

IndyCar Media Conference

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Fernando Alonso

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us. We've had a great day of broadcasting across the internet. Fernando Alonso here today for his first laps going in the opposite direction, from the times you've been here before at this Speedway.

Two time Formula One champion, three time runner up, we are really thrilled to have you here.

I guess I'm going to kick this off really simply and just ask you: Most of the guys when they come and run here, and we run on the road course to begin with, for them it's backwards. But for you, you spent seven or eight years here running this direction and now today you're running the opposite direction. Did it seem strange to you to run the Speedway in oval configuration?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Well, hello, everyone. Yeah, definitely it felt new to me and it felt a little bit, yeah, strange, driving anticlockwise and at those speeds.

At the beginning, we went through the rookie orientation program with different stages and different speeds, which, yeah, it really help, you know, the way you build your speed and you get up to speed. So that was the first thing.

And then later in the day, we were doing some runs just for myself to get a little bit familiar to some of the setup changes they use to do on the car here, some of the even some of the procedures. Now when we have some drops of rain on the visor, we slow down. We were on the pace car simulation and we did some kind of procedures there.

Yeah, it's been a very helpful day in terms of knowing all these different world, these different techniques on driving and get up to speed a little bit. Still a long way to go, but I think I'm happy with this first step.

THE MODERATOR: So when you come back in May, you'll have several days of practice and qualifying. But Race Day, you'll have a venue that's almost completely full, whereas here it was empty. Did you notice there were a bunch of people watching you run through Turn 2 with flags?

FERNANDO ALONSO: I saw them on the way out of the pit lane. When you're driving in the normal time lap, you are not able to see anyone. Probably on the Race

Day, yes, but not today. But every time that I was going out of the pit lane, I saw the people there, so yeah, thanks for coming.

THE MODERATOR: And final question, you talked a little bit about the raindrops and what that is. You had a little bit of an incident and you got some other kind of drops on the car from some birds. Did you know those were coming?

FERNANDO ALONSO: No, I didn't. I didn't. I didn't saw that one coming. I saw one bird approaching Turn 3 in the penultimate run, and I just lift off and avoid the bird. Probably I will not do that on the Race Day. But today I save one life there. I didn't manage to save the other two; that apparently they came out of one. But those ones, I didn't notice.

Q. Working with Eric Bretzman, your engineer, Dave Popielarz as your chief mechanic, and with Michael (Andretti) as your race strategist, how quickly have you been able to mesh with the team and form a communication bond?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Well, it has been a fantastic help from the team. The team has been very, very supportive and very helpful. Not only today; I think the last two or three weeks, we exchanged so much information every day, on e mails and things like that, that I think I was able to go into the test knowing more or less, you know, most of the important things on the car and procedures and things like that.

Then Michael, obviously with the experience and the help that he can offer, is just something that is very unique. So we feel very, very privileged and happy. Marco (Andretti) this morning, shaking down the car, you know, making some set up changes already and thinking already on how I could feel that car on the first time that I jump in.

So you know, everyone was really looking after me and together with the people of Honda, we make also some setup work on the engine side with Gil de Ferran. The last two, three weeks, we've been through many of the things that I was probably facing on this first day, and now we have a lot more things to go through after this test that will be much more useful. Because at the moment, we only watch races on television and we saw data on the simulator, which you always are not 100 percent sure if you can trust or not until you test the real car.

So I think now, we have a lot more things in the pocket that we need to go through.

Q. Welcome to the Speedway, by the way. Is this a childhood dream come true to race here? What's your first recollection of the Indy 500 as a child; do you remember?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Not really. I will lie to you if I say something different. You know, I was concentrating in go karts, and not even dream about Formula One when I was a child, because everything seems, you know, too far away, too difficult to reach. I was taking it step by step in different go kart categories, and then on the single seater; first, the World Series and second, Formula 3000.

Eventually, one day, you arrive to Formula One and you realize that you are an F1 driver. Probably my first Indy memory will be Jacques Villeneuve win here, and then coming to Formula One, then Juan Pablo (Montoya) doing the same in 2000, I think was the year. Those were the first memories that I have from this place.

So when we came here in Formula One, it was just something special, because we were racing first in the States, which is always something amazing for Formula One, and secondly, on the biggest place in the world. I remember coming here, I think it was 2004, the first year that I raced here, and, yeah, I was taking pictures of the entrance for the Speedway. You know, capital of the world, motorsport. I was taking picture.

So it's a special place for motorsport in general. To race here in May on the Indy 500, it feels quite a big thing.

Q. I don't know what your expectations were getting into that car, but did the emotion and the feel in the car meet that expectation for you, or was it different?

FERNANDO ALONSO: I think what I felt in the car, it was more or less what I expect. Also thanks to the simulator test that we did in the last couple of weeks.

So I think it's quite realistic what you feel there. So more or less what I experienced today, it was expected.

What is different now is in my excitement of the race itself. I was I am, you know, very excited about the race, but now that I test the car and I drove the car, I'm much more focused and concentrate on the work in business than the whole thing, you know.

Everyone has told me, until here, until this place, how excited are you now, and how you know, what you felt in the car, and I cannot answer. I'm excited, yes, but I want to go down and talk with the engineers about the last few things that we test, you know, so it change a little bit the way that you prepare the race now after

testing the car. Because there are so many things to go through with the guys in the technical aspect; that all the emotional aspect, it's a second priority now.

Q. I represent the Hispanic business community, and I would like to ask you a question in Spanish for our Spanish community. (In Spanish)

FERNANDO ALONSO: (Speaking Spanish).

Q. In your opinion, how big of a challenge will be learning how to drive in traffic here on the oval, as opposed to what you're used to over across the pond on the F1 circuit?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Well, it's going to be probably the biggest challenge, running on traffic. I think there are a couple of things that I'm definitely not up to speed.

One is the traffic thing, I think we need to go step by step. Today was just running alone and try to feel the car, the circuit and all the things that are involved with this technique.

Second will be setting up the car. The guys, they make constant changes to the car. One on the steering wheel while running, and those on the pit lane, those tiny changes, tuning the car perfectly on the week for the qualifying and then doing the same on the race, and sometimes also on the pit stops, getting up to speed until the last part of the race.

So on that aspect, I am not up to speed. I am not able at the moment to feel the car or the small changes that we can make to the car, because I'm not driving the car; the car is driving myself around at the moment.

So things that, you know, we need to hopefully learn in the first days of free practice and, you know, as I said many times, I'm with the best team possible for that. Even for the traffic thing, we are six cars. So we will make sure that I will arrive ready on Sunday 28th with a lot of laps behind cars.

Q. You talked about getting down to business but what is it like to go into Turn 1 that first time at over 200 miles an hour? Was it anywhere close to what you thought it would be like, and was there a thrill factor, even for a seasoned pro like yourself?

FERNANDO ALONSO: It was OK, I think thanks to their rookie thing. So the first couple of laps, you lift off and then you go in the corner, so you start feeling the grip, the car, and you try to follow that target that you need to reach at the end of the lap in terms of the speed.

So that was one thing. And then at one point, they told me, OK, you're done with all the limitations, so you know, you just need to do now 15 laps above 215. So run free as you feel.

And I knew that Marco was flat out in Turn 1, so I said,

I will do flat out now in Turn 1 because the car is able to do it.

So I arrived to Turn 1, and I was convinced 100 percent that I was doing flat out, but the foot was not flat out, you know, has his own life, it was not connected, my brain with the foot at that moment.

So at the second or third lap, I was able to do it. But in the first lap, it was definitely a very a very good feeling, you know, to be able to feel the respect of the place, the respect of the car, the respect of the speed. It's something that for any racing driver, it's just pure adrenaline, so it was a good day.

Q. What is the fastest corner in Formula One, and how is the speed and sensation of cornering here, how does it compare to that?

FERNANDO ALONSO: I don't know, corner, probably will be 130R in Suzuka, which probably is 320 or 330kph; which I have no idea in miles per hour. It feels different.

I think on the Formula One, the feeling of just the steering wheel with the power steering and all the helps we have, it feels a little bit easier. Also the level of downforce, all the sophistication of Formula One give you a little bit more grip and a little bit more predictable car.

Here is just more raw. Everything is more racing. It's definitely faster and different. But at the end of the day, we all started in go karts. We all started in the small categories that probably we miss that kind of feeling when you get to Formula One and you have everything under control, you know, every single millimeter or every single tenth of a second. Here it's more driver input, you know, in different phases of the corner or different runs run.

Q. How challenging were the conditions out there today, and did you get a good sense of how much this track can change over the course of a day?

FERNANDO ALONSO: The track definitely changed during the day. In the morning, I think the conditions were a little bit better. Less windy or less gusty, I think. The wind became a little bit strange now in the afternoon.

But if the conditions were good or bad, I have no idea. You know, it's what the team was asking me, how do you feel. I don't know; I feel good. I have no idea. I have no experience here when the circuit is good or bad or when the circuit is fast or slow.

So definitely it get in my opinion worse throughout the day in terms of wind. I was feeling on the straights, the car was moving at times in the last couple of runs, I think the whirl was coming and it pick up a little bit of wind. But it's very sensitive, this place, to wind and to climatic conditions. Everyone was telling me this before

coming here, but yeah, we confirm it today. We need to be always ready to set up the car for whatever conditions we have there.

Q. You had talked about watching a lot of the 500s before you did this, previous races, but then you said you also get a lot more out of watching them once you're able to get in the car. What are you looking forward to now being able to watch some of the old 500s, and do you think you'll be able to see now?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Yeah, we watch all of them again. Because now, definitely the track, it's narrow than what I thought. You watch the television, and you see three cars aside on the main straight, and now you are with the car on the main straight, and it's hard to imagine, you know, how you can fit three cars there and at that speed.

Definitely you will see some of the moves and some of the things that you were watching before in a different perspective, in a different way. So I will rewatch everything. I have some planes to take, some hours on the flight to watch.

Q. You're going to be traveling back and forth a lot. Has that had an effect on you yet or will it have an effect on you?

FERNANDO ALONSO: I think not anymore. Actually, I started in the week before Australia, and I was not coming back to home until after tomorrow that I will be there. So it has been from the first week of March that I'm moving.

Yeah, the next four days, I will train a little bit and I will relax a little bit. I will see the family in Spain and then it's the Spanish Grand Prix on the next weekend.

Yeah, a lot of flights, a lot of time zone difference, unfortunately. But, you know, I'm pretty much OK at the moment.

Q. Because these cars don't have the level of sophistication and technology that the Formula One car does, in many ways does it feel primitive, and because of that primitive feel, does it make it more fun for to you drive as a race driver?

FERNANDO ALONSO: It does. It does. You know, you just, they ask you if you are ready inside the car, you say yes. You switch on the car, and you go. They put fuel, tires, and you go.

While in Formula One, it takes maybe six minutes to fire up the car, because they need to check, recheck. There is so much technology there, electronics, the hybrid system that needs to be linked with the combustion engine, the brake by wire, and many things that slow down every run or every feel that you may have on the car.

So here, as you said, probably it's more fun because

you just switch on the engine and you race.

Q. We have an e mailed question from Radio France. They want to know if you're coming to win or to have a great experience.

FERNANDO ALONSO: At the moment, I'm coming to have a great experience, that's for sure. It's something that you cannot miss or you cannot lose that perspective and that target. It's just, you know, one of the best race in the world and you are one of the 33 drivers on the grid, which is just by its own is just an amazing thing it. That's the first thing.

But you know, after that, you know, when you close the visor on Sunday or in qualifying, you don't like when you're in second. It's the same in every sport probably. I'm sure now the NBA players, they are doing the playoffs, I'm sure they enjoy and they are thankful they are in the playoffs this year. But if they lose the game, that day you don't have even dinner. You go to bed and try to recover for the next day. It will be the same thing here.

The first thing is try to enjoy the experience of the event, but we are all competitive drivers, and when we are there, we want to do the best we can.

Q. It's been a couple tough years for you in Formula One with the development of the car and everything and the engine. This coming year, having a fresh challenge and a completely new challenge, does it help put a smile on your face and make things a little bit easier in light of what's going on in your day job?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Yeah, definitely helps. I think the last two weeks, three weeks, we had this thing building up and getting up to speed with different things that we work on, and it keeps your head busy, you know, from other things that may happen on the real world or in the real Formula One. It's I think a good thing for us, for the whole team, to have this new motivation that we didn't expect one month ago.

But you know, the main focus, still Formula One and get up to a good position. You know, the McLaren, Honda combination is so strong and so powerful, that at the moment, we are underdelivering a lot in terms of competitiveness in Formula One, and we need to find and we are working to find the solution as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, this Indy 500, I think put a smile on everyone in the team. Even in Russia, I was preparing to race with the engineers, and the strategies; came to me, you know, with two or three paper. I said: Study this. You know, these are the last 10 races there, so I prepare for you some charts to look at what they do. Some things make sense, some things doesn't make sense, but you will ask the team there because we don't understand exactly why they stop here or there. So everyone in the team is excited about this.

THE MODERATOR: You'll be back here in 12 days for the first practice day for the 101st running of the Indianapolis 500 presented by PennGrade, and we are just 25 days away from Race Day. On behalf of the fans at Indianapolis Motor Speedway and fans around the world, we thank you for taking on this challenge.