

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Tuesday, January 31, 2023

Kyle Kirkwood

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Kyle Kirkwood, driver of the No. 27 for Andretti Autosport this year, driving the Honda. Tell us about your day. How is it going?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: It's going good. This is one of the last things I have, here and Firestone. It's actually gone quite a bit quicker than last year went by a long margin.

THE MODERATOR: Heading from AJ Foyt to Andretti this year, back to Andretti for you. It's got to feel good, and I'm sure you're champing at the bit to get going on Thursday, right?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, no doubt. I've got kind of a reference of what the Andretti Autosport car is already like. I did three days in the car preseason to 2022. It's kind of funny because 2022, I felt like the entire year I was trying to mimic what the Andretti car was like, and I feel like I kind of never got to that point with the AJ Foyt car.

I'm so curious to get back in that car and see and know what we were missing. It's something that's kind of been eating me alive through the off-season because you know that's something that Andretti is not going to tell me. But once I get in the car and I'm able to feel it, it's going to be pretty cool.

I'm excited. I couldn't be more ecstatic about this opportunity and getting back with a team that I won a championship and a very important one to my career.

Q. Elaborating a little bit more on the Andretti experience, obviously this team is not foreign to you at all, but when Colton was in here he was saying that the way he put it was maybe it's good to have the transitional year your rookie year at another team because you tend to make mistakes and damage equipment. Now you come here and those have gone away. Are you looking at it from that perspective at all?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I feel like there's a lot of people that look at it that way. If you look at one of the most

successful teams being Penske, they don't take rookies. That's kind of how it goes.

To that point, Colton did the same thing. He was with Harding Racing when he started off. He had a very successful season there with them. But it's nice to have that transition year, right, where you have -- where you're able to hone in on your skills and learn everything, but even with that being said, last year for me, I was fully focused on doing so well with that team and trying to progress them forward and stuff.

But now that I've gotten into this year now and taken this step back and kind of looked at it, I was like, man, I needed a year to learn and try and hone in on my skills and learn all the different things about INDYCAR that you don't learn in junior formulas. Biggest thing is pit stops and strategy and having two different types of tires. Those are way different than anything I've done.

Q. Another thing Colton said, staying on the topic of mistakes, that was a big problem for Andretti last year, when they did their deep dive into 2022 they discovered the foundation was there but the execution wasn't always there, especially with him qualifying so well. Results didn't pan out. Have you gotten a sense of that, being in the team now for a few months?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I mean, just joining with the team and kind of seeing how they work and operate and whatnot, they've obviously got all the fundamentals and go and win championships. I think that that was a sure thing, no doubt. It just seems like things, stars needed to align a little bit better for them last year, whether it was a pit stop mistake here or a small error here or a wreck here, whatever it might have been, it kind of hindered them from winning a lot more races than I think they should have.

I think the team has recognized that, and I think we're very much on our "A" game to make sure that these small little mistakes don't happen.

Yeah, and that's ultimately going to be the goal, right, because the fundamentals are there.

We know we're going to have a fast car at a lot of tracks. Obviously the street courses are probably a strong suit for



Andretti Autosport as well as like Indy GP and whatnot, so we expect to be extremely fast there and be able to win races, but we need to make sure we get all the fundamentals together and make sure the stars align, but that's within our control, too.

That's the important thing.

Q. Even though it was a little bit of an off year for Andretti last year, they obviously are in the headlines with F1 or new IMSA team, there's all these things Michael Andretti is doing, but this is still the anchor of his racing enterprise for Andretti Autosport. How important is it for Andretti Autosport to rebound and have a big year for INDYCAR this year?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I think it's massive for them. Andretti, like you said, this is their anchor series. Yeah, there's aspirations to go to Formula 1, but at the end of the day, this is where they're from. They're from INDYCAR, they're from Indianapolis, and that's where they're going to stay. INDYCAR is the main focus to them.

It is important that we go out there and have hopefully a standout year because I think that will set kind of the mood for the years to come with the way Andretti and Andretti Global is going.

Q. Kyle, over the last couple years, this Andretti Autosport team had a lot of veterans on it. I think of Rossi, Ryan Hunter-Reay, James Hinchcliffe. It's become progressively a lot younger team. Romain obviously is older but just has one full year in the series. Do you guys collectively or you specifically, do you come in here feeling like you guys need to -- mature is maybe not the right word, but just pick things up a little bit more quickly to try and carry the load that those veterans were carrying for this team?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I think mature is a good word for that. I feel like, yeah, there's obviously with years of experience, you learn a lot of things, so I feel like us being a younger group, we've got to pick it up. We've got to pick it up really quickly, and I feel like Colton, I think Colton is younger than me, and he's going to be really the one leading this program for us, and obviously he's had five years in it, so he's got a lot of experience, but he's also still very young.

But I think he's done a fantastic job, and that's something that we need to mature on. I think we need to definitely be at a standpoint that we need to act like these veteran drivers, like Dixon, like Newgarden, like Will, even though we're so young.

It is a tougher position for us, but I think we're very capable

of doing it.

Q. Colton has often brushed off the idea that he's in this big leadership role, whether it's going into this year where he's, as you mentioned, been here for five years longer than anyone else or when he was winning more than Rossi was over Rossi's last couple years there. You know Colton better than we do. Do you sense that he can be or wants to be or needs to be a little bit of a leader, or is this kind of more of a driver makeup where everyone can kind of bring something to the table and you guys can work more collaboratively?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I'd say it's a little bit different with Andretti. I think Colton's way of saying that he's like kind of brushed off his leadership role is in a sense that he's not beating on his chest, like I'm a driver; everyone kind of bows down to me. He's trying to brush that away.

But at the end of the day, he's the one with the most experience, and if he does something, we're kind of going to ask him the questions, be like, hey, Colton, when you tried this, what exactly happened, because he's the one with the most experience, and he's been the most successful driver on the team that we've had. It's a sure thing that we're going to reference off of him, which in a sense makes him kind of the lead driver, yeah.

Q. I know your experience is different, but going into before you went into your rookie season, I know we were talking about leading this before we officially started here, but when you had that scholarship that had been set up for quite some time, how helpful or how comforting was that going when you were trying to figure out where you were going to end up, knowing that you had all that money behind you that even if you were someone who doesn't bring a ton of money outside the scholarships that you had that to help you along with your success at the lower levels?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I mean, at the end of the day, the scholarship isn't going to fund a full program. Not even close. Maybe a fifth of it for some teams, right.

But it is super important because all the scholarships that I had leading up to INDYCAR are what kind of kept me alive, and definitely the scholarship that I got from Indy Lights kept me alive into INDYCAR. Having that over million dollars to go racing in INDYCAR is a very nice incentive for any team owner.

So yeah, that definitely kept me alive.

Q. You brought up a good point about Colton being

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

the elder statesman team leader, and he said he's the youngest on the team, so how unique is that, that the youngest driver on the team is the one with the most experience?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: It's definitely a unique situation, but at the end of the day he's the one with the most experience. He has a right to be kind of in that position. It's not a -- I'll say it again, it's not a position that we're all expecting him to lead us on track or expecting him to lead us off track and lead us with car development. He's ultimately our main source of contact really.

Q. How does it feel to be a key cog in what is basically an Andretti youth movement?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: A what?

Q. You're a key part of an Andretti youth movement.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yes, yes, and I feel like it's everywhere in INDYCAR nowadays. There's kind of a new wave of drivers coming in, and it's nice to be a part of it. There's young drivers filling in to all the top teams, and I'm one of them, so it's a cool movement that's happening, but it happens every 10 years or so, and this is just the next one.

Q. Of course we spoke a few times last year about the challenges that you faced at Foyt, but do you feel that at times you were maybe overdriving the car a little bit to compensate? Is that fair?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I mean, that's completely fair to say. You could definitely say that. But at the end of the day, when you're 20th and you feel stuck, naturally you're not going to just give up, you're going to push to the absolute limits. In a sense that's what we did. We overachieved some places and we underachieved by trying to overachieve at some other places. It's unfortunate events, but I learned so much and I can't wait to take what I learned into this season.

Q. How difficult was it to come after -- you came off a number of years where you basically won everything you could win and then to be suddenly fighting for 20th, it must have grown you mentally, as well.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Not so much. I wouldn't say it grilled me mentally. I kind of understood what the expectations were. I wasn't showing up to INDYCAR and being like, oh, I can't wait to go win some races in INDYCAR. That's kind of not the mentality that I had. I expected to probably get some top 10s. We got one top 10, and I knew I needed to learn, and it's shown me, as I've now gotten through the

year, my first rookie INDYCAR season, and look back at it now, I've just learned so much. That's the biggest thing I'm taking away from it, not any of the finishes.

Q. I didn't mean to say grill, I said grow, that it helped you grow mentally.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Oh, sorry, grow mentally? Is that what you said? I thought you said grilled me mentally.

Q. No, no. Anyway, I think you're going to surprise a lot of people this year getting into this car. You mentioned the scholarship before, and you've always said how important that was for you to climb the ladder. With that in mind, do you have some reflections on the reasons for upgrading of the scholarship for Indy next again, especially after the situation with Linus?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I mean, that's something that's completely out of my pay grade, but you're obviously referencing Linus, right?

Q. Mm-hmm.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I think it's a super unfortunate situation that he's in. I highly respect Linus. I think he should be one of the next young drivers, like we were just talking about. He should be part of that next youth movement, and the circumstances that he's in is obviously not an ideal one. I think he's the first Indy Lights champion that hasn't made it into INDYCAR in quite some time that I can think of, at least a full season's seat for at least a year. It's disappointing to see for me because I feel like if it was a year later for me in his seat that I would be in the same position, unfortunately.

Q. We have talked a bit about the situation you're in being in this sort of youth movement at Andretti, and that goes without saying, the implications that has for a team so large and so historic. But something that's unique to your situation is in the middle of that youth movement having someone who is 13, 14 years your senior and a former F1 veteran in the form of Romain Grosjean. Having Grosjean in the team, how has that impacted your process of gelling into the Andretti fold?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: To be honest, we're so fresh into this that us drivers haven't had really a big chance to bounce things off of. Once we start driving, then we start to work together a lot. I'd say that really hasn't happened much in the off-season, so that's still yet to come.

But I think it's a very unique dynamic that we have in the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Andretti camp. We have three really young drivers, all with lots of experience in many different forms of motorsports, and then we have Romain who has the most experience in motorsports, drove in F1 for many years, he's driven in INDYCAR with two different cars now, so he's got so much things to reference, as well. We've just got a whole bundle of knowledge that I hope this year we can ball up and use to our advantage.

So I'm kind of excited for it.

Q. Last year when you were obviously trying to wring the neck of a reluctant car, was it frustrating for you to see how well your former Lights rival Malukas was doing, or was it actually encouraging because you think --

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Well, he's sitting in the room with us back here, so...

To be honest, David, hats off to him. He did an incredible job last year as a rookie driver. No, I'm being honest. I'm being honest. Like his drive at Gateway was incredible, just drove around everyone, close to winning. He did a phenomenal job.

I think him and I were very comparable in the Indy Lights season. I won 10 races, he won eight I think it was, and it came down to like a few points at the end of it. It was either one of ours to win.

Honestly, I was happy to see him do really well because if we both did not so good, then we were both out of the leader's circle and stuff, it would be like, oh, maybe that Indy Lights group wasn't that good, but actually David doing so well kind of put us back or put me back on the map a little bit, because it's like, Kirkwood did better than him and won the championship against him, so obviously he's going to have a chance the following year.

In a sense if you look at it in that sense, it actually helps me.

Q. I wanted to ask if you have been studying the traces of your new teammates from 2022 data. Is there a particular driver that you think that your driving style will mesh well with?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I think Colton's, to be honest. I think him and I are very similar in driving style, and we base a lot on simulator stuff. I've done a bunch of simulator stuff that I didn't have the luxury of doing last year already preseason this year, and we're going to continue to do that.

So far it seems like Colton is going to be the close he's to

me. It was the same in Indy Lights, too. Indy Lights I almost always drove what Colton did, and him and Pato were vastly different. It's going to be nice to have that very similar dynamic.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks so much, Kyle Kirkwood, driver of the No. 27 for Andretti Autosport with Auto Nation on the side of that Honda in 2023.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

