

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Tuesday, July 9, 2024

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Thanks for joining us. Certainly by now you know the housekeeping rules.

Obviously it's back to the ovals for the NTT INDYCAR Series, the first of six wrapping up the season, six of the next eight races, to be more exact, this weekend. It's the annual HyVee INDYCAR race weekend with the HyVee Homefront 250 presented by Instacart Saturday night, and then Sunday it's the HyVee One Step 250 presented by Gatorade. All part of a full weekend of racing along with musical performances by Luke Combs, Eric Church, that comes up on Saturday, followed by Kelsea Ballerini and Post Malone on Sunday.

HyVee expanding their involvement with INDYCAR. It began several years ago with our guest today, who drives the No. 15 One Cure Honda this weekend for Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. We welcome in Graham Rahal. Thanks for doing this.

GRAHAM RAHAL: No worries. Thanks for having me.

Q. Going back to Iowa Speedway, how much are you looking forward to one of the bigger weekends on the calendar?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I'm excited. It's a big race for HyVee. It's a big race for our team. It's a big race for the series. Obviously great musical acts and entertainment this weekend, double-header Saturday night race. Sunday is kind of an early race, which is kind of an anomaly, what, 11:00 a.m. or just after.

Q. Noon eastern.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, so 11:00 something, but I'm excited to go back. Obviously Randy, Jeremy, Aaron, Donna, Matt, Anna, the list goes on at HyVee of people who have done an amazing job to put this together year in, year out, and clearly great partner to our team but a heck of a great partner of the sport.

This is going to be quite different with the repave. It's

definitely a unique scenario compared to what we've had in years past there. Something that we're all going to have to adjust to, extremely fast lap times. Since the test, INDYCAR has made some rule changes with reducing the downforce level, so we'll see how that works out.

As we go back to the test, the speeds were extremely, extremely fast. We'll see how that works out. Hopefully we can put on a great show this weekend.

I know it's a critical point in the INDYCAR season, but obviously this is a race that we as a team in particular put a lot of energy and time into to try to be at our best, and I think the repave is going to level the playing field from what we've had in the past, so we'll see how it goes.

Q. You mentioned a couple variables. You've got the hybrid power unit as well, first time on an oval, quick turnaround from Saturday to Sunday, both races on NBC. From a driver's perspective, how do you prepare for something like this this weekend?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, there's a lot going on. There's a lot happening. The physical side is probably the most important because the G loads that we experienced at the test were extremely high and the physicality was extreme. It'll be interesting to see how that works out. Obviously two full races there, some heavy lifting to be done.

Also just to try to make sure that we work together as a series to get the high line practice in there early on Friday, make sure that we get the high line in because if that happens, I think we're going to put on one heck of a show, particularly on Saturday night.

Saturday night race always at Iowa was one of the greatest races you'd ever see. We've gone away from that in recent years to more daytime races, but seeing a Saturday night race again I think is going to be great.

Q. Hydrate is the key.

GRAHAM RAHAL: That is the key. Gatorade is a team sponsor. Gatorade is a sponsor with HyVee, and they're a sponsor this week, and there will be plenty of that consumed, I can guarantee that.



Q. Graham, you had experience over the weekend with the hybrid unit. How different is the oval going to be dealing with that?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, Mid-Ohio was very affected. It was definitely -- had a big influence on the way things went. Even in qualifying at Mid-Ohio, I ran out of deployment out of Turn 9, and even compared to Christian, my teammate, it was about a half a tenth of a second difference. And obviously a half a tenth nowadays in INDYCAR makes quite a large difference, so something to be aware of.

However, I would say on the ovals, it's less effective. I was explaining to some people, hybrid is just like you think it is in a street car. It is effective from how does a street car work? The hybrid, the electric part works off of a stop sign, but when you're at the freeway speed, it's not working, it's regenerating. It's recharging the batteries when you're on the freeway; it's using the internal combustion engine.

It's the same for us. When you think of the test, the minimum corner speeds were 180 miles an hour or whatever they were, which is really wild, it's not doing much there.

But come race day, different conversation, because race day when the minimum speeds really start to drop off, you'll see a greater effect in the way that the hybrid works.

On a place like Iowa, if I'm very honest with you, it's going to be a lot to deal with. A lot to deal with, because it's taking all of your strength and everything else to hold the wheel, let alone be pulling paddles and pushing buttons and doing all of those other things.

There's some fine tuning that needs to happen on the hybrid as we go forward, but I thought at Mid-Ohio it was quite effective, and it worked pretty well.

