

# O'WARD TUNES OUT DISTRACTIONS, POWERS TO BARBER VICTORY

By Paul Kelly, indycar.com, May 1, 2022

With a clear mind and a fast car, Pato O'Ward returned to his winning ways Sunday by capturing the Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama presented by AmFirst at Barber Motorsports Park.

O'Ward, from Mexico, earned his first victory of the season in the No. 5 Arrow McLaren SP Chevrolet, beating reigning NTT INDYCAR SERIES champion and 2021 Barber winner Alex Palou to the checkered flag by .9800 of a second. NTT P1 Award winner Rinus VeeKay finished third in the No. 21 SONAX Chevrolet.

The third career win came after O'Ward admitted he was distracted by contract talks with Arrow McLaren SP at the first two races of the season, at St. Petersburg and Texas, where he finished 12th and 15th, respectively. O'Ward rebounded by placing fifth last month at Long Beach and returned this weekend to the form that helped him finish third in the 2021 championship standings.

"It sucks to be at war within your own team, right?" O'Ward said. "I'm glad there have been very positive talks for the future. I wanted to do it for these guys, for Arrow, for McLaren SP, Team Chevy. I was tired of being 10th and 11th and fifth, so I said, 'Let's get a win under our belts so we can claw our way back into the championship fight.'"

O'Ward climbed from ninth to fifth in the standings with his first victory since winning Belle Isle-2 last June.

There was also movement at the top of the championship, as Palou took the lead with his third podium finish in four starts this season in the No. 10 The American Legion Chip Ganassi Racing Honda. The Spaniard leads Scott McLaughlin, 144-141, as just 10 points separate the top four drivers in the standings.

Two-time series champion Josef Newgarden, who led the points entering this race, dropped to third after finishing 14th in the No. 2 PPG Team Penske Chevrolet.

The race, which took place in dry, sunny conditions after morning thunderstorms, unfolded as a strategic duel between drivers who chose a three-stop strategy and those who opted for two stops. Newgarden, Colton Herta, Romain Grosjean and Marcus Ericsson were among the contenders who elected for three stops, hoping they could



PATO O'WARD CELEBRATES INDY WIN-PHOTO BY ANNE HICKS

lean harder on their Firestone tires during shorter stints.

But that strategy unraveled when rookie Callum Hott spun his No. 77 Juncos Hollinger Racing Chevrolet into the gravel trap adjacent to Turn 9 on Lap 32. That incident triggered the only full-course caution of the race and essentially returned the entire 26-car field to the same tire strategy.

Nearly every driver pitted either just before or after Hott's incident, with VeeKay leading O'Ward, McLaughlin, Palou and Alexander Rossi as the top five on the restart on Lap 35.

Dutch driver VeeKay built a lead of 2.0875 seconds over O'Ward by Lap 60. VeeKay, O'Ward and McLaughlin pulled into the pits for their final stops in lockstep on Lap 62, with VeeKay and O'Ward taking new primary Firestone tires, while McLaughlin opted for used primary tires on his No. 3 Sonsio Team Penske Chevrolet.

VeeKay won the race off pit lane, but O'Ward pounced on the out lap. He passed VeeKay with a brave outside move in the hairpin Turn 5 and never trailed thereafter.

"(Team president Taylor Kiel) told me we were fighting for the win," O'Ward said. "We almost got him in the pit stops. I said, 'Man, this is

the chance.' It was so tough to follow because it's such a fast and flowing circuit. I knew if I had the opportunity, it would have been right then and there. I knew if we got into clean air, we could kind of control the thing. Once we did that, it was cruise to Victory Lane."

Palou made his final pit stop on Lap 64, producing sizzling in and out laps and re-entering the racetrack behind O'Ward but ahead of VeeKay. Palou kept O'Ward on his toes until the checkered flag, pulling to within .8951 of a second on Lap 73 of the 90-lap race.

But O'Ward kept his cool, managed his tire wear and eased away for victory.

"He was running second at that time," Palou said of O'Ward on the restart. "I think we're running fourth and just that track difference, that's what got us. I think I did a mistake on a restart, and the 27 (Rossi) got us there. So, I think that was all the difference."

"The No. 5 (O'Ward) was really fast today. But yeah, so we're happy with the No. 10 American Legion Honda car was super-fast this weekend and another podium, so we were fighting until the end. We couldn't make it today, but we'll try to win at the next one."

Up next for the NTT INDYCAR SERIES are two races at the hallowed ground of the sport, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The GMR Grand Prix is set for Saturday, May 14 on the 14-turn, 2.439-mile IMS road course, while the 106th Indianapolis 500 presented by Gainbridge will run Sunday, May 29 on the historic 2.5-mile oval. Both races will be televised live by NBC, with live coverage also from the INDYCAR Radio Network. Tickets for both races are available at IMS.com.

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