

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Press Conference

Fernando Alonso

Arrow McLaren SP



THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everybody in the States. Good afternoon to Fernando Alonso, who on the back of yesterday's news that he will be joining Arrow McLaren SP for this year's Indy 500 is joining us from Spain. Thanks very much indeed for your time, Fernando.

We will just have a few words from Fernando just in terms of his news, just to hear straight away from the man himself, and then we'll get straight into Q & As. If you could just summarize over the next couple of minutes how you're feeling and your thoughts ahead of this year's Indy 500.

FERNANDO ALONSO: Okay. So hello, everyone. Well, I think I'm very happy. One of those days that you announce the participation in one of these iconic races, which is always very special, and it's no different this time, even if it's the third attempt. It feels like the first one, and you feel that the month of May is going to be an important one once more for your career and for your emotions because it's quite an emotional race and all the things that are happening around that event are quite special.

I'm really looking forward. Definitely last year we had not the experience that we wanted, and we struggled on the back foot beginning from March, from the first test.

This year I want to go there even more compared to last year and try to delete that feeling and try to experience the event from the beginning to the end with nice momentum.

That's how I'm feeling right now. Obviously there are a couple of weeks now of preparation with the team, with the simulator, tests that are coming in the next weeks, as well. Quite a busy time now, from now on until May, but really, really excited.

Q. Fernando, congratulations on returning to Indianapolis. I know there was a period of time there where your contract with McLaren had expired at the end of 2019. If you could maybe walk us through the time from there until getting this deal complete, some of the things that were involved in doing this, and also how much better prepared you feel you are this year over last year, to have a team like Sam Schmidt at Arrow McLaren

doing your efforts?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Yeah, so I think going through the process, probably it started in probably October last year when I started looking at some options. I knew that my McLaren ambassador contract expired at the end of 2019, so I didn't have any obligations to race for McLaren in 2020. But obviously I will be always in contact with them for whatever future projects.

But it's true that I looked at other options. Racing for Andretti in 2017 was one of my preferred choices, as well, in terms of projects, and yes, more or less I think in November the Abu Dhabi F1 Grand Prix, I said clear more or less that my options were the Indy 500 were, first off, to race, because I wanted to have another attempt, and maybe the choices between Andretti or McLaren with a new project that they were working with the Schmidt Peterson team. But those were the thoughts at that time at the end of last year.

Then I raced at the Dakar Rally, and that was quite intense preparation and I didn't want to affect the Dakar on another team. I waited until the end of January to go deep on the conversations and finalizing what will be the Indy 500 deal, and from that moment, yeah, two weeks later, I arrived at an agreement with McLaren and with a new team now that for sure is going to be more prepared than last year.

I think being a one-car team, it was a big penalty for us last year. We had a couple of issues. We had not the real ability that we wanted in the first couple of tests, and obviously we didn't have much information.

This year with three cars, even if you have a bad day, you're still learning a lot of things from the other two cars. So I think that will be a good advantage, plus the team is not new, it's been racing for many, many years in IndyCar, and the background and all the knowledge I think is going to be very beneficial with the things that McLaren can add to that project. It was a project that was already existing. So that's the second thing.

Yeah, and that's more or less how things unfolded. Yes, the final decision was not easy because I think between Andretti and McLaren, maybe people think that Andretti can be more competitive, maybe other people will think that it could be McLaren, and that's something that is difficult to know in advantage before the race happens, but you know, I think and I trust this project a little bit more, and I have this sense of loyalty, as well, to McLaren and to our fans that last year they

had high hopes, as we have, and didn't show up on the race on the big weekend.

I think we have this kind of -- not obligation, but this kind of feeling that we need to give something back, and this year we will go for it.

Q. Plus you get to work with Craig Hampson, and he's a real speed wizard around that place as an engineer. How big of an asset do you think he'll be to your effort?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Well, that was one of the biggest parts of the decision, as well. Everyone was telling me that Craig Hampson was the man to work with, with so much experience, and making the difference in many of the races and championships on the last couple of decades in IndyCar. Obviously that's very attractive, to work with this kind of people that make a difference, and you can learn a lot from a driver point of view, as well, from the team and the engineers, and then the COTA test. Obviously I wanted to wait, as well, for the COTA test, even if everything was already done and we all agree on all the terms, COTA test was also a nice thing to really look at the team from the outside, how things were working together and gluing together.

I think they had a very, very positive test, and that was also good news for me, as well.

Q. What is the goal going into Indianapolis this year? Is it solely to win and check off that box, or is it just to go there and do the experience again like it was in '17?

FERNANDO ALONSO: No, it's just to win. I think there are no other goals at this point of my career. I don't need really to do this kind of challenges. I've been in Formula 1 18 years. I have achieved more things than I ever imagined, than I ever dreamed in my career, and if I am doing now this big, big races, the 24-Hour Le Mans, Daytona, Dakar, the Indy 500, it's only with the aim of winning.

Winning is the main aim. Obviously I want to be competitive, as well, and have a nice feeling, but these kind of races, sometimes they chew at you more than being super competitive. Sometimes the lack of so many factors can influence these kind of events. That's something that we will try to follow and try to win it, so that's the only aim.

Q. I was talking to Michael Andretti all winter, and he was gung-ho that maybe you were going to be there, and whatever happened at the end, can you just put to rest this whole thing with Honda? Was Honda the biggest factor? Have you ever been approached by Honda? If you apologized to us, you can be our guy again, you can drive our cars? Can you just let us all know how that stands?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Yes. Nothing about that. I have read that, as well, in the news and in the papers, and I

was surprised, and I was talking with Michael sometime because we both were surprised. When you talk with a team and negotiate with a team, you are negotiating with them, not with their partners or anything like that. They don't have that power anyway to do this kind of things. I don't have any issues at all with Honda, and as far as I know they don't have any issues with myself. But that's more a question for them, but I'm sure that they don't have any.

Yeah, at some point I was also more towards the Andretti project. I just thought we waited to finish the Dakar, and after the Dakar I think the McLaren team had some reinforcements, and they were having other new people come into the team, and I don't know, I turned a little bit more towards the McLaren one, and I know also that Chevy won the last two Indy Grand Prix. I raced with Chevy last year there, and I know that for the top end they have maybe a slight advantage, so that was also something to take into account.

At the end, I think with the three-car team, we can be protective in terms of data, in terms of information, but not too chaotic in terms of too many cars or anything like that. At the end, I don't know, I felt like this was the natural place for me to land and to race, especially after what happened last year. It's something that I think we need to give back to everyone.

Q. What about other races? Would you like to maybe try Road Atlanta or try a small oval like Iowa or Gateway? Have you thought about that at all?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Yeah, I've thought about that, and that was part of the conversations that I had with both teams, what they were thinking about that and what are their thoughts and experience, and it's still something -- an open point that we need to develop a little bit more. Formula 1 thinks that maybe later in the year it can be a possibility to experience a normal IndyCar race just to see how it feels and to add some more experience. I have the thought that maybe that would be before the Indy 500 because maybe it gives me a little bit of preparation. You see I'm not doing F1 or I'm not doing endurance championship, so my next race is going to be the Dakar Rally, which is a completely opposite style, so maybe one race before or some extra prep will be a help also for me, even if it's not proper oval racing.

There are things that are under negotiations, and that was also something that took a role in the final decision, as well, between the teams.

Q. You've touched on this a little bit, that Craig coming to the team was a big part in this decision along with all the changes that McLaren and the new team at McLaren SP have made in the off-season. I guess what was their message or maybe what convinced you that something like last year in qualifying wouldn't happen again with this new team, the new people that are surrounding it, and

the new -- everything that they have in place?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Look, there are no guarantees. In this sport, you never know what can happen. But there are other factors. I think this year, as I said before, I think the three cars in the team, that will help to share information. Maybe if you have a bad day or someone on the team has a bad day, there is not the cost that there was last year. I remember the open test, we did like 19 laps and we got barely any information, and that was already a bad start, and we came from Texas and it was even worse. There were things that happened from which we could not recover at any point in the event.

But you know, eventually even last year with more data available or with one of those little things that happened, we have different luck, I think maybe it was enough. We were only short of time and only short of times but not running short of desire and potential in the team.

I think this year having the full championship on the shoulders, especially not being a new team, it's just a team that was running for many years in IndyCar, it was running competitive for many times, and now has the plus of McLaren helping them on the most important areas of the performance.

You know, there are clearly signs of -- in a competitive way that things will be very different than last year.

And then the second point is the emotional part of everything. As I said before, for me, my only events on Indy were in a McLaren car, even if it was partnership with Andretti and then with Carlin in a way in terms of that. But it would be strange for me to race there and to have McLaren in the garage alongside, and knowing that they have more potential than they had last year. I think we've been together through good things, bad things, and we need to discover this new opportunity together. That's what I felt was the right thing to do.

