

IndyCar Media Conference

Saturday March 11, 2017

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with our Verizon IndyCar Series media availabilities. We're joined now by Graham Rahal, driving the No. 15 Steak 'n Shake Honda for Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing.

You became the youngest Verizon IndyCar Series winner in 2008 when you won here. What do you remember from that year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: A long time ago now. In many ways feels like yesterday and in many ways feels like an eternity.

It was a special day. Particularly after the way this weekend has gone so far, I hope it rains tomorrow, we'll have a similar result.

It was a tricky day. It started wet. It was drying. I got punted by Power on one of the restarts, I think.

We had the pace. We had gone in the race from the back, got up to running third on a pretty good charge there. We knew we had the pace to run up front. It was just a matter of getting there.

We were able to do a lot of fuel saving and get ourselves in a position to take the lead on the restart from Hunter-Reay.

I don't think anybody thought we could make it to the end. We were good on fuel. At the end when it became kind of a duel with Helio, Kanaan and myself, we were able to pull off four-, five-second gaps.

This place has been love/hate for me. I absolutely love it. It's probably one of my favorite races of the entire schedule. But we haven't had the best of luck here in recent years. We've been fast. Last year started up front. We were running in the top five. Year before, again, similar sort of thing. Haven't been able to finish it off. Hopefully this year we can turn that around a little bit.

It's been an interesting start to the weekend for us. Definitely struggling a lot with many things, brakes kind of being the number one thing that has been fighting us really, really bad, concerning me.

But we're going to just keep muscling ahead and see if we can figure this thing out from qualifying.

THE MODERATOR: You've started from the front in this race before you came back in 2009 after that win, started on pole. What is it going to take this afternoon if qualifying to start up front in tomorrow's race?

GRAHAM RAHAL: With Turn 3 the way it is now, it almost takes even more risk to get the reward than years before, which is fine. It's going to take a quick lap.

I can tell you the cornering speeds these cars are doing nowadays, it's impressive. It's impressively quick. It's surprisingly quick, I guess I should say. Knowing what it used to be like, knowing what it is now, it's hard to imagine these things can do what they're doing.

I don't know what lap time it's going to take. We're going to have to push it pretty hard. I was looking at my group. I think I was sixth or seventh quickest of my group this morning. It's a stacked group. You have Pagnaud, pretty much all the Ganassi cars. It's going to be tough, tough. Helio is in there, which he's always