

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Kyle Kirkwood

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Great to be joined by Kyle Kirkwood, back in the No. 27 Andretti Global Honda, beginning his third season now in the NTT INDYCAR Series, obviously with breakthrough wins at Long Beach and the Streets of Nashville last season. Seven top 10s in 2023. How much do you look forward to getting back in a car, getting back into -- I know you did some hybrid testing earlier, but kind of get going here in 2024.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, it's kind of weird because usually you have like a huge break at the end of the season, but we were straight into hybrid testing, which was really nice, to be honest. I loved it. Usually we're sitting static for like four months or three months at least until kind of the 24 comes around. And this year that was not the case. We were testing a lot. We were testing a ton in the hybrid car.

It was really just doing laps. It wasn't like we're going to go test some items and be on absolute kill. We're doing race stints time after time after time after time, which was an absolute killer. But it keeps us fit, which I enjoyed. I thought it was great.

Q. Certainly keeps the chops up heading into the season. What did you learn about the hybrid?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I'm looking forward to it. I think we as a team at Andretti kind of came to grips with it very well. It definitely takes some adjusting with the car and understanding kind of how it works and the way it works. It changes the balance when it's charged and uncharged.

But it's been fun. It's kind of like thrown something new to us that hasn't been the case in INDYCAR.

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. I think it's going to be great when it's implemented.

Q. You were obviously quick at Thermal during the test. How excited are you to go there with \$1 million on the line?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I mean, I'm excited. I like that place. There was a lot of people that I think kind of were skeptical of the track, looking at it -- kind of looking at the Armco barriers around it. And we were like, are we really testing here? Then we got there and we drove the track and we felt how much grip it had and how enjoyable it was to drive.

And I think all of us left the place pleasantly surprised how great that track was to drive. I think it's awesome. It's something new.

It seems like the format is cool, something that's completely different than we've ever done. I'm glad it's not a ton of laps because that place is really, really physical. I would do seven or eight laps there, and I'm just like, whooped, like out of breath. Granted, that was at the beginning of the season and usually you're not as fit as you are at the end of a season, so maybe that has something to do with it.

But I'm looking forward to it. I think it'll be fun. Like you said, Andretti was really fast there, so that gives us a little bit of confidence going into it. Hopefully that's still the same. I plan on it being the same. Hopefully we come out of there a million dollars happier.

Q. Is it different to race for money instead of points? Is that something you've ever done before outside of karting?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: No, now that you say that, I've never done that. At the end of the day, do us drivers actually get the million dollars? No, that's not the case. We're still going out there to win a race.

For us, I think every driver that's in INDYCAR is in it because they love racing and they love competing. They're not in it because they're looking for a million dollar prize, to be honest.

Q. You guys are obviously down sizing this year to three cars. Do you think that'll be a benefit?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I think it's going to be a benefit. To be honest, we haven't changed the amount of people that are



on the team, so us having a four-car personnel that was very sufficient and dropping it down to three cars and having the same people, if not more people, is great. It just gives us more resources, takes weight off of some engineers' shoulders, off some crews' shoulders, and kind of makes everything more fluid.

I think it's going to be a great thing for our team. It's working well so far. Me, Colton, and Marcus have gotten along very, very well, and I imagine it's going to keep going down that road and just keep getting better.

Q. When you think of it, all three drivers, multiyear contracts, there's some continuity there for a couple of years with this team, so that's got to be comforting.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: It's very comforting. And just how we've kicked it off, too. I think me, Marcus, and Colton have very, very similar mindsets. We want the same thing out of the car. We're looking for the same thing. I think we're just going to be able to build on top of that.

Knowing that like one person isn't striving to keep their ride with the team or you need to do something to beat your teammates, no one is in that position. We're in it together to go after wins as a team, go after championships as a team, go after the 100 as a team.

Having that multiyear deal, like you said, it gives us kind of that support and that confidence and kind of that almost like a relaxation in a sense. And we can just fully focus together and go after what we're all striving to get.

Q. Obviously you've got Marcus joining the team this year. What do you think he brings to the team in terms of his experience with Ganassi over the last couple of years? With you guys kind of scaling back, what do you think he'll have for you guys moving forward into the new season?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, obviously it helps that he was with a team that kind of everyone was after at the 500 and all the other races. Like they were clearly really, really good last year.

I think having a piece of that with Marcus -- obviously Marcus, regardless of where he comes from, he's an amazing driver. He has a wealth of knowledge. I think no matter where he was, he's a good addition to our team.

I think that's just a perk, the fact that he came from Ganassi and he kind of knows what they've done. Not maybe specifics, but he knows kind of the cadence and understanding what they are trying to get from the car and the process of things, and maybe he can help us with that.

Obviously we'll be able to learn that a little bit more as the season comes and we'll be able to kind of pick things out.

But I can only foresee it being a benefit from all aspects having Marcus on our team.