Q. You mentioned the really fast lap times at Iowa, and as you mentioned also, you're also dealing with more things to do. Do you have to wrap your head around that going in to realize your hands are going all kinds of places quickly?

GRAHAM RAHAL: There's a lot happening, 100 percent. There's a lot happening, a lot of buttons and figuring out when to regenerate, figuring out how much to regenerate, figuring out when is the best place to use the deployment, is it once a lap or twice a lap, do you use it both corners or use it for one shot as much as you can get. There's a lot going on. There's a lot going on.

I thought Mid-Ohio for me was quite a test because we tried the three-stop strategy. You guys all see the finishing results for the three-stoppers. It didn't work for anybody.

It was not the right way to go, but because of that, we ended up driving every lap as if it was qualifying, and pressing those things and pushing buttons and figuring all this stuff out, reducing the amount of regeneration in the engine. There's a lot happening in a short period of time, and it's a very hard thing to transition to in the middle of a season like this.

Q. I didn't necessarily think this was a fair question to ask in Mid-Ohio. I wanted to get a race through it. But I was kind of curious, we head into HyVee's race, and now it's a race removed from the news that Christian is leaving the team. I was curious what the morale was within the team.

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, I mean, I think everybody is in good spirits. Obviously we had hoped for better results all around at Mid-Ohio than what we ended up getting. Christian kind of salvaged a decent result.

But for me, I think we had the speed and just didn't quite it put it together.

I felt like everybody is pretty upbeat about it. We've got a great -- the team has got great opportunities ahead for drivers, so I don't think that that's what the main focus is right now.

It's obviously never good to see people leave the organization, but I don't think that any of us were surprised by the team in which he went to. Good for Christian. As I told him via text, I wish him nothing but the best.

I feel like I've been a part of his development as a driver and a racer in particular when he came in. He was fast, but his race craft struggled a little bit, and he's come a long way in that regard. But he's got a hell of a future ahead of him. Obviously it would have been good to see him win with us some more, but he's made that decision, so we turn the page.

I think the morale is good. Our sponsors are -- everybody is looking forward to the future, and that's going to be the way that we approach things. That's all we can do.

Motorsports is a business, and it changes all the time. We'll just keep our heads down and keep focused forward.

Q. To turn the page and talk about Iowa, there was some chatter within the paddock that there's some concern this could turn into a single-file race, but



there's still enough of a lane with the repaved area that we could see two wide. I'm curious your assessment.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. Your assessment is accurate, but it's only accurate if the drivers don't play ball. You know what I mean play ball is we've got high line practice Friday first 30 minutes of practice, and if the guys decide they're going to do high line practice and run low or do whatever kind of gamesmanship they all played the last couple times we've done this, then we're not doing what's in the best interest of the sport.

But I don't see that happening. I think everybody knows that the second lane can come in very quickly. If you had gone to the Iowa test and we started the morning session, it was gray. It was very -- even though NASCAR had just been there. There was very little rubber down.

By the middle of the afternoon, it was black. The bottom lane had gripped up a lot and applied a lot of rubber. So what that tells me is we do that to the second lane and the same thing is going to happen.

It is in the best interest of the drivers, it's in the best interest of the teams, it's in the best interest of the series for HyVee and for the race and for the fans to get the second lane to come in. And I think if we do that effectively on Friday, you immediately follow with an hour and a half practice in which everybody is going to want to run up there because you really don't have -- while qualifying is critical, you don't have a lot of time to focus on that versus the race. You've got to get into your race running.

I think that the second lane will come in, and it will be fine. I remember Kyle Larson, his first test at Iowa, he texted me right away and said it was one trick pony, it was a one lane racetrack. And then you watch the Iowa NASCAR race, and that wasn't the case.

Same thing, though. They all worked together. They applied that second -- of course they've got that PJ1 or whatever they use. We do not have any grip applicator like that with Firestone, but the reality is it can come in. So I'm going to be Mr. Positive here, and I'm going to say that we're going to get that in and put on a hell of a show, like we typically do at Iowa.

Q. I want to ask you, it's off Iowa topic, Courtney and Brittany had encouraging posts this weekend. I just wanted to know how things are going and how you guys are holding up as a family.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, everybody is good. We're all hanging in there. It's been a lot of teamwork, frankly. I'm not going to lie to you, that's why I was a few minutes late

here, because I've had very little time to be with my wife and with the kids. She's been off in Richmond. Obviously I've been doing dad duty.

