

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Friday June 7, 2019

Press Conference

Takuma Sato

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing



THE MODERATOR: We'll welcome in our NTT IndyCar Series P1 award winner, Takuma Sato. Takuma's ninth career pole, his first here at Texas Motor Speedway. Obviously, that means a new best start here.

Takuma, we've heard conflicting opinions on how great it is to start from the front row if it really matters all that much. I'm guessing you feel pretty positive about it.

TAKUMA SATO: Yes, absolutely. Before we start, like to say great thank you to the team, great opportunity. I want to thank ABeam Consulting, my primary sponsor, and Mi-Jack.

It's been a great weekend. Here in Texas, it's kind of dreaming about it, be on pole. I have been saying that to the guys, that this is one of iconic track in IndyCar Series, high banking, very fast passing. You never know till very last lap. You see Graham Rahal won by one corner or something from Hinchcliffe a couple of years ago.

Really, maybe the end of the day front row here is safer. Obviously, you can control the race, which is the biggest part. But for the end of the result in tomorrow night, it will be a completely different scenario.

To be on pole is great. But at this track, you can do completely anything possible from the back row. I'm not really back off on that, of course. But certainly, the team gave us unbelievable speed of the car. Just a phenomenal feeling to go that fast through the corners. In fact, I was keeping on the lower side of the range. Car working extremely well.

Huge credit to the engineering side, and my engineer, of course, Eddie Jones. I was very happy for the boys, too.

THE MODERATOR: By the time we go green tomorrow, probably about an hour later than qualifying. What are you expecting in terms of how the conditions will affect the racing tomorrow night?

TAKUMA SATO: Obviously, IndyCar gave us a great opportunity to run in those conditions yesterday. Obviously with the rain, cut short. At least we had a taste of what kind track temperature and ambient temperature gives us the Firestone and grip level as well as the downforce and drag level.

I think like Graham said before the qualifying in his television interview, it's going to be more tight, close racing than last year because we have approximately 100 pounds more downforce than last year.

But I don't think it's going to be pack racing, but it's getting somewhere close. Like I said yesterday, here it should really allow us to go into the two-wides in at least turns three and four. A bit of extra downforce, and I think the Firestone brought a great tire. We've seen so far it's phenomenal performance.

Tomorrow I think it's very exciting racing going on. Until really last stint, really last lap, we can't predict who is going to win the race.

THE MODERATOR: Excepting a few races here and there, a fairly consistent season for you, mostly staying within the top 10 results-wise. What would you attribute that to this year?

TAKUMA SATO: Just the environment that I got, that the team really put me in a fantastic opportunity. Thanks to Bobby and Mike and David, to be honest. Really team works together. That's continuous throughout last year.

Last year couple race we necessarily struggle, but they come back really strong. So today, not only for today but the whole season, 2019, they're showing outstanding support. Give Graham (Rahal) and I really able to going flat out actually.

Really Graham is a great teammate. He gave me great (indiscernible) for the conditions today, too. We trust each other. We pushing like hell each other. We completely believe in ourselves that we can do the job. That's what the boys produce.

So I'm extremely happy for the team.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Takuma.

Q. Put this in perspective for your career. We talked a little bit yesterday that things are progressing. You're turning into a little bit of a different driver. Are you just hitting your prime?

TAKUMA SATO: I don't know. You could judge from outside. It's me all the time.

Obviously, I'm challenging all the time. But this time, of

course, I've got great support from the team. Yeah, I can feel more confident, more comfortable shall we say, that the things when you need it, pushing 100 percent of course.

But if it's not, I mean, it's like name of sport. Every athlete tries to improve yourself. Every time jump in the car, I still feel I developing, I still learning. Obviously physical stuff, you never compete for some of the 19 years (indiscernible). Speed is nowhere near.

I survived Detroit last weekend. I'm still feeling fresh and ready to go.

Everything, really everything has come together. This year seems to be hooking up great speed, consistency, great race craft, too. Hopefully, this trend goes to the end of the season so I can challenge for the top three of the championship.

Q. You're starting up front, but what is it going to be like as far as how many lanes there are? At what point do you think there's going to be too many marbles to prevent someone from taking an outside run?

TAKUMA SATO: The marbles, honestly, I don't know. Firestone brought new compound and new construction tire, which gives the different structure for the tire and mechanism for making marbles. Marble tends to just slide off the surface, which means cars kind of sliding all over the place. That's what happens with the softer tire.

Historically here in Texas, I don't think Firestone had any problem with the marbles. We can use the second lane as long as you have enough downforce and grip level.

Now, of course, the start of the race probably difficult to go two-wide. At the start, you can. Restart you can. But once it gets settled, I think you have to wait until get dark and downforce from the cooler temperature. Maybe at the second or third stint, you be able to see some of the cars go high lanes.

With this downforce, I think turn three and four is idealistic. You can use one-point-five to two lanes. I'm not sure about turn two. I tried yesterday, it's never worked. Hopefully, by the second half of the race, we'll be able to use the second lane in Turn 2. Then I think you can see a very, very exciting race.

Q. What was the longest run you did in afternoon practice? How do you feel the tires are bearing up?

TAKUMA SATO: We haven't done a full stint, unfortunately. I did 36 laps on my tire. That wasn't even the full tank either. Given the choice, I think it's a little easier for the tire from that point of view.

Looking at the wear, looking at the internal condition in

the tire, it looks very healthy. I've heard there is a few teams had a little bit more not exactly issue, but there is a little bit sign of tire giving up. That's probably come from the higher tire pressure. That's what the Firestone reported.

Hopefully, with the recommended Firestone tire pressure, I think we don't have any problem.

Q. You're fifth in points right now. How much are you thinking big picture championship? With the NASCAR Truck race, laying down a different rubber compound, is that going to affect anything tomorrow?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, NASCAR Trucks, honestly I don't know. Like I said, I think the start of the race, let's say the first quarter of the race, it is always slippery. You will always get good grip when you put the second stint on the fresh tire, how much tire grip is available. Then the driver gets confidence to use a little bit higher lane. As I said, once it gets the sunset, I think now you can fully attack at the higher lane.

I think by that time, all the rubber will be Firestone rubber. Hopefully by then shouldn't be any problem. No, we have to wait and see.

No, always thinking bigger picture, of course. Of course any race you want to win. Let's say couple weeks ago Indy 500, let's say last week wet, soaking, difficult condition in Detroit. Both cases I finished third. Wanted to win, but I couldn't.

Of course, therefore the third place. I take it because it's such valuable points. Being fifth in the championship for the first half of the season, it is extreme effort from the team. That's why we're here.

I want to maximize that performance. The rest of the season my approach will be exactly the same: if I have a chance, I will go for it 100 percent. If not, if the car is a fifth-place car, we will take fifth place. We'll see how we end up end of the season.

THE MODERATOR: Takuma, congratulations. Good luck tomorrow.

TAKUMA SATO: Thank you.