

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Saturday September 21, 2019

Press Conference

Colton Herta

Harding Steinbrenner Racing

Josef Newgarden

Team Penske

Alexander Rossi

Andretti Autosport

Simon Pagenaud

Team Penske

Scott Dixon

Chip Ganassi Racing

THE MODERATOR: Joined in the media center by NTT IndyCar Series points leader Josef Newgarden, driver of the No. 2 Hitachi Chevrolet for Team Penske. Josef, you're going to start fourth. It looked like you had a little adventure on the last lap of Firestone Fast Six qualifying. Was that a difference-maker for a higher starting position? What are your thoughts on that?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I don't know. I think we may have still been where we are if -- I was on a one, so I went for it. I knew it was going to take a really good lap, like a zero or a one to get the pole, and we saved our good tires for the second one, and we were up there going into Turn 2 and I just pushed a little too hard. I went really, really deep. That's an area I've been working on all weekend, so I kind of just gave everything I had there and it was too much, and it was kind of a one-lap deal, so I aborted after that, and that was it. But we're in the top six, which was good. I knew I had a lap to kind of lean on if everything went bad in that second run, so that's what we're going to do now; we'll start fourth, which is pretty solid for us for tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Let's start with the first qualifying group. Talk about the pressure of making it through that first group because it was loaded, and all four championship contenders were in that session.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, you want to advance in that one, but we did. Everyone did a good job just executing there trying to get to the Fast Six, which was the goal. Obviously, we'd like the pole. I think we did have pole speed here today. We just didn't convert it. But we got pretty close, which is fairly good on a weekend like this.

Team Chevy has done a really good job for us so far.



We've had really quite good power, good drivability around a difficult track. Our cars felt pretty solid all weekend, very consistent. So now we've just got to continue that for another day.

THE MODERATOR: All four championship contenders held serve, so they make the Fast Six. I guess if there's a big-picture look at this, you know where everybody is and you're right among them.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: We're all there. We are all there ready to go. It's funny how that works out. They all made it, right? Which is good. That's what we're supposed to do. Yeah, it'll make it interesting. We're amongst each other.

Q. There's an old line, keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer. Is that kind of how you feel with the championship, because like you said, we're all right there?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, I mean, in our situation it's a good thing to be close to the competition, specifically the ones in the championship. Yeah, we've got to have a good clean run tomorrow. You'd like to win every race and maybe we've got a race-winning car tomorrow. It certainly feels like we have the capability of it. But we need to have a good clean day, try and not get caught up in anything, and just run our race like we normally would. I think that's what we'll try and focus on.

Q. Josef, I saw you standing there and looking at the board and studying it, and then you kind of pursed your lips in disgust. What did you see that you didn't like?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Oh, nothing. I was just --

Q. That's the look you just made.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, it would have been nice to see Felix up there. He had speed to probably be up front. It would have been interesting to have him up there, too. That's the biggest one to me that's kind of a surprise, I think, from the session. But everything else looks about right. I think everyone is about where you'd expect them for the most part relatively. But it is cool all four contenders made it through to the Fast Six. That's great. We're all close to each other. So it'll be pretty exciting.

Q. Just to follow up on that, you would want Felix up there as -- I'm sure you're not just championing his talents. You want him up there because you

want faster cars up there to race with the other guys?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: To be fair to Felix, he has been fast all weekend. He probably would have been in contention for the pole without a doubt. If you look at where Dixon has been, I think he's been a fair bit quicker than Dixon this week. Just on merit he probably should have been up there. But yeah, that's more beneficial to us if he's in the mix, more helpful. But I don't think it changes things dramatically. It just would have been interesting to see him up there in the mix.

Q. Following up on something Colton Herta said the other day, he said that given -- he was talking about racing the championship contenders, and he said, the good thing is with Josef maybe leading, he may not fight me as much for the lead because he'd have more to risk. Do you buy that?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I mean, yeah. Why would I? Why would I, right? I mean, I'm not going to pull over and park my car, take a quick lock-in and get going again once he's by, but I'm not going to try and do anything silly.

But at the same point, if he's faster than me and he can get by, he'll get by. He doesn't have to do that now. He's already in front of me. He's already in a better position than what he was talking about. But yeah, it's really going to depend how this thing shakes out at the start. I think you start thinking championship and running order when you see really where people are and where they've been running. Rossi is excited to get in here, so I should finish up, but that's how I feel about that.

Q. At Portland it seemed like the whole weekend everybody kept asking you guys, oh, what's going to happen in Turn 1, it's going to be crazy, blah blah blah, but maybe I missed it, but I haven't really heard that topic too much about this weekend, but it still looks kind of dicey. Are you guys going to be sorted out by the time you get there? Why is it not as much of an issue here?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I'm guess being Portland has been more historically different at the start in Turn 1 than here. Both these venues are new to me, so I don't have a lot of knowledge, including Portland in that. Portland was the same way a year or two ago to me. I think Portland was notorious for that chicane creating issues than here. I don't know, I'd have to look at the stats. I don't know what the Turn 1 wrecks -- we call it Turn 2. But the I don't know what the statistical crash rate of Turn 2 is here at the start, but I'm guessing it's lower than Portland was, so I'm guessing that's why no one has talked about it. But having said that, our starts are always jumbled up, so something could happen here, too.

THE MODERATOR: We also add to the press conference Alexander Rossi of Andretti Autosport, who will start third in Sunday's race, Simon Pagenaud of

Team Penske will start sixth, and five-time NTT IndyCar Series champion Scott Dixon of Chip Ganassi Racing, who will start second. Since Alex got here first, we'll ask Alex, you've got all the championship contenders around you, you know where they start. Maybe it's appropriate they all reach the Fast Six. Is that good for the show?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Not good for me, but yeah, I guess it's good for the show. It's what probably should happen, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about the pressure of just making it through the first round.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I think it's the same as every weekend. We go on and on about how tight the NTT IndyCar Series is, and we knew it was going to be a tall order to put laps in today just with how challenging it's been for the past couple days. So yeah, I mean, it's always difficult every qualifying session.

THE MODERATOR: Simon, talk about your adventurous run there on the last lap in qualifying. Did you have a chance to make the advance higher than sixth?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Our last lap actually was the least entertaining of them all, I think. Yeah, it was definitely an intense qualifying. We pushed as hard as we could to try to be ahead. Very exciting. I mean, a little too exciting for my taste, especially Q1. The problem is we were back there on pit lane, and it's very difficult to get your tires up to temperature when everybody is trying to get themselves up front. So it's an accordion effect, and Q1 was complicated. Our first lap was going to be my fastest and I caught Sebastien. To make sure I was going to get a good lap I had to abort to get a second. It was a very stressful situation, but overall I wanted to be on the pole. I think we all wanted to be on the pole. But it was very tight. It was very important to at least transfer to the Fast Six, and I think we tried everything we could. I was attacking everywhere, maybe a little too much at times, but that was the time to go. Absolutely no regrets, and we did the best we could.

THE MODERATOR: Scott, your thoughts about starting second at least ahead of these other three guys?

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, it was definitely a good recovery for us. We'd been struggling a little bit all weekend. I'd just been struggling to get the time out of the new tires. Felix has been doing a fantastic job. I don't know the total scenario there, but I think he would have fought hard and had a really good shot at getting the pole. He's been quick all weekend. But that's the way it rolls. I think we did a good job. I know our second run pace on used tires had been really good all weekend, it was just I hadn't been able to get the speed out of the new ones. It was a nice surprise, and you know, in a good

position. We'll just have to see how it rolls tomorrow.

Q. Alex, yesterday when a lot of us were probably looking too much at speeds and what you guys were doing, you guys seemed to be calm and methodical about it. Did you kind of figure it would all work out like this?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Well, you always don't plan on being last in qualifying, but yeah, we were going through -- it's a new track, so we have the opportunity with such a big team to dedicate cars to roll through tons of different just setup philosophies, and as long as you have a couple cars that are on a consistent platform that you know you can go back to and feed off of, I think it makes you more comfortable to do that. Yeah, we made sure we went through everything that we could theoretically come up with that might work, and then, yeah, put it all together. Hopefully, we were hoping we could put it all together this afternoon.

Q. (No microphone.)

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, for sure. We all work together every session. You have to when you have that many cars out on track. Everyone is doing a corner a little bit better or different than you, and you've got to put the puzzle pieces together. Yeah, you definitely feed off each other for sure.

Q. Alex, you've been saying that the pole was a priority for you this weekend for the race, and yesterday you were doing, number one, with the times you dropped yesterday or this morning, you dropped down, and then you end up third. What changes were you making, or were you guys toying with a little bit of the setup differences to try and get that extra tenth out of it?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: My engineer in his setup sheet has something with a drop-down item that says punt, so we punted a lot, so that's what we were doing. Like we need to get a fourth down and you need to give the ball away, and you just kind of -- you're French, so... (laughter).

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, so?

Q. Josef and Alex, I keep seeing this #RiseAbove and #RiseAbover. Can somebody explain the background on that? What is all that?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: It started with #HoverAbove, which people didn't understand, and then it became #RiceAbove with a bag of rice over my head, and then it was #RiseAbover because people still didn't understand the rice. So yeah.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I thought the rice one was hilarious personally. I don't know if anyone saw this, but that one was a meme, and I thought that was really good. But I love it. I just love that you guys have taken our campaign as inspiration and used it. I think we've got their heads in the right place, and I think that's a good thing for tomorrow.

SIMON PAGENAUD: I think you should explain #RiseAbove in the first place.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: #RiseAbove is actually just that. For us it's just a campaign to speak about our mentality. There's always difficult times throughout the year, and for us it's always about moving forward and always trying to climb the mountain. And that's what we're trying to do tomorrow. So for us it's been a great little campaign rally. I think a lot of guys have liked it for the most part. And so yeah, we're going to try and do that tomorrow, we're going to try and rise above everybody else.

It's our thing. I think Penske pushes it, too, but it's our deal.

Q. Scott, you've known Felix longer than most of us, and he seems like a pretty quiet guy, but he's pretty fired up after qualifying and said some pretty damning things. Does he often show emotion like that?

SCOTT DIXON: Sure. Actually he's got the short-man syndrome. (Laughter.) No, I'm joking. Well, I imagine, like he's been super fast all weekend, you know, and of course he gets fired up. I think all of us are extremely competitive. It's the environment. And I think with -- I don't know what the rule was or how it was. I thought you could when you caused a red and he didn't. I know he hindered somebody's lap, so whatever, to lose your two quickest and then not advance even though had he done quick laps he would have advanced. I can imagine he's pretty angry. But he's been knocking on the door all year long, and I think he's still got a very good shot tomorrow. You can definitely in that position create a very good off-strategy race. But yeah, I've known Felix for probably the last five, six years. He's pretty relaxed. I haven't seen any of this stuff yet, so I'm excited to see it.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: What did he say?

Q. (No microphone.)

SCOTT DIXON: Ooh.

THE MODERATOR: Ooh, based on an explanation given of Felix's response, which I won't repeat.

Q. Scott, I've seen somewhere you're in the qualifying run of the TV commentators said that the track temperature was extremely hotter than the days before. Did you feel any changes in the performance of the car?

SCOTT DIXON: I thought the track grip actually was fairly good, considering the ambient conditions were hot. The track is not super dark here, so I don't think that really affects it too much. But yeah, conditions were good. I think the hardest part here that everybody fights is just all the dirt. Especially when it gets a little bit windy, the dirt gets on the track, and then when

you're following somebody that goes off, that's pretty tough. But yeah, the grip level was actually pretty good. We don't get to run on the reds too often, we did yesterday in similar conditions in qualifying, but the blacks definitely didn't feel anywhere near as good as what we had this morning.

