

# NTT INDYCAR SERIES

## News Conference

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## Graham Rahal

### Press Conference

GRAHAM RAHAL: It was a good first morning, I guess, of time on track. We were pretty focused on just running by ourselves, trying to get a good understanding of what is different from last year to this year, see if we felt that we had found the speed that was expected.

We kind of had three different specifications of cars running around today, and I'm sure there's more to be coming, at least within our team. But I thought it was a positive morning. The car felt good. Chassis balance was really nice to drive, so the changes that were made there in the off-season I think were a positive.

I wish we had time, like most, to get into race running because I really wanted to see before May what do we have, what are we going to come back with in that regard, but also understanding how well the car pulls up and sucks up and tows because that's where we really, really struggled the last few years.

So that being said, all on our own it feels good and the pacing seemed decent, so let's see.

THE MODERATOR: Generally speaking, even the end of last year into this, if there was something you could circle, hey, this happened, this is a good change for this team, this has put us on the right trajectory, what would that be?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, that depends on the area. The best thing to happen to the team was the worst thing to happen to the team, which was me not qualifying. I said before, I'll say it again, that I think me not qualifying was the best thing that could have happened versus anybody else because it clearly rings home for my dad and everybody else. Not saying it doesn't matter for any of the others, but it got serious in a hurry, and that made us really lock in and focus on fixing a lot of items, particularly when it came to Indy.

I'll just say, these are -- our struggles of last year are things that I had said to the team for years. It wasn't that we all of a sudden were slow. We were getting slow. Like we were



falling behind for the years prior, but it's a struggle when in the years prior you had won Indy and you had finished -- well, 2021 was looking extremely good on our car. Certainly we were in the catbird seat. I think anybody could say that. We needed one more pit stop, everybody else needed two. It's a pretty simple math equation that we were looking good in 2021.

So you know, when you have that sort of results, like oh, no, you guys are fine, well, the reality was we were never that fast. In 2020 we didn't qualify in a superspeedway trim like in an ordinary year you would have. 2021, we were pretty average frankly, and in the race we kind of moved our way forward through strategy, et cetera.

Last year not qualifying was a real shot to like, hey, we are really far behind and we need to get serious about this in a hurry. It allowed the owners to dig in because I don't think many of the issues were issues that they were frankly that aware of. I mean, they know what our budgets are, they know what we spend, and we spend everything we could. Anything that was requested was always done.

But the realities were the things that we were spending on weren't the right things. I don't know that they had the awareness of that fully, and I think last year brought a severe intensity and focus to what was going on and brought the change that was necessary.

So when it comes to Indy, I would say that moment.

On the road courses and street courses, I still think we actually have a lot to gain. I feel like early in the season what we've seen here is -- I think there's a couple of other teams that have taken some big steps forward, and so while we have, as well, I think we've got some speed to be found in all aspects, and so we'll see how we go out to Long Beach next week and we'll see how that is for us.

It's going to happen in a hurry now, so we'll figure it out.

Indy GP of course I feel good. I can't seem to think that much is going to have changed from last year. We should be pretty strong.

**Q. We talked about this earlier today. Can you**

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**elaborate a little bit more on just what you feel inside the car that makes you know that this is different than what I had last year?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, a lot of it is when you are in here, you're man and machine. You're one together. You realize there's small things that indicate performance increase.

For me, the way that the car accelerated today off the corner, the gears in which you were able to hold even when the car would say dip down to an RPM range that's below where I wanted to be, and traditionally I have to downshift in order to build speed down the next straight, and today was the first time in a while I'd start to see speed, RPMs would start to come up like the car was responding well to it.

Then the other thing was for me when I'd get a sniff of a tow today, so seven, eight seconds, entire front straight, the speed would pick up, and last year we would -- for most drivers they're probably thinking, yeah, that's obvious, that's the way it is. But last year that's not the way an RLL car was. We would probably fall further behind.

Today we had a couple of times at that sort of gap where suddenly on my own I'm running 220.6, and all of a sudden it's 21.2, 21.3 and picking up as the run went on. That's just a good indication. Those are things that we didn't have last year.

As I said, it's a shame not to get a little bit of race running because I would have liked to see it with the heaviest downforce we could put on just to see where we are competitively, but it was nice to at least feel that a little.

**Q. Real quick, the importance and how happy you are Takuma Sato is back with the team. You guys ran really well together in 2020. Just the importance of having him back on the team.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, we need the experience, and you know I think if we hurt in one area last year, it was really a lack of a lot of experience, a lot of depth. So to bring Takuma back, he's a guy that's clearly very good here, having won twice, chance for a third in '12. He's a guy who's run up front here consistently, but also he's been with some good teams, most recently with Ganassi last year. So he knows. He knows what it should feel like.

I just talked about the way that the car responds to the tow. It's going to be fresh on his mind what that car did for him last year and then where we stand today.

I hope -- Mother Nature doesn't look good to us tomorrow,

but I hope that there's magic that we can get a little bit of running because I really would like to get Takuma's feedback more than anything. Today he didn't get to do many laps. I'd like to hear a little bit more about what he has to say.

**Q. Is Brack just here on vacation or does he have a helping role?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, we were joking last night at dinner that the 11-to-1 session was a refresher for he and dad. They were going to get back out there and see what they could do.

First off, Kenny has been, as everybody knows, very, very close to our family since he retired. Remained very close. I hear from Kenny a lot. But it's great to have him back in a role in which he's integrated in the team. He's listening to all that's going on.

I just talked with -- to answer Tony's question about experience, well, Kenny has a lot of experience. He's won here. It's important to have somebody like that, particularly for the younger guys, but it's also nice for me to have somebody to bounce ideas off of and relate to.

I'm happy to have Kenny back. He'll be back here in May with us, and I look forward to it. I'd love to have Kenny around more, quite frankly. He's a guy who truly understands what the driver's position is, understands what all that entails, and as he once told me, the driver is the most influential part of an entire team because you literally and figuratively sit in the center of everything.

So everything revolves around you, whether it's the mechanics, whether it's the engineering, the team management, the team owners. They're all directly connected constantly to the driver, and the driver gets to see it all, experience it all. So he's lived that. He's seen that, and hopefully he can have a really positive impact on what we do going forward.

**Q. Obviously coming off of last year with what happened, having to deal with the emotions of that brief period of knowing that you wouldn't be in the race, do you find yourself now having a newfound appreciation for just being able to qualify for the race, let alone be a contender for the win coming into this year?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, there's no doubt about it. Kenny, dad and I had this talk at dinner last night, and I said it last year. Indy is not a place that's given, it's earned. You go through that roller coaster of emotions, and the ups, the downs, the highs, the lows, that's racing in



general but Indy magnifies all of that.

But it is a place that will test every bit of you. As tough as it was, I fully believe that you should have to qualify for the Indy 500. Just that should be a standard thing.

This year we're going to have to go out there and try again.

After last year I told a few people, but the first voicemail when I got back to my phone, literally the first phone call and voicemail I had was from Al Unser, Jr. It meant the world to me -- in fact, if I pulled up my phone right now, it's one of the few voicemails that I have not deleted for the last year because he's a guy who's experienced this. He's been at the highs. He's been at the lows. That's what makes you in the end.

For me, this is a year that I need to -- we as a team need to respond as well as possible and have a good month of May, and I fully expect that we will.

**Q. Following up on what you said about Takuma, on the Peacock interview you were saying Takuma has the most advanced car, you're in the middle, and Christian and Pietro are one step behind. Can you elaborate on what that means, that he's the most advanced car, and is that because even though he's the one-off he's the most successful guy at the speedway? Is that the thinking there?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, it's just with our development, what we have, and what that comes down to is INDYCAR right now has a serious issue with parts and part shortages. My car today is not my Indy 500 car. It's my Long Beach car. It was my hybrid test car last week. It was whatever. Whereas Takuma's car has been at the shop for a sustained period of time which allows it to get a little further ahead.

We have a major parts shortage with the bell housings, gearboxes, a lot of the new hybrid componentry that's not being used with the hybrid currently. So we have simply have not had a lot of spares to be able to take to prep Indy 500 stuff. That's what it comes down to.

A lot of that, his stuff -- he also has the Indy race motor. All of the part-time drivers today would have their Indy Month of May motors in, which I'm sure for both manufacturers is a step ahead. It's an evolution.

