

IndyCar Media Days

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Graham Rahal

Media Day Presser



Q. What did you think of Clemson's victory?

GRAHAM RAHAL: To be honest, after the Ohio State game, I thought they'd beat Bama. I mean, I don't think Washington is very good at all. Anyway...

But that's not what we're here to talk about.

Q. Let's maybe start off a little bit, if you can remember that far back, recap your 2016 season a little bit and then maybe what you're looking forward to for 2017.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, yeah. I thought 2016 was a year of tremendous potential. The potential really that we did tap into, if you look at our qualifying performance was pretty solid everywhere compared to 2015 where our qualifying was certainly weak. But 2016 we were in the ballpark a lot. We were in the Fast Six a lot.

I want to say every single road course we were, rather than Watkins Glen where we got the penalty.

So you know, I felt like speed-wise, our performance was actually better than 2015, pretty considerably, and we just did our season reviews about a month and a half ago, and it's pretty clear to see performance-wise, the team performed a lot better. However, we had a lot of things that just didn't quite go our way, whereas in 2015 we had bounces that certainly did. 2016 the bounces didn't happen. We had to fight a lot harder, still managed to get a top-five finish in the championship, but you know, if I look throughout the entire season, it starts right off with St. Pete running in the top 5, getting punted. Everybody knows that whole image.

So you know, you get -- running from fifth, solidly if fifth, great race car that day, there's no doubt we would have stayed there if not improved, and you finish 13th or whatever. So right there is a missed opportunity.

And then that carried on to Long Beach, and had a brake line come loose in Detroit when we started fifth or sixth. Just a lot of just mishaps that cost us.

I think a really genuine shot to go -- I don't know if anybody could have challenged Pagnaud consistently, but there's no doubt I think we could have been in the top two.

Lots of potential, and we just have to find going forward a way to keep that performance level, enhance it a little bit. Obviously the cars aren't really going to change at all. We'll see what Firestone brings on the tire front and what we have to adjust to there, but hopefully we can keep the speed from the car. We really need to improve at Indy. That's our main focus of everything this off-season. And also get a little bit of those breaks.

You know, that's kind of the goal. That's what we feel like we need.

Really we've had no changes with the new organization. I mean, we brought on Tom German to kind of help out on the engineering front with specialty projects, particularly because Indy was such a struggle. We really messed up on some aerodynamic testing that we did before. We only did one day of wind tunnel testing, and it completely fooled us, and that's what happened to us at Indy. We just reacted to this one day, and the data points weren't even correct, and it literally ruined our entire month.

You know, we were an outlier for the Honda camp by far, as far as our aerodynamic settings. We shot ourselves in the foot, and so we just kind of have to reset, and Tom will help us do that.

He brings, obviously, a lot of experience from Penske mainly. Clearly he was with Rossi last year, but going forward or going backwards from that, he had many, many years at Penske, so on the preparation side of things, he's already pinpointed a couple things that we need to do.

But other than that, you know, the organization is going to stay the same, keep trucking along just as it has been.

Q. You mentioned the fact of not changing the cars obviously this year. We've heard about that. Your thoughts on that? Are you frustrated and disappointed because you kind of know your lot right now, it's going to be tough to make that leap.

GRAHAM RAHAL: It is. It is. But my hope, as a Honda guy through and through, is that the engine can continue to improve and overcome what the aero kit lacks. There is no doubt that there's aero kit inefficiencies, but it is what it is.

And yeah, is it a little bit tough kind of going into a season knowing, okay, we're going to have the same uphill battle we've had for the last couple years? Yes. But again, I actually believe that Honda on the engine side is pretty strong, and I think that that will continue to develop. A couple new hires that they've had starting middle of last year really helped the performance of the engine, I think, the second half of the year, just getting comfortable pushing it a little bit more, and I think that will continue to happen.

You know, I hope we can get enough -- as they say, horsepower can overcome anything. So we've just got to get enough of it somehow.

I know that they're working hard to make that possible for us.

Q. Rico and Eddie both said that you probably drove better last year than in 2015. Do you agree with that?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. I mean, in 2015 definitely when we had our opportunities we took them. There was no doubt. If I look at last year, I definitely was more confident. I feel like I was -- if it came down to like having to throw a lap in, I feel like I did a good job maximizing what we had for sure.

But I think everybody else did a good job adjusting, too. I'll be honest, we finished second at Sonoma, but my car was like awful at Sonoma until the race, and it took a combination, an effort to put that magical qualifying lap in, to get it into the Fast Six, and then what do we do, go on to Sunday, and that's not just me, that takes everybody, from all the engineering staff, Joe, my Honda engineer, everybody. What are we going to do to improve this thing, and they did a great job, too.

You know, yeah, I think that I probably drove better last year than 2015. But hopefully the best is yet to come. I don't know. I mean, it's hard when you look back. As a driver you always have to be critical of where can you improve, where were mistakes, what did you kind of let go, you know, and where did you lose points. Last year there weren't that many cases of it. Like I said, we had a couple cases of mechanical issues and stuff like that, which was very rare for us, and then we had a couple cases of just getting caught out like St. Pete and getting punted, and the place that I know I hurt us the most is Long Beach because we were fast at Long Beach and I crashed right before qualifying, and we -- it was just a panic just to try to get the car put back together, so that's probably an area that I really hurt us a lot.

Q. How do you look at where the series is at as a whole? Do you think it's on the upswing with some

momentum?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think there's no doubt it's on the upswing. And what I like about what we have going on here is there's no fake news out there. There's no -- let's just say something just to say it. Genuinely, everybody, Jay and the entire organization here, Bill, they've done a great job. And there's no doubt it's headed in the right direction.

I think when people see the new car, people are going to really like it. I mean, you guys know how it is. You've got your just passionate haters out there that are going to continue to just do that. But in general, what I really enjoy is I do see the series has so much potential and is headed, without a doubt, in the right direction.

And I don't see that that's going to stop any time soon. I mean, I don't. I hope that our TV package can improve in the years to come and we can continue to get in front of more eyeballs. But the at-track attendance is strong, and like I said, the thing I appreciate the most from what I've seen is the honesty within and outside of the sport.

You know, areas where we're weak, we're going to tell you we're weak. In areas where we're strong, we should be proud of it. But it's good to see. I like what I've seen out of Jay's group in particular. I think it's strong.

Q. Do you think some of the haters will be quieted when they see the return of what they prefer in a race car with the 2018 kit?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think so. I think so. What people need to realize is IndyCar racing has never been more competitive than this. And people go on about the aero kits. They go on about all this stuff. But this is the deepest field anywhere in motorsports. It is the closest field anywhere in motorsports. And okay, last year you've got -- obviously Penske won a lot of races last year. You know, but they're one hell of a team, too. It's a great organization, but at the same time, you've got a lot of other people that have opportunities and chances to win. I mean, it's just -- these guys that are worried so much how the car looks or the noise of the engine or whatever, the racing is great.

Now, I do hope that the new car has less aero wash. I do hope that the under tray is more effective and that you can actually follow closer to make the road course racing a little easier because with these aero kits for sure, it's more difficult. And really, you then rely more on the tires to create the falloff and then create the racing, which Firestone has done a great job of that.

But I think the new car -- you know, I haven't seen the finished product by any means, but I think it looks

pretty awesome. You know, it's -- I'm excited about it.

For me, it's more like what I feel an IndyCar should look like.

Q. There's going to be a ton of eyeballs on Indy this year. You say IndyCar is on this big swing. They'd better sell out again or people are going to jump off the bandwagon, aren't they?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, I'm not worried about that. I'm not worried that they'll sell out again because it's hard to really sell out anymore. Now, I do know ticket renewals are the best that they've ever been by far, percentage-wise, and I know a lot of people that I talk to when I travel and go to other races, they talk about the experience and how they won't miss another Indy. I have no doubt that it's going to be -- it's going to be really good. But I don't think by any means if it's not sold out that people are going to jump off.

The race has lasted over 100 years not by chance, you know, and it's going to continue to go on and be successful for many, many years to come.

Now, the race last year had a lot of drama, right down to the -- obviously to the very, very, very finish. I have no doubt that this year is going to be the exact same.

But if you look at it, if you look at the potential of it, again, it's just trending upwards. With the snake pit and everything they have going on there, with the facility upgrades and everything, there's no reason to believe that by any stretch of the imagination is this thing going to fall backwards at all. I mean, I think it's -- everything that they're doing is only going to -- Keith Urban is playing, right? That's a huge draw. I mean, everything. I think all the partners are all hands on deck, and it seems to be headed in absolutely the right direction.

Q. What was the most memorable thing or most fun you had during the off-season?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Actually I would say, yeah, the -- for me, the Honda Classic, getting to go with Firestone and Honda was -- I'm a big hockey guy, so that was a lot of fun. That was a really, really cool experience for me to go see.

Q. That's the NHL Winter Classic?

GRAHAM RAHAL: That's what I mean, Winter Classic. Honda Classic is a golf tournament I'm going to in a week. I've been pretty busy this off-season. Everyone is like, we need a shorter off-season. I'm like, hell no, I'm all over the place.

And on a personal level, just getting to spend some time at our dealerships, I'm getting more involved in our

dealership group, and I'm very passionate about it, getting to go up there and see them and seeing all our award winners again this year, we had our team Christmas party, and there's -- there are well over 600 people there. It's impressive to see the way that the company has grown, and it gives me personally a lot of pride for what Dad and his partners have created there. On a personal level, that's what was most powerful for me.

Q. You said before when looking at adding a second driver to the team, we saw Rahal Letterman announce Oriol Servia. How has the dynamic of the team changed with Oriol addition to 2017, confirming it this early?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, you know, Oriol is a clear plug-in for us. First of all, he's a great guy. Second of all, he will help us. He's going to help our performance at Indy. I can tell you that right now. And third, he's been there so many times with the organization, he's been in and out of the team a handful of times. He knows everybody. He's been part of the team before. So it's a clear fit.

One thing we learned last year, and I love Spencer, I think he's got great potential in his career, but like at Indy last year, I mean, you might as well have been a one-car team. Legitimately there was no information coming off of that car to help, and when we were having these aerodynamic issues, you need somebody to say, hey, I tested it, too, and I'm not really sure or whatever.

And when we were following this aero path, the comments from the other side were just like, yeah, it's just a lot better. So you just react. We need just a very experienced guy who can help lead us down the right path, and Oriol is going to be that guy.

You know, I think there was a bunch of drivers, and I can't tell you who because I don't know because they don't tell me, but I know there were several drivers who came to the team that wanted to run full season, had budgets to do it and everything else, and they were all turned away. I mean, they've genuinely -- the team is focused on making sure if there is the addition of a second car full-time, it has to fit the right environment. We don't see turnover, in an area here of Indy, if you want a job, literally all you've got to do is walk across the street. So normally you do see pretty high turnover. You guys might see the same faces in the pack, but a lot of times they're at different places every couple years. We don't see that, and we really are proud of the environment that we have, and so Oriol is a guy that fits that just perfectly and won't upset the apple cart, so to speak.

Hopefully that continues on, and hopefully he's not --

and you can tell him I said this. Hopefully he's not falling apart over 40 now and everything else. But he's a great guy, and I think he'll do a heck of a job for us. We're looking forward to it.