

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Wednesday, March 16, 2022

Pato O'Ward

Taylor Kiel

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: A few days away from the second race of the NTT INDYCAR SERIES season. Arrow McLaren SP has some fond memories of Texas. Pato O'Ward brought up his first win at Texas last year, an adopted Texan, using the win to jump-start a championship run.

Joining us besides Pato O'Ward, the man who has been in Pato's ear the past several years as race strategist, we have Taylor Kiel as well.

Pato, heading back to Texas Motor Speedway, how much do you look forward to that?

PATO O'WARD: I'm pumped, man. Thank you, everybody, for joining.

I'm looking forward to it. First of all, it's a place that holds a very special place in my heart because I've lived in Texas for many years. Honestly if you would have told me that's where you're going to get your first INDYCAR win, I would have told you that you're crazy, but we did it. We did it there last year.

I think we've proven we had an oval package as a team that's as strong as anybody out there. I feel like this is a great chance for us to capitalize on a good opportunity, kind of (indiscernible) our way into this 2022 season after having kind of a rough start in St. Pete.

THE MODERATOR: When you look back a year ago, how important was that win to set the tone for what turned out to be a championship run for you?

PATO O'WARD: I think it was so important to get it out of the way. It was kind of like a reassuring of ourselves. We just won together. The group of people that were in, engineers, mechanics, driver, everybody together, we just won. It's like this package can win. It's proven to be race winners already.

I think you always believe it, but I feel like once you actually break through it, it's a fact, it's a statement, it's not a belief anymore. That was just huge into I feel like really knowing that we've got it, we can bring it to the big guns. I don't think it's going to be any different this year.

THE MODERATOR: Taylor, same kind of theme. What did that win do for the team last year, maybe the program, partners, how it raised expectations?

TAYLOR KIEL: I think Pato hit the nail on the head, validating for a lot of reasons to our team, all the people involved and what we're doing, partners alike.

For us, I think you go into a situation like this where there's a lot of change. We have great partners, new drivers, we're trying to put this team together, pave the path towards the top of the championship.

Breaking through for that first win I think gives everybody a lot of confidence that the path we're on is actually the right one. It wasn't a victory because of the timely yellow or rain or whatever. I mean, we went there and we took it.

I think that gave everybody a lot of confidence. I think it provided a springboard certainly for the 5 car group of guys that said, Man, we can do pit stops with the best of them, strategize with the best of them, put together a car that can go win.

In total for our team, it was a good experience, good confidence for everybody. I think it allowed us to do a lot of the good things we ended up doing throughout last year.

THE MODERATOR: Pato, it's not just a race weekend for you. You're hosting something called Pato's Home Fiesta, Texas Live!, located between the Dallas Cowboys and Texas Rangers stadiums, 5 to 8 tomorrow night. Your partner Mission Foods is sponsoring it. Tell us more about it.

PATO O'WARD: It's going to be fun. Pato special tacos, Arrow McLaren SP, INDYCAR two seaters. Dallas (Cowboys) cheerleaders are going to be there. It's going to be a fun time, man. It's going to set the tone for a fun weekend. Everything is bigger in Texas, man (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: I've heard that. Wins, included, especially if it's your first career win.

We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Pato, headed to Texas, we're talking about your first win. Yesterday I read on Racer about (a possible) move away from AMSP and McLaren. Can you expand on what's going on with that?

PATO O'WARD: As of right now, I have a long championship ahead of me. I'm focused into truly delivering something that I want to be proud of, that I want the team to be proud of. Honestly, I love the group of people that I get to work with, the engineers, the mechanics. Honestly, it's hard to say that I've met a group that's more hard working than them. In the off-season they've tirelessly tried to find what we have been missing, right? Last year we had a great oval package. I'm looking forward to try to capitalize on that, having a great weekend this week.

To be fairly honest with you, I'm fully focused in what I'm doing right now, which is driving and trying to do the best season that I can. My group of people is just scouting out what my future is going to look like. Yeah, that's pretty much as much as I've got right now for you.

Q. Did something change? This seemed like such a great home for you. Now all of a sudden they signed Colton and there's this headline you're looking to leave. Did something change?

PATO O'WARD: That's a great question (smiling).

I think we're all going to have to wait and see what that answer is, to be honest with you. I don't want to lie to you. I don't want to lie to everybody and say, No, no, no, or, Yes, yes, yes. We'll see how things shape out. I think it's too early in the season to truly see what's happening.

Honestly, as of right now, like I said, I'm fully focused into delivering a season that I know I'm capable of with the team that is around me. I'm sure things will start taking their place, yeah.

Q. Taylor, Pato says he has a big year, wants to win a championship. Arrow McLaren SP wants to win a championship. We're one race in and his name is in the rumor mill. How does that affect the team at all?

TAYLOR KIEL: Look, it's a blip on the radar, in my opinion. We've already addressed any of the rumors or otherwise with the team internally. I've got full confidence that everybody is focused and ready to perform at Texas.

That's really what's important to me, that we're ready to go. Everybody is here to win, everybody is here to do the job.

Certainly internally we're in a good place. I think that's really all that matters to me. The external noise, everything that surrounds situations like this, it is what it is, it's part of the sport. It's on us to make sure we have our house in order, when news needs to come out, it comes out from us and we go from there.

Q. Pato, there's always talk about PJ1 there. How much did you feel it last year? What do you see as being a solution to that particular issue that's developed over the last two years?

PATO O'WARD: Honestly, if I'm not mistaken, I think we were in the same situation as we were last year. As much as we'd love a second lane, I just don't think the PJ1 is a surface that's ever going to give us that second lane. If it does, it's going to be way slower, so it's not going to be a second lane where you can fight and pass people, rather than shovel your way back in a way.

I don't know, man. I think last year, even with that PJ1 there, there is enough space where you can pull off a move. It's not easy at all. I remember I got a little wiggly on it last year on restarts and stuff.

I mean, it is what it is. Can't just go on there and peel it, right, go back to how it was a few years ago. I never got a chance to race without it. I feel like it's unfair for me to give pros and cons or be comparing them.

I think we have to work with what we have. We had a great race there last year. We proved to be able to be making moves. Maybe not two or three at a time, but one at a time. It certainly wasn't easy.

I just think it's going to be the same this year.

Q. Despite its history and long tradition, the fact it's put on some of the best races in INDYCAR history, Texas Motor Speedway, the crowds have tapered off to a point where there's discussion whether it will be back next year. You from Monterrey, Mexico, having lived in Texas, how valuable of a market is it for INDYCAR to be in that part of the country, not only it's Texas, but an oval and a great venue for the Hispanic community to see you race?

PATO O'WARD: It's huge. I really enjoy going there. Not just because we were strong there last year. Ever since we went there for my first time in 2020, I've always just enjoyed it, enjoyed being in Dallas. I think it's a great track. It's certainly not an easy track to master, but I think it's a

track that has a lot of history, but it's a track that has a lot of character.

Obviously the characteristics of what it might have had a few years ago are different now, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's way worse, no. It's just different. You have to adapt. You have to be flexible, you have to adapt to what is getting thrown at you.

I'd honestly be very sad for it to go away. If it does, I'd love for there to be another solution in Texas because I feel like it's a huge market that I think is very important, specifically for me, but for our partners, for INDYCAR in general.

Yeah, I mean, we'll see what ends up happening, to be honest. Let's see. I don't really make those calls so all I can do is give my opinion and see what ends up happening.

Q. Taylor, if you were going to make the call, what would it be? Unless the fans show back up, what do you think the solution would be for that?

TAYLOR KIEL: I'm not quite sure. I think certainly I would hate to see Texas leave the schedule. I'm not aware of any of that being tabled at the moment. I'm certainly partial. We've had a lot of success there. As a team we've ran well there. I agree, I think it makes for some of the most exciting racing.

