

# NTT INDYCAR SERIES

## News Conference

Tuesday, August 27, 2024

### Graham Rahal

#### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: The late summer stretch, let's call it, of the 2024 championship continues with the first-ever doubleheader weekend at the Milwaukee Mile and the Hy-Vee Milwaukee Mile 250s. It's a packed Labor Day weekend. Race one comes up 6 p.m. Eastern on Saturday and then coverage of race two begins at 2:30 p.m. Eastern on Sunday. It's a new track for some, but not all, including today's guest. He has made seven starts at the Mile. He has two podiums, including a second in 2011 and a third in the Series, last race there in 2015, nearly won pole as well back in 2008. He drives the No. 15 Hendrickson Honda for Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. It's Graham Rahal. Hi, Graham. Thanks for joining us today.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thanks, Dave. Thanks for having me.

**Q. You got it. All right. Heading back to the Mile. How much are you looking forward to this?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's been a good track for me. As you just said, a couple of podiums. Kathi said I started on the front row in '08 and '09, which I didn't remember. I remembered '08. But it's probably my favorite oval. I've said that for years. Flat, one mile, a lot of different pavement types, big dip in turn one after corner entry; super, super challenging place. So I'm excited. I'm excited to go back.

Obviously, Hy-Vee, the sponsor this weekend of the race itself; Hendrickson is on our car. Had a good result last weekend with them on the car. So hopefully we'll keep that good luck, good mojo going.

But we're excited, particularly after St. Louis. I know the end result with the engine blowing up, we didn't get to show it, but the car was fast at St. Louis in the race. I thought we did a great job. We were off strategy, on purpose. Starting 14th, we needed to do something a little different, and it was shaping up good. Obviously didn't get to the end to show kind of what we had.

But I'm positive about Milwaukee. Big weekend, double header. Three races to go, all oval. So let's see what

happens here.

THE MODERATOR: And probably worth touching on as well, the fact that Hy-Vee is a partner for this coming weekend. That area has become key for the company and proof again that, you know, you go back to that conversation you guys had in 2020, you never know where conversations take you; right?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. I mean, I was actually quite surprised to see them jump on board with the double header in Milwaukee when they did, but they've been a great partner, great partner of the Series. I think the Series has to be just as grateful as Hy-Vee's support for us as a team for sure.

So, yeah, I mean, it's a big weekend. There's no doubt about it. We want to do well. We need to finish this season off on a pretty positive note. There's been so many close calls, shoulda, coulda, wouldas for us on the 15 car this year.

If I look at all the points that we've given away, if I look at all the grid position penalties that we've had, it's hard to fathom, to be frank. But we are where we are. We need to finish the season strong, and that's what we're aiming to do.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go ahead and open it up for questions.

**Q. Hey, Graham. Just wanted to hit you up over a few questions, one of which is just, you know, the racing that we had at Iowa compared to Gateway, dramatically different. I know there was a lot of negativity towards what we thought we were going to get in Gateway versus what we actually got in Gateway. So do you kind of anticipate that same formula, Gateway in Milwaukee? Do you think we're going to have that same style of side-by-side racing?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, Milwaukee was always conducive to that anyway. Not that Iowa wasn't. I think Iowa, people lacked confidence, including myself. People lacked confidence to go to the second lane. I think in Gateway people were surprised, but confidence grew as the race



went on, that that second lane was there. And even without the second lane, actually, the cars, the aero package, the downforce that we had was conducive to good racing in Gateway.

If I look back at Iowa, Iowa could have been a lot better; and when I say could have been, because if you remember, the Series took off a bunch of downforce when we went back to the race, because of the tire issues that we had in the test. And there was a lot of nerves about that between the Series and Firestone. We didn't have that at Gateway, and I think that both the Series with the downforce levels, but as I told Kara and the entire team of Firestone, I thought Firestone nailed it at Gateway.

And they've been sent through the ringer. I think we're all hard on them, but to try to deal with a car that has the kind of mass that this car does now, it's very different. So my hopes are that we get the right combination for Milwaukee.

At the test in Milwaukee, the tires seemed very hard, but it was low grip. The downforce level was maybe a little light as well. So let's see what kind of transpires. Milwaukee is also a different take in the sense that your second lane in Milwaukee is actually the low line, not the high. So, you know, I don't know what their plan is to get that line to come in and to utilize it. But I think that that's important, and I hope that people are positive about it, and I think after what we saw at Gateway, people will be more positive about Milwaukee and certainly more positive about Nashville. And so hope we'll put on some great races here.

**Q. Awesome. I dig that insight, man. The other one is just, obviously, silly season, being well deep into it now. There's a lot of good drivers out there, and I'm just kind of curious, like I'm not going to ask you who you want specifically in a teammate, unless you'd love to share that, but like what do you look for in a teammate whenever you're trying to find someone to replace Christian next year?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, you know, I've said it for years. I think what I'm looking for is somebody that helps add to the equation. You know, we as a team need to be moving forward, and we need to improve. And that's the gist of it. You know, I want somebody that's going to be able to come in and help me. And so help not only me, but help the team, right?

We need to move forward. We need to try different things. We need to get better. I think we found some good stuff at St. Louis. I'm hopeful that we're going to start there and find some great stuff for Milwaukee. But it would be great to have somebody with experience. I have not been shy

about that. It would be great to have a guy like Alex, but obviously Pietro is doing a much better job. I think what people don't see about Pietro, too, is his race pace has always been very strong. He's a good racer. You know, qualifying pace, things like that are going to improve. But his race pace is very tough, meaning good. Like he's a tough guy; when he's behind you, he's on you like a little bulldog.

And then, lastly, I've said all along Juri deserves a shot; and if it's not with us, I hope somebody looks at Juri because Juri is a professional. And I understand what's happened in the past, but we need to all move on. We've made mistakes in life; we gotta move forward, and Juri is a talented, talented human being that deserves an opportunity, and I thought last weekend he was a pro. He came in; he was fast right away, struggled a little bit in qualifying, struggled a little bit in the race, but those things are to be expected.

So let's see what happens here, man. I don't know right now where we're at as a team. I don't know, you know, where things are going to end up. But there's a lot of great options out there, for sure.

**Q. Assuming you mean Rossi, not Palou when you say Alex.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, yeah, Rossi. I'm close with Alex, too. I'm a cheerleader for him. I always have been, kept in touch with him very closely since the Andretti days and where he could go. Look, guys, the facts are the facts, which is maybe some day I make these decisions, but that day is not today. So, you know, I can have my opinions, I can say my piece; that doesn't mean that's what's going to happen.

**Q. And one last one and I'll stop holding this conference hostage here. Obviously today there was some news on the NASCAR front with them being able to go to Mexico. Once upon a time INDYCAR was in Mexico. We know that Pato has been cheerleading for that for the last several years. I'm just kind of curious your thoughts, either, one, do we belong there? Do we need to go back or do we -- is it just the timing is not right, and is there something that's just holding it up? What's your kind of thoughts on why INDYCAR isn't there?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think you should ask Penske Entertainment that question, not me.

**Q. Fair enough, man.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm all about international expansion.



So, you know. Yeah.

**Q. Fair. Thanks, man.**

**Q. First of all, kind of following up from one of Joey's questions, Juri obviously raced with you again in Portland, but he's been on the sidelines for the year. What have you made of him as a teammate while not on track this year and how valuable is the work he's been doing off the track this year kind of been to you as a team?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I think Juri has great professionalism about him. He is present. You know, often when I go into the shop to go work out, to do whatever it is that I'm doing, which more often than not, I'm just in the way, and it's not worth me bothering everybody, but you know, he's there, a lot.

Obviously, he's been doing some sim stuff for us, but keep in mind we're regulated on sim days by Honda. It's not like we can just go to the sim any day that we want. They're very good partners, and they've allowed us to utilize the Static quite a bit, but the motion sim is restricted quite a bit.

But Juri has been a pro. He's been a pro in that regard. And like I said, you know, here's a gentleman who's -- he was one mistake away from probably being Verstappen's teammate, right? And that's not just me saying it. That's a reality. He's had great success on the international racing scene, and he deserves a chance in INDYCAR racing. And he's a pro in the way that he handles his business, and I just hope -- like I said a second ago, whether it's us or it's somebody else, I hope Juri gets an opportunity to shine because he deserves it.

**Q. And I know obviously there's been testing this year, but heading to Milwaukee and to Nashville, do you believe having raced that before, even a long while ago, will give any sort of advantage to you and the other drivers with experience or has just too much changed over the years?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Too much has changed, and honestly, the guys are just too good now. It's not like it used to be.

You know, I was looking at the 2007 grid at Portland last week. 17 cars. We thought that was a lot. Last week there was, what, 28, whatever. And you just look at the depth of the field now versus the depth of the field then. It's a whole different ballgame. So everybody will be on par quick, and I have no doubt, pretty much everybody tested there, I believe, and so they'll be right there.

**Q. And nothing is confirmed, of course, but there are**

**obviously reports that the INDYCAR is kind of exploring introducing a charter system. As one of the more kind of senior drivers in the Series, I wondered your take. Is that something you would be in favor of being introduced, and kind of in an ideal world, what would you want to be included as part of a charter agreement?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: While the charter is a must-do, it's a shame it hasn't happened yet. If you look at the owners that are in this sport already, they've invested tens of millions of dollars to be there. And just to be clear, I don't even know what the charter agreement says. It's not been discussed. It's -- with me at least. I'm not privy to any of that. But all I do is I sit there -- I'm a businessman, too. You guys know that. And I sit there, and I look at the investment that's been made, and I'm not talking about just in the assets like buying a race car, but buildings, infrastructure, employment, individuals. There's been a long, long, long dedication to this sport by people like us, by my family, Mike Lanigan, like the Foyts, obviously Penske, Ganassi, Andretti. The list goes on. And they deserve the security of that asset. They deserve the security from the Series that Dave and I can't start a team tomorrow and go compete.

While that sounds good, the reality is that undermines the value of being a team owner in the sport, and that undermines the value of the investment that they have made over all of these years. And so I look at it very simply.

My family and Mr. Lanigan have made a massive investment in the building that we have in Indianapolis to provide a workspace and an environment that is unmatched and unparalleled in INDYCAR racing. If Dave and I can start a team tomorrow and just go race and we can race out of a shed at the back of his house, it clearly devalues everything that we have done.

And you can't sit and go, yeah, well, you have property investment and real estate value, because that shop is specifically built to be a race shop. It is not a warehouse. It is nothing other than a top-tier, top-level racing facility. And so we need the security of our investment, in my opinion.

And, again, I say this stuff. I have never seen the charter. I've heard pieces from Dad about, you know, this, that and the other thing, and I probably presented him with questions that he hadn't even thought of yet. But I think it's really important.

And it does affect me on a personal level, because as I said, maybe today I'm not making those decisions and in

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

that position, but some day I will be, and some day that pressure will be on my shoulders and not my father. It'll be on Pat Lanigan's shoulders and not Mike's, right?

So I've gotta look at this with the long runway of where is it going to be. I think it's very important that the charter system is in place, and I think if you want to play in this Series, which is a great thing -- we want a lot of people to play, but you gotta buy somebody out or you've gotta make some sort of tangible effort financially to make it worth everybody else's time.

**Q. Thanks, Graham. That was super insightful. Thank you. Best of luck this weekend. Cheers, Dave.**

**Q. Couple Milwaukee-specific questions for you. First one, Graham, how kind of temperature sensitive is Milwaukee as a track and how kind of does the race get impacted if the ambients are higher or lower, because I know a lot of times this aero package is quite sensitive depending if there's a few degrees temp difference.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, the Aero Package is and also the tire is for sure, but -- you know, it looks warm this weekend, but the weather looks nice. You know, obviously it's kind of an evening start on Saturday, which is great. But, look, I mean, you know, Gateway -- obviously, Gateway got maybe better as the night went on, but the reality was, too, like I thought Gateway was a pretty good race from the start, too. Like I thought almost a better race early in the race because of the fact that it was kind of -- the conditions were more challenging.

When it cools off, that kind of helps even up a lot of the cars. So I think you can see a good race, Tony. I think we've seen it over the years in Milwaukee. You know, Milwaukee typically provides a lot of excitement, and so hopefully we can make that happen. Hopefully we get a great crowd there. Hopefully the momentum and the energy is building.

Obviously it's a big weekend in Indianapolis with a lot of things going on, but hopefully a lot of people choose to come up to Milwaukee from the surrounding areas and support it.

**Q. I think you literally touched on what would have been my second question, which is basically how important is it for this Milwaukee version to work since it has been kind of a stop-start history from when it was '08, '09; then it had a different promoter, then Michael tried it; now the Penske group is trying it.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. I think it's important. You know,

I think it's important for us to -- first off, I think it's an important market for us to be in. Midwestern markets are big, but obviously Wisconsin we've always had a great draw.

But it is a challenging market, particularly this time of year. Everybody is going back to school. Labor Day weekend. It's just a lot of things kind of happening. But to me, I enjoy being in Milwaukee. I think it's the right time of year to be in Milwaukee, frankly, because of the temperatures. Obviously mid summer, very, very hot.

I'm a big proponent of night races for ovals, but that's not happening anytime soon, it doesn't sound like. But hopefully they've done a lot. I mean, Hy-Vee obviously does a lot of promotion and a lot of support. In this case it's Penske Entertainment, so let's see how it works out.

**Q. Is this a good opportunity for Hy-Vee to be able to expand further into Wisconsin? I know they have some regional stuff here. And, also, do you know if there's going to be an on-site grocery store there like there's been in Iowa?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm not sure on those things. I wish I had more insight into that, but obviously they've got great big expansion plans in the Midwest, Indiana as well. But I'm not sure on the mobile grocery store. It's a great thing to have, but I'm not sure.

**Q. Thanks, Graham. Cheers, Dave. Appreciate it.**

THE MODERATOR: Yeah, Tony. I think the release sent out yesterday you'll notice I believe there are eight Hy-Vee stores located in the Wisconsin area with expansion expected. So I think it's going to continue to grow out there.

**Q. Graham, I wanted to ask you about the hybrid assist unit and added weight to the car. On an oval like Milwaukee, does it help or not your car in particular kind of close the ballast gap that you traditionally face just by being physically taller and heavier than others on the grid?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: The ballast gap is still kind of what it is. You know, for me, I've struggled a little bit the last few races to be able to get the center of gravity, the weight distribution forward. My teammates are able to run more forward than me. So that's been beneficial to them in some of the tracks.

I think the hybrid has been an interesting addition. It takes a hell of a lot of thinking. I mean, even at Portland it's like every lap, every time, like off a 12, off a 3, off a 7; maybe 6



if you got -- like there's a lot of thinking that needs to go into the hybrid and how to utilize it.

On the ovals in qualifying, when you're kind of up high speed, it's less effective, but in the races, I think it helps you close the gap. You can use it offensively, defensively. I think it's a positive. So we'll see what happens this weekend.

Obviously Milwaukee doesn't have the min corner speeds of like turn one, two at St. Louis, but it's probably a slower -- it is slower than say Iowa. So I think it'll have a bigger effect than what we saw out at Iowa for sure.

**Q. Graham, first of all, I will ask you about you've mentioned during this press conference that you feel really, really motivated about this weekend in Milwaukee. Just how positive do you think this motivation could be for you considering that it's the third weekend in a row that INDYCAR is competing?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think it's been good to finish the year off with -- look, I like getting into a rhythm and kind of going. Obviously, to go St. Louis all the way to the West Coast and Portland and then back, not ideal in some respects, but I like the cadence of the end of the year here, particularly with us having a little momentum.

I know that St. Louis didn't go the way that we wanted it to, but we had a lot of speed in the race; a lot. You know, things were good. And so we were excited. We were positive about that. And then obviously we went to Portland, a track that we -- the team has done very well at, and all of our cars were very competitive. And to go back now to a short oval, which our St. Louis setup should have some positive effects, we're eager and we're excited for that. So it's a good rhythm here to finish the year off. I'm excited by it. I'm excited to see what we can do here.

**Q. In the previous double header in Iowa, you have the two phases. Bad result, a very good result and your best result of the season. What things do you think you can extract of that weekend, and what things do you think you can extract in order to do better, in order to put on the table this weekend in Milwaukee and in order to make yourself better?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: The biggest thing is the -- Iowa is hard to take much from because it was such a unique race and the cornering speeds were so high and the new track was so smooth and things like that, but I expect that we can take a lot of the setup information and data that we got from St. Louis and utilize it for this weekend to try to improve.

The setup that I ran on -- I can't remember what day; we raced on Saturday, I think -- Friday night and then into the race was a pretty new setup for our team, and so I kind of threw pasta at the wall and just tried to see if it would work or not, and it worked well. The 15 car was the only car that ran that setup in the race. I thought we were very strong. And so we're going to try to take kind of some of that information and try to utilize it for Milwaukee. So a lot of the track will have an effect.

Nashville is not that dissimilar, say, to Iowa as well; a little bumpier, concrete versus asphalt, but the shapes and the speed and stuff is similar. So a lot of these races will have a similar effect on each other. So hopefully we can find some speed and be very competitive.

**Q. And the, last, speaking about Iowa, how confident are you in order to improve that result that you took in the second race in Iowa that it's your best result of the season, if I remember?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, but I think that's a thing. Like we've had a lot of bad misses this year. It's just the truth. You know, I get that was our best result, but, man, if you look at early in the season and even the Indy 500, my pit speed penalty on the second-to-last stop or the last stop, whatever it was, that took away probably a Top 5, Top 6 at Indy, like legitimate. I mean, we were ahead of Dixon and he finished third. Maybe we don't finish ahead of Dixon, but you're going to finish up there somewhere.

And it's been a lot of mistakes this year that have taken a big toll on us. We've had a lot of engine failures. We've had a lot of penalties. You look at Iowa, race one even, we should have finished at least nine spots better, but we had a nine-spot grid penalty.

You look at last weekend, if we start 6th at Portland instead of 12th, I think we finish 3rd or 4th. I mean, I'm really confident to say that. Like I definitely feel that way.

The penalties have taken a big toll on us this year, and we just -- we gotta keep our heads down. I mean, it's simple as that. We just gotta finish the year as strong as we can.

**Q. Okay. Thank you very much Graham, and good luck for this weekend, and I hope you have a great result.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks. Unless there's a followup, we'll maybe end on this, Graham. It's Labor Day Weekend, and I'm thinking about you and your family, and usually it's the U.S. Nationals; it is for that matter, and you're going to

be up in Milwaukee. Maybe just talk about how special that family is on a busy and nice holiday, let's call it, weekend in the United States.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. It's interesting time, you know, for sure, with everything going on. And I know that this year in particular there's been a lot happening with John and everything there. But, obviously, he won't be there this weekend, but he's doing good. Hopefully my sister-in-law, Brittany, can carry the torch and do a great job in the U.S. Nationals for him, you know. And we'll see how it all ends up here.

But it's definitely -- it's a little bit weird, you know, for all of us, I think, for my wife, for everybody, for Court; she'll be at home. In fact, you know, when we get off the call, I gotta go pick up my daughter from her first day of school ever.

So it's a very interesting period of time for all of us as a family, but hopefully Brit can have a great weekend, and we can have a good one up in Milwaukee and kind of carry the torch in a very different manner than maybe what Labor Day Weekend has for our family in general. But we got a lot to be thankful for, so we just keep moving on.

THE MODERATOR: Well said, and hopefully your daughter wants to go back for day two of school.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Dude, she didn't even say bye to me. I sat her down. She's so talkative. She's just so excited to meet kids and do everything, that she literally didn't even say bye. She just -- she was gone. Anybody that knows Harlan knows she's a social butterfly. She's an absolute sweetheart. So, yeah, I have no doubt she'll be excited for her next day of class.

THE MODERATOR: Out of sight, out of mind. Graham, we'll leave it there. Safe travels. We'll see you in Milwaukee.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Sounds good. Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports