

# IndyCar Media Conference

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## James Hinchcliffe

### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're delighted to welcome Schmidt Peterson Motorsports driver James Hinchcliffe. James last night finished runner-up on season 23 of Dancing with the Stars, the hit celebrity dance competition show that airs on IndyCar's partner network ABC. James finished second from 13 original celebrity competitors, with Olympic gymnast Laurie Hernandez taking home the prize as the champion.

First of all, James, congratulations.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously it's been a very exciting and yet very grueling 11 weeks of competition. It didn't stop at the conclusion of last night's show. You left Los Angeles to New York City where today you appeared on Good Morning America and The View. Have you had any chance yet to let it sink in what you accomplished?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Not quite. I think it's all a bit of a blur. Certainly the two-day finale was exhausting. Getting through Monday night was obviously big, then the 24-hour challenge and everything that went into Tuesday's show was really just a very cool way to cap off what was an incredible season.

If you had told me at the start that we would have ended up in the runner-up position, I wouldn't have believed you. It was a huge, huge reward for a lot of effort that both Sharna and myself put in. I can't thank her enough for all that effort and for being so good at her job to make me capable of being part of a team that got up that high in a very tough competition.

THE MODERATOR: Can you put into words how this experience has changed you as a person.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: What it's really done for me is reinforced a belief that I had beforehand, which was that you can do anything you put your mind to. I came into this competition obviously with zero experience in the craft, a lot of apprehensions at doing it.

Once I committed, I focused and put 100% of my effort towards it. Luckily the IndyCar season was winding

down so I didn't have obligations to my day job to fulfill, could give myself to it, and look what happened.

To finish runner-up to someone that is an Olympic gymnast I think is a pretty impressive feat for someone who sits for a living.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions at this time.

**Q. You told me when you went into this contest you had no experience in dancing at all. Where the heck did that come from? At the end of that thing, one of the judges said you're the best male dancer that show has ever seen. Where the hell did all this come from?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I wish I knew, I really do. I have to give a ton of credit obviously to Sharna for having a teaching style that really resonated well with me, obviously just being very good at her job, choreographically, creatively.

It was a lot of hard work. I won't lie. It was not something that came naturally. She'll be the first to tell you that every Tuesday morning when we're starting from scratch, it was pretty rough.

But by putting in the hours, not being afraid of a little hard work, some long sessions, late nights, repeatedly watching videos trying to improve, it's amazing what can happen.

**Q. Not a lot of sleep for you over the last 11 weeks, especially since last week. Helio did this twice. Would you be interested in doing that again?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It's funny, when we were about halfway through the competition, I thought to myself, if for whatever reason I was asked to go again, I probably wouldn't.

With what I've learned, how far I came as a dancer in that sense, then how close we came to the top spot, I think I probably could be talked into it again.

**Q. From this experience, what do you most take back to your driving career?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think for me it's, again, just kind of reaffirming things I already knew. Obviously I put 100% of my effort into my day job, into racing.

There's no need to convince myself that working hard and giving 100% is the right way to go about that.

But certainly not being afraid to kind of tackle new things even within the sport, whether it's racing different cars in different series, trying to match a teammate in a certain corner with a certain setup. It's really just about making sure that you give yourself enough credit for what you're capable of doing.

**Q. Beyond learning the steps and the choreography and all that, which was difficult enough, you're having to do this in front of millions of people, very public situation. How hard was that part of it beyond just the physical nature of learning the dances?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It was a challenge, for sure. Unlike athletes from other sports, be it football or hockey, basketball, tennis, golf, doesn't matter, in racing, though the crowds are just as big if not bigger, you don't see them, you don't hear them.

When you're doing something in front of a live audience like that, it has an effect. The very first week, that was the biggest thing I took away from the show on Monday, was the sound. Every time you did a move that the crowd liked, they let you know about it. It kind of caught me off guard. I'm not used to hearing people cheer every time you make a pass on the track. You're so hyper focused on what you're doing. I had to teach myself to make sure it didn't throw me off and have me forgetting steps. It really was just an element I wasn't prepared for.

**Q. Is this something that Helio is going to be able to hold over you for the rest of your lives?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I'm never going to hear the end of this from him. I'm well aware of that. That's fine. He did a tremendous job. He did what he had to do. He was able to walk off with the trophy.

We were not quite able to do that, but I was at least up at the sharp end, so we can still be proud of the effort.

**Q. When you look at the feedback week-to-week, how much did you and Sharna look at other performances that other teams had done? Is there anything you can relate to looking at data or other things of that sort?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, it was very similar in that sense. That's something that Sharna picked up with me very early, is that I am kind of an analytical learner. I am used to looking at data and applying it on the racetrack.

For me, whether it was watching video of other dancers, a certain dancer doing a certain move,

playbacks of our own videos that I could look at what I was doing, it was the fastest way for me to learn, was to see what needed to be done, apply it.

There were a lot of parallels in the sense in how I wanted to make myself better as a dancer and how I would do the same thing on a race weekend as a driver.

**Q. I looked at a picture of you from a couple months ago. You had kind of a chubby face compared to now. What physical part of this program can you take to your racing endeavors?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Honestly the physical requirements are quite different. As you point out, I look quite a bit different now than I did at the end of the race season. The muscles that you need, the type of endurance that you need to dance is very different from driving an IndyCar.

While it's an incredible amount of work, it's an incredible exercise, an incredible workout, I'm going to have to go back to the gym and get back what I need to be competitive in an IndyCar.

There's not a whole lot from a physical point of view that translates. Maybe my feet will be a little more gentle on the throttle, but that's about it.

**Q. Will you get anything out of it mentally and will that carry over?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, I think just being able to overcome the kind of fear, being outside of your comfort zone in front of such a large audience in the room and on TV. It will help anytime I find myself in a situation where I am nervous or anxious about going into a race or making the move or whatever.

Any kind of opportunity to flex your mental muscles in that sense and have that kind of experience will pay dividends in your own sport.

**Q. Over the season, you had a ton of support from other drivers such as Conor Daly and Alexander Rossi as well as Helio Castroneves. How did that support motivate you each week?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Honestly, the support from the motorsports world was incredible. Alex and Conor were at the first show. They made it to a couple throughout. Charlie Kimball was there the last night. The amount of tweets of support from guys in the IndyCar paddock, guys in the NASCAR paddock, guys overseas, it was overwhelming. It was great to get that feedback and see that, A, they were watching, and B, they were supporting.

I can't thank just the drivers, but the fans, crew,

officials, everybody in the motorsports world backed us and were such a big part of us making it to the finals in the first place. We're just appreciative of that.

**Q. It looked like each and every week you started to gain confidence. Was there a turning point through this process where you had a chance to look back and say to yourself, I really can do this, win this thing?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: The nerves never fully went away. You certainly get more confident with the process, knowing what to expect in certain situations. That helps. Ultimately it was all still very new to me, even right through to the end.

But in week six, I believe, when we had our rumba, it was the week that Julianne made that comment, I started to gain a little more confidence in what I was doing. Before the judges had said anything, because of how I felt, I started to adjust the way she was teaching, really forcing me to do more, to lead more, to kind of be more the role that I should be in the traditional ballroom (indiscernible).

Being able to do that, execute that, gave me a huge boost. That was a point where my mindset maybe changed a little bit.

Going into it, I was assuming I would be gone by week six. Instead, around week six is when it kind of got kicked into the next gear, so to speak.

**Q. What do you have against buttons?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Against buttons?

**Q. Yeah, your shirts.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Oh, I think you're giving me far too much credit.

**Q. Good thing that race suits have zipper.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yes, let's be very thankful for that.

**Q. What part of the show were you least prepared for?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: The dancing parts (laughter).

No, honestly, I sort of alluded to it, performing in front of a live audience was a very new experience for me. I've obviously spoken in front of crowds and things like that, but never had to perform in any capacity, either in sport or life. Kind of just understanding what that can do, how the energy in the room changes when that happens, it was just (indiscernible). You seemed to pick it up an extra notch on show night because of the energy from the room. It was pretty cool.

**Q. In the first week you go out and tie for the highest score. For a guy who went in thinking you had no experience and didn't expect much, what did that do for you?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, it terrified me, to be honest. There was some sort of expectation. I figured (indiscernible) downhill from there. Luckily that wasn't the case. Sharna and I were able to keep developing and keep working on my ability, my technique. We continued to kind of stay at the sharp end all the way to the end, which was a big surprise certainly.

As you said, I came in not really thinking I was going to be around long. The way it ended just shows that she knows what she's doing. It was a pleasant surprise for everybody.

**Q. Is there someone you pegged as a favorite right off the bat before the dancing started?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, I think everybody came in thinking Laurie was kind of the one in charge. It was essentially hers to lose in a way.

I mean, credit where credit's due. Laurie and Val did an incredible job the entire season. She's a phenomenal dancer, incredible person. She has an infectious smile, bubbly personality that you can't help but love. They were very deserving winners. Huge congrats to them for that. It's been a very good year for her.

**Q. How hard was it to adapt when Sharna was injured and you had to change your dancing partner?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, it's funny, I made the joke at the time, even though it's serious, that I danced with one partner for my entire dancing career. It was a true statement.

If you think about it, everything I ever learnt about dancing, every step I'd ever taken on a ballroom floor was with the same person. To still take someone that is a complete amateur and switch that up, I definitely had challenges.

Every teacher has their own style in that sense. Every person feels different to dance with, the same as you could build two IndyCars in the same (indiscernible).

It was a challenge for someone that isn't trained in the craft. But Sharna was still there to help on the coaching and teaching side. Jenna obviously did an incredible job with us for the three weeks she was kind of part of the team. We thank her for that. I was lucky we still had Sharna in the room kind of running the ship.

**Q. You seemed to fit right into the character of each role of each dance. Do you have a natural talent for that? Have you ever thought about acting, taking on a movie role?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Not really, no. I mean, if you watch back to the first week's performance, there was not a whole lot of emotion or character in my face at all. There was a lot of thinking hard about steps face. I learned very quickly that the performance element of it was a huge part of it. The steps are almost secondary. You got to sell it. You got to sell what you're doing.

It's something that Sharna worked very hard with me on, to try and make better. We got to the point where she could really start embracing creative concepts that had characters because she was confident we'd be able to perform them the way she wanted. It was another element to the whole thing, another part I didn't realize I would end up enjoying as much as I did.

**Q. Did you have a favorite dance that you enjoyed performing more than others? How was that craziness at The Grove?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: The Grove was out of control. I'm not entirely sure how they logistically pulled that off. The cast and crew deserves a pat on the back for making their mark on Tuesday.

As far as a favorite, it's tough to choose. The most memorable week was the tango. The rumba, like I said, was kind of one that stood out to me where I kind of grew a bit as a dancer. The Argentine tango, leading her through the entire dance while blindfolded, as well. And the freestyle was a very personal one and very beautiful one.

There's a lot of dances that happened. The Viennese waltz on Halloween, that one went viral. That was a cool one to be part of, a cool character to play.

We had so much fun this season, we really did. She's such a creative genius, there were so many pieces we really enjoyed performing together.

**Q. Being a great sport, you accepted second place honorably. For those of us who don't know much about racing, isn't going up against an Olympic gymnast in a dance competition kind of like going out on a racetrack against the Penskes with an extra hundred horsepower?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It is a little bit, yeah, for sure. There were obviously some elements of Laurie's day job that prepared her very well for the competition. She came out strong and did it.

It's the nature of it. It's not just about steps, like I was saying before. While maybe some of the steps came a

bit more naturally, she did an incredible job embracing the characters she had to play, tapping into the emotions.

She's 16 years old. She hasn't had a lot of life experience to tap into. She's not an average 16-year-old, she's one that has been in a very specific I don't want to say bubble, it makes it sound like I'm saying it in a negative way, but she's been a very focused kid for a number of years.

It was tough for her, too, to be able to kind of tap into those emotions she had while dancing and sell those characters. But she did it brilliantly. Like I said, credit where credit's due, they really did deserve it.

**Q. Beginning of May, at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, I know you didn't want to focus on what happened to you in 2015. At times it was a subject that you really didn't want to talk about. What was it that made you embrace it? It seemed like after you won the pole for the hundredth Indianapolis 500, you were more at ease talking about it and you even made this Dancing with the Stars a little bit of the story of your comeback.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: For me, and we talked about it a lot last May, I just wanted to change the story. I wanted to change the narrative and give everybody a new story to talk about.

Once we won the pole, proved to everyone that we were back, we were as strong as ever, stronger than ever, then it was easier to have the conversation again. There was no more people asking questions about, What's going to happen when he gets back to Indy? Is he still going to be able to do this, that or the other? We answered that question on Pole Day.

To me, that made it a lot easier then to talk about it. Coming into the competition, it wasn't really something that was on my mind. But when we had the opportunity, especially in the freestyle at the end there, to kind of like I said on the show, fill that gap in the story, almost give it a bit of closure, it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

**Q. You seem to have made a lot of friends amongst the fellow competitors. Of those, who did you make the best friends with? Might we see some of them show up at IndyCar races in 2017?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think you'll see a lot of the season 23 cast at various IndyCar races over the season. We made some great friends, certainly obviously Calvin and I's friendship. He definitely wants to come out to the 500. I think it would be silly to not have him be the grand marshal at one of the races in Detroit. That's my opinion.



Certainly a lot of the cast are based out on the West Coast. Both Long Beach and Sonoma are popular ones on the list.

Kenny, Baby Face, originally from Indianapolis, has a highway named after him there, has never been to the race. He's told me he will be my guest at this year's running. He already booked it off.

We're going to see some of the people for sure. There were definitely some great members on the cast, made some great friends that I'll hopefully keep for a long, long time.

**Q. Take us behind the scenes. You were essentially learning a new track, a new layout every week. Sometimes you had to learn two in one week. Tell us a little bit about how that came together, how the dances were designed and did you have input. Secondly, describe the process. When you learned the dance specifically, did you break it in segments, look at it as one. Tell us about the process behind the scenes.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: One of the most frustrating parts about the whole process is that you work all week on perfecting a certain routine. You go out and perform it on Monday. Let's say you nail it. You show up on Tuesday, everything you learned the week before is thrown out the window and you start from scratch.

What is so frustrating about that is you didn't feel you were making any progress as a dancer. You always felt like it was your first week on the job. That was a tough thing to overcome at first.

The way they come together is quite simple. Sharna will put the moves to music. She'll teach you the basics of a given style, whether it's straight legs or bent legs, whether it's heel leads or toe leads, how your hips are supposed to move on certain steps, some of the fundamentals of a given style.

Then she'll start putting some specific moves on you, see how those work, see what tools she essentially has in her toolbox to build a routine.

There's no way you're going to be good at every step in a samba or a rumba or whatever. She would run you through different series and combinations to see what you were capable of doing, what looked good on you, and then she would start building a routine based on what worked.

She was always very good at knowing what my strengths and weaknesses were, making sure the routines were going to highlight what I was good at.

After all, that's what we're trying to do.

You would break it up into sections. You would get through the steps. You'd eventually get through it faster. You would start polishing things like frame and footwork. You'd eventually get that section to music, then videotape it, move on to the next section. At the end of the day, when you'd go home, you would sit in bed, watch the different sections, try to beat the little notes she had for you into your head. That was my life every single night for the last three months.

**Q. How did it feel when you occasionally over the course of the whole show had missteps? Can you liken that at all to maybe not getting a corner in racing the car?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: For sure. It's very similar. In racing, I like to say there are a thousand variables that can affect the outcome of a race. As a driver, you control about 10. If I'm affected by one of the 990 that are out of my control, I'm pretty good in dealing with it. Where I get frustrated is one of the 10 things I'm in control, I screw up. I'm very hard on myself. I'm not hard on my mechanics if there's a failure, a bad pit stop, another driver if they take me out. For the most part I'm pretty hard on myself. When I make a mistake, I'm pretty hard on myself.

In this case, it's the same situation. In a lot of situations, we don't control what style we get, what song we get. All we can control is what happens on the dance floor. We don't control what number comes up on the paddle. We don't focus on scores. We just focus on what we can do.

When it counts, it's game time, you do make a mistake, it is tough. It's part of learning. It just shows I'm human, not a dancer. The important thing was to be able to fight through that stuff and, A, finish that routine as strongly as you can, like we did in our jazz number, then try to come back even stronger the week after.

**Q. As far as the two-night finale goes, the freestyle Monday night, I think we could all see how emotional it was for you. In the package, you talked about how Sharna kind of helped you complete your story. Could you elaborate on that just a little bit and maybe talk a little bit about what she helped you complete from where you were at the crash point to where you ended up.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, it all came from a comment that Dr. Pullman made in his comment during the most memorable year packet. He firmly believes there was a point where subconsciously I made a decision to fight for my life.

In the immediate aftermath of that accident, the chance

of survival was very low. A lot of people wouldn't have made it through. He firmly believes that it was because of some sort of fight inside me that helped him do his job and ultimately get me through that.

Sharna started asking me questions about that. I obviously have no memory of that. That's not something that you do consciously. It's a subconscious thing. So from somewhere in the time from when I lose my memory to when I wake up, that happened, that decision to fight happened.

It's not something I had really thought about, what that moment would have looked like or what that moment really meant. I'm not sure if I was purposely not thinking about it, because it is a scary thought, or something that had never crossed my mind.

She saw that was a very, you know, important moment. That's what she wanted to create. For me there was kind of a gap in the story because I had not really thought about that, whether it was a subconscious or conscious decision. She so beautifully built that part of the story for me.

Now I have a visual reference to what I think happened and how that went down inside me. It was a very cool process to be a part of.

**Q. As far as going through this process, working with Sharna, what will you cherish most about the friendship that you two have built?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: The thing for me was just her and I operated in a way that we used humor to get through most situations. I'd be lying if I said there weren't days that were stressful to the point where you wanted to walk out of the studio, have a go at each other kind of thing. Not even at each other, but just the situation.

We always managed to use humor to get through it. That's how I conduct myself in every aspect of my life. I do it in racing, my day-to-day life, my other businesses. It's just always been an effective tool for me.

From day one, she operated the same way. I think that's what made us such a good team. I liked the way she taught, she liked the way I learned. At the end of the day we knew when to take it seriously, when to let loose, let it be a little bit lighter and have a good laugh.

**Q. What did Sam think? Obviously you've had a lot of support from the whole IndyCar community. What were Sam's thoughts on how you did in this whole thing?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Sam was thrilled obviously.

He's a big supporter of anything that I do. He's a big supporter of IndyCar, anything that helps spread the IndyCar message. He got to have one of his racecars on the dance floor. For him it was a really cool experience as well, I think.

**Q. I know you're running on fumes right now, pardon the pun, but you told us your favorite dance, the ones you enjoyed the most. Was there one that you had that was so trying, it was like you wished you could skip that week?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Obviously the jazz number in week nine was that one for me. In talking with Sharna and some of the other pros, everybody's got one of those weeks. For us it happened quite late, which is unfortunate. It could have affected our entry into the semifinals. Luckily the motorsports fans and the Dancing with the Stars fans got us through.

That number, it was very heavy in choreography. Due to the fact that we used every single square inch of available space on the floor, on both stages, it was never a routine we were able to run top to bottom to music in rehearsal. It wasn't until we got on the stage for camera blocking and dress rehearsal that we were able to put it all together. Essentially I got three runs of the routine before we had to go perform it. I did make a pretty big mistake in the middle of it there.

That one for me was a frustrating week because we weren't able to run it at any point during the week of rehearsal. But we got through it, we survived. That was definitely one that was more stressful than the others.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to thank and congratulate James Hinchcliffe for a job well done on Dancing with the Stars. You made us all very, very proud.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Thank you so much.