Q. This is for each of you. In a series that's got so much competition, I think it would be hard to argue that the four drivers up there are not the four best drivers this season in the series. How does it feel to have it come down that you are the four best drivers fighting for the championship?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Well, none of us got pole, so we clearly aren't that good.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I think we've probably been the most consistent, all of us, in a lot of ways. It's hard to say the best. I mean, I would say the most consistent for sure. But you know, guys like Felix, for instance, he's been pretty strong towards the end of this year. I think they'll be contenders next year. But it's about who strings together the best results all year. Obviously it's a championship race, and every race counts pretty significantly. I think that's why you see -- you normally see these contenders up front every weekend, and now when we come down to it, that's why we're all together. It pays to massively to win, so that's why the guys that win the most races are normally up front.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I think what they said. At the end of the day, there's a championship on the line. I think you've got to rise above. (Laughter.)

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Or hover. Or rice. Just get up in the morning.

SCOTT DIXON: I'm just happy to be here, man.

Q. Alexander, I know in Indianapolis they assigned you garage 13 and you or somebody on the team took the 3 off the 13. Are you a particularly superstitious guy?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Considering that's the first I've heard of it, I don't think so. Not at all.

THE MODERATOR: All right, we'll see one of you tomorrow about this time in championship form.

Next up, NTT P1 award pole winner Colton Herta. Welcome to the press conference room, Colton Herta. Congratulations. You've done probably something else that your father has done over the years. I would think given the family history here, his history, that this pole may mean a little bit more than others along the way. Your father won the pole here in '97, '98, '99, won the race in '98 and '99.

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it obviously means a lot with the family history, and 50 percent of his IndyCar wins coming from here. Obviously it means a lot to kind of

keep on the family tradition. Honestly, going into practice 3, I thought maybe we lacked a little bit, and we didn't have quite as big of a gap. We were P7, and we needed to find a little bit of time, so I was going to be happy to make it into the Fast Six. That would be an improvement. But we got there and we led every group that we were in, so I knew that if we dialed a lap in and we put it together, we could be on pole.

THE MODERATOR: You just watched the end of a press conference that had four of the best drivers of this era, and you out-qualified all four of them on a very difficult racetrack. What does that mean to you?

COLTON HERTA: Obviously it means I'm doing something right, the team is doing something right. We obviously had a great car this whole weekend, and after leading coming just straight off the truck and leading, being P2 in the morning and Thursday, leading the day Thursday and leading practice 1, being there in practice 2 and 3 and obviously getting the pole, it just shows the charisma of the team and everything we're doing has been in the right directions. Obviously it feels great, now it's two poles in two weekends.

THE MODERATOR: Just before qualifying started, the team announced the organizations that you've been working with this season, announced that you will drive for Andretti Harding Steinbrenner Autosport. It's a mouthful but an important step for you for 2020.

COLTON HERTA: No, it's big. Obviously I'm very fortunate to get a deal with the top three teams in the series, obviously. Everybody says Penske, Ganassi and Andretti are the top three teams in the series right now, so honored to be in that. Like I've said through this whole process of choosing a team, it had to make more sense than the situation I'm in, and a lot of them maybe didn't. I had the opportunity with Michael and to also bring Harding and Steinbrenner with me, which was important because they gave me my start in IndyCar and truly believed in me, and I didn't have a full season ride from anyone except for them. It meant a lot to stay with them and bring them with me, and hopefully we can continue our progress.

Q. How did those conversations go? Obviously it's a sensitive time in your career, you don't want to burn bridges but you're trying to do the best thing for yourself. Was it hard to have those initial conversations about trying to get this all together?

