

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Tuesday, February 23, 2021
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA



Romain Grosjean

Dale Coyne Racing with RWR
Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good evening, everyone. My name is Dave Furst from INDYCAR and the NTT INDYCAR SERIES. Glad you could join us after a busy day of testing at Barber Motorsports Park. We'll take a few questions here in just a bit.

If you've been following the day, Romain Grosjean had his first test in the NTT INDYCAR SERIES driving the No. 51 for Dale Coyne Racing with RWR, and Romain joins us from Birmingham, Alabama. A lot of questions but some general thoughts just to begin with on getting into the race car, your first time driving an INDYCAR. How was it?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: It felt good. It really felt like home at the beginning. Obviously, it's a new car, so I just had to adjust a little bit to my new driving position and so on, but things very quickly felt quite smooth, which was good, and then I discovered the joy of not having a power steering wheel, and I don't regret all those hours in the gym, but maybe I'll do some more just in case.

THE MODERATOR: Of course there's the other storyline; this is the first time you'd been in a race car since the accident in Bahrain. How did the hand hold up today?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: It went okay. I mean, it's not -- as I say, it's not perfect. There's a nice big blister on my left thumb which is not pretty, but driving-wise it was okay. It wasn't painful. I was being a bit careful on some of the curves, but generally, it hasn't been a limitation.

Q. When you told your children, hey, I'm going to go back, I'm going to get back in the car today, what was their reaction? Did you have to soothe any of their fears or anything like that?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: No, they were actually super excited, and I've been sharing and talking with them a lot, and we made some video calls over the last few days and I showed them the car, and they were happy. It was hard to know that I was going to go away for like 18 days, but they

were happy, and yes, I sent them pictures so they could follow on social media a bit, and yeah, I think they know that their daddy is doing what he likes, so I think that's the most important for them.

Q. Adapting to a car without power steering, how heavy did the steering wheel feel? I know there are a couple of turns there at Barber that are pretty heavy turns working the wheel. How big of a transition was that for you?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: It's definitely the hardest steering wheel I've had to cope with. The first few laps, the muscles weren't quite warmed up or ready for it. It got better at the end, which is always a good sign. I'll know where to exactly where to work in the gym and what to do. I also know that's the hardest track of the year, which is always good to start with so you have a baseline of what it's going to be like. But yeah, I think I can fine-tune my training. I didn't know really what to expect, and now it's pretty clear.

Q. What about the acceleration in an INDYCAR compared to Formula 1?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Yeah, I mean, there is less power. That is for sure. But I observed that the mechanical grip of the car is pretty outstanding and therefore you can try different lines in the corner and you can actually make it smooth in the way you want it.

I think I could go on for a long time comparing Formula 1 and INDYCAR, but I don't think it's doing any favor to anyone. I think really what I've found here is that there's a lot of mechanical grip and less aero than the Formula 1 car and obviously a little bit less power, but that the drivability of the engine, the modes of the engine, the different maps we tried worked really well.

Q. What about the difference in team? I know in a typical Formula 1 season -- Formula 1 team probably has more people in their catering and hospitality department than Dale Coyne has on his entire team. What's it been like adapting to -- Dale is a racer, he runs a lean machine, but everybody kind of pitches in and helps out. What's it like working for Dale Coyne now?

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ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Yeah, yes, it's one of the smaller teams of the championship, but it doesn't mean that no one -- the guys here are very motivated. They do a great job. They've been turning the car quick. They've got some good experience. So really I don't think it's anything to be bad or to be ashamed of. I think, yes, we are a smaller team, but also if you think the car may be a little bit complex in terms of -- because they are spec parts, it doesn't mean they are easy to set up. But I think we can do a great job with what we have, and that's why I took the challenge.

Yes, there are less people, but I think generally I've been getting on very well with everyone, and I haven't really felt any limitation in terms of working on the car.

Q. Just wondered what your plan was for the day today, if you can kind of run through what you were hoping to achieve at the start of the day and whether you actually got through all of those things that you wanted to kind of do.

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Yeah, well, the first thing was to get adapted to the car, to understand the way it works and making sure that the seat position was good, which it was, so that was already the first good thing. We tried different setups on the car just for me to have a feel what does happen when we change this setup or this setup because obviously when you get to the racetrack you never really have so much time. We didn't look at finding the perfect balance, but we looked more at making sure that I had an idea of what was happening while we were changing big things on the car.

Q. You've spoken a lot about your accident last year and how that affected you sort of following that. How did it kind of feel just getting out of the car, coming out of the pits and getting those first few laps in, kind of refreshing your brain and bouncing back from what happened last year?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: It felt like home, to be fair. It felt like home, and didn't have any apprehension whatever. Just going out there, learning the car. The real question is going to be at the race start April 18 here in Barber, but for now, driving the car is good.