Q. With having those two extra cars with young guys, Pato O'Ward and Oliver Askew, I know they don't necessarily have loads and loads of experience in IndyCar, and some of what Zach mentioned yesterday was that you felt like you could be somewhat of a mentor to them in some ways being a very veteran driver just in auto racing in general. What are some of your thoughts on pairing up with those two young drivers and what you feel like their potential can be by themselves and you guys' potential as a three-car team in general?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Yeah, I think, yes, I should touch on all three of us, I think we are lacking maybe some experience. That's a fact. We have different characteristics. I think Oliver has a tremendous talent that will help to discover things in the team and will guide in some of the direction that maybe by his (indiscernible) will teach everyone else. Pato is a very

brave guy and very talented guy with no fears on anything, and that's something, also, that will be important to deal with and to learn from him, as well. And I have maybe the experience of many years of racing but not on that kind of racing.

At the end, I think we need to help each other and we need to follow that the team itself has more experience with all the drivers together. To work with Sam, with Craig, with Gil de Ferran, there are personalities there that they have all the experience in the car and they have won many, many things there. I think all together and all pushing in the same direction, we should be quite a good team, a good effort. I'm confident that things will work.

Q. After everything went down the way it did last year, was there ever any doubt in your mind immediately following the month of May that you would ever come back to compete in the Indy 500, or was this always something that you were planning on coming back to do regardless of how that all went down?

FERNANDO ALONSO: No, I was 100 percent sure that I would come back. I think after finishing the world championship I made it very clear, I think from September, October, November, that the biggest priority for 2020 was the Indy 500. I said in September, November, in January, in the middle of the Dakar, when we finished the Dakar, I said, so now I've finished with Dakar and the main priority is the Indy 500. I always said before, during and after, that race is just magic. I love everything that is happening there.

Sometimes from 2017 -- I could not race in 2018 because I was in F1. I don't know if I will race again in 2021 because I don't know what will be in the plans for 2021, but if I'm free in that month, I will be always looking to race that event. Last year, yes, we failed. Last year we were not ready for the challenge. But the sport is full of these examples. You need to fail many times to learn and maybe to achieve the success once in life. For one success there are hundreds of failures.

Last year it was a hard one for everyone, but maybe it was a necessity to become better and to be stronger this year and to have a shot. You know, all the things happen for one reasons, and I'm sure last year was a good learning.

Q. I wanted to know how much simulation work you have done, and while you're on the simulator, can you really detect the difference in the weight distribution that the aeroscreen is causing, and does it fit with your driving style and have you adapted to it well?

FERNANDO ALONSO: So the simulator plans didn't start yet. I only have the information from the COTA test that the team did a couple of weeks ago, and I'm in contact with the team, with the records that they had after the test, and that's the only info that I've got at the

moment.

I know that we are planning some simulator days in Charlotte, but the days are not confirmed yet. But yeah, they're going to happen very soon.

I think on the ovals, it's going to be different than the road course setup. Maybe the difference is going to be smaller on the oval because also the downforce is -- the importance of the downforce in that package is minimal because it's more winds. So I think the gains and the losses are quite small anyway. So it should not affect much. I think the behavior of the car -- over here I'm looking forward to test there just to see how the comfort inside the cockpit is now, the ventilation, the visibility. There are some question marks in my head that I'm looking forward to answer, but in terms of performance, I don't think it's going to be a big factor.

Q. And I assume that racing the Toyota at least gives you lots of experience just sitting behind a windshield?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Yes, and the Le Mans prototype is also a help in this kind of visibility, to make the eyes quickly adapt to this new vision. And yes, I said before that maybe -- now that you mention Toyota, the loyalty that I have for McLaren, when you need to make a decision like this one that I made, the loyalty that I have for Toyota over the last two years, it makes also a small part in this decision. I think Toyota, McLaren, they gave me so much over the last five years, that I think to land in McLaren and share it, a lot goes into it from my side.

Q. Do you think you'll run the Indy Grand Prix? Would you like to run it, and will you run it?

FERNANDO ALONSO: Look, there are possibilities. You know, I think it's not up to me 100 percent. As I said before, I think more tests, more simulator, more races, whatever I do before the Indy 500, it can be only beneficial to my preparation because I would like to be a little bit more active from now to the Indy 500.

But there are other things that may compromise the Indy 500 car or the setup or the building of everything, so I don't want to make any problem to that preparation. There are things that we will talk to the team, and as I said before, they have much more experience than me, with Sam, with Zach, with Gil. We will figure out what is the best preparation, and as I said before, I'm open to do more things than in the past.