

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday February 10, 2017

James Hinchcliffe

Tony Kanaan

Mikhail Aleshin

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Joined now by three other Verizon IndyCar Series drivers: Mikhail Aleshin, driving the No.7 Honda for Schmidt Peterson Motorsports, Tony Kanaan, driving the No. 10 NTT DATA Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing, and James Hinchcliffe, driving the No. 5 Arrow Schmidt Peterson Motorsports Honda for Schmidt Peterson Motorsports.

Mikhail, we'll start with you. Obviously just fresh off the track from the first session here at Phoenix. What were some things you learned and your impressions of the session.

MIKHAIL ALESHIN: Well, first of all, it's very nice to be back in the series. Very nice to be back in my home team of Schmidt Peterson Motorsports. Obviously very nice to be back in the car, you know.

First session was interesting I would say because having drove -- I mean, the same all the time in the car as everyone up here, it was really cool to get to driving again and work with the car and the setup as a team.

So at the moment, everything is fine. You know, we're really -- we're sticking to our plan, and that's the most important.

THE MODERATOR: Tony, obviously a busy off-season for Chip Ganassi Racing with that manufacturer switch. What are your impressions so far from the first session?

TONY KANAAN: You know, it was a big change for us. We worked really hard to try to understand off-track how the aero kit worked, and I think we had a pretty good idea. First session, we're still -- our first time on the oval. I did test at St. Louis last year, but it was more for INDYCAR, which I think a couple of the guys tried to make it better when we got back there. But no big issues, so we're still learning, learning, scanning through all the lists the engineers have to make it right when we come back. So we're not really concerned what we're going to do here today. I mean, we're here



to learn as much as we can, so when we come back we can try to win this thing.

THE MODERATOR: James, I hear you had a busy offseason, probably did a few things you thought you would never do in your life. Back to your day job now, back in a race car. How great does that feel?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, it's great. This is kind of the unofficial start of the season really for us, to get everybody out here, all the new car and driver combinations, and just the whole field on the track at the same time. You get that kind of competitive spirit going again and that excitement just for the start of the season.

Q. I don't mean to be indelicate, but why were the Schmidt Peterson cars down at the bottom at 179 miles an hour?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: That's about as delicate as a sledgehammer. No, we like everybody have a test plan, and we're trying very hard to stick to that. It's easy to get lost in the timesheets and try and tune at 4:00 in the afternoon on February 10th, which isn't when we go racing.

We're getting through some basic stuff now. We're trying to stay focused on our program. We have two days, so we're not in any kind of rush, and kind of like Tony said, we're just kind of focused on our program at the moment. I certainly hope by the end of the two days we're not still there, but for right now we're not too concerned.

MIKHAIL ALESHIN: And also I think the results up here are really important. Really important will be when we're going to come back here for the racing. That's when we need to be at the top.

Q. Mikhail, can you talk a little bit where the hold-up was to the late bring-back of the car?

MIKHAIL ALESHIN: Well, there was different circumstances let's say. But in the end, it all worked well, and I'm here.

Q. And how important is it for you to be back for a second consecutive season and not have that year off?

MIKHAIL ALESHIN: Obviously it is very important, and

I hope it's going to be good for results, because last year was good progress, I think, from my side and from the team's side during all the season. The start of the season was difficult, but then the progress was very good. And I think that was because, like mostly -- I think it was me, as well, because I didn't do the previous season.

So now I'm doing two -- second consecutive season up here, and I think it's going to help. So that's a great thing.

Q. Tony, historically you've been very successful here at Phoenix Raceway. Last year I believe you finished fourth. What is it about this track that makes you so good here?

TONY KANAAN: I don't know. I mean, historically I'm pretty decent on the mile ovals. It's something that I worked really hard. Back on the Indy Lights days I remember when I used to come to this kind of place, Steve Horn used to let me drive all day long, just like trying to teach me stuff. I think that paid off big time.

If you look at my results, in '98 and '99 I started dead last every single mile oval I did, and I was told that that was probably not supposed to be my thing, so I guess that got under my skin and I worked really hard to improve that. Whatever it is, it suits my driving style. Obviously I've been on good teams, as well, that provide me good cars. It's always good to come back to a place that you know you do well, you know you did well, you know you won a couple races here, so it's always a good feeling. But I really don't know. I don't have the right answer for you. It's just something that -- it's definitely up my alley, and I love the mile ovals, so that helps.

Q. Tony and James, how strange is it that Kevin Kalkhoven and Jimmy Vasser are not in the paddock?

TONY KANAAN: I mean, let me put it this way. It's weird or sad to see a team go, regardless of what those people are. But for me, especially that team that we won the biggest race of our lives together, and that's the team that we struggled together, and I remember how we struggled to get where we got. And honestly, we only made it this far because of that win.

I was with Jimmy last week in Vegas, and it's sad. I was even trying to convince Jimmy to come do something for us just to be around. Kevin obviously was a big part of this thing coming back together, him and Tony, when they talked. So it's sad. Unfortunately, it's racing. I think it's everybody's reality. I mean, it's just the way it is. People come and go.

But that was one thing that I -- from the bottom of my

heart, I didn't want to see it go.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, not a whole lot I can add to that. As Tony said, it's sort of a function of our sport. These things are kind of cyclical, some great teams have come and gone over the years, and unfortunately KV and its various different acronyms that it existed in over the years isn't running anymore. It doesn't mean it will ever be again. Jimmy is a racer at heart. It wouldn't surprise me if we see him back in some capacity sooner rather than later, and hopefully we do, because he's a big personality and a big part of the sport.

Q. James, outside of the racing world, doing Dancing With the Stars, have people come up to you and been able to recognize you for being on the show instead of being a race car driver?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I'm everybody's grandmother's favorite. That's the new thing. Oh, my grandmother loved you on the show. It's bringing a whole new demographic of fan to IndyCar, which was a huge motivator for doing it in the first place. You know, when you're on a program that draws 10 to 11 million people a week, that's pretty big numbers, so you're bound to get recognized a little bit more. Like I said, a big part of wanting to do it was to kind of help the visibility of the sport, and I think we kind of did that, and hopefully we see some Dancing fans in the grandstands this year.

Q. As far as the Honda package is concerned, around here do you actually feel a handling difference, or is it just experimenting with drag levels and downforce levels?

TONY KANAAN: It's too early to say. We did only like -- out of the three hours, we probably ran max 45 minutes total. But I would say there are a lot of characteristics that are different between the two engine-wise. I really can't get into much details. But at this point, let me put it this way: Honda has a lot of positive things about their package and then a lot of negative things that we've got to work on. So we've got to concentrate on the negative ones and use the experience that we got with the other manufacturer and try to play into what we got.

We know, it's very well-known that this track doesn't favor the Honda package. IndyCar made a change last year, a week prior to this race, that actually -- it's the way it is. If you make a change, it's going to hurt somebody, and it ended up on our end. But it's their decision. We respect that. We're going to work on it to make it better. We know we're struggling, especially here, but I know a place that actually the car is really good, and I'm not really concerned about it.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: (whispering) Indianapolis. If

you didn't know, he's talking about Indianapolis.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much.