

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Bobby Rahal

Mike Lanigan

Graham Rahal

Pietro Fittipaldi

Christian Lundgaard

Takuma Sato

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We continue on Fast Friday and our news conferences ahead of PPG presents Armed Forces Qualifying this coming weekend. Great to be joined by Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, and joined in the middle, the namesake behind the team, the three-time INDYCAR Series champion, the 1986 winner of the Indianapolis 500, Bobby Rahal; joined the race team in 2010 as co-owner and first competed as the name as we know, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, Mike Lanigan, good morning.

All four drivers are also joining us here this morning. Driver of the No. 15 United Rentals Honda, six-time winner in the NTT INDYCAR Series Graham Rahal is here. Driver of the No. 30, 5-Hour Energy Honda, grandson of the two-time Indy 500 winner Emerson Fittipaldi, cousin of the 1995 Indy 500 Rookie of the Year in Christian Fittipaldi. Please welcome Pietro Fittipaldi. Great to have you back at the speedway this month. Driver of the No. 45 HyVee Honda, race winner on the streets of Toronto last year, Christian Lundgaard, and the driver of the No. 75 Amada Honda, great to welcome back two-time Indy 500 champion Takuma Sato.

Mike, we'll begin with you. We know how much you love the Indy 500 and coming back to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. We know obviously the history that Takuma brings with him with this team. Just your feelings about heading into another month of May and an Indy 500 coming up a week from Sunday.

MIKE LANIGAN: First of all, this is my 49th Indy 500 in a



row, so I think they've got me in a big way.

Indy is always a very special place. I always look forward to it over the years. It's obvious, I'm obviously very pleased to see Takuma back and when he won the Indy 500 from us in 2020. It's always a great time at Indy. I wish it wouldn't rain today, but we'll find out sooner than later.

This is something that's been a passion for me. First partnering up with Bobby and David and of course known Graham since he was a high school kid racing for me at Conquest Racing, it's a thrill to be with all four of these guys between Pietro and Christian and of course Takuma and Graham.

I guess you're here to talk to these guys, but I'd like to thank everybody for being here, and hopefully I'm sure we'll have a better month this month than we did last year. Thank you very much for attending.

THE MODERATOR: Bobby, obviously we know the situation last year, but we also know the changes that were made since then and momentum has changed a little bit with this team. How have those steps that this team made paid dividends in your opinion?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I think we're already several miles an hour faster than we were at this time last year when we did qual sims a year ago. I think that's a good indicator for us. Certainly I don't think we know -- I think we can be faster for sure in like configuration as say yesterday.

You know, I'm pretty happy with where we are. I have to say, a lot of work has been put in by our team members over the course of the last year. Still being put in. We've probably doubled if not maybe a little bit more our engineering department since that time, done more R&D work than we've ever done before, so I think it will pay off. It is paying off and will pay off. I think we've seen that in the pace of the team at the first road courses that we've had, been very competitive, especially Christian and making it to the top 12 now in road courses, that's an accomplishment in itself. We've been there on a fairly regular basis.

I'm pleased. We're continuing to expand and grow. I think

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we've got a good basis now. Yeah, I think we'll see the benefit of that, and as I say, I give a lot of thanks to our team members because it's been a lot of hard work, particularly over the last six months. I think we'll see the results of that, positive results from that.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, you spoke at length right after the Indy 500 open test about the changes. What has been different this month in your view?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think a lot. I feel like, as Dad just said, there's been no breaks, I think, for the organization. This winter has been full gas, I think, for everybody to get to the position that we're at today. It's taken a lot, a lot of long days the last few weeks even to get the cars final prepped and ready to be here.

Hats off to the mechanics, honestly, because the engineers give them the direction, and the mechanics are putting in a lot, a lot of long hours to get to where we're at, to get the cars together.

I think if we saw anything yesterday, there's very little spread between the four cars, I think, honestly, which is good. Maybe a couple tenths of a mile an hour, but if you look at some of the other teams, they have a mile an hour and a half between their cars, so the prep, the job well done by them.

It's clear that there's been gains. For me in particular, I think all week I've made maybe two adjustments on my car so far in race running as well as qualifying, and I can't say that that would have been the case last year. I think it would have been a lot more chasing.

Yesterday we dedicated our time to qual sims or at least low downforce running just to see, kind of get a base on where we're at. Clearly we would have liked to be doing some of the race running that others were, but as Will Power questioned why we were doing qual sims and I reminded him what happened 12 months ago and why it was important that we figure that out. That's kind of where we're at.

I think the team has done an excellent job. I think all four of us have been working really well together. Taku started the week for us doing light downforce work that we needed to be done while the other three were working on race cars. Christian has been working on an alternate setup. Things have been progressing well and I'm proud of the team because people don't see how much work truly goes in behind the scenes. It's been a hard, hard 12 months dedicated to this race, but yet we've still been able to focus and do a good job at other venues at the end of last year and the start of this year. Tip of the cap to them.

THE MODERATOR: Pietro, it's crazy to think it's three years now since your first Indy 500. What's it like coming back and obviously being a part of a championship team like this?

PIETRO FITTIPALDI: It's amazing. I've always had the dream and the goal to come back to INDYCAR, but to do it full time, so it's the first experience I'm having actually doing the full month of May because last time I was here it was only for two weeks, and it is very different.

You go from the Indy Grand Prix to then the qualifying week, which we are now, then the race week, then Detroit. Now I see how mentally tiring and even physically tiring it is not only for the drivers but for the team, so you get a whole different perspective really of what the month of May is.

It's extremely exciting for me to be part of this team, to have so many Indy 500 wins within the Rahal Letterman Lanigan organization. I'm just looking forward to seeing what we've got today in Fast Friday. Hopefully the weather improves a little bit, and then, yeah, going out for qualifying and then racing.

I've always loved oval racing, especially short track oval racing, as well. I'm excited.

THE MODERATOR: Christian, starting off the month of the podium, the SONSIO Grand Prix a month ago tomorrow, the sign of the recovery plan and the success and the turnaround, what is your outlook for qualifying this weekend and the race coming up a week from Sunday?

CHRISTIAN LUNDGAARD: First of all, I'm super excited. I think the work that's been put in, and Graham explained it very well, I think, no one has had a day off, and it's been very long hours, it's been long days, to put in the work, because it was an eye-opener last year. We really needed to make sure that we weren't going to be in that position again, and I'm proud of the team. Everything we've done right now we are looking at being faster. Of course we also need to pay attention to everybody else gaining speed, but I think we've taken the step forward that I think we needed.

There's more to come, and Bobby said it, as well. We of course would like to be faster and I think we can with what we have right now, and that's what today is for. It's to make sure we find that last little bit to make sure that we're on the right end of the field.

THE MODERATOR: Takuma, I can only imagine the comfort level when you come back to this team. Obviously the ring on your finger helps tell that story a little bit. What's it like to be back with Rahal Letterman Lanigan

Racing?

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, it's been remarkably comfortable as you can imagine to come back to the team. Third time probably. He's called me every single year really: Taku, when are you going to come back? I think really appreciate Bobby and Mike obviously putting those things together. As I said, when they mentioned Graham and TK that engineering prospect, how hard the team has to go through the 12 months ago and on the kind of spring back and really go through all the details over the course of the winter.

I've been kind of really involved in the program from the engineering side and really happy to see the car performing on the track. Obviously the true performance will be showing the next two days hopefully, but certainly a huge step forward for the team. It's a huge credit for the engineering team.

Q. In view of everything that happened here last May, how huge a day was it in Toronto last July when Christian got his first victory and got you back into Victory Lane and really helped turn the page on the disappointment that had happened here about six weeks earlier?

BOBBY RAHAL: Yeah, it was fantastic. Of course we've been strong at -- I'm trying to think of the race prior to. Grand Prix we had been strong at. Even after this race, the 500, we made changes, and I think we immediately saw the benefit of that, and the performance on the street course, of course Christian winning, huge for him, huge for us, for our sponsor, HyVee, huge.

That just eased a lot of pain. It erases a lot of that, having a great race like that.

Obviously after that we were very strong on the road courses. So yeah, that was a big day for all of us for sure.

Q. Also just to confirm your eye for talent because you saw this kid a couple of years earlier and thought, this is the type of guy I want on my race team. What was it about him that really impressed you?

BOBBY RAHAL: Hey, if you remember his first race here, he was less than a tenth off pole. He was fourth on the grid I think it was, or third. Obviously I did not know Christian, but we were introduced to him, and we were able to put the one race together and then another and of course the season.

He's just a very good young driver with a big, big future ahead of him, I think. It's fun to be a part of that.

Q. Mike and Bobby, we heard a lot from the drivers all through qualifying last year and the stress and the process, the anxiety that they were feeling. Graham talked at length in April at the open test about all the changes that had to be made and all the work that had to be done. You two as the team owners, what was that two days like for you, and then after it all -- the dust settles and Graham ultimately gets in the race, when do you start -- how does the process start off, okay, we've got to fix this and this and this and we need this and these people got to go and we need to hire these people?

MIKE LANIGAN: You asked me how the process went? It was ugly. I mean, quite frankly it was embarrassing. Both Bob and I and Dave totally agreed that we may have gotten a little lackadaisical on the engineering side quite frankly.

In 2020 we were extremely competitive. Takuma won the race. Graham was in third. I think we got caught sleeping, frankly. Very depressing over the winter. Bob and I totally committed to the resources required to -- for this not to happen again, and quite frankly, the sting will not go away until one of these guys are on the podium a week from Sunday.

But we are excited about where we're at with the cars right now. Are we there yet? I don't know if we're there yet, but we're certainly going to be extremely competitive versus last year.

Q. (No microphone.)

BOBBY RAHAL: No. Right after qualifying.

MIKE LANIGAN: I cried a lot last year.

BOBBY RAHAL: First off, thanks to my partner Mike because his passion is equal to mine or maybe even greater, and obviously -- how were those two days? It was hell. It was hell. Like Mike said, it was embarrassing. God, it was just awful.

I said at the time, this is going to kill me if I do this again. I'm sleeping at night -- it's embarrassing I think may be the best -- here we won the race two years prior, now you don't qualify? It's like, come on.

So that's when I just said to Steve Eriksen, who I had brought in about six months prior to the race last year, who has done a really good job for us, I said, Steve, in 30 days I want a plan how we're going to turn this ship around and get it back to where it should be at Indianapolis. That's

when it started. 30 days later I had the plan or I had the basis of the plan, and Mike had it, as well, and said, okay, let's go.

It was a big investment for Mike and I, but we're not here just to be here. We're here to win.

That's why when we won at Toronto, how good was that, right? Then you beat the best that they can throw at you that day, soundly beat the best. Graham had problems in qualifying in Toronto, ended up ninth from 27th. That was pretty good, as well.

Yeah, it was hell. I certainly don't want to go through that again.

Q. (No microphone.)

BOBBY RAHAL: You know, I've loved Takuma from the day I first met him. He was with us in 2012, then came back in '18 I think it was or thereabouts. I think we've always had a good relationship, and certainly disappointed to lose him two years ago. But happy we're back.

Takuma's engineer that he won the 500 with is his engineer this year, as well. A good combination there.

I think we've got four strong candidates here to win this race, and it's just a matter of us executing, doing the job.

MIKE LANIGAN: Yeah, I sat down with the team and our four bullets here and told them that tomorrow was my 50th anniversary, and I'd like to have a nice present tomorrow, so don't forget that, guys.

I think four cars in the top 12 would be pretty good.

BOBBY RAHAL: You heard that.

Q. Bobby, how much outside of the box thinking have you done over the last year? It almost feels like a re-brand of the team. You've got consumer friendly sponsors which is huge. How much outside of the box thinking did you have to do for every aspect of the team over the last 350-plus days?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, yeah. First off, you mentioned whether it's HyVee or Fifth Third or United Rentals or 5-Hour Energy, to bring them into INDYCAR racing, with Amada, that's a new sponsor into racing, at least INDYCAR racing that we were able to bring in and partner with Takuma. We've had great sponsors, and I don't think there was any better indication of that than last year after Graham's car not qualifying. United Rentals could probably have been understood if they said, hey, we're out,

and they didn't. They strengthened the relationship.

We're very fortunate to have great sponsors, which you have to have, obviously. It's a real -- everybody just kind of agreed or signed up that we had to increase our effort. We had to do things better. We had to execute better. I think we saw that almost immediately, as I said, by Toronto last year, things changed dramatically in the performance of the team.

So just continuing that.

Q. Christian, looking back at your first Indianapolis 500, Rick Mears said one time that a rookie doesn't really know what to expect, what he experiences in practice and qualifying because in the race you get forced into areas of the track you haven't run on all month. What do you recall from your first Indianapolis 500, the first thing that jumped out at you that was like, whoa, I didn't expect that?

CHRISTIAN LUNDGAARD: IMS. Honestly, the place. I think from a driving standpoint of view, it's fairly easy to drive around by yourself in quality trim. Sure, you have to hustle the car, but I think once cars are around you, you really understand where to place yourself. I've spoken to some of the rookies this year just to try to help them to get up to speed, and with the amount of rain days we've had now, they haven't had the track time. They haven't had the traffic running. They haven't had time to run qual sims and now they're being thrown into Fast Friday.

From that standpoint I consider myself fortunate enough to -- in 2022 to get the full month really.

But no, I just took every step at the time and just progressed and wanted to learn as much as possible. I think my ultimate target for the month of May was be in the race and then finish the race, to get the mileage, because I wanted to learn, and it was the same for Texas, coming from a background of not running ovals.

I was talking about this yesterday, that when Graham was a rookie in the series, half the calendar was ovals and testing was less limited, so there was a lot more oval races and just driving, which we don't really have nowadays, and we see rookies come in with not a lot of experience on the ovals, and it makes it difficult for us.

Q. But was there an instance in the race that really got your attention?

CHRISTIAN LUNDGAARD: I mean, probably being lapped at some point. But in the end, it's the same for all ovals in my opinion, that as soon as you're in the pit sequence, you

pit before people, you're suddenly a lap or two laps down, and then the pit sequence come around and you regain those positions, and they come out on newer tires and they get by you again. Just that whole sequence is a little mindblowing sometimes.

Q. For Mike and Bobby, we heard a lot from Christian and Graham with Christian's contract status. Where do you guys stand? I assume you want him back with the organization?

MIKE LANIGAN: Would I like to have Christian in the organization? I don't know, I'll have to think about that. I'll tell you what, I'd love to have all four of these guys for a long, long time quite frankly. These guys are not only good on the track, they're great off the track, and that's part of the whole a.m. beans of this sport is you'd better be able to communicate well with the sponsors, spend time with them, and in my world that's just as important as performance on the track.

Q. But are you currently talking to him about a new contract?

MIKE LANIGAN: We talk to him all the time. Now, whether they talk to us, that's another question.

Q. Christian said he's committed to racing.

MIKE LANIGAN: I know he's committed. I just want him committed to this team.

BOBBY RAHAL: I think we would be -- I think there's a lot to gain for both of us to continue. We'll leave it at that.

Q. Takuma, you drove a Ganassi car last year. How important is that coming into an RLL team that struggled a bit last year, and at the end of the day then why did you want to come back to RLL for this year?

TAKUMA SATO: First of all, like Bobby said, it was a little bit painful two years ago that we had to go to the different way. But as a professional race car driver, it was fortunate that I had a different path, and obviously they're going racing in 2023 -- 2022, sorry, '23 Chip Ganassi Racing. It was a tremendous experience and incredible to see the strategy and the resources that they're using.

Back to the team, my biggest wish is obviously trying to help this team and the list as high as possible. Same thinking with everyone else in here, as well as engineers, working extremely hard. How much I can input, obviously only the results could tell.

I'm hoping that four of us obviously working extremely

together and closely and four of us can be competitive as high as possible.

Certainly the last two years of experiences is helping for all aspects, I believe.

Q. For Bobby and maybe Graham, is there anything specific as far as you guys actually can divulge that you've maybe changed in terms of philosophy ahead of coming back to the speedway this year, and what would make a successful Indy 500 campaign for you if you've thought that far?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, as far as this year, I think we've come here much better prepared. Of course that's easy to say in hindsight. You think you're prepared last year, but obviously we weren't.

A lot of the actions that we took following the race not only have continued for the whole year since then but will continue in the years to come. In other words, this isn't a one-shot commitment or one-shot deal to improve the competition of the team as a whole.

We've really strengthened the engineering area, and I think that's already producing results and will continue to produce results. I think that's maybe a difference.

I kind of didn't hear the second part of your question, so if you wouldn't mind repeating it.

Q. What would make a successful Indy 500 campaign, or is that still quite a fluid thing heading into qualifying weekend?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, what would make a successful 500 for us is obviously winning the race. That would make it -- easily give us a good feeling.

It's all about being competitive and being in the thick of it. Because this race, a lot of things happen in this race, and you just want to be in a position to be opportunistic. That's our intent is to be opportunistic.

Q. For Pietro, how do you assess your time back in INDYCAR so far these first few races?

PIETRO FITTIPALDI: I've loved it, just being here with the team and being able to actually run a full-time INDYCAR program. As I said before, it's been a goal of mine for a very long time. We had a very successful year last year with JOTA in the World Endurance Championship, and I had opportunities to race in Hypercar this season, but when this opportunity to come back to INDYCAR came about, I said, I have to give it a shot, and that's what I want



to do, and we're here now.

It's been great. At Thermal we showed pace. We were there in the final 12, in the final heat races. Last week, as well, at the Indy GP we were running pretty well. I've been very excited to be part of this team and just continuing to grow.

As Christian said, it's very limited, the testing in INDYCAR, so a lot of the tracks that we're going to, I'm arriving not knowing the tracks and having to learn it in the first practice and so on.

That's always a little bit tougher, but I knew the challenge ahead, and I love challenges, so the goal is just to continue progressing, and I think we've shown good progress, and just got to continue growing.

But I'm very happy.

Q. Bobby, my chronology may be off a little bit. I believe he had already left Miller by the time you signed with Miller, but last night Eddie Gossage passed away. What are your recollections of him and just the fact that -- Texas Motor Speedway used to have a promotion called no limits. He had no limits when it came to promotion --

BOBBY RAHAL: That's an understatement. I had met Eddie at Miller. He left pretty much right after I got there. He was a showman.

There was nothing too crazy for Eddie. There was nothing too extreme for Eddie in terms of promotions at the races. He was a promoter. You don't see that often anymore. Most people, yeah, they just rent the track out and that's it and then complain about not enough spectators coming or something.

He was a promoter. He was out there making things happen. Of course he had a great mentor with Humpy, but yeah, he was an old friend, but oh, my God, like I said, there was nothing -- nothing was out of the question. He'd consider anything, whether it's the 101st airborne rappelling down out of helicopters before the race -- he did stuff nobody had ever done before. Obviously he was very successful.

Q. He also wanted a boxing match between Danica Patrick and Dan Wheldon after the Milwaukee situation.

BOBBY RAHAL: Yeah, yeah.

Q. He was just a great friend to INDYCAR for a long

time. In fact, that was as important to INDYCAR back when he was running the place as Indianapolis was.

BOBBY RAHAL: I think so, yeah.

GRAHAM RAHAL: There was a direct correlation when Eddie stepped down to the performance of the race going down, and it was a shame. He was a disruptor, and you guys all know that I love that kind of person. As I just said, I've never seen a clearer case in my life of what promotion can do for an event, from when Eddie was in charge to those that were after. He was a great guy, and as you said, a great fan of this sport. Wish there were a lot more like him, that's for sure.

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