

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Sunday, July 7, 2024

Pato O'Ward

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We continue on with this year's champion of the Honda Indy 200 at Mid-Ohio presented by the 2025 Civic Hybrid and Pato O'Ward, who led 24 of the 80 laps today, of course driver of the No. 5 Arrow McLaren Chevrolet, first win on the track in 31 races, obviously the second win in 2024, sixth career win, climb into third in the points standings, just 70 points back out of the championship.

Congratulations. Yes, St. Pete happened, you got the win, but this maybe feels a little different.

PATO O'WARD: No, this feels like the first win of the season. I know St. Pete we were P2 and ultimately ended up getting the win because Penske cheated, and yeah, the 500 was two corners short. But we really pushed it. I was pushing so hard. Watching Palou kind of trying to run away with it in the first stint, I said no way, no way.

For some reason they are so quick on the primes, the Ganassi cars. They're in a different stratosphere. But I knew as soon as we got the reds on, that was my chance to close the gap and ultimately beat him.

I knew that was the objective and just tried to keep him at a somewhat manageable distance. I'm super stoked. I'm so proud of the team. All my 5 guys, they've been working so hard. It just feels like we've had heartbreak after heartbreak after heartbreak and we've obviously had a tough battle trying to figure out this new tire this year.

Yeah, it feels so good to give this to them. I know they're as happy as I am today, and we earned it. No one gave it to us. We had to earn it.

Yeah, it feels really good.

Q. Pato, that lap when Alex came into the pits, how hard were you pushing on that out lap? What was your mentality? You know full well that he might come out right ahead of you or right behind you. How hard was that out lap trying to get past Palou on the pit --

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, if I had a chance to get by him, it was going to be either on the out lap of him with new tires or on the pit stop sequence. We ultimately ended up getting him kind of halfway between both.

But yeah, it's just so competitive. Obviously I haven't watched the race. I don't know how much battles there were in the back, but it's become so tough to get by people, and when you're up at the front and you don't really have much of an advantage to another car, you can't get by them.

You saw ending the race that we were stuck behind Kyffin and I think it was Canapino. No matter if you catch them by a few tenths a lap, but once you get there, you can't do anything. It definitely made me sweat a little bit more for sure, just because we were basically just stuck in line, and Palou was on my bumper, I was on Kyffin's, and it was just all about not making mistakes and pedaling it there to the end.

Q. Going into the last few laps when you're behind Kyffin and Canapino, how difficult was it to keep your emotions in check knowing, hey, we need to get around these guys but you can't take too much of a risk, yet Palou is right there and if something bad happens he gets by you?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, no, for sure. But I put myself in being behind the leader, and I would have picked my position every single time because it's just more of a pain to actually get by somebody. For all I knew, I just had to minimize mistakes.

This weekend really has been very smooth I would say. Like we executed in qualifying, but as soon as we were done in P2, I told the guys, this is the best car that you've given me all year. Like I have something to battle with. I have something to challenge with and to execute in qualifying without feeling like I have a knife up to my throat.

We showed that. We were .0024 for pole, and then in the race we maximized where our car was stronger, and that's how we got it done.

Q. Pato, more to the point on going by Palou, are you

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

sitting there thinking, yippee? You're looking for him, I would think, out of the corner of your eye; where is he coming out of the pits. What is the emotion you're feeling, like yippee or let's get on it? Explain that.

PATO O'WARD: I'll tell you exactly what I was saying in my head. Coming out of 13, I saw him launching from the box, and then I said, I got his ass. Yeah. That was it.

Q. What is that like, though, in a hard-fought race like that to go by him? You kind of touched on it, but you've been working for that moment.

PATO O'WARD: The hard part is to get by the guy. After that, then it turns more into a battle within yourself I would say, just like really hitting your marks all the time, not making any mistakes. They were so strong on primes, I knew that he was going to be really putting on the pressure the last stint because it was a new tire race, it wasn't a red race. Yeah, it was good.

Q. You went to the Push-to-Pass ATM, as I call it, the last --

PATO O'WARD: Oh, I was ripping through it. He was, too.

Q. At the end of the race are you thinking more to use the Push-to-Pass or the regen?

PATO O'WARD: Push-to-Pass is more powerful because it lasts longer, but I was using both.

Q. You said out there at the start of the press conference that it was fun winning the way you did because in the first stint he was pulling away, and in the second stint getting back to him on alternates and no yellows in the race, to get by him must be fun for you to get it done this way?

PATO O'WARD: Absolutely, it just feels really good. It feels like such a hard-fought race. I have to say, it's the first race in my career where I didn't really have a chance to kind of take a seat when I got out of the car, but when I was doing the NBC interview with Georgia, quickly after that I had to take a seat. I don't use the cool suit. I know a lot of these guys do. It just gets so warm in there, so warm, and it's so physical. It's a lot more physical than I thought.

We were fuel saving the whole race, but it felt like a full push. It really did, and every lap was just all about not making any mistakes because Palou wasn't making any mistakes, either. I knew we had to be pretty much perfect to have an opportunity.

Q. With the race being so close, which I'm sure they always are, is there a critical situation or critical decision that you can think of that you and your team made that really made the difference in you winning today?

PATO O'WARD: I would say it's just really pinpointing where we were stronger. Like I mentioned, they were stronger on the primes. They've always been stronger on the primes. We've never really had a chance against them on the primes.

But when we were finishing out our red stint, I had really, I feel like -- I wouldn't say figured them out, but I definitely feel stronger on those usually more than on the prime, and that was where I said, hmm, let's just see how it plays out.

I saw him coming to me pretty aggressively at the end of the second stint, and I just saw the doors open to an opportunity, and I was like, we have to take it. I knew if I got in front of him, it was going to be a battle to the end, but it's a lot better to battle to the end and you be in front than having to pass him because at that point you just can't get by anybody.

Q. Pato, if Palou didn't have the issue exiting the pits, when do you think you would have passed him late in the race because you were catching him before the stop?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, but we also had an issue on the first stop not to launch and get into Malukas's way. He had a bad stop on the second one but we had a bad stop on the first one. So it just played out.

Q. The rest of the race going green after the first three laps, were you expecting it to go green all the way? How much more difficult did that make the race?

PATO O'WARD: I was shocked that it was all green, no yellows, but it just makes it more physical for us, to be honest, and obviously in terms of strategy, it doesn't turn as much into like a roll of the dice, which I feel like more times than not we're on the bad end of that, so it was really nice to just, like -- yeah, have a good one.

Q. Pato, did you feel happy when you found Palou took the same tires throughout the second stint for reds?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, I think that's probably what gave us the opportunity I would say. Who knows; it's hard to say how much -- how it would have played out in the other scenario. But yeah, we beat him on the same strategy, same everything, which makes it feel obviously that much

sweeter because that 10 car has been the car to beat, and it still is the car to beat all year. They've been very, very strong, very strong driver with extremely strong team. That's who we're chasing at the moment.

Q. I wonder if you could give us some insight or reflect on how the year has gone from your perspective a little bit from inside the team. It's been obviously -- I guess it was a difficult first half of the season for you, but you've had five top-10 finishes now and you're the first driver to win on a street course and a road course this year.

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, I would say it started well and then it quickly fell apart for not just one race but for a few. Then the 500 kind of gave us a breath of fresh air in a weird way. It was pretty devastating to just be two corners short, but ultimately gave us that boost that we're -- we were just a hair to win it.

A testament to all the hard work that's gone in the off-season, and a lot of it does go into the Indy 500, and it's always really good to see that we've very strong there, and I would expect it to be the same next year.

But this year it's been more of a tough battle, I would say, in road courses, which usually have been our strong suit, so now with the hybrid, with the extra weight, I just think the way we work together and to kind of really extract the most out of this new package was very refreshing, and I think it's a great boost for all of us to kind of drive us forward.

Was this race No. 9? This is race No. 9, so we barely got over halfway. There's still so much racing to go. I know I'm very strong in ovals, and there's a lot of ovals left.

I have a lot of faith in the team that they're going to give me a good car to battle it out in those, and yeah, I think the next one to really try and maximize a lot of points on the table is Iowa. It's a repave, it's different, and we need to stay on top of it.

Q. How do you feel about the hybrid going into Iowa and how that might impact that race weekend and what that might look like for fans watching?

PATO O'WARD: I would say the hybrid, it really doesn't do anything on ovals. It does more on road courses and street courses. It obviously has added the weight; how is the deg going to be.

I was surprised to see the deg, how good it was today. There was really no deg. You were as quick at the end of the stint with the first part of the stint, which I feel like has

been very hit-or-miss all year. You don't really know what to get.

Yeah, that was very good to see for this weekend, and yeah, Iowa, I know we tested with I believe more downforce than what we're actually going to race, if I'm not mistaken, so that's going to be a new challenge even for everyone, just really seeing where everybody stacks up.

Q. Pato, you said the degradation was less than you expected with the repave?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, no, the degradation was fantastic. The tire behaved really, really well, both prime and alternate. The track was very enjoyable to drive. Even from the first practice, it's changed the balance a bit with the new hybrid, but once you get it into tune, those annoying bumps that we had just magically disappeared, obviously, with the new repave. It's just a very beautiful track. It's a very flowy and enjoyable place to come to.

I was determined to have a good race here because I've had very strong qualifying here. I've been very quick. But been out of the running for one thing or another.

Yeah, this year I was determined to just get back to my normal form because it really hasn't been there.

Q. You touched on this, but can you speak a little bit more about is it more gratifying or more special to win in such a hard-fought manner against someone like Alex Palou, a two-time champion?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, no, that's how you want to win. That's how I want to win. In my career, I've had -- I believe it's six wins with this one. There's been one of them that's been ultimately handed to us, I would say, and that was Iowa when Josef had a failure because he's truly been the king there.

But all the other ones have been so -- I've had to fight so freaking hard to win, and it feels so sweet because it wouldn't have been the same, like Palou got an MGU fault or whatever and we just took the win. That is not the same.

I was excited to have this challenge and like truly prove it to all of us and just do it.

Q. The fan backing you've got is pretty astounding; what does that mean to you?

PATO O'WARD: I always say Pato fans are the best. It's very cool to see, and a very grateful, fulfilling feeling going to the different markets, and a lot of papaya walking

around, a lot of No. 5 jerseys and people excited. That's why we do this. At the end of the day, we're in entertainment. My goals and ambitions are obviously always to strive forward in my career and just try and make -- bring something to motorsports that maybe wasn't there, I would say.

I've tried to kind of dip my toes in different areas to enhance a fan's experience at a weekend -- I can't do it everywhere because ultimately -- it would be great to make it a business, but it's not as easy as that, and ultimately I sometimes just end up spending my own money, and they're chunks. There's thousands and thousands of my own money that -- I want people to see what INDYCAR is and what it can bring to them, just like some people follow soccer, some people follow basketball. Why not follow racing?

But it's definitely been frustrating lately because I haven't given them that reason to, like, just go crazy. I think the 500 was obviously the closest that we've been, but it feels really special to see such a group of people that's behind me, and whether it's good or bad, good or bad weekends, a good chunk of them are always behind us, and that's very special.

Q. Two years ago when Gavin joined the team, and I don't know if St. Pete would be considered a proper first win for him, but I was hoping to get your thoughts on what's delivered him a proper first win now on the two-year anniversary of actually joining the team?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, this was the two-year. It was. Man, what can I tell you? Gavin has got a lot of passion. He's got a lot of passion for what he does and for racing and just for building a very strong race team.

I feel like athletes and maybe teams in general like around the world, whether it's basketball, soccer or football, racing, whatever, you kind of build this skill to turn cold when things don't really go your way. You always just move forward, move forward, move forward, move forward, turn the page, turn the page, turn the page.

At some point it will weigh down on you because there is so much sacrifice and energy and money and a lot of stuff that goes into this.

It made me so happy seeing their faces at the podium now. I could really tell that they know I drove my ass off because they can tell in the telemetry, and honestly, that's what they should expect because that's what I expect from myself, and ultimately there's nothing like having a team of people behind you that truly trusts you 100 percent, and they know when you do have that chance, you will make it

happen for them, and that's always been what I strive for and what I want to give to them, but sometimes it just -- we need to look at our realities, and sometimes kind of bring that bar down a little bit to get to that objective and then bring it back up.

Q. But for Gavin specifically --

PATO O'WARD: The guy has got to be ecstatic, I would say. I obviously haven't had a chance to talk to him too much. But this probably feels as strong as it feels for me because really, our last -- my last win, not counting St. Pete, really was Iowa. Gavin was present, but it was shortly after he joined the team. This is truly the first one that we've all been able to -- well, to really live.

I think Gavin has got a whole group of people behind him that also trust him, where he's taking this team. He's definitely brought a different view to how to approach certain things, but it's not going to change in one day to another. It takes time. It takes money, just like everything. We can't go play race cars without a chunk of money. But yeah, we're here to win.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports