

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Continuing with Content Day, joined by Graham Rahal, driver of the No. 15 Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing Honda entering his 18th season now in the NTT INDYCAR Series, two NTT P1 awards last season along with a podium and five top 10s. A lot of momentum, a lot of stuff happening with the team right now.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think we finished the year quite strong. I think in the last nine races or so, Toronto on, we had four poles as a team, which was pretty good. So I feel like there is good momentum. I think in the off-season we've been able to do some great things as well. Sponsorship-wise, see Hendrickson really step up with the 15 car is a great thing; to announce 5-Hour Energy yesterday was a huge thing not only for the sport -- not only our team, but the sport to get them back into racing in general.

Good momentum there. A lot of changes at our team. A lot of new engineering changes and new people to the sport, period.

Then naturally, having Pietro in has been a great addition I feel like to the program. He's a great kid. Brings a lot of experience, too, and I think he's going to be a plus for us.

I do feel like it's been a good off-season. I think everybody is pretty locked in. I think everybody is very focused on what's ahead. We know our challenges. I know I'm going to get asked about Indy, but it is -- that's behind us now, and I think we've found a lot that's going to help us as we go forward, and we're going to continue to work very hard in that regard.

But I'm excited about 2024 and looking forward to what's ahead.

It's been great working with 5-Hour Energy. That's been a deal we've been working on for quite a long time, but it's not only huge for the team, but like I said, for the sport and motorsports in general.

To get 5-Hour back is a huge deal. I've already been

asked about pretty much everybody here for free 5-Hour Energies today, so it's a good thing we've got a caseful.

But we're very excited about that.

Q. This off-season, having a chance to reflect on last year as a whole, when you guys looked at May, I'm sure there's not one thing that that came down to, and I don't want to dwell on it too much, but is there a thing or two that you look back on that you feel like led to everything that happened --

GRAHAM RAHAL: Oh, yeah. There's a lot of low-hanging fruit, unfortunately, that was missed. That's part of the game.

But it's disappointing now to look back.

Having said that, I've got to tip my cap to my dad, which everybody thinks, oh, you should do that. No, he was very motivated after May to get responses and immediate responses, and then from that, Steve Eriksen has done an amazing job to put the plan together, and now to let Stefano and his group implement the plan.

They have invested a lot of money. We've got sponsors that have jumped on board to help us with some of the R&D costs, and it's going to make a big difference.

No -- is it one thing? No. But we have already identified, I think, a lot of things that were not right that has hurt our team and kind of made us fall behind here.

Just got to keep our heads down and now implement those properly, make sure the changes that are being done are being done to every car, being done well, and hopefully we'll see some good performance gains this year.

Q. I know you are never one to shy away from speaking your mind. You are often asked about kind of the state of the series, where it is, where it's going. It's been an up-and-down off-season to say the least over the last couple months since we left Laguna. I know some drivers, I don't know if you were involved, had a chance to sit down with Penske Entertainment over dinner --

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GRAHAM RAHAL: I did.

Q. I know you probably can't tell us specifics about that, but drivers have talked about coming away from that feeling like things are headed in a great direction with some great things to come. Can you tell me as much as you can about how you came away from that meeting and maybe why you might feel more positive, if you do, than you did yesterday?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. I mean, look, I'm always a glass half full when it comes to INDYCAR racing. The reality is I'm harsh on everybody in a lot of things because I see things maybe differently than most.

But I've always -- I've committed my life to being in this sport and have a bigger part in the sport than just a driver.

As I left last night, yes, there was a few of us that were fortunate to sit down and have conversations. I think it validated a lot of things I was already thinking were happening. There's stuff you'll hear about soon I can't speak about that I think are major positives for the sport.

Are there things that you would like to see different? Sure. We all have opinions. I would like to see international races. I would like to see us be on the front foot and be aggressive when it comes to Europe or other areas that I think are great.

