

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We continue here with day No. 2 at the Palm Springs Convention Center. We quickly move to Graham Rahal, driver of the No. 15 Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing United Rentals Honda, among others, I'm going to guess, this year, right? Who else is on board for you guys this year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: There's a variety, as always. I think I've got six suits today. Fifth Third is probably the biggest one behind United Rentals, but we're excited for -- pretty much everybody is back on board. It's looking good.

THE MODERATOR: That's one of the key things about this team, is that people come on board, partners come on board and stay on board for you guys.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Try, man. That's our job. We try to give them a good ROI and perform for them on and off the track. Obviously we've got to get better on the on-track side, but I think we've always done a good job off the track and keep people in for a long time. That's the goal.

THE MODERATOR: Some changes in the off-season. Stefano Sordo on board. Other change as well. What's the outlook for 2023 for you guys?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I feel really good about where we're at. As I was thinking about this exact kind of media conference last year, I was pretty reserved in some of my comments about the outlook, and I was thinking about it this year, I feel a lot more positive.

I think Stefano has done a great job as he's come in, but I think also organizationally from the team perspective we seem to be in a much better place. Everybody is working towards achieving the same goals.

The engineering side is more focused I would say. Not that they weren't last year, but I would say more focused on the right things and not spending time doing things that aren't moving the program forward.

I feel really good about where we stand.

Q. A couple weeks ago, a lot of us were glued to the TV when Damar Hamlin had a medical emergency on the field. I'm curious, were you watching at the time? And when you saw what happened, did you look at the emergency response at all through a racing lens?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I wasn't watching. I was in the middle of a snowstorm trying to get my wife and the kids back to the house. But I was being updated frequently.

As I look back and see the response that they had, that the medical staff had, was tremendous. Obviously the assistant trainer is the guy that basically saved his life in the moment.

I think it's a tremendous thing, right? We all train, those individuals train so often, and you wonder when that training is going to need to be put to use. My wife and I were talking even with our daughters, right before we had the baby they made us watch CPR videos and practice and do all this stuff. You're like, is this really ever going to happen, and then you see that in real life and realize, oh, man, it definitely is good to be prepared, and you just never know when you're going to need it.

What an incredible story. Freak accident, and all you can hope for is if it ever happened to one of us or whatever that the response, that the support you would have would be the same, and I'm super confident in the staff that we have at INDYCAR in particular that it would be.

Pretty crazy deal.

Q. One of the buzzy topics in the aftermath was the perception, why didn't they immediately postpone the event; why didn't they let people go home. Can you speak a little bit about INDYCAR's emergency plans when there is a situation where there is a protocol in place, how to handle something like that?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I'm not going to speak to necessarily the INDYCAR plan because I don't know specifically how they would handle it. What I do know is sadly, I have been in a situation like that while being in the sport. I thought INDYCAR did handle it very quickly and I thought they did a great job with their response.



There's so many things and so many factors going on in that moment that it's hard for the common fan or even any of us to understand exactly what is going on with all the executives and how they handle that situation.

Obviously there's the emotional trauma of being a player or a driver in our situation. I think back -- honestly, I think back to Vegas right away with Dan and obviously Pocono, but Vegas in particular because we all knew right away that it was super bad.

I thought that the response, the communication was really good on INDYCAR's behalf, because what happens most often in that situation, you just want to know. You just want to know what happened. You just want to know what the end result was, as crazy as that is. That's human nature.

In Vegas it was very, very clear, and they made the right choice and moved on quickly.

Like I said, I think that's a hard one to speak to INDYCAR's specific plan, because frankly I haven't asked what-ifs. I think we react a lot, as well.

Q. Following up on the feeling like you're in a better place, you said engineering has the right focus, and I understand you have a reunion with your engineer who you've won races with before. Can you talk about that?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I'm excited to be back with Eddie. I had a great time with Alan. I love Alan. But I think it was time. It was time for a change, and I think it was time for Jack, too, in particular.

I felt like Jack, when I sit back and look at things from an unselfish perspective and the team, which I often do, I feel like Jack was going to need change to get him on track this year, and to be back with Mike or to be back with Eddie, who he was with last year, I didn't feel like for him that was going to move the needle on his side of the team enough.

But for me to have Eddie is awesome. Eddie and I are kind of both pretty low-key guys. We're on the same page. Super fiery and competitive, but off the track I think we both have a similar mindset.

Adam Kolesar is going to be the assistant. He'll be race engineer I'm sure shortly with us. Adam has been under Alan for a long time. He's a great kid. The hardest working guy on our team by far, not even close, and to have him with Eddie I think will also help further his career.

We've got a really good staff obviously with Derek

Davidson on my car, as well, this year. I'm excited about that because I've never gotten to work with Double D in that regard, and he's a guy I have tremendous respect for as a leader, an organizer and a manager and everything else.

I'm excited about that.

We've had a little bit of turnover this year, as to be expected. There was time for change in certain things. But with Eddie, he and I won five times in three years. We know how to win together, and hopefully we can get this thing back on track. We're pretty fired up about it.

