

# IndyCar Media Days

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## James Hinchcliffe

Media Day Presser



**Q. What we've been doing is having all the drivers recap your 2016 season. Basically you have some stuff to talk about your off-season, and then look ahead to 2017.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Okay. Recap 2016. 2016 for us was -- you know, I think a pretty productive year.

We showed really good pace at a lot of events.

Obviously the month of May in general right from the Grand Prix through qualifying and the race itself was a huge highlight for us. It's always nice having speed at the speedway, having pace at the speedway I should say. The podium in Toronto, another highlight.

But we had some lowlights. The entire Detroit weekend was unfortunate. We had a top-5 car and we had a parts failure in the back of the car and then taking it out on lap 1 of race 2, that was a disaster of a weekend. Watkins Glen, primed for a second-place finish, ran out of gas with two to go kind of unnecessarily due to a miscalculation in something.

Losing the win at Texas was painful, but being in contention like that was obviously very promising, so that's not actually as big a block spot as some of the others. Our ultimate championship position is nowhere near the place that we should have been. Obviously we caught the penalty at Texas, as well, points-wise.

So we're excited to hit the ground running in 2017, not having any major changes to the engines, the body kits, anything like that, whenever we have something like that, the smaller teams are on the back foot a bit. You don't have the resources of the big three, and so when we're dealing with a big change, it's always harder for us. Now that we don't have that, we can really focus on the little details and improving on the areas that we've identified we need to improve on, and hopefully that bodes well for us for '17.

I guess that's kind of a combination of both things, right? Kind of previewing '17, as well.

**Q. Obviously you had a busy off-season.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, the term off-season is a bit misleading. I started my off-season gig before the racing season was even over. Obviously the show was an incredible experience, a great opportunity. I was very thankful for that, and it took some convincing to get me to do it. I won't lie. The thought of doing something I was very unqualified to do in front of me

and 10 million of my closest friends every week was a bit daunting, but I ended up really enjoying the experience, really enjoying the process, and learnt a lot, met a lot of great people, and at the end of the day, I had a lot of fun, too.

One of the big motivators for wanting to do it was to help get IndyCar in the primetime limelight, and I think we did that a bit. We were around long enough on the show that people started to care, and hopefully that translates to more fans tuning in on TV and hopefully showing up to the racetrack, and had the car on stage for one of the numbers, which was huge, and yeah, hopefully just kind of helps raise everything up in that sense.

Busy holiday season back home, visiting between my family and Becky's family, and then we had the Race of Champions coming up this weekend. We have Daytona the following weekend, and come February, IndyCar testing for us really kind of gets going again. No rest for the wicked, as they say.

**Q. It looked like everything was buttoned up as far as Mikhail back in October and November, but now I guess with visa renewal problems or whatever, that hasn't been finalized yet. How much has that put everything else in a state of flux at the team?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, uncertainty is never an element in success. It's not something that we look -- it's not something that we're excited about, obviously. It's still very much the goal to get Mikhail in the car. As much continuity as you can have in a race team you want because that is always a huge, huge bonus.

So we'll see. I don't know the ins and outs of the situation, and if I'm totally honest, I gather it's quite complicated. But fingers crossed we can pull it off. I'd love to have him back in the car. At this point, finding someone else to replace him would be very difficult, someone of the caliber of him that would help push the team forward. We're all very much on the side of trying to make that situation come together as best we can.

**Q. And when I talked to Piers in December, he was even confident of having a third car for some of the races, so I guess this kind of puts all of that back a ways?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, no doubt. Not having

the second car buttoned up means you aren't even thinking about a third car yet. But I'm sure something will come together, and we traditionally run a third car at the speedway, and maybe that can extend into a GP deal, as well, and maybe a few others, who knows.

But for right now, especially with the loss of the Lights team, 100 percent of the focus in the building is on the IndyCar program, and hopefully we see some benefits from that.

**Q. Talk about that dancing thing. I know you're going to hear it all year. It's going to be weird that people are going to know you for a whole different deal. Are you ready for that, expecting that?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, in the paddock luckily they knew me as a driver first. It's more walking through airports. That's been the biggest adjustment. But yeah, I mean, I did not appreciate quite the size and quite the following of the Dancing With the Stars fan base before I was on the show, and they're a very enthusiastic, very vocal, very loyal group of fans. It's been awesome to see that, A, people were watching and people were a fan of what Sharna and I were doing on the floor, and it's definitely going to be a little bit different walking through the paddock.

**Q. Walking through the airport, you weren't recognized maybe as much as a race car driver as you're going to be now. Flash back the last five, six of your life, were you thinking, someday I'm going to be known as a great dancer?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, that's not -- that was not on the radar. That was not something I was aspiring to do necessarily. But you know, like we said before, it's a tremendous opportunity for IndyCar. Obviously for myself, as well, it increases my profile and all that. But for me it's about trying to get fans to tune into races, and I hope that we did enough.

I mean, a lot of people that know nothing about racing and IndyCar and all the rest of it until they meet someone in it and they have a reason to watch, right, and then they tune in once to watch their person and they realize, hey, this is actually pretty cool and the product is very good, and they continue to watch. They end up becoming fans for life. It takes that reason to turn it on once. We have such a good product in the Verizon IndyCar Series that it sells itself once it's in front of someone, and my hope is that what we did on the show just gets a bunch of people to tune in once, and if that happens, I think we're going to gain a lot of lifelong fans.

**Q. Now when your girlfriend says, let's go dancing, you can't say, I don't know how to dance?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I can because I don't know

how to dance. This is what people don't realize is unless it's that very song and that same routine and I have a professional on the other side -- she had to teach me how to dance. I don't know her steps. I don't know what the woman's steps are in any of the routines, so I can't actually do it. I could do it for 90 seconds a week in a very specific set of circumstances, but basically Becky and I have to go to dance lessons.

**Q. So the takeaway is James Hinchcliffe still can't dance?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Still cannot dance.

**Q. When it comes to promoting IndyCar, was it just being you and being on the show, or did you feel like you were talking to fans, interacting with fans, talking about it to push it a little more just to make sure you were doing as much as you could instead of just being there?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: What was amazing to me is how many people -- how many fans were asking the questions themselves, because it was something new to them. There was a high level of interest to learn more. And so I always had that mindset of trying to educate people, but a lot of the times I didn't even have to initiate the conversation in that sense because once they knew what I did, they were genuinely very interested in it.

**Q. Does anything transfer from that process of dance or being on the show into the car that might help you down the road?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Not really, no, if I'm honest. There were a lot of parallels, a lot of things that I do to prepare for a race that I would kind of mentally do, also, to prepare to perform.

**Q. What kind of things?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, so everyone is different, right, and some guys need to get angry and amped up and listen to punk rock, heavy metal before they get in a car to get the heart rate going, and I'm the exact opposite. I'm usually the guy cracking jokes with his crew before he puts his helmet on, and that was very much my approach in the show. When the package would play right before the dance, Sharna and I had -- our thing was from week one we would never watch the package, and DWTP, that was a joke, don't watch the package. And that was the same thing. If you spent that minute and a half watching it and seeing what you went through that week or whatever, you never knew what the package was. That's the other thing some people don't know is you don't see it until it airs, as well, so you don't know what story they're telling, and reality TV has a way of sometimes telling a story that's not completely accurate. So that kind of mindset of keeping it calm and keeping it cool and not stressing

too much about what's about to happen and just kind of letting it happen. At that point all the work is done. You can't make it any better, so you do what you have practiced and what you know to do and kind of go from there, and it's the same kind of approach before a race. I like to kind of be jovial and joking with crew, hey, we've done all the prep, we've done the qualifying, the setup is what it is, there's nothing else I can do, so let's just go drive, and so it's kind of the same thing.

**Q. Was there a point on the final show where you thought, unless Val falls, I'm going to finish second?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, if Val fell, we'd just get the sympathy vote. It would be even worse. Honestly we knew from an early, early stage that Laurie was the one to beat, and then she hit the dance floor and was a phenomenal dancer, just an absolute sweetheart. She is a very deserving winner of the whole thing. I just didn't want to go home first. So standing up on stage with her in the finale, Sharna and I were laughing. We weren't stressed about it because we were pretty sure we knew the outcome. So it was just a proud moment to even be sharing a stage with her and Val because they were phenomenal, and she's an incredible kid.

**Q. Are there any friendships or connections you made from that show that you were surprised that you made?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I didn't know what to expect from Vanilla Ice, but he was actually really cool. I've got a standing invitation whenever I'm in Palm Beach to go see Rob. I didn't know what to expect from a lot of the guys and girls, the contestants, to be honest. Obviously Calvin and I hit it off and they like to make a big deal about that. Terra was probably my favorite person on the whole show. Just the personality of that girl and the sense of humor were incredible. Yeah, I mean, everybody, we all got along very well. It was a big family. Ultimately we were all going through the same thing. We were all going through the same traumatic experience together of putting ourselves out there in that sense, so it was kind of like our own little therapy group.

**Q. Were you surprised at the bonding between Governor Rick Perry and Vanilla Ice?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think everybody was surprised at that one. But it just shows how cool both of those guys are. When we all first met, Rob was the last guy in the room, and I mean, he's a big deal, he has been for a long time, and you don't really know what to expect, and he walked in and couldn't have been nicer, walked, introduced himself, introduced himself to everybody in the room. At that point it was kind of like the first day of school. It was a little awkward. There were little cliques happening, you're

trying to sort out who was going to be your friend, and Rob just walked in, took the room over and said hi to everybody and it was great, and Rick is very much the same way. He's in politics. That's part of his job is being very outgoing and interactive, and yeah, the two of them just hit it off, and it was hilarious.

**Q. Has Governor Perry invited you down early for the Texas race so that he can show you parts of the state that you might not know about?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: He wants me to come down to the F1 race, actually. I guess he was maybe in charge when they were getting all the permits and permission done for that, so he's got a little bit of an affection for that place. Might have to go check out the USGP this year.

**Q. You had a couple of stretch runs with solid finishes, picked up with a couple of bad ones, but what is it going to take to mitigate the bad runs and sustain all that consistency?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, that's obviously what the big focus for us has been in the off-season. There were a few results that came as a result of bad processes and procedure on our side as a team, a few things that I certainly could have done better behind the wheel. We swallowed that big points penalty in Texas, things like that. Because we haven't had any major shifts in our program, we've been able to really kind of pinpoint those things and work on implementing new processes and procedures within the team to maximize efficiency. We don't have the human resources that some of the bigger teams do, so we've got to be as efficient with our time and everything as we can on a race weekend, you know, streamlining the decision making process on the engineering side and making sure that we focus as much on the race car as we do on the qualifying car.

There are a lot of different things that we're going to -- we are going to do better this year, and that should lead to a more consistent season.

**Q. Talking about Texas, do you have any thoughts on the repave?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Honestly, man, I mean, part of me is kind of sad about it. For two reasons: One, old tracks for sometimes as painful as they are to get your head around from a setup point of view, that's a lot of the character of them. We had a pretty good car there last year, so I wasn't super thrilled at the thought of a complete repave.

But at the same time, I understand why it had to happen and definitely give Eddie and the crew through a lot of credit for stepping up and doing that. There are a lot of other facilities that could learn from that and

should have done certain things by now. Obviously the drainage was a big reason for wanting to do it, and that's going to help everybody going forward. No one likes racing on Sunday or Monday or August 27th.

So I'm excited to get there and see what it's like. New pavement is usually pretty sticky, which means I think we're going to see some pretty crazy racing in Texas this year.

**Q. Sam Schmidt recently shuttered the Indy Lights program over there. Have you been possibly maybe focusing more engineering onto the IndyCar side, possibly another entry in the IndyCar Series?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, we absorbed some of the people from the Lights program, certainly, and I know it was very tough for Sam to make that decision. That was the heart and soul of that team essentially. It started with that. It was his baby. So it was very tough for him to make that decision. But ultimately I think it's going to benefit the IndyCar program in a big way, not only through the personnel that we absorbed, but it just keeps all attention focused in one spot and not having to split it, be it Sam and Ric, be it Piers, be it the commercial department, whatever it is, and yeah, I mean, we'll see. We'll see about a third car. I don't think that's on the short-term plan. We want to make sure we've got two cars running really well before we start worrying too much about a third.

**Q. Now that you're back, it's not a return season for you, how realistic do you think it is that you can challenge for the championship?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: You know, obviously stats don't lie. As a manufacturer, we're on a little bit of the back foot with nothing changing for 2017. I think the other guys won, was it 14 out of 16 races last year? Those aren't awesome numbers. So we need to change that trend. We have to do a better job with what we've got in order to do that. But it is such a competitive series, and consistency is so valuable in this series that even if you're not winning those races, if you're consistently in the top 5, getting on the podium, maybe snag a win or two, there's absolutely no reason why you can't be at least in the hunt, in the conversation of the championship when we get to the last two or three races.

**Q. And coming from your Atlantic and Champ Car background, what do you think of the universal aero kit, the way the car will look?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, the sketches that came out I think look very cool, definitely some throwbacks to the old IndyCars and Champ Cars of old. But I think it's the right direction esthetically certainly. But the most important things are the

performance goals, and if we hit that, then the quality of the racing will be tremendous, as it has been, but we can make it better, and that's what the goal is for the new car.

I'm excited to see not only what it looks like but what it can do.