

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Colton Herta

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon as we wrap up the afternoon session here today wrapping up two days of content day for the 2024 NTT INDYCAR Series season. We're joined by Colton Herta, driver of the No. 26 Andretti Global Honda, beginning his seventh year in the NTT INDYCAR Series, two NTT P1 awards last season along with a podium at Toronto, seven-time race winner in the NTT INDYCAR Series. Happy New Year. Ready to get going here?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, excited.

Q. A lot of good stuff happening right now with Andretti Global. All the drivers have multiyear contracts. You guys are moving forward together. Some good stuff happening in 2024 with this race team?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah. Obviously the biggest thing for us, moving from four to three cars and trying to concentrate that effort. And yeah, excited for what happens with it. Everyone is always excited in the off-season and think that they've found a lot. And we truly feel the same, and I guess we'll have to wait and see if it pays off.

Q. You get to St. Pete, obviously, the opener, that's going to be kind of the level set about where this team is, where it needs to go and that sort of thing, correct?

COLTON HERTA: For sure. We have a little bit of off-season testing and a few other days to come in the future. Just working on different things. Then obviously St. Pete got to kind of set the tempo right in that first race and see where we can go from there.

Q. I remember about a year ago you guys talking a lot about feeling positive and hopeful about the work that you guys had done in the off-season. We saw some of the fruits of that at St. Pete, and I know it was kind of an up-and-down year for the whole Andretti organization outside of that. How different do you go into this 2024 season compared to 2023 and what you guys felt like you found last year to what you think you

guys have found coming into this one?

COLTON HERTA: I think our mindset is still kind of how it's been before. Some of the trouble places for us did get a little bit better, Iowa and Gateway. Milwaukee is going to be a big focus for a lot of teams. And some of the places that kind of -- I guess we were a little underdeveloped compared to a lot of other guys and struggled a little bit more.

It stays the same. We bridged the gap a little bit. We need a little bit more and obviously need to keep the tempo up on our street and road course cars, as well, which I still feel are at a top level.

Q. Knowing that those short ovals are places you want to continue focusing when there's a chance that all four or five of those could involve a new engine formula with the addition of the hybrid, does that complicate those plans that you guys have been going into the off-season with, or how does that play into all that when we don't quite know yet where that's going to debut?

COLTON HERTA: I think for us, we've gotten a lot of testing done with the hybrid already, which has been great. Now that we know that, we still have a few more hybrid test days coming up and some without the hybrid. So it's going to be very crucial for those days to mark down the differences in the two because that could be a season killer for sure if your car is great without it or with it and vice versa.

You go into the later half of the year or halfway point of the year, whenever it gets introduced, and your season can be flipped. You really have to stay on the ball and understand the differences between the two.

Q. Does it put that much more of a heightened importance on the start of the season? Everyone wants to start off strong. Obviously if you feel like you're in a good spot at the start of the season at St. Pete or Thermal, for example, I know you feel like there's great things that can come from that. But when you have almost two halves of a season in terms of the technical regulations that you guys are going to have,

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does that put a heightened performance on this early chunk of March, April, May, and maybe June?

COLTON HERTA: I think from just a personal side myself and mentally, it does a lot more when you start the tempo off like that. When you're doing well and everything is clicking, it just kind of sets it for the rest of the season.

We've seen guys being able to win championships doing both, starting off the year and kind of running it down, and vice versa. Scott Dixon in 2020 when he won four races in a row or whatever, five races in a row. It can be done both ways.

But I think for me mentally and personally, it helps a lot more if you can get it done early and you can kind of keep that tempo up.

Q. This has been a team since you've been a part of it in various iterations that's run four, five, sometimes six cars at the 500. You guys are down to three full-time entries plus the alliance that you guys have with Meyer Shank Racing. I know you haven't had all the test days and certainly haven't had all the cars on track at one time, but from having run a season with Kyle and the way in which you know and have gotten to know Marcus Ericsson a little bit better and your understanding of this team and its dynamics, how do you feel like scaling back by one car to three full-time could potentially help this team moving forward?

COLTON HERTA: We have a lot of great guys at this team. Obviously it's a full plate. When you're talking about mechanics and engineers, what they have to do when they go do simulator days or some post rig days and wind tunnel days, it's a lot for them. So being able to kind of concentrate on three entries, dialing in the speedway cars when you have one less to worry about, you can spend more time on them. Everybody gets a little more time in the spotlight for sure when you dial that back.

It's the same amount of people on the team, but it's just one less car. So we have a lot more kind of in-depth look at each driver and each car and how things are going on the race weekend.

I can only see positives from it.

Q. What do you think Marcus Ericsson's addition to the team brings to you guys?

COLTON HERTA: He's very calm and very collected. His feedback seems to be very good. I've only been with him at maybe two days of testing, and that was with the hybrid, and we were both on separate days. But he's been quick

in the car, and obviously a 500 winner. He's done well there in the past.

What he'll bring also is a good insight into the differences in the Ganassi and Andretti car at some places and what he's feeling and what the differences between those two and how to bridge that gap, if there's a place that he thinks Andretti can do better.

