

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Saturday, July 1, 2023

Graham Rahal

Colton Herta

Press Conference



figure things out, and all three of you made the Fast 12 and then you and Christian --

THE MODERATOR: Wrapping up qualifying for tomorrow's The Honda Indy 200 at Mid-Ohio presented by the 2023 Accord Hybrid. Our pole winner for tomorrow's race for the second straight event in the NTT INDYCAR Series, Colton Herta, will join us here momentarily.

Joined by the other driver that's going to start on the front row, Ohio's own Graham Rahal, 2015 winner here at Mid-Ohio, driver of the Fifth Third Bank Honda for Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, first Firestone Fast Six appearance in almost two years, and the first front row start in four years. Congratulations.

You guys have been looking for something like this for a long time, haven't you?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It feels good. It feels good. I thought we were going to get him there. I knew it was a solid lap.

But man, I was just walking up the stairs wondering where four/hundredths is. But at the same time that's INDYCAR racing today. I think the top four of us were only separated by less than a tenth. It's unbelievable.

It's great to be in the front row. Obviously great job to Honda. We're here for the Honda Indy 200, for them to sweep the Fast Six in their background, and for us, for Fifth Third bank, a Cincinnati based company for our team, for everything else, for me, this is a big day.

It feels really good. I'm excited for what tomorrow has in store. Hopefully Mother Nature is nice to us and we can go battle, because I do actually feel that our race pace may be a little better than I expected out of qualifying, so I'm excited.

Q. Graham, did you have any kind of feeling today that this was going to happen? You talked about yesterday about you guys going three different directions to

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, really nice for the team. It's been a long time coming. We've been beat up. We've been bruised. We've been knocked down. For us as a team to rebound this way, I could have told you last night after the practice, yeah, I was P20, but I told everybody I don't think that's real at all.

And I told the guys in the engineering room I said, actually I think I've got P2, P3 pace and I don't normally say that unless I'm fairly confident that we do. This morning we went out, ran only one set of blacks, we're right there.

So, yeah, I felt good. To be honest with you, this is the first weekend I felt like I've had the car to where I can drive it the way I want to drive it, and it's rewarded me because finally -- like this isn't a long year, and it's finally to the place I can charge the entries, I can do the things that I like to do with my style, and it's just nice to finally see the result come.

It almost feels in a weird way like today you don't have to drive nearly as hard as you were the last two years combined. You knew the speed was there. You weren't over by pressuring yourself. You just simply needed to work through it and get there.

It certainly was nice to see the result, as I said, for the whole team.

Q. With the season you've had, you would've taken this turnaround at any track, but the fact it's at Mid-Ohio has to make it that much more special.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it does, but I think the turnaround has been coming. Detroit was a major disappointment, which worries me a little for Toronto because I think there's still a lot of questions for us on our street course package, but the road course package, you look at Indy GP, you look Road America, and you look here, and we've been competitive.

Again, it's good to see that, good to feel the energy, feel the momentum.

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I think we're finally starting to make changes with the car, as I just said, that they're responding the right way, the way you'd expect them to, and it's nice. It's nice to feel that.

More than me, I think it's just for these guys, to see the smiles on the mechanics' faces, those guys, they've never had an ounce of quit in them, and they could have for years. To see them excited is worth it.

Q. All three Rahal Letterman Lanigan drivers had a good day, so that's going to really make the whole effort feel good?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Bob will be happy tonight. I already got a text from Dave. Dave is happy. I haven't heard from Mike, but I'm sure I will. For sure it's a good day for the organization.

Q. Graham, good day for the whole team across the board, but we've seen and talked to you over the last couple months and known how much all of this has worn on you. You've talked about this a little bit already, but how rejuvenating is that result when you hop out of the car?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, I think I've joked with you guys many times, but while most of the world probably thought I forgot how to drive or could never drive, that's not the reality. Today is just a nice day to remind people. It's easy to forget.

But INDYCAR racing is the most competitive form of motorsport in the world. It's the most demanding form of motorsport on the teams, the drivers, utilize the resources that you have, which is minimal, and the teams do make sure that you're on your game at all times.

So on a day like today, it certainly is rewarding when you can see all of those things come together finally, and it's not that I needed reminded to myself because I've seen it, I know it, I know I can do it, but it's nice for everybody to see once again that it takes the full package here to run up front and to win all the time.

I mean, Alex Palou is probably the best guy in the series at this standpoint, but he also has a damned good car. You've got to put those pieces of the puzzle together to run up front, and I feel like we're getting better. We are finding our way, and that's all we can do.

Q. You told us at the start of May that you were thinking about all your options in terms of your future in 2024 and beyond. Things have gotten maybe worse and then maybe now have gotten a little bit better

since then. Where are you in your own thought process on what next year looks like?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm going to focus on honestly just tomorrow. I know it sounds cliché, but it's the truth. At this standpoint there's been a lot of discussions, a lot of conversations back and forth. There's a lot of thinking to do. But right now I've got a chance to go win tomorrow. If I can get another win at home, it would mean a hell of a lot to me. So that's my focus.

THE MODERATOR: Also joined by Colton Herta, our NTT P1 award winner for tomorrow's The Honda Indy 200 at Mid-Ohio presented by the 2023 Accord Hybrid. His second career pole position here in 2023 after also winning pole on the road course at Road America a couple weeks ago. You're on a roll right now.

COLTON HERTA: I know. I hope it continues tomorrow. Obviously we picked the right stuff today and had a competitive car, and yeah, I think the tire choice was kind of what set us over. I think that was the right call.

Q. Talk about going with the blacks there at the end.

COLTON HERTA: We were looking at it all weekend. After practice 1 it didn't seem like a big enough jump, and it got a little bit bigger in qualifying than it was in practice, but we were in a position where we weren't happy with our first set of tires that we ran on reds so we didn't want to run on them and we didn't want to run on our second, so we only had one choice, and it kind of made the choice for us, and I think it was the right one.

Q. Unless I'm mistaken in my math, 14 of the last 21 races here have been won from the front row, so for both of you, how much confidence does that give you looking ahead at tomorrow's race?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I won from like 14th, so I must be the anomaly in that stat. It's nice. This guy knows it. Starting up there is a hell of a lot easier than coming from somewhere else.

I also think we're surrounded by good guys, too, so that's what's nice. You feel like you have a good clean start, just get out there, get the pace -- who knows what Mother Nature is going to do to us tomorrow, and it's going to be physical. He looks like he just got out of the shower, but he's fresh and clean, and I'm so soaked over here. Maybe it's just physical for me.

It'll be a bruiser tomorrow, and we'll see how it goes.

Q. Graham, after what happened in the month of May,

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was it difficult to kind of turn the page and refocus a little bit on this month and have you changed your operating procedures to where you're so high up or has there not been many changes?

GRAHAM RAHAL: There's been a few changes. Fundamentally there were things that needed to happen. As I keep saying, we're finally being rewarded for the changes. It's hard to make those mid-season. It's factual. It's hard to make a change and immediately see a result. It's not typical, but we had a lot of good people that I think were being held back a little bit.

Once we started to unleash them a little bit to realize their full potential, it benefitted the entire program, and so we're starting to see that, as I said, at least on road courses.

We don't know what the street course in Toronto is going to present us. Iowa, I think our race car in Iowa is going to be very strong, and we typically are. I'm worried about qualifying there for sure based on the test, so we still have some improvements to make there, but we're starting to see it. We're going down the right path finally.

Q. Graham, I think it was on your lap that got you into the Fast Six, I may be wrong, but there was an in-car shot of you going right here under the bridge where you kind of got -- kind of skated out to the edge and you kind of let it go. Is that what you call about confidence?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Actually the best lap, yeah, it bottomed a little bit and snapped quite a lot. So it wasn't my best run through there. But I found that the tire was really only going to be good for that lap, so you just had to hang on, and I had to -- compared to -- I ended up doing a 95. I did an 02 the run before, and I had to make up -- to get back to that time, I had to make up three-tenths between Turn 2 and 9, which is not easy.

We ended up just sneaking in there and finishing third, I guess, in that group, which was great. So I was pleased.

In the Fast Six actually we had the same thought as him. I didn't use a set of blacks this morning to keep them for qualifying because I thought if we get to the Fast Six we're going to need a new set of blacks. We just didn't think -- we thought the delta was too much, and this guy was obviously able to overcome the delta from blacks to reds.

Turn 1 is awesome now. I think now that it's repaved, it's sweet. It's going to be run of the best corners in racing, a lot like Road America, and if they repave the rest of this place, it'll be fast.

Already, what was the record? If they repaved the whole thing... Just make sure it's nice and hot for you.

Q. Was that an example of the confidence you had in this car that you felt today?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's much nicer to -- as I said, to be able to drive the car the way I want to. I felt like the last few years, it's just not to my style. I think Christian has done a great job because he's more tolerant of the oversteer slides on entry and things like that, and for me, my style, I want to attack the corner. I want to brake late, brake hard, roll speed with good, good rear confidence, and I've struggled with that mightily. This is the first weekend I've felt like, finally.

Even looking at my notes from here last year to my notes from this weekend, completely different. I mean, completely -- obviously we qualified like 18th last year, so it's clear. But it's been nice.

Q. Is there one guy that's responsible for that kind of change from a setup standpoint or whatever?

GRAHAM RAHAL: There's a bunch of us. There's a lot of guys.

Q. You don't want to name --

GRAHAM RAHAL: I don't want to name anybody. We're a team.

Q. Colton, are you aware of the .0432 difference as you're going for it? What is it like running that kind of lap knowing that you've just got to throw it out there and see if it sticks?

COLTON HERTA: Usually I don't know. I don't like to know, but I went off before -- I think on my third lap before my last lap, so I asked them because I wasn't pushing at that point, and they told me I think it was like a low 3 or something that I needed.

So I did that time, but I wasn't sure if it was good enough still. It took them like 30 seconds to tell me. Everybody went around again, so it could have gotten better. No, it ended up being good enough, and it was a good lap. I think I did pretty good with it.

Q. What does it mean to you to throw a lap in there like that in that kind of situation, basely pole is on the line?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Nothing, because he does it all the time.

COLTON HERTA: That's what we're paid to do. You just have to do it.

Q. Colton, the change between Road America and here to have Rob Edwards on your radio, I know you know him very well, but how does that strategy change going into a race weekend?

COLTON HERTA: It's not how I would like to do it. You would want an off-season to prepare with one person, and unfortunately I never got that.

It's nice that they're open and willing to making changes, and they take everybody's feedback, and they look it over. They truly want everybody on the team to do their best, so they want to win, and they know it's not an ideal situation.

We obviously have the speed, and we just need to put together some race weekends as a whole. Hopefully we can do that. Obviously it's been a struggle to do that pretty much all year. It's pretty frustrating to be sitting here and having a best result of fourth and not really getting an opportunity at a podium.

I'm happy that Rob is here. Like he's been really good with me on the radio. But it's not how he is on the radio. It's all about strategy and what we can do with that.

That's the most important bit.

Q. How much did how the end of the race at Road America play into that decision ultimately?

COLTON HERTA: I think it had a little bit, but for that stuff, they're obviously pretty critical on strategists after every race when they're going over everything and they have their meetings and I'm sure they get drilled pretty good in those meetings if they make a wrong decision.

But it's tough. It's just like the drivers; you've got to do it, and you've got to do it every time, and if you can't, it sucks, but that's the way it is.

Q. On this season, as you mentioned, you've been looking for your first podium finish. Is there any through-line through some of those close calls and near misses, weekends that you'd like to have back that you feel like have been holding you back so far?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, for sure, you can look back and say we could have done better here and there. But the best thing is just to learn from them. I feel like I've been saying that a lot this year, just from my end, from everybody's end. I would love to have just this weekend,

just be super clean, get through, have a podium, hopefully a win. But just have a clean race, clean stops, clean everything, and then try to build on that.

Q. Colton, we all know Graham's history here at Mid-Ohio, but the Herta family has a pretty long heritage at this place, too. What's it like here at Mid-Ohio as far as being a Herta? Your father started his career, went to Ohio State, the whole Herta story at Mid-Ohio?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, my sister was born here, also. Obviously you do get a lot of Herta fans here because of my dad when he was driving for Bobby and obviously living out here in Columbus, as well.

Yeah, it's pretty spectacular racetrack. It's an awesome place to be. It does feel like one of the better races for me. I get a lot of love here. I know that's because of my dad and driving for Bobby. But yeah.

Q. Also as a kid didn't you spend a lot of time playing around here on race weekends out in the campgrounds and everything?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, I've come here a few times. This is one of the best weekends that you can ask for as far as being a fan. It's great when it's on 4th of July weekend. Obviously we couldn't get 4th of July this time, but it's an amazing race. A lot of people show up for it.

It's such a great one even if you're not into racing. It's such a great one just to be here and camping and outside, and plus you get to watch INDYCARs, which I think is just fantastic.

Q. Graham, obviously I know it's only Saturday, but how much confidence does the result today give you, not only just going into the race tomorrow but also for the rest of the season?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, it definitely gives me confidence for tomorrow in particular. As I said the whole time, I feel like our race pace this weekend, our old tire pace has been very, very good, and that's why we didn't go to another set this morning was because we were still within a couple of tenths of our best lap on lap 20. I felt that that was solid, and I didn't really want to overly panic.

I feel good about tomorrow. As we both said, we'll see what Mother Nature gives us. Today was supposed to be a wash-out and it wasn't, so hopefully we see the same tomorrow.

Certainly as we go to Indy GP2 and Laguna Seca even



and Portland and places like that, we've made progress. Our road course cars have made progress. That gives us confidence as we go forward.

Q. Today Fast Six are all Honda engines. What was the reason or what was good about this weekend?

COLTON HERTA: Honda is just better. It's simple. They wake up in the morning and they piss excellence. (Laughing).

No, it's tough to say. It's constantly changing, and I think we have weekends where we think we have better power down and they have weekends where they think they have better power down or straight-line speed, vice versa.

It just felt good. Downshifts were clean, power was great.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I just think they're doing a really good job right now of pushing the envelope again, you know, more. And I thought that as Colton just said, there were times this year where we felt a little bit deficient, but the last couple of races I've felt like they've really started to push really hard again and try to find more and try to help us makes lives easier, and I think they've done a wonderful job. And clearly this race is as important for Honda as it is anybody and any other person here or any other company here. It's good to see them lock out the top six.

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