

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday March 8, 2019

Robert Wickens

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us for a special NTT IndyCar Series media availability. We are so happy to be joined by Robert Wickens here in the press conference room.

I'm going to let you do most of the talking. Honestly the question on everyone's mind, I'm sure you're going to be asked a hundred different ways while you are here, is how are you, how are you progressing, how do you feel?

ROBERT WICKENS: First off, good to see everybody here. It's nice to be back in a world that I'm familiar with.

No, I'm doing well. Really I am. There's obviously good days and bad days. Being back at a racetrack makes everything feel a whole lot better, although we just finished practice one, it's a little bit strange to be on the far side of the pit wall.

No, it's just crazy to think, when you're driving, you know the engineers are talking and figuring out how to make the car better. When you actually listen on a race weekend of the communication that goes on, it's intense.

I thought I'll put a headset on, chime in, give some insight every now and then. I struggled to find my space to make my blurb. It's all a work in progress, work in progress.

From my front, I'm getting some stuff back, getting better each day. A long road. You feel like you're on that road trip, it's the 100-mile road that's a straight line the entire time without any scenery, and you're just working as hard as you can to get to the end.

We're getting there. One step at a time. It's basically all I can say, we're making progress. The thing with a spinal injury is you never know when that day comes where you won't progress any more. I think right now we're trying to utilize every day we can to get as healthy as I can.

THE MODERATOR: You've obviously had an outpouring of support from fans as you've been rehabbing. At the same time it has to feel so good to witness it in person here at a track. What has that experience been like for you in your face here at the race?

ROBERT WICKENS: It's been amazing. I was expecting a lot of support, but it's already kind of gone way out of what I expected it would be. I mean, heading to the pit lane for the first session, I thought the fans would kind of be more focused on the racecars, like I would have been when I was a fan attending a race.

All they seemed to care about was kind of me. Everyone was cheering my name. It's really cool to see team personnel from other teams just saying it's great to see me. People, never even seen them before. Competitor team uniforms, all being really supportive. It goes to show how great the INDYCAR community is, how close it is, but then the fans are just fantastic, as well. Everyone is just giving me such an outpour of support. It's been fantastic.

It's been a motivation piece for me. On those days where I'm just not having the best day in rehab, you feel like you don't really want to put in the final three hours of your day, but then you just think about the long-term goal of me trying to get back into an Indy car. It's pretty easy to find that motivation again.

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

Q. Your remarkable determination and spirit, have doctors been able to tell you how important that is in the tremendous progress you've been able to make?

ROBERT WICKENS: I didn't really catch that.

Q. You've shown remarkable determination to try to overcome this. Have doctors been able to say that's really made it important in the amount of progress you've been able to make, your willingness and determination?

ROBERT WICKENS: Honestly, the spinal cord injury, every single person is different. I'm working my butt off doing everything I can because my whole philosophy in life is the harder you work, the better results you'll get. Make sure you're the hardest working guy out there and you won't be beat. That's been my philosophy from day one of my entire life, how my parents brought me up. That's my approach today.

I don't know if it's right or wrong. There could be a person beside me with the same spinal cord injury eating fast food and sitting in their hospital bed all day,

and they might walk sooner than me.

I think all we can say, the doctors know I'm working too hard, they're telling me to rest. On the same token, they're kind of telling me to keep doing what I'm doing because it's working. It's kind of that fine balance of I am doing four to six hours a day six days a week. It's tough. I enjoy my day off on Sunday.

Besides that, I mean, there's no real reason I'm getting the results I'm getting, or if I did more or less it would change the results. No one really knows.

Q. We talked in January at the Arrow announcement. That's six, seven weeks ago. Your improvement seems to be marked in that period. Do you feel that's true, this last two months has been a big step?

ROBERT WICKENS: I think they've been more, like, sexy steps. Getting the first muscle flick back in October, whenever that was, was huge, right? But it's just a little muscle flick. You don't really notice anything.

Then as I was getting a little better, now that I'm getting up on my feet, I think it's putting into perspective, Oh, my God, he's standing, then taking steps, kind of getting better.

The big thing for me is right now they always told me kind of the six to nine months or the six to 12 month frame is where you'll see the most progression. I'm kind of right at the beginning of that. Hopefully I didn't peak too soon. Hopefully I'm still in that prime spot.

We're just a little bit over six months post-injury. I am getting a lot of improvement from week-to-week. I don't think it's really been escalating. I think it's been pretty linear. I'll take the linear progression over one that kind of plateaus and goes up quickly then plateaus again.

Every week we're making small improvements. (fiancée) Karli (Woods) and I are documenting everything I can do at the start of each month. It's been remarkable to read back to see what I was doing February 1st to March 1st, January 1st. Every month it's a pretty consistent chunk of new things.

Q. Is it still in your mind one day you'd like to race again? And why?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, 100 percent. The goal is to get back into an Indy car. We won't know till I try it to see if it's a reality. Apart from that, I mean, there's been so many remarkable drivers that have succeeded with hand controls in motorsports that it makes me believe that regardless of how my progression goes, I will be in a racecar again. Just a matter of which car. The dream is an Indy car.

I know the team has been very outspoken that they'll always have a car for me when I can race. I think there's also rules and regulations that we have to abide

to. I don't know how many modifications we can make, et cetera. We'll have to cross that bridge when we get there.

The second question, why. It's all I know. I mean, that's the biggest thing. From such a young age, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life. I told my parents when I was like nine or ten that I want to be a racecar driver. They laughed at me and told me that night in bed, Our kid wants to be a racecar driver. Like unachievable thing I wanted to do. I was telling them I want to be the first man to Mars back in the late '90s. I don't know. I was young.

It's really all I know. Everyone told me early on, if you can't race again, you're still going to do something great with your life. I'm a hard worker. I know I'm going to land on my feet somewhere. I wasn't happy with that answer. Like, I don't want a nine-to-five job hustling somewhere new. I want to hustle as a racecar driver. Even if I had to learn something new, like hand controls, I know it's something I'll work hard with.

There's Billy Whizz, who is doing a great job with hand controls, Alex Zanardi, the guy to get back into motorsports post-injury. When I look at what he did in Daytona this year, when I look at what he did in DTM last year, as a racer who raced in DTM for so long, great he got a top 10 without even testing.

Anything is possible. I know I'm a hard worker, analytical. I think I could get on top of hand controls. My only fear is that I always wanted to get back into racing as I left off, on the same level that I left off. I don't want to be just a driver in the field. I want to be one competing to win the podiums like I was when I went out. That's kind of the main thing for me.

Q. We saw the video of you getting onto the plane yesterday going around. How difficult has travel been for you with this condition so far?

ROBERT WICKENS: Well, that was actually my first flight I was sitting in a seat. All the other ones I've been in a medical plane on a stretcher. So far travel has been fine domestically, jumping in Ubers and taxis is a transfer from the wheelchair into the seat. It honestly hasn't fazed me that much. It's harder for Rick having to break down that wheelchair for me to get into those cars.

Travel so far hasn't really been a problem. I'm sure it's kind of like a puzzle in a way. I'm kind of interested to see how it plays out.

Q. Are you planning on dancing at your wedding?

ROBERT WICKENS: Even what I did before was hard to call dancing. Even if I stand perfectly straight, I can wiggle my upper body a little bit. I don't know, what defines dancing? That's the big thing.

I mean, if we can just both stand there and awkwardly

stare at each other for three minutes, I think that would be pretty good, as well.

Q. How much of an inspiration has Sam been as your team owner and a friend?

ROBERT WICKENS: Sam's been super helpful throughout the whole thing. I mean, just the fact when the injury happened, he already knew basically like the good doctors, the good surgeons. Before I would get to the hospital that I was going to, he already had vetted it for me, which was always...

At the time I wasn't in a space to recognize. But he was always making sure I would get the best care possible. Nothing dodgy, but everything legally. He just knew so much because of his injury, because of his research and everything he's done with his paralysis. He's been to so many rehabilitation hospitals, that when that became a reality for me, he knew the ins-and-outs of every hospital, every rehab facility we were looking at.

In the end we came to the conclusion of where we wanted to go. It was kind of a full team decision. It wasn't just me trusting a doctor that recommended it. I felt like we really made the right choice in the places that we went.

Then from there moving forward, he has his place in Las Vegas, a facility, which has opened. That could be a very viable option for me once rehab finishes and I still need a place to keep conditioning.

It's hard to put in words really what he's done. I think he did a lot that I still don't realize, because I was in a state that I wasn't able to realize what he was doing.

Q. You've had a lot of drivers, some have been through adversity like yours, reach out, trying to connect. What has that meant throughout this process?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, it's been amazing. I always knew that the motorsport world was always supportive. I know I've always been supportive when a driver had an accident, even though you didn't know them. If there's ever that day where you read a fatal story, the outreach is always so good to that family.

To be on the other end of that was something special. Still, again, like at the early stages of the accident, I still don't know really the full effect of what the support was like. I haven't been home in Indianapolis still since that day. I've heard through Karli, I've heard through the team, that there's cases and cases of mail waiting for us to open. The outreach was fantastic.

From the motorsport world, all the drivers, big names, small names, every post I make, every progression I do, they're right there behind me motivating me, reassuring me that I can do it.

Honestly, when those drivers kind of reach out to you,

you want to do it even more. I think that's kind of the bigger thing, is I want to finish this journey not just for myself but for the whole motorsports community. I don't want to fall short in any way.

THE MODERATOR: Robert, again, so amazing to see you here at the race. Thank you so much for taking the time to join us.

ROBERT WICKENS: Thank you, guys.