Q. Your dad is kind of helping out with Sebastian Wheldon's career. Similar age to you when you got into racing. What advice do you have for Sebastian as he continues to grow as a racer?

COLTON HERTA: That's good. I was actually just on the phone with Sebastian talking about what he's doing next year and whatnot. The biggest thing for me at that age was time in the car, which is a lot easier to come by than once you get into the higher formulas and stuff. So kind of taking in everything that you can.

The biggest thing that I was taught when I was coming up especially in Europe, which is it's always your fault, which is a good way to look at it because it helps to make yourself better, even though, say, for example you get taken out in a corner but maybe two corners before you made a mistake that gave the guy a run. So it can always stem back to yourself.

I think looking at racing that way is very important because it gives you a lot more self-improvement.

Q. Now that you've had a bit of time to reflect on 2023, what do you feel were the biggest shortcomings for you, and how do you feel as a team and sort of yourself you can now improve and kind of return to race-winning form in 2024?

COLTON HERTA: I think it was a season of kind of what could have gone wrong did. Yeah, it was just kind of all over the place. It was for sure probably my worst season in INDYCAR, with only two poles and one podium, no win. It was the first time in my career that I haven't had a win in a year.

The goal is to obviously get that back, and kind of going forward, working on the tempo through races and just having a more consistent weekend.

There were some things that were definitely out of our control, and there were a lot of things that were in our control. So kind of looking back at some of those races where we had mistakes, making sure that we note those down and stuff like that doesn't happen again for sure.

Q. I've learned over the years of watching a bunch of INDYCAR stuff that you need to keep reaction time sharp. How do you mainly train to work on that?

COLTON HERTA: That's a good question. So at my gym in my house, I have a reaction board. It's basically like a big TV that you can press buttons on. And you do a lot of training, high cardio work, and have a reaction workout with that, and it'll come up with flashing lights that you have to click or flashing lights that you don't have to click. Maybe certain shapes that you have to click, others that you don't have to click. And that for me is the best reaction work.

Q. What race other than the 500 are you most looking forward to this season?

COLTON HERTA: It's always Long Beach for me. I grew up there, and that was the first race I ever went to. It kind of made me fall in love with INDYCAR racing. It's definitely Long Beach Grand Prix.

Q. With previous aspirations for going to Formula 1 -- obviously INDYCAR is your main priority right now -- but with Andretti as a whole trying to make that transition to Formula 1, has there been any internal talks that you can talk about in terms of maybe making your way over there, or if you're even still interested in trying to make that move further down the line?

COLTON HERTA: You know, I think it's very time sensitive. I'm probably at the highest age that I could probably go over there with a team maybe besides Andretti. Yeah, so I don't have anything to report on their side of things.

I think their goal is still to get a Formula 1 team, and they're still trying to.

If that happens, we'll have to see what timeline that is and how old I'll be and where I'm at in my life at that point. For me, really just the main focus right now is INDYCAR, and we'll see where it goes.

Q. Looking forward to 2024, obviously Milwaukee is coming back on to the calendar. That might be the biggest shake-up for this year aside from the unfortunate removal of Texas. Flashing back to Gateway this last season, there was a lot of talk among the press and the media about the racing product and kind of the difficulty to get any serious competition outside of restarts. With Milwaukee coming back on to the schedule, do you feel that that is a concern that needs to carry over to Milwaukee, or are you feeling good about this new addition, given what we've seen

this last year?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, I think there's some updates that we're doing to the package there for the short ovals, and hopefully that adds to better racing.

I'm not sure about Milwaukee. I'm probably not the best person to ask. I've never driven there. I've never been to that track, so I have no idea what it feels like in an INDYCAR and what it'll be like for racing.

But watching races in the past, it looks like it's a lane and a half, two lanes sometimes, and quite a flat track. So that can add to a little bit of a better racing aspect because it's not as dependent on one line.

I think we'll have to wait and see, but my hopes are high.

I think through the last few years, it has been a struggle to get good racing on some of these ovals, and INDYCAR does a lot of work into it and tries to make it better. And we've seen that in the past with races like Texas last year, how good that race got, and Indy continues to get better and better every year.

I think they know the problems, and it's just kind of fine-tuning the car to figure out what the best solution is.

Q. You talked about your team testing the hybrid. Were you the driver for that?

COLTON HERTA: We all three of us.

Q. You talked about the challenges that it could be at the beginning of the season with the regular engine and then switching. What do you think will be the technical challenges for a driver to learn that?

COLTON HERTA: I think it's a few things. I think it's down to engine manufacturer and who kind of implements the new gearbox and how the engine power is transferred, and the hybrid part of it is transferred to the power train. And how well that is done for drivability is going to be a big thing.

I think Honda has done a tremendous job with that so far, from what I've seen.

But obviously once it's actually put into play, it could be a whole different story because of the timeline and how long down the road it will be.

So development is still ongoing and everyone is making their car better day by day with it.

For me it's really about understanding -- this could be a season wrecker. If you go to the hybrid and don't understand what it can do to the race car, and all of a sudden when you have a top car every weekend, you might fall back to seventh, eighth, ninth place, which could be a season killer for you.

So really understanding the different dynamics of it is going to be the most important part of it for every team this year.

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