COLTON HERTA: No, I think it's hard to make the decisions. Obviously conversations, especially in racing and stuff, it doesn't mean anything until you have something written down on paperwork, and many times in your career you'll have times where people say, yeah, we're going to sign this deal with you, we'll do this, we'll do this with sponsors or teams or whatever, and then you call them and nothing ends up happening.

Obviously it's important to kind of feel the water of what everybody is thinking about me and who wanted me, and you know, meanwhile it was important that my dad was able to do this so I could stay focused on my job of performing with Harding Steinbrenner. Obviously like I said, I wanted to stay with them because we're working so well together.

But yeah, it's important not to burn bridges especially, but when you have an opportunity, like I said, to join the top three teams, you have to take it. You don't know how many times in your career you're going to have that ability.

Q. You're going for obviously the big win. Compared to where you were a year ago at Sonoma to now heading into race day, from a personality standpoint as far as you personally, where do you feel you've grown in this rookie campaign?

COLTON HERTA: Obviously I've gotten to know everyone a lot more. That's really nice. If you look at it a year ago, I had a lot longer hair. (Laughter.)

No, but I think I qualified 16th and finished 18th or qualified 18th and finished 20th. That just kind of shows what I've done in a year and all the progress that's happened. Not only me but my feedback to the team and working on making the car better is so vital in this series because although it's a stock series, everybody runs the same stuff, there's differences in setup and what you feel through the car can make a car quite a bit better and really nailing that down, and obviously we have the one-lap pace down, so now we're working on the race pace.

Q. Colton, I know how much this means to you, and I know you're already semi-teammates with him, with Rossi. Would you be prepared to increase the lead to allow Alex to win the championship?

COLTON HERTA: Tough question. I don't know. I'm sure I'm going to get talked to tonight about something of that nature. I'm hoping I'm not in the position. Honestly it depends where I'm at in the race for sure. If I'm leading, it's going to be really hard to say yes and help him out. It's got to be some incentives there, know what I mean?

THE MODERATOR: Anything in your contract you negotiated in that you had to have, anything special?

COLTON HERTA: No. I mean, I would love if I let Rossi by, I would love half the championship money, that would be great. What do you get, a million dollars? That would be awesome. Move out of my parents' house.

Q. When you think of just how dramatically this season has been, 20 minutes before media day you find out you're not going to have your teammate, and now here you are after your third pole of the

season and a victory, it's got to really be one mind-blowing season for --

COLTON HERTA: I actually have that on Twitter, too. Everything happened so fast, I guess the media picked it up before it was able to get to me. But no, obviously it's been a roller coaster and a lot of questions about the team and the financial stability, and no, they worked hard. Mike hard worked. George worked hard, the whole team, all the PR department, Liz worked hard, and to find the money to keep the team going, and honestly, yeah, there's a point in the season around Mid-Ohio that we weren't going to show up at Gateway. We weren't sure. And then everybody stuck it up and put in the money that we needed to and we signed some good deals, obviously Capstone being the most important to bring from Mid-Ohio onward or Toronto onwards to the rest of the season. Very grateful for them, and they're the whole reason that I was able to finish out the season.

Q. Do you ever wonder what it would have been like (indiscernible)?

COLTON HERTA: As in like me and Pato as teammates? I'm sure it would have been amazing. Obviously we were really close in Indy Lights and able to push each other a lot. I'm sure it would have been the same thing, offensive end I'm sure if all the poles that I have, I'm sure he was going to match, too. It definitely would have made my life a little bit harder, but it definitely would have made me better, and that's what IndyCar is about is the competition aspect and everybody being so close. I was on pole by four hundredths, right? So obviously you can't leave anything on the line.

Q. Your dad may have been the most notorious, meanest practical joker in Andretti Autosport history. Now you're part of that team. Are you kind of afraid that you might be the bearer of all those paybacks?

COLTON HERTA: Well, Marco was the only one that was there when my dad was driving, so he knows a lot of the tricks. But I know even more, so bring it on.