

# NTT INDYCAR SERIES

## News Conference

Friday, March 21, 2025

**Colton Herta**

**Scott McLaughlin**

**Pato O'Ward**

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Wrapping up P1 this weekend of the Thermal Club INDYCAR Grand Prix here at beautiful Thermal Club. Joining us is Scott McLaughlin, as is Pato O'Ward, but joined now by Colton Herta, driver of the No. 26 Gainbridge Honda, quickest in Group 1 today, today fourth quick overall. Colton, not your first time around this racetrack. Has it changed in the last couple years?

COLTON HERTA: Not really. Similar stuff. The curving has changed a little bit in some areas, but other than that, it's very similar.

**Q. Your thoughts on being top 5 here so far this weekend?**

COLTON HERTA: I mean, good start for all the Andretti cars. All in the top 5. Just happy with that. This is a place where we tested, so really wanted to start off on the right foot.

If we're not quick right away after a place that you've tested at, it's a little disappointing. You scratch your heads a little bit. So to start off that way is a little bit expected because we tested here, but it feels good.

**Q. I know it was a little bit of a broken-up practice with the red flag and everything, but as much as you guys could, did you feel like you got something out of knowing what the tires are going to do, this new compound that you haven't raced or tested on and how it might impact Sunday's race?**

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, for us it was a pretty short session, especially if you were in the first group and got caught in that red flag and only one run and then straight into the group running.

It was good to get somewhat of a feeling even though it wasn't much. But to kind of understand what you need

from the tires and how many laps, it seems like it'll take -- for qualifying, yeah, it's important.

**Q. What did you learn from that practice tire-wise, Scott?**

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: I just want to acknowledge that we're watching NHRA in the INDYCAR press conference. At the end of the day it was, I haven't been here for a while, nice to get out and have a feel for it. The track is in pretty good nick, I thought, compared year on year. And all the changes they've done to Thermal Club, honestly, you have to thank them because they've put a lot of work in, pit lane and all that stuff and on track.

But yeah, felt good. Played around with some settings on the engine side, and I think we're okay.

**Q. Pato, I was asking these guys about what they learned tire-wise from this opening practice. I know that'll be a big determining factor for how this race goes on Sunday. What did you think you learned from the tire life you'll get out of the primaries and how many stops we'll see on Sunday?**

PATO O'WARD: Ooh, it's still a cheese grater. We just need to look at the data, really. I think it was a bit different for each of our cars. But yeah, the common denominator is that the DEG is going to be big. I would see it like an Iowa -- like an old Iowa kind of thing, I would say, but I can't road course. Hard to pinpoint it.

**Q. Colton, how much -- did the car feel very similar to January or does it feel a lot different from the test?**

COLTON HERTA: It's pretty different. We were here when it was 30 degrees cooler with a different tire, so it would be nice if it was a little closer to what we have this weekend, but there's still general things. In the general balance, it's somewhat similar. Even if we're on different tires, it's still good to know what changes do what to the car, and hopefully, that stays similar to this weekend.

**Q. Did the changes in Turn 17 to the curb, were those good?**

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SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: I think I'm still airborne. Are you?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, we're still jumping. Yeah. I thought it felt a little bit better.

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: Oh, for sure better. More raceable.

PATO O'WARD: We're still catching some air.

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: That's cool.

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, we feel it.

**Q. One question for Colton and one for Scott. Colton, you just said a minute ago the tire was different when you were testing here like today. How is the new tire feeling, which was launched this weekend here from Firestone? Is it more difficult to drive, or is the setup a bit more difficult to set up the car correctly?**

COLTON HERTA: I think this track in general makes anything hard to drive, with the lack of overall grip and how Pato said, it ruins tires pretty quickly, so there's a lot of DEG. So that makes it difficult to get a lap together.

I think the overall performance of the tires red and black are a little bit better than what we saw in St. Pete. So that should be a little bit better in that sense.

But it's still going to be interesting, right? On the reds, you're looking at one, maybe two laps in qualifying. It puts a lot of pressure on us to get it done on that one or two-lap tire.

**Q. For Scott, watching the practice, obviously, it looks quite difficult during the race in traffic for overtaking. What's your opinion in traffic situations? Is there a safe place to overtake or do you have to stay patient?**

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: I've said it a lot during the week to my guys. I actually think it's going to race a lot like the old Laguna Seca in some ways, quite a high deg track. We'll probably play that patience game a little bit. Traditionally, last year was hard because we ran the same set of tires over two races almost, so you were kind of saving the tire for the first half and then making sure that you had enough if there was a late yellow. But this year, obviously, with pit stops and stuff, you want to make some -- obviously, when there's degradation in some spots, it's as many as you probably thought there would be on a big, big track, but I think with the tire degradation it'll create opportunities that you may not normally pass someone on the same speed. But yeah.

