah, I think that track I've had more poles there than any other track, so there might be something to just -- flows well for me there that those happen. Like Indianapolis for Helio, just seems to flow well for him. But, yeah, I can't really say there's one particular thing that makes me quick there.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I know it's Turn 10. Every time --

WILL POWER: I was going to say to you I can't believe -- Helio has been up on me and he's about to get the pole, and I get him always in Turn 10. I don't know what it is. I did that to Newgarden, as well, got him by 100th.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: There's a huge wall right on the exit and Will is colorblind, so I don't think he even sees that. He goes so fast. So it's Turn 10. I'll make it happen, so hopefully we'll see what happens this year.

WILL POWER: Helio, you'd be happy to know last year I didn't see the exit wall and I bent the toe link and I crashed over the finish line. I tried to get it flat and it was all wobbly and I it spun, so it finally got me.

Q. Helio, obviously it's a new team this year. You had a quick start in testing last week. You've got kind of a bit of familiarity with Simon this year. How beneficial is that to you going into a new year with the team, particularly in St. Pete?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: You know, Simon and I worked together for so many years, as well, like Will. When you have someone that didn't have a break -- three years without being in INDYCAR full time, but when you have someone that just came over, knows how to work as a teammate -- not that Jack didn't have that opportunity.

Unfortunately Jack has been a lone wolf for so many years, and it would be great to continue.

However, with Simon bringing over sort of like the experience that he has and putting together, and me and him putting together kind of like -- starting all over with Meyer Shank Racing. It just helps. It just absolutely helps.

It was a strong test that we had. However, Sebring is a very difficult place. You can't judge by just the times. But it's always good to finish well.

Both him and I felt fantastic, and we're going to carry this momentum to St. Pete. It's always very good.

Q. Helio, you were out at Sebring the same weekend as Texas. You're not going to do Sebring?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I am not.

Q. How did you get to that decision?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, once INDYCAR decided to qualify on Saturday and whoever is not participating would start in the back, since Texas is a very tough place to pass these days, I don't think it's a smart idea to do that.

That was me and Mike came to the conclusion that we should put the priority first, and INDYCAR is the priority right now.

Q. Were you disappointed to not be able to do both?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Very much so. I was really looking forward to Sebring. It's a place that we didn't accomplish what we accomplished with Team Penske with an Acura. It would be really nice to continue what we finished at Daytona, so very disappointed.

Q. I know you both think very highly of INDYCAR and you both believe it's one of the strongest series in the world. It's at this weird place right now where it's growing and it's bigger and European drivers want to come to INDYCAR. But at the same time, Herta and O'Ward want to go to F1. What is INDYCAR right now to you guys? When you look at the series, where do you think it stacks up?

WILL POWER: Yeah, you know, obviously Formula 1 is the pinnacle when you look at the level of money and television coverage around the world that it has. So if you're a young driver, it's somewhere you would love to go and have experienced that series.

But as far as competing and competition and parity, there's

no other open wheel series in the world like INDYCAR. It is more competitive than Formula 1, not because the drivers are better but simply because the cars are all exactly the same. You've got so many drivers and teams that have been around for so long in these same cars that it is really, really tough.

You don't even have to take my word for that. Just look at the practice sheets and the qualifying times. You can mathematically work that out yourself, that INDYCAR is more competitive than Formula 1.

Formula 1 you compete possibly just against one person, which is your teammate, but maybe this year they have more parity. The drivers are not -- I'm not saying that INDYCAR drivers are better. That's not true. I'm just saying that the formula is more competitive, and I think the formula is better for fans, honestly. You never know who's going to win.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: For me when you're young obviously you want to try everything, and Formula 1 is middle of the world. Obviously as Will mentioned about money, and obviously you can explore so much more.

However, again, if you're not in the right team you're not going to be in the right position to even finish in the points maybe.

At INDYCAR it's completely different because the rules are able to allow your talent to show. Obviously you go out there and you might have one fantastic weekend and sometimes not, but the competition level in INDYCAR, it's so difficult.

However, because of the different styles of tracks, with ovals, with short ovals, with street courses, you definitely blend so many different talents, and you can still have, as we have today, drivers just not going for one style of racing.

You create more competition, create more buzz, and yes, that's why INDYCAR has continued going on the right direction.

Now, with Penske Corp taking care of the series, hopefully now with the pandemic just passed over, I do believe INDYCAR can concentrate to becoming what it used to be 30 years ago, 30, 40 years ago.

Q. Helio, you're starting your 21st full-time INDYCAR season, but from what we can see of you of course at Indianapolis last year and all those kind of things, you look like a 21 year old rookie just wanting to be fun and being that excited. Is that the case in a way?



HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, certainly every time you start a season you always get a little antsy, the butterflies in the stomach. That's what it's all about. I guess if you don't feel like that, probably you're not ready to do anything.

In my case I'm just super excited with, again, coming back with the team that now I have a little bit more understanding, new teammates and ready to go. Yes, I'm 46, feeling like 22 this way.

Q. You did six races last year. Which are the tracks this year that you are coming back to this year that you wait for the most? Maybe it's St. Pete this weekend.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yes, absolutely. St. Pete, as you heard them talking about, won three times there. Love to make it four. Detroit also is a place that I won the first time ever, and really looking forward to the last time we're going to be racing at Belle Isle.

Iowa was my last win in a short oval, so would love to go back and get that one, as well.

There was so many. Texas, won many times there, as well, too. I'm just happy to be back in a full time season, and having six races last year certainly helped me a lot understanding the new car. But again, it's still a new team. We're still going to go through ups and downs, but we're ready for the challenge for sure.

Q. Helio, you won of course the 24 Hours of Daytona already this year; then you went to Sweden to compete in the Race of Champions on ice. Tell me about this experience. That must have been quite different.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Incredible. I'm telling you, it was absolutely incredible. Every time you race at the Race of Champions it's great. You have a great time meeting incredible drivers. However, the snow in Brazil doesn't go very well. It was certainly very, very cold, but I'm glad I was wearing a lot of jackets to make sure to keep myself warm.

However, I need a little bit more practice to understand when you turn left you've got to turn right. It's extremely a lot of fun. I'm happy to have my family, as well, there. And, again, racing, especially with someone that I always look up to, was Mika Häkkinen. It was a guy when I was growing up and watching him race, it was really cool to see him and his sense of humor, and he's still got it. So it's pretty cool to see that.

Q. Will, it seems like over the last few years you've

really come on strong the middle to the end of the season, and you've always felt that if you had a strong start to the season you'd be more of a championship contender. Is that your mindset going into this weekend, is you have to fire off on the season really, really well?

WILL POWER: Yeah, I was like that last year, as well. Yes, very focused on the beginning of the season. I have to say I feel like I'm fitter than I was last year. I feel -- like I said before, I think the team has done some good development.

I think Chevy has found some good stuff, as well, on the drivability side. We'll see. I'm maximum effort. Every race counts for the same amount of points. But that is true, for whatever reason we have struggled early in the season.

Not last year. I guess we had a couple of good results early on and then it wasn't that special. But, yeah, can't really -- we've looked at every reason why that is. I feel like I've got a very good crew. I've got all the stuff, all the tools available to start really strong, and, yeah, be a contender from the beginning.

Q. Why do you feel like you're more fit than you've ever been? Did you change something up over the off-season? Are you doing a different workout routine?

WILL POWER: Yeah, well, slightly different, yes. You know, obviously the science is changing all the time and there's new ways, better ways, more efficient ways to work out.

Definitely stronger and fitter than I have been. I wouldn't say ever. I've been pretty high at some times, but right there. I'm stronger for sure and just as fit.

Q. The last three years, the winner of the season opener has gone on to win the championship. Do you feel like -- one, why is that, and do you think that that can be the same case again this year, that our winner this weekend could eventually be the champion?

WILL POWER: Yeah, I reckon what happens is that you don't -- for one, you're way more focused because you're leading the championship and you're focused on not making a mistake instead of focused on trying to win.

I think that's some of the psychology behind it, is that you're not trying to claw back. You set a pretty good base, boom, you've got big points and you adjust, nicely maintaining those points instead of desperately trying to claw back to get back in the game.



I reckon that's some of the reason that that happens.

Q. The new marketing campaign target fans not just in the Midwest, but seems to challenge fans outside of that market from where I am in New York to Texas. And if you had to let's say have 15 to 30 seconds to pitch the series to someone that doesn't know about INDYCAR, what would you say and what can fans expect to see in 2022?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, I'd say the most exciting races that you're going to have, the most competitive. You're never going to know who's going to win. It's the best drivers, the best teams, and it's pure excitement.

I guess if people haven't had a chance to go and check it out, not only one race but several races, they're going to feel like they were missing a big part of their bucket list.

I'm a big fan. INDYCAR runs through my veins, and I'm excited to be back.

WILL POWER: Yeah, you're not going to find a more competitive racing series in the world. You know, it's open wheel racing, so they're purpose-built race cars. We go to tracks like Indianapolis where in qualifying we're doing 240 miles an hour and 300,000 people will be watching on race day.

We need to get it out there as much as possible because the product is so good and you race on so many different disciplines. You have road courses, street courses, superspeedways, and Bullring short ovals.

Like Helio said, you never know who's going to win, you never know who's going to be on pole, and you really don't know who's going to win the championship until the last race and sometimes the last lap.

It's a great product, and it has been growing over the last decade. It's like significantly grown since I started in INDYCAR, and the teams and the drivers are the highest standard that I've ever seen.

It's a great series. It really is. It's a great series, and I hope that we continue to push to get it out to the public.

Q. Helio, welcome back to St. Pete after 1810 days.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Wow.

WILL POWER: That's a long time.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Long time, yeah.

Q. After five years this is your first full season; how different was your preparation for the '22 season? You changed something in terms of the mental and physical preparation so you have to start for 17 races? If so, would you share some details?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, in that aspect, it's pretty much the same. Even that I go and look at my logbook from the past, remember, the car has changed and the setup has changed. There is so much difference from what you had.

However, the combination that we have and the partnership that we have with Andretti Autosport, it helps so much because they were able to -- they were there last year, even Meyer Shank Racing were there last year to look to details, and that's where I'm going to start going.

I can't just go back too many years -- like 1800 days and start, okay, this is how I started. That's how it should be. You've got to just go with the flow at the moment.

But it was good. It was good. It's still changing, believe it or not. I'm still going to make a new seat after St. Pete because I still can't find the areas. I was like, Ug, still not there yet. But in the end of the day, you're still looking for improvement details to make it better, and that's what I'm looking for.

So I'm glad I had those six races last year so that we can start in a much better way this year. But the preparation is -- the mentality is the same it's always been. Like I said, I haven't been stopped. I've been racing with different type of series, which the mentality is very similar to whatever you're going to do next.

Q. Helio, if you win the race, where will you do spiderman? Next to the main grandstand?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, let me tell you, my friend, I will find a way. Normally it's something that you -- when you're going around the track, you're like, this is the spot. I can't say right now, but I'm definitely going to pick a spot when I'm out there.

Q. Will, what do you think about the situation that befell you're your compatriot Oscar Piastrì? Year after year this guy became the F2 and F3 champion and still didn't get to Formula 1. Wouldn't it be better for Europeans if Oscar was in an INDYCAR this season?

WILL POWER: Yeah, I think I understand your question. Yeah, Oscar Piastrì certainly deserved to be in Formula 1 this year having won back-to-back titles in Formula 3, then

F2 first year out as a rookie.

And then not to be in Formula 1, to me the system is sort of broken. Why? Why do they spend all this money to run something like F2 and you win the championship the first year, and I'm going to say the budget for that has got to be 2 million Euros or something like this, and not get a Formula 1 seat?

I think he deserves to be in Formula 1. He should be in Formula 1. I can understand why he wouldn't want to come over to INDYCAR, because he's worked his whole career. I'd have to say I was kind of disappointed that he didn't get a ride.

So we'll see what happens. It's a total travesty if he doesn't end up in Formula 1 next year because then he'll probably won't ever end up in Formula 1, which is just such a shame.

Q. What have you and Team Penske learned from the race in Detroit last year?

WILL POWER: I heard Detroit, so it must have had something to do with the car not starting. Yeah, that was massively disappointing. I so badly wanted to win that. It was such a hot day, too, so I would have got to go dive in that fountain.

It would have been perfect. I don't want to win on a cold day where you've got to get in the fountain. I want to win on a hot, hot day like that. Had I won, man, five to go, I mean, Ah, how bad is that?

It kind of felt like Helio at Edmonton in 2010 or '11 or whatever that was. He knows the feeling.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I felt it, Will. That was devastating. I agree with you.

Q. We have a Chevy driver here and a Honda driver. How do you think the engine competition is going to play out this season? Do you feel it in general depends on the type of tracks? Have you in the Chevy camp found something?

WILL POWER: Yeah, it's definitely -- I would say it's very close. Very, very close. Yes, we have definitely improved our engine on the drivability side, there's no question. We certainly have more tools at our disposal in that respect.

Very close. Very, very close. I mean, we've seen Honda be a bit better at some of the tighter street courses, but obviously in qualifying at Indy, a Honda has been better recently. But it's very close. No one has a big advantage.

It's pretty good.

Q. Helio, your thoughts?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, I believe Honda found something that is going to be a little bit ahead of the Chevy. I'm just messing with Will. Sorry.

WILL POWER: Helio, I know you so well. As soon as you said that, I'm like, oh, yeah, Helio is just winding me, trying to say, we know you didn't find anything.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I agree with Will. Both manufacturers, and that's actually big props for INDYCAR, they're trying to keep all the manufacturers close to not give anybody an advantage, and we were just mentioning we're very, very similar in all the places that we go.

It's going to be interesting. It's going to be definitely a big battle again this year, Chevy against Honda. That's why it's become so competitive, the series, because even the best scenario, INDYCAR makes sure that everybody is running really, really close and it comes up to the teams, it comes up to the drivers in the end, and that's why it's competitive.

Q. I find it interesting with all the activity in auto racing that we've had a lot of influence in the House of Penske. After all, you have Acura DPi, you and Simon. We have the NASCAR Busch Light Clash at the Coliseum won by Joey Logano, Team Penske. And then of course the Daytona 500 with Austin Cindric. What do you think it is with the Penske culture that delivers this kind of success? First, Helio.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, I worked with the organization for over 20 years, and no question they're looking for every small detail and continue to develop in off-season and during the season. It's a great organization and they don't see any limits. They actually -- the same way -- and I believe the INDYCAR started that with kind of like the work attitude translates to the NASCAR world, and probably that's why one of the successes that happened is having that mentality from INDYCAR to the NASCAR world.

Now it's not only that but INDYCAR and NASCAR, IMSA, they all have that kind of mentality, which helps. It helps everyone to stay in the program, understanding what they need to do. It gives you the tools that you need to go there and execute. The results obviously come out later, and it's no question the team that has the most record in a lot of the series, and they'll always be a contender.

Q. Will, your reflection on Penske culture?



WILL POWER: Yeah, it starts from the top down. You see the way Roger runs his corporation, the business, any business that he's in, and like he always says, it's human capital. It's the people that you invest in. He always has a very good team at the top, and that filters all the way down through the whole organization to really anyone doing anything within the shop.

Great people preparing the cars. You've got great people doing development behind the scenes, and you're expected to win. Roger expects the team to win. That's why last year was so disappointing on the INDYCAR side, because we did win but we didn't win enough, and we weren't competitive enough at Indianapolis.

Certainly went into this last off-season really, really digging deep, and the whole team looked at everything and has done some great development.

Hopefully that translates on to the track. It's a super competitive series and environment right now, so you can never know. But Roger expects all of us on the INDYCAR side to be contending for a championship.

Q. It was March 13, 2020, when this race got shut down because of COVID. At that time I think there was like five cases in Hillsboro County and there was a lot of panic back then. At that particular time only the die-hards knew who Alex Palou was and Jimmie Johnson was a NASCAR driver. Here we are two years later, Jimmie Johnson is an INDYCAR driver, Alex Palou is an INDYCAR champion. Talk about how different the world is today in INDYCAR than it was at this point two years ago before the shutdown.

WILL POWER: Yeah, I mean, it's not really -- I would say it's only got more competitive. I mean, yeah, obviously Palou is a champion. No one knew who he was in 2020, and Jimmie Johnson is running full-time in INDYCAR, even doing the ovals. Yeah, things changed very quickly.

But as far as the competition and the teams, it's pretty similar. Everyone has had this car for quite a while, and they've developed it to the nth degree. That's why you're seeing these ridiculously close qualifying sessions and a different winner every week and different pole sitter every week. Yeah, it's making a very interesting series.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, I'll echo what Will is saying. It's exactly the competition. For me it'll be interesting to see. I've been only six races last year, but I've been following INDYCAR all this time.

There was very little developing in the car except the

aeroscreen that was probably a couple of years ago that it was introduced. So all these little details.

You see shuffling people, mechanics and engineers that they can share information, whether they are in one team or another, which it creates even more of a challenge to everyone becoming more competitive, and that's why, as Will mentioned, it's so competitive. Hundredths of seconds decide who's going to be on pole.

Q. Are you amazed in spite of the pandemic that INDYCAR flourished both on track and financially?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, it was great props to the Penske organization, Roger able to give people security of the pandemic. Yes, a lot of people lost money during those times; however, giving that opportunity for everyone to believe and stay put, no question it helps the credibility of the series with everyone.

That's why the series is going even better for the future, because of people like Roger and that organization. As competitive as the series is now, can the Ganassi Team win three straight? And who do you guys expect to be battling for the title this year?

WILL POWER: I reckon you couldn't really name -- well, you could name more than 10 drivers almost. You could almost name 10 guys that you would say would be a contender for the championship, so it's anyone's guess really.

You know Newgarden will be up there. You know that Palou coming in for his third year will be up there. Herta, Rossi, the two McLaren drivers, the Rahal drivers, the Shank drivers. There's so many good guys now, it's really, really, really hard to pick.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, that's a good question and a tough one. Obviously the teams that have been there, the front runners, Penske, Ganassi, Andretti, and McLaren now, it's becoming one of them.

Our goal with Meyer Shank Racing is to become in that part of the group. As I mentioned, we're going to have some ups and downs, but for sure when you have teams with history, it's very difficult that they're not going to be there again.

Our position is to work our butt off to make sure that we are right there with those guys.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, two of the best in St. Pete. Hopefully that continues this weekend. Thank you so much for your time.



