

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Thursday, May 23, 2024

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Kyle Kirkwood

Takuma Sato

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Row 4, starting 11th, two-time race winner in the NTT INDYCAR Series, driver of the No. 27 Auto Nation Honda for Andretti Global, welcoming Kyle Kirkwood. Starting 10th, two-time Indianapolis 500 champion who returns to drive the No. 75 Amada Honda for Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, it is Takuma Sato. Ryan Hunter-Reay will be joining us at the end of the afternoon session here at media day.

Kyle, looking ahead to tomorrow, how important is that last two-hour Carb Day session?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, typically by that session, you should know what you have. I mean, I don't see us really changing much from Monday. We seemed like one of the stronger cars on Monday. Excited just to get into some more race running and get fueled up before getting into the big race on Sunday.

Q. Takuma Sato, welcome in. A shot at No. 3. How good is that shot do you think?

TAKUMA SATO: By context with Kyle, it's extremely important tomorrow for me. I haven't done the setup for my race car yet, so it's a lot of changes actually since Monday, just bearing in mind because I was focusing for the qualifying so much this past week, I didn't have any group runs in traffic at all, so Monday was my first day, and I was kind of shocked that I really needed to get -- a lot of work needs to be done.

Hopefully tomorrow the weather stays like that and we can do a solid two hours' practice and then hopefully I feel probably better on Sunday then.

Q. Taku, we've talked a little bit about returning to INDYCAR, returning to the track. How do you go about preparing for this race when you kind of know that it's going to kick off your season and it's the biggest race on the calendar?

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, I think not racing like Kyle every two weeks, it's not easy to jump in a car. Obviously we can drive, but we talk about over the last 2 percent of the competition level, to get there, you definitely need to get in a rhythm. It takes some momentum, and then you need to feel confident. To do so, it's the only way you can get confidence just doing it well in practice, which we were a little bit lacking at the moment.

I know what I'm doing. This is the 15th time coming back to the Indy 500. Thinking about that stat is extraordinary for me, and extremely grateful for the people who are putting all the things together. Really appreciative of the fans and support and sponsors for giving me an opportunity like this, particularly to Bobby and Mike Lanigan to get things going for me and welcoming me back to the team for the third time, which is often not happening.

I really appreciate everything. Really pleased to come back here to IMS, and hopefully we have a great Sunday, and that's all about it.

As long as I have opportunity, I'd like to participate in this opportunity. So really happy.

Q. Obviously this is a challenging track, but talking to Helio and Marco, this is their first race of the season, but they feel like this is kind of a good track for them to jump right into because they know it so well. Does it feel that way for you, too?

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, I think if you asked to jump in the car in Detroit next week, I would be panicking. But at least here, even though there is a lot of rainout, washout day, still, you have days of practice. You have time to think about it, get into the zone, make yourself comfortable with the environment you have, with the boys and the engineers.

There is good time to prepare. I'm not too worried about it.

Obviously the game at the end of the race, nobody knows. Whoever felt comfortable with the fastest and make no mistakes will be coming up to the front. That's all about it, the name of the sport. We love it.



Therefore, yes, Helio it's the same thing, myself. It's just more experience recently helping but never an advantage for that one.

Q. Kyle and Taku, I've been talking to a lot of the drivers, asking this. How do you feel about driving a normal car on just regular roads as compared to a race car? Do you have to tell yourself not to drive like a race car, or what's that like for you guys?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Honestly, it's so much different driving an INDYCAR versus driving a road car. It's vastly different. It's pretty easy to just switch that on and off, for me at least. I know some of the other guys -- if you asked Colton that, he'd be like, I'm doing 120 down the road and I don't know why.

TAKUMA SATO: Me same. If you're Graham Rahal to have an extraordinary car every day then you would gas it more, but when you have a Honda Pilot, which is very reliable, it's just going back and forth, no problem, for the 60 miles, cruise control, and happy to be, so yeah.

Generally speaking, I drive anything there is a wheel and a gas pedal. We love it. I'll tell you a funny story. Not much for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway here, but I used to, when in Formula 1 days, testing and pounding around in Monza, going over 220 miles an hour, same speed. And then after, also 400 QM test day and then going back to the Monaco and then when you jump in a Honda Civic, you feel so slow. You want to go fast. But keep in mind I was only in my 20s. When I was young, I wanted to go fast. But today I'm really happy to be relaxed and do some more fun --

KYLE KIRKWOOD: So relaxed at 240, right?

TAKUMA SATO: Exactly.

Q. Taku, every time we met, we remember Charasco (phon). Considering you are running like legends and you are a legend, as well, how do you keep motivated, and how do you keep in focus despite you are not doing a full-time season?

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, because I'm looking forward to Charasco (phon) every single year. No, I think it's just tradition and history, the name of the challenge. That's what motivated me. Not just because I can have this opportunity, which I entirely appreciate, so grateful, but that's a result of you working so hard for everybody's support. That kind of challenge just gives me a lot of motivation.

Now, if you asked me to do a full 18 races a year every single year, yes, when you are young, you'd love to take part in it, big time. It still is my motivation. Don't get me wrong, I'm still really interested. But I'm more happy a little bit focusing for a few races and then do something else for using my energy and the experience to helping out with, for example, like a young driver, new generation, particularly I have a role with HRT this year starting officially working with them. That's kind of different motivation. But at the same time, you don't want to completely relax and retire. It will come in the end one day, of course, but since I still have a really taste of this sensation with speed, racing with like Kyle, who's a young, really competitive driver, and to come back for IMS, those sorts of things just give me a great feeling. That's why this is the biggest special.

Plus I think it gives some hope to the young drivers who are eager to come to here, plus everybody knows motor racing is so expensive sport, really expensive. An ordinary family cannot afford it. You need someone -- manufacturer is obviously the best way, but to get a manufacturer seat, is a very little chance. To have 15 times come here, that gives you -- even he could do, I could do. That sort of mentality. I want to give the young driver, just don't give up, just keep on banging on the door and you will get there. Then you must come to take my seat. If anything, I will help you. But that is true, so that's why I keep going. Until somebody knocks down the door to completely take my seat.

Q. What are you guys doing for the relaxing considering the pressure you guys are feeling from the race week?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I mean, not a ton for me. I like to just hang out with friends and family, get away from the track, go play a little bit of golf, things like that. It's pretty easy for me to relax, if I'm being honest. That's really it.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, it's the same. It's just off time is so important, equally important, so therefore you can have a constant rate for the racing. Glass of wine, have a good meal with friends and family, that's the most relaxing time for sure.

Q. Kyle, now that you have a couple of starts in the Indianapolis 500, what is your comfort level here? Is it markedly different than I would imagine your rookie -- your first start here? What is your comfort level like, and how do you genuinely see your chances? Do you feel better about things this year than ever before?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I do. I feel really good about this year. Comfort-wise, I can't say I'm more comfortable than I was the first year, but I know a lot more. I know a ton more

about this race, and I understand the cadence of it. I understand what needs to be done to be able to win now, whereas the first year coming in, all I know is how to go fast, not necessarily strategy-wise. That's something that I figured out over the years.

With that comes, I guess, a little bit more comfort. But almost in a sense I'm still uncomfortable because I know there's still a lot more I need to know and I need to figure out. I'm getting kind of a sense of everything now, and I'm getting a feeling of running up front, which I had a short period of last year. But I'd like to have more of it, and with that, I still have to keep pushing out of my comfort zone.

Q. Has there been any one person you've leaned on? A lot of drivers have talked to somebody, there's somebody they can lean on to kind of feel things out a bit.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I mean, so I've got two within the team that are amazing. One of them is Helio, one of the best to ever do it around here. Then Bryan Herta, too. He's on my stand. He's helped me a done. Those are two guys I definitely lean on. I look at Helio's data more than anything because I don't think he's going to tell me his trade secrets as much as what Bryan will. And Michael. Michael is a wealth of knowledge in this race and in INDYCAR in general. There's a lot of people on my team that I lean off of. But I would say Bryan and Helio are the two specifically for this race.

Q. So you feel good, I'm guessing, based on what you said? You feel good coming into the race and have the highest hopes you've had, perhaps, for an Indy 500?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I do. This month has gone by very smoothly, and that's something that is pretty rare, to have a whole month that it's just smooth. You're happy with the car. You're confident in the changes that you do. You're confident in your qualifying ability, but you're also confident in your race ability, and that's something that we've had all this month. That's something rare. With that, it just gives me a lot of confidence in the race. Everything that I learned last year, hopefully I can translate into this year and go from there.

Starting from the fourth row alongside of him, I've got two really good veteran guys outside of me. I'm right in the center of you and Ryan Hunter-Reay, so I'm happy I'm on that row, and hopefully we can all go forward.

TAKUMA SATO: No, you have very good people to rely on. Obviously indirectly when I was at ThorSport he was on my stand, but he often come and he's just a calmness and just a voice. Obviously he knows what needs to be

done in the cockpit. He knows exactly what it is.

He's probably one of the best person I ever work together, and for the driver, somebody in the cockpit doing 220 miles an hour, the only person talking are him and the spotter, so he has to have confidence with that, and he has obviously one of the best environments, which is really important going into the race. This is still a human race, so it's a very --

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, it's a good group that I have.