Q. You kind of just mentioned about signing that contract extension. Just curious the mindset of coming off a two-win season, won Long Beach. I know Colton has talked over the years about the continuity and felt loyalty to the Andretti program of signing early before testing free agency. So I'm curious about your mindset and why you signed early before the contract ran out?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I didn't hear that from Colton, but I would imagine it's pretty similar. I kind of have had a lot of support from Andretti over the years. And coming from Indy Lights where they helped me out there. We were ultimately able to go get a championship and 10 wins in our one year in Indy Lights together, and they've helped me even before that.

Like I've known J.F. and some of the guys over there for many years. And the fact that I was so comfortable jumping into their INDYCAR and kind of doing very well from the start just made me feel like this is my home. This is where I want to be. I don't want anyone to question that. At this point in time, this is the perfect place.

Q. Both your wins last year obviously come on street courses, obviously a strength. Where do you feel like are some areas this season that can further elevate you?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I think ovals are the main thing for me. I didn't do bad at ovals by any means, but that's something that's still new to me. A lot of these guys in the series, they have 10-plus years experience on ovals, whereas in my lower categories, we only do one or two ovals a year, and they're not the big ovals. They're not anything that we get to see in INDYCAR.

That's something that I'm still learning, I'm still grasping, if you will. And kind of understanding setup stuff with that. I understand road course and street course setup to the T. I can be like, okay, we need exactly this for the car, if I was to tune the car myself.

When it comes to ovals, I'd have no idea. So I have an idea now, but coming into it, I had no idea. Zero idea what I'd want for -- but with now two years under my belt, now I'm starting to figure it out a little bit, and I think that's something that I'm still looking to strive towards. That's

probably the area that I can excel in the most.

Q. (Question on the 500).

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I don't disagree with you. I was really fast at the end of the 500. We had a really good shot at winning. But I'd say with that -- like, not just the race, I'm talking about things leading up to the race really. Like getting up to speed, knowing exactly what I want from the car at this point in time.

And obviously at the race, we were okay in the start of the race. But once we figured it out and I started driving well and we kind of got the car in the right place, at the end of the race, we were super, super fast. Now, what would have happened if I had that -- if I was in that position before the start of the race? It probably would have been a better outcome.

That's the way I look at it. I get to grips with the ovals but not as quick as I would like, if I'm being honest.

Q. (Indiscernible).

KYLE KIRKWOOD: In what sense? I mean, it bounces through a lot of people. It's not only just me and Bryan. It's kind of like a joint thing between myself, my engineer, Bryan -- Bryan helps translate it because he's a driver on the stand. Any information I say, if the engineers don't understand it maybe perfectly, he's like, hey, this is what he means, this is what he wants, we should do this. He's kind of that translator in a sense, which is great. Having a guy that's driven a car on your stand is phenomenal. I've never had it before. This is the first time for me, so this is so cool.

I guess Larry drove when he was on my stand for a little bit last year, but Bryan has been a wealth of knowledge, and he's been awesome to have on my stand.

It's really a decision between everyone. It's not just me and Bryan. It's not me and the engineer, it's kind of between everyone, and we all come up with a good idea.

Q. You were saying after the season was over that you did quite a few miles with the hybrid system and that it was taking some adjusting to get used to. But not everybody has had that opportunity at least yet. At the risk of being an awkward question, is there going to be enough time for everybody to get used to it before it's implemented?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: You know, I think the fact that it's kind of a joint program between Honda and Chevy, that they're going to share the information that needs to be shared to

the teams to make sure everyone is on a level playing field.

I think the only benefit that we're getting from it is the fact that we're driving a car. We're not able to go out there and do like testing items. We're not getting the same tires as what we would at a certain track. So none of that stuff is really relevant. The only thing we're getting is seat time in the car. Honestly, it's really just a benefit for all the other teams that haven't had a chance to get into it.

But to answer your question, yes, I believe there's no way INDYCAR or even the manufacturers will shy away the smaller teams because they haven't gotten time, and they're like, okay, here's a hybrid unit, good luck. That's not how it's going to be. They're going to share information. They're going to make sure everyone is in a level playing field.

Q. Also with it coming in mid-season, what are your thoughts on it being a disjointed championship with kind of two halves there?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I think you can never predict what happens in INDYCAR, you know, racing, weather, no matter what's going on. Obviously it would be easy for somebody to say if they're leading the championship, the hybrid comes in, they're doing bad, that they blame it on the hybrid or vice versa. It could be the opposite of that.

I don't think that's going to be the case. I think it's pretty transparent if you're going to be quick with the current car that you have, you throw the hybrid in, you're still going to be quick. That's going to be the case. That's how it is in racing no matter what. If you're a quick driver, you're going to be quick in any car. If you're a quick team you're going to be quick in any car.

I don't see it throwing a huge wrench into the championship. I think it's going to be a good thing for us. It's a step towards sustainability, and I think it's going to be a great addition for racing, as well.

Q. I think I'm right in saying your two wins were your only top 5s last season. How do you feel you can -- I know you were forced into some recovery drives from early incidents, but how do you feel you can become more consistently up there?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Thanks for asking. Yeah, I mean, obviously it's a goal of mine. I look at that. I look at it. I see that my two top 5s are first-place finishes. That's not the ultimate -- that's not what I try to do, of course. But really it's just kind of -- I think it's really experience for me, understanding some strategy stuff that I feel like I'm figuring out now.



There's a lot of factors that came into play last year that kind of kept us out of top 5 contentions in various different times. It wasn't just one single thing. I think it's just circumstantial that we only had two top 5s, and both of those were wins. That's just circumstance really.

The goal is next year to have consistent finishes. Obviously that's what you need to do well in the championship is to always be in the top 5. Look at Palou; he was first a lot of times. But he was in the top 5 for like every other time.

That is a main goal of mine, and obviously that comes with, I think, experience mostly and kind of understanding of how the races go, when to push, when not to push, when to save fuel, when not to save fuel, the cadence of everything. So that's something I've been focusing on and trying to get down for this coming year.

Q. What are your biggest takeaways from last year, which was essentially your first year with a race winning team, pole contending team? What was your biggest takeaways from that?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I think the biggest takeaway is how easy it is when you're at the front. You'd expect it to be hard from the front, and it's no different than fighting for 10th, I came to realize. When you're already at the front, you're kind of controlling the race, which is -- something that I was comfortable in, I guess, when I was in my lower categories was being at the front, so maybe I find comfort in that.

But I find that everything leading up to the race matters so much more than someone might expect. Like practices, qualifying, all that stuff, making sure you nail it through an entire weekend is absolutely crucial. You can't just show up on race day and expect to win a race. That's not the case. You've got to show up from the time you get to the track on Thursday.

Q. Going back to what you said earlier about the ovals last year and not necessarily struggling but just not having things line up the way that you and the team probably would have liked, has there been any adjustment to what you and the team have been doing off track to work toward those oval results coming out a bit better? And in particular, how does Milwaukee's addition to the calendar fit into that equation?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Well, to answer that question, Milwaukee is something that's all new to me. Obviously we're going to put a huge effort in in the simulator, in the sim world in general, and trying to get me up to speed as

much as possible with that track. We have a test before it. That's going to help me immensely.

But to answer your first question, I mean, some of it -- a lot of it is kind of between both of us. We're trying to find a car that I'm happiest with. I'm trying to get as much experience as possible. A lot of it's just experience like the previous question that someone asked. A lot of it's just experience. I don't have a ton of experience on ovals. That's just a known thing from me.

As I build confidence, as I build experience on those ovals, I think a lot of the success will kind of come to us, and I feel it coming.

Of course I feel like we need to get the car better at some places, but at the same time, it's like, well, maybe if I was better at the beginning, maybe the car would be better. There's always give and take with that stuff.

But we're obviously working hard. I'm working hard to get it nailed down. The obvious one is the Indy 500. We were really quick at the 500 towards the end of the race, but kind of leading up to it through the whole month of May, we were kind of working at it, were kind of in that top 10, top 15 range most of the month.

Our big goal is to make sure we're in that top 5 range the entire month. And the team is putting a huge push, I'm putting a huge push. Having the new additions that we have are hopefully going to help massively with that.

Q. How much work do you have to put in during the off-season for preseason prep when it comes to sim testing, cardio, all that kind of stuff?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, from all aspects, you want to be as prepared as possible, and that comes with training as much as possible. Cardio training, weight training, whatever it might be, working with whoever you might work with to be as fit as possible. That's a key aspect.

But also being mentally prepared and understanding kind of the goals of the year and seeing what you need from the car. Like looking through data from last year, going to the sim, whatever it might be, to kind of just prep yourself for the beginning of the season.

The hardest part of the year is the beginning of the season, I think, because you're coming out kind of almost out of hibernation, and you're trying to just prep yourself as much as possible. Whereas when you get into the nitty-gritty, like, in the middle of the season, you're prepped. Like, you're car fit. You're ready to go. You're ready to show up to the next weekend and rock.

The first weekend you feel a little cold, so trying to break that rust off is something that is crucial. And that comes with a lot of different aspects, like you mentioned, training, how you eat, how you study, how you talk to the engineers, getting that kind of relationship back going, testing, whatever it might be.

Q. What race other than the Indy 500 are you most looking forward to or ready for this year?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I'm looking forward to Nashville, not only because I won there but because it's now going down Broadway. I think that's so cool that we're now in downtown. I think to the normal viewer it might just look like a bunch of 90s, but just the layout of the track is going to be absolutely awesome.

I think it's going to create great racing for a street course, compared to most street courses, and it's something that is, I think, huge for INDYCAR in general, just being in that prominent of a place and shutting down streets that are that prominent to a massive city like Nashville.

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