

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

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Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Great to have Graham Rahal with us. Looking forward to 2026? 15 years, 20 years, is that right? What's hell happened here?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Close, yes.

THE MODERATOR: Your thoughts on the year ahead for you? A lot of good stuff happening at the team right now.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, there's been a lot of change. A lot of things going on in the off-season. Certainly excited about what we've seen, what we learned, what we've heard, all those sort of things.

Now I think we got a couple of tests coming up that are particularly critical. Phoenix mainly. See if we can make some improvement on the short ovals. A lot of short ovals. That's been our Achilles' heel the last few years as a team. If we can do that, I think we'll be sitting in pretty good position.

I think we'll be strong at the road and street courses. We were last year. We'll see how everything plays out here, man. It's been good. Been good to hear some of the new ideas and concepts that have been thrown around. We'll see.

THE MODERATOR: Open it up for questions.

Q. The latest rumor about going to Washington, DC, how bad ass do you think that could be?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Extremely (smiling). We all follow each other on social media. I know the way some of you guys go (laughter).

It's a massive opportunity for INDYCAR. It's a bit shameful sometimes when I read comments on social media in response to some of your posts. Not that you guys are directing it, but you read these, oh, then that's the one race I'm not going to watch a year. I mean, get a life. Get a life.

If you really are an INDYCAR fan, this is a huge

opportunity that's been given to us. Hasn't been given to NASCAR, not to Formula 1, it's been given to INDYCAR.

Obviously I'm a patriotic guy. No matter who's in the White House, I don't care who it is, if we got to go race in Washington, it would be awesome, particularly in the National Mall. I mean, one of my favorite things to do is go to the National Mall and walk around at night and see what it's all about, and understand history. Good, bad, understand history, see what it's all about.

So for us to go get the opportunity if it happens to race in Washington, I think it's a damn good deal. It's a big-time of year. We have a lot of potential sponsors that are looking at the sport right now. They're really all rallying around this 250, the anniversary, what that can do for them.

Particularly our sponsor is very patriotic. You guys know that. It's a big-time for us. If that race happens, I think it's a great opportunity for our team in particular to lure in some more partners and things like that.

Let's see what happens. I think for INDYCAR racing, we've all been talking for all these years getting opportunities to get street races, go to new venues. It's all laid out there on a grand stage. I think it would be great for the sport. Let's see what happens. I mean, who knows if this is going to actually take shape. But see.

Q. We knew a lot of additions to your team, under Jay Frye's leadership; Gavin Ward. How does the team as a whole get better on the ovals to push everything else forward?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Gavin is probably the most important link there because the rest of our team really is the same as far as the engineering core. There's some new guys and gals. Fundamentally Gavin would be the single biggest diversion of that.

But I'm excited to have Gavin. The ideas that he presented to us were phenomenal right away. I was pretty excited about a lot of what I heard. Also what I liked about Gavin was he came in and fundamentally told us where we were lacking, the data that we had, the aero information that we had, what we were relying on wasn't accurate, things like that.

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That's really critical because when we look at where we were at last year, these are question marks we all had. Gave us some good direction.

We'll see.

Two, he also validates a lot of the good things we were doing, too. You see it on both sides. Hopefully that's a positive for us as we go through this year.

Q. Going into this season, what do you feel like a successful year looks like for you?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, we got to get back on the podium. Obviously want to go win races, but let's walk before we run. We had a lot of top 10s, finished almost every lap last year, bar a couple. Finished every race, but a couple laps down in Milwaukee, Nashville.

For me, I think that's the single most critical thing, get back on a podium, get a lot more top fives, maximize every opportunity. If you look at Detroit last year, we're in the catbird seat or looking really good. Rasmussen it was I think and me, maybe Rossi and me. Rasmussen and me. We have a wheel nut issue.

Those sorts of things took us from being in contention to laps down or certainly at the back, and we can't have those things. As a team, we need to make sure that we don't have those missteps. I feel confident that we won't. I feel like we've got a great group of guys and gals on my team, a great group across the board on all three of our cars.

I think having Brian Barnhart is a huge part of that. We've always been very close, but fundamentally he's an asset that shouldn't be underutilized as we look at this year. He'll be on my stand, too. I think strategy-wise we'll see a good step forward.

I'm excited across the board. I think we got a good opportunity to surprise some people this year, for sure.

Q. What are your thoughts on the new I0B?

GRAHAM RAHAL: The officiating deal?

Q. Yes.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, I don't know about that. Let's give it a few races and then we'll figure it out. I feel like independence is good, but I feel like it really needs to be independent. You know, we'll just go from there.

Like I said, I don't have a strong opinion one way or

another. For me what I look at and what I think about is this: I don't care who owns the series or who is running the series. You make your own bed in many situations.

When Barnhart was in charge, people hated Barnhart. I never did. I got penalties. I had goods, I had bads. Most of the time I had to look at myself and say, Yeah, I probably deserved that. Maybe I didn't and I disagreed, but I'm a grown man and I just move on. I may be upset, given you guys a quote or two, but that's competitive life, too.

Me, my take on Kyle has always been that. He and I haven't seen eye-to-eye all the time. It's a hard spot to be in. Like I said, hopefully the new group is independent, can be truly independent, can give an honest take on every situation, and hear us out and see things through different lights, and at the end of the day we all feel like we've been respected and our views have been shared, whether we agree or not.

It's the same as politics, same as life. I'm not going to agree on a ruling, that I got a penalty and that somebody didn't. We just got to kind of move on with it. Hopefully this year will give a little bit more stability to it.

As I just said, I think it's a pretty thankless job. I think no matter who is in that position, as long as this guy has been around, he's heard the same stories about officiating. It's a tough job, for sure.

Q. You mentioned how critical that Phoenix test is to your team. One of the things that's being talked about is doing a high line session. For your team, does that really matter to you? Do you want to do things that have to do with how the race is going to be versus it's a test I need to figure out my car?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, honestly I think in the good of the sport, yes, we need to work on the high line. It's extremely important. I don't know what NASCAR does with PJ1, whatever they have. It may be completely different on the race weekend. I'm not completely 100% sure.

For me, we put on some pretty good short oval races last year. The high line stuff is working. We goofed and laughed at it the first time we tried it at Texas years ago; helped a little bit in Texas. Helped a hell of a lot more as we've gone through some of these other races.

So let's just see.

I don't know when the last time Phoenix was repaved. It's certainly not what we experienced at Iowa. Hopefully we

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can make it work.

Q. Talk about Mick so far. Louis mentioned he's brought ideas to the table already. Talk about refreshing it is to have a teammate that's all in on the project this early on.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I haven't necessarily had the same sort of thing as far as ideas and stuff. What I would say is I had dinner with him, spent three hours together. He's a really impressive kid. I think he's very, very humble. Very down to earth, very easygoing. Probably be fairly quiet, at least to get going for many of you guys.

I think he's all in on this concept. He spent a lot of time in America the last few years. His sister is here full-time. There's a large intrigue, a large desire to be here, to be a part of this. He's asking me about oval racing. I told him last night, I said, Mick, listen to me, if the car is good, you'll have more fun oval racing than anything in your life. It's a blast when it's right; not so good when it's not obviously.

But I hope that we can provide a really stable footing for Mick to go and kick some ass. I mean, he's a tremendous guy. I told him last night, like many in my generation, I grew up idolizing his dad, a lot of my drive to get into racing may not have been as much from my dad as it was his dad. I think probably most everybody would say that here, drivers at least that grew up at the same time I did.

For him and for his mom, for the whole family, for everybody to be as humble as they are, is really refreshing. I think it's super cool. So I'm excited to have him part of our organization. I hope he's here for a long time, so...

Let's make sure we're all welcoming and kind, for sure.

Q. You mentioned earlier the short ovals were the team's Achilles' heel. What was wrong with the package last year? How have y'all corrected it?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, I don't say this as a smart ass. I generally mean it. If we knew, we would have changed it by now. It's not last year, it's been years, years of struggling on short ovals. Ask Christian. Years of struggles.

I don't know. I got to be honest with you, that even with the new engineering core, no one has come in and gone, Oh, it's this.

What I do know is that Christian Lundgaard can leave Rahal Letterman Lanigan and run up front on a short oval. I know other people have left and gone, Man, the rear stability of this car is so much better than at Rahal

Letterman Lanigan.

We got to figure it out. We got to understand what we're doing that's causing it, frankly. Easier said than done, for sure.

Q. This year marks 40 years since your father's Indy 500 win. Anything special planned for the month of May?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Honestly, I haven't even heard about it or thought about it. He hasn't said anything about it. So Cathy? Have we dreamt anything up? I don't know. I saw my fire suit today. I look like the Star Spangled Banner. I don't know honestly.

Q. I don't know if you've thought about this yet, but with Brittany kind of retiring after last season, Marco stepping away, you don't really have an Unser, Andretti, a Force. You're the last one of the legacy family names. Have you thought about that, as far as Americans?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No. But it weighs a little heavy on me with my end sort of being near, too. It is an interesting time, right, to build up these future names.

Brit, with Brit and everything going on there, too, it's definitely an interesting dynamic for the family, for our family, for them, for the Forces. It's a bit of a weird time. It's weird for them to think about all the daughters. Nobody's racing. Does Big Mama go to race? Does she not? This is unfamiliar territory for all of us.

I guess I'm the only one left. Courtney, every time I tell her that I'm thinking about retiring, the one person that's against it is my wife, big-time. I tell her she's quite selfish when she tells me that. She feels that. Man, what do we have left? Nobody else is in it anymore. It's so different.

But at the end of the day as I tell them, and I would say the same here, we're always going to be here. We're always going to be involved. I don't see the Rahals not being involved or the Forces not being involved, in some capacity, in some way, as one big family in two separate teams, whatever, I don't know.

I think it's important that our name stay involved in the sport, particularly in drag racing. Drag racing is not the same without John Force. I mean, that is just the cold hard truth. The girls have to dig in and be more involved. I think they'll do that. You'll see a presence there.

Q. You have a lot of different personnel that came in. Where do you feel like Rahal Letterman Lanigan got

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strongest?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think coaching. I think getting - sorry Christian - but getting Barnhart for us was a big deal because we struggled a little bit in that area. I think we just needed a little bit of, I don't know, operational fortitude. I don't know what the right word is. We needed somebody up top to give a little bit more stability.

Having said that, obviously we lost Derek Davidson who I had nothing but love for. He's at Carpenter now. I still love Double D. Donnie Stewart left.

Donnie and I were together from when I was 12 years old in go-kart. That's quite an unusual thing. Wanted to move back to Ohio; he did that.

I will also say that the positivity that I see around our shop is at an all time high as of the last couple of weeks. I think are we perfect? No, we're not perfect. This is what I remind guys every day. Every one of us can complain about something. We have to be grown men and women, figure out how to make this work and be as positive as we can. I've seen a lot of positivity. I think our players are always strong. I think we've always had good mechanics. I think Christian will say the same thing.

Our guys at RLL have always been great guys, but we need a little more up top. With Jay at the top, that's changed a lot. It's gotten a hell of a lot better up top. Now the steps below or in sync. A lot of positives.

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