Q. Takuma, I wanted you to remember a little bit of 2004. In Indianapolis you were the second Japanese to have a podium in Formula 1. The atmosphere at that time, feeling the place, did you think then you could make history as an Indianapolis 500 winner? Tell us a little bit about that sensation.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, it was an unbelievable day. I still remember like yesterday, when you talk about it, brought up the exact 20 years ago, which is staggering to think about it.

But the view from the podium was just unreal. The spectators, as far as I could see, 20,000 people, whatever, just the energy moving, a sensation just bubbling around. It was a bit in a sense feeling that I probably felt in 2017 Indy 500. But to get to the podium, particularly with Michael Schumacher and two Ferraris on the podium and myself, we had a very competitive car through the season but wasn't necessarily easy for everything. We had lots of technical issues that I could see the mechanics boys in Honda, the personnel and everybody is like, we sweat, claw, everything. I could see the boys are so relieved we achieved a podium for me at least at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, here.

So that was an amazing day. Amazing day. It's as glorious as Formula 1. It is. It's always what you ambioned, but you never really imagined that you can take part of it. It was an unbelievable day.

Then since then, I don't know how to say it, 14 years later, I stood on the podium with Andretti Autosport and winning the Indianapolis 500. At that time you never imagined what it's going to be the future. So the future is always interesting, and I'm pleased to be back here again still sharing the memories with the fans and myself to what happened 20 years ago here.

Q. Kyle, I think if we can go back to last year, a lot of our memories are blurred by your true performance because we think about the incident with Felix. Wrong place, wrong time. But in fact you were running at the

front in your first 500 for Andretti, second career. Take us back there and tell us what that felt like, and was it kind of a pinch-me moment or you were relishing the opportunity of where you were, and then in turn how much confidence does that give you for this Sunday?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, so I'm sure everyone knows what happened to me last year, right? Upside down, tire goes over the fence. That's obviously the highlighted moment for the race for me. It's what got a ton of publicity. I probably had as much publicity as what Josef had. I was on FOX & Friends the next morning talking about that moment.

For me, that wasn't the takeaway. And I think for our team that wasn't the takeaway. The takeaway was that we started, what was it, I don't remember, 16th, something like that, and just like Josef did, just like Colton did at one point in the race, we drove to the front. We were -- in the last stop, I was on Marcus's gearbox coming into Pit Lane. We were running P2 when we made our last stop. Obviously it was a little bit off strategy. But we were running in the front group. We had a shot at winning the race.

Yeah, it ended in a terrible way, but we also -- with that last stop, we had a slow stop.

This year our pit stops have been phenomenal. That's something I have a lot more confidence in this year. And the race car is phenomenal. We had I think the best race car -- both Colton and I did. Colton's race didn't go to plan colliding with his teammate, with Romain, but he had a shot at winning, too. We've got four really good bullets in the chamber for this event, and if everything goes smoothly, I think we've got a really good shot.

To your point, those were the highlights of last year, and they've definitely translated again to this year.

Q. Takuma, when we were talking about legends earlier, you're a legend to your people. How do you feel about that? Also, you get a chance to follow the Japanese major league baseball players?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, first of all, of course been driven with incredible team owners. Starting from Jimmy Vasser and then obviously for Bobby and then A.J. Foyt, Michael Andretti, and then of course Bobby and Chip Ganassi Racing and Dale Coyne Racing. All the owners have been legend drivers. It was always fascinating to hear the story. But obviously anything outstanding is A.J., is incredible stories all the time, and to have winning here for four times, particularly the time he's been somewhat is not as safety as currently we have. So it's a commitment versus how you go through without any accident or incident or any

circumstance. That is unbelievable, to live how he is today, how much better he is and running for the entire AJ Foyt Racing is fully respectable.

Obviously no offense with Bobby, Michael, anybody that has done a fantastic history, but I would never imagined I would be part of that is absolutely an honor to be in.

Then now it's a focus obviously. Still we have legends driving in Helio Castroneves. We still have to catch his tail. It's a long way to go, but I love this kind of challenge, so really appreciate it.

What was the second question? Oh, of course. Obviously Ohtani is an unbelievable guy on and off the mound. He's one of the nicest guys probably we ever met as an athlete, and then of course the performance on the mound, ground, is just unbelievable.

Yeah, myself and Ohtani has been together for a long time because we're both Descente ambassadors for years and years, so when I had the opportunity to throw the first pitch and obviously he's the first home run of the game, so we had a little coincidence and we met finally together after 10 years of being in the same catalog, same page together, but we actually never met together physically.

So it was a good experience, and obviously after Ichiro and you name it, there's so many great baseball players come from Japan and performing like incredible. But I think Major League is outstanding in sport. So really happy to see him doing extremely well.

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