

# NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Thursday, March 4, 2021  
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

## Graham Rahal

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing  
Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Graham Rahal, welcome. Graham is the driver of the No. 15 Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing Honda. Glad you're here.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: How is everything shaking out so far as you're testing? What are the goals, the plans for 2021? How is it looking?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, everything so far, I think we're doing pretty good. Testing has gone well. I feel like our guys are pretty locked in. I feel like everything has gone really well. I'm excited about the opportunities I had.

I think our team has got a lot of potential, and it's our job this year to go and fulfill all of that potential. In the past I think we've done an all right job. I don't think the last couple years we've done a good enough job with that. It's going to be our goal to try to make that happen this year.

**Q. The Bobby mustache is gone. That's disappointing to see.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I got overruled. Wife is not a big fan.

**Q. We were talking to Takuma earlier and I know there's a business implication of having a third entry in the team, but he said he felt like having that third entry would really help the team to move forward. Is that something you share? He talked about the extra data points and stuff like that that would be helpful. Do you think a third entry would be a benefit?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, it is if it's beneficial. What I mean by that is it only works if all the guys are performing at their max level and you are getting a lot of data out of it.

It does not work or it does not help, and it just becomes a

distraction, if that third car is not giving back as much as it takes. That's the hardest part of that thing.

Even at Indy 500s before we've had where it's been highly beneficial, we've had Indy 500s where it's been nothing but a distraction, I think, for everybody.

Honestly I'm not -- I'll say this: My focus this year is just so much on my car, just on the 15 car solely, that I'm really not concerned too much about if they want to run a third car. If the owners decide that's what they want to do, fine, but it's not really up to me.

**Q. It's been noticeable in a couple of tests this year that you've turned way more laps than anyone else. Is there a particular reason for that? Is it trying to gauge how well you do on really warm tires?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's just a weight loss program that I'm on (smiling).

I'll be honest, man. It's kind of what I just said. The first test Takuma wasn't feeling well, so we really didn't get anything out of the 30 car at all. We had to do it. Takuma will tell you that, too. He had a sickness, and he just wasn't feeling good when we went to Sebring for test number one.

So he was just -- we had to. How are we going to get through the list if we don't?

Same with Barber test. You've got to do it. We've got to try to get through the list. And so for me, it was just important just to kind of hammer through it.

I also think it's a mentality, and I'm not saying it's a good one, but my engineer and everybody, they definitely like to run. We're not the best at taking breaks. When the track is green, we like to be on it.

You're right, we've done a ton of laps compared to others in the off-season so far.

**Q. And your fitness regime, you're kind of okay with that? I think you did two race lengths at Barber.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I felt great, man. Honestly, I did. I felt great. I had no issues at all. Physicality-wise I'll be good.

**ASAP** sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

It is good to get back, though, and to do that to get the bumps and bruises -- my elbows already, I was just feeling them, are a little raw in a couple areas, just to get comfortable. You've got to build up the calluses a little bit every year, every time you get in, so it's good to be able to turn some laps.

Barber repaved, it's grippy, it's fast, it's silky smooth, so that was a good test I think of everybody's fitness. I saw Grosjean a couple minutes ago and I said, What do you think of Laguna? He said, It was nice because I actually felt like I could turn the steering wheel, just the grip level between the two. Barber is going to be a test of everybody's mettle when we get back there.

**Q. It looks like you could be on the front row again like a couple of years ago.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: We're going to try. We're pretty determined this year. I think the 15 car guys have had a lot of close performances the last couple years. And as I just said, some through our fault, some not through our fault, but we haven't been able to fulfill that. So we're pretty focused, pretty locked in on being able to make it happen.

**Q. Off of what you just said to David, last year was a lot of ups and downs. You had a lot of good weekends, some weekends to forget. Did you make changes yourself? Did the teams make changes to make sure those off weekends aren't quite as off? I know you're not going to be podiums every weekend, but those finishes at Gateway, if they're in 10th, is there something you can do as a team to help --**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, you hit the nail on the head. You look at our season, we start off at Texas where we have our best qualifying result at Texas in forever and the car doesn't start. Well, that sucks. So there goes that weekend.

We go to Road America, and I can't remember the order, man, I'm getting old, but Road America or Indy GP was next. I can't remember. But Road America you finish great in one race, the next day we get punted on the second corner.

Then you go to Indy GP, maybe it was vice versa, should have won, period. Without that yellow, we -- I've gone back and watched it multiple times. Our lead was going to be about 45 seconds. I'm sure Dixie would have made up some of that 45. Still going to win that race by 25 seconds.

Should've could've would've here obviously. I am racing theoreticals here. Again, missed a little opportunity there.

Really the one that was the dagger was Gateway. Gateway was bad. Double-header. We sucked. We've got to close the gap there. We've got to figure it out.

We found a lot after Gateway. There was a lot that we found and we learned that we improved on or that we will improve on, I think, as we go forward.

We're trying to, as I said, fulfill all of the potential, and we're trying to close that gap between our great weekends and our not-so-greats. But overall last year, our car was pretty strong. To still finish sixth in points even with all of those things being said, not bad. Not bad.

I think that there's great potential there, and I hope that this year we can make it all happen.

**Q. What's the biggest thing that Roger Penske did last year in his first year of ownership? And what do you think he could do this year?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, look, I think you know Roger, and you know what his organization is all about. Everybody does that's on this call. Roger brought sanity, I think, to a year in which there was really none. He brought support and he brought stability to a series that needed it so desperately.

I think to everybody here in INDYCAR, racing at INDYCAR, at IMS, is grateful for what he did. Bud Denker, Bud is the man, and seeing Bud run around and make all this possible, too, we're fortunate that that played out the way that it did.

What can he do going forward is all the little Penske touches. I think that Roger has got a grand plan, Greg, who I have tremendous respect for, Greg is going to continue to take this thing forward and improve. I think that we're going to see it. There's some opportunities ahead.

I mean, I'm not saying it's Roger specifically, but what is it, nine network races on NBC? Pretty damned good. Does NASCAR get nine NBC races? Probably not.

There's things like that that are starting to move in our direction that I think he can help push that envelope. The third manufacturer, nobody is going to listen to anybody -- no manufacturer is going to listen to one single person like they would Roger Penske.

While the Ferrari thing didn't come through, I think it was a pipe dream for that to come through anyway, there's other opportunities on the horizon, and Roger has got the power to make it happen and the leadership to make it happen.

I think it's going to be great. It will be great. It'll be interesting to see what he does. I think it'll be fascinating to see what he does.

**Q. It was a couple of years ago, I think, that you were really proud that you said that you got Bob to admit that the level of driver competition in the series now is as good as it was when he raced in the mid, late 90s in CART. When you look at this year with Formula One champion, Supercars champion, NASCAR champion, is that even an argument anymore about how stout the lineup is anymore?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, we've got -- obviously been asked a lot of questions today, and it's one I was thinking about. It's come a long way, man. I remember my first year in '07 in Champ Car. I told this story last year, but if you were outside the top 5 in a Newman/Haas car you were probably pretty ticked off.

You look at where it is today and just how deep the field is, and it's impressive. I mean, this is a -- maybe everybody wants to say the golden era of INDYCAR racing was in the early '90s or in Champ Car, may have been the late '90s, early 2000s.

But I've got to be honest. From a talent pool perspective, the golden era is right now. We're living the golden era. It's never been better, and I'm not sure it will get better. It is deep across the board, and it's definitely cool because you're also gauging yourself against the rest.

For sure there's going to be times that guys go out there and they're going to perform great and we're going to be like, Oh, yeah, they're awesome, and then next weekend like us in Gateway, you may just completely suck, and it shouldn't be a surprise because you cannot miss a step.

The depth, every single driver in the series can win. That's factual. That couldn't have been said 20 years ago, let alone five years ago.

**Q. I know this answer is somewhat self-evident but I just want to get your take on it. If you tried to explain to somebody who wasn't a huge INDYCAR fan why those drivers are here, what would be the main reasons you would explain to somebody to say why those guys are coming here now?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think it's just a very pure form of motorsports right now. My opinion is it's a very pure form, and what I mean by that, no driver aids. The physicality of it is at the prime. Jimmie grew up, he hasn't been shy of saying it, his dream was to be an INDYCAR driver, and now he's got the opportunity to be able to fulfill that dream.

For Scott, he's done all he could do. He could go win 20 V-8 super car championships, but at the end of the day he's ready for the next challenge. For Grosjean what else is he going to do in F1? Unless he's in a Mercedes he's not going to win, so where do you go? What are you going to do?

Might as well look across the pond where here he can compete. Here he is going to have the opportunity to win no matter what team he's with. So these guys, I think the purity of INDYCAR racing is what's attracting so many people to the sport right now.

I think that's only going to get better. There's some great races on the calendar this year. You look at Nashville. Nashville is -- if there's ever an opportunity for a street race to be a home run, that's it. I think even to see Dale get involved in the ownership role, Justin Timberlake, guys like that, they can make Nashville explode even more and put it on more of an international viewing platform. I think there's great opportunity ahead.

**Q. You've touched on this a good amount already, but I've been wanting to ask you as you mentioned coming into this year in INDYCAR, in 2021, where INDYCAR is up for a broadcast contract renewal. We have the series continuing to look for a third engine manufacturer, you've got all of this talent that you've just touched on already. As a driver, I know you guys are so focused on the on-track product, but do you sense just how big of a deal this season can be and hopes to be for the series? Do you guys feel any sort of pressure on wanting to make sure you guys put out that great product so that the future for the series can look super bright?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I don't feel pressure. I don't think any of the drivers feel pressure. If I had anything to say, I'd say I feel a sense as a fan of this sport -- I feel that I need to do what I can to help grow the sport this year. I've felt that way my whole career. I feel like any ins or any connections that we may have in the auto industry, which we do, our family being in the auto business, we do have some connections. We're trying to open their eyes or constantly be in their ear about, Hey, check out INDYCAR racing.

I mean, trust me, there's not a time that goes by that I see a Toyota executive that I don't go, Hey. It's not because I want to drive for Toyota. Obviously I've been a Honda guy my whole life, but it's a big brand. It would be a great brand to have in INDYCAR racing.

We try to have our voice out there as much as we can and

help as much as we can.

I actually didn't know the TV contract was up for renewal this year, but with NBCSN's announcement that it's going away, I guess, it's probably a good time to have a renewal to kind of take a look at it and see what we can do there. But I think that the groundwork for our sport is -- the foundation is solid right now. RP, as I said, his whole group, they're going to do a good job. I don't think any of us need to worry about it. If we do our jobs, we put a good show on the track and everybody within the organization does a good job, I do think -- the positive I can say in the position I'm in today is the future, the next five years looks a lot brighter to me than maybe even the past five, and that's a great thing.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, we appreciate your time and we wish you the best of luck this season. Thanks again.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports