

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We have Graham joining us.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Hello, everybody.

THE MODERATOR: Expanded Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. You've also said you're supportive if it helps the program. Looks like you have two guys that can help the program, ovals, from the team perspective?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, it's great to be back in the swing of things a little bit. Gets the blood pumping. Excited for the season. I hope everybody has had a good holidays, Christmas, New Year's and everything else.

But yeah, as far as the team, we've been very fortunate. We've been very fortunate as an organization to see tremendous growth. I think back so much to 2015. Yes, we had success, but we had no money, no sponsors. To where we are today, now expanding to three cars, we have our new building, which I'm sure some of you have driven by or seen, which is going to be a statement certainly to our focus and seriousness about going out and winning. I think it's been really, really good.

The guys so far, Christian is young, it's going to take him awhile to understand what we do. It's going to be fast, but to understand the ins-and-outs of what we do is quite different than Europe. The tracks aren't all billiard table smooth. I'm sure he's going to have some challenges in that regard as we go through the season. He's young, I think he has a long career ahead of him here.

Jack has been around awhile now. I think he's extremely capable. He's a great qualifier. As a team, we're going to make sure that he ends the races up front as well.

I will say Jack has been great for me already from the standpoint he is definitely way more involved than what I'm used to in Indianapolis. He's way more interested and has a lot more questions about what's going on at the shop, people and places and things.

Not that Takuma didn't, but Takuma was definitely in a

different place most of the time, being in Japan or wherever else. Jack being here, it gives us the access to him and vice versa at all times. I do think that's really going to help push the program forward. I'm excited by that.

We made good steps bringing on a full-time trainer for everybody, physical therapist, try to make sure everybody's focused, including the driver. Actually been my trainer for the last 13 years. Good to have him now all ours. I think he'll help with Jack, Christian, myself as well, get everybody locked in and ready to go.

I'm excited about it, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Where are you now in terms of maybe a different spot in the organization? Maybe not.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm old. I get it (smiling).

Where am I? I'm getting closer to the end. I think that we all know that. In the position I'm at in my career now, I would say I'm definitely focused on winning more than ever before. I'm focused on being a good teammate. I'm also focused on helping build this team.

It never really was my mindset that someday I would be a team owner. The minute that building was built, I got a phone call from Mike and my dad. It was very clear that the expectation is that I'm going to assume that role with Pat Lanigan. I'm focused on how we get the team to the next level as well.

There's a lot to think about, to go through. But definitely more of a seniority role. We have a lot of changes within the organization, even some as of today, which I'm not going to comment on. I don't think they've been announced. All good things, elevating guys into roles, guys that deserve the opportunity to go to management roles.

Where am I at in my career? I've got to kind of be the guy now to try to lead the charge a little bit. I think when you're younger you don't really think about those things, certainly when I was just focused on me, my car, my team. Still to that extent.



I'll be quite selfish when I say we really want the 15 car to be winning all the time. At the same time it's important that we get this team headed on down the right path as I creep up in age here a little bit. Still young-ish, but (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Obviously you are the elder statesman on the team. Hasn't happened for you a lot. Are you looking forward to playing the role of the mentor? Do you think that actually can up your game as well?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, so I don't think Jack needs a mentor, but I do think Christian, like I said a minute ago. Christian, right, he's been around Fernando Alonso and guys like that this year. It's not like he's never been around more experienced guys. There's probably nobody more experienced than Fernando.

For me it's an opportunity. Every time we get a young guy in there, they all operate different. It's interesting to see how they operate and how they're successful, how they're fast, what they do.

Even last year, we experienced Christian. We obviously had Oliver. We had Santino, who Oliver was a guy who pored over the data. Santino, I don't know if he even looked at it. Takuma was, right? Everybody is different. But you learn from guys like that. You learn to see, Okay, this works for them and why.

For me it's refreshing. Every guy that I'm around, you can adapt something from their style. So even like last year, Indy GP with Christian, he was quick, qualified well. All of his time gain was on one part of the racetrack. He crushed Takuma and I there. But we had never seen somebody drive the track that way. It was a totally different style than what we had seen. Maybe that's because he had never driven there. I don't know, right? You have to learn from somebody like that.

It's something that we can all take from each other this year. Certainly Jack has a lot of experience, of course, at Shank. The Andretti backing over there. The Andretti engineering. To get some idea of what they're doing, what they do, how they prepare for qualifying versus a race setup and things like that.

There's already been some interesting knowledge that has been gained. Those are all positives for us. We need to take every little bit we can and go from there. Same can be said for engineering staff, we got young engineers and stuff, new guys, new faces, try to learn from them.

Q. Talking to Christian yesterday, he's a 20-year-old

but he talks like a Formula 1 driver. Do you find his personality to be unique? He's very honest and very direct.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I really haven't been around him that much. I haven't seen him since Indy GP last year. I think the very honest and direct thing is a very European way, which is probably a positive in many ways.

They're trained at a very young age. Everybody knows that. When I was in Formula BMW as a 14-year-old, they had media training come in, they tell you exactly what to say, how to say it, all this stuff. Obviously I strayed from that a little bit. Some people like that, some don't. That is I think kind of a very European mentality.

I think Christian is going to be great. I'm sure his dream was, maybe still is, to get to Formula 1 someday. He's certainly young enough to be able to do that. He's been groomed in that system for a long time.

Q. You're an Ohio guy. Have you jumped on the Bengals bandwagon?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm not a Cleveland guy necessarily. I'm not a Cincinnati guy either. But I am a Joe Burrow guy because he was a Buckeye for a little while. I think he deserved his shot at Ohio State and he never got his shot. I was glad to see him go somewhere else and get it.

That team is still stacked with Buckeyes, let's not forget. Five of them there. Sam Hubbard probably being one of the all-time greats. He's a Cincinnati boy. Definitely good to see them do well.

Q. Burrow is worth the price of admission.

GRAHAM RAHAL: He's pretty good.

Q. Yesterday INDYCAR announced some new aero options. Will you be able to test before Texas?

GRAHAM RAHAL: We've run them at Indy, right, so we know. It's not going to be life changing for us. I think I actually tested them last year at Texas, if I recall correctly.

It's an interesting thing. The dynamic, the way it changes the balance of the car, it actually makes the car feel a lot worse most of the time, particularly when there's heavy crosswinds which we can get at Texas.

I think the changes that they're making certainly are great. Texas has its challenges. That's no secret. Has its challenges for NASCAR, challenges for everybody, now with the new layout and the material, the pavement and

everything else.

Having said that, I think it's a good thing they're doing because we need to make the racing a little more exciting for the fans there.

I mean, Iowa I'm excited with Hy-Vee, everything they're doing. Iowa is always a great race. For Gateway, too. It's a great thing. Then now to work with Firestone maybe a little bit, try to just get that combination right. It's good to see changes being made though, for sure.

Q. I realize you just said that Christian blew you guys away at the Indy road course in terms of qualifying pace. I've spoken to an engineer, he thinks you're maybe a 2/10th disadvantage at every track because of where your weight is, because you're a big guy. Is there anything that you believe that INDYCAR can do in the next draft of regulations for the 2023 car to alleviate the problem of big guys being a natural disadvantage to the smaller guys?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, I'm at a pretty big disadvantage, but that's just been my life. It was even worse in go-karts, you know what I mean? It's even worse when you drive a sports car, and the sports car is weighed to the lightest guy. When I was driving with Helio, I weigh twice as much. Even a bigger disadvantage. Kind of is what it is.

As we look towards the next version, Indy GP is one of those tracks that would highlight that because it's a lot of quick lateral movements, short turns, where they're all interconnected. That's where high C of G and weight really hurt you. That magnifies my issues.

It's not something I think about at a race weekend. We just do what we do. In the next INDYCAR the focus must be - must be - to build the car right in the first place. What I mean by that is we went through the last INDYCAR, we had to add intrusion panels, we had to add this, that and the other thing.

We built this chassis in 2012. Wasn't quite there. We had to add intrusion panels. We had to add stiffeners. If you remember the one that cracked on Jay Will at Fontana. Sebastien had his problems.

The weight of the cars is significantly higher than when I started my career. Now you're adding in the hybrid engine, everything else, significantly higher. Obviously the aeroscreen.

It's not a knock-on where we're at, but it is a key focus going forward to the next generation of car. We need to

drop the actual weight down significantly, and then they can get it to where the driver weighs. Right now if you were to add, get it even-even, your chassis weight would be sky high. We're kind of at that limit.

That obviously is going to be affecting the braking with the new speeds, bigger motors. It's going to affect the tires significantly and everything else.

Just important I think that we get the car built right the first time around. I have all the faith in the world in Dallara. They've always kept me safe, done a great job. I think it's really important.

Q. Hearing you talk about your new teammates, the setup of this new team, everyone feels often supremely confident coming into a season before you have been on track. Would it be fair to say the makeup of this team leaves you as confident as you've ever been in your career?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I wouldn't say I'm as confident as I've ever been overall. That's not because I'm not confident in the team. I'm just not going to sugarcoat it. We have a lot of new faces. We've got a lot of new people.

I'm more confident in the people than I've ever been. I'm more confident in the morale that we have within the organization than I've ever been by far. I think the changes we made in the off-season are great.

The reason I say I'm cautious is because we haven't done a test yet. I haven't. Get one before the start of the season which is not much.

Our team didn't figure out the INDYCAR, what was it, driver evaluation day quick enough. We didn't really do any testing throughout the off-season. So therefore we really frankly have big meetings the next couple of days to understand how these new personalities and engineers are bringing new info to us. To this point I personally have not been able to see the fruit of that.

Am I excited? Yeah. I think we have the best group of people in the paddock anyways, particularly from a mechanic standpoint. There's nobody that's got better guys. Our team has been able to attract a lot of great people.

I'm just cautious. I don't want to sit here and say yes, we're going to go kill everybody. We need to do a test, need to do a couple, look at what we've got. From a preparation standpoint there's not going to be a team that's probably done more than we have over the last couple of months to make sure we come out and fire away. We know where

the strengths were and weaknesses were last year. We know where they slipped away from us. Now we just have to go correct those things.

Q. You've been one of INDYCAR's biggest proponents as the series has taken off from a media standpoint and an attention standpoint. We have 14 races on network TV. As this series continues to try and build a fan base, a following, both passionate and casual fans, anything you feel like the series needs to do to try to capitalize on all of the momentum heading into this year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think we just got to keep on down the path. Obviously we've seen with social media such tremendous growth, specifically for Formula 1. I don't follow Formula 1 in any of my channels. I can't go on any of my personal channels without being blasted with Formula 1 stuff 24/7. I do find myself clicking on it and watching some of it. I think that's really critical for us to continue to chase on down that path a little.

I think everybody's doing a great job. That includes all of you guys. Everybody is in here together. I can't see you guys on the Zoom call, but there's a lot of people that are very passionate about INDYCAR racing, that's why we're here. We appreciate all of you guys. That does make a big difference in the message that we put out, the fans, getting sort of the casual fan watching each and every weekend.

I certainly hope to play my role. I know in the year we were in the championship hunt, there was a lot of excited people who haven't watched in a while and knew my dad, watched my dad. To see a familiar name up top excited them. I feel a little bit on my shoulders I need to get back up front, winning races consistently.

Beyond me there's a lot of young guys. Obviously Colton is a tremendous asset for the sport as we go forward. Obviously Alex did an amazing job last year, winning the championship. A lot of young guys are going to be able to carry this torch on.

As I made clear a second ago, I'm a big fan, always have been a lifelong fan of this sport. Maybe some people came here because that's where the opportunity was. I came here because that's all I ever wanted to do.

For me as I leave this sport, I'll certainly always be a part of it, I just want to see it continue to grow.

Q. You mentioned about the aerodynamic changes for the cars for the Texas track. Can you talk a bit about what changes will be in the car for this year. Last year

before it goes hybrid. Might it upset the parity, give teams an opportunity to innovate?

GRAHAM RAHAL: There's not much there unfortunately. There's not much we can do. If anything, I would say I expect even more parity because the engines, for instance, are pretty well locked. There's nothing we can do anymore.

At Indy two years ago the Hondas were dominant. Last year you saw us quite close in qualifying. Two years ago it was split grid with the Hondas up front. A couple years before that it was a split grid with the Chevys up front. This year at Indy it's a toss-up. I hope I'm wrong and the Honda dominates. I think it's going to continue to be close this year.

As we go towards this year, there's a lot of new information, driver tools and things, I'm just understanding and utilizing the hybrid assist properly. I almost feel like there's more of an opportunity for spread in performance from team to team next year than there is this.

I think this year everybody's getting it figured out. I think it's going to be super, super close once again.

Q. You talked about selling, if you want to call it that, INDYCAR. With Tatiana coming in, your dad always has been a big supporter of women in racing, which is wonderful, what do you see how that's going to help change things as far as viewership?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think it's a tremendous asset for us to continue to get diversity and get women in the sport, women involved. You're seeing it more and more. Not just drivers. A lot more engineers, mechanics, so on. To have her come in and race with us is going to be great. It's also great she's a great supporter and rocket.

The DeJoria family that I know is quite involved in that. It's great to see them. That's a recipe for success. We'll see what her passion is as she goes. If ovals become of interest, what she wants to do.

Certainly everybody has seen that INDYCAR is a route on a pretty equal playing field to come and show your talent versus Formula 1 is quite hard to get into still. It's great to have her. I think it will help push the sport forward.

Q. The shop on target for schedule, the new one?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's looking good. They say it's going to be done May, so perfect time to move in.



Q. How much bigger than the old?

GRAHAM RAHAL: A lot. A lot.

THE MODERATOR: Dismissed. Good to see you.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you, guys.

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