

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Press Conference

Robert Wickens

Arrow Schmidt Peterson Motorsports

Ted Klaus

President, Honda Performance Development

Mike Long

Chairman, President and CEO, Arrow Electronics



and difficult ones. There were moments of joy and elation, standing, taking a few assisted steps. The video of Robert standing and hugging Karli for the first time in six months after the crash was emotional for all of us that saw it.

Robert's recovery is not linear, and despite the obstacles, the long days of therapy, difficult days where it would be easy to say, I'm not going to do this today, his spirit, his motivation remains strong.

This weekend marks another step in the road to recovery. Prior to the green flag on Sunday's Honda Indy, Robert Wickens, with fiancée Karli beside him in the passenger seat, will drive a modified Arrow Acura NSX in the parade laps.

Robert, welcome back to Toronto. I speak for so many when I say how excited we are to see you, to see you back in a car. Can you just first of all express for us what this moment means to you and how significant it is?

ROBERT WICKENS: Wow, that was some of the nicest words anyone's ever said about me. That was something. Good job.

No, it's amazing. I mean, I was able to get a couple practice laps in yesterday, and it put a huge smile on my face. Just to think how fortunate I am, one, to have such great partners around me to make this happen. Racing is my dream, it's my passion, it's all I want to do. And to have a company like Arrow to be so hands-on building the hand controls and then a company like Honda that somehow trusts me with a very expensive car is -- I still don't know why. But I actually bent a wheel already. (Laughter.)

TED KLAUS: Bend all you want. We'll make more.

ROBERT WICKENS: I'm notoriously hard on equipment. I tell everyone that when I start working with them.

But it's just been a whirlwind. It's been a big eye-opener for me, this whole injury. I have a whole new perspective on life, which I guess there's good to take away from that, but the biggest thing for me is when I was in rehab every single day, it was the support that I had from my racing partners, from my family, from Karli, from all the fans, from everyone that kind of was getting me there to the gym the next day, and I was

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the Honda Indy Toronto. Thanks for joining us for this special press conference today. I'm Todd Lewis; I'm happy to be the moderator. We're here to provide you a little bit of information about the first step in what's a very old venture with Honda, Arrow Electronics and of course Robert Wickens.

Joining us today is Ted Klaus. He's the president of Honda Performance Development. Mike Long, who's the chairman, president and CEO of Arrow Electronics, and the man whose suggestion got things moving, Robert Wickens.

For those that aren't fully aware of Robert's story and how we arrived here, I'm going to give a little bit of background. In March of 2018, Robert Wickens burst on to the INDYCAR scene in St. Petersburg, first race of the year, his first ever INDYCAR race. He snagged pole position and came within inches of being a first-time winner in his first event. As the season moved along, he scored a runner-up finish in Phoenix, total of four podiums, including a third-place result here at his home race in Toronto.

His warm smile, sense of humor, genuine personality, it all quickly made him a fan favorite. He was just as popular within the driver ranks as the rest of the IndyCar family.

Last August at Pocono, Robert was involved in a harrowing crash and sustained serious injuries. They included a neck fracture, fractures in both legs, fractures in both hands, fractured forearm, fractured elbow, fractured ribs, pulmonary contusion, along with a thoracic spinal fracture and spinal cord injury. His road to recovery is sure to be long and very uncertain, yet his determination to get better was as strong as his desire to race and win.

Robert was supported from his fiancée Karli (Woods), the rest of his family, began to share the story of his recovery. That meant sharing openly both good days

always -- when I was at rehab, I was just patient 31265, and then you get to become friends with these patients and you hear their story, and then like I get back to my place at the end of the day and I kind of think like, man, I'm so lucky that I have such great support everywhere. If I'm having a bad day, just all my fans can just come and pick me up where everyone else can easily get into this big spiral and get into some depression and everything.

It's just been quite the ride, and we're not even one year in of what's going to be a very long recovery. But hopefully I can keep on driving because I think that's the best therapy I can have, and I'm a little bit concerned by how eager I am to get back in the car, especially after driving yesterday, because yeah, I mean, I was always having this -- it's kind of like the angel and the devil on each shoulder because once I get back into racing full-time, the rehab is almost going to be sidelined, and then I need to figure out at what point am I OK to start driving again and almost give up on rehabbing.

That's going to be a -- that's a future problem. So right now we can just focus on this event and how fun it's going to be.

THE MODERATOR: We're all looking forward to that come Sunday. We want to hear from the other men on the stage, as well, Ted Klaus from Honda Racing HPD. First of all, Ted, this is the Honda power of dreams, kind of a dream realized, I think.

TED KLAUS: Yeah, I mean, how can you not be inspired by someone who takes life in big bites, in little bites, and always looks at the glass half full, not half empty.

Our founder, Mr. Honda, even though I never met him, he kind of still speaks to me, and I work for Honda from kind of a spiritual, passionate viewpoint, and I think that's how Robbie and those that support him live their lives, and certainly that's how Arrow looks at the future.

So it was really easy for us to say, oh, yeah, how do we -- it's not about the car, it's about the people who drive the car. It's not about technology, it's about how technology serves people and allows people to live their best lives and their best self. We just want to support those people that approach life with such kind of zest and positive attitude, and I was just inspired in that at St. Pete I hadn't even started my new role, and we met, and we shared your dream, and I said, well, let's just be a small part of that, and then we reached across to amazing Arrow and Schmidt Peterson, who quickly said yes, how can we make this work. Just happy to be a small part of this.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Ted. Mike Long from Arrow, as well. You have played an instrumental role in this. What is it about your association with Robert?

What is it about him that makes this an extra special project?

MIKE LONG: Well, I think first off, the important thing we see in Robert is passion. We saw it from the day he showed up to drive cars for us. His desire, his determination was all well-founded. He was winning races. Sometimes you have these unfortunate turns that life takes, and Robert had one in a race, and it set him back.

Well, we happen to be in Denver, Colorado, and that's where Robert was recovering, and he approached his recovery with the exact same determination that we saw when he was in the race car, and now we've seen him be able to do more and more and more, and when he brought up the idea of getting back in the car, I know Ted and I were like, yeah, let's just get it done.

To give you an idea about how fast we got it done, we got the car and about two weeks later we had it on the road, and Robert wrecked it yesterday. (Laughter.)

There was an interesting piece of this that I think everybody in the world was wondering is will Robert go fast again. I will tell you I don't think there's any question. We wanted to start this now with Robert so we can be a part of his rehab together with our friends at Honda and get Robbie back to racing because that's what he wants, and we're going to be there to support that effort all the way.

THE MODERATOR: A little bit of the technical detail about the specially equipped Arrow Acura that Robert is going to be driving. This is expected to be phase 1. There is a kit that controls the throttle and acceleration with a ring on the steering wheel and software. The brake is a mechanical handbrake with the driver's right hand. There's no clutch, transmission modification. Robert is going to shift using paddles on the steering wheel. Arrow has also updated brakes, tires, racing seatbelts, and the goal is to make Robert competitive once again.

This is sort of the brief synopsis of where we are at this point. There's going to be lots of questions. We're going to take a few minutes and we'll take your questions.

Q. Robert, for a lot of us who are car people, driving a car itself is liberating. How liberating was the experience?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, I think the most liberating part was as soon as I got into the car, I got strapped in and like pushed the ring throttle for the first time, and the car started creeping away, and then I just like went full throttle just to kind of see what it would do. Honestly, the car is so good that that was kind of a moment where I'm like, yeah, I miss that, and that was one of those situations, because the thing is, once you've driven an Indy car in anger for a while, it's hard

to get excited by a road car.

But it works. It did it. It's just -- it was one of those moments where I actually stayed full throttle for a while and then I kind of just coasted to kind of just take it all in and experience it all, and like I said before, just how grateful I am that Arrow could allow me to accelerate a car without using my legs was something pretty special.

Q. And when we spoke with you at St. Pete back in March, you talked about trying to spark the nerves in your legs and getting them to do that. Has there been any improvement that you can report since then?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, there's always steady progress. It's never -- I haven't woken up one day and had this miraculous gain, but I think little by little, we're getting there, we're getting a little bit stronger -- well, quite a bit stronger I would say. But in terms of new nerves firing, it's funny, sometimes you don't really notice, but something will be moving, and you're like, when did that start moving, I don't remember that. A couple months ago I started gaining some feeling in my abdominal area, and I just kind of one time just itched my stomach and realized that I felt it, but I just didn't -- I have no idea how long, if it was that day that I noticed it or it might have been there for weeks.

But I think luckily I haven't hit that plateau yet. I'm hoping I never will. And if it does, it's years down the road because there's people that defy odds. They always say that nerve regeneration is the first 24 months of a spinal cord injury, but then I know speaking to a lot of patients from Craig Hospital where I was rehabbing, the fact that people find their biggest gains four and five years afterwards because they finally start training really hard or they finally get stronger. Anything is possible with this injury. So I think it's not easy, but hopefully we can keep on keeping on.

Q. Theoretically the system that's in the Acura, and maybe it's a question for all three gentlemen, is this adaptable in an Indy car? It needs some evolution, obviously, but the basic theory of you controlling the car with your hands as opposed to your feet, is this adaptable, because I think everybody is thinking that, if you're going to get back in a race car. Can this thing be adapted for an Indy car?

MIKE LONG: Well, I'll start with the name Sam Schmidt. It's very adaptable. In fact, what we try to do at Arrow is not come up with this complex technology that's not going to be suitable. We're showing off this technology because this technology could be for anybody in the world with Robbie's problem to get back on the road with a car and drive their own way.

So that's really what drives us is trying to do good. We will continue to develop this all the way back to the Indy car for Robert, whatever he may need, and there will

be certain pressures that I'm sure will be put on INDYCAR to allow it to happen.

It's no different than golf or other sports where you've seen people with certain handicaps being able to compete with people that don't have them, and we think this is nothing different. So I'm totally convinced we can put Robert back in a car. It will be possible for him to drive, and we won't stop until he gets there.

Q. Rob, you haven't been around this paddock in Indy for a while, but when you go around this track this weekend and even last year at this same time, I was seeing a lot of Robert Wickens hats, a lot of shirts. What does it mean to you to have so much fan support this weekend? Are you surprised at this?

ROBERT WICKENS: Last two questions, you guys have been like right under the lights where I can't even see you guys.

But it's phenomenal. The support that I got from this race last year was a crazy, crazy experience. Everyone -- when I look back on my season, like this race was the highlight of my year. It wasn't the Indy 500, it wasn't my first podium in Phoenix, it was this one, just because it was my first home race in 12 years, and to get on the podium and to feel the home support, again, for the first time in so long, it was just incredible.

And then to be honest, since I've been back, since post-injury, every race I've been to has almost had that same atmosphere. Everyone is just so supportive of me in my recovery to get back, and the INDYCAR fans are one of the best in the business, and they're so loyal and they're so passionate. Like I touched on before, it's them that really kind of picked me up on my down days, and being here, seeing so many hats and shirts is -- it makes me want to get back. I want those guys to have a reason to wear the shirt, not to make it a pajama shirt or something.

Q. Last year at this time, you beat James (Hinchcliffe), and then in the hospital in wheelchairs, you beat James. And now that you're driving the Arrow NSX, you're ahead of James. Are you ever going to cut the guy some slack? Are you going to at least let him tie with you at an effort?
ROBERT WICKENS: There's no tying in motorsports.

Q. You know what I mean.

ROBERT WICKENS: No, to answer your question. James and I go back a really long time, and we've always had that very fun, friendly competition. I think there were races last year that he beat me on merit, there were races I beat him on merit. I think there was never -- we never let each other have something easy. I think we almost crashed with each other here last year on the first lap. But we got through it, and that's fine.

Q. Can you take us through some of the technical challenges of re-learning how to drive with this new way of you driving? And how much time have you actually had in the car?

ROBERT WICKENS: So we were able to do a small shakedown at the Canadian Tire Motorsports Park Wednesday, and then I was able to get 30 minutes on track yesterday afternoon. So total, I'm probably two hours-ish in the car by now.

Basically with the way the ring throttle operates, you operate it with the thumb and you push it into the steering wheel. Once I got out there on track, there was a lot of problem solving going on that I'm still to be honest trying to figure it out because it's definitely not second nature, by any means. But basically I originally in my head when I've been thinking about this for hours and hours and hours at night while I was in rehab was I figured out how to throttle on the one side, brake on another side, and it was very important to me that my hands can't leave the steering wheel in order to drive an NTT IndyCar because the steering wheel and everything without having power steering in this championship.

So I was always thinking I'd have brake on one side, throttle on the other, and once I got on track, I quickly realized that I need to be able to access throttle with both hands and access brake with both hands because if you're turning right into a corner and especially in the tight cockpit of an IndyCar, your bottom hand is pretty handcuffed. You don't have that much availability to grab throttle or grab brake if you need to, so you have to use the hand on the top. So I was constantly switching between left and right hand when I was driving around.

And yeah, in this car, because like we said, it's just phase 1 of the program, we have a handbrake on the right-hand side, so it was kind of -- I was flip-flopping between which hand I was using for throttle and then obviously always using the brake down on the right-hand side, and the big thing for me because I always wanted to use throttle with the left so that way I can -- I wanted to minimize the coasting time before I hit the brakes, which is why people left-foot brake in IndyCar is to save that little bit of time before braking, and I was trying to get the same theory accomplished.

Q. From what you have shown us over social media, your rehabilitation is long and painful. You have a lot of time, I imagine, to think. How much have you thought about what's going to happen on Sunday at what is essentially your hometown race? What it will be like for you to be out there and the ovation that you'll get?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, to be honest, I haven't had that much time to think about this one because it was put together so last minute. I've had this dream for so long to get back, and this was the target was to get the car ready for Toronto, and it was only fitting that it's the

Honda Indy of Toronto, and it's my home race. It was kind of the perfect fit.

But I never -- I'm always the person that until it's in front of me, I'll believe it when I see it type of thing, and I was trying to keep level-headed in case it didn't happen, and I didn't want to be disappointed. But it's just going to be amazing. I don't really -- I don't fully know what to expect because I think I've obviously never been in that position. I've never been one of the cars in the parade lap. I've always been the race car in the parade lap and not really paying attention for what goes on. I've never had a passenger in the car for the start of a race. That's something else that's a little new. Honestly it's going to be incredible. If it's anything what the fans showed me today or what they've shown me for months over social media, it's going to be a real sight.

Q. Obviously Sam Schmidt may have some unique experience and understanding as to sort of what you've been going through over the last year or so. I'm curious if you could talk about the relationship that exists between you and the support you've received from him.

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, I mean, Sam has been -- he's been a great person to have in my corner through this whole thing. I think he was very helpful at the beginning stages of the injury, kind of helping my family with anything we needed at the start, and once we were -- went into the hospital, I wasn't -- I was already sleeping, but he was ensuring us that we had good doctors, and once we got to the rehab phases later on, he kind of was really in depth with what rehab facility would be possibly the best one to go to with my condition.

It was -- he was just always helping in those kind of ways. And then once we got into the actual rehab of it, our injuries are so different, although it's a spinal cord injury, we just couldn't really relate that much from that point onwards. But he was a great help at the beginning for sure.

MIKE LONG: I might want to add to that because Sam was supposed to be here today also at this event, and Robbie, he said to me this morning that he still thinks he's the better driver and is just waiting for you to accept his challenge for a race.

ROBERT WICKENS: Well, I challenged him to a wheelchair race and he turned it down. The ball is in his court.

Q. Ted, tell us why select the NSX. Why did you pick that one?

TED KLAUS: Well, I was the chief engineer of that project, so I just said, yeah, let's use that one. (Laughter.)

But you know, just a little deeper, it's just an amazing

forward-looking product for a forward-looking platform. It is an electrified vehicle, so it has interesting opportunities, I think, to be responsive as we move forward with some of these next steps. It doesn't matter whether it's an electric motor or an internal combustion motor. It really doesn't matter. But I do hope that as Robby really enjoys re-learning how to control the car with his hands, I'm sure he's going to realize he's just using different parts of his brain and his body with this man-machine, woman-machine challenge, it's just amazing.

And I hope that soon you'll realize that, oh, wow, there's like another layer with this onion and another layer to this onion. He's sitting in between us, and he's going to be doing that on the controls side, but then he's going to start to feel the underlying vehicle dynamics and be excited about that.

I just thought it was a great platform for him to do what he wants to do. I mean, it's his desire to get back to the relevant and to grow and challenge himself.

And I think what you're going to realize really quick with a little more time in the car, there's just a lot of stuff going on that you can access with those hand controls. It's just going to be neat to see you peel that onion and try a little bit along the way.

Q. You told us in March that you're going to dance at your wedding. How close are you to being able to do that?

ROBERT WICKENS: I haven't practiced since March. No, we'll see. I'll definitely, I think, like I said in March, I'll confidently say I'll be able to stand there, and then jokingly like that wouldn't have been much different than if I wasn't injured in the first place. (Laughter.)

No, I mean, hopefully we can sway a little bit. She might have to take the lead, and I'll just drag behind her. But we'll figure something out.

Q. How many parade laps are they going to give you, do you know?

ROBERT WICKENS: So I think I'm doing -- well, technically so you go past the start-finish line once, so it'll be out of the pits, then once past the start-finish line and then I'll come into the pit lane.

Q. They're going to flag you in? Are you coming in? You're not, are you?

ROBERT WICKENS: I will neither confirm nor deny. I'm trying to figure out what that penalty would be if I just kept going.

Q. Robert, INDYCAR released an updated spotter's guide with your name and the NSX featured on there with a little message at the bottom. How happy were you to see your name and that car alongside all your fellow competitors?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, that was a surprise. I

wasn't expecting that one, and actually this event, especially being our home race, is always so crazy that I personally missed it on Twitter, but it wasn't until the team kind of sent me the link and I looked at it, and then I was like, yeah, that spotter guide. I don't get -- why are they sending me the spotter guide, and then I kind of looked through it and I saw our NSX there, car No. 6, and it was really cool, and I think the message at the bottom, enjoy the parade lap, Wickens. Yeah, that was a nice touch.

Kudos to Honda Indy Toronto people and INDYCAR for letting me be on there. It was a lot of fun.

Q. Robert, you used your wedding as targets and you saw them finish lines. Have you set one beyond the wedding date for the next phase or the next stage?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, hopefully we can -- I think the target after the wedding is to hopefully have a trial basis steering wheel setup so I can get on the Honda IndyCar simulator and get to work.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody, for coming. Robert, just as we wrap up, can you offer a message to the Honda Indy Toronto fans and the many, many fans who have followed your story?

ROBERT WICKENS: I sure can. I mean, from the bottom of my heart, everyone that has supported me, from before the accident, the people that have been very supportive afterwards, I mean, it's -- like I've been saying a thousand times, honestly, it's not just words out of my mouth to you guys that if I'm having a bad day I can almost lean on everybody to help pick me up, and it's not just the fans, it's not just the fans here at the Honda Indy Toronto, it's these two guys sitting next to me, it's the entire Arrow Schmidt Peterson team. It's a lot of my family, a lot of my fiancé Karli, and I think that the biggest thing is if it wasn't for all the support that I receive from everyone, I honestly don't know, looking in now, we're creeping up on 11 months since the accident, I wouldn't want to think what I would have been like if I didn't have you guys there because I feel like I'm being portrayed as this extremely strong and inspirational person, but behind every good person is a great team.

It's not just me doing it. I know like Karli has picked up a lot of my slack at home because I've just been so focused on rehab, and if it wasn't for her, my rehab would have been affected. And if my family wasn't able to be as great as they are, I don't know, there's just so many different ways that I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for all the help that I received and letting me be me, basically.

I think I always need to be in a positive mindset to be happy, and that's been a big part of my life from the beginning. I feed off of other people's energy. So when everyone is giving me all the support and all the

positive messages, it does reach me. Thank you all,
and hopefully there's a very exciting Honda Indy of
Toronto this week.