

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Friday, February 3, 2023

Zak Brown

Sam Schmidt

Gavin Ward

Felix Rosenqvist

Alexander Rossi

Pato O'Ward

Press Conference



LAUREN GAUDION: Good afternoon, everyone. We have a great audience here at Thermal. I'm Lauren Gaudion, director of communications with Arrow McLaren.

Joining me onstage we have No. 5, Pato O'Ward, No. 6 Felix Rosenqvist, No. 7 Alexander Rossi, McLaren CEO Zak Brown, racing director Gavin Ward, and team owner Sam Schmidt.

We'll start with some opening statements from Zak, then move along to Gavin and open it up for questions.

Zak, you want to get us started.

ZAK BROWN: Certainly. It is officially good afternoon. So good afternoon, everyone. Excited to be here at Thermal for the first-ever INDYCAR spring training test.

Very excited to be here with our three drivers, our newest one here that we worked hard to get, Mr. Rossi, and of course our returning veterans now of Arrow McLaren, Felix and Pato. Great to be here with our partner Sam and our racing director Gavin Ward. We're very excited about Gavin leading the team moving forward.

It's been a very busy off-season, ultimately recruiting a lot of people for our expansion, then of course announced Tony joining us for the Indy 500 this year, and Kyle Larson joining us in '24. We're definitely thinking long-term about our commitment to INDYCAR racing.

I think we're going to field very competitive racing cars with aspirations for them all being in a position to win races and

compete for the championship.

That being said, we are still a pretty young team, especially with onboarding. The amount of people that we've onboarded over the winter will take some time to work through the experience of working together.

But we are very excited.

So let me turn it over to Gavin, who is ultimately responsible for leading the performance of our racing team.

GAVIN WARD: Gavin Ward here, racing director. Very happy to be here at Thermal. Very happy to be here getting some race cars back on track.

We've got very few days to get ready for St. Pete. So this is crucial time for us with the additions and growth of the team, to pull this team together and gel, get ready for St. Pete. It's going to come up in a hurry.

So far been very happy with it. Blown away by the positive atmosphere and the great integration of Rossi into the team. Yeah, it's been a neat venue for us.

For us, the approach here is not so much about going to win the test, but really about making sure we learn as a team, we nail our processes, we learn how to work together, and we learn about the development to the race car so that we can be more competitive once racing starts here.

LAUREN GAUDION: With that, we'll started taking questions from the field.

Q. (No microphone.)

ZAK BROWN: INDYCAR racing is different from Formula 1. I think we always have to be careful to think that bringing Formula 1 is some sort of magic to INDYCAR racing. INDYCAR racing is as competitive as any form of racing I've ever seen.

That being said, we do have aspects of our Formula 1 technology and know-how that we will ultimately long-term be beneficial to our INDYCAR teams.

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So to have someone like Gavin who understands the capabilities of a Formula 1 team and an INDYCAR team is what you need to understand where are there areas that you can extract knowledge and know-how to the benefit of the INDYCAR team.

I think when we looked at Alex as a driver, it is great that he has Formula 1 experience. I've been following Alex prior to being in Formula 1. Alex and I first met in England. When we looked at Alex, alongside Felix and Pato, we thought it was the perfect complement of speed, experience and kind of global knowledge of motorsports. We think Alex will bring a lot to the table for what is still a pretty young team.

Q. Gavin, the ability to work with all three drivers as the race director, how important is that? What are some of the bigger-picture ideas you bring to the team that can help them increase even further?

GAVIN WARD: I think you kind of nailed it with the start of that question. To succeed in INDYCAR requires exceptional collaboration amongst drivers, engineers, crew. It's interesting with how tight it is in this sport, we kind of have to raise the bar as a team working together.

I think that's my big emphasis actually right there.

Q. Zak, how influential is it going to be having Tony onboard for the Indy 500?

ZAK BROWN: I think he's got a lot of experience. He's won the race, as has the guy sitting to my left. So I think, I don't know, that's probably one for the drivers because I think where he adds value is obviously with the team, but maybe ask Felix and Pato, who have yet to win Indy. Gotten really close.

Q. For yourself, Pato, Felix, go ahead.

FELIX ROSENQVIST: Yeah, I mean, Tony has been around for a very long time.

ZAK BROWN: I'll tell him you said that (smiling).

