

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing News Conference

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Bobby Rahal Graham Rahal Takuma Sato Santino Ferrucci

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We continue our traditional Fast Friday news conferences this morning by welcoming Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, a team that of course has two Indianapolis 500 wins on their resume along with 29 series wins, 33 pole positions.

We say good morning to Bobby Rahal, the 1986 Indy 500 champion and three-time series champion, a man celebrating 30 years with Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, his race team. Also joining us, the driver of the No. 15 United Rentals Honda, Graham Rahal is here this morning. Driver of the No. 33 Panasonic Peopleready Honda is two-time and reigning Indy 500 champion, Takuma Sato. And driving the No. 45 Hy-Vee Honda, great to see Santino Ferrucci back in the NTT INDYCAR Series. Also we should add cleared to drive, which is the great news in the last 24 hours.

Let's begin with Bobby. Coming back to a place where you're certainly the defending champ probably has a little bit different feel to it. How much of last year do you think about when you drive under the tunnel and you come back to this great facility?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, it's always frankly humbling when you drive through the tunnel, the immensity of this place and the history associated with it. You just feel very fortunate to be here, to participate here. Of course this year -- it's always great to be here, but it's always much better when there's people here.

I'm really excited to see the people coming in, the buzz, kind of feel the buzz. Last year I think the pandemic, it was



kind of a crushing thing in a lot of ways, but yet we had a race and it was a great race. It was too bad we couldn't share it with people live, at least with spectators, but it's great coming back, great to see people.

We're excited about our chances and looking forward to tomorrow, looking forward to this afternoon, Fast Friday, and then of course getting ready for the race.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, you're fresh off battling back to finish top 5 at the GMR Grand Prix last weekend. All season you've been one of the biggest movers in the field. I think I counted up, plus 25 from where you started to where you finished each and every race so far this season, which is the best of anyone in the series. Do you feel some momentum, if that's the right word, heading into this year's Indy 500.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I feel good about the performance all year. I think the boys have done a great job. Engineer core has done a great job to put us pretty consistently competitive. And even the places we have struggled, Barber a little bit, or even last week, we were able to overcome that and still salvage really good finishes at those places.

I do feel a sense of momentum. I also feel that everybody is performing at a pretty high level right now. As I said, last week is a perfect example when things really went sideways on us, we were still able to come up with a plan and get the mileage necessary to finish in the top 5.

Maybe in years past that would have been kind of a crushing blow to it and we wouldn't have been able to overcome it, but I think this year everybody's eyes are on the prize, and it seems like we're doing a great job with that.

Yeah, I feel like our boys have done an excellent job in the off-season, and I'm seeing it carry through here so far at IMS and on the oval days.

We're excited for today, see what we have. We think we have a really, really strong race car. So if we can qualify towards the front, then I don't need to worry about that plus/minus thing too much.



The plus, what is it for years, Tag Heuer most positions gained or whatever. I think I won that thing about five years in a row, but I'm not super proud of that. So hopefully we can qualify up front and not have to worry about it.

THE MODERATOR: Takuma Sato's reign as the defending Indy 500 champion, probably the shortest in the history of the Indy 500, just eight months since that August race, but for you the return to see fans, I know it's very special for you.

TAKUMA SATO: Indeed. Really the most significant part is that we have the fans back at IMS. That's the biggest thing. The biggest thing we missed last year. Yes, okay, it was the shortest period of time to be defending the champion, but that's okay.

We come back here. I know the boys and the team prepared so much over the course of the winter, and then we did have a few testing unlike last year. I know everybody has become quite competitive.

But like Graham just mentioned, we feel confident with our race car and try to squeeze out a last mile an hour for today and tomorrow and for Sunday, of course.

THE MODERATOR: Santino, great to see you back. What happened yesterday and how are you feeling today?

SANTINO FERRUCCI: We were just working on our race trim, trying a couple different things, and just more my mistakes. Brandon has been doing such a great job engineering the car, the Hy-Vee car, and it's been incredibly quick. We have been on top of the board yesterday after the last two days trying to figure some stuff out, and I should have pitted a lap before because it made some moves, and normally around here it's not a very good sign. I was just trying to compensate with the weight jacker and see if I can adjust because you get the same conditions in the race.

I just made a mistake following Takuma. I'm feeling good. We went to Southern Methodist. I'm very happy the safety of the INDYCARs. It's come such a long way so fast. And they just performed a CAT scan, make sure everything is good with my leg, and they cleared me to drive this morning. Be looking forward to getting back in the car.

Q. Santino, Conor Daly had radioed to his crew right before you crashed that your car was kind of getting a little squirrely. What exactly was the car doing? What were you feeling right before you lost it?

SANTINO FERRUCCI: Yeah, I was really tight in 3 and 4,

so I was getting a lot of understeer and then the car was really neutral. I think just the way I was trying to get runs off of and follow Takuma out of 2, it was just -- I guess he sees the car moving more than I feel it, but it's like that in the race car. It moves when you're behind it. Even looking at other cars and watching T.K. in front of me before I passed him, you could see his car was moving. With the temperatures on the rise, it's not uncommon. I do like a loose race car, and I think yesterday was definitely over the razor thin edge of this place.

Q. Bobby, one of the tough days as a team owner when the driver stuffs the car into the wall and also some other things that happened yesterday involving the team. Last we heard they were going to repair the car that he crashed.

BOBBY RAHAL: Correct.

Q. How long did the crew work on it, and will he be able to go out today?

BOBBY RAHAL: Oh, yeah. Naturally we were fortunate the tub was okay, the gearbox was okay, engine was okay. Certainly the left side of the car was gone, but we were prepared, we had a rear clip.

I will say all three teams jumped in and the other two teams jumped in to help the guys in the 45 car, and it was a late night, though. A lot of them were -- some went home around midnight, some by 1:30, some 2:30. I think there were some people still here at 5:00 a.m. today.

I'm thinking around 2:00, maybe earlier, but I think probably 2:00 is a good time to gauge things by. So pretty amazing really, because again, it happened late in the afternoon, too. It's not like it happened at 10:00 in the morning. Great recovery. A great team effort getting the car done, and more than anything I'm pleased that Santino is okay. Certainly I'm sure he's sorer than he's letting on, but to see him walking around, that's a good sight.

You know, coming here I think I said we've got probably the most competitive three cars we've ever come to this track with for the 500, and I'm just glad that Santino and the 45, the Hy-Vee car, will be back, and all looks good.

Q. You guys were one and three last year. Do you feel like your cars are even improved from that point last year?

BOBBY RAHAL: I do, yes. I think we learned a lot of good things in the off-season. Well, not just the off-season, but after Indy of last year, we did a lot of good things. I think the engineering group has done a very good job over the

course of that period of time. Our relationship with Honda has been very strong and collectively we've discovered some things together.

I do feel that we are in a better position than we were last year. That's not saying, though, that it takes a lot more than that to win the race. But still, I'm very pleased with where we are, what we've done, and I think as a team we're better across the board than we were a year ago.

Mainly it's the same people but just greater commitment, greater dedication. Just realizing the talents that they have. I'm pretty pleased right now.

Q. For the drivers, I just asked the Penske guys this, you guys were obviously one and three last year, factor in Santino, three of the top four. If it's easier to pass up front, do you race each other any differently if you're coming down to the checkered, and if you're racing each other do you race each other differently than you would Penske or Ganassi or somebody like that?

SANTINO FERRUCCI: Probably not other than keeping all three cars in one piece.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think you've got to be smart in that position. It's important that the team has a really good result. At the end of the day it's the Indy 500, and you're going to go try to win it.

Like I said, I think last year, too, if you look at us finishing one, three, four with Santino being factored in there, it's a pretty good run for the three of us, and it would be great to have that again.

I thought we did a good job last year together at the front of the grid kind of after that last restart managing the race together and not racing too, too aggressively. I think clearly if it's another car, strategy plays a different role as far as just where you want to be, how aggressively you're going to race them, the chances that you're willing to take.

But as I said, no matter what, it's the Indy 500, and I can guarantee you anybody in that position is going to try their best to get it done.

Q. Bobby, we talked a few years ago at Mid-Ohio and you were talking about how Graham was entering his peak and you said coming at 27, 28 range is when a driver starts entering their prime. We've seen a lot of young winners. Does that maybe need to be adjusted younger?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I mean, there have been young

winners before. I don't think this is anything new. We're early in the year, but all credit to these guys. We saw how good Pato was last year, and we saw some of the other fellas that were very competitive last year, maybe couldn't put the whole thing together but now can a year later, more maturity, more experience. That's what makes it exciting.

But there have always been -- Graham won at 18, won at 22 or 23, and there have been others. Marco won very young. This is just more of the same.

But for sure just as you have a lot of guys over their 40s now in INDYCAR, you have a lot of guys that are under 27, 28. You know, we're getting close to that changing of the guard, and this is maybe the start of that.

Q. Taku, you won this race with Eddie Jones last year as your engineer. I know this team has great engineering depth and resources but I think there was a change in the off-season. Can you talk about the engineering and where the team is going.

TAKUMA SATO: Eddie was going to attend this event anyway to oversee and supervising the three of us. It's just a little my primary engineer, Matt, had some personal issues so that he couldn't come over, but he's online and he's supporting from England.

Yeah, we're lucky to have just Eddie to be on standby, and it was kind of coincidence this coming together. Backing all 30 boys and all 30 cars, you're just feel naturally you felt melt into immediately. We're just working on good progress and get Eddie up to speed because obviously he hasn't raced this year. But our engineers are all the same, so we have great support people. We feel pretty positive.

Q. For Graham and Takuma, the 30-minute penalty today, how do you feel like that's going to impact Fast Friday for you guys?

TAKUMA SATO: I think there's nothing that will hurt us to be honest. Maybe we have a little bit longer lunchtime, but other than that, we as a driver we just concentrate on today's program, which is Fast Friday, so probably seven-ish short, depending on how many new tires you want to use. But designing a good program, that's what's important.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I don't think it really affects us very much. We probably wouldn't have really run until then anyway. I think we'll be okay.

Q. Bobby, I know you said yesterday you were disappointed in INDYCAR's punishment. Could you elaborate any further on communication with them,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

any discussion with them? Was it a miscommunication thing?

BOBBY RAHAL: No, I mean, we were given a penalty, and we're going to pay it and get on. Frankly I think it was unfortunate, what all transpired. It certainly wasn't the intention. But we're paying the penalty or will pay the penalty, and now for us really the focus is today and getting Santino back going and recovering from that dramatic event, frankly, that no one ever wants, especially the day before Fast Friday.

I was thinking to myself yesterday, the last time this happened I think it was when Ryan Hunter-Reay drove for us, and that would have been 2007 or '8, I think, and he crashed that day. I think it was actually Fast Friday.

Yeah, nobody wants that so close to qualifying, but Santino is good, which we're very happy about, as I said. The car will be back, and I'm sure it'll be very strong. That's our focus.

Q. There's been a lot of general conversation this year about the direction and INDYCAR trending upward and everything sort of moving in a positive momentum. This is the 25-year anniversary of the CART/IRL split. Can you contrast how different things are now versus where they were in 1996?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I mean, I was actually talking to somebody who was asking me about this the other day. I think INDYCAR racing today is as good as it's ever been. I've said this many times: Thank God we have the stewardship of Roger and his companies, not just with the speedway but with the series and the 500.

Thank God for that, because given that, plus given, I think, the progress that the series has made, Jay Frye's guys, the last five to seven years I think all we've seen is this incremental gain, the positiveness, and the racing. I don't think there's better racing in the world than there is in INDYCAR racing right now, and has been that way for a while.

Yeah, you can look back, and whenever you reminisce, you look back, it's always a little bit through rose-colored glasses. '96 was a great year, but life has changed in racing, period, let alone for INDYCAR racing. You had two tire companies at the time. You had three different engine manufacturers. You had the tobacco companies in there at the time. There was a lot of money in INDYCAR racing in that period of time.

It's taken that long to get back to that point or close to that point, given all of those elements no longer being existent.

I personally think that's a reflection of that and our confidence and belief in the future is this new building that we just broke ground on recently, which is a major commitment on the part of my partners and I.

I don't think we'd be doing that if we thought that there wasn't a long runway here for INDYCAR racing in particular, but also sports car racing. You look back, as I say, and you always think grass always looks a little bit greener. I'm not sure it really was.

Q. Bobby, on the photo, was the issue that INDYCAR didn't know that you guys were doing it?

BOBBY RAHAL: I don't know. I don't know what the actual issue was, other than we did not convey to them that we were going to do this. However, we waited. Everybody went out, this was pit stop practice, everybody went out, we let everybody go. We were two abreast going down the back straight. Santino was tucked in behind so if somebody wanted to pass they could.

By the time we got to 3 or 4, nobody was coming by, the spotters, so that's when we spread out, and it was just unfortunate.

I don't know, we were close to the start-finish when the incident happened coming out of 4. But I don't think anybody is happy about what happened, least of all us, because that was certainly not the intention. Thankfully nobody really suffered damage in a major way, and in the end we were penalized, and we're paying the penalty today.

You know, these guys might say it won't affect, but nobody likes to be penalized. We'll pay our penalty. We'll take our medicine and go on.

Q. The Penske guys obviously did it, some other drivers yesterday said how cool they thought it looked, what you guys were trying to do. Do you think there should be a time allotted that if teams want to do that they can go out and do that?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I definitely -- we should have made a formal request. I don't think there's any question of that. We were trying to do it so we didn't have to -- it's not that we didn't want to make the request, we were just trying to make it fit, and thought we would have been able to do it because, as I said, we were almost at the start-finish line when the issue happened.

I do think whether they have an actual period of time to do that or if we had requested, they might have said, Yeah, go

ahead, you guys go out for a lap, we'll tell everybody you're going to do a photo shoot and that's that.

In the end, that's why I say we were penalized. We didn't complain, we didn't protest that penalty. We agreed with it. We agreed with Jay and his guys, and upward and onward.

Q. Is that a valuable marketing tool?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, for sure. I think for us to some degree we never really got the chance to really exploit the win last year, so to have the three cars together -- we have a new sponsor, a major sponsor in Hy-Vee. They were here with us last year but they're going to be doing a lot more. And having the great cars, they all look good, so if we can do it, great.

Obviously we weren't going to do it in the middle of practice with people bombing around. But in the end, thankfully no major issues, damage.

As I say, we should have asked Jay and his guys. And like you say, maybe they would have said, Okay, go early or do that at the end of the session. I don't know. But that's certainly the lesson that comes out of this.

Q. Graham, Michael and Marco are back on the radio together this week, Colton and his dad are working on the radio. I had talked to Bobby at St. Pete. Traditionally you two did not work out well on the radio, Michael and Marco did not work out well on the radio. Why is it that fathers and sons can't do that?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I will say this. I think like a Colton-Bryan scenario is easier because of the position that they're in, which is that they're very competitive. If you look at the time that dad and I were on the radio, as a team we were just not competitive, and that adds to the stress level and it makes things harder.

In fact, last year I actually requested that he get back on the radio. He enjoyed drinking his wine in the suite more than being on the radio, so he didn't want to.

But I'll just say I think we could be very successful together now. Dad has a brilliant mind when it comes to strategy and things like that, but obviously Neil came on board and has done an excellent job in that role.

But also it's very dependent. If you look at Michael and Marco, same thing. The competitiveness wasn't there, and that adds stress to whoever it is, whoever is the strategist in that point.

With Colton and Bryan, Colton has been excellent. The team has performed at a high level, and Bryan is a pretty even-keeled guy. So I think that that works out exceptionally well.

BOBBY RAHAL: I might add that my role has really changed since those days.

Q. To wine drinking?

BOBBY RAHAL: No, no. Graham makes it sound like I'm up there getting gassed. No, I'm there to take care of -- to assist our marketing and salespeople because that's my real key role is to help bring funding into the team, and that's representing the team to our sponsors.

It's kind of evolved since those days. And on top of that, the depth of our team has increased dramatically since those days, so we have good people that can do that. I have no problem with that.

As I said, it's Graham racing, not me.

Q. Graham, when it's the dad in your ear telling you what to do, are you able to separate it and say, Shut up, Dad, or are you able to listen to the race strategist?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I will say --

BOBBY RAHAL: No kid wants to listen to their dad.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I will say what he said is spot on, which is his value with the sponsors has been tremendous, and you can see that. Since that time, since, what, 2014-15, if you see the increase in sponsors on the sleeves of this shirt, let alone on all of our race cars, it's tremendous, and he has a huge role in that.

There's no doubt he plays the biggest role in being the front man and spending time with those people and making it all happen. So that has been tremendous. The depth of the team has grown a ton as far as the amount of people and personnel that we have.

You know, I do think as you mature, yes, I think you've got to be able to listen to what he has to say. I will say very rarely, very rarely when we were together did I ever doubt what he said from a strategic standpoint.

Sometimes those things aren't easy when you're being told to get a crazy fuel number or this or that. That's a hard thing to do. Or when he tells you just go pass that guy. It's not like you're cruising around not trying to pass somebody.