In terms of the fans, I think it's incumbent upon all of us in the INDYCAR SERIES to do things like we're doing with Texas Live, Pato's Home Fiesta, engaging partners, INDYCAR, even reaching out. I think the future of motorsport, as we all know, kind of lies in the collaboration between on and off track action now. That's the reality of the situation.

While we need to work hard to put a product on track that is exciting and loud and fast, in your face, like we're doing in INDYCAR, we also need to reach out and offer more of an experience to people, get them out of their houses, into the action.

Certainly us as a team, what INDYCAR is doing, is the right path. The rest will take care of itself. Certainly me personally, I'm very biased, partial to Texas. I hope we can all work together to bring the fans back into the stands.

Q. Pato, the new downforce package with the sidewalls, trim sidewalls, supposedly those can provide 10% more downforce. Do you think that will make a difference in passing, trying to pass, through the PJ1 and whatnot in the second lane?

PATO O'WARD: Honestly, a great question. I didn't get to test it a week ago or something. I know cars were there testing.

To be fairly honest with you, I don't know how much different that's going to make it. It will certainly give us more downforce, but it's going to give everybody more downforce. With more downforce comes more drag, so there's less of a slingshot.

I don't know, man. It's a great question. I think I'm going to -- I'll probably be able to answer it after we have our Saturday done with. Yeah, I really don't know.

I mean, we get to the point where, okay, maybe it's easier to follow. The problem is that you can't place your car in areas where you can't just place the car.

If it comes to a point where maybe it did help us, the problem is we don't have the space to work with in order to make those passes. Honestly, I think it all depends on how much it helps you to either tow up or tow down from a car. I think that's going to be the big teller into it's improving following lengths but not necessarily being able to kind of slingshot by.

It's a tough place, man. It's a triangle. It's not like you can just go around into different straightaways. It's tough. It's definitely going to be interesting to see. I don't know exactly what we're in for this weekend in terms of how different or how similar it's going to be.

Q. Will Power has suggested a practice of some sort, 15 or 20 minutes, where the drivers are instructed to run that lane. I guess the problem is who is going to be the first.

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, I hadn't heard about that actually to be fairly honest with you. I have no idea. Obviously if it's a practice to go and do it, then yeah.

I feel like we're going to get to a point where you can maybe run on it, but you can't run flat out on it. The point is you got to go flat, especially three and four, to get around someone there. If not, you're just going to slow down. I don't think the issue is rubbering in. I think the issue is how fast are you going to be able to go through there if you place your car there if there is no marbles there in a way.

I don't know. That's a great question. I have no idea what to expect for it.

Q. Pato, you've made no secret about wanting to be in F1 and race there. Did you know about the Colton Herta news? What was your reaction to it? Were you

disappointed you weren't selected to be part of that program?

PATO O'WARD: I knew a couple weeks back, yeah.

Q. We were told they were going to be looking at putting other drivers testing cars. Is there still movement that could happen there?

PATO O'WARD: I mean, I guess if there's a possibility, I think anything could be a possibility. As of now, I'm not aware that I'm part of that.

Q. To clarify, as far as contracts, you are under contract beyond '22 to '23, they were not going to allow you to go to another team. Is that correct? Do you have the ability to talk to other teams?

PATO O'WARD: I am currently under contract with McLaren. Just like anything, there are scenarios that I could stay where I'm at or there could be scenarios where I could be in a different place.

Q. You'd be allowed to solicit other offers, and McLaren could probably match it? Is that where it stands?

PATO O'WARD: Oh, man. You're good (smiling). Bingo.

Q. Taylor, Zak and Pato were saying at St. Pete consistency was a big part of the steps that Arrow McLaren SP had to take this year to be a part of the Ganassi, Penske, Andretti strata. How does the team view things now? Do you look at St. Pete being an outlier? Was it tough on the team?

TAYLOR KIEL: Yeah, no, I think it was disappointing for us, for sure. I think ultimately consistency is certainly key, especially when your ambitions are to win championships obviously. You need to look at the bad days and you need to take advantage of the good days.

For us at St. Pete, frankly we had a lot of issues last year with making the tires last and protecting the rear tires, doing those types of things. You lose a bit of pace. Fortunately for us, our partners, Chevrolet, have further developed their engine package. Frankly, I think we're just a little bit slow to onboard that, start to pull those Band-Aids off.

By the time we got to qualifying, I thought we had good pace in the car. We didn't quite execute. When you start off on the back foot in qualifying in the INDYCAR SERIES, as we all know it's super competitive, it's very difficult to pass, there's only so many things you can do from a

strategy perspective with the way the yellow flags may or may not fall on a street course race.

I think Pato drove fantastically in the race. I think when you start that far back, you're in damage control. St. Pete for us is one of 17. It is a small piece of the puzzle in terms of the championship outlook. Not dwelling on that by any means. Certainly we've done a lot of review and debrief and technical analysis on what went well and what didn't in St. Pete. I feel like we'll be better for it come Long Beach.

Texas is an excellent track for us. I feel very confident we can rebound.

Q. Pato said he can put the team's oval stuff up against everybody. It's just street and road. Is that the team's assessment?

TAYLOR KIEL: Yeah, I think our oval package is strong. I think kind of where we are in our development journey with this car, the aeroscreen era, I think we're a little bit late to the party in the road and street course stuff, but we kind of nailed the oval deal.

I feel like we've been able to maintain that through the off-season and level up what we're doing when we're turning right and left.

Again, St. Pete being a small part of the equation. While it is part of the equation, I feel like we've improved our package during the off-season. Feel very confident about Texas. Again, time will tell. I'm sure a lot of people in the paddock have done a lot of work to try to catch us to up certainly in the Texas package and improve their oval piece generally anyway.

We'll see. It's a new year.

Q. Sorry to return to this, but would your future depend on finding an INDYCAR team that can help boost your chances of getting into Formula 1? Also, is it difficult to be a young driver in the position that you're in, to find the team who knows you might not necessarily want a long-term deal because if you get an opportunity in Formula 1, you're going to grab it?

PATO O'WARD: I mean, great question. I think it's not a secret, right? This passion that I have for motorsports, it started with Formula 1. Of course, I'd be interested to be in Formula 1. But if the right opportunity arises and if I was able to extract the extra things that Formula 1 offers you as a professional, as an individual.

I love INDYCAR. I love INDYCAR racing. I think the series is on a constant rise. I think it's going to keep



getting bigger and bigger. My job right now is to try and help that in getting it bigger, specifically in the Latin market. I think we've done a good job so far but I think it can still grow a lot.

What I think people need to understand is, yes, I get it, Formula 1 is the pinnacle of motorsports. In terms of competition there is nothing harder than INDYCAR because everything is closer to each other. We'll see how the F1 unravels with the new regulation this year, all that stuff.

There's very limited seats. Many of the times, as we've seen in other forms of motorsports, it's not about can you do it, but is there a seat available, is there someone that wants to put you in that seat.

Honestly, it's a lot of the things that I can't really control. What I can control is trying to position myself in a place where I can see a future, in a place where my best chances, whether it's in INDYCAR or in Formula 1. Right now, to be fairly honest, INDYCAR is where I'm at. I need to see what my best positioning is for what I want to achieve. Everybody in the sport wants to achieve the exact same thing, right? We want to win championships, races, 500s.

Like I've mentioned many times, I love the people that I get to work with at Arrow McLaren SP, great group of people, really smart people, people that I know that believe in me, believe that me driving the 5 car, the car that they have built, the car they have set up, they know every time I go in it's always going to be more than 100%. I will extract everything that it has to offer.

When we make a mistake, it's together. It takes a team to win championships and to win races. It's not just the driver. I think for me right now, I really don't know what's in store for me. I feel like a lot of things can shift.

As quick as it might come, it can go away. It's a moving puzzle in a way. So I think right now the most important thing for me is to focus on my season and kind of let everything else fall into their place, see what comes of it.

I truly am kind of in the same place you guys are at. There's just a lot of noise right now. I want to do a great season for the team that has been behind me for these past couple years. I think we've had a great 2020. We had an even better 2021. I want to raise the bar even again for 2022.

We've been close to the big cookie, so I don't know why we can't do it, right? We need to keep working just like the Ganassis and Penskes and Andrettis are doing. You have

to continuously develop and find new ways because we are a spec-ish series. You need to find every little detail you can to get an edge over your competitors.

Right now it's just full fledge into trying to get everything we can out of analysis that we might have seen, races we might have had last year where we struggled, try and just make those better.

There's not a lot of things to say we need to win every race. It's impossible in INDYCAR. That's just not possible. But you can certainly bring your 16th place horrendous finishes to eighth or ninth. That's what we need to do.

For example, what Taylor said, in St. Pete, I mean, I feel like we started off the race obviously far back. I made the way forward to kind of open us our options, which it did. Then we can't tell the future, right? You can't tell the future when you're planning a strategy. You go with the strategy that you think it's going to be the quickest. A yellow comes into play. Once you commit to something, you can't be like, Oh, no, I'm going to go to another strategy. Maybe in short ovals you can be a bit more flexible. When it comes to a street course race like St. Pete, it's just two options. Once you stick to one, you can't go to the other one.

For us, we're kind of in the same boat as Dixie and Newgarden were. We took a gamble. That yellow was just a little bit too long. If it wasn't for that, I think we would have definitely been on a lot better shape.

It's hard to blame someone or something on that. It's racing. It's things like that will happen. You won't always be on the good end of it.

Q. If it transpires that Colton is testing for McLaren (indiscernible) Andretti Autosport into Formula 1 in 2024, does that mean everything is forgiven and stay at McLaren, does that help decide your future?

PATO O'WARD: No. Just like anything, you need to look at what the best is. You look into a place. The next decisions I take in my career are one of the most important. I need to make sure that I'm doing what's best for me and what makes me feel happiest. I think that's just as honest as I can be with it.

It's not like I want to be here, no, I want to be here. Just like anybody in any sport, right, you need to look at where is this going to take me, where do I want to be, and just start putting your puzzle together, start checking off the objectives of I want to do this, check, I want to do this, check, I succeeded in this, check, we haven't done this, let's work on that.

Just like any other athlete in motorsports or in any other sport, right, you need to be very careful and you need to be very aware of what's going on and make the best decisions that will put you into what he want to achieve.

Q. Taylor, totally different question. I realize this is quite a thorny issue. I wanted to ask you about what Juan Pablo brings to the team for the 500, how difficult it is to get a third team on the level of your full-time guys with Felix and Pato?

TAYLOR KIEL: Second question first, then the first.

The third car piece, it can be difficult. We've made it difficult on ourselves in the past by trying to just do it for Indy. What we've done over recent history, the last few years, is we've brought in these people full-time. They're full-time members of our team. The third car group did practice with the first and second groups. They're working in car builds, assemblies, job shops. They're fully integrated into the team so we can turn that switch on and off as we need to. It's given us a lot of flexibility with how we operate, whether it's with testing schedules or whether it's with any development testing we might need to do, whether it's running a third car somewhere.

That's been super beneficial for us. Luckily we have the resource and ability to do that. In the past when we didn't, it was distracting. We're trying to pull together 10, 12, 15 contractors that we haven't worked with, and expecting them to do high-level pit stops. If you go to Indianapolis to win, you have to do it at a certain level.

We've ticked that box, so to speak. We have a pretty robust program for when we want to turn it on.

What Juan brings is very simple: he brings a world championship caliber attitude. He's obviously won at Indy twice. That's meaningful. He knows how to get around. He knows how to seal the deal when the time comes. He brings a ton of experience.

For us, there's a level of continuity now with Juan where we've got a seat, his measurements, know what he likes, pick up from where we left off last year. Having the ability to get on with it rather than spending the first day or two familiarizing with each other is important.

For me it was a net positive to our program last year and I see it as being more positive for this year for those reasons.

Q. (No microphone.)

TAYLOR KIEL: I'm not sure. I think Pato could probably

better answer that. I know what's important for Juan, he has his own opinion. Whether it meshes or doesn't, it gives us another opportunity for us to look at something.

For instance, something that pops out to me specifically is where he places the car in the corners is a lot different than Pato and Felix. They get around at similar speeds, right? Is one better than the other? I don't know. It gives us an opportunity to look at it and evaluate different schools of thought.

I think that's where we can find ourselves in trouble, is if we're all thinking and saying the same things. It's nice to have a different opinion occasionally and have some challenging conversations, but not in a way that's negative. It's like, Well, have you thought about doing it this way? I think that makes us a better organization.

Q. Taylor, on Pato's future. You and Zak have spoken positively about Pato's performances since he's joined the team, the investment you put into him. How keen are you basically to keep Pato on the team? What's the level of intensity you are bringing to those discussions?

TAYLOR KIEL: I mean, look, for me, it's an absolute no-brainer. The one thing we all have to consider here, we're beating this question to death no doubt, but Pato is a young kid that's extremely talented. He's done a fantastic job for us. The team has done a fantastic job for him, right?

The fact he's been able to put himself in a position to compete for championships is a function of Pato's talent but also a function of the team, right? We're growing together. We are ticking these boxes together. We won on ovals, street circuits. We will win on road courses. We will compete and fight for championships together.

In my opinion, there's nobody I'd rather have driving one of our race cars than Pato O'Ward. I think he's an absolute world class talent. We've invested a lot in each other.

But Pato is young. He's got a lot of interest right now, as you would imagine. I think everyone in the paddock would be silly if they're not trying to at least have the conversation. I get it. It's part of the business. It's a lot of pressure for him. It's a lot of pressure for us. It's a lot of pressure for our team.

All we can do right now is focus on each other, internalize everything, make sure we keep the noise to a minimum, work through our business and make sure we're on solid foundations putting our foot forward. I have no doubt together we can be unbeatable and we'll get there. It's a



journey, right?

For him, it's kudos to him being as young as he is to be mature enough to handle these conversations and do it in the right way, handle the pressure of it all, while still being able to be laser focused and in a position to win races week in, week out.

This isn't the best thing that's ever happened to us as an organization, no doubt. Ultimately it will strengthen us and bring us together. As a team we're galvanized, strong, focused. I'm ready to get on with it, go to Texas and show everybody what we can do.

Q. One of the checklists for Texas would be the traffic from the rookie drivers. Taylor, from the strategy of how to solve the problem with the rookie drivers?

TAYLOR KIEL: The rookie driver piece, I would have to imagine it's something along the lines of he's been a rookie in this sport. You got to start somewhere.

The oval piece is interesting. It provides a lot of challenges. It's certainly the most high-level commitment of circuits. For us, we treat all drivers equally. They're all competitors in terms of developing a strategy to make sure they don't affect our race. That's not just limited to rookie drivers. You're always looking for clean air, specifically at a place like Texas.

For us, I think we'll let Pato know who he's around and the rest is up to him to time the passes appropriately and give the space that he needs to give to certain drivers. As you know, there's some people that you can race wheel-to-wheel with, and there's some people you hold your breath and hope you get out the other side.

For us, rookie or non-rookie, it's no different. They're all competitors in our eyes. We'll keep Pato informed and he'll make the best decision possible.

THE MODERATOR: We will wrap it up there. Appreciate your time.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports