

IndyCar Media Days

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Simon Pagenaud

Media Day Presser



Q. We've been having every driver as they come in sort of recap your 2016 season and then look ahead to 2017. Obviously the season couldn't have gotten much better for you last year.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, it's been a really good season. You know, obviously for us, 2015 was about building, and I think as a new entity and a fourth car at Team Penske, we did a good job at building in '15, and especially transitioning during the winter into '16. We managed to get everybody on the same page and get a really good chemistry with everybody, and I think that was the key.

And then we started off really strong. I think St. Pete, I kind of lost the race on my own there, and I think it set the tone for me for the year. I realized I had to be even more aggressive to win races, so it was a good first race. The first five races of the season were really strong for us, and I think that's where we put a stamp on the championship there.

Then the middle part of the season we had a little bit of a tough time with some mechanical issues mostly, a little bit of bad luck in Toronto, and then we -- what really characterized my team, I would say my -- yeah, the group that we are, is how we bounced back, because when you have a tough time in the middle part of the season and your rival wins everything, it's really tough actually being able to bounce back like we did. So very proud of everybody on a personal standpoint because everybody was strong enough to keep looking forward and keep their focus, and then at the end of the season we were strong again and showed that.

Yeah, it was a great team. There's still a lot to iron. It's only our second year together, so we still have a lot to improve, so that's what's exciting for 2017.

Q. How do you top 2016?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I think it's about being disciplined. It's easy to relax after you've won one time, but it's about being disciplined. Myself, it's to reflect on '16 and see how I can improve myself physically, mentally, all the aspects of driving, the craft basically. I can definitely improve on a lot of those things.

And then there's the race team. I'm basically the quarterback on my team, and it's about looking at every race, every practice, every qualifying, and trying to see how we could have done better each time and

then tackle the weekend that way, with a new strategy going in that would basically put us at a better level to start the weekend.

You know, I think it's about -- it's like you look at a messy bush a long time ago and then you trim the bush as you go and you end up defining it and making it the way you want to make it at the end, so I think that's where we're at right now is basically designing the bush, and it's really cool. It's a really good time.

Does that make sense?

Q. Makes perfect sense.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Like a tree bush, you know? I just want to make sure we agree on that.

Q. How do you think -- you had a very similar path at Team Penske as Josef did coming from a smaller team. Do you think he's going to have a season at Team Penske similar to what yours was or do you think he'll have a little different road?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I think it's dependent on everybody. We're all different. The way I drive seems to be quite different from the way he drives in terms of approach. But it's going to be a different story for him because he has a team that's already rolling. The 2 car has been together for a long time. It's a successful team. They won the Indy 500. He's going to be in different shape than where I was where we had to build a team and start with new people from outside.

I think he's going to be all right from the beginning. I don't think he's going to have as much of a transition as I did.

You know, as long as he adapts well to the system, I think he'll be just fine. But he's definitely going to be a championship contender very quickly.

Q. Is there anything unavoidable that comes in a transition like that that you can impart to him as far as having been in that same situation? Anything that you know that he is going to have to face that you can maybe kind of help him through as a teammate?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, definitely time is your best -- you don't have a choice. You've got to let time do its things. Sometimes it's just -- you just need to be with

people for a long time and then things get better and you get to understand each other better, and then you end up being at a much better level. But I think time is going to do everything for him. I don't think he can force time. You've got to let it happen. That's what I would say.

Q. Did you try to force time in 2015?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, no, you always try because you want to give it your best, and if it's not happening, it gets frustrating. So yeah, you try, but you just can't do it. It's a natural course.

Q. What can you do better now that you've trimmed the bush, so to speak?

SIMON PAGENAUD: That's a good question. That's a great question. Get to the point, I guess.

Well, you know, I always look at -- I look at it at different -- there's always different departments you can work on, right. There's myself as a driver, how do I improve myself as a driver. But I like to look at it as me being part of my team and the whole team working together well, gelling well, and making sure -- one of the big things for us having won is not to rest on our laurels and keep going, keep pushing to get more. So being hungry is going to be very important for everybody, not just me but the whole team.

What I can do better myself is obviously I think if you look at my craft, we didn't qualify well on the speedway this year, so we need to improve that. One of the reasons being is maybe we need a different approach in how we approach qualifying, but if you look at 2015, we qualified well, we didn't race well on the speedways. It's about adjusting that. It's about understanding -- obviously we've raced better this year.

But we can do better. I think one of the things that -- outside factors is Honda is strong on the super speedways, so there's ways to improve superspeedways. Short ovals we did improve, but for me there's some crafts still to get better. I think to improve my performance on the road courses and street courses will be tough. I think we got to a very good level, so I think it's mostly focusing on the oval for 2017 and trying to raise the level there.

Q. You've been one of the fastest drivers across the street the last two years. What do you got to do to have the speed at the right time at the end of the race?

SIMON PAGENAUD: On the speedway?

Q. Yes.

SIMON PAGENAUD: I think it's a good point. Well, this year we had a mechanical issue, so really there's

nothing you can do about that. I think what I realized is it's easy to get lost in two weeks of testing. With the condition change, now we've got data, I've got information, I know the car, I understand the race better, so it's about trusting what you have and focusing on race day as much as possible. I don't think qualifying actually -- despite what I just said, I don't think qualifying is very important at the 500. I think actually if you look at who wins, it's often the guy that comes from the pack because he gets to test his car in the pack, and he gets to go to the front. The guy that starts at the front, when you get back in the pack it's difficult to adjust.

I think it's about working on the race car and working in traffic, working your skills in traffic during the two weeks of testing and focusing on that mostly and trying to make very little changes.

Q. Nico Rosberg won a championship and retired. Obviously you didn't retire. Were you shocked at his announcement, and could you see what would make a driver at 31, a champion, retire?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I think I totally understand his decision. You know, it's not a decision that I would have made, but I respect his decision.

I think, you know, what might not transpire is how difficult it is to live this life. It looks all shiny and all fun, but it's not. There's a lot of work in the background that's not being seen. Some of us hide a lot of the work that we do because we don't want it to get away from us.

But the preparation to be at this level is -- you've got to have an education -- it's an everyday education, it's like 24/7, and don't really have any room for personal life. You don't have room for going out with your friends. You don't have room for anything else than being selfish about your career. Sometimes being selfish, sometimes people have enough of that.

So it's a very selfish life. Maybe he's done with that, you know? Personally I'm in a different situation. I just love competition. I couldn't live without it. If tomorrow I didn't have competition, I would be really bored. A bored life is not what I'm made of.

I get that at the end of the last year when the championship was finished, I was tired, too, and I didn't think about retiring, but I was tired.

Q. So you admire guys like Tony Kanaan and Helio who are into their 40s and still very competitive and it's 24/7 for the last 20 years for these guys?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Absolutely, yeah. I totally admire those guys. I admire Jeff Gordon, I admire Jimmie

Johnson, I admire Michael Schumacher coming back. You know, it's crazy. Yeah, I admire all these guys.

Yeah, 20 years, I mean, it's crazy. You know, first of all, the physical side of it, your body -- I mean, the suspension of an IndyCar is not that good. You hit the ground, it's rough.

Q. Especially with your back.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, it's rough. So you've got to take care of yourself, and I think that's what Helio and TK have been doing, and they're the most popular drivers because they've been around for so long, so people relate to their names. They've been seeing them for 20 years. It's admirable to see such a long career.

Like Helio said, it's admirable to see that when he shows up, he's like 19 years old. You know, it's something to be inspired about. Anyone should be inspired about their life and the desire that they have.

Q. Going along the lines of that selfish lifestyle, how does Penske continue to have such -- the team being so unselfish year after year between the dynamic of drivers?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I think we all understand we drive for a grand -- we drive for something historical. We represent a name that's historical in motorsports. It's difficult to -- you can't be fully selfish. You have to race for the team. Now, it's your right to try to be the best of the four. It's your right to compete against the others, and that's what Roger wants. He wants us to race against each other fairly, as long as we don't crash.

I think that's where the line is drawn. The race starts, and we are allowed to race, but before the race starts, it's about sharing and making sure that everybody has a good understanding of that and good relationships. But to last 20 -- I think Helio has been about Team Penske for 17 years. To last 17 years, you have to come to the truck on race day or at the shop with an open mind and accept everybody around you, otherwise you're going to blow up at some point.

Q. How cool was it for you to go to the big Team Penske Christmas party this year? You were the big star because you were the champion.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, it was quite a big change, you know. After showing up in '14 and being the new guy, and in '15 not having such a great year, and then being a champion now, it was really cool. It was really cool. We had all the NASCAR people. We had about -- I think it was 500 people at the Christmas party. Families, all the families were there, kids and spouses. That was pretty cool to see.

You know, the support from family is very important to our success, so it's something I always like to say at the Christmas party is thanks to the families, too, for supporting a selfish life, basically. Those guys are gone -- more than the drivers, they're gone all the time, so it's great to see that.

Q. What did Brad and Joey say to you?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Say or -- well, they congratulated me right after the championship. I'm good friends with Joey. You know, I was pulling for him at the last race, too. I actually went to see him in Martinsville, too, so that was cool.

I was hoping, but second. I don't think he was very happy with it, to be honest.

Q. There's a lot of talk about cockpit protection for F1 and IndyCar. It looks like IndyCar is going down a road. As a driver is that something you want to see happen, or is it something that's mandatory for you to keep driving five years down the road, four years down the road?

SIMON PAGENAUD: What do you mean by going down the road, going down the road of protection?

Q. Yes.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yes what?

Q. Would you like to see some sort of cockpit protection down the road?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I mean, if you look at the evolution of time, I'd like to see that because, I mean, if you look back 30 years ago, it was acceptable to lose a race car driver in a race or somebody else in the pits. Now it's not acceptable. Society is changing. Safety is changing. It's the evolution of time. It's the evolution of time to see a big crash and the driver walk away. I'm good with that. I'm a driver, so I want to live for a long time.

I think if you look at the IndyCars these days, the only way you can get hurt, that's the truth, is to get hit in the head. So if you can protect the driver, protect the head of the driver, it seems like it's almost -- and I'm saying almost, impossible to get hurt.

What an incredible evolution that IndyCar has made throughout the years. It's amazing. Especially being on an oval at 240 miles an hour, being able to protect your driver this way I think is crazy good.

Now, when you see the evolution of safety between '15 and '16 on an oval, it just shows that IndyCar is going down the right way. So very happy to see that. But yeah, if it goes to head protection, it would be great to see, as long as we keep the look of an IndyCar.

Q. You mentioned improving various things behind the wheel. Do you feel like driving different cars has helped you do that, because you drove in the Rolex 24 and Petit Le Mans this past year?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I think any time you can have an open mind about things, it's helping you. I think driving different tires sometimes helps you to understand things or different ways to drive, different techniques, so I think it is helpful. I think also doing sports car races is good for team spirit, to keep you open-minded about your teammates, and seeing other ways that you can drive the team forward. I think that's good, too.

It's a job -- it's endless, this job. I don't know if I'm being clear, but it's an endless job. There's no limit to improving. The question you asked me is how can you improve. You can always improve. It's just you being curious about it and trying to find more ways. It's just difficult to explain because it's such a narrow field I would say. You know, when I explain to you about parking in my box during the Indy 500, I need to gain 1 mile an hour going in so my 60 miles an hour to 0 is faster than usual. We can't go into details that much in an interview, but that's the kind of things we're working on.