

# IndyCar Media Conference

Monday May 29, 2017

## Takuma Sato

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with our Indianapolis 500 winner's morning-after press conference. We are pleased to be joined by the champion of the 101st running of the Indianapolis 500 presented by PennGrade Motor Oil, Takuma Sato. Congratulations. We've been together for most of the evening and this morning, but it's been a complete whirlwind experience for you, and I heard on SportsCenter this morning that you were actually out until 2:00 a.m.

TAKUMA SATO: Yes.

THE MODERATOR: Tell us about what you've been doing.

TAKUMA SATO: Well, since checkered flag I've probably done 30 interviews, and it's really nice. It's nice to talk. I was exhausted, but somehow kept on going because I think the race just pumped me up and went through the couple pressers last night primarily for the team dinner. So all the team members were at the Marriott Hotel, and we had going at midnight, and then after that just supporting my member, gave a little talk and a little drink and then went until 2:00 a.m. Went to bed at 3:00 a.m. actually, because by that time my phone is just abuzz, exposure, the explosion from Japan, it being in the daytime.

So it's been a little journey, and wake up this morning 6:45 or whatever time, so yeah. A few hours' sleep, but keep on going. So thank you very much for the support.

THE MODERATOR: It seems from what you're saying that the support from the INDYCAR community has been quite strong but also because of the time difference, the same time as everyone is kind of dying down in Indianapolis, everybody in Japan is just waking up; how has the international support been and especially from all of your friends and family back home in Japan?

TAKUMA SATO: It's just fantastic. Everybody is so happy, and I've got -- I don't know, probably hundreds, 1,000 emails by now with all the SMS congrats and things and congrats from the fans and across families. It's just great. It's getting the evening here basically a good morning in Japan. As Kate said, it's just nonstop, nonstop going, but I must admit, this is the happiest things, and yeah, I can get on with that.

THE MODERATOR: I know you've been asked this question a lot, but this means a lot for your country and especially all of the involvement you've had since 2011 with the tsunami and earthquake relief with With You Japan. How special is this for you and your home country?

TAKUMA SATO: This is special. I always wear the special helmet for the Indy 500. It wasn't this case this year, but I always did, and it's always gone to the charity auction for the helmet and for the race day, the fans for it, and a couple of sponsors over there, also the donation was always helpful.

There was a Japan program really started in 2011, the immediately after the earthquake happened, and all the intention was helping the children from the devastated area. It's a difficult life for them, lost friends and family, and lost home. As I repeat, 250,000 people still living in temporary houses today, so it's suffering a lot. It is on the recovery, but it's a long way. So I couldn't put a big donation, but I can bring some energy through the motor racing, so always I invite 100, 150 kids from the devastated area, and we do a go-karting event in the last few years, and that's spreading all over Japan now, and there is a few places to help, and we did some tournament system, and then end of the year last year in Suzuka, we had a great race, so it's combined all Japan as well as devastated areas. It's been -- it's great. I think it's great support, everyone, and as long as I could do, I wanted to keep supporting the children until they become adults, and hopefully one of them becomes a professional race driver.

THE MODERATOR: Throughout the Indy 500, even though you know anything can happen in 500 miles, it was really hard to bet against Andretti Autosport this year because of the strength of the team and the strength of the drivers. When you started with opening practice on the Monday after the INDYCAR Grand Prix, did you get in that car and know that you had a shot of winning in a couple weeks' time?

TAKUMA SATO: I couldn't picture myself winning, but always winning is our aim. So obviously we race here, the only reason is go for the win, of course.

Yes, it's difficult to say, but I thought the car has got tremendous speed, whites come off the package, only because they have such a good base setting from last year, and over the course of the winter, I know back in

the shop, the boys are working on the car, so much details, and talking to my race engineer, I know from the numbers, looking quite promising.

Now, of course tire could be different and condition is obviously different, so you know, I don't know how it's going to be. But fundamentally, the speed comes from preparation, and that was the case from day one, and I was very impressed about -- not only for the quality level that the cars are building, but the program, the test program. So you've got probably two, three hours just to figure out getting comfortable by yourself and maybe some adjustment according to the condition, but like at 4:00 p.m., on time, we're going to do the group run from day one, which is very impressive because no matter what other test program, you have to create and be prepared for the group run.

That is creating some traffic and exposing where the weakness of the car and where the strength of the car and amounts of the six drivers divided different setups and finding what the best way is, and that's everyday things.

To answer the question, yes, when I get to the car, Garrett, my race engineer, just to use their last year's setup. The other drivers who are already in here, they already developed from last year, but Garrett, my race engineer, wanted me just to figure out, this is a generic Andretti Autosport setup for the Superspeedway. I drove it. Wow, this is impressive, even with a green track. So yes, I felt relatively good fitting, and then developing every day. We had a windy day, we had a cold day, and you know, it wasn't really a hot day to be honest. It's only one evening we had nearly up to 109 degrees temperature on the track temperature, but other than that, very smooth, and we were saying it was just seamlessly working through the six drivers and with strong engineers. So that was a very, very strength of the team.

THE MODERATOR: What if we went back even further from a couple of weeks ago, back to when you first started racing cars and I think age 19.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Was the Indy 500 even on your radar at that point?

TAKUMA SATO: No. To be honest, no. It's a long story to make short. This is no secret that I was aiming for Formula 1, only because that was my first race to see it with my father was Formula 1 in Japanese Grand Prix, so just naturally followed them. But having said that, I do remember physically I watched the race through TV was the Indy 500 when it was '86 or '87. It wasn't remote control, it was dial, like this. You probably didn't -- but I was so keen on that TV day, and I didn't realize that was Indy 500, but now I can tell you 100 percent because it was Superspeedway, it was oval, and I

knew immediately the scenery, and it was the Indy 500.

So when I got to Europe and go through the Formula 1 project, that was obviously an awesome time over there, but back of the mind always ringing the bell, Indy 500, it's something I really wanted to try all the time. And the opportunity come 2009 at the qualifying day, I came here the first time and stood inside of Turn 1, and I was very impressed. Coming from Formula 1, usually you don't really surprise by speed, but this speed is something completely different. You come down 240 miles per hour down the straight, and that speed, the driver going to the corner, and they are controlling. The car was sliding, I could see it physically, and that was like big, big surprise.

And then I talked most of the team owners, and Jimmy Vasser told me that he would wait because back then there was no secret again I was nominated for the finalist for the winner Formula 1 team, so I was waiting for the final confirmation, and it didn't happen that way, but Jimmy, okay, by all means, let's go for the INDYCAR, so that's how we started, and really big thanks to Jimmy to bring me in here, and of course after that probably give me a great chance, and everyone knows 2012 situation, and after that AJ gave me four years of Lights for racing the No. 14 car, and now it's Andretti Autosport. It's a fantastic opportunity for me to work with Michael and driving the 26 car.

How happy the boys are today, everyone is so happy, and the whole entire team, we just got a picture of every single family, and I was very, very happy. So even though it was two hours photo shooting, I don't mind, so I'm smiling happy.

**Q. Honda has been a huge link of both your careers, both the F1 and INDYCAR side, but you've had the opportunity to know the Honda Japan culture and Honda of America culture. How are they different and how are they similar?**

TAKUMA SATO: The one thing is one goal for the winning. It's the Honda DNA, and that comes from, of course, Mr. Soichiro Honda, and that's the way Honda Japan, American Honda, it really doesn't matter. Obviously for the production model and endorsement and legal road car, it is reflecting what the original -- the request, but from the mental end that's how Honda wanted to push absolute on the limit. I could see both ways very, very similar, not only for the Honda global but very specifically like HPD here, it is the same philosophy. And go back to the Tochigi R&D in Japan same, and HRD used to be in the UK for the Formula 1 engines. Everybody is the same.

For example, Tanabe-san, who is the chief technical photo field director -- if I'm wrong, sorry, but he's already working a lot of stuff, details. He was a Formula 1 engine engineer for Jensen, and Mr. Hasegawa, who is my engine engineer, is now the head of Formula 1 project.

Its platform is going back and forth, but as Honda, it is just one aim, it is winning, so I can see both ways.

**Q. You're the very first Japanese driver winning the Indy 500, and what's also better, Japanese engine is also built here. You mentioned earlier you got a lot of phone calls, emails, et cetera, from Japan. Do you think this can bring more Japanese drivers to Indy car racing? And do you think that you will be approached now by a Japanese company for a sponsorship, future sponsorship?**

TAKUMA SATO: I certainly hope so. I mean, I want to see the new generation. I mean, as long as I can drive, I want to teach them, of course, but beat me and come up and then get even better. I think that there is a lot of potential young Japanese drivers out there, and there is a few of them in Europe. Unfortunately we haven't really seen the up-and-coming young Japanese drivers in the States. But after this result, I'm sure there's many, many drivers who wanted to achieve that one, and here in the States, there is a great pyramid and scholarship system from Junior Formula until Indy Lights and (Verizon) IndyCar (Series). There's always great opportunity, and Honda is committed for this series, and I'm here to help anything. Yeah, by all means, I'm open to talking to anybody.

And of course for the sponsorship terms, it is heavily reflected by economies, but like this way, it is amazing when you have a great qualification, I suddenly have a primary sponsorship, and that was supposed to be one race, but maybe, let's see, there is maybe a few more.

So it is always market here, and if you understand the structure, I'm sure there is opportunity for a Japanese company to involve the sponsorship.

**Q. Working with Ziggy, how comforting was that to know because he told me on pit lane a little bit ago that you guys sat together on two trips to Japan, and you already knew him before you joined the team. How important of a role does Ziggy play, and what's some of the strategy that helped you win the race?**

TAKUMA SATO: I feel comfortable talking to Ziggy because my eye line is exactly the same as his. I don't have to look up. But no, he's a genuine great guy, and I've known him only because my manager, Steve Fuese, worked with Ziggy back in PacWest days. Even though we were a different team in the past few days, when you're passing through the pit lanes we talk about it, and when finally I came to Andretti Autosport, Ziggy is calling my race, that's fantastic. So I already know a few people in the team have got confidence because it's building a relationship, all about building a relationship. He's certainly helping for that, and he brought a great spotter, Damon Hill, who is spotting me Turn 3. Of course my primary spotter is Roger, has been eight years. He's just an unbelievable guy. But at the same level, Damon was doing a great job from

New Zealand. It was kind of a team island. But I think it's great. I think Ziggy is putting everything he could, putting together. I think working extremely well.

**Q. Sebastien Bourdais said he didn't know how many friends he had among the drivers until he had his accident, and seemingly every driver showed up to see him and visit him. Tell me about the reaction you had on pit lane yesterday because it seemed like every driver, team owner, even AJ came running. Their show of respect must have moved you.**

TAKUMA SATO: Yes, I think that really showed the -- talk about what INDYCAR is like. It is extremely, extremely tight competition out there on track, but you can see we care each other because that's all about in sport, and not only for the racing. I know everybody is working on it by their own program, and things happen like Sebastien, and we are heavily concerned with Dixon's accident yesterday, and it was such a relief he got out of the car, and we all think about Sebastien has a speedy recovery. He's a strong guy, and he's already showing like tremendous recovery already. It's a great union, I think, so everybody cares. But it is extremely tight field, so it's very competitive guys.

Having said that, it was nice to see everyone really cheering on me and congrats to me yesterday, including a lot of team owners and including AJ come to the window. That is very nice.

I feel very, very lucky. I feel really, really appreciated, all the support from them.

**Q. Very few drivers have won at 40 and older, and yesterday you had a 42-year-old guy chasing a 40-year-old driver in a real rarity. What do you think about age involvement where you have the two guys that old competing?**

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah. I think you're making great point because, yeah, Helio and I are both 82 years old, right? That's good. I think it's good for the sport, showing determination and how the person can be competitive as you are. If you look at the baseball player Ichiro, he's also over 40, and he's showing tremendous speed, and his kicking dashing speed is even improving. Very physical pure performance, of course it's going to go down, but if you're working on it specifically, what you need to your sport or your specialized, I think people can still improve, and with additional is what do you have is experience, and become such a quality experience makes you perfection.

It's great to see a lot of teams and young 20s drivers on charge. It's nice to see it. But by all means, we can compete, and Tony Kanaan is another example, Helio, Tony, me, kind of age 40 group, and it's a couple years ago Dario was the one to beat, and everybody is respecting him because he's just a pinnacle. I think that's good for the sport for the mixture, and Indy 500

you can do that physically. It is exhausting because two and a half hours race, and even I have a little pain in arm today.

But it's tough on when you go to street course, road course, for example, Detroit next week, this weekend, it's double-header, it's incredibly bumpy track, very physical, so you have to physically prepare a lot more than here.

But here is really driven by mental. The mental strength is the one -- you have to keep on concentrate. You have to judge, now is the time to go or you pull back, and there's no mistake. One single mistake, you are gone. That's part of the combination, and I think even still age 40, it was proof that we were competitive as young people, and I think it's good motivation.

**Q. We've had a lot of comments from drivers in Formula 1 on this race this year for obvious reasons, with Alonso but also you, an ex-F1 driver. Do you think what we've seen this year will encourage a few more Formula 1 drivers to take this race seriously and maybe see it as more of a valid career option rather than something they think about falling into when Formula 1 is over?**

TAKUMA SATO: Right. I mean, that's a nice way to look at that. I think everybody has a fan base, but here I think we'd like to see it. Formula E is a good example. It is kind of offsetting off-season, so a lot of very competitive international race drivers, ex-Formula 1 drivers is also challenging that one, including me. I did it with Aguri-san for the first race. INDYCAR is obviously different, but like Fernando's case was proved, he can do it, but during the season I think it's terribly difficult, and particularly from Formula 1 to here or vice versa.

I think Fernando's race is an extremely rare case, but love to see it. You know, like back in the old days, they go back and forth in Europe and the States, and they compete with various different categories. That's quite good fun. I want to do that, too.

But meanwhile, I really wanted to come race for the Indy 500 as well as the championship in here, that's why I really didn't take part in any other series, but after this, yeah, there is a wide-open opportunity. It'll be nice to see other drivers compete together.

**Q. After Dixon's accident yesterday, it renewed some speculation by a lot of people that closing the cockpits or putting in some sort of a roll cage may be an inevitability. What are your thoughts and feelings about protection for the drivers?**

TAKUMA SATO: Yes, closing cockpit is one thing we always discuss about it, and there's some discussion for sure, in positive and both negative. But for the safety point of view, it is 100 percent better to have it. I mean, in Scott's case, it was just extremely lucky to go to the sideways going to the wall. If that was directly

going to the cockpit, it would have been worst-case scenario, right, so we don't want to do that suggestion.

So open wheel is difficult always, open cockpit is always difficult, especially in open wheel because that's exactly happened, right? He was on the tire, and it's the wrong step. Anyway, there is no perfection, and the sport is always danger, even other category where they don't use any equipment but they still are in huge when you're in sport, and you're working in the public road, too, there is always danger.

I cannot say, but there it is great to see that FIA is involving for the enclosing cockpit R&D things, and hopefully it happens in the very, very close future because we just lost a best friend two years ago.

It would be nice to see improvement for the next level because really after including Formula 1 but also the platform for the open cockpit formula, even Junior Formula nowadays has huge protection but that's only because of his accident. Now we've seen we need to go move up to the next level.

**Q. When you awakened this morning, did you have a hard time believing?**

TAKUMA SATO: Actually, yes. I had a few hours' sleep, so I had a headache and kind of feeling not great, and oh, my gosh, was it just a dream? But my manager said, come on, you've got five minutes to go for the interview. Okay, now it's real. So it was nice to see it actually happened.

**Q. During the photo shoot, I saw you looking at the other drivers' images. What's going to be your reaction when you see your image on there?**

TAKUMA SATO: Wow, that will be like wow factor I think. I can't wait to see my face on the historical trophy. I mean, I was happy enough to have my face on the Long Beach plate, too, and it was nice to see following the fan crowd tour everybody take a picture together, and it was such a happy moment. So now I've got the best trophy in the world, to name on it forever. That means something very, very special. I'm extremely happy about that.

**Q. I got a chance to talk to Michael today, and he was saying one of the things he's most proud of is of his five wins, it's been five different drivers. How important is it for you to come to a team where you know that you've got to give each one of the drivers a chance to win?**

TAKUMA SATO: Oh, absolutely. In Andretti Autosport, every single driver is a potential winner. Well, it is a winner, right? Ryan won it, Alex won it, and Marco was nearly, and I was almost, too. I think Michael did a great job in terms of preparing all the team, got things together, and got find most competitive drivers in the field, and that's why I was very happy, extremely happy to be chosen from him to become his driver.

Among the practice days, we worked together, we shared the information. There was no secret, no hidden, so when I had a great qualification on Saturday, guess what, Sunday everybody has No. 26 car's setup. It happens. But it's okay because that building relationship, I get some benefit from them and vice versa. Now in the race day, kind of a little 1 percent difference made a difference, and that could be pit stop, it could be wing level, it could be the driving style, and like Michael said, six bullets, and one bullet go through it, and I was just lucky yesterday that I was one of them. It's sad to see Ryan had a problem that was just in front of me happened as well as Fernando, but I think in this business you have to keep on challenging and keep on pushing. That's how I have been in the last seven years.

Finally this time, thank you very much, I take it, and next year will be completely different scenario maybe, but I will keep trying.

**Q. You've only got two career victories in this series, but they're the two biggest races on the schedule. Apparently the brighter the spotlight, the bigger you get up for those races. What's it like to have the two crown jewels of the series as a winner?**

TAKUMA SATO: Well, I feel just so lucky, happy, incredibly proud of the team who made me happen in this way. AJ, the team winning at the 2013 Long Beach was such a special moment, as well as this Indy 500 winning. Even you're dreaming about it, even you put the perfect scenario, still you cannot win here, right, because it's so many perfection, you really need it. I had a small issue yesterday, very small technical issue, but that could be throwing out. It was very, very close. I can't tell the details, but it was very close.

But when things happen, it's just like Tony Kanaan said, the track chooses you, and I think we were -- the No. 26 car deserved to be chosen yesterday because everybody is so hard work.

Now, of course after Long Beach win, after Indy 500 win, okay, so when is the next one. I don't care. I don't care when it is. I'm happy to go back on the podium at Detroit next week and then the following at Texas, and I'm so looking forward, particularly now, in championship standings, my standing is very high now, and certainly it is the real challenge for the championship. That's the most exciting thing for my life right now. Let's try and give it everything.

THE MODERATOR: Takuma, thank you very much. Congratulations.