Q. Kind of piggy-backing off the last question, I know you've been doing a lot of sim work leading up to today's test at Barber, but how much of today as you mentioned was trying to find the proper setup for you and how much of it was trying to test the limits of what this car could do and what you can do within this car?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Well, I think there were a little bit of both. Every time you come testing you have to try to find

your limit, which I did this morning in Turn 1. I wasn't quite happy with it, but it happened, and I actually understood something you could do in Formula 1 you maybe cannot do in INDYCAR, so actually that was kind of a good learning experience.

And then it's really learning about when you change to dampers or the bars or something, what does it actually do on the car, how does it affect the car, which part of the corner. Also getting to learn my engineer and him to learn me and what I'm talking about entry, which phase of the corner am I talking about and so on. So that's been our day, and it's been pretty good.

Q. You mentioned the incident in Turn 1. It sounded like it was a fairly simple spin that didn't cause too much damage. Can you kind of take us through a little bit -- I know most of us weren't there to see exactly what happened. It didn't sound like anything too major, but can you take us through what happened there?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Yeah, basically I just went too fast in. When I was on the brake I also picked up the throttle which you do in high speed, but because it's a mechanical diff it does open the diff when you do that, and therefore it makes the car lose, whereas in Formula 1 it would actually stabilize the car, so I would say it was a learning experience and then I didn't do it anymore, and it was better.

Q. I know we don't have any official times from today, but how competitive do you feel you were amongst that field and how competitive do you feel like you can be this year from your first test and what you learned today?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: I don't know. It's definitely super tight. There were a couple of very quick times at the front. For us, the last set of tires I didn't get anything out of it. Just didn't feel great for some reason and the sun was quite low, so the visibility went down.

But I think the set before -- middle of the afternoon we had a decent lap time, especially looking at a track condition maybe a bit hotter. But yeah, generally I think -- I don't know, it's difficult to say, but it's definitely super tight, and we need to keep working and I need to keep adapting my driving style and understand how to go fast in an INDYCAR because it's a bit different than a Formula 1 car.

Q. You had mentioned that you didn't want to talk too much about the comparison between an F1 car and an INDYCAR, but some of that is actually quite fascinating. I know you can't really compare the braking but I know the steering is a little bit different,

as well, so could you go into a little bit more detail with that?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Well, I think Formula 1, if I'm being simplistic, Formula 1 only works as aerodynamics and the rest is just here to support the car. An INDYCAR works really with the setup and the aerodynamic is much simpler and much less downforce. So high-speed corners is a bit more fruity on an INDYCAR but the low-speed corners actually feel maybe better.

Q. And the physical nature of it all, I know you were saying at the beginning your arms are actually quite tired. Going back and having to reassess the physical side of things, do you know which portions you're going to have to work on yourself to get ready for the race?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Yeah, I think so. I think I've got some clear idea. I'm going to go back in the gym and make sure that the muscles are good. Sometimes you can do as much as you want in the gym. The real race, the real training is in the car. That's good that we did 80 laps today. It gets the proper driving muscles active. Obviously I wanted to do some shifter kart back home because I think shifter kart could be good training, but with my hand and core temperature I wasn't able to, but I think no, things are getting better and I think I can get on it and I think it's going to be actually very helpful for INDYCAR.

Q. You had said to me that you spoke to Marcus Ericsson about what you expect from the series and Marcus told you it was a really nice environment, that you would get along with the guys well. It looks like you've had interaction on social media with some other drivers. I'm wondering how the welcoming has gone and what drivers you have found to be friendly.

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Well, it's been great. It's been great, and yes, I think Marcus wasn't wrong, and I've had already some good interaction with Sebastien Bourdais. He was next to me so that was easy. Takuma Sato came over. I saw some of the other guys. Simon Pagenaud in the pit lane, he was driving and I gave him a wave and he gave it back. So I think generally it's been a great day in that respect, with Edward, my teammate. We have a good relationship, as well.

I told him I used to be an asshole as a teammate back in the days, but now I'm 35 and I'd like us to be friendly. On track you want to beat them, there's no doubt, but outside of the track I think if we can be friends it's mega.

Q. Is it a surprise to you to be in this sort of atmosphere?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: It's definitely very different from what I'm used to.

Q. And your engineer, how has that been going? I know that he worked with Bourdais a long time. I don't know if they put you guys together because you're both French, but how is that working?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: It's been good. We've been fairly busy and haven't really got much time to sit down and debrief, but on track and so on, it's been clear. We've done the testing. I guess now it's going to be a question of sitting down together, going through the data, working through it, what we're going to do.

It's always nice when your engineer speaks the same language as you. We do all the debriefs in English because we don't want to exclude anyone, but obviously when we are outside of the track and talking just the two of us, that's going to be French, and sometimes it's a bit easier to explain some of the feelings in your mother language.