Q. Any trepidation about testing the next few days at a place you guys have never been to before? You don't have the baseline of a Sebring or --

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, and I'm not sure how much it relates. Obviously we're running a Barber tire. We know it's going to be the Barber tire for this year, similar to the Laguna Seca tire. Who knows what the track grip is like in the desert here.

If you look at a lot of the corners, a lot of hairpins, a lot of slow speed corners, but then you've got like the end of the back straight is quite a fast left-hander. But they're very shapes of corners, decreasing radius, on increasing radius. We don't have any tracks that do that traditionally.

As I look at it, we've got to pick and choose exactly what we get out of it, but I'm all on board for the Thermal thing, so I don't want to sound like I'm not. I think it was great to have change.

We've kind of gone to the same places time and time and time and time again. It's good to see something new.

Q. Obviously INDYCAR is going to have this reality aspect this year with the Vice show. You're somebody who's not shy about expressing your opinions about other drivers. Do you feel like that's a key to this thing being successful is hate sells?

GRAHAM RAHAL: A little drama?

Q. Yeah.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I don't know what my role is going to be. I don't think it's necessarily been communicated if I'm in, I'm out. We're all involved, we're not. The one thing I will say is I'm very excited for the series. The CW is one part of it.

As I challenged Sean, who's the CEO of that whole group,

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was I hope that they utilize this to promote and maximize outside of the CW.

If you look at the next star, if you look at all the places, all the network stations that they own, it's extremely vast. Obviously KTLA, got stations in Vegas; I think they own my NBC in Columbus, Ohio. I'm not exactly sure.

Point is they could do a lot to move the needle for the sport on their 220 stations. But Vice, as well. If you look at the demographic of Vice, it is to a T who we need to hit. If you have 414 million viewers or whatever they have worldwide a month, even if you can just capture 5 percent, 3 percent, something, it moves the needle.

So I'm excited about that for the sport.

Q. Graham, you mentioned earlier you came into last year maybe a little conservative or unsure of what adding a third car was going to do for you guys, but I remember thinking back thinking that you at least had kind of a positive aspect of what that could be. As you guys went over the last 12 months and diagnosed things, went through the personal changes you guys had, bolstered you guys' lineup, whether it be in engineering or management folks, what did you feel like this team needed most or needed to do most that you guys didn't have or do last year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think what we needed most was pretty simple, and that's just direction. I thought that from the top on down, we needed a clearer path, from the engineering corps in particular. We didn't have a technical director. We didn't really have somebody that was leading the charge. We didn't have enough depth.

That's becoming clearer to us now that we know like what McLaren is doing. With Stefano coming in you see what all they're doing, and we were not even in the ballpark as far as depth and stuff like that. We've learned that now. We've been able to add. We've gotten ourselves into a really good spot.

You see, though, it's not like we've fired a bunch of engineers. Our guys are good. We've got good people. But we needed direction, and we needed somebody to kind of stand up and go, no, this is a -- I'm not going to say what it is, but there was some testing we've done for a while that we've all been saying, this is worthless, we're getting nothing out of it, but we kept getting told, no, we've got to do it.

Luckily Stefano comes in and says, that's worthless. Why are you doing that? Thank goodness. Here's somebody else who can back up what we've been saying for a long

time. Now we can focus our energy. Engineers aren't doing all these crazy projects. It's just let's focus on what actually can move the needle.

I thought that's what Stefano really brought to the table. Kind of helped drive us a little bit better, so I'm really excited about that. We've obviously all talked about Ryan Harbar a lot this off-season. I gave him -- he's our trainer, head of human performance for us.

Given him a lot of s--- about the fact that he's gotten more media attention than anybody else in the INDYCAR paddock this off-season.

But having said that, he has absolutely changed the mental side and the culture within the team and gotten everybody locked in and focused and working out and using the sauna and playing pickleball tournaments at the end of the day for the camaraderie and the competition, and getting everybody -- I mean, the pit stop practice have been amazing, the breakdown of the videos and everything.

Ryan has also done a great job, I think, just moving the needle on the mental scope for the staff, for us to make our game to the next level.

Hopefully we can put all those pieces together and have a great year.

Q. We've seen in such a tight sport where there's so little that separates 5th from 15th on the grid that a first year for a driver at a new team can maybe leave a little bit to be desired. I know we had high hopes of what Jack could deliver to you guys last year. What did you see him struggle through, and how do you feel like he might be better suited to have some better performance this year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, look, I've got -- still I have extremely high hopes for Jack and what can come. I love Jack. Number one, he's a great person and I want to see him succeed.

There's a lot of effort I've actually personally put in, whether he knows it or not, but in the off-season to try to make sure that we're doing the best that we can, too, for him. It's really important to me.

I just think that last year coming into this program we didn't have the best cars. I think the Andretti cars were, are, were, considerably better. Considerably better.

Maybe on race days that didn't show to you guys as much, but I think that the cars were considerably better, and Jack will back that up.

The thing is he came in here with an expectation of this is the way it should be. This is the way a car should feel. This is the way it should handle. This is what it should do, and it was nowhere near.

So when people compare Jack versus Christian, the positive Christian had is no expectation. He didn't know what it should feel like, so he'd just go drive it hard.

Yeah, you would think in theory, well, Jack can just go drive and do it, too. It's hard as a driver to change completely. It does take a little bit of time to jump from one team -- I've done it from Ganassi to here, whatever. I remember going from Sebring and testing the Ganassi car, to six months later driving the RLL car there. They felt polar opposites.

I mean, Newgarden will tell you the same. When he went to Penske, they were soft and roly, and compared to anything he'd been in it was a bit of a shock. Of course, you can find a way to make it go fast, but point is, the mental side does take a period.

I think that's where it was with Jack. It was a big challenge to jump into something that drove so completely opposite of what he had been used to. So let's all give it a chance here. I'm glad he's back. We'll keep trying to help him as best we can. He's a young guy still. He should have a long, bright future ahead of him, so hopefully we can make it happen.

Q. As we sit here every year, Graham, the team owner comes through more and more each --

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, I'm not a team owner.

Q. Are you enjoying being more involved in that side of things?

GRAHAM RAHAL: You know, I'm not that involved. I don't want to sound that way. I think my mind is just changed. When you're young and you come into this it's all about you. Everything is about you. Your focus and your energy, screw my teammates, it's me, it's me, it's me.

But as I've gotten older, like for me, I still want to go kick these guys' butts every weekend. That's a given. I'm sick and tired of not winning. I'm sick and tired of watching guys like Josef and dudes that I feel like I can drive with win. That's factual.

But I also love to see guys like Colton Herta have success because he's a young, up and coming American who I think on a world stage can do a great job.

A guy like Jack Harvey, I think Jack has a bright future ahead of him. I don't want to see Jack fail. I know how hard it is, whether people think so or not because my name is Rahal, I know how hard it is to get here.

I've gone on the sponsor search. I've done all the work. I've helped put teams together. In 2010 I helped build my car for the Indy 500, wrenching on it myself.

So I have been through a lot of different stages in this, so I understand what it takes. I see the effort that goes on behind the scenes. I just don't want to see guys fail.

I think it's different when you're young. I could have cared less if they were there the next year. Now I know how hard it is to get here. I know how competitive it is, too.

I heard Will say a minute ago, I remember my first year in INDYCAR, man, if we weren't in the top 5, top 7 running for Newman/Haas, even as a rookie, like there was something wrong, something wrong with you.

Today that's just not the case at all. I don't want to see guys fail. That's the biggest thing.

Q. The sponsorship mix is really quite intriguing, and yes, you are getting involved with all of that. Did you ever expect the Hy-Vee sponsorship and its mix and its play in Iowa ever to be so large, and how does that affect you as it relates to being a driver at that track?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, obviously we want to do even better there than anywhere else. Not anywhere else, but that's a big, big weekend for us as a team.

The one thing I learned from the start, from my first meeting with Hy-Vee, is they thought big, and if they went in, they were going to go in all the way. Everybody has had a lot of sponsors that come in, dipped their toe, sponsor for a year or two, but do no activation around it and they come and go really quickly. That was from the start with Hy-Vee. They were spit balling with some crazy ideas and they're great.

I mean, I can't say anything else. We were just standing out there talking about it a minute ago. I know people are a little upset about the ticket prices, but you're not just going to a race anymore. You're going to a full weekend of festivities, and I can guarantee you NASCAR is working on it and jealous of that. I can guarantee you NHRA is dreaming about that, and even Formula 1.

Yeah, you can go to COTA and see a concert or two, but not at a place like Iowa where you can literally sit in a

grandstand and see everything from one spot.

Hy-Vee, they're dreamers. They're going to keep moving this thing forward. I really appreciate all of you guys and your positivity and everything that they're doing. It's really important.

I also appreciate all the other drivers. I've never seen a group of drivers comment and tag somebody else's sponsor as much as Iowa last year, and we appreciate it because it doesn't go unnoticed by them. It's really important for the longevity of that relationship to have that.

Q. Is there any way that that kind of spark can affect other sponsors to do the same throughout INDYCAR?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Hey, as Nate said a minute ago, I'm not necessarily shy on my opinions, and I call it -- I said it last year. Chip Ganassi didn't like my whole Pittsburgh comment. He made that clear to me in the pit lane in Nashville.

But when I look at Pittsburgh, you've got PPG up there, you've got PNC Bank, you've got some massive companies. I don't care if we go to Pittsburgh or not. There are other companies in other places that we could do great things and they can activate. They are a consumer-facing specific brand. You are out there to target a consumer.

So let's do it. Let's see.

If you look at Formula 1 and their platform, and I've said multiple times, we're not going to go spend a half a billion on Las Vegas. That isn't possible, nor does it make financial sense. But for a lot less we can go and put on some great events, but what Formula 1 does have going is big companies willing to spend big money.

NASCAR is in the same boat, I think, as INDYCAR. We have got to find a way to tap into that a little bit more. Fingers crossed. Hy-Vee can set the standard and the rest can follow.

Q. Also love your attitude on social media and your family and growth --

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, man, I'm getting older.

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