

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Monday, June 17, 2024

David Malukas

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. The 2024 NTT INDYCAR SERIES season continues this coming weekend at beautiful WeatherTech Raceway at Laguna Seca. Sunday will also mark the competition debut for one David Malukas in the No. 66 AutoNation Arctic Wolf Honda for Meyer Shank Racing.

David joins us this morning. You've been patiently waiting for your first race here in 2024. What is the anticipation like as you head into the week and Sunday?

DAVID MALUKAS: Yeah, man, time is just getting slower and slower. I can't wait to get back in it. It was the same way for the Milwaukee test. I've never been more careful in my life going upstairs or anything before I left. Left foot, right foot. Really just focused that I can make it in one piece into the car. It was good.

The test went fantastic. The speed was there. The team was there. It was really good.

Going into Laguna I can't wait. I'm actually going to go to the simulator later today to prepare for it, then head over.

THE MODERATOR: Things have moved quickly since the announcement, the test. Have you felt a relationship with the team yet? How have you gelled with the team so far?

DAVID MALUKAS: It's been incredible. As soon as I came in they welcomed me with open arms. Kind of felt like family to me. Just like long-lost brothers. I felt like I have known them forever and get to see them again.

From Shank's side to the engineering crew, the mechanics, so friendly, welcoming. I think it's going to be a good last 10 races for me.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Could you take us through what the emotions have been over the last few months, obviously from the accident, the release from McLaren, now the rebound.

DAVID MALUKAS: Definitely been a roller coaster, that's for sure. Man, it started with obviously a big high, getting the whole Arrow McLaren signed. Then it went to a pretty big low after everything that's happened with the injury.

I mean, those few months afterwards... I would say the stress went away once the contract got terminated because there wasn't such a heavy push on making a specific timeline.

At the same time I was working on the hand, doing everything I could just in case something were to happen. The MSR deal came around. I gave a call to the doctors. Yeah, we think you'll be ready. Fast forward to now, we're here.

Definitely an emotional roller coaster for me this 2024. It was a character-building year and now we're back.

Q. How did the wrist feel after last week? Do you feel restricted, more to go, or is it feeling pretty good now?

DAVID MALUKAS: I mean, it's feeling very good. The Milwaukee test, I wasn't really too worried going into it. Just being an oval, not that much strain on the left wrist or hand. Not much move on the steering wheel. It is also more left-handers. Laguna is going to be a question mark with the repavement being heavier on the wheel.

We are going to see what we can do. There's a lot of things from the car side that we can do from the car side that we can do to help the steering and already have done from a setup standpoint to make it a bit easier for that wrist to move. But overall I think it's going to be okay.

I've been on the sim almost every day doing race simulations two hours plus to the point where my right hand is getting a little bit tired. We're doing everything we can. We'll be ready to go out there and perform.

Q. Are you placing any expectations on yourself for the early stages? Is the most important thing to keep the pressure off getting back into your groove?

DAVID MALUKAS: I think for the time being, kind of just taking pressure off, like you said, going back into it.



Coming from an injury, I never had an injury this bad before, let alone going back into a car. I don't really know what to expect.

Talking to people around me that have dealt with those things, especially with T.K., take your time going into it, things are going to be very different, just take everything slow.

We're going to see how it goes. I think the performance is going to be there, especially after how well the Milwaukee test went. Then again, you don't know. It's a road course. We'll take our time, see how it's going to be, a little bit of a survival race. After that, focusing on more performance.

Q. You mentioned T.K. Has McLaren done anything to support you since the release? Have you been working with physios that they've supplied?

DAVID MALUKAS: Yeah, I still was able to use their trainer, Sean Smith. He's been fantastic throughout my entire recovery. We both know it's very hard to kind of find somebody new once you've already been with somebody that started from the early stages. They still let me use all that stuff.

Away from the team side, T.K. has let me use his fancy simulator place. It's been very cool, very welcoming. Has been interesting, he streams in the background. Last few days he's been wearing like a wig. I turn around, What is he doing?

He's been super friendly and awesome.

THE MODERATOR: Good to have T.K. in your back pocket?

DAVID MALUKAS: It's incredible. Another thing, too, the 2024 season I'm working with both of best Brazilians in racing, so...

Q. What were your thoughts on the hybrid test?

DAVID MALUKAS: Overall I thought it went very well. We didn't have any issues from the hybrid testing. I tested with the hybrid at McLaren in the early pre-season stuff. Obviously it was more in the early stages. Kind of a big gap for me coming back into it now from what I was expecting before.

Now it seems they've cleared up a lot of those issues. It seems to be very well and strong. I think it added a lot of characteristic for an oval especially.

Q. In terms of Monterey coming up, obviously a very

tricky track, but it's a very fast track. What do you think you can do in terms of helping the team to move forward this weekend?

DAVID MALUKAS: It's going to be a win-win from both sides of the team. From my side I am obviously getting back in the car, to be able to see where the car is at. From the team side, another characteristic.

I seen obviously Felix's data at McLaren. We do have pretty good matching with the way we enter corners with heavy braking, focusing on exits. I think we're going to mesh very well, work on kind of creating a very good setup together working at the practice sessions moving up to the race.

Q. When you go through something like what you've been through, could you share maybe the mental strength that you've had to grow and experience from this, how in some ways this has propelled you on a different level, maybe more mature than six months ago?

DAVID MALUKAS: Yeah, I mean, when all of it happened, it was tough. Honestly for me mentally, it was definitely one of the toughest things I had to go through.

Man, there were some really rough, rough days, especially after the whole termination and things going very dark for me.

I had my parents on my side. They went through a lot obviously through their lives. They kind of helped me through it, told me that this is nothing, opportunities will come, just get ready. They were kind of my rock to keep me going, that foundation I needed.

But it's definitely changed me quite a bit. Looking back at certain moments like that, your brain tends to spiral a little bit, you start asking what is the reasoning, why is this happening to me, these kind of things.

I feel like for myself, I kind of believe in the fact that everything happens for a reason. I think the reason for that was to become the driver I can be, with the potential I needed. I needed something like that to obviously get me there, to try very hard, to just be better than I was before. It was a very tough few months for me. I think it was all needed. Now we can look forward and obviously becoming a better driver than I would have been.

Q. You talk about them being your rock in that situation. Was there something they did specifically or something that you recognized that you needed to find within yourself to hit the reset button?

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DAVID MALUKAS: It was a bit of both. Coming through it, your brain, as soon as you kind of have so much pressure and things going down, your brain tends to say, This is over, it's done. It just thinks of the worst thing, goes to plan Z.

My parents were there. My parents went through a lot of hardship coming from Lithuania coming to America. No money, not speaking a lick of English. They went through a lot of struggles, a lot worse than what I'm going through. They were the ones helping me through it because they understand it very well, more than anybody.

They kept pushing me, kept motivating me. We stayed with it. Did INDYCAR concept for the month of May. Smiled. I stayed positive, knew it was going to come.

Right after the month of May it did. It came very fast. A big thank you to them, all the people around me supporting me through it. They were the ones to tell me to keep pushing.

Q. Because you got to play around with the hybrid before and after said injury, how much more movement are you putting on that wrist in the car with the tools in comparison to what it was before the hybrid? How does that affect things?

DAVID MALUKAS: When it comes to specific little movements, especially with the hybrid additions, a lot of it is more like a few added buttons. You can actually use the clutch as a region panel as well. Those have not really been any issue since the movement with the wrist is very good. It's bending of the wrist movement that's a little bit stiff. Finger movements, since there were no injuries in the fingers, no problem from that side.

The roll bar definitely still a little tough on the left hand after so many laps. You need to go in and move it. Definitely feels a little bit... Still able to do it. Still there. Obviously we fast forwarded since the Milwaukee test even more.

At this kind of stage of the injury, I'd say every week it just jumps, jumps more and more by quite a bit. We're nearing that probably 80% mark, I think.

Q. You mentioned before this period is very tough mentally. At some point do you consider the fact that maybe 2024 is a losing season for you?

DAVID MALUKAS: I wouldn't say a losing season. I mean, we've definitely recovered and bounced back. With Meyer Shank Racing, the whole opportunity, it's fantastic for me. It's a better situation for me in some ways. It was

very, very good the way things turned out. Now we're on the up.

Of course, the beginning of the season started out rough. I'm very excited with the end of the season. I think, if anything, 2024 is going to be one of the most adventurous coming from down here, now skyrocketing into the skies. It's going to be the biggest year for me.

Q. You mentioned it has been a very tough period for you. During this period it has been the Indy 500, the most exciting race of the year for the drivers. How tough is for you the fact that you have lost this race, you watched this race on television or outside of a racing car?

DAVID MALUKAS: Yeah, I mean, yeah, definitely was very tough. It is obviously one of the biggest races. To me personally, it was very equal to missing any of the other races. I mean, to me, every race is special. Obviously just want to be back in the car. Obviously seeing it go round is tough.

Month of May was a little bit different since obviously I was fully out of the car then. There wasn't any sort of obligation of getting back in the car. It felt a little bit different in that perspective.

I was able to get a different view on the 500, being a fan again after many, many years. In some ways it was actually a cool experience to see how fast we actually go, it's a lot faster on the outside than the inside.

Q. With McLaren, how is your relationship with McLaren after what happened in the past?

DAVID MALUKAS: The relationship is still very strong. From both sides, I think we both wanted me to be in the car. It was just unfortunate the way things turned out.

At the end of the day business is business. They had obligations to hit. Obviously with the injury, I couldn't do it.

I mean, from a relationship standpoint, everybody on the team, I still have very good relationships from the media side, mechanics, engineers, to Gavin and T.K., and everybody onboard. It's been very good. On that side of the relationship, it's still strong. No, like, holding on of emotions there.

Q. You mentioned arriving with Meyer Shank, the tests you have in Milwaukee, being in that team is like a family. How important has it been for you in terms of motivation that great relationship you have built?

DAVID MALUKAS: I mean, it's very good. He shows that he trusts me. He knows that I can do what I can in the car. From my side, it just feels very good that everybody on the team trusts me in that car and knows I can perform well in it. It's the perfect environment for the way things are right now and for the future.

I think it will help me reach my better potential of what I can be. The way things formed out, I'm still 22, I'm still young, still have a lot to learn. Being in this environment is giving me that opportunity.

Q. I remember you told me you have this process of doing first your recovery, then a little test in a car to see how are your reaction doing. Do you have any test before going to the hybrid test last week?

DAVID MALUKAS: No. Milwaukee was my first test of kind of what you were saying, that test of reactions, seeing how everything is going to be. Milwaukee was that test.

Before that, it was all just stuff on the simulator with Honda.

Q. When you tested the hybrid system with McLaren, was early days. There's a lot of doubts about the teams have many times to test this component. Now you can compare the process teams like McLaren have, the process that teams like Meyer Shank have. You can explain what difference do you see if there's something that the teams that have been doing that much tests can be calm about it?

DAVID MALUKAS: Yeah, I mean, of course, there's definitely some inconsistency there when it comes to some teams having a lot of testing, others not.

When we tested with McLaren early on with the hybrid system, it was very much beta testing, a lot of it was brand new. They didn't have set rules on what they wanted to do. A lot of region, how do we do it. It was more going out and figuring what they needed from Honda and Chevy to help figure out to make the hybrid to where it is today.

When testing at Milwaukee, yes, Meyer Shank didn't get any testing, but everybody from Honda works together, everyone from Chevy works together, all the data is shared on the new hybrid system.

Going into it, from a driver standpoint, the drivers that didn't get to test are going to be at a little bit of a disadvantage. All that information was there. Before I got into the car, I could see everything that has been tested, what is going to happen. It's now more set in stone because they finally figured out their way around the system. Back when I tested with McLaren, we didn't really know what was going

on.

Q. With this new family, how do you integrate fast with them? Felix is an easygoing guy. You are an easygoing guy. How do you connect with all of them? The culture is completely different. Also you have this relationship with Andretti family. You know things about big teams, but you are in a small one.

DAVID MALUKAS: No, I mean, it's been amazing right off the bat. Things have gone very smoothly. Already been smiles, making jokes right away. It's been amazing.

Felix was actually the first driver to come up to me when I first joined the INDYCAR SERIES, to introduce me to the paddock, the series. He is literally the nicest guy on the field. Having him as a teammate, he's also very talented. He's had an incredible season.

I think it's a very good spot for me right now. I'm just so excited to get into it. It's just going to be very good.

Q. You are no longer Little Dave. What is your nickname?

DAVID MALUKAS: I don't know. We're going to have to work on that. We'll have to see. Maybe these next few races we can come up with a new nickname. Something we'll end up forming.

THE MODERATOR: It's good to happen organically.

DAVID MALUKAS: Exactly. Little Dave happened exactly organically in an interview at Texas. We'll see.

Q. You spent quite a bit of time around the HMD INDY NXT guys. New shop, 10 cars. How nice was it to have that distraction while you were going through this period?

DAVID MALUKAS: Yeah, it was very nice. It was very cool to see all the success that's happening over there at HMD. It was a really good distraction for me. I was able to go there, hang around with some good people, able to kind of just forget about everything that's going on for a little bit.

Obviously it's a beautiful facility. I've been in there using the gym and everything. It's been very nice to see everything, just to get to talk with the drivers, the team over there. A lot of people are still there from when I was there. A lot of good relationships.

Q. You said your injury is about 80% healed. Will it get back to 100%?

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DAVID MALUKAS: It will definitely get back to 100%. I think it's like anything in life, though, you can quickly get back to that 80, 90% range. That last little bit you have to slowly pick at. That's going to take a lot longer.

We're not really worried too much about that. We were more worried about getting it to the 80% because that's enough to get back into INDYCAR and perform. The last 20%, it will come with time.

It won't be that much of a big factor or change. We'll have to play it by ear to see how it will go. I'm happy with the progress it's already made.

Q. How did the opportunity come about at Meyer Shank? Was it a case of you reaching out to them or did they reach out to you first?

DAVID MALUKAS: Well, they reached out to me because I saw the news about Tom, but I wasn't really too sure on what the deal was with it. I thought maybe an injury or something of some sort happened.

I didn't reach out from my side because I didn't really know. So MSR reached out to me, and things really played out well. From when we initially started talks to when it was pen or paper, it was a total of seven to 10 days, somewhere around that realm. It did happen very fast.

THE MODERATOR: You never know what doors life open up for you.

DAVID MALUKAS: Exactly. One door definitely closed and another one opens.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for doing this.

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