

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Thursday, August 6, 2020
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA



Graham Rahal

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing

Takuma Sato

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing

Spencer Pigot

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing
Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to today's video news conference with the drivers of Rahal Lanigan Letterman racing. Pleased to be joined by Graham Rahal, driver of the No. 15 United Rentals Honda; Takuma Sato, the driver of the No. 30 Panasonic PeopleReady Honda; and Spencer Pigot from RLL with Citrone/Buhl Autosport, driver of the No. 45 Mi-Jack Embrace Pittsburgh Honda.

Graham, you're sixth in the championship after a pretty good Iowa weekend. How much are you looking forward to the Indianapolis 500?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Certainly ready to go. I feel like we've all been thinking about this, talking about it for a long time now. Our team has been extremely dedicated to our performance at Indy, trying to enhance that.

I thought last year we actually had a really good shot at it in the race. But this year we're focused heavily on making sure that we improve even further and run up front.

I thought Texas was a good sign, obviously other than the issues starting before the race. Our competitiveness there was very good. I feel like all year round so far we've been able to bounce back, even at times like Iowa where we weren't great, we could bounce back and have a great race result.

I'm excited. Obviously try to get this United Rentals car in Victory Lane. We have a special paint scheme for the 500, which will be cool. We're certainly ready to go.

THE MODERATOR: Takuma, you won the Indy 500 in 2017. Coming back to the Indianapolis 500 has to be very

special for you.

TAKUMA SATO: Always, yes, whether you won or not. I think for all of us, for the drivers, waiting for the special moment. Obviously this year is very different circumstance, very challenging. We should be really happy and appreciate Indy 500 is still holding. Can't wait to be back in the car.

THE MODERATOR: Spencer, I know it's a new team for you with Citrone/Buhl Autosport. You made your debut at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway earlier in the Indy Grand Prix. How much are looking forward to, especially being on the front row last year, of getting back to the oval at IMS?

SPENCER PIGOT: Yeah, of course, excited to be heading back to Indy. Still going to be the biggest race of the year, the one we're all looking forward to the most. I'm excited to be back with Rahal Lanigan Letterman, like you said, joining with Citrone/Buhl Autosport for the first time.

It's an exciting time for many of us in the team. For me, like you said, qualifying went really well last year, ran up front for a good portion of the race. Looking to have a better run at it this year.

I have two really good and experienced teammates to work with. Just excited to get on track next week and see what we can do.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open up the call to media questions.

Q. Takuma, every year when the entry list comes out, they'll announce there's eight former winners in the race or nine. You're one of those former winners. How does it feel when that list comes out knowing you already won this race? You kind of carry something a little special when you compete in it again as a former winner.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, absolutely. I think nice to be on the list, the winning list, for sure. But once get into the weekend, it's nothing really different. It's just a focus. Even you have experience, doesn't really matter for imagination. Compared to unknown territory, I just know how I feel it and how the team will feel it. You just want to repeat it.



I think that's why the multiple winning Indy 500 winner is always just as hungry as the first one. Yeah, I mean, just a number, just a matter of be paper or your racemate talking about former winner. Once get into the weekend, as fresh as your first time. It's really, really excited moment and hungry for another win.

Q. Graham, to not have your name on that list as former winners, that has to be something that has to bother you every year and inspire you even more to go out and win it.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, it does. At the same time I think there's been a lot of great guys that have competed in this sport and never won a single race let alone an Indy 500.

For me, clearly we want to go win it. We've had good opportunities and good shots before. We didn't maximize those. Last year obviously we were collected in a little incident with Sebastien, which looking back you don't fault either of us. We're going for, what, P3 or P4 at the Indy 500? You're going to go for it. 15 laps to go, 20, whatever it was, it's time to go. We've had good shots before.

I got to say, I feel like our team is operating at a very high level. I feel like the engineering staff is doing a tremendous job. Allen on my car has always done extremely well at Indianapolis. I fully expect us to be very competitive.

