

IndyCar Media Conference

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James Hinchcliffe

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by James Hinchcliffe, driver of the No. 5 Schmidt Peterson Honda. Also new Dancing with the Stars contestant.

James, let's talk about racing for a moment. We are here at Sonoma Raceway, the finale of the 2016 season. Obviously quite a journey for you this season. Your first season back in the car since the accident, the great pole position at Indy, a lot happened. Looking back on your season, what would you say are the highlights and what are you looking forward to at Sonoma?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think as a team we can feel proud for the effort we put forth. Certainly there were weekends that didn't go our way. But the pace was there almost every weekend.

We got really good this year at turning bad situations into okay results. We had some problems at Pocono, pulled off a top 10. At the halfway point of Mid-Ohio, I think we were dead last and pulled out a top five. It wasn't lucky yellows and stuff like that. It was a good car, good driving, good pit stops, good strategy.

Results like that are the type of races that put you in championship contention. If you ignore the Texas penalty and you make those last two corners at Watkins Glen, we're a handful of points out of third position, which speaks volumes for this team and just shows how strong we've become over the last two seasons.

I think we take a lot of positives out of this season for sure, especially because of those last two weeks with the penalty and Watkins, we don't feel we are where we deserve to be in the championship. But that happens.

Like I said, the hard part is going fast. We seem to have been able to do that, capitalize on good opportunities, do pretty good damage limitation on bad weekends.

Coming into here, we don't have championship goals that we may have been considering two weeks ago. It's an all-or-nothing weekend for us. Sure, double points are nice, but we want to get that win on the

board. We were so close at Texas obviously. Weren't able to pull that one off. We're kind of flat out going for the win here at Sonoma.

THE MODERATOR: Two long practice sessions yesterday. What can we expect out of qualifying and the race tomorrow?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Qualifying is going to be a bit of a lottery. The track here is so difficult. The grip is so low. The tires last exactly one lap, maybe even less than a full lap, to be fair. So you're going to see a very interesting grid.

Some guys are going to nail it, some guys might not. You may see some surprises, not only of guys being up further than you'd expect, some surprises in terms of maybe quick guys being down a bit further.

You literally get one shot. It's almost like playing roulette. You're going to go out there, do one lap, and see where it lands on. That's a huge ask for the drivers certainly.

And then from the engineer's point of view, trying to make what is left of the tires then last a stint over the race. That's going to be a huge challenge as well. It's a monumentally challenging place for us. But hopefully we'll put on a good show.

THE MODERATOR: So on the other end of the professional spectrum, Celebrity Family Feud this season, now Dancing with the Stars. How has your life evolved and changed this season with all of these national opportunities you've put yourself into?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I've been on TV a lot more, I guess (laughter).

No, it's been a lot of fun. The Feud opportunity was something that T.K. and I were especially very excited about. Big fans of the show. Happy to walk away with the win on that one, got the fast money. Good for the Indy Family Foundation. Happy to play for a good there.

It's funny. That opportunity sort of led to others. Was on the Steve Harvey Show after that. Then it was actually one of the producers for Dancing with the

Stars was in the audience that day, and that's kind of how that whole conversation started and led to this opportunity.

It's kind of crazy how it's all sort of snowballed from one thing, but it's certainly been a lot of fun. I think it's been good exposure for the series and helped people learn a little bit more about the personalities in IndyCar. I think we have a good cast on this show. We need to get it out there more.

THE MODERATOR: You walk into your first live show this past Monday. It went extremely well by all accounts. What was going through your mind leading up to that day? Were you more or less nervous than on a race weekend?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Very different kind of nerves, but in a lot of ways more nervous. I've been racing 20 years. I have a fair amount of experience. I've been through pretty much everything that could happen on a racetrack at one point or another.

I hadn't been through anything on a dance floor, good, bad or indifferent. There were a lot of unknowns for certain. Doing it not only in front of a live studio audience, but a live television audience, something I've been doing for two weeks versus something I've been doing for two decades.

It was very nerve wracking. But I have an incredible partner in Sharna Burgess. She kept me calm. We were joking literally right up until the count came down. We almost missed the start of the song because we were cracking jokes on the dance floor. I didn't see the video package leading into it. I don't remember what we were joking about. We were joking about something.

I honestly don't remember much of the dance at all. I just remember ending and thinking, That actually went pretty well. I was floored by the scores and the judges' comments. Couldn't have gone any better.

Problem is we set the bar high and people will expect good dances. Not sure we can repeat that.

THE MODERATOR: Sharna was at Texas. She was here yesterday. You gave her a ride in the two-seater. What was that kind of like to flip worlds?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think she enjoyed it. The interesting thing for me is educating people about IndyCar racing, what it takes to do what we do. Sharna has had quite an education over the last couple weeks, learning how athletic drivers have to be, how focused they have to be, the concentration level required to compete at this level.

She kind of saw from the periphery of Texas, but didn't really see anything on track, we didn't really know each other. Now having learned all these things from me, getting to come here, see some of it on the track, experience the car herself, again opens her eyes to the next level of what it really takes to do this.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for James.

Q. Have you ever danced before? Did Helio give you any pointers about being on the show?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I had never danced in any appropriate way before. I had never danced in any sober way before, is probably the best way to put it (laughter). I imagine it wasn't pretty. I was a complete neophyte going into this. Before the show, I had no desire to learn how to dance. It was just not even on my radar.

I can now say I've kind of learnt to enjoy it quite a bit. It's fascinating. It's cool learning something new.

So, yeah, I mean, the expectations going in were quite low. But I did get some pointers from Helio, not so much on particular dances as much as just kind of learning a bit about the process, what I was subjecting myself to, how to get through it week-to-week.

Q. Helio was a legitimately good dancer. In the All-Star edition he didn't advance very far because it comes down to a popularity contest. How do you win those votes? Does IndyCar have a big enough platform for you to get those votes?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I got to say, IndyCar deserves a ton of credit for the amount of effort they've put behind this campaign, for lack of a better term. We've morphed it to look like a mock campaign given the time of year.

We'll see. It certainly won't be through lack of trying. They've put a lot of effort behind it. We have campaign shirts, buttons, yard signs, the whole bit. I think it's working because analytics show that after the first week, 'hashtag pink stop and go' was the most talked about team name.

So going into it with nothing, I mean, probably being the least followed, smallest social media personality of all the contestants on the show, to come out of week one with that, I think it speaks volumes.

Now that people kind of know who we are a little bit after that first show, hopefully that can just keep growing. Obviously the impetus is on us to keep dancing well because that helps.

We'll see. We'll go from there. But you're right, it is to a certain degree a popularity contest in that sense. We're putting a lot of effort on our side. IndyCar is helping out a tremendous amount. The racing community is huge. We're going to lean on our friends over in NASCAR as well. They got Michael Waltrip pretty far. He wasn't the smoothest on his feet and he made it pretty far in the competition.

Q. Hinch, you've got a lot of logistical challenges. Coming here, going back to L.A. You also had that earlier this year with the Indy 500 pole. Did going through that Indy 500 circus help?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think there is a lot of time in an IndyCar driver's career we're pulled in a million different directions. We have to be able to flip the switch, focus on one thing, flip the switch off, focus on something else, travel, whatever. It kind of goes with the lifestyle. In a lot of ways doing this for a living prepared me for taking on this extra responsibility and extra task.

The scheduling and logistics have been a bit of a nightmare over the last couple of weeks. Fiona deserves a ton of credit for getting me all through it.

After this weekend, it kind of calms down a little bit. This was always going to be the worst one for us. Coming off the first show, really only getting Tuesday and Wednesday to rehearse, I was gone Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, fly back Sunday night, show up Monday for the show. I had like seven days of rehearsal before the first one. I get two before this one. So go easy on me this week. Might not be quite as pretty.

But it certainly has been a challenge. It's the kind of thing as an IndyCar driver in a sense we're kind of used to.

Q. I hate to continue this questioning along the dancing, but a lot of the non-fans don't understand the physicality involved with racing. Can you compare the physical aspects of the dance and the concentration aspects through the entire dance, your partner reacting, that type of thing?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It's interesting. I really wish Sharna was here to explain it from her side. Hearing her input on it is actually quite fascinating.

What certainly helps, the concentration is a huge thing. In football, plays last about 10 seconds. That's kind of what those athletes are really trained to be focused on. It's hyper, super intensive for that short burst of time.

When you're getting into dances that are one, one and a half, two minutes long, that's longer than they're used

to having to concentrate. We do this for three hours. So the concentration side of it is not very difficult for us.

Running around a dance room, yes, it gets the cardio going. Again, some of these athletes are good over short sprints, but if you do it longer, that's not what their body is trained for. We do this for three hours. That's not an issue for us.

One of the most fascinating things that Sharna talked about is how receptive I am to small inputs. When you're driving a racecar, the racecar is talking to you. Every part of your body is getting some sort of input from the racecar. Everything that's touching the car, your back, your bum, your head, your legs, your hands, everything is getting some sort of input. We are making instantaneous, very minute adjustments based on what the car is doing.

Dance, you can do the same thing. Obviously, I'm leading as the male or whatever. But let's be real, she's driving this car. She said that when she does something to try and adjust me or taps me on my elbow or shoulder, she said not only do it recognize it and feel it, I adjust instantly. She said the only other partner she's ever had that could do that was her partner last year Nyle who was deaf. He was just so much more in tune with his other senses he could make these instant adjustments.

I explained that's what you do in a racecar. When you go through a corner, you don't just go through, turn and come out. When you turn, you're making miniature adjustments that the human eye can't see, but we know we're making. We're taking every sense we have in our body and adjusting accordingly. That has been a huge asset on the dance floor.

Q. You're doing a Latin dance Monday night. Which one?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah. Wasn't really looking forward to this. I keep calling it the Casa Lupe, but I don't think that is right. Paso Doble. There's a Nacho Libre, Chalupa. I keep getting it wrong. I'm not good with this stuff (laughter).

Q. You touched earlier on all the different exposure you've had. You have become one of the two faces of IndyCar. How do you embrace and accept and expand on that role, the responsibility of pushing the series forward?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: For me, in a lot of ways, doing Dancing with the Stars was to help spread the IndyCar message. That was honestly one of my reasons, bigger reasons, for doing it. I'm such a fan of this sport. I have been since I was a kid. I'm now in a super fortunate position to be involved in it and

essentially in a sense be a spokesperson for it. I want to tell the story. I want to show people how cool this sport really is. Any opportunity I get to do that, I'm all in.

I mean, yes, it does end up benefitting me. The better the series does, as a person involved in the series, the better I could potentially do.

Really for me it's about spreading the message. This is my family. This is my sport. The more that people learn about what we're doing here, the more people are going to enjoy it because I don't know anyone that comes that doesn't enjoy their time here. That just benefits everyone here and everyone that I love and I work with.

Q. This dancing stuff, are you also doing the typical classic dancing like the Vienna waltz and tango? In case this dancing stuff becomes successful on television, is it also a start of a second career in the television business for you?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, to answer your first question, yes, there will be the Viennese waltz, tango, all sorts of different dances. The competition is 12, 13 weeks. I don't think we repeat dances. We'll be learning a bunch of different styles, providing you make it that far.

I honestly don't know what it will do for my television career. I mean, hopefully I'm still in a racecar for a while. We don't have to worry about that for a bit. But maybe it sets me up for some post-driving opportunities.

Q. Who chooses what dance you do? Are there any things that you're learning from the dancing that you can use on the racetrack?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, the producers on the show, they decide the song and the style of dance. So we don't usually get that until Monday night or Tuesday morning for the following week. So it's all kind of last minute.

You spend the first few days learning some basic steps, as the pro will then build a routine and do the choreography when we get the song. The creative process of it all I've found fascinating. Sharna is widely regarded as one of the best choreographers on the show. Watching how she does it when she gets the song, knows the style of dance...

There's no creativity in IndyCar. We deal with engineers. They're not creative people in the traditional sense, right? So you don't get to witness that creative process in my day job. I'm not a creative person either. It's not a criticism, it's just an

observation.

So watching someone who is an artist, who is creative kind of get involved in that has been really fascinating for me. I really quite enjoy it.

But, yeah, you don't know until kind of last minute what they're going to be throwing at us.

Q. I don't know how you can say you're not creative. Have you heard of the Mayor of Hinch Town?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Goofy, but I don't know about creative.

Q. I'm surprised they're having you doing the paso doble because it seems to me that's usually a dance that's done later in the process. Probably you'd have a Latin-type dance. Can you be a real serious, dramatic dancer because that's what it requires? I don't see you as that type of person.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I don't think I can be a very serious about anything. I don't think that's really my shtick. You know, that's the other side of this, right? I struggled with this on the foxtrot a little bit. It is a performance. It's not just about getting the steps right. It's the energy. You're acting, essentially. It is quite literally a performance. I'm not really an actor.

They're like, James, great dance. Stop focusing so hard. You look like you're trying to go to the bathroom or something. That was like genuinely a big struggle. I'm an analytical mind. I'm like this step, this step, this beat, do that. You could see on my face that's clearly what was happening. It was not naturally coming through me.

That was a big challenge in the foxtrot. I think I managed to crack a smile about halfway through the routine on show night. It took a solid 30 seconds to get there.

With paso, you're right. From the get-go, from the start of our routine, you kind of need to be in character. That is an element of it that I am definitely still learning.

We'll see how that plays out. Good to know, though, that paso usually doesn't come in until later in the season. Glad they threw it in now when we had two days to practice. That was super sweet of them.

Q. Were you a regular dancer before?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: No, no, no. Not at all. I wasn't even an irregular dancer. I was not dancing in any way, shape or form.

Q. (No microphone.)

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: No, never did that. Don't plan on starting either, if I'm honest. Like I said, this is really just me hanging on for dear life as Sharna does all the work. I don't think I'm going to be able to do this with anybody else, I don't think.

THE MODERATOR: James, good luck this weekend and good luck on Monday.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Thank you, guys, for coming out.