

IndyCar Media Conference

Monday September 10, 2018

Brian Barnhart Patricio O'Ward Colton Herta Press Conference



car. So if can be media, it can be communicating with the team, it can be communicating with just important people, and it really, really helped me development and as a driver and as a person.

And speaking of just the Indy Lights parts of the IndyCar, driving-wise it is very, very similar. It really, really prepared me well, and it's just like a new car. I'm going to have to get used to the different things that the IndyCar has, but thanks to a lot of the things that IndyCar and Mazda Road to Indy offer, I got to -- I got basically just to play a little bit of catch-up into someone that hasn't been around the Road to Indy. Definitely a very, very big help for my development as a driver.

THE MODERATOR: Brian, it's been an eventful first full season for Harding Racing in the Verizon IndyCar Series. You've raced with Gabby Chaves and Conor Daly and tested with both those drivers and Patricio and Colton. What did you see in both Colton and Patricio that made you want to add a second car for the weekend?

BRIAN BARNHART: Well, what we were looking for here at Harding Racing is unfortunately we weren't getting the results early in the year, so we kind of identified some issues that we would like to address and try and set in place our plans for 2019 as soon as possible. And the challenges associated, we've talked a lot about this, with being a one-car team, the only one-car team participating on the full schedule of the Verizon IndyCar Series, it is a huge challenge.

So about mid-season we made the decision to get some additional insight and some additional feedback from some different directions, so we've run Conor Daly in addition to Gabby, and we also are firm believers in the Mazda Road to Indy program and the talent they've been able to develop and bring through, including current IndyCar Series champion Josef Newgarden, who graduated through there. So in keeping an eye, and while the car count was down a little bit in the Indy Lights series this year, clearly Pato and Colton demonstrated a ton of potential, some great racing craft, a lot of speed for the Andretti Autosport Indy Lights team, certainly caught our eye on that. So in addition to Gabby and Conor, we focused on trying to give some of the up-and-coming young talent a test. We were able to do Colton's test at Portland the first week of August, and after Pato secured the championship, as mentioned, we ran him last Thursday

THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media teleconference. On Friday, Harding Racing announced that two standouts from the Mazda Road to Indy will graduate to the Verizon IndyCar Series for this weekend's IndyCar Grand Prix of Sonoma. We're pleased to be joined by Harding Racing president Brian Barnhart and the 2018 Indy Lights presented by Cooper Tire champion Patricio O'Ward, and little later we'll be joined by Colton Herta. First we'll start with Pato and Brian. Welcome to the call.

Patricio was crowned the Indy Lights champion in 2018 after a stellar season that saw him win nine races and a series record nine poles as well as a series Rookie of the Year title. He tested in IndyCar for the first time with Harding Racing last Thursday at Sonoma. Pato, I know after racing in Indy Lights all season and finally getting to drive an IndyCar, you probably can't wait until Friday when you get to practice and join the rest of the field.

PATRICIO O'WARD: You are totally right. I honestly am really grateful for the opportunity that presented in front of me by Harding Racing, and I got to drive an IndyCar a few days ago in Sonoma, and I also really loved, loved the car. It is fast. It is very grippy, and it's basically like an Indy Lights car, just so much faster and so much more grip.

I honestly couldn't be more excited for my first Verizon IndyCar Series race. It's going to be my debut, and I was really, really satisfied and happy with the testing, so I'm looking forward to the weekend.

THE MODERATOR: You're a graduate of the Mazda Road to Indy, you raced in Pro Mazda, you've raced in Indy Lights. What has the racing in the Mazda Road to Indy meant to you and how well has it prepared you to make your IndyCar debut?

PATRICIO O'WARD: I think it's an awesome ladder system. I think it really prepares drivers, most of all -- basically to learn about setting up a car, learning how to work with your engineers, learning all those different kind of things that drivers have to go through, but it really helps to develop your outside skills of the race

at Sonoma. Both of them very successful days. Really impressed by the maturity of both the kids. At 18 and 19 years old, they really demonstrated a high level of maturity with their thought processes, their feedback, their car control. Both of them did an excellent job.

We ran a lot of miles both days. We were flirting with 200 miles on both days, so they both got ample laps and a lot of opportunity to run. I think Pato will probably be able to address -- he was talking about how fast the IndyCar is and how much grip it has, but I think he was also probably a little surprised at how much more physical the car is to drive than an Indy Lights car. The loads, the steering effort, probably be something both of them will be challenged with this week at Sonoma. They'll be longer races than anything they've ever done. They'll be involved in pit stops, which they haven't done in an Indy Lights car. So the physicality of the car itself, the loads and the forces combined with the length of the race and the pit stops is going to be a physically and mentally challenging weekend for them. But I think they're both going to be up to the task. Harding Racing really believes in the future of these kids, and I think they've both earned an opportunity to make their debut this weekend, and we're excited about it.

THE MODERATOR: Adding a second car means adding twice as much equipment, twice as much crew, things like that. How difficult a process has that been for the team?

BRIAN BARNHART: Well, it's been huge. It has been hats off Brian Hornick, "Cuz," all the guys, the mechanics all the way, Red and Shelby and Donny and Lenny and Chris and Jeff, we've had everybody just flat out in making the leap from one to two at a time, as well, when you're doing Pocono, St. Louis and Portland on back-to-back-to-back weekends. They've done an amazing job working twice as hard to get two cars prepared for these guys.

We've gotten a ton of cooperation. Chevrolet has done a fantastic job and been very supportive, as well. Really appreciate everything Rob Buckner at Chevy and Wayne Bennett from Ilmor have done for us in helping in that process, as well.

We've had some good assistance from the Andretti guys, who obviously had the contract rights to Colton and Pato through the process of when we were testing them, and they've been able to help us with some pit equipment and some timing stands. So it's been a huge, enormous task, and we certainly wouldn't have been able to do it without all those people's help.

THE MODERATOR: At the end of the weekend, what are you hoping to achieve with both Colton and Pato and looking towards 2019?

BRIAN BARNHART: Well, I think the biggest thing we

want to do is focus 100 percent on the debut of both those guys in their Verizon IndyCar Series careers. We think they both have very promising and high potential for long-standing careers in the Verizon IndyCar Series. We at Harding Racing are just exceptionally proud that we're getting the opportunity to provide their debut for them both, so we're focused 100 percent on this weekend, and we'll see what we can do from there, and then we'll do what we can to try and see how that develops into potential programs for 2019 for Harding Racing. Our goal would love to be a two-car team in 2019, and with the feedback that we've gotten between Gabby and Conor and after this weekend, Colton and Pato, we'll make decisions moving forward after this weekend.

Q. Quick question for Pato. A year ago at this time you were probably getting ready for one of the last couple of sports car races you were doing in the Prototype Challenge. Maybe explain how the last year has gone where you've won that, got an Indy Lights ride, won the championship, how you're making your IndyCar debut? Is that something you even would have considered a year ago?

PATRICIO O'WARD: I feel like I'm a big believer in things happen for a reason, and circumstances from the end of 2016 kind of led me to the sports car path. Even though the year didn't look as competitive, didn't look as challenging as I would have liked it to be, I matured a lot as a driver, as someone outside of the race car. I learned some new things that I hadn't learned before like pit stops, fuel strategy, taking care of the car, you know, pushing to the limit, but just getting back that little bit just to save the car, make sure that you take it home, and working with other people, basically with an operation closer to the size of what an IndyCar team is than what a Mazda Road to Indy team is.

From both sides, from a Road to Indy team side, I learned a lot, and I've matured a lot I feel like as a driver. You know, if you would have asked me, hey, do you see yourself in an IndyCar in the end of 2018? Honestly I would have told you no. The goal has always been to get to the IndyCar Series, but after this fantastic year that we had and this amazing opportunity that Harding and team Chevy have given me, I want to make the most out of it, and I couldn't be more excited for my debut, honestly.

Q. I would like you to comment on your experience last Thursday at Sonoma, especially on Turn 2 in the Bus Stop, when we saw you having some issues with the handling of the car, please.

PATRICIO O'WARD: Okay, yeah. I got to test an IndyCar for the first time, and my first impressions were the car is just a lot quicker. But something that really, really impressed me was the amount of speed you can carry into the corners, the amount of stopping force the car has with the aero, with those Firestone tires. It really, really is just so much more than anything I've

ever driven. And it was a lot of fun, honestly. I really, really enjoyed driving the car.

I expressed that the car was very, very physical, and it was very demanding in that sort of way. I've heard from everybody that Sonoma is a very physical track. There's barely any time to rest, and it's a track where the fitness of a driver will get tested. So I feel like it's pretty cool to get your first experience in a car there because you know that it is somewhere where the track -- where the car will be hard to drive, where the car will be difficult to handle. But you just basically get a chance to test what the car can do in such elevations, in such fast corners.

You know, just about the little moments that I had, different things that obviously they put the car sideways, it's all about learning, and it's all about just figuring out the car, figuring out what it can do, figuring out how the tires like to be loaded, figuring out when the tire is going to give up after it loads. It's quite different from the Cooper that I've been used to so many years. So it was a very good test day to just figure out what the car likes, figure out what I like within the car, and test the limits at that are going to help me in qualifying sessions and during the race whenever the tires are old or new.

THE MODERATOR: We'll welcome in Colton Herta, the driver of the No. 88 Harding Group Chevrolet for this weekend. Colton, welcome to the call.

COLTON HERTA: Thanks. Sorry I was late. I just got my times mixed up a bit. But yeah, I'm here now.

THE MODERATOR: Colton, you got to test an IndyCar with Harding Racing about six weeks ago. How long has the waiting been before finally getting your debut this weekend?

COLTON HERTA: It seems like a century. Once you get a little taste of IndyCar, it's hard to go back to any other car. It's such a nice car, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. Yeah, super excited for this weekend. Really looking forward to it.

THE MODERATOR: As I mentioned, Colton finished second to Patricio in Indy Lights presented by Cooper Tires this year, had four wins, including a historic sweep of the May races at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. When he debuts this weekend, Colton at age 18 will be the fourth youngest driver to race in IndyCar.

Colton, as a product of the Mazda Road to Indy, what has racing in the Mazda Road to Indy meant to your career, and how much has it prepared you to make your debut this weekend?

COLTON HERTA: It's prepared me massively, and I think it's a great ladder system, not only for drivers but

for everybody involved, teams, team owners, mechanics, engineers, and it's obviously proven that it's worked. I mean, I know many people have said it, but I think like 25 out of the 33 starters last year in the Indy 500 came through the Mazda Road to Indy. Yeah, happy to put my name on that long list of drivers that went through that system, and I think it's helped massively.

We got to race on a lot of the IndyCar weekends, and we got to see how the track develops over the weekend with the IndyCar rubber down and how much the track changes. It's a great stepping-stone, and yeah, it does an amazing job.

Q. Brian, is there any -- I don't want to put the cart before the horse, obviously, but obviously you're very high on these two young men. Has there been any talk or is there any talk planned about possibly maybe working some kind of a deal or partnership with Andretti for next year to get one of them or potentially both of them into one of your cars next year?

BRIAN BARNHART: Well, we're certainly interested. We've been happy with the assistance we've received from the Andretti group. Mike Harding, our owner, has a very good relationship with Michael, and we tried to be very transparent and began this process this summer when we were interested in at least getting the two guys an opportunity to test in the car. Before we even reached out to Colton or to Pato, Mike and I went straight to Michael and told him of our interest and certainly didn't want to cross any boundaries there without being transparent and open to Michael about what we were looking to do. He was nothing but supportive and has helped facilitate with a lot of the equipment and some of the pieces and parts to make it happen, and he's been very cooperative in getting the track time on there.

We're very thankful to Andretti Autosport and Michael Andretti for what they've been able to do. They did a great job, obviously, with Colton and Pato in their Lights cars this year running 1 and 2 in the championship there. I don't know, I can't speak to a lot of what the future could hold on it. We're certainly focused on this weekend and then trying to identify what we can do to maximize Harding Racing's plans next year. Ultimately as we've said all along, we would love to be a two-car team, and a lot of that will be budget driven, and if we can make that happen, we think that's our ultimate goal.

Q. You've always been a big-picture kind of guy, Brian. In your opinion, what or how will the Indy Lights program grow? Obviously we had seven teams or seven entries this year. How does the series grow next year, especially if either Pato or Colton or both go up to the IndyCar ranks?

BRIAN BARNHART: Well, I think they've got some huge challenges on the IndyCar side because I think

the Mazda Road to Indy is a vitally important program. The ladder system, feeder system has been very successful, and I think the best thing coming out of it could be even though they only had a seven-car field this year, we've identified two very capable drivers that we're really proud to give them their IndyCar debut this weekend, and a couple other guys were certainly on the radar, as well. So while the field didn't have a lot of depth, it certainly had a lot of quality. And if we can give these two guys a good weekend show here, and based on how they performed in both of their tests, they were on pace right away, we think it's going to certainly raise and continue the awareness of the Mazda Road to Indy program.

I think IndyCar and Dan Andersen Promotions will focus on doing what they can to improve the car count on it and just keep attracting major talents like we have with Colton and Pato.

Q. For both the drivers, a couple quick questions. First of all, how important was it for you guys to each get that seat time with the testing going into Sonoma as opposed to going in there cold out any time in the car beforehand?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it's super important. Obviously you've learned so much after the first test. You get the first test out of the way, and you sleep on the test and you get back in the car, and you kind of know what to expect. So I think that's what we have going for us going into Sonoma. We kind of know what to expect from the car. Obviously still very little experience in the car, but having that one test day under the belt really, really helps a bunch. It brings you up to speed. You can expect a lot more from the tires and from the one-lap pace, and it's going to be super important in Sonoma. We see the tire deg seems to be pretty bad at Sonoma, and kind of your first lap, second lap is the best.

So with having that experience in the car the first day, we can get up to speed quicker, and that should help a lot in Sonoma.

PATRICIO O'WARD: Yeah, for me, just like Colton said, it's really a big help to get your first taste of what the car is, of what the car is going to do in certain situations before you just jump in straight to a race weekend because even though we've been prepared well, we've been learning from what we have seen and from what we accomplished and raced at Indy Lights this year, the car is a totally different monster, and it's a lot faster. The tire is different.

Just like he mentioned, it really helps just to sleep on it, and when you come back, you know what the car is going to feel like. You know what it might do just in different corners or whenever the car is doing this or that and trying different setups. So it really helps you just communicate with your engineers better. It just helps you connect with the car better, and you feel

more in with the car.

These tests that we did I think are going to be a huge, huge help to what the weekend is going to be. Even though we honestly haven't had much time in it, one day is definitely the biggest step that a driver will do when getting into a new car than anything else.

Q. What then would you consider a successful weekend for Sonoma?

COLTON HERTA: I think a win. No, we just want to get some good experience. I mean, I can't speak for Pato, but for my side, just getting experience. There's not a lot of pressure on us to perform. I mean, we want to do well, but it's a tough track, and we're coming in at the end of the year, so it's always going to be an uphill battle.

But I think if we can finish the race top 15, I'd be pretty happy, and really just progress with the driving, progress with the car and just learn as much as I can.

BRIAN BARNHART: Yeah, that's a good answer for that one. I'm going to jump in there. I think from Harding Racing's perspective, our point of view is going to be experience for these kids. We want them to be on track as much as possible, seat time laps is important, giving them the opportunity for starts and restarts and pit stops and the length of these races. We're going to try and manage expectations, and we just want their debut to be a positive experience. We're also mindful of the fact that it's championship week for the Verizon IndyCar Series, and you've got a great battle up front with Dixon and Rossi. You've still got Newgarden and Power available. It's a double points weekend. So we'll make sure we are mindful of what we're doing and not interfering with the championship outcome, at the same time giving these guys a ton of experience for their debut weekend.

PATRICIO O'WARD: Yeah, I think this weekend is going to be all about experience, all about learning. I feel like if we do anything better than honestly just like finishing the race, making a good race, good pit stops, anything better than a top 15 I think is just going to be a win-win situation for all of us. I think it's all about just learning everything, taking it step by step, and I feel like not many people should have very many expectations because the amount of time we had in the car is basically none compared to everybody else. So it's going to be a hard learning curve. It's going to be something really new to us even if we've already tested the car. But expectation wise I feel like if we're on pace with some top 10s or something, I feel like that would be really, really, really good.

I don't really have as many expectations for me, and I think Colton, I don't know what he thinks, but how he explained, I think we're just trying to learn as much as we can. If we get to be within the top 10 with what we're doing, I think it's going to be great, but if not,

we're just going to learn as much as we can and it's going to be really important for obviously the next years if we get the opportunity to be in the Verizon IndyCar Series.

Q. Pato and Colton, obviously you're very excited about what's going to happen this weekend. What is the future for both of you? For next year specifically, if one or both of you get the opportunity to race in IndyCar, great; if you don't, will both of you both be in the Indy Lights series again? How are you kind of looking at 2019?

PATRICIO O'WARD: I don't look at myself back in Indy Lights. I feel like I'm ready for the IndyCar Series, and I feel like I'd do a good job there, so I'm going to be working really hard to get something together for possibly a full-season ride for the next couple years. I think that would be ideal.

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, I think we're both in similar situations where we're ready to move up and kind of just focus on this weekend, but during the off-season try and get a full ride. But if not, try and do a few races, try and at least do a 500, something of that nature, just kind of get experience in IndyCar, try and get some good results and maybe a door will open.