Certainly there's not a day that goes by that you don't think about or dream about winning the Indy 500. Clearly winning it this year would be slightly different than maybe other years, but it all means the same. We want to go win the thing, find ourselves in Victory Lane. We're going to try hard to make that happen.

Like I said, does it bother me I haven't won it yet? In a way it does, but in a way it doesn't. If you look at the list of guys that never did with it, it's a hell of a lot longer than the list that did. There's a lot of good guys that are in that list that didn't as well.

I certainly want to get out of that, but my point is it doesn't haunt me necessarily. We just want to go and try to accomplish it.

Q. How much does it hurt to know there won't be any fans there?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's not great. It's not great. I mean, I think everybody would like fans there. No matter the heat that he's taking, there's nobody wants fans more than

Roger Penske. I can assure you that.

Each and every one of us, it would be great to have fans, but obviously there's a lot of pressure coming from a lot of different areas. There's -- I'm not even going to get into it.

There's a lot of pressure from a lot of different areas. Unfortunately at some point the decision had to be made.

As I said the other day in my comments, we have to run this race. We have to run this race. I mean, no matter how you look at it, I want fans there as much as anybody. We thrive off of that, we thrive off of that atmosphere. But I can tell you right now there's a lot of teams, trust me, I get the heat for it on social media when I say teams probably wouldn't live without this race. I get all the fans saying, I don't care about the teams. Fine, that's great for you. But for us, we do.

We care about the jobs that it provides, the cottage industries is provides in Indianapolis, everything else it does for our city, the economic impact. We have to have this race. At some point the call needed to be made.

Some people said to delay till October. My personal opinion of that is you can't. What if this doesn't go away? In my opinion, it's not going to. I just don't see this disappearing any time soon. You get till October, you delay further, then it's snowing, the race doesn't happen.

The race doesn't happen, I can guarantee you United Rentals is not happy. I can guarantee you PeopleReady for Takuma, people aren't going to be happy.

We have to have this event, it's really critical for our sport.

SPENCER PIGOT: Yeah, I mean, obviously ideally we'd have fans there. It's going to be different not having people standing outside the garages, Gasoline Alley, cheering for you as you walk out onto the grid. It's going to feel a lot different.

Obviously the decision was made for the greater good of the community. We always have to respect that decision. Looking forward to hopefully seeing all the fans packed in in 2021.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, I mean, it's the same, echoing two of my teammates. Basically we are all the same boat, same feeling. We miss the fans.

Under the circumstances there's not much choice. We respect the decision Roger Penske made. We support it. I think to 2021, hopefully everything will be ready, go back to the 250,000 people. Even more probably appreciate it for

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

the over hundred years of history for the first time.

I think that's it. I think still TV audience will be as many as it should be. We all excited. For the drivers' point of view, same. The atmosphere is a bit different. Once get in, the visor down, driving, I think it's nothing really different.

Q. This season obviously has been disjointed with changes and cancellations coming up. Everybody wants the 500 in May, now it's in August. What has your approach been either individually and as an organization, how you go into every week not knowing what might change, how things are changing, and how you move past all that and get ready for the biggest race of the year?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, my particular season was a bit tough. It's not really successful so far, can't say that. We show a couple good speed and opportunity, but just didn't come all together. It was a little pity and a shame.

At the same time you are learning all the time to miss the things that you didn't realize, particularly for compress the schedule is very hard for everyone. Any one little make of the error make significant difference in terms of result.

On one side it's great for much watching maybe fans and excited for the racing. It's completely unpredictable for that. The other side is preparation is extremely important. It is just a challenge. It's very difficult angle. Once you're driving it's the same scenario, but for the preparation, less testing, engineer doesn't have time to analyze all the data, makes it more harder.

Other than that I think approach is the same as usual. I think all the drivers physically, mentally be ready every single weekend as it was for the normal season I believe.

SPENCER PIGOT: For me, obviously it's been a lot of waiting. I was supposed to do my two races in May. Now one was in July and the next is at the end of the August. It's been a little strange being kind of in the car then out of the car, in the car again, with such big gaps in between.

It's given me more time to prepare physically for the conditions that we might face in a few weeks with the heat and also to get to know the team better. I've been able to spend a lot of time in the shop, I've been to some of the races as well to get to know everyone better.

For me it's been a little change, a little bit more waiting around than I would have liked. But there's positives to it as well. Tried to make the most of it. Now we go to Indy feeling really prepared.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think on my end, I think the hardest part is always just the question marks of what's going to happen. I was so prepared to go to Mid-Ohio this week. I was excited to get home. I didn't see any chance this thing was going to be derailed this late. That's been hard.

The physical fitness side of it, I felt really good at all the races we competed in. At the same time I'm not the guy that wants to sit in the gym each and every single day. It's not just my makeup. That's been hard to stay really committed through this process, not knowing what may come.

At the same time what I'm most proud of I would say is the team. I see it when I go to the shop, the commitment that they put in. For instance, Mid-Ohio got delayed, right? I called the engineers, chief mechanic. The response was, Hey, that's great. Now we can spend a little extra time massaging on the suspension, now we can spend extra time doing this or that for Indy.

I'm proud of that mentality. They've kind of taken it in stride. We move on to the next battle. What can we do? What can we take this sort of time to be better for whatever is going to come? I think that's shown.

The development from the team standpoint has been great. I feel like the preparation, Iowa obviously we struggled with the preparation, most places we've shown up and been competitive. All three of us at Indy Grand Prix were extremely fast. I feel the team has done an excellent job being ready to go. So that's been good.

Clearly there's a lot of questions. There always is going to be.

Q. Having raced the Grand Prix with no fans, you have a little bit of an idea what it feels like. Will that take away from any part of the 500?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Sure, it does. Once you're in the moment and you're locked in, as Takuma said, when I'm racing wheel-to-wheel with Sebastien or anybody else last year, I'm not looking at the grandstands, right? A couple of my buddies play in the NHL. I've been talking to them. I asked them the same, What is it like to play without fans? To be honest, once we start playing, I didn't even think about it. The same for us. That's even in a much closer environment than even Indy.

For me, do we want fans? I mean, you know we do. We all thrive off of that. Hopefully it is us that wins the 500 and drives through the Yard of Bricks. To see nobody, it's going to be a weird feeling, for sure. At the same time we all understand the position that we're in today and what we

have to do to keep this thing going forward.

Q. The original schedule certainly with the Aeroscreen, other changes, the original schedule didn't have any ovals before the 500. Now you have Texas under your belt, you have a couple at Iowa. The fact you've been on an oval already this season, how much of an advantage is that getting ready for the 500?

SPENCER PIGOT: For me, I haven't been on an oval yet. For me it will be a new experience. But I will say at the Indy GP, after a lap or two, visually I didn't even notice it. I didn't realize it was there. There was no distortions or anything in my vision. That makes me feel pretty confident going into the Speedway there's not going to be any issue.

At the GP it was quite hot. From what I've heard on the ovals, going a constant high speed, the airflow is quite a lot better. If anything, I think it will be an improved experience from when I drove at the GP.

Q. It's weird how the schedule has changed things, changed perspectives a little bit going into a huge race.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yes, it's different. It is different. It was nice to get Texas under your belt I felt like. It was nice to get Iowa under our belt. I was loving that string of races right there. Five races in a couple of weeks was awesome. I really enjoyed that. You get into the rhythm of it. Now I feel like we've kind of lost that rhythm.

Certainly excited to go out there. As Spence said, we're all starting to get used to this Aeroscreen. There's adjustments that are continuing to be made. We're appreciative of INDYCAR for trying from the cooling standpoint.

Yeah, I mean, on the ovals it's not nearly as bad, which is a great sign. I mean, look, we're ready. We're excited and ready to go. It is nice to have an oval before Indy, that's for sure.

As Spence said, too, at the same time, Indy Grand Prix, nobody had run on a road course forever. I think NASCAR is seeing this, too, right? They haven't had practice, qualifying, nothing. You go out there, I mean, figure it out pretty quickly. You remember pretty quickly.

It's been good.

Q. Takuma, your experiences coming to ovals in the U.S., specifically the Indy 500. What was the biggest thing you had to kind of adapt to when you came over

in terms of your driving? We know the strategy of the Indy 500 is a key thing. What was the biggest lessons you had to learn and adapt to?

TAKUMA SATO: Right, I think it will be interesting the question because when I come to the U.S. already experienced a lot in Europe, as you know. I was just clean sheet of paper, really to absorb any new challenge. It work.

Talking about road course and street courses, very similar to the European racing. Even, okay, strategy, category was different. But pretty much you're adapting very quickly.

One thing oval was different, of course. Still you took the wheel, same driving style basically, how you respect other people's lines, don't cut other people's line. I think there needs to be more attention, more respectable for the other people. You just don't realize.

That's why I think a young drivers, rookie driver, don't know. For the sudden movement, or cut air, those things you know it after you experienced.

As everybody knows, in oval they said there's two type of drivers: one hit the wall already and one is going to hit the wall (laughter). Whether you're good or not, obviously INDYCAR, it's super competitive, but they will have a crash into the wall, just unavoidable. Has to be ready for that one and just respect for the oval track and the other people.

That's really nice because sometimes you get into almost a reimport to the other racing, other category, other road course, too. You just expect little bit more the space for other peoples. I think eventually making more exciting race.

But I just never forgot the sensation of the speed going to the high-banking oval. People are thinking and putting for the three Gs, four Gs, but we actually pull diagonally because the cars go banking. You have almost the vertical G Force, and 3 G and 3.5 G. That's unbelievable thing.

But, of course, driving to the oval, it's great fun. Oval, talking about short oval like Iowa a couple weeks ago, we are going to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, it totally different. We feel really, really great sensation. Like you saw a lot of great driver jump in the car. Indianapolis, 500 miles, enough days of practice.

Fernando Alonso came, he immediately adapted after a few runs. He said he didn't know if he had the brain muscle in his right foot. He knew he could go to the flat for



that without any traffic. But then he just couldn't. Even him couldn't do it.

That's showing the feeling, sensation, of going to the corner over 230 miles per hour, you have to have a constant with the car and environment. Once you do that, you have a superb feeling.

Once again, nothing really change dramatically, just the respect and the learn the things. Then you pick up the speed. You know how the idea is. Then you have a great racing in any other category, but particularly for the oval.

Q. Graham, you talked about how the guys at the shop are massaging the car. We know you're ready. What about the pit crew guys? Indy has more pit stops than anywhere else. With double points, do you foresee this being more important in a couple Sundays?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Pit road is always important. It's the easiest place to gain and lose positions. We know that. The guys know that. I feel like everybody is working extremely hard. We have a good area in our shop for them to be practicing with a car, electric-power car, that moves, gives them some real sensation of what's going on.

I think our guys are extremely committed to improving. I think our guys have been given a lot of heat over time. I think they take that to heart and want to go out there and prove everybody wrong. I feel very confident in what we have, in the guys, the job that they're going to be able to do.

Pit stops are critical. We have seen a lot of mistakes this year. Obviously we've had a couple on our car, which may have cost us a win at Road America race one. That's part of the game. We've all been there. We've all made mistakes. We just have to rebound and be better from it.

I think our guys are committed to doing that.

Q. Spencer, obviously you've got two teammates for the 500 this year. How beneficial is that going to be for you in terms of collecting data and practice before the race?

SPENCER PIGOT: Yeah, it will be great. The more cars you have, the more information you have to look at, the more chances you have to try different things amongst the three cars.

I think Indy GP we all worked really well together. I definitely learned things from Graham and Takuma that helped me there. I assume the same is going to happen at the 500.

It's always great to have two fast and experienced teammates. I think between the three of us, we've all got a great shot of doing well. We've all been competitive here in the past. I'm excited to be a part of the team.

THE MODERATOR: We'll thank Graham, Spencer and Takuma for their time this afternoon.

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