Q. We talked about the extra physicality of the INDYCAR to drive without the power steering and we know your hands got quite badly burned in the accident at the time. Has there been any extra issues with that, with the extra physicality of driving the car on your hands as they continue to heat up?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Actually, no, it's been all right. I've got a big blister on the left hand, on one of the thumbs, but I didn't really feel it in the car. So I guess that was fine.

I think generally, no, that's been okay. Putting the gloves on and removing it is not always nice so I tend to keep my left glove on, protect it from the sun, as well, but generally it's been okay.

The aeroscreen removes some air that you get in the car so it gets quite warm, but the other tubes that you have with the helmet air system and also at the front of the cockpit works pretty well. So I think it's very physical. It is tough driving those cars, very much, in a different way than Formula 1 where the only thing you fight in Formula 1 is the G-forces where here you actually fight the heaviness of the car physically. But I don't mind it. It's quite cool.

Q. You mentioned the aeroscreen there. Obviously you were used to the halo in Formula 1. How did you find the aeroscreen on the INDYCAR?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Absolutely fine. If it wasn't for the air not coming through your helmet and your visor staying clean, you wouldn't notice. You wouldn't know it.

Q. As for the experience itself today, you were at Barber, which I always think is quite a European style track. Does that help you settle into the new car and the new environment compared to some of the tracks you're going to go to this season which are going to be very different?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Yeah, I think there's going to be some different tracks, but if you look at Mid-Ohio, Road America, Laguna, they're not dissimilar in a way to the tracks that I've known. The pavement may be a bit different with some patches on, but again, it gives character to the circuit. The street circuits, they're always different, and year to year they change. They're bumpy. I heard they're very bumpy. But well, let's see.

Q. And of course you're going to have the ovals to get used to, as well. What do you think when it comes to oval running?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: We'll see later. There could be a chance that I do get (indiscernible).

Q. In terms of the aeroscreen, how was the visibility for you today, and also how beneficial is it for you testing in Barber today and also Barber being the first race? Is that a beneficial kind of aspect for you to build on?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Well, the aeroscreen wasn't an issue at all and I completely forgot it was on, so that was good. Testing in Barber, obviously it's always good and we kind of come racing here. But I still feel like I've got some stuff to learn in the car to go faster, so that's what I'm going to be doing in the next few days before we go testing in Laguna Seca.

Q. How beneficial is it for you to have Ed with you?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Yeah, it's been good. I've been looking at data, and I'll keep doing that, keep understanding. I need to get used to also the PI system that we use to look at data, but I'm definitely going to work on that and make sure that I understand what it does different, where I'm faster and what I can do to improve myself.

Q. Going into the season you have a couple of drivers that are making the jump to INDYCAR. You have probably one of the top drivers from the Australian area and one of the top stock car drivers of all time with Jimmie Johnson. Has the mindset come across to you that this season could bring a lot more eyeballs, especially at a race with Barber being a complex road

course?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: Well, you know, I think it's mega to have Jimmie and Scott on board as well as all the other drivers. I think we've got a very strong field with a lot of experience from some of the guys, and a huge fan base from Scott and Jimmie. For everyone that loves motorsport, it's super cool to have that and to be able to watch that.

Q. I know it's only your first day in the INDYCAR, but have you been able to get an impression of the kind of driving that the Firestones would require and promote? Do they have any kind of characteristics to any tires you have raced with previously throughout your racing career?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: If I'm being honest I've been very pleasantly surprised with the Firestone. They've been great. No tar blanket going out of the pit. It does feel -- okay, it's a bit more slippery but there is grip, and you can actually push for a few laps and they stay quite consistent. I was doing good laps after 25, 26 laps on the tires and that's something that I couldn't do in my previous experience.

Generally I think I've been happy with them. Obviously we haven't used the red stickers on ones, so they may degrade a bit more, but definitely the primary tires were pretty good.

Q. When you say slippery, would you put that down to maybe it's still February and the temperatures are maybe cooler than when you'll generally go racing or is that more a condition of the tire?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: No, I think it's more condition of the tires because we got to 95 track temp, something like that, close to 100, which isn't bad. It's been actually a very sunny and cool day. Generally I think Firestone is a good product.

THE MODERATOR: Romain, you'll be at Laguna and that's a place you grew up playing video games; is that right?

ROMAIN GROSJEAN: When I was young and beautiful.

THE MODERATOR: We want to thank you, Romain Grosjean, a full day of testing at Barber Motorsports Park in the book. A reminder the season opener for the NTT INDYCAR SERIES just 54 days away. They'll be back at beautiful Barber Motorsports Park April 18th for the Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama. Thank you all for joining us here tonight. Everyone have a great evening. Thank you.

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