

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Alex Palou

Kyle Kirkwood

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Wrapping up qualifying ahead of tomorrow's Firestone Grand Prix of Monterey.

Joined now by the front row for tomorrow's race here at beautiful WeatherTech Raceway, Laguna Seca. Alex Palou driver of the No. 10 DHL Chip Ganassi Racing Honda. Joining him on the front row, an all-Honda front row, is Kyle Kirkwood, driver of the No. 7 AutoNation Honda for Andretti Global.

Alex, we'll start with you. How thrilling was that qualifying session for you?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, it was amazing. Car was really good. It's been good all weekend. But it was really tough. Like, if you see the gaps, even Q1, Fast 12, now Fast Six, it was tough. You had to nail everything.

So yeah, glad I did it. The car was on rails. It was one of my favorite places, and it's becoming probably my favorite place.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously you won a championship here. You got some history here at the track. What is it like to drive on this facility?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, it's amazing. It's tough. Now with the grip we have, it's super tough to get that last 10th or half a 10th of lap time. Then you have the wind that blows up some dirt on track. Maybe you go from understeer to huge oversteer.

Yeah, it's tough to judge, tough to commit. But once you nail a lap, it feels super rewarding.

THE MODERATOR: Kyle, front-row start for you tomorrow. Something in the air about California, coming out here? Long Beach last year, now this run. Good momentum for the team.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, this is the second best qualifying I've had in INDYCAR. I've only got one other pole. Really good day. We executed super, super well. Did everything we needed to do. Just didn't have the eight hundredths to beat Alex today. It's always frustrating.

THE MODERATOR: Qualifying is tight.

KYLE KIRKWOOD: It was really tight. We saw in it practice two where there were a group of drivers all within a 10th. We knew it was going to be tight.

Honestly, our group, group two, seemed really, really strong based on practice one and practice two. I figured that actually getting out of round one was going to be the hardest part of qualifying. Glad we did that. Glad it was all smooth and glad we executed well.

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

Q. Kyle, things being this tight, can you feel that level of difference? Anything you felt like you missed that would make any significant difference?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I felt like my Fast Six run was actually the best of my three. Red tire run. Obviously I'll go back in the data and find eight hundredths somewhere. Never do you ever do a perfect lap. You never can literally do anything better. That's always the case.

No, I thought I did a really good job. Like I said we got our tires in perfectly. Thought we nailed it on the right lap. Didn't put anything out of place on the quick lap Fast Six.

Now, for group one and group two, Q1 and Q2, I can't quite say that. I feel like I didn't do that good of a job. But Fast Six was really good.

Q. You're both Honda drivers. Did Honda bring something new or improved that you feel a difference at this track versus some others this year?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, not that I know. I mean, it's been good. Everybody knows we struggle a little bit in May. Apart of that, it's been good.

Yeah, Road America there was three cars flying a little bit more than others. I wouldn't say that was related only to engine.

Q. On the tires, Kirkwood, you said you went through three sets. Ran reds three times in each of the qualifying sessions. Seems the drivers have said they're not sure whether this is going to be a primary tire race or option tire race. People used up the reds in qualifying because it's a primary tire race. Do either of you have a preference?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I don't. We don't really know yet I don't think. I feel like they're both good tires. The primaries last forever. We are doing full stints on them within a short range. The alternates, usually wherever you can go and do a second run and go just as quick as your first run, that means that they are pretty good, as well.

I don't think we have a preference at this moment, but we'll learn more in the warm-up.

Q. Today morning session was kind of cold temperature on the surface of the track. This time it's very hot. Did you need to change a lot of setup?

ALEX PALOU: Not really. Not at least on my end. We made some changes but not for the track conditions. I think they were really good actually. Like, I expected to have a little bit less grip, but it was actually really, really good. Especially on alternates, it felt like we had a ton of grip. You could feel it everywhere, all the minimum speeds.

Yeah, didn't have to change my car for conditions.

Q. Kyle, you said you were going to look for some driver deg, I believe was the term. It's 72 Fahrenheit.

THE MODERATOR: You making a heat analogy now?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: It was 80 degrees before we went out in qualifying. I don't know what it is now.

I think this has turned into the most physical track on the calendar. Just with the repave, it becomes very, very heavy. Also tomorrow when we're full of fuel, the car weighs a little bit more, it's going to be even heavier.

Doing a lot of laps around here is not easy.

Q. (No microphone.).

KYLE KIRKWOOD: The ambient is definitely a factor. Like, today it predicted being 65, 66 degrees. It ended up

being 80 at one point. Those 15 degrees make a difference for the driver.

Q. Alex, this is a track that you've had quite a run of great race performances. What about this track suits you really well? Are you feeling as good as ever with your best qualifying performance going into tomorrow?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, so you said which other track I feel good or why I feel good?

Q. No. What about this track you feel like suits you?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, so I don't know. Honestly, I love this track. Like, you do a lap and you fell in love with the place, with the car - when it drives well obviously.

It's a track that it's really complete. If you look corner by corner, almost every corner is beautiful. I would say there's only two corners that are not beautiful at this track.

Yeah, it's amazing. I don't know what fits me. I think having a good car around here, as well, helps. I had these in the past years. Yeah, it's been great. Qualifying we've improved. I think the last couple of years we were struggling a little bit more in qualifying than probably now lately. Made a step.

We need to keep working on everything. Maybe it's only I think that we improve here. Road America, Linus got the pole, but it was mixed conditions.

Yeah, we're happier with our qualifying performance, for sure.

Q. What have you been finding weekends, particularly on Sundays, that just feels is rounding into a better overall season for you in your third year in INDYCAR?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: We've been really good I feel like across the weekends this year. We haven't really had the pace to challenge for wins. I guess Detroit we could have challenged definitely for a podium. We should have won there, if it wasn't for the yellow at one point.

We just had a consistent year. Coming into this season, really just wanted to have more consistent races and get top fives. In the past two races I've been in top five. I'm making headway with that. Now that I'm piecing that together, it's time to go for podiums and wins. Taking a step back from last year where it's either win or nothing. Kind of just get consistency and go for wins from there.

Q. Do you feel like you have potential race pace to

compete with Alex?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Yeah, I mean, that was a topic that came up in discussion earlier. If you look at our pace on second, third run on primary tires, we look really good, which is middle end of the stint on this tire.

Yeah, we definitely have competitive pace, especially in race pace. Like you said, we'll learn a lot more in warm-up.

Q. How tricky is the surface still offline in comparison of how it was last year?

ALEX PALOU: I don't think it's really bad, honestly. I think it's a little bit worse. If you miss the apex a little bit, you don't go off the track. I think it was more Road America that we had that last year. Here it was still a bit greasy outside, but not as much.

I think here sometimes the issue is the sand that the wind blows. If you have that in a corner, you can go off pretty quickly.

But yeah, tarmac conditions are good.

Q. Kyle, you're in the position where you're going to have to pass in order to get this lead. When you look at the way this track feels in the second year, where is the ideal passing opportunity?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: Well, this place makes it really tough to pass. Hopefully Alex just makes a mistake for me and makes it easy.

ALEX PALOU: Sure (smiling).

KYLE KIRKWOOD: No, we got to nail strategy. Obviously race pace is involved with that.

Really, the only passing spot that I can think of at this moment is down into turn two. Outside of that, it's really hard to make a pass happen. You have to get lucky or just be extremely fast in one spot, which I don't see that being the case.

Q. Kyle, you talked about momentum, things going the right direction. Then we're going to change the car at Mid-Ohio with the hybrid. Is it frustrating or has that even crossed your mind?

KYLE KIRKWOOD: I'm not concerned about it. Based on pre-season testing, the way the Milwaukee test went, I think it should be a pretty fluid transition.

Yeah, it changes weight distribution on the car, makes the

car heavier. But those are tough that you can tune to. It's not impossible to tune to it.

Also we had zero failures at Milwaukee, which was a question mark before. I don't think it is now for any of the teams.

We're excited to get into it. I don't see it being a big ordeal for us. It's not a massive change, I think.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. I think it's going to be cool. More tools for the drivers and the teams to try and make differences on strategies, maybe overtakes. Everybody has to go to it, so...

Like, everybody will have the same issues, let's say. Yeah, looking forward to it.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations to both of you. See you tomorrow.

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