

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Colton Herta

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We continue as content day 2023 continues with Day 1. Joining us now, the driver of the No. 26 Gainbridge Honda for Andretti Autosport with Curb-Agajanian, it is none other than Colton Herta. Couple wins last year. Couple poles. Look to capitalize on that. Do a little bit better, do more, do better, chase the championship and all that good stuff. Oh, by the way, you're back in car on Thursday. Can't wait I'm sure, right?

COLTON HERTA: Yes. Super glad to be back. The off-season always feels so long, and then all of a sudden we're here again. Good to be back.

THE MODERATOR: Then you blink and it's going to be Laguna.

COLTON HERTA: Exactly. It's crazy.

THE MODERATOR: Some changes in the team obviously heading into 2023. How does that shake out so far for you?

COLTON HERTA: So far, so good. Happy to meet and see all the guys again. Just happy to be here and get stuck in.

Q. Did I see you were on vacation? Was it Disney World? Where were you guys?

COLTON HERTA: I went to Disney World with Josef and Scott in between Daytona.

Q. Are you traumatized by that?

COLTON HERTA: It was all right. They took good care of me.

Q. How have you managed to block out all the noise? When we don't talk about what's going on in INDYCAR, we're talking about Andretti Global trying to get into Formula 1. You've done very good blocking out all the noise. Does that get difficult from time to time?

COLTON HERTA: No. It's very easy to just not pay attention to it. I don't know. I don't know how I do it or don't do it, but I just don't put much effort into thinking about it.

Q. By doing that, if you didn't do that, how much would it --

COLTON HERTA: I don't know. I've never let it get to me. It's never been a problem.

Q. Following up on that a little bit, how big a year is this for Andretti Autosport knowing that you guys have driver movement, you're coming off a year that didn't go exactly well, and as Bruce said, there's a lot of attention on Andretti and all of its plans for other series? How important is this INDYCAR being the anchor of Andretti Autosport to have a big rebound year?

COLTON HERTA: It's very important. Yeah, it's no secret that last year was not a good one for us. We need to do better on all fronts. That's what the main part of the off-season has been. It's been looking at everything and just trying to improve everything.

We just need mistake-free weekends, and that's the goal, one by one.

Q. Is that mostly what you've found, that it's just a matter of execution, that the foundation is there?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, we just can't make mistakes.

Q. Alex was in here earlier, Rossi, and was talking about you kind of becoming the leader. I think you already were inheriting the leadership mantle with your success the last few years, but now with him gone you're kind of like the dean of the team at 22 years old. How does that feel?

COLTON HERTA: It's not much of a difference for me. Maybe they'll rely a little bit more on my feedback and I might have to do a little bit more, but for me, it's kind of business as usual.

Q. So no change in style or vocal --

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COLTON HERTA: No.

Q. Let's just say the team comes to track and the car isn't that great when it rolls off the trailer. What can you do on a road course weekend to kind of catch up to everybody else?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it's hard on a weekend that you don't roll off the truck good, because everybody tends to make steps every session, so you always tend to be a little bit far behind.

But you really need to hone in on the biggest problems and try to tackle those.

Luckily, we haven't really rolled off the truck this year and been terrible. We've just been missing a little bit in some of the parts, a tenth or two, and that's enough to qualify fifth or 13th.

Q. In the off-season, how much did you and I guess Nathan O'Rourke work together? Did you work with your engineers in the off-season, or was it once you were done with INDYCAR, that was it?

COLTON HERTA: No, I don't think anybody really does that in INDYCAR. It is still a full-time job. Especially after some of the disappointing results last year, we definitely needed to figure out why and what we could do better from our side of things.

A lot of intensiveness of going through each race and seeing what was the problem on that race week and why could we not figure it out in the time frame that we had and how are we going to do it differently when we come back.

Q. You've had some questions already about being a team leader this season, now that Alex is gone. When you first came into INDYCAR, in your first two seasons, were you learning a lot from the likes of Ryan Hunter-Reay, and if so, did you take anything in terms of leadership away from what he was able to teach you?

COLTON HERTA: Guys like that, the leadership pretty much entails just being smart and really good at setup work. That's a big thing. You go to a place like the 500 and I don't have a ton of time there. I still have a lot of time, but not as much as a lot of these guys have.

So they know a lot of different tips and tricks and what they're looking for in the car, where I'm fairly confident that I know what I'm looking for, but yeah, so there's a little bit of an adjustment period there. That's probably like the

biggest difference is -- or the most helpfulness that you could bring would be setup work and your experience through that.

Q. Have you had any more discussions on a testing role with either McLaren or Alpha Tauri?

COLTON HERTA: No, not at the moment.

Q. Your relationship with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the Indy 500 has been something that I've really enjoyed watching over your career. I was in Japan and stayed up until 4:00 a.m. to watch your qualifying run in the 2019 Indy 500, and that was ridiculously impressive. And then your luck has been a little bit mixed. Coming into your fifth full-time season I believe it is now, what has your relationship with the Indy 500 looked like, and what do you think it's going to take to put together that all-important full weekend performance at the 500?

COLTON HERTA: It's not been a great one, to be honest. I think my best finish there is like sixth or seventh. Definitely not satisfied with how competitive I've been during the race, during the 500.

Practice, we've looked at it, have qualified really well there in the past, but for some reason, the race kind of eludes me.

So really understanding on evolution of the track from the first day all the way up until and through the race and what I need and what I need to stay on top of, that's the biggest thing for me.

Q. Moving into this more of a team leader role at Andretti Autosport, is there anything that you would offer an incoming driver to the team advice-wise about the event that you would consider unique to you or a bit of a hidden gem maybe?

COLTON HERTA: No, not really. Nothing that comes to mind. I think if something stands out that I would mention it, but no, nothing that really comes to mind.

Q. The addition of Kyle Kirkwood to the team, how well do you know him? And I think he's a little bit older than you, but have you raced together in series in the past?

COLTON HERTA: He was always a little bit behind me in cars, but I raced against him in go-karts. I believe last year was the first time I ever raced against him in a car.

But yeah, seems like a really quick driver. He's won a lot

of stuff on his way up to INDYCAR, and it's hard to judge off of what he did last year, right. This year you have a better understanding of how fast he is, I think.

Q. Is it good maybe to have that transitional year before he comes here?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, for sure. I think if you're looking at it from Michael's perspective, to get like rookie mistakes out of the way in somebody else's machinery than his, it's valuable for him.

But yeah, I think we'll see a much more rounded driver. I feel like that's your biggest gain in INDYCAR is from your rookie year to your second year. Everything else seems like minimal gains. But if you can put a good season together in your second year, it shows how much you've improved for sure.

Q. Pato was in here earlier and he was saying INDYCAR is different than other series where it's not like F1, they build a car and the drivers have to adapt to it. INDYCAR can be a lot more their own, sort of a more adaptable area. Is that how Andretti works with having so many drivers, that each gets their own autonomy over the car?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, I think we each share similar things, but there might be minor differences between a guy that likes a car a certain way and a guy that likes a car a certain -- understeer or oversteer. Maybe they're more pitch sensitive than another guy, so you might have some minor changes in setup because of that. You learn that throughout the year.

In the past four seasons I've learned what I liked and didn't like that Alex would do with his setup. It's something that you kind of learn from over time.

Q. The testing Thursday and Friday at Thermal, a track obviously you guys haven't been to before, you're not going to race at. What do you feel like you can accomplish there? What are you going there to accomplish, and what do you know about that track and INDYCAR being there?

COLTON HERTA: I don't know much about the place. I've never been here before. It looks like an interesting track. I've only seen very little video on it. But tomorrow we'll have full debriefs and whatnot on the track and what we expect to do for the next upcoming days.

The biggest thing is just having a place that you can knock the rust off, and I haven't really seen the runoff and what that looks like, if it's enough room or not.

But hopefully it is because you do tend to drop a wheel here and there, have a spin if you're getting back in the car for the first time in a few months.

Q. These last couple years you've had ones where you've been contending for a potential championship, and I know last year wasn't what you wanted it to be. On a year where things are just kind of a little off, at what point in the season did you feel like you just didn't feel like this was maybe the same type of year that you might have had the last couple?

COLTON HERTA: I'm not too sure. I was always hopeful going to the track, and every weekend was a full reset. I never felt like I was going to the track and just doomed like I wasn't going to do good.

Yeah, I don't know. Just seemed like during the races, we struggled. Qualifying we seemed to struggle a little bit. My average qualifying was, I think, like 4.2 positions worse than it was the year before, and that affects you big time in the races, as well, if you're not qualifying up front as consistently, just giving yourself more work.

One-lap pace I think we can improve on, and definitely in the race, also.

Q. Did you come away this off-season with your work with Nathan and the team at large feeling like you guys were able to figure some things out? And a second part to that, when you're coming to a track like Thermal where no one has tested on this track before, it's not a track that we're going to at some point later in the year, do you feel like this is a place where you can pick up or know for certain if you guys are on the same page or have something to work on before we get to St. Pete?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it's going to be difficult to say. I think timing here is going to be hard to judge. I'm not too sure.

If the track feels similar to a place then maybe there's some relevancy, but as far as grip level and whatnot, I'm really not sure what to expect. It could be that it helps us for a place like, who knows, Barber or Indy because it has a similar feeling. Or it could just be irrelevant to us in the progression of making the cars better, but nice to get track time.

Q. A couple drivers have mentioned that they've gone to the level of watching some YouTube videos of just kind of cars going around the track because there's no simulators with the track on it. Have you done

anything like that, or are you really coming in pretty blind tomorrow?

COLTON HERTA: I've seen some onboards. Yeah, it's difficult to watch some of the onboards because it's not really professional drivers and they have like the cones set out on the track, where to turn in and where to get on the brakes, so it's kind of irrelevant.

Yeah, I watched a little bit before I got too bored and turned away. But the track walk will be important. That's going to be the biggest thing.

Q. How often did it take before you got bored, watching the videos?

COLTON HERTA: I think probably the third lap of some dude in a Ferrari. I was like, all right.

Q. When you have a difficult weekend, is there someone that you turn to, that you talk to and talk that weekend through with?

COLTON HERTA: It's really just Nathan. Me and Nathan really have to go over and -- I think for both -- our strong suits are pointing fingers at ourselves and saying what was wrong. In that way, it's easy to get better when you can blame yourself. That's what I always try to do, even if I get taken out.

You can always thumb it down to yourself, how did you get in that position, how did you let somebody get that close to you, were you making a mistake, was the car not good enough, why was the car not good enough, you not do a good enough job in practice? You can always somehow turn it around to yourself so you can always learn from something.

Q. Is there a danger to that of getting into a negative cycle of always blaming yourself?

COLTON HERTA: No, because I don't blame myself. It's lighthearted.

Q. You mentioned knocking the rust off at Thermal. I presume you did a lot of that the last two weeks at Daytona. How did that feel, even though BMW didn't have the race you wanted?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it was great to get in the car and push the pedals. It's obviously a very different feeling than driving an INDYCAR, but the same principles, so it's nice to kind of get in the mode of doing your debriefs and feeling the car out and whatnot. It's the perfect way to kind of gear up for the season I feel.

Q. Are you set for endurance races with them?

COLTON HERTA: I only do -- at the moment I'm only planned for the 24.

Q. I wanted to ask, was there a particular focus on tracks last year that you felt maybe caused you guys to fall behind on other tracks? Like we saw obviously the Indy road course, which had always been not a good track for Andretti Autosport and it suddenly became a good track for you. Do you feel like your other tracks suffered as a result of improving that?

COLTON HERTA: It's tough to say. I think I struggled with the change of these red tires. Road and street courses, we seemed to take a step back because of that. That was kind of a focal point of the off-season is understanding what we're feeling in practice versus how much does that change in the race, and then having a setup correlate to that.

Q. I'm writing for Detroit, and I wonder if you could say a little bit about your anticipations for the new track there, and especially considering that you're so good on street circuits.

COLTON HERTA: I haven't seen too much about the track. I've seen the layout, but I haven't seen the actual street that it's taking place on. It looks like an interesting layout. I think it's fairly basic with 90-degree corners, but it looks like it has some good setups for overtaking.

I think the pit lane is going to be very interesting. It's like a split pit lane, right, with both sides? We'll see how that goes.

But it sounds interesting.

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. It's always great to go to Detroit. I loved racing on Belle Isle. I really loved that street circuit, so it was a shame to see it go, but I'm happy that we're still going there in some capacity.

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