**Q. Pato and Scott, you guys obviously had Felipe test here for Penske and I think Enzo for Arrow McLaren. I know it wasn't the same thing as being here, but does having that little bit of extra data help you this weekend?**

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: I guess you could see the track year on year how it's looking, but yeah, it's hard because when you have a test like that, there's only probably three or four cars running around, so the track is probably not as right. But it gave us an idea of where it's at, at least our team, and it was nice to have three-point do some laps here?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, it's a track that's very sensitive to temperature. So like Colton said, they were like 30 degrees cooler and the track temp was definitely a lot nicer then.

I can't remember what you guys were running, but it was definitely quicker than what we were with the old tire, stuff like that. It's just very sensitive to those differences.

Yeah, I'm curious to see what it's going to do in P2 and then back into qualifying. I think there's going to be such a shift from one to the other.

**Q. Pato, how are you finding TK as team principal?**

PATO O'WARD: How am I finding TK? Race car driver mentality. He still thinks he's a racing driver.

**Q. Is that good or bad?**

PATO O'WARD: I think it's good. I think it drives everybody forward. Obviously, always has a good spirit, lots of energy. But so far, I think it's been good. Obviously, there's been also additions to leadership, as well. So it's obviously taken some time to kind of all mold together, but I think we're headed in the right direction.

**Q. Lundgaard said that TK can be critical and that Lundgaard's father was a race car driver and he never listened to anything his father told him. And so now he's struggling to listen to what another former race car driver is criticizing him about. Do you have that problem with TK giving you feedback, whether it be good or bad?**

PATO O'WARD: I always like to hear, like, the negative feedback more, I would say, than the positive because I feel like the positive, it's always very dependent on just results. But I feel like behind the results, there's a lot of things that happen, and you always learn more from the things that you're doing maybe not optimal. I always

welcome it.

Sometimes maybe it's not what you want to hear, but I would say it's the right approach to have an open mind to that to try and be better. Honestly, I welcome it from everyone.

Yeah, we all want to be better.

**Q. Can you talk about the difference in the hybrid and how did that work out in the first practice session? What did you notice?**

COLTON HERTA: It was pretty straightforward for us because we tested here so we already kind of knew what we wanted to get out of it and how to use it. I'd say compared to the other tracks that we've run the hybrid on, you get a lot more usage out of it here, so it's a lot bigger time gap if you don't use it. So it makes it a little bit more important than other tracks.

But yeah, it's okay. Not too challenging.

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: Yeah, they've added the energy limit, adding to Colton there, so this weekend we can use more than we actually have in previous races. In some ways, the way that we're using it, which is, obviously, we're making improvements and getting more comfortable with this hybrid system, but there's still kinks in it and whatnot, and we're trying to iron that out.

But at the same time, like from a kinks perspective of having to use it and learning to use it and where to use it, I really do enjoy the complexity about it.

**Q. Pato, in case you have a totally different opinion, of -- when TK has an opinion about setup or whatever, a technical decision, you have a totally different decision, you will start a fight, you will be very emotional? What will happen?**

PATO O'WARD: I'm going to do as I please because I'm in the car.

**Q. Colton, first off, do you feel safe sitting next to Scott after seeing that FOX cartoon of him?**

PATO O'WARD: They did you so dirty, man, but they fixed it.

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: I heard. My wife texted me.

PATO O'WARD: And I think it's because of you.

COLTON HERTA: I thought the head looked a little too

small for me.

PATO O'WARD: They're going to land a helicopter on it.

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: I know. It was kind of accurate, though. I do have a big forehead. That's why I wear a hat.

PATO O'WARD: But not that big. Don't do yourself so dirty.

**Q. Earlier today, we were saying they weren't going cool suit on Sunday. After being in that practice session, where do you stand on cool suit --**

COLTON HERTA: Whenever it's available, I wear it.

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: Same.

COLTON HERTA: I'll take it even if it's like 60 degrees out. I like it.

SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN: This place is a difficult track after a long amount of time, big loads in corners. The heat is going to be close to 90 degrees on Sunday. Yeah, I'm wearing it.

PATO O'WARD: I've used it once. But maybe I should reconsider. I used it once and it was in Nashville, and I was very thankful I used it because I think you didn't and you looked wrecked after the race. I don't know, maybe I'll reconsider.

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