

IndyCar Media

Conference

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Graham Rahal

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Let's welcome the winner of the Firestone 600 to the podium, Graham Rahal, driver of the No. 15 Rahal Letterman Lanigan Honda. You led one lap tonight --

GRAHAM RAHAL: That's all I needed to.

THE MODERATOR: You're the 14th driver in IndyCar history to lead only the last lap of the race and win, first time since ironically James Hinchcliffe in Saõ Paulo in 2013. Take us through your night and through the conclusion.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I had a really good car all night. It was a matter of trying to bide our time a little bit and dial it in slightly. We just needed to add some front wing, and then once we did that, I mean, the car really kind of came to us, and I didn't really change anything after the first or second stop.

Just trying to preserve my tires that last stint and get to lap 205 on the dash before I would pit so that I would have a short stint, 43 laps or so to the finish. Obviously we did that, and I played it just like I wanted to, and I came in, and those yellows came out, which was nice because it closed us up, because honestly I felt -- I think I had the best car, I just kind of lost touch with Hinch, which sounds funny because he dominated. I just felt like if I could get back to him, if I could -- that I felt like my pace was extremely good, and particularly for whatever reason tonight, my car would toe up really well.

I just thought if I could get there, we'd have a good chance, and then we went fighting at the end there, a lot of guys obviously have to talk to Helio a little bit and see what that was all about, but close call there with Helio and Kanaan and I was in the middle, and next thing I know, Helio decided he wanted to go from the first lane to the top and try and take Tony and I with him. It was ugly, but luckily we made it through and bounced around a little bit, recovered, and just kind of pulled her back up and gained back up on the lead pack.

Again, as you guys could see, once I could get there, I could drive through them. It was just a matter of trying to pick your spot, and very fortunately at the end, I



knew I was going to have to try to take Hinch to the top side because there was only one way actually clear him, which was to the bottom, and I was just very lucky it worked, and I have to thank Hinch a lot because, first of all, we're flying home together tonight, so at least it's not going to be awkward, and second of all, he gave me some good room at the bottom and didn't end up in tears. Have to thank him for good, clean driving.

Q. This was one of the best races here in a long time. Were you guys at all conscious of the need to put on a good show here or is that just something the promoter thinks about?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, we love putting on good shows. I thought tonight the conditions were perfect. Everything worked out well. In fact, the sunset being when it was, it allowed us to go out there and run what I think was a bit of a safer race actually because it was clear, like the sun was further down at the start of the race, a little better for your visual, and good clean green race for the most part. Obviously there was some action there at the end, cautions, so to speak, but we put on a great show for Eddie, but we put on a great show for the fans, and I think anybody that watched that race, they can come back next year and understand that when they come to an IndyCar race they're going to get the best racing possible.

You know, it was a great event, a lot going on, geez, four wide and pretty nuts. But it's also a lot different than what it used to be. It is not just flat-out easy pack racing anymore. I mean, you were lifting a heck of a lot in traffic, but the way these cars suck up nowadays, the draft is huge so it just makes the racing awesome.

A lot of fun tonight. A lot of fun. Obviously the sparks were crazy. One time going through 4, it looked like somebody just put a camera right between my eyes and set it off because the flash was so bright right in my face. But it was pretty cool, and a lot of fun for everybody.

Q. Were you motivated by the -- were they two six-shooters did you get to fire?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, you know what I was motivated by a little bit is I kept thinking about Justin there, because a couple years ago we had a great battle here. We came up a little short, and quite honestly I was picturing him shooting those things off there the

last couple of laps, just trying to get it done for ourselves here.

Big special weekend for myself, obviously my wife is here, which is cool. She doesn't get to come that often, so it was a lot of fun. She's seen Fontana and this one, the two most nerve-racking races you could ever see, I think.

I'll be honest, what motivated me the most was this team deserves it. We have had our backs up against the wall this year. We've been just inside the top 10, but nothing has come easy for us, nothing. You look at our performance last weekend, we had zero straight line speed, couldn't figure it out all week, couldn't figure it out at the test. Just frustrated. Guys kept heads down, kept working hard, and this is going to lift their spirits a lot, and hopefully we can go into Watkins and have a good run. I didn't want to go through this year without a win, and on that last yellow, I was telling myself this could be my chance, you'd better get it done, and we're just lucky it all worked out.

Q. Can you explain over the fuel stint, I don't know how many laps, maybe close to 40, I don't know if that's too many, but how does the car change, because it seems like your car was good through the entire stint.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, mine was, but I would say for me, my Firestones were very consistent. I had a lot of front tire degradation. I was having to take the early laps a bit slower to try to save that outside front. You could see Kanaan and Dixon even a little bit quicker than me, Yates, but 15 laps or so into the stint I closed back up because my car, I think, was better on the tires in the long run.

Look, I mean, we're trying to save those tires a little bit and go fight at the end. It was a lot of fun.

Q. What does it mean to you to be able to deliver Honda an outright win head-to-head given how tough this year has been for them?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, it's been tough, but I've got to be honest with you, I just feel like maybe people don't see it this way, but I feel like we've been Honda's best team as a single-car team the last couple years, so it's just very rewarding for us because obviously the proof is in the pudding and this year hasn't necessarily shown that. It has on road courses as an entire package, so it means a lot to us as a team. Trust me, we take a lot of pride in representing Honda. For us as a family, the Rahal family, it's far more than just an engine manufacturer; we're obviously Honda dealers, and it means the world to us to have success on Sunday and sell on Monday, so to speak, and it's a good week because we're actually headed off to the

grand opening of our Honda State College store so at least we can go talk about great things. But it's special for us to get a win for Honda for sure, and be able to call corporate on Monday and have a good talk.

Q. It's been 77 days since this race started; how much were you thinking about the last 172 laps of the Firestone 600 through those five races we've had since then?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Not once. I haven't thought about it once. It's a very strange thing actually. We came down here this morning, and I don't know, it was just a weird day to kind of get into the groove of it. It was like, we landed so early, we had so much time to kill, then such a short practice, and then we just go racing. It was just a very strange sort of thing for me.

But I haven't thought about it at all until this week. This week I knew, again, because of the year that we've had, it was an opportunity. I felt like in June we had a great race car, we just didn't get to see it through, and tonight obviously from the front, we went forward, and it was a great night. Glad it worked out. I'll be excited to come back here next year, and hopefully we can repeat.

Q. At what point did you realize you had cleared Hinchcliffe?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I had mid corner, but I knew he would come back around, because the high groove, if you could stay there, you're just more wound up, so I figured he'd get a run. But when I came out of 4 and I looked in my mirror, I thought I was going to get it. I was telling Robin a second ago, when I got to the stripe, I started to like raise my arm and then I was like, make sure his roll hoop says 2, and looked over and I could see it said 2, and I knew I had it. Just a cool night.

Q. You did realize that maybe you were doing it a little too early?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I started to lift and I thought I was clear. I knew it was going to be very close, but I thought his closing rate was going to have to be extremely quick to completely clear me because he was pretty far back at the exit of 4. So I thought I had him, and like I said, those LED panels that IndyCar started using are awesome because I could clearly see at that time that his car said No. 2, and good battle. A lot of fun. If people don't love that type of racing, they don't love racing. That was as good as it gets.

Q. Eddie showed us a picture, part of Tony's car was on yours?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, Tony had Ed's car on his, Helio had everybody's car on his, and I had a piece of Tony's, which I don't think I ever hit Tony. I did touch

Hinchcliffe. I was outside of him. We were three wide through the dogleg, and he just came up, and I did touch him into 1, but I don't remember ever touching Tony, so I don't know where it came from, but yeah, I've got a little piece of memorabilia from him.

Q. So when you actually did hit Tony is when you went four wide there heading into 3. Did you know you were four wide at that time or when did you find that out later?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I don't know that that was the time. You probably saw better than I did quite frankly. But I knew I was in the middle of Helio and Tony, and we went into 3, and Helio decided to ignore his spotter saying 2 outside, and next thing I know, he's hitting me right in the shark fin and I'm hitting Tony. That's just not smart driving. We're going to have a talk about that a little bit. He's obviously a very experienced guy, a guy that's won here, a guy that's very hungry to prove he can still win with the best team out here, but man, you've got to be -- you've got to be smarter than that. You've got a lot of space. There were three of us in the top lane, and there's plenty of room below you. Even if you are four wide, that means the guy on the bottom has got two and a half lanes to mess around with.

I'll have to go back before I might say too much. I need to go back and watch, and I'll definitely watch this one.

Q. I asked Tony earlier when he came in about you guys bumping into each other and hitting each other. That's not indicative of the IndyCar Series. How crazy was it out there when you guys were trying to keep control of the cars?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, everybody, the cars moving around a lot. I've got to talk to TK and make sure he knows, I don't think he -- I'm not sure that he knows that Helio hit me before pinballing into him, so I'm just glad he and I are okay. But you know, it was just tough racing, tough racing. A lot of guys out there. The three of us -- I don't think Tony has won this year, so we're winless. So we're all going to push as hard as we can to get it. Fortunately we all came out in one piece.

I mean, I don't know how Helio even stayed on our lap because when I saw his car, it looked like a tank driving around it had so much stuff on it. But somehow he stayed on our lap, and next thing I know he's -- it reminded me a bit of a Cup race. Next thing I know he was running up with us, and I'm like, what the hell? Where did he come from? Anyway, good fun.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about how instrumental your spotter is in a race like this, and if there's even time for him to tell you what's going on on those restarts when there's so many cars three and four wide?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, you know this, as well. It's constant communication. Steve does a great job. But tonight I had to keep my eyes particularly peeled at all times to my mirrors. I always trust the spotter but I want to make sure in a lot of cases that we gave ourselves a little extra room. Thankful for those guys. They keep us safe.

Q. You spoke earlier about what happened a couple years ago with Justin Wilson. How much of a weight is off your shoulder now regarding Texas Motor Speedway after what happened four years ago?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it's just nice to kind of tame the beast a little bit. This place is a tough place to win. It's just tough to win. So it feels nice. To not go through this year winless is the biggest pressure I feel off my shoulders. I can't tell you how pleased I am to get that over because not that it would have been a dry spell like last time, but I don't want to hear -- want to have to hear the questions again, so it was nice to just get that.

We were very good at the Watkins Glen test, too, so I hope we can have a good run next weekend.