

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Sunday April 7, 2019



Takuma Sato, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing Sebastien Bourdais, Dale Coyne Racing with Vasser-Sullivan Scott Dixon, Chip Ganassi Racing

Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama
Post Race News Conference

NOTE: The below transcript is from the NTT IndyCar Series' Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama post-race news conference with the top finishers of the race at Barber Motorsports Park.

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with our NTT IndyCar Series post-race press conference. Joined by our second-place finisher Scott Dixon, driving the No. 9 PNC Bank Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing Team. Scott, I know another runner-up finish, obviously a big story line here for you this weekend, but take us through your race and how it played out for you and the team.

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, all in all, we've got to be happy with that. It's always tough competition. We come here to win, but second place, great for points. I think we're only 27 back now in the championship or something.

You know, it's one of those days we were kind of just really in defense mode. We had really good early speed, but if we pushed too hard, the tires were just killed after about 15, 20 laps. A lot of the time was just trying to take care of the tires. On that first pit stop exchange we made some really good gains. I made a small mistake on the second pit stop with selecting second gear instead of first, which kind of bobbled us, and then obviously the 18 got in front of us, which kind of -- we couldn't get around him. We were stuck there. He was on a slightly alternate strategy. They did a hell of a job, but with that caution coming out on the third one there, it was nice that actually race control left it green and let the field pit. It's the first time I'd seen that.

It's quite similar to what we see in IMSA and some other series. Obviously it has to be the right circumstances for that to happen, and I think Kyle and everybody up there did a hell of a job to call it that way, otherwise it would have flipped the field and we would have looking a lot worse off.

But yeah, on that last pit stop there I think Bourdais had put in some more fuel so we were able to jump him, and away we went, and from that point on it was just trying to keep the tires underneath the car.

But big credit to the PNC Bank guys. On pit road they did a hell of a job, helped us today. But definitely as a team I think we've got to work on the deg. We had pretty big deg at COTA, as well. I think we have some pretty quick cars for the first 10 to 15 laps, but it hurts a bit later.

THE MODERATOR: We heard you say on TV yesterday that this is one of the most mindboggling weekends that you've been through. Is it because of that deg? Is that what you're referring to there?

SCOTT DIXON: No, I think we tested here in November, and even that November test when we only run on blacks, we were over a half a second faster. Last year we were in the 67s every session, and this year we only just broke the 69s at a couple of points. The car drove very different from what we're used to.

The conditions were fairly ideal. There was not too much UV on the track. The track temp was quite low. We didn't have any hot conditions, but whatever Firestone maybe brought here, or maybe it was the other cars that ran this weekend. It just made every session a bit of a lottery of trying to figure it out and the window was quite small to get a lap or two and get the ultimate lap time out of it. I think you saw that in qualifying; it was a very mixed field, and I think you saw that today, too, with cars just coming and going.

THE MODERATOR: And finally, towards the end of the race, we saw Takuma Sato go off track a little bit. What was running through your brain when you saw that happen?

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, I saw it, and I was hoping he went a little further off.

But it was his race today. He deserved it. That was the only thing he did wrong, and he caught it. We tried to

put pressure on him. It was actually quite tough to get close this year, and I think that's, again, because the grip level was quite low, so it was really hard to get close. And in that situation when I pressured him, my tires went off, and started to back in, Bourdais really charged with about 10 to go and then he made another run with a couple to go. He had a lot of OT and he nearly had us. It was definitely a nail-biting situation for the 9 car there. I was obviously hoping to get to that checkered flag and salvaged second place, but yeah, it was interesting.

THE MODERATOR: Last weekend we saw Colton Herta become the youngest driver in Indy car history to win a race. This weekend we see three veterans at the top showing a lot of grit and experience. What does that say about the diversity of the series?

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, I was just joking it was a geriatric podium. It's good. The field is extremely tough. It's great to see the young talent coming through. It's very important for the sport. There's such diversity, which is really important, especially in the growing times of the series. It was so cool to see Herta win at COTA. He's been driving fantastically, so has Pato, and even Felix for that matter.

There's been a lot of new guys this here and guys stepping up, as much as Wickens did last year, too. It's great to see, and it definitely keeps us all on our toes, and you know, and I need to hold out for a couple more years at least.

Q. The development of Takuma since he joined the series, there was a couple of years there early in his career where nobody really wanted to get near the guy because they were afraid he might take them out in a wreck, but he's really seemed to kind of slow down enough to go fast. How do you see the development of him because the last couple of years he's been pretty impressive?

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, I actually thought he was driving Graham's car on the first two laps because Graham was driving pretty crazy. As soon as we got to Sato, he was running us off the track. I think we had some pretty good runs there and runs that actually would have got the pass done but there had to be an avoidance. But yeah, Sato, I think it's when you find the right situation, the right place, the group that you're happy with, and he's done a good job, and I know he's got a lot of good people around him, and when you feel comfortable, you excel, and he's done that. I think sometimes when everybody is under pressure, you make mistakes, but today he drove flawlessly and they came away with the win.

Q. Scott, you mentioned about the situation when the yellow came out and how INDYCAR left the pits open, so people had a chance to come in and pit. It would seem that one, there's nobody really in danger when the yellow comes out if every driver

slows down and then they work their way to pit lane, that would prevent a fuel-saving race, which can be kind of boring if that's what's going on, and maybe the fans don't always understand that if you have to constantly make your fuel number, but it would seem it could be done safely based on what happened here. What would you like to see in the future?

SCOTT DIXON: You know, if I was at the back of the field, I would have liked to have seen it go yellow. But where we were today, it was convenient.

I think all we really ask for is consistency, and I think Kyle has kind of been heading towards this direction. It's always very hard to call that. I'd hate to have that job, and I'm sure somebody is going to be complaining about it.

So it's -- for me, I think that's how we prefer to race. I think if you asked probably most of the guys that are normally racing at the front, that's how they would like it, but also that flip of the field is what INDYCAR is known for, and it creates some crazy racing, some late-race charges and winners that maybe didn't have that possibility.

You know, there's many different ways to look at it, but today I think that situation was the right call.

Q. You said that the track, the grip levels affected the quality of the racing. Will the resurfacing that's taking place for next year have an effect on that?

SCOTT DIXON: I'm not even sure it was the surface. As I said, we tested here in November, and it wasn't that long ago. Maybe it was last year's tire. But then what we had this weekend was significantly slower. At that test in November I was in the 67s, and you come here, and you just break 69 (seconds) on reds. We only get to test blacks. I can't imagine the track changed that much just over one winter, and other cars actually tested here not long ago and were faster than I think what we saw on the pole on blacks.

So I'm sure everybody will dig into that a little bit to see where that goes. I'm sure Firestone will maybe make some adjustments for next year if it was a tire thing, and something they tried, but yeah, I think the first few years we raced here were pretty epic. There was a lot of overtaking, a lot of passing. This is one of the best facilities we go to all season, and I was kind of shocked that hear that they were going to repave it. Kudos to Mr. Barber, and hopefully it's the right seal, I guess, hopefully.

Q. You may have already answered this, but with Leist, were you surprised, were you angry when he didn't give you the position and that finally INDYCAR had to give him the blue flag?

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, you know, I understand what they were trying to do. He actually went at it pretty hard for the first lap and then realized that Sato was still

pulling away and he didn't have a chance to unlap himself. In that situation, he's just trying to make a quick pass, pray for a yellow and he's back in the race. But he let me by after a lap, and we were asking for a favor there for the restart, but I don't think it would have changed the outcome.

THE MODERATOR: We'll welcome in Sebastien Bourdais, driver of the No. 18 Team SealMaster Honda for Dale Coyne Racing with Vasser-Sullivan, a two-stop strategy for Sebastien Bourdais today. Sebastien, when that call was made finally and you understood that's the direction the team was going in, what were your thoughts?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I knew all along that was the game plan. But by lap 15, 16, I was like, guys, I am not so sure I can hang on to that car for another 10 laps. We thought we were a bit better than -- we'd be a lot better than we were, and I mean, it's all relative, obviously, if nobody really stuck to it or just maybe Will or -- I have no idea really who stayed with it or maybe two or three others, but yeah, it was really tricky, and for us to start with the Firestone red used tires already might have been a little bit over-optimistic. But it worked out. It worked out.

Hats off to the boys and the SealMaster Honda crew. They obviously had maybe more faith than I had myself to be able to wheel that thing all the way through lap 26 or whatever it was. The plan was to hit 29, so when I saw that, I was like, man, that's going to be a long end of the race and divide that race in one more stop. I wasn't worried about fuel. Fuel was not a concern today. It was very easily achievable, but the problem was to be able to hang on to the tires.

The sun came out, and that was the last thing I needed to go as long as we did and as deep as we did on the stint. As soon as the sun came out every time, it was not consistent, but every time the sun would come out, the temp would go up instantly, and you would lose a half a second a lap. So, it was like, oh, boy. If that sun could go back behind a cloud, that would make us a big, big favor.

Yeah, it kind of worked, but it was a lot of hard work, that's for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Towards the end of the race you really did seem to be catching Scott Dixon in second place ahead of you. Did you feel like maybe a couple more laps and you might have gotten him or no?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: No, I mean, I had saved on the front end everything and more I needed to be able to be on the move and not have to save and also use all the Push-to-Pass I had. So, I gave it a burst nine laps to go. I caught him in like a lap and a half pretty much, and as soon as I got in his rear wing, there was just nowhere to pass. He was staying low and pretty

much using the same lines as I was. Had he been using something different, maybe I would have had a chance to -- if I staggered and got some clean air, but you know Scott, he's just too good. Like he just knows exactly where to put his car and where to block, and without doing anything wrong, but just completely kill your momentum and not give you any opportunity. He played that to perfection, and I tried again on the last lap thinking, I've got all that Push-to-Pass I'm not going to carry to the next race, I might as well use it, but same thing, I run him down and got to the rear wing and almost crashed a couple of times, there was just at that point the tires were just starting to give up, and it was barely okay on my own, but in traffic it wasn't.

Just a tough race all around, but really happy with the results and looking forward to Long Beach.

Q. Seb, Scott said that was a geriatric podium and we were just talking about all the rookies for the last two weeks coming off of COTA. You're 40, Sato is 42, Scott is I think 38. This is a very physically --
SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I'm 38 for a few more weeks.

Q. This is such a physical place, but it does say something about don't ever count anybody out just because they're close to 40?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Well, I guess we would have gotten our butts fired if we didn't earn that spot, so I don't think it's relevant. It's funny, we were talking about it I think in that series, obviously the physical constraints are high because there's no power steering, but it's also -- if you're in good shape and you do the job, it's also very physical at 40 years old to be able to drive it and not leave anything on the table.

And I think the experience and races like this where you've been there before, you've had to manage those tires and you know the fuel game and you know the place and you know the feel, when it starts to give you the little indication that the left rear is kind of starting to give up, you know what to do and you've been there before and you take counteractive measures and you just wheel it out. That's certainly a place I've been familiar with before and I knew I could survive to a certain point. I didn't really know I was going to survive it all the way, but yeah, I mean, definitely experience in that series is very important, and it's just the beginning. We're going to go to places that are just as tricky as this one, and then you get to Iowa and Pocono and places like that, and then hang on to your pants if you have never been there.

Q. Would you say the safety car period kind of killed your chances of taking the win today?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I think Sato had us pretty much covered just by the fact that he managed to get himself a very big lead early on and distance himself from the rest of the pack. He did that by kind of playing his strengths early and going like brand new reds and then new blacks, new blacks. In hindsight, I just --

maybe that would have been the right thing to do for us. We had the tires, we just really thought that the option tire was going to be better. I really kind of would want to see the outcome of the race without the yellow because I do feel like having been able to keep Scott behind as we had done, and we probably would have pitted the same lap because at that point with 31 laps left, everyone would have to obtain because there's really just no reason to stay out and get hung out like in COTA for those guys. So yeah, I wish I would have seen the outcome of the race without the yellow, but I don't know that I would have had anything for Sato because he was just too far up the road for us, and it would turn into, again, track position.

THE MODERATOR: We welcome in our race winner, Takuma Sato, driving the No. 30 Mi-Jack Panasonic Honda for Rahal Letterman Lanigan racing today in the Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama. Victorious here from pole. Just take us through your emotions of how exciting this is, a really dominant weekend for you.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, very happy. Very happy obviously needless to say. This is the -- I don't know, it's probably the cleanest race that I ever won, and again, big thank you to the team. Without their support, we wouldn't be able to push this much hard, and I think the engineers did a fantastic job. I think we come here with the hopes, always does, that honestly physically never really, really expected to be this much of a domination, be able to do it. But all the conditions and whatever you call it, I think all the environment was really, really helping for us, and today I think showing such a domination, that was a superb feeling. So, I'm just really, really excited.

THE MODERATOR: Towards the end of the race a little excursion off track for you just to make things interesting. What was going through your head when that happened and what did happen?

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, obviously Scott, I was charging like hard, and also obviously Sebastien. We had about 1.5 to 1.7, 8, that sort of a gap that I was controlling a bit, but it's never relaxed. Outside probably looked easy to win from the cruising and the pole position, but it wasn't really cruising, so I was really pushing hard using Push-to-Pass on everything exit on the last 10 laps. So, it was tough, and I had a little moment into the Turn 8, and we still were having on Friday completely sideways and knocking the port out, I decided, nope, this time I'll go straight because I knew I had to come back.

It looked like it, but it wasn't that much in that moment I decided to go straight. Anyway, it was not necessary to give the little bit sort of heart attack to the body. I hope -- I think again, Bobby, Mike Lanigan and of course David Letterman who decided to fly in this morning after locking up the front row with Graham Rahal, so it was great that we demonstrated such a great result in

front of him, and very, very happy, very proud of the entire team.

THE MODERATOR: Racing can sometimes seem like a real momentum sport, and you're heading into the Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach where you've been victorious before. How much do you believe in that mentality of momentum?

TAKUMA SATO: I think it's good for the boys. Obviously certainly at least leading up to it, and motivation-wise, physically here, I think the whole energy is definitely a good momentum. Having said that, it's a totally different venue, and I think it's a clean sheet of paper. You go to the weekend, you see every single weekend session that anyone can be the top of the time feed because it's so competitive. I don't see too easy or into the weekend at Long Beach, but of course, of course, we wanted to perform the highest ever.

I think last year we had a good race. Unfortunately, we had an incident, but up until then, I think we had a good race. Graham had a really good qualifying in Long Beach. So, combine that with this year's performance in St. Petersburg and today's performance, I think there's no reason why we can't be competitive again.

Q. Given your history with Honda going back to the '90s, how rewarding is it to be the first driver to win this race for Honda since 2014?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, this is really fantastic effort of the entire Honda family, and HPD working really hard as everybody knows, and it's a great competition between Chevy and Honda in the past few years, but I think we see good and bad, but I think nowadays, I think Honda is very competitive.

You look at the qualifying top 5 Honda and top three podium Honda again. I think we're very, very happy at the moment, and of course Honda Alabama Grand Prix, we are really proud of that. And of course, going to Long Beach now, it's Acura. This is a long, long time Honda wanted that specific event. There was no one didn't like Long Beach. It's such a special event.

I think it doesn't really matter the manufacturer, but I think we all enjoy the Long Beach Grand Prix, and hopefully, we'll be very competitive.

Q. Eddie Jones was saying that the reason the first pit stop that lasted a long time didn't bother you was because you had built such a good lead. Were you at any point anxious over how long that pit stop took?

TAKUMA SATO: We were talking about it before the race why we had an advantage to starting from the front row, which Graham and I talked about it, whoever took the Turn 1, 2, 3, whatever you call it, took the lead, we should be obviously racing together at that point. We just wanted to have a solid formation going

to Turn 5, and after that, whoever had a good pace should go for the win.

We basically stretched the -- how do you say, the gap between us and the group because any moment for the yellow obviously disappeared, but like you said, now changing a tire, it can be a problem. So, you wanted to have any second in the pocket, and that's what I did, and that's why I started from the brand new reds, and it worked really well.

It worked really well, and obviously while as a driver sitting in the cockpit and having problem on the mechanical failure or whatever the tire didn't go on, it took like ages, but it's important to just head down, and you do your job, and just you've got to believe that the boys will do an excellent job in the next pit stop, which they did.

So perfectly okay for me. In races it happens. I make mistakes, too, so I don't blame it, but I think it's important to understand what's happening and make sure we will improve for the next pit stop.

Q. And when you first arrived, you often drove faster than the car you were in, and sometimes that would get you in trouble. Now you seem to have the exact feel that it takes to go fast, maybe slow enough to do what you need to do to win the race. How important has that become to your development?

TAKUMA SATO: True. I think some of that is obviously the personality. Some of that is a learning curve, and even 42 years old, still learning curve. I think it's a nice way that I've got great support from the team and my environment of my team and obviously Steve my manager and then doing the spotter thing in Turn 2 and 3. We've got a great relationship. Everyone who I have is very supportive, so I really appreciate all the 30 boys, and that's why I can build myself with confidence and slowly but surely we are moving steps forward, which is a fantastic feeling.

Q. When the yellow came out, race control made the decision it appeared to leave the pits open before they threw out the yellow. Did that affect your fuel strategy at all because you described how you still could use the Push-to-Pass to keep that gap toward the end of the race? And it's much more exciting to not watch everybody trying to make a fuel number and nobody challenging because they have to save fuel.

TAKUMA SATO: Right, right. First of all, I think INDYCAR did a great job and a great decision to obviously go to yellow because that's a safety issue. But the car parked at the exit of Turn 9 was not the danger in position, and unfortunately, I think the guy goes into the problem in the pit lane was a little bit dangerous, so I think they brought the yellow after that.

But obviously, that played extremely important decision

whether in or not because after that I think anybody who pit stop, it didn't do it, it cost a lot. So, it was definitely making the decision which they did a good job. After that, 30 left in a stint, which required a little bit to save fuel, but I think it took three or four laps before the start which made us a little bit easier in terms of fuel.

But again, the last 25 laps Scott and Bourdais were charging, and I was of course in saving fuel, but at the same time using a Push-to-Pass. It was a good challenge, and I think it was fun, so hopefully, the fans enjoyed it.

Q. Are races like this great for guys with experience? You came into it, practice time was limited, tires changed, the track changed. Is that where your experience and Bourdais's experience and Dixon's experience shows?

TAKUMA SATO: Yes, I think it's definitely good to have a track like this. Barber Motorsports Park is just a beautiful facility, and I think the track has got such a combination of flowing high speed with elevation change, which is why all the drivers love it. It might be difficult to overtake, but that's the nature of the road course, and we don't complain that, and obviously Mr. Barber puts incredible effort in that.

I think this is one of the I think favorite circuits for the fans. Look at the crowd today. They obviously really enjoyed it. Obviously, before the race, there was a lot of the fans and cheering. I really love it, and I think a lot of young guys coming on board now are such quality rookies this year. You're able to see it like us and they combined, it's a lot of very competitive racing. So, I think the series is growing really, really nice way.

Q. I think Mario Andretti was 53 when he won Phoenix and the Unser brothers were 48, 47. Obviously, they all won races close to 50. Do we make too big a deal out of age in this sport anymore?

TAKUMA SATO: I don't know. It's obviously nice to hear and encouraging me that it looks like I have 10 years. But in current formula, I don't know. Obviously, it's a very physical sport nowadays. Don't get me wrong, even Mario, of course, it is. But the cars are very fast and putting 3.5 to the 4G's and have to have an extensive program for the training. See how I go, see how I survive with age, and mentally I'm still a happy guy to race with, and if it -- is it possible? I think that Bobby will give me an opportunity. Let's see how far we can go.

Q. Where does this win rank among your entire career, not just INDYCAR?

TAKUMA SATO: Every single win is so special, and you can't really directly compare here to there. Of course, Indy 500 win is -- no doubt about it, it is significant. But today, whole my career, hmm, I think this was such an exciting win because I think what I've

done from pole to win because I had to go back to the British Formula 3 back in 2001. Since then, of course, I won Long Beach, other races, got a pole eight times, this time, but the last seven races I don't think I won it from the pole position. Because it's the NTT IndyCar Series such a competitive until really the last lap on ovals. You never really know who's going to win.

In that game, to be able to nail it, pole to win is such a special feeling. Today it wasn't really happening and obviously I was calm, not the most exciting race perhaps, in a good meaning, but I take this as very special, and especially my first road course pole position in the NTT IndyCar Series, and bear in mind, this is officially my first INDYCAR test track back in 10 years ago, back in 2010. It took long to come to here, but that seems why to me it's a special story, special memory, and this is definitely one of my recollections of winning.

Q. When you go back to -- two weeks ago the youngest driver in the series wins a race, today the oldest one does. When you look back over your career, does the significance of poles and wins and success, has that changed since you were a young guy, and now do you appreciate it more?

TAKUMA SATO: I really appreciate the environment I have, and really thank you to everyone who's supported me the last 20 years of my whole race career. Really incredible to be honest. Obviously, Colton, Felix and you name it, a lot of great talented drivers. Obviously, Colton won the last race, but some luck obviously. We were dominant and he had it unfortunate. So, it's racing. It's happening. But he grabbed it when he needed.

Today I think we had the same suggestion, okay, Penske wasn't as competitive as he was usually, and so does Andretti. But today we dominate when we need it, and I think the key to this momentum is incredibly important, and younger guys winning and older guys winning, I think it's good for the sport, and let's see, I think this is the name of the sport, so it's a very exciting moment.

Q. What can you tell us about what you learned over the off-season that helped this weekend, and what did you learn this weekend moving forward?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, I mean, over the course of the winter, I kept saying that the engineering made the significant changes in philosophies, and of course after Matt now coming into the team, he brought something that we never used to, and we have to accommodate and adapt with our ways to do that, and of course my engineer Eddie Jones is such an incredible legend and feeling of the guy who used to be racing at Pocono. So, it's a guy who knows about business in the cockpit it is my engineer, which should help. So, I always believe and trust with the engineer. We had gone through some painful difficulty last year, but then after that, they really come back strong.

That was a job for them over the winter, and Graham and I have to physically mentally prepare to reflect what they can prepare and produce this kind of a result it's not easy, but I think this is a whole team effort, and that's what I love.

Even coming to this weekend my team says, "We want to come here to plan to dominate." Of course, we wanted to be competitive, but after seeing a couple of road course tests, race at COTA, we could be maybe top 5, but we never expected to be front row, which is fantastic. This is motor racing. This is the science behind it, but this is also a magical feeling, as well, and that's what I learned this weekend. Again, never give up and really attack all the time, and then you grab the chance. That was today's result, so I learned a lot today, and really happy moment and really proud of the teFastScripts by ASAP Sports