

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Saturday July 13, 2019

Press Conference

Sage Karam

Carlin



THE MODERATOR: We are happy to be joined today, on many levels, I should say, we're happy to be joined by Sage Karam, driver this weekend of the No. 31 SmartStop Self Storage Carlin Chevrolet for Carlin. And I say that because we've known Sage a long time from USF2000 Champion to Pro Mazda Rookie of the Year, Indy Lights Champion, NTT IndyCar Series driver, a lot of things in this sport. You've been successful at every stop.

It's a challenging weekend jumping into this car without a lot of street course experience in recent years. Talk about, first, the excitement of being back in the series.

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, I mean, definitely exciting weekends for me just because we've been trying so hard for so many years to do another race other than just Indy, do more races. There's been a lot of times where we thought we were in positions to get some races and then just kind of didn't work out.

So you know, it's finally good to get one here. But I'd say it's probably the hardest one to get. It's a track that is very, very difficult, especially when you don't really know the car in road course configuration. It's hard to find limits when you're just surrounded by concrete. It would have been much easier to find limits at a track like Road America or Laguna or something, but I think it's good. It sets a foundation for maybe potentially doing more races later on, and it's also just kind of knocks it off the checklist for me of knowing and expecting what this car is like in a road course; so that when I do do another race or whatever, I am definitely more comfortable going in.

But yeah, it's been tough. But the team, they have come in with I think the right attitude with the expectations with me and they knew it wasn't going to be an easy task at all.

So you know, they have been telling me I've been doing everything I need to do, as many laps as I can get, want to ball up the car obviously. And then this race in particular, because this is a difficult track, I mean, even veterans are struggling quite a bit with keeping it off concrete and tires.

But that also opens up opportunity for, you know, if you aren't sitting P1 or Top-5, it can often open up the opportunity for still having a great result if you just keep

your nose clean and turn your laps at your pace.

So yeah, I'm learning so much every session, every lap. It's hard out there with 22 cars, I believe it is. You know, trying to get clear laps. I think we're definitely quicker than like what we are showing right now. We just can't really -- it's hard to get a full perfect lap together, and then when you kind of do think you're about to go for it, it's like somebody will come out of the pits in front of you and kind of screw up your lap.

It's a small track for a lot of cars. I think qualifying will be interesting because, you know, groups of 11 or so, and should make it easier to get clean laps.

THE MODERATOR: Has it been more difficult in these practice sessions to learn the car in this configuration, or learn the track?

SAGE KARAM: I think the car was kind of what I expected it to be. You know, didn't really throw many curveballs or surprises at me. It was more or less, the track was a bit different. I expected there to be more grip, and I didn't think it was as bumpy as it was.

I haven't raced in Toronto since 2013 in Indy Lights, so it's been quite a while. The last time I raced here was a completely different last sector. So that's changed, and it's quite bumpy, and you know, very different.

So having to learn that, and then learn the car, as well, I think the bigger one was learning the track and just -- there was not a lot of grip yesterday. It's starting to get better.

So I'm starting to get more comfortable. But I feel good in the car. I feel confident in the car. Like I want to be able to push limits in it, and I kind of have an idea of where I think those limits are, but it's so hard to tell yourself to push to that limit on a street course just because the line to cross for that is so fine of making a mistake, and usually if you make a slight mistake on a street course, you're usually in a wall.

It's not like we have big grass run-offs and a lot of room to deal with if you do go off or something. Usually you go off in a street course, that means you're in a wall somewhere. That's been hard.

I think it's more or less the track that's given me troubles rather than the car.

THE MODERATOR: Any bruises yet to report?

SAGE KARAM: I feel fine. I thought it was going to be very, very physical, and it's really not. Like I was surprised. I thought this was going to be a lot harder physically than the oval, but I think the steering was much heavier at Indy.

Yeah, I don't really feel that bad. I got a couple bruises on my elbows just bouncing off curves and bumps and my elbows hitting the sides of the tubs, but that's pretty standard.

You know, I've kind of been building up speed and confidence, and gave a couple walls a couple kisses, but you know, nothing more than just a little peck. We're working there.

Q. What would define a successful weekend for you keeping everything clean? Top half of the field finish? What would be a successful weekend for you?

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, so I think what's happening here is that the team has the expectation that they have set for me, and then I have an expectation that I have set for myself. And I think I expect a lot more from myself than the team is expecting, which is kind of good because it's not -- it's not like they are putting a massive amount of pressure on me to just go out and run into a Top-5 finish or something like that.

But you know, I'm a competitor, so obviously I don't want to lose. You know, I want to do as best as I can. But I think a successful finish to this weekend would be in qualifying, it would be to close the gap to the leaders. And I can't control how fast everybody else goes. I can only control how fast I go, and I don't really know the Red tire yet.

From what I can say is I can probably go in thinking qualifying is not going to be the greatest. It's not going to be all that great. But that's just an experience thing, and knowing the car and knowing the Reds.

But I think if we can just try and close the gap to the guys in front like we've been doing, I think that's the name of the game. And then come race time, it's just keeping the nose clean. Finishing the race on the lead lap, and trying to mix it up.

I've noticed when I'm out there with other cars, I hang with them. They don't really pull away from me. It's just I'm missing right now when I get on the new tires, getting everything out of them because I don't flirt with that limit right now that everyone is comfortable with because they have been driving the car all year. So that's like my hardest thing.

But then once everybody has worn tires and I've worn tires, it kind of evens out. I did my best lap that session on 20-lap-old tires. I'm getting faster and faster every

lap, so I'm not really maximizing the full amount the grip of the tire yet. That will come with time and more sets of tires and figuring it out. But it's a difficult place to figure that out.

So I'm happy with how things are going. I think the team's also been pretty vocal with me that I'm doing everything I need to do. They are very, very happy. Most of this is me coming in and they want to see how I can develop a race car, and because I think they want to take their program to the next level and you know, a lot that have comes in with the driver's information on changes and stuff.

So I've really been focusing on trying to give them the best feedback possible, and you know, describing pretty in-depth of what change did what. They have seemed pretty happy with that.

Q. You've had Max Chilton as a teammate and you also have Charlie Kimball here this weekend. Have you been able to rely on their expertise to help you get more comfortable throughout practice so far?

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, Charlie has been a big help. He's been going to corners and kind of seeing what other people are doing line-wise, braking-marker wise. He's been a good help as far as that's concerned.

And then, you know, Max, he's been quicker than me every session so far, so it's always good to have a teammate that is quicker than you because you get to see everything they are doing. So I get to look at his data. I get to look at his video. And we're close. I mean, I'm not -- I didn't think after the first session -- we couldn't even compare data because it wasn't even comparable. But then second session, third session, we're definitely in a ballpark now where it's like, you just clean up these couple corners, and boom, you're right there.

Where I see where I'm losing to Max is mostly just he has this little bit more -- well, not little bit, a lot more confidence with knowing what the car is going to do, when it's going to do it. It's like, you know, he'll pick up the throttle on exits half a second sooner or something because he's comfortable with the wheel spin and knows it's going to spin this much and it's going to slide that much and he's going to brake ten feet later and get off the brake ten feet earlier.

You know, it's just those little things, and it's just a little bit everywhere, and that all adds up, you know, over a lap.

So the good thing is every single time we've gone out, we've like closed every single distance on everything. So we've got one more chance to close it pretty good, which I think, you know, we potentially could do, and I mean, the goal is to work as a team and work together here. You know, he's been having a really great weekend, as well. It's good to be able to look at his

stuff.

Q. 2013, I believe you won the Indy Lights championship that year. Were you with Schmidt Peterson at that time?

SAGE KARAM: Yeah.

Q. Was there a lasting influence that anybody on that team, whether it be James (Hinchcliffe) or anybody otherwise, that had on your career?

SAGE KARAM: I think (Simon) Pagenaud was at the time at that time. I don't remember who else was there in the IndyCar side. I remember Pagenaud, yeah, he was a big help for the Lights guys. And then I also had really, really good teammates that year. I had Gabby Chaves and Jack Hawksworth, and it was pretty cool, because me, Jack and Gabby were all on different teams. It was Star Mazda at the time, and we finished first, second, third in the championship, and then we all came together as teammates in Indy Lights as kind of like a super team.

It was kind of cool because we got to push each other all the time, and we all lived in Indy. We worked out together. We all hung out. It was a really fun year. I was just kind of fortunate to get the better of it.

Q. James wouldn't have been part of that team at that time, I guess.

SAGE KARAM: No, I think he was at Andretti because I think it was more at the beginning of his career.

Q. If I could ask your memories of that time on this track. What are your memories specifically?

SAGE KARAM: I mean, once you drive a track, you know the layout of it and certain little things. But the thing was, it's been so long, and they have done so many different things. Like they have smoothed out turn one and they have changed the whole last sector.

I mean, literally, the only thing that's similar for me is turn three and turn six. Other than that, I mean, everything else is pretty different.

And then also, it's a completely different car, so I can't really take anything I've learned in the past and apply it to the IndyCar. It's like you're starting from scratch, starting over. That's what's been tough.

Q. I forgot to ask you, do you remember your result at that race here?

SAGE KARAM: I think I got sixth. I don't remember. We had a tough weekend. Me and Veach actually ran into each other in turn three. He stuffed it in the tires and I had nowhere to go and turned under him. You know, turn three gets super, super tight. He locked him up, went in the tires, and then I tried to get around him and kind of got under him and then we were just playing catch-up from there.

Yeah, that was a weekend to forget for sure.

Q. I heard your father, who is a high school wrestling coach on the NBC Sports show yesterday saying he was really proud of the way he put you through the physical paces the last couple weeks getting you ready. It was almost like he was getting a fighter ready for a fight. Is that a fair description or were you up for the challenge?

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, for sure, and maybe that's why I'm feeling not so bad in the car is because we trained super, super hard. Probably some of the most intense training I've done for a race.

Dad used to train me for a long time. Trained me in Indy Lights, and we won a championship there. Then me and Dad used to butt heads all the time in the gym. You know, you're training with your dad, so I kind of knew what I could get away with, and then that kind of started to change when he saw me started trying to get away with stuff. And then he's my dad, he could react in a different way than somebody else who is not my dad could. We ended up starting to butt heads more than actually just take care of business and work out, so we ended up stopping.

Then I started training, you know, with another person, and it was good. I still go in there and I get pushed, but I think the way I get pushed with Dad is just different because I am his son, so whenever I train with him, I don't want to look weak or anything.

So I'm going to, you know, go harder with my dad watching me, and my dad is going to push me harder because he wants the absolute best for me. So we kind of just decided, let's bring it back from 2013. Let's get ready for this race the way we need to get ready, and see what happens.

So yeah, I mean, I'm enjoying it now. I think I'm older and can talk to him. You know, I think now in the gym, we can kind of communicate better. I think we just -- I was a young kid back then and was a bit immature. I didn't want to communicate in the way I needed to.

THE MODERATOR: Good luck to you. Good luck in the race more so than maybe in qualifying.

SAGE KARAM: Also, just want to throw in, just say thank you to Carlin for the opportunity, because it's hard to get opportunities in IndyCar nowadays. There's a lot of good guys and a lot of good guys on the sidelines. You know, for Trevor and the whole Carlin organization to take a chance, that means a lot. It's going well.

And then also, all the hard work from everybody in my camp, you know, Gerald Grube, he came on board the last couple years and has been working really, really hard. Got this SmartStop partnership together. Yeah, they are dipping their feet in now, seeing what it's all about. Hopefully they enjoy it and they have a good

weekend and we can get them a good result, and would love to see the SmartStop colors at more races.