

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Friday, September 8, 2023

Callum Ilott

Kyle Kirkwood

Marcus Ericsson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Wrapping up this Friday, beautiful Friday afternoon at WeatherTech Raceway at Laguna Seca looking forward to Sunday's Firestone Grand Prix of Monterey, Marcus Ericsson and Kyle Kirkwood on their way, currently joined by Callum Ilott, driver of the No. 77 Juncos Hollinger Racing Chevrolet, whose best finish was 22nd a couple years ago, his rookie year in the NTT INDYCAR Series, but as many of you may recall, he started on the front row last year, just getting bumped by Will Power, who then broke the all-time pole record in INDYCAR series history. That was last year.

This year, nice start to the weekend. Tell us about it a little bit.

CALLUM ILOTT: Yeah, super grippy track. It's incredible this repave how much performance it extracts from the cars and the drivers.

Yeah, putting it together, it's tough. For some reason, it's very knife edgy, lots of guys making mistakes, myself included. I had a little gravel moment.

But yeah, it's an interesting place. Real drivers' track, and it's taken it to another level this year.

THE MODERATOR: It's been compared to a lot of old-style European road courses. You've got some experience on places like that. Is that accurate do you think?

CALLUM ILOTT: It's a very roller coaster style track. I think a bit more than anything I've kind of experienced in Europe. There's some tracks in the north of the UK that are a bit like this, but I didn't get to experience those.

Q. As far as closing out the season with a great performance, how much do you think that'll help you for next year to help firm things up with the team?

CALLUM ILOTT: In terms of what?

Q. Well, having a good finish to the season. How much would that help your cause, your effort to continue doing what you're doing?

CALLUM ILOTT: Obviously a finish is a finish, a good one is a good one, and I would like a few more good ones. We know we have some good pace here. Yeah, I mean, it helps everyone, and it's nice. Simple way to put it.

Q. How much more rewarding is it to get everything right knowing that so many drivers have gone off -- you had your own issue, but how rewarding is it when you get that right and go even quicker than what you thought you could?

CALLUM ILOTT: Yeah, I think trying to stay -- the thing with this track is if you're under the limit and comfortable, you're too slow. That's why everyone is making these mistakes is it's just enticing you to go faster and faster, and then suddenly it's not allowing you to do the same thing as you did the lap before, and you kind of end up going off.

But yeah, it's rewarding to be consistent. Obviously it's rewarding to the team, as well, to not have to be putting new parts on the car.

But it's tough. It's real tough. For some reason, it's a pain in the ass to put together a lap.

THE MODERATOR: Joined also by Kyle Kirkwood, fifth quick in that practice session, driving the No. 27 Auto Nation Honda for Andretti Autosport, finished 21st here in his rookie campaign last year, of course a two-time winner this year in the INDYCAR Series. A nice start to the weekend. What do you make of the asphalt? Everybody's eyes are wide open.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: It's fast. It's so fast. It's incredible how heavy it is, as well. Like the steering effort is like astronomical, and I can only imagine with full fuel, and I'm thinking about it -- thinking about yesterday, man, when we add a little bit of weight to the car, I don't think anyone is going to be able to turn around this place.



Yeah, it's fast, but it's a lot of fun. It's cool to go there and go out and just do a lap because of how fast it is.

THE MODERATOR: Marcus Ericsson, last year's Indianapolis 500 winner, driver of the No. 8 Huski Ice Spritz Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing. His best finish here was sixth a couple of years ago. Of course he's sixth in the championship, winner of the season opener at St. Pete. What do you think about this facility nowadays?

MARCUS ERICSSON: I really enjoy it. The extra grip has made it very physical and very fast, and yeah, the speed you can carry now in the corners is pretty impressive.

I've enjoyed it a lot the last two days.

Q. Does a good finish ensure that you come back next year or are you already set --

CALLUM ILOTT: I'm coming back. There's no question. It was just for a while where and what was going on. But yeah, no, I'll be coming back.

Q. Can you encapsulate what this season has been like? It seemed like it started off so strong and then mid season just kind of went astray.

CALLUM ILOTT: Yeah, a lot of optimism, and unfortunately we didn't really manage to execute everything almost every weekend from there.

A bit of a shame. We did start super strong at St. Pete, although obviously there we didn't execute the qualifying. We struggled on one-lap pace. That's been a real issue for us this year and means we start always very far back, and it's just a pain in the ass to -- number one, to kind of work your way through the field, and number two, to kind of survive working your way through the field.

Yeah, there's a lot of things that we need to kind of review and put together because even the little things if we did them well, we would be in a better position.

But it's a learning phase. When you expand, you kind of sometimes go down a few different paths and don't quite make it work and don't know why.

We're finding our way back. I think the last couple events maybe the results haven't shown it as much, but I think we're starting to get to grips with it.

Q. Kyle, following up on what you were saying about the physicality, and you've got a lot of laps around this place, is there any concern that we might have drivers

falling out Sunday?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah. Yeah. It's definitely a concern. If it's going to be as heavy as it just was there on the alternate tires throughout the race or heavier, I think you'll see people crash because they just can't turn the wheel. I think that's very possible.

Q. Do you think guys would just get out because they couldn't physically make it to the end of the race?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I don't -- I won't. I'll probably -- I'll go off before I give up for sure.

Q. For Marcus, a few of us talked to Chip today and he was saying that like no hard feelings, he made a big offer, but he knows it was too late and that he really would have liked to have kept you. Can you kind of address that and -- this last season, this last race with Ganassi? Is it kind of ending about as well as it could for you?

MARCUS ERICSSON: Yeah, for sure. I'm very thankful for Chip and everyone at Chip Ganassi Racing for the opportunity there. I've had four amazing years together with them and we won the biggest race in the world, so we end on good terms.

I was quite clear I wanted to have an offer for a long time, and like he had said to you, he gave me an offer, but I had already sort of made up my mind then.

With that said, I'm super excited about that new chapter that I'm about to start next year. I think that's going to be great for me. I think it's going to be a great fit.

I'm super excited about that, but like I said, very thankful, and ending on very good terms with Chip and Chip Ganassi Racing.

Q. Can you guys give me an analogy of what heavy means? Try to explain this to a layperson that's not super technical. Is this somebody standing on the front bumper of your go-kart while you're trying to turn it, is it grandpa's power steering pump on his station wagon going out? Give me something better than I'm coming up with?

CALLUM ILOTT: I think your last one where you've got no power steering in a car and you're like, oh, that's pretty heavy, but it's okay in the slow speed, ramps up in the mid speed, you come to the high speed or with high load, and you kind of have to give it one bit of effort and lock your arms. If you either snap or the car stops understeering, you can't correct it.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: To add to that, like he said, you have this one input, right, and it's either enough, too much or not enough, and you're kind of just guessing. To make a correction with that, you usually kind of go off line and you're trying to gather it up with a super heavy steering effort. It's probably double here than I think anywhere we've gone this year. We're doing everything we can to try and lighten it up to make it easier on ourselves.

Q. Do you have some force meters to tell you what kind of force you're having to put in there?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: We do, but I'm not sure what it is.

Q. Kyle, some drivers have a knack for certain race courses, and obviously Colton Herta has a knack for this place. Do you have any idea why he's so good here and do you marvel at his proficiency about being so good around here?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, they mentioned it at the start of the season. They're like, Colton is really good around this place, and I'm like, I feel like I'm really good, too. Like I had a really good season in Lights and I've got a lot of laps around here and whatnot, and then I just -- I've seen him yesterday and today, it's like I compare his data, and I'm like, man, this guy absolutely rips around this place.

I mean, I see what the hype is about because he's doing a really good job right now.

Q. For Marcus, you're sitting next to next year's teammate and we're talking about another next year's teammate as the fastest. When you look at next year, how excited are you that you're going to be on that team?

MARCUS ERICSSON: I'm super excited. I think it's going to be a great lineup with me and Kyle and Colton. Just to work together and sort of push each other forward and get the best out of each other, I think that's what it's all about, so can't wait to get started there.

I had great teammates at Chip Ganassi Racing, but like you said, Kyle and Colton is two of the fastest guys on the grid, so yeah, I'm looking forward to start working with them.

Q. Callum, coming back to Juncos Hollinger for next year, how critical is it to have that stability to help the team and yourself move forward where you've got the same people, hopefully same teammate next year, everything remaining constant going forward next year?

CALLUM ILOTT: Yeah, I think it'll be a lot nicer and solid in the sense of not having to expand, not having to try and find new people and find the right way that that all works together and comes together, so I will be able to perform, I think, in the winter in a certain way to build ourselves.

There's a good bit of structure we got in the last couple of races and we can definitely build on that for next year. There's lots of little areas that we know we need to improve on, and I think the engineering team is trying to expand and hopefully we'll come a bit stronger next year.

Q. Callum, last year you started on the front row here, and if it wasn't for a mechanical, you might have had a great finish. What's it going to take in qualifying tomorrow? Can you repeat that? And am I hearing from the drivers that the race itself might have a lot of accidents?

CALLUM ILOTT: Yeah, I think -- obviously, yeah, the goal is to repeat that. I think we can. It's a bit more of an unknown right now. The sessions have been super messy because of the amount of red flags so it's very rare you get a clear new tire run at the moment, and I had a bit of a mechanical yesterday, so I didn't get to run the last hour.

But yeah, the race is going to be messy. The next practice session is going to be messy, and qualifying is going to be messy. It's just super easy to make a mistake, and it's not even big mistakes, it's the little ones, as well, that catch people out.

Q. Kyle, you mentioned the data you're getting from Colton and trying to -- and you're seeing that. How much of these offs are people trying to match other people's data or trying to match even their own from earlier in the day and trying to commit to what they were able to do a little while earlier?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I'm not sure what the question is there.

Q. Let's say your teammate is going 60 feet deeper into Turn 6 than you are. Are you guys trying to match those performance levels across a team --

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Of course, yeah.

Q. Is that getting people in trouble?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I'm not sure what's getting people in trouble. I personally haven't caused a red flag and I feel like it's just been constantly red flags. I feel like it's just -- there's so much grip, and as soon as you go over the slip

angle, you find yourself off line, which doesn't have much grip right now, and it's throwing people for a whirlwind. Fortunately I haven't been one of those guys.

But yes, that's usually how it works in INDYCAR is you're always to match your teammate. You're always trying to get faster. You're always trying to get that little edge on everyone, and if your teammate has an edge on you, then you need to find that edge.

Yeah, I mean, that's the real reason why people are going off, right, because they're pushing really hard, and that's what it takes every single session in an INDYCAR, in the INDYCAR Series, is push every single session, every single corner anytime you get a chance.

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