

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

Pato O'Ward

Alex Palou

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. We wanted to set the stage for this week's Unser INDYCAR Open test here at Phoenix Raceway. It's great to be back at Phoenix Raceway.

Alex Palou joins us, driver of the No. 10 DHL Chip Ganassi Racing Honda, four-time reigning NTT INDYCAR Series champion after really a dominating performance last year, eight wins, 19 for his career.

This season will go for the rare four-peat, trying to become just the second driver in the history of the INDYCAR Series to do that and the first since Sebastien Bourdais in 2007.

Pato O'Ward also joins us driving the No.5 McLaren Chevrolet beginning his seventh full season in the NTT INDYCAR Series. He is a nine-time winner in the series after having two wins last year; also a seven-time pole winner after adding two pole positions in 2025.

Alex, we'll start with you. Welcome to Phoenix Raceway. How much work do you guys have in front of you the next couple days?

ALEX PALOU: A lot. A lot. Very excited to be here for the first time for me and just to get the season started.

So yeah, we have a lot we're looking forward to do to get started.

Q. You guys were at Sebring last week, Phoenix now, so you guys are right at it?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, and it feels like we're not going to stop until like two months from now. But yeah, it's exciting, very exciting. I think the team has done a lot of work over the off-season to try and have a year close to 2025, if we can, and yeah, see how we roll off.

THE MODERATOR: Pato, welcome to Phoenix Raceway. I think there's only four drivers that have had any

experience here: Will Power, Josef Newgarden, Alexander Rossi, Scott Dixon. How much are you looking forward to really learning about this race course?

PATO O'WARD: Yeah, this is a new race for me just like it is for Alex. It looks a bit of a mix of maybe Gateway, Iowa; obviously looks old school, typical INDYCAR. Yeah, hopefully we can get a second lane working.

Honestly, I haven't really watched the 2018 Phoenix race, so it's been a while since I've seen INDYCARs go around this place, at least online. So we'll see what it's all about, but it looks quite quick, and our race weekend truly starts here because it's coming up very quickly. Lots of work to do.

Q. Pato, your times weren't the greatest at Sebring, so I'm curious --

PATO O'WARD: That was straightforward (laughing). We cannot read too much into Sebring. We've done well there, we've done bad there, and not a lot of influences into what St. Pete usually looks like.

We were just testing a lot of the things that we obviously worked on during the off-season with obviously the sets of tires and stuff. We weren't there to set the fastest time with what we wanted to try.

I would say, yeah, I don't think it was full-on performance running where we were trying to set the fastest lap time.

But I'm not worried. I'm happy with what we've found and developed over the off-season. I know there's been a lot of work going into that.

Yeah, hopefully you're not asking me this after St. Pete.

Q. With it being your first time racing here in INDYCAR, what things are you looking for in this test, as you said, Pato, as this is kind of the beginning of the Phoenix race weekend? What are you looking for as you go out there this week?

PATO O'WARD: I mean, it's a new oval to the calendar for

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most parties involved, apart from the three or four guys that have ran here before.

INDYCAR oval racing really is obviously part of what the fans love here. I think I share the same passion as a lot of the other guys in terms of racing. It's just obviously very different to street courses and road courses, so it's been good to add a new one.

Yeah, we'll see what it's all about. I really don't know what to expect in terms of what the racing is going to look like, but I'm assuming we're probably going to do a two-lane session this weekend to try and bring that up to life a little bit and see if guys can be running up there because we obviously want the race to be good enough for cars to be exploring rather than just the one-lane zone.

Q. For both of you, what would you come away from these couple of days of testing kind of seeing as being a success, and what are you really wanting to achieve from this test?

ALEX PALOU: I don't know. Normally at ovals, it's just about how you feel with the car, if you have confidence to push and attack the car and be, like, on top of the car and not just allowing the car to drive you and take you around.

Yeah, a lot of subtle changes. I think normally we don't really have much time to test on ovals. It's only at IMS that we really have days or hours to do any testing. On all other ovals we just have like one hour before qualifying and you cannot really test much.

It's exciting. Although it's a new track, so we're starting from zero. But at least tomorrow we'll be able to do a lot of changes.

You always want to go fast, even if you are not trying to go, like, quick. You just want to feel fast.

But at the same time, it's just a lot easier, I feel, here when it comes to testing to get a super big lap compared to when you come here on the race weekend and you only have two qualifying laps and then the race. Everybody on the same fuel, setup and everything.

I just want to feel confident with the car.

Q. Anything different from your side, Pato?

PATO O'WARD: No. I mean, obviously the ovals you would think would be more of a caution whenever the car isn't really to your liking. You obviously need something that is under you to be able to just be running out there really. If it's not, then it really is a big delta from one to the

other.

Like what Alex said, you have to be comfortable, you have to be happy with what you have, and this will be a huge opportunity to see the car in every aspect rather than just a performance run and then kind of guessing what the car is going to be like in the first stint.

Q. We've kind of heard people mentioning about, oh, there could be a benefit of having Phoenix before the 500. But obviously with it being quite a different oval, is there any benefit to having that before the 500 in terms of another oval race to start the season?

PATO O'WARD: You know, we've both been part of years where there's nothing before the 500 and then where there is. Indy is Indy; like Indy is very different. Even when we had Texas before Indy, it doesn't fully translate. Indy just decides what it wants, and obviously the car can be good one day, and then the other day it's like, what's going on with it. Indy is its own beast.

I would say it really doesn't have too much of a comparison if we were to start with an oval or not.

Q. Obviously both of you have had your new FOX commercials have come out; Alex obviously yours pretty recently. Can I just get your reflections on those for this season, your latest adverts?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I think they did a great job, once again, especially Power's. It's my favorite. I think they nailed it. It's good. It's fun. I think they're doing a great job, and I think it's what we've been asking. They delivered last year, and they delivered again this year. I think it's great.

Q. The fact that there's three races right off the bat, have you guys done anything differently in terms of your conditioning, either physical or mental, to be able to be ready for that? You're race drivers; you'd run every weekend if you could. But in INDYCAR it's a little bit different start to the season. Have you made any changes to your regimen to get ready for it?

PATO O'WARD: Not really. Just build on what maybe you feel like you lacked in last year or whatnot. But I guess it can be quite specific to maybe a certain muscle or something that you need to be working on. But all in all, it's quite close.

I try and keep it very -- a variety, basically, not just all weight training, and that seems to keep me entertained the best. That's what I try to do in the off-season.

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ALEX PALOU: Yeah, honestly, I think every year you kind of build from last year. I didn't do anything different. I just tried to prepare as much as possible. I think Daytona helped me a lot, preparing earlier, and kind of just have to be ready in January instead of February or late February.

Again, it's going to be a busy start of the season. I think that's tough for everybody, everybody that is on the teams and drivers' sides. If you add in Sebring, as well, it's like two months of full-on.

I'm excited. I think it makes it very challenging for everybody, but when you have a good time at the track, it makes it easier.

Q. The cars are completely different, but the NASCAR race at Phoenix since the layout was changed, they use that wide apron a lot of times to cut the corner. Not sure you can do that very much with INDYCAR, but is it an inviting prospect late in the race to try to cut the corner and maybe pull off a pass?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I tried in the sim because I thought it would have been great. It's very tough on INDYCARs. But on top of that, they don't allow us. So even if it was doable in INDYCAR, you're not going to be able to see it because it's forbidden to go there.

Q. So INDYCAR is going to enforce track limits a lot more than what we've seen there with NASCAR?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, for sure, which I think honestly, with our cars, it's actually good. For the show, it would be if you could have a couple of cars spinning on the straights because they bottom out.

But it's very rough. What I saw today during the track walk, it doesn't look very nice. It's very -- I think there would be a big crash if somebody tries it.

Q. Alex, when you were getting your milk, I noticed you passed up the Pato magazine on the magazine rack --

ALEX PALOU: It was during two hours or one hour that I was putting the milk on the belt, and the person behind me was grabbing one of those magazines, and I would just flick the magazine, angry. I don't know why they didn't put that because it was pretty funny. But I think it's cool what they did on small details like that, the detail of Power's phone number, as well.

Yeah, I think they think about the little things, and it makes a difference.

Q. I know you haven't been out on the track yet, but I think Firestone has designed a different tire, especially the right front. Are you testing that this afternoon and tomorrow that will be used in the race, or is it something different? What do you think about the harder tire on the right front?

ALEX PALOU: My understanding is that it's wider, the front right tire. Everybody already starts with that, and this would be the tire for the race.

I think it's Scott and Rossi that tested here last year, and they went through different tires to see what was best, and that was best for following cars and racing.

I think it's actually what we need at some of these ovals just to get more grip from the tire itself so we are able to go in the second lane when it's not so grippy and just kind of still be able to run it.

Q. At this stage in your careers, how do you approach test sessions such as this differently than you may have done in the past?

PATO O'WARD: I mean, obviously when you start a day when you don't know the racetrack, maybe it's a little bit different to maybe a track that you've already known, so I would say it's kind of like going just to any new tracks. You don't quite know -- for the teams that haven't really tested here since 2018, obviously, the aero is different because of the aeroscreen and all that stuff, so things have changed. So you first just need to see if you're in the window and you're in a place where you can start evolving from that package that you've brought.

So I think that's the biggest thing, at least for us in Arrow McLaren, just trying to get that underway and then really build on that. But no certain specifics I would say.

ALEX PALOU: For me, I would say I still -- yeah, maybe a long time ago I would take every single lap like it was the last lap ever and then I'd have to show the speed that I had.

Now it's a bit different. I still try and do it and I still have that in the back of my mind of, like, every test session or every day that you're in the car, you need to show the speed that you're capable of delivering.

But at least now we have a plan, and you know that the plan is the test plan from the team or setup wise or driving wise. It's more important than the ultimate lap.

Q. You talked about the FOX commercials earlier. There's a lot of cross-promotion this year with the . . . when all is said, we're done.®

trucks of St. Pete, O'Reilly is joining you guys on Saturday. What are you most excited for in terms of Phoenix weekend crossing over with fans, the drivers, anything you guys are in particular looking forward to?

PATO O'WARD: Obviously FOX have done a phenomenal job with trying to keep growing our sport, right, our brand, the INDYCAR brand, our personal brands, as well. We're two of the lucky ones that got this shot, not just once but twice, the first one being a Super Bowl commercial and then now with the second part of them.

I know that weekend that we're here is a NASCAR weekend, which is why we're racing on Saturday afternoon, but even in the past when we've had weekends with them, we obviously see them around, but we don't really -- we've got our own kind of hectic schedule going on, so there really isn't much crossover rather than just hearing them in engineering meetings on the track, very loud.

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I mean, I think it's great that hopefully we get new fans engaged with INDYCAR and discovering the -- I think here it's going to be very visually, the speed. I think a lot of people don't realize the speed that INDYCARs have, so hopefully when they can see a NASCAR, a Cup car or an Xfinity car, then the INDYCAR hopefully is going -- maybe not, I don't know. It's cool.

Q. I was going to ask about the dynamics of sharing the weekend and the track with NASCAR, but you're going to have a lot of data -- you're going to come away from here with a lot of data, but when you come back it's going to be a whole different dynamic, maybe different weather. How do you reconcile all that?

ALEX PALOU: Yeah, I mean, and especially the weather, it's quite cool now. We don't think it's going to be as cool when we come back for the race. I mean, myself, I just let the engineers figure that out. I'll just try and do the job that they want during the test.

It changes, but at the end of the day, if you have a good base here, it's still going to be a good base when we come back, even if there's different rubber, different weather, different sessions, whatever.

I think it's all about doing a really good base of a car that allows you to be comfortable with it, driving it, and that doesn't have too much static for the long runs and so on than anything else. We're not looking for the ultimate details, let's say, of a car.

PATO O'WARD: Just different rubbers. The NASCAR rubber sometimes affects the INDYCARs a little bit differently than obviously if it's just all Firestone rubber for

us.

Sometimes it varies from track to track, so you just have to wait for the race weekend and see if it decides to throw the balance upside down or not.

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