But from a strategic standpoint, he was always on it. And that comes from I think a lot of drivers when they retire would be good in that role because you've lived it, you've experienced it from inside and you kind of get the flow of the race. He's been one of the best at it for sure.

Q. I wanted to ask if there has been a new emphasis on qualifying for you guys this year because of the difficulty in passing because obviously, Graham, as you mentioned earlier, I think you've passed more cars in five straight years or whatever. How much does that change your philosophy as to how you spend the four days of practice and the buildup to it?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, clearly we want to qualify well. Takuma did a great job last year. We were in the top nine, as well, although the Sunday did not go as well for us.

I think our qualifying balance wasn't so good on the 15 car last year. We had some speed, but the balance wasn't there over four laps, and that's going to kind of be our focus today.

It seems that there's some cars that are just fast, maybe a little faster than us, but I think that that -- I don't know, row 2 to 9 is going to be very, very close together, very close.

You're going to have to focus on the consistency and what makes you good over four laps. Pace-wise if you look at yesterday on the no-tows a lot of guys very, very close. We'll have to see.

You don't want to get into desperate times, desperate measures or things like that because it'll bite you around here, but we definitely want to qualify well.

If you look at our race last year, it was tough to pass, too. And if you look at our race last year, we fell back to 20th or something at one point, and then just kept working on the car, working on the car, and then all of a sudden she came to life in the last 100 laps. We did nothing but march forward and ultimately got right up front and had a chance to win it.

I think the same will be said this year. We all run around in a pack because we want to, as well. You're trying to learn. But in the race you're not doing that. You're trying to go.

I think it'll be a little different when race time comes.

Q. Obviously a lot of it depends on quite literally the luck of the draw tonight. Taku, have you got yourself a car that can handle well in all temperatures and all states of traffic?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, you just want to hope so. Well, drawing is a traditional thing, regardless whether it's fair or not. That is the tradition, and we live with that.

Fortunately last year I think at Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing draw incredible numbers. The girl did coverage of, and I think she's doing it again tonight, no pressure, but draw the good numbers. That's what we hope.

But regardless of whatever position you have to qualify, you have to qualify. Like Graham said, we feel we're confident in a very competitive way. But there is some cars that yes, are definitely faster than us, which we need to find this afternoon.

Passing people is as difficult as it was last year, might be a little bit more passing because with new updated aero package allowed us to follow the car much closer than last year and more downforce is available, equally there's more drive. Once you get past and once you lead the pack, there's no way you can get away this year it seems like.

I think for spectators' point of view, for racing point of view, it will be much more fun, but hard on us, but I think that's the nature of the challenge for the racing, and hopefully we'll qualify strong. That's the first point. You can control the race and also you can minimize the risk each start you want to be at the front basically.

Q. Obviously you're kind of famed for pulling off brave maneuvers and avoiding all shunts. How is your confidence now when you go seven miles an hour quicker into Turn 2 with the extra boost?

SANTINO FERRUCCI: It's one of those things where I think a lot of drivers that crash around here on their own don't know why it happened and they don't want to admit to why it happened.

I'm pretty confident I know what I did wrong, and I know how to fix it. Obviously getting back in the car today, we're going to go out in race trim with all the downforce on the car and we're going to go run around, and we're just going to peel it back off again.

By the end of the day, I have absolutely zero doubts that we'll be back up at full speed with Graham and Takuma. The guys worked all night long. They're going to work all morning. They're going to work all night tonight getting the car where it should be for Saturday.

I have zero doubts in this team. It's an incredibly professional organization, the Hy-Vee crew, and it's really nice to have the help of the 15 and the 30 crew. To see everybody come together and make it work, that puts a lot

of confidence back in me knowing everything is back together correct the way it should be, the way it was.

Q. Bobby, obviously a lot of teams focus on one car leading on it, polishing it, making it just perfect. Are there enough speedway parts, as it were, to get Santino back to where he was?

BOBBY RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, I think Dallara had the parts. Of course, yeah, you breathe on a car all year getting the body fit 100 percent, and we're going to do everything we can to get it as close to the other cars, as Graham and Takuma's cars, and I have no doubt that our guys between now and qualifying tomorrow are going to make sure that it's as good. That's just the nature of I think the people we have.

I think as Santino said, this afternoon for him it's all about getting back in the saddle and go through chunks of the list that he's got. And same thing holds true for Graham and Takuma. I'm expecting good things by the end of the day.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thanks for coming up, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, ready to go here on Fast Friday. Thanks, guys.

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