FELIX ROSENQVIST: One of the first drivers I knew in INDYCAR. He's a great guy off the track as well. I think he has the mentality where he always tries to help, is a team player. I think that's more valuable than anything.

If we all want to do well, we're all going to have to work very closely together. I think that's already in the mentality with me, Pato and Alex. We don't really hide anything. I think adding Tony, he will definitely be onboard with that.

He won the race. He's had a lot of success there. He finished between me and Pato last year in P3. So, yeah, looking forward to having him.

Q. I was curious why did we pick Tony Kanaan to run the 500 this year?

GAVIN WARD: Tony, he's super experienced, very capable, no doubts that he'll be straight up to speed. For us, with a growing team, that's an obvious choice for us to put in the car and build out our depth for the biggest race of the year, the biggest race in the world.

That would be the obvious one.

Q. Zak, motorsport is a business. With the number of New Zealanders you have driving for you, what does it mean to you culturally, significance-wise, having the name McLaren associated with the team?

ZAK BROWN: I mean, I grew up as a McLaren fan, as I think many people have. My earliest memories of McLaren date back to '88 with Senna versus Prost, back when I was racing. I feel like I've got the second-best job in motorsports. I feel like the guy to my left, the two to my right, have the best job in motorsports.

I don't know. Alex, you've been a fan of McLaren. I think the drivers can probably talk more to what it means to be a McLaren driver.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, I mean, there's a huge amount of obvious performance that's synonymous with the team. And for us as individuals that are a part of it, it's up to us to raise our game on and off the track to represent the brand.

There's a huge privilege that comes with that, but also responsibility.

It's early days for me, but very excited to be able to call McLaren home and look forward to pretty cool things we're going to be able to accomplish together.

Q. Sam, in many ways what you did in the Indy Lights program was the foundation for where we are now. When you look back, does that make you very proud to know you created some of this?

SAM SCHMIDT: Overwhelmingly. Second only to being the father of two great kids, I think this is very similar.

As Zak mentioned, I've known Zak for over 25 years, we're both racers as heart. That's why we're here. That's why everybody in this room and on this paddock are here.

We want to win. Through 10 years of Indy Lights, seven championships and 80 wins, probably the biggest compliment I ever got was by the announcers being the Roger Penske of Indy Lights, right?

It still wasn't good enough. You want to win the Indy 500, you want to win championships. After eight years of punching above our weight with guys like Simon Pagenaud, et cetera, I can tell you the guy at the other end, we tried to get him seven or eight years ago. This caliber of driver is what it takes to win. I believe we started strategizing with Zak right about 2018.

I want to be involved. It's obviously difficult to travel all over the world. The competition with racing in multiple forms of series, Formula E, INDYCAR, Global Rallycross, you name it. I didn't have the bandwidth to do that, nor the resources.

I think this is the perfect two-year engagement, now a bit of a marriage. Resource-wise it gives us the opportunity to have everybody you have sitting up here, lots of orange shirts in the paddock, you can't miss us. Sorry, papaya. Have to get that right (smiling).

This is a dream come true. I can be associated with people like Arrow and Onsemi and Lucas Oil and NTT, pursue my dreams in a car again, do some things with the foundation that we couldn't do, but also be a part of this going forward for a long time to come.

Thank you for the question. But, yeah, seems kind of weird coming from me, but I live the dream every day.

Q. I wanted to ask again about somebody who is not here, Tony Kanaan. If he wins the 500 this year, it's going to be hard to get rid of him when you already signed Larson. Are you looking forward to running five cars at next year's Indy 500?

ZAK BROWN: I hope we have to deal with the luxury, challenge of having one of our drivers drinking milk at the Indy 500.

I've known Tony for 30 years. We were teammates in 1993. We were laughing about it the other night. He didn't really speak in English. That was before he came over to do Indy Lights.

I'm looking forward to us racing with Tony.

Q. Gavin, I wanted you to talk about how easy or difficult it was to expand at a time when we all know it's really hard to find really good personnel. You

chose this year to field three cars.

GAVIN WARD: That's a great question.

Yeah, I mean, it's a fight for talent out there. There's no hiding that right now. Very happy with how our recruitment has come together in the off-season. We've had to get a little bit creative.

I think that's actually how we always looked at it. We didn't look at just wanting to bring in people from the INDYCAR paddock necessarily to fill the slots we needed to fill, we always kind of wanted to bring in a good mix.

We've got some great hires from other racing series. We have a great mechanic from World of Outlaws, a great mechanic from Williams F1. We brought in engineers in from Cup. We have an engineer from Boeing, one that has a Salesforce background. Happy with the amount of diversity we've brought in there.

Also a little bit of promoting from within. Chris Lawrence stepping up as engineer for Felix. Really happy to give him that opportunity and recognize his success and contribution with this team.

Q. Felix and Pato, how do you feel after the first day and a half of testing and where are you at after an off-season of hard work now?

FELIX ROSENQVIST: I mean, it's hard to say. This track is very different from anything we do. I think it has some similarities to maybe Portland, some Indy GP. There's some really slow corners that we don't have in the calendar.

We try to learn where we kind of have a corner that are similar to what we normally do.

Honestly, the cars are so even now, they're very equal to what we all ran for the past two years. It's all in the details. I mean, we'll be strong. We're up there. But now is not really the time to judge if you're going to be on pole or not in the next race. We're just trying to learn. We have a master list of things to go through.

No, I'm very positive about it. It feels very good so far. As Gavin said, new engineer this year, Chris. Just getting up to speed with that, as well.

Everything feels good. But I can't answer if we're 5/10ths or 1/10th, plus 1/10th quicker than last year.

Q. Zak, some big news in Formula 1 with Ford coming onboard for Red Bull. Do you have any kind of opinion

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on that, what it means for Formula 1 and McLaren from your perspective?

ZAK BROWN: Yeah, I think it's great. Formula 1 is growing in leaps and bounds at the moment. Long may it continue. Ford has a great history. Jim Farley, who I know quite well, is a racer at heart, as is the Ford organization.

I think it's fantastic for the sport to see another big OEM come in and join our sport.

Q. Alex, we spent Content Day bugging you, asking you how you're feeling, how are you getting acclimated. Now you have three sessions, how are you feeling after that?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, we're getting there. I mean, it's a lot of new things. It's obviously a new team, but there's new people on the team, as well. I'm not the only new person. There's new computers. Everything is new, right?

There were some bugs yesterday that we were sorting through. It's a new manufacturer for me. It's been a little bit weird because Felix and Pato don't really have a benchmark of what the car should feel like here either, so we're all kind of learning together in a strange way.

It's been very productive. This morning was heads and shoulders better than how yesterday was going for us. I think we're getting settled in and this afternoon should be another step better.

Generally happy. The big thing is, everyone has kind of faced adversity and everyone has just kind of dealt with it. There's been no stress or panic. We're kind of taking it one step at a time, which is very encouraging.

Q. You talk about the new manufacturer. Often we see drivers switch teams. Have you felt any differences, nuances, that you can share?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, they're certainly different. I mean, I think it's very public knowledge that Team Chevy and the teams that had Chevy engines worked really hard in the off-season 2021 and 2022 to close the gap of what the Chevy drivers felt like they were missing compared to the others. I think that was obviously proven last year with winning the drivers and manufacturers championship.

There is differences. There are some things that, me being so fresh out from the other side, I'm able to have a very clear black-and-white understanding of this is better, this is worse. Hopefully we can come out of here with a couple bullet points to continue and take forward going into St.

Pete.

Q. Gavin, this is a bit of a different role than what you've done in the past. Has it been easy or difficult as an adjustment? If so, why?

GAVIN WARD: Yeah, so I'd say it's been a pretty easy adjustment. Probably easier than I expected. I said it before, but I feel, although I come from an engineering background, and I'm still pretty hands-on in the engineering world here, this evolution kind of fits the way that my career has evolved, to be more people focused and more focused on the human performance aspects of the sport. As I've come to learn, at the end of the day that's what really makes this happen or makes this sport tick. So yeah.

Q. In terms of the infrastructure at the team, have you had to change anything in that regard?

GAVIN WARD: Yeah, we have. I mean, the growth we've had, as everyone has talked about, is huge. From an infrastructure point of view, we've been building everything up, testing out some new systems here. As Alex mentioned, we had a few growing pains to work through yesterday, which I think we've made a lot of progress on.

We're trying to turn this team. It's quite difficult to develop, to grow and develop at the same time. I think we did a big sprint to get the right people in place. Now it's all about building our processes, people working together well, gelling the team.

The culture is strong. I have no issues with that at all. We're trying to hit that fast forward button, trying to do things in a number of weeks that might naturally take a bit longer here to get full stride, but also build the systems in the team so that not only are we going to hit St. Pete with competitive race cars, but aim to be able to continually bring performance through the year to try and really fight the Penskes and Ganassis out there.

Q. How beneficial is it to have three experienced drivers on the team? They all appear to have different driving styles. Is that beneficial for the team or not?

GAVIN WARD: Yeah, I mean, there's nothing more important in INDYCAR to having a strong driver lineup. I think we've got the best one out there.

As for driving styles, I mean, I'm a believer that there's as many driving styles as there are racing drivers. It's up to us to give each of these drivers what they need to execute on the day.

We're heads down trying to do that.



Q. Zak, you obviously move between a lot of different motorsports series. Where do you feel INDYCAR is on the commercial side of things? What kind of atmosphere is there for improved commercial aspects?

ZAK BROWN: I think lots of opportunity. We sat at a team owner meeting yesterday with the league, they laid out their plans, and they have big aspirations, which is great. Lots of new activity coming. Lot of focus on the drivers, which I think is great.

I know they met with the drivers, what was it, yesterday? All my days are running together now. Ultimately the drivers are the star of motorsports, not just INDYCAR.

Yeah, we're here to support them. I think we can bring some value to the series as well. I think the new TV programming that they have will be excellent. It's the best broadcast schedule that I think I've seen certainly in the recent times. Good schedule. Doing new things like testing here in spring training.

Q. Zak, last year Pato had a lot of testing in Formula 1. What is the plan for Pato in this season to try to prepare for Formula 1? What will be the main change in the team? Last two seasons Pato has been fighting for the championship. Unfortunately had some problems. What will be the main change in the team to try to resolve these problems?

ZAK BROWN: First thing is we want our three drivers to compete for the championship this year in INDYCAR. That's priority number one.

We are still developing our Formula 1 testing plans for the balance of this year. Right now we're focused on getting Oscar up to speed. Pato will be back in our Formula 1 car at some point later this year. But right now we want to be laser focused on the job at hand, which is getting the most out of our INDYCAR team.

Pato, I know you spoke with Andrea not too long ago. I don't know. What do you think?

PATO O'WARD: I think it's great (smiling).

I mean, the schedule in INDYCAR is so tightly packed. I know we don't have a lot of testing before St. Pete. I feel like once we're done here and once we're done mid February in the Sebring test, it's coming fast. Once that kind of ramps up, it's pretty much non-stop up until September.

As I mentioned I think a couple days ago, the F1 stuff is more of an off-season project. The cars are very different. I think Zak is on the same boat as well as Andrea, we don't want to take away from the energy and the hunger of the things we want to accomplish in INDYCAR to get a test in in the Formula 1 car. I think that will come later in the season, as Zak mentioned.

We've got a big ambitions for this year. I think these two test days have been really good to get all the little gremlins out. It's definitely not been the smoothest, but I think session after session we're just getting back into the flow of everything.

As Gavin mentioned, so many new people. That's been really nice. I've really enjoyed just working together with everybody. I guess in a month, a little over a month, we're going to be in St. Pete, yeah, starting the season.

Q. Alex, earlier in your career you knew what McLaren meant to that series. Now you're a McLaren driver. What does it mean to you to be part of McLaren?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, I mean, kind of as I said before, it's a huge honor, but it's also a big responsibility, right? There's a lot of extra eyeballs that are on the organization because of the name and then the brand that's associated with it.

For us, it's very important to make sure that we dot our Is and cross our Ts, but at the same time show what McLaren is about. That's about obviously performance, but also as Gavin mentioned, having the diversity aspect of hiring people from different aspects of life, bringing ideas from all corners of the team and organization in order to improve it.

I think that's something that's very unique to the INDYCAR paddock. On top of that, having the resource that we can rely upon back in England, assuming all Internet connections work. That's a really positive thing (smiling).

Something I'm looking forward to continuing to evolve with as time goes by with the team. But, yeah, just incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to be here.

LAUREN GAUDION: Thank you all very much.

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