So I came back last week from Mid-Ohio, and we basically had a day and a half before I leave for Iowa tomorrow.

Everybody is hanging in there. Everything that they've said in the statements is accurate, which is that there's a long, long road ahead. There's a long road ahead. But I guess Brittany's post, I didn't know we were supposed to tell anybody or say anything, but I just read Brittany's post from last night that John is moving now to a new location, and I'm sure the family and the team will put something out shortly. He is improving, and that's all we can ask for.

But at this time, that's pretty much where we're at. Like I said, there's a long road ahead, and I'd be remiss if I didn't say it, but AMR, series sponsor, tremendous to work with, to help us with what was needed with John. Denise Titus, Dr. Vargas at INDYCAR. Denise Titus is an angel, and she reached out, and she helped our family tremendously from the start.

Dr. Vargas helped us a lot. He was INDYCAR's neurosurgeon. He's been tremendous to get ideas and get help from. We've been very blessed to have their support to get John to the place that he needs to go and get the help he needs. Certainly excited about his prospects.

Q. As for you personally as a racer, that happened on a day you had a race, and you've had races since that he's been in the hospital. How were you able to focus and do your job?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, that day was a little harder because I was watching it live. Courtney was not. She was still kind of taking a nap frankly. It was early morning out in California. My girls were running her ragged.

When I saw it, I immediately went to her and said, hey, you probably -- you should probably wake up. You should probably look and see what's going on here.

Unfortunately I've seen a lot of crashes in NHRA. With Courtney's explosion in 2017 and Brittany has had hers and John has had a lot over the last five years or so, but you know when it's different. You can see it. We all saw it.

It's hard because at that stage the reality was that we didn't know anything. Laurie, my mother-in-law, was with me. So we didn't know anything. There was just so many questions to be asked about what's the condition. So it wasn't until really a day, day and a half later that we started to get some clarity on what it was.

But this is racing. As much as I hate to be tone deaf to it, because I'm not, these things happen. I can tell you that -- this is the truth. I've never said it in a public setting like this, but when we lost Justin Wilson -- when we lost Dan, it was hard. When we lost Justin Wilson, he was a very close friend of mine, and it took me years to kind of move past the mental side of sitting in a car, particularly at Indianapolis or at a superspeedway and not having it flash through -- like I said, I've never told anybody this, but not have some sort of flash through my mind about Justin and those sorts of things.

On that given Sunday with John, it was hard, but you've got to do what you've got to do and go out there, and then obviously from there our focus was just to get the girls to him as fast as we could, get all of his daughters and get Laurie out there and get him the care that he needed. So very fortunate with that.

Q. Did they go immediately, or did they stay at your race?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, no, they were with me until the end of the race, and then basically got the kids home and then got them sent off to -- got Laurie and Courtney sent off, which from where we were wasn't the easiest thing to get to Richmond, Virginia, I must admit.

But we're all blessed to do what we do and to have the contacts and the people that we have, and I won't lie to you, I literally called the guys at NetJets and I said, I need a favor and I need it now. Two hours later a plane was there and off they went.

I know that's a very fortunate thing to have, but the reality was in a situation like this, it made our lives -- it made their lives a lot easier because the girls needed some clarity. Laurie has been there ever since. Courtney is coming back. Brittany is back out there in Richmond. They're going to have to rotate on and off for a while. So we'll see what it is in the future.

Q. Helio set the single lap qualifying track record of 17.2 seconds and 186.8 miles an hour in 2014. With the repave do you think we might see some track records fall this weekend?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, at the test we were doing, I did a 16.96 at the test or something -- yeah, 16.98, 16.96, and I was on a lap that was about eight hundredths up on that before I bailed out due to the car wasn't turning as much as I needed.

But to be frank with you, they reduced the downforce level

a lot from the test to now. At the test we had some challenges with tire wear and stuff. The loads are just so, so high.

To answer the question, I would be surprised because of the fact I think from the test they took off 300 something pounds of downforce, which is a lot. I think it would be very hard to be flat or almost flat as we were, frankly.

I think the average speed at the test, the top was Colton maybe or somebody, and it was like a 190 mile an hour average speed. That is screaming around a short oval like that.

Q. Following up on -- you talked about with Kyle Larson a few minutes ago, I was at that tire test. He, Christopher Bell and Brad Keselowski all told us at that test that they thought the Cup Series race would be single groove, passing would be hard. That's pretty much the only thing we heard going into that race, and I think we got the best short track race in the last three years. What can INDYCAR drivers, if anything, learn from the Cup Series race here?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I think one thing is to be positive, to talk positively about the event, to talk positively about the sport and what we're going to be doing. And then to work as one, work united as a group of drivers to make sure that we achieve that goal.

I can just tell you right now, if everybody goes out there on Friday and focuses on getting that high line in, I will guarantee you it will be in. But if people go out there and don't care, well, then, it's going to be a challenge. That's just the reality of the situation.

The thing that we don't have that NASCAR has is the PJ1, the grip application that they use that works with their tires and stuff. We do not have that.

But I think if everybody focuses on it with the downforce level of our cars and stuff, I think it will come in.

We talked about this at the drivers' meeting last weekend at Mid-Ohio, and I think we're going to see it here. I think that Firestone is going to bring some extra tires for us to use. We'll go out there in the first 30 minutes on Friday, and everybody has got to run high and get that high line in.

If they do it, it'll stick because I can assure you 28 cars around Iowa Speedway is a lot of cars in a very small track.

As I kept telling all the guys in the meeting, you're going to want it as much as anybody else. You're going to want



that fresh air. If there's an opportunity for fresh air, you're going to want it. It's in the best interest of everybody to work towards it, and I think we will, and I think it'll come in.

Q. I'm interested in how you evaluate the year that you've had so far this year, you and the team. Obviously last year we saw multiple poles, we saw Christian take that win. How is this year on the whole compared to what you guys did as a team last year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, on my side, I'm extremely disappointed. I won't sugarcoat that. I think you guys all know me well enough to know that I don't do that. I'm extremely disappointed at the way that we've performed.

There's been times like Mid-Ohio where we did have some pace, but we didn't improve even in the race. We just never improved through the weekend and others caught us and others were just better. By the end of the weekend, we weren't the fastest, we weren't even in the top 5 or top 7 fastest. Those are difficulties that I think are a little bit frustrating.

But I will say this: On a whole, I think we've been much more competitive than we were last year, which is going to shock people I say that. But there's a lot of places that we have gone that we have been much, much closer and faster than we were last year.

You need to look at the Indy 500. I understand I still qualified 33rd. I am well aware. But if you look at our gap to Ganassi last year, it was like six miles an hour, and if you look like year, it was like one and a half. That's a big change. That is a big change.

I think we've done an okay job in many areas, but I think the future is really bright when I look at the changes that we've had mid-season here. We've had a couple people leave that I thought were positives, were good things that they moved on. It has allowed some other young stars to come up and shine and that maybe were held in the weeds there for a little while. And I think the future of the team is extremely bright.

Even if Christian moves on, that's not going to, I don't think, detract us or take away from what we've been able to do. I think the opportunities ahead are really good.

While I'm disappointed we're 16th in points, if you look at our early season in particular, we just missed so many opportunities, fueling issues or really untimely yellows. We were running well at St. Pete, running really well at Barber. Just absolutely killed our strategies.

That happens sometimes. It's just frustrating when it

happens kind of like as consistently.

When you look at Laguna Seca, as well, we probably finished top 10 or right at it, and after where we started, you would have taken that at Laguna, but instead get caught up in somebody else's mess.

There's been a lot of that this year, but in my position, unfortunately, I've been through that a lot, and so I'm experienced with it, and you've just got to put your head down and keep working. All you need to know is you can go to Iowa this weekend and win the double. That's the truth. Things in this series are so competitive nowadays. It is so close at all times that it's very, very frustrating.

But it's also cool to be a part of an era in motorsports like this that's as close as it is.

Q. Obviously we've got quite a lot of oval races coming up, and a lot was made of the hard work that went into improving it in the 500, and I guess we saw that in the race, but I think it's probably fair to say there were a few issues on shorter ovals too. Can any of that work from the 500 translate, and how confident do you feel going into this swing of shorter ovals?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think a lot of it's a product of the oval itself, not necessarily the package, meaning like Iowa has always put on a great race. I get that Penske has dominated, but the mid-pack and everybody else, it's always an exciting race because there's a lot happening.

Obviously Penske has a huge leg up when it comes to the dampening. The dampers and the shocks that they build in house, go look at them on the cars because they look like aliens compared to every other damper in INDYCAR. They're a totally different thing.

So they dominated, but that's gone this year at Iowa. This is a fresh take on what Iowa is going to be. I think that's great for the fans. I think it's great for the opportunity.

Gateway, Gateway was a better race than recent years. We started to get the second lane we wanted to, a little bit of movement there at 3 and 4. How does the hybrid come into play at Gateway because obviously Gateway utilizing it there. Again, as I talked about earlier, very slow speed Turn 1 and 2, so you'll have a greater net effect of the hybrid boost than you would say Iowa or Nashville, et cetera.

Then I think Milwaukee is a question mark. I'll be frank; I think Milwaukee needs some work from the package that we all tested there at. The tire was quite hard, very hard for the grip level that the track had. INDYCAR is aware,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

and they're working hard on the aero package and everything else that they can.

Then Nashville is kind of anomaly because Nashville is like a short oval that's not a short oval. It's high speed, concrete. And I think, much like I said about Iowa, we run a high line practice in Nashville because of the texture of the concrete, it applies rubber very, very fast. So if we run a high line practice, I believe it will come in in Nashville.

So I think you can have some good shows there to finish the year off, but there certainly is a lot of ovals here in the last little stretch.

Q. Do you guys feel like you are in a position to be a bit more competitive than you were last year on these ovals?

A. I think we have work to do still. I think Iowa we can be very competitive. I feel strongly. But I think Milwaukee we struggled as a team, point blank. I felt like Nashville we were okay. We just did a tire test, so I only ran a few sessions, to be honest. I barely ran. But we were okay.

But I think we still need to -- it's an area that we need to improve, but we're going to work hard at it.

Q. What's the mentality, maybe the focus of a driver going from Saturday night under the lights, primetime, NBC race, fresh, to Sunday after 250 grueling laps Sunday morning, hopping in the car, heat of the day? What's the mentality of a driver between those two races?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, Saturday should be a very competitive race because when the sun does start to go down and the track temp will start to decline a little bit, the grip level of the surface changes a lot in a hurry, whereas on Sunday you've kind of got the opposite. It's going to be heating up as the race goes on. A little bit of a unique challenge in that regard.

I think the biggest thing for me is I've set out on this mission to try to finish every race. I was disappointed at Laguna Seca to come nine laps short or whatever, I can tell you that, because this year we've been pretty consistent in that regard.

For me, we want to make sure we go out -- first off, qualifying is important. We're going to want to qualify towards the front, be with the good guys, and try to get rehydrated after that race. Saturday night, I know it's evening, but it's still going to be hot. It's still going to be physically extremely demanding.

We'll see how it goes. It's going to be a very tough weekend, coming off of Mid-Ohio, which on a physical standpoint was about the most physical thing I think I've ever done. Be anxious to see how it goes.

Q. What are your emotion levels like hopping into the car on Saturday night? INDYCAR is cool under the lights, nighttime racing. It just seems that everyone is more jacked up. Do you come back a little bit before hopping in the car?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I don't get too jacked up anymore. I'm pretty calm about every scenario. I guess 300 races or whatever it's been will do that to you. But you kind of know. You've been through that. You've seen it all.

But I love INDYCARs at night, and I really wish -- I've been saying to the HyVee folks for years that I would have loved to see a night race. I'm excited that they were able to pull it off. I've told them for years I'd love to see a Friday night, Saturday night, like late. Hell, that 3:00 a.m. race we had at Iowa once was probably the best race we've ever had there. We don't need to go that late, but I've always really enjoyed it.

But it is close. There's not a lot of margin for error there. You've got to compete on Saturday night and do well, but man, if somebody has an accident or something goes wrong, it's going to be very difficult to get that car turned around and be ready for Sunday. We'll see how it goes.

Q. I want to go back and revisit the hybrid. We saw what happened at the beginning of this race with Scott. Was there any concern with the Honda group relative to the challenge that we saw for Scott at the beginning of the race?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No. Frankly, I wasn't even -- I saw what happened, but I didn't know what caused it. But no. I think we should all be extremely impressed by what INDYCAR has done, extremely impressed by what Honda and Ilmor and Chevy, the combination of the two manufacturers has done, because all we heard about was reliability issues and this and this and this and this and all this stuff for years, right? But the reality is every test that I've done in the car so far and now obviously have done a race with, knock on wood, we've had little to no issues whatsoever.

In that regard, I thought it performed really well. I'm excited to see what the future has. Clearly from the power level, then the deployment power that it provides, that's going to increase over the years. It's going to get better as time goes on.

But obviously it's a bummer for Dixon, but seemed to work pretty well flawlessly for everybody else.

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