We don't have that. So that's really what it comes down to. It's not an experience thing or anything else. It was literally parts, where we could get them and how it worked. That's why Friday I don't know the final decision, but if it rains out tomorrow I don't know if they'll run or not, but if

you run Friday it puts -- it's going to make lives very, very hard for the teams because my car, Christian's, Pietro's, everybody's car has got to be turned around to race next week and you have a very short period of time before those trucks need to leave. It just comes down to parts at this time.

**Q. You had mentioned that the philosophy wasn't necessarily a new approach for you guys, it was just going back to there's no substitute for a fast race car. It's just about building fast race cars again for Indy. Did something get lost there? That seems like such a basic elementary sort of thing. Did that go by the wayside when you guys lost your way in 22 and 23 were you weren't focusing on let's build fast race cars and that's the be all end all?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Here's the deal. We've always focused on it, but there's a big -- there's a lot of question marks, and there's a lot of elements that add up to equal a fast race car.

I don't think it comes down to saying, oh, RLL had poor build quality in their race cars. That's not accurate. I think Rocket would tell you that. He sees them. He sees every team, and I think he would say that the RLL cars are some of the nicest.

But there's a lot of intricacies in the way these things are built. There's a lot of things that make a massive difference to the performance of a race car.

When you get behind in certain areas or you go too far in certain areas that you thought was a positive development but in fact it is not or is a negative development, those are things that need to be identified.

Sometimes when you just kind of get stuck in this mentality of going down this path, going further, you just think more and more and more it's going to get better and better, well, the reality is that's not necessarily true. I think that's what hurt us in the past.

As I said, it wasn't sitting there going, oh, we're just not going to build fast race cars. That's not going to be the focus. No, we've always paid a lot of attention to detail on our build qualities and items like that. But there's a lot of componentry that makes a big difference, and unfortunately, certain areas of that componentry was not maximized or anywhere near maximized.

So as difficult as that is, I can't say much more. But that's what it comes down to.

**Q. What are the emotions coming back to the IMS after**

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**last year and what are your confidence levels like and your motivation heading into this year's event, as well?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I feel very confident here. You've got to come in here with the belief that you can win. I firmly believe if you come to the Indy 500 just to compete in it, you shouldn't be here. It's just like if you're going to go race in the Daytona 500 just to do it or Daytona 24 hours, Sebring, 12 hours of Le Mans, there's no point. It's not fun if you don't have a chance to win. That's the reality.

For me, I feel really good about where we're at, where we've developed to. I think we've got some strong opportunities ahead of us, and I'm excited to get back for May.

For me, this is circled on the schedule every year, but as all of you guys can imagine, this race for me means a lot more than it ever did before. To have the opportunity to just get back out here and try to qualify and put ourselves in a really good place I think is going to be key, and I think the team has done a great job.

We'll see, but I can assure you that the feeling at the end of today even after five or six runs versus where we were the first day of the spring test here is a very different vibe within the team, and I hope that that will keep a positive outlook as we go into May.

**Q. Harkening back about what you were saying about Takuma, can you weigh the benefits of having him in a fourth car as opposed to maybe having a more streamlined three-car operation?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I can't speak to that as much as maybe dad or Steve or Mike or somebody, but I think that to run a fourth car here this year was going to have to be somebody like Takuma. I don't think they would have done it just to have a fourth. I think we've learned our lesson in that regard, and when Takuma, when the opportunity started to come up with a Takuma a handful of months ago was probably the first rumbling I heard of it. It made a lot of sense. Takuma has a great relationship with Eddie Jones, who's his engineer. Eddie has worked with Takuma and I back and forth for seven, eight years now, and so Eddie and Takuma have faith in each other in what they can do. A lot of the guys within the team know Takuma well. A bunch of them won it with Takuma. So he was the right fit.

I'm not sure that RLL would have done it otherwise. Nor am I sure that Honda would have done it otherwise. I think that's a critical part, too. Engines are definitely at a premium right now. There's a reason there's not 40 cars in the field, and it's not because there's not interest. Getting

engines is hard right now.

But again, Takuma was a great fit for us, and I'm excited to have him. The last time we were -- one of the last times we were together here was when we finished first and third, and I think he's going to be a great asset for us in May.

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