I understand the sponsorship struggles with that. Is Europe valid for every sponsor in the series? Probably not. Maybe I'm fortunate with United Rentals that they are absolutely everywhere nowadays, so it makes some sense for us.

There are certainly areas that I would like to see changes, but the reality is that when you sit in a room and you listen to the things that are being done and you really see the things that are being done, they're not stuff that maybe affects you guys or us today, but I think it does on a longer scale, longer term plan.

I feel upbeat about it. As I made clear last night and I made clear to Bud and everybody over the years, my thinking isn't just today I'm a driver; that's my role. But a handful of years from now, that's likely not my role, and my role becomes an owner or manager or something else. Then my concerns are different than being a driver.

Most drivers when their career ends, they just move on. They go home. They go do whatever. So my concerns of today aren't focused on me. It's more focused on where are we going to be.

I think last night -- we're in a very solid footing with Penske, and I think the future is great. I don't know how many of you guys know Greg Penske, but Greg is an awesome guy, and I think the future is going to be -- maybe I'm making the assumption that he's the guy, but I'm pretty sure, and he's a great guy. I think the future is very bright. I'm excited about it.

We're going to have our challenges, but we are combatting a lot of the externals, and I'll tell you from a sponsorship perspective, 5-hour, and that's fresh in everybody's mind, that shows the validity of INDYCAR racing.

It is the motorsport that you can get the best bang for your buck in the world right now. There is still a lot of intrigue and a lot of interest to be a part of it.

Q. One of the main things that's being discussed this season is the TV contract for 2025 and beyond. I know NBC offers a lot of the platforms that INDYCAR would love to have and they also have tremendous exposure. There may be some other interested parties out there that may want to offer a higher rights fee. What's your viewpoint on the way the TV thing looks, and what would you like to see done?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think you've got to have a combination here of eyeballs and viewership and money. We need an injection of money into the sport as much as anything, but you certainly don't want to go to a full streaming platform where there's no eyeballs because that'll have a longer term effect.

I remember we talked about this when Versus or whatever it was called signed, and we were going on about the next contract after that could have been 100 percent streaming. We would have been, yeah, maybe the first to it, but we probably would not be in existence anymore. I think we're still at that point.

How many of you guys stream your football games, whatever it may be? A lot, right? But not everybody, not all the time. So you can't give up on the traditional TV channels yet, cable and network and all that stuff.

Luckily I don't have to make those decisions, but I think that it is a fine line between going to a streaming platform versus continuing to utilize the network.

We are very fortunate. I think something that gets lost in all of this, even in NASCAR's new contract from what I've seen, we are very fortunate in the amount of races we have on NBC, on the main channel. That is a critical thing. Yes, you have USA Today or Peacock or here or there.



But if I'm not mistaken, I think their new contract has a lot less network races than us, and that is a great thing for us.

I think they've been a great partner. We can all push them. I say my thing, I said to somebody else the other day, I'm already hearing Jim Nantz's voice talking about the masters coming in April.

I would like to see something Indy 500 Memorial Day weekend. Doesn't have to be any glitz or glamour, just nail it in people's head it's just hard to forget and it creates that memory in your brain.

I think NBC has been a solid partner for us.

Q. Also you look at Roger Penske, your father, Chip Ganassi, Michael Andretti, A.J. Foyt, a lot of these team owners in the series are former drivers, and how important is that to running a race team and also for your possible in the future running a race team, how important is it to be a former driver to really know the entire business of this sport?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I think the great Kenny Brack told me a couple years ago, the thing is the driver is the most important piece, and it's not because they drive, it's because they sit in the center of the wheel.

Literally and figuratively, the driver is in the middle of it all, and you hear from every department, you work with marketing, you work with PR, you work with mechanics, you work with the engineers, you work with the truckers. You see everybody and everything.

I think that's why drivers often when they move on to the next level can succeed, because you've seen it. You've been exposed to it. You know what it means. You've worked hard for the sponsors.

I think it's important. I also think it's important a lot of those names that you said are certainly older nowadays, in age, I mean, and that's something that all motorsports are facing right now, and to see some younger ownership come into the fold over the next few years -- I think with Andretti obviously Marissa has done a really good job kind of inserting herself into the role there.

Obviously for me in our family I think it's Patrick Lanigan and myself will continue on. So I think there's good plans. Larry has done an amazing job. Larry is a great guy, those that know him, with Foyt.

But certainly I think the next 10 years are going to be pretty interesting to see a lot of change in the drivers and the

ownership and where things go.

Q. Obviously with the growth of the series, what are your thoughts on the return of Milwaukee?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, my initial thoughts are how are we going to fit all the cars in pit lane. That was helped last night after dinner, so I think we'll be better there.

I'm a huge Milwaukee Mile fan. It is the best short oval that I've competed at. It's the trickiest short oval that I've competed at just because it's flat. It's a lot of different pavement types and not a very grippy surface. It's just a very demanding place.

I think if the promotion is done correctly, the Milwaukee Mile can have a great following.

The last couple years that we went there, I don't know that it was promoted as well as it should have been, so let's see what happens this year. But I'm thrilled to go back to Milwaukee.

Q. You've been with the team now since 2013, with Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, and you've seen the good times and seen the bad times. It's all changed. Where would you rank where you are standing right now before this 2024 season compared to where you were for example in 2015 or in 2013 when it was more difficult?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I would say this season resembles a little bit of 2014 for me where we struggled quite a bit. There were times where we were quick but we could never get the consistency. 2014 if you remember the last race that year I think was Sonoma, and we had a chance to win that thing, and basically came up one lap short on fuel, had to pit, ended up somewhere just outside the top 10 if my memory recalls right.

That's kind of how our last season went. I thought strong at the end of the year. We went through our battles in 2014 as well for the Indy 500, if you remember, we had to retire the car right away as the engine was shutting off, which was a very interesting experience.

So needless to say, I do think that it resembles that a lot. I see a lot of momentum. I see a lot of positives. We've done a lot of things for our staff this winter. We've had people come in, a lot of motivational folks come in and speak to the group, and I'm excited by what I see.

I think -- my hopes are that the response to all of this is a year like 2015 is ahead, a year where maybe we're considered a bit of the underdog but we come out and

surprise some people and we can build upon it from there.

There's a lot of new faces. There's a lot of new faces, particularly in engineering. A lot of those faces are new to the paddock, which could be interesting this year. But everything I've heard and listened to them, I think they bring a great wealth of knowledge, maybe not of INDYCAR specifically but of racing and all of those different aspects, and I'm excited to see what we get out of it.

Q. Of course this year we'll see the introduction of the hybrid component to the cars, but after the Indianapolis 500. How do you think this might change the complexity of the championship, and how do you feel INDYCAR will introduce it? Do you support the fact that we are waiting and not introducing it in a hurry at the start of the year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: First off, I 100 percent support it. Personally, I think it was going to be a major detriment to the teams like Rahal Letterman Lanigan who didn't get to test it. It was going to be a major advantage to those who have tested it and had knowledge of it.

So I'm glad to see them delaying it.

I don't know how I feel about implementing it mid-season, but that's a personal thing. I think it's clearly the way of the future. It's clearly the way Honda wants to go. So we need to make sure it happens.

I'm sure INDYCAR is doing -- I know they're doing the best -- I know they got a lot of heat for that deal, but I don't think people realize how hard it is right now to get vendor support. I own a massive business outside of racing and we do a lot of this, and getting parts is damned near impossible and has been for two years, and it's not getting better.

Nowadays we've got to get rid of the COVID excuse. It's just getting suppliers to deliver has been a major challenge, and unfortunately INDYCAR got stuck in that. They're going to follow through. We're going to make it happen this year. But I think it was 100 percent the right thing to do to delay. We would have been in serious trouble at St. Pete if we tried to make this happen.

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