

IndyCar Media Conference

Tuesday February 12, 2019

Conor Daly Major Ross McKnight Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to our first NTT IndyCar Series media availability today. We'd like to welcome to the podium Major Ross McKnight. Let me get this correct now, he's the national events branch chief for the Air Force Recruiting Service.

Alongside him, Conor Daly, who will be driving the No. 25 Air Force Honda for Andretti Autosport in the Indianapolis 500 in May.

Conor, obviously you were very excited about the announcement here very recently. Tell us a little more about it, what you're looking forward for the month of May.

CONOR DALY: It's really cool. We started something last year that obviously the fans responded really well to. The car was the coolest looking car on the grid. Our die cast sold out. People loved the fact that we were representing such an incredible group of people.

To be able to come back and do even more is something that I actually hadn't been able to do really with a partner. I think there was so much more I wanted to do last year, so much more that we were all trying to smash into one month of May, now we have another month of May to do it, and really a whole year, since they're part of the Andretti Autosport team for the season.

It's pretty cool to be a part of that again. #aimhigh. We certainly aimed to the highest we could go with Andretti Autosport. It's a cool opportunity with an incredible team. Just honored to be a part of it yet again.

THE MODERATOR: Major, if you could speak to what the Air Force saw out of the program from last year that made it so exciting and you wanted to build a program and return again this year.

MAJOR ROSS McKNIGHT: Absolutely. Just the things that tie us to racing in terms of the competition, the ties to stim is also important to us from a recruiting perspective, getting our message and branding out there, tie to similar platforms.

Being able to partner how we did last year, then again

this year, with Andretti Autosport and Conor, it really works well for us reaching our target demographic for talking to kids as they're interested, want to do things in motorsports. There's very similar things they can do in the U.S. Air Force.

From a looking at it holistically for that partnership, it was really great for the month of May. Now being able to work with Andretti Autosport for the whole season, as well as Conor, is just going to be really good for us. We're really excited about it.

THE MODERATOR: What is it about Conor that makes him fit so well into the program for you?

MAJOR ROSS McKNIGHT: Just about everything. He was the most red-blooded awesome American that we could find that was available for the month of May. He did a fantastic job for us last year and continues to do great things for us.

He's a great driver. He's a great person. He's done a really, really good job spreading our message. We really like being around him and having him represent us.

CONOR DALY: Thanks. That was nice.

MAJOR ROSS McKNIGHT: Absolutely.

THE MODERATOR: Conor, you've alluded to this on a number of occasions, but this is a tremendous opportunity for you along with the Air Force to work with Andretti Autosport, currently one of the front running teams at Indianapolis every year. You regard this as a very good opportunity for you to advance your career.

CONOR DALY: Yeah, I mean, Andretti, there's a lot of people in that shop that I've known since I was a child. I've known Marco forever. He's been one of my best friends for a long time. Michael and JF, I've tested their Indy Lights cars before. I've been in and out of that shop. I did some of the Cooper Tire development with the Indy Lights cars. I've almost been in one of their Indy cars two or three different times.

It's really cool to finally kind of get over that hump of maybe doing a race to doing a race and doing it really well, doing it with a really good program. There's a lot of pressure, yes. There's a lot of things, expectations, that come. But that's awesome. I think that's great.

When you're expected to try and do well, that's cool. Let's go do well. You know what I mean?

That's what I'm looking forward to most, is just having that opportunity, having the expectations set very high, and having a great group of people to work with, with drivers and engineers, crew members as well.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Your impressions of the track so far, Conor?

CONOR DALY: Well, COTA is an awesome track. I think our cars are going to race really well here. The long straights, the track surface, it's such a high-quality place. It's going to make a really good race happen for sure here, no matter what.

Q. Tell us about your experience racing here.

CONOR DALY: I did the IMSA race here. It was a lot of fun. The place is so wide, a lot of heavy brake zones for great passing areas here. I think our cars are going to race really well.

Whenever we can get a good draft going, the cars are trimmed out for the long straights, it's a lot of fun. I can't wait to see what happens. Who knows, maybe I will race here. Don't limit us (laughter). With my life, you never know.

Q. Conor, do you think this is the most prepared you'll be for the 500?

CONOR DALY: I really do, yeah. As far as I know, I think I'm going to be able to test in April, which is really cool. As a one-off effort, I've barely been able to do the first day of practice when it comes to May. We missed the first day last year. Every time I've been a one-off effort, it's tough, it's hard.

This situation seems to be extremely prepared for, even now. There's already people in place. Andretti is so used to running such a good fifth car that you almost have no worries. It's just kind of another day in their team operation. That's really cool.

To be able to show up and know that you're just going to be right in that incredible draft train that they've got every day of practice that you can run, preparing for race setup. I've always wanted to be a part of that. It looks like a lot of fun when they do the five-, six-car trains, they run race setups and stuff like that. You always try to tag along, but you never really know when they're going to do it. Now I get to be a part of that. It's really nice to be a part of that.

Q. Talk about the brutal ups and downs you're going through in your career. You keep coming back, so why?

CONOR DALY: Well, why? I mean, I love this. I love what we're doing here. I love racing. I feel like I want to prove so much still. I finished second in an NTT IndyCar Series race. I've been on that podium. It was

such a cool deal with Sebastien Bourdais and Juan Montoya, pretty legendary fellas. I love to see the potential for success. That's what we have a lot of here at Andretti.

I think, I don't know, I want to go out there and I want to win a race. I want to win. I want to feel that feeling again. I think we can do it with this incredible group of people. I'm just thankful for the opportunities that we're still getting.

I'm never going to stop fighting because I think it's such an incredible sport to compete in. There's a lot of great people. We have an incredible fan base. I think that's one of the biggest things is we have so many great fans that have got behind me, for sure, whether or not I'm racing. There's still a lot of people that are really supportive. So that means a lot to me. It would be cool to do something awesome for them, as well.

Q. Major, are there any specific activation plans as far as the month of May? Anything coming up that we can look forward to from the Air Force?

MAJOR ROSS McKNIGHT: Absolutely. Our activation plan throughout the month of May, we will have national assets, mobile experiential tours that people can walk through, experience the different technology that we have, as well as playing some games that relate to some of the stuff we do in the Air Force.

They will get a chance to learn more about different career fields and opportunities we have, visit with our recruiters. We'll have Conor out to our footprint a few times to sign some autographs along with other teammates.

Q. Conor, with your familiarity of the COTA track, knowing the drivers that will be racing here, what part of the track do you think those drivers will find fun and/or challenging?

CONOR DALY: I think the high-speed section, obviously the first sector of the track, is awesome. You have the heavy brake zone, then into the extremely fast S's. That puts a lot of strain on the cars and the drivers physically.

Formula 1, they just look like they're zipping through there easily because there's not a lot of steering effort. For us, there's a lot. This track will be physically difficult.

Everyone is setting up for the long straight to try and make passes. I think that will be really cool because that hairpin is so open. When we did the track walk yesterday, there's going to be a lot of people trying to get passes done here rather than wait for the end of the straight. I think it will be really exciting.

With degradation, too, it will be new for us. Curious to see what that will present racing-wise, but I think it will be a good show, for sure.

Q. Major, what is your background in the Air Force?

MAJOR ROSS McKNIGHT: I'm 11 years active duty this May. I graduated from the Air Force Academy in 2008 with a systems engineering degree. I do what's called acquisitions for my career field. It's program management. I've had chances to work in weapons acquisition, missile stuff. I did time in our Air Force research lab. I worked in the national reconnaissance office, which is one of the intelligence community three letters.

I've had a pretty diverse care of doing that. Now I'm running the event marketing program for the Air Force. It's all program management, balancing cost performance, schedule and risk. What your technical performance is different than marketing and a missile.

Q. Conor, you talked about your fan base. Do you think your participation in the Amazing Race, if that added a lot of interest from fans?

CONOR DALY: I think, for sure. I mean, it brought us to another level. Still my fan base is the core racing fan base. There are a lot of people that show up at the race that say they didn't know me until they saw me in the Amazing Race, which is awesome.

Still there are fans that have been tweeting me since I first got Twitter that are still tweeting me now. Know what I mean? That's a pretty cool group of people that stay faithful. And more so every day there's more people that are coming onto the Conor Daly train. It's kind of cool. I think that's awesome.

I like interacting with all of our fans because I think that's something that INDYCAR does so well. Our drivers are really relatable, really personable. It's cool. There's a lot of fans here. Everyone is walking around the paddock, and we are, too, which is cool. To be able to relate with them, hang out with them, I don't mind that. I think that's part of our game. Hopefully, we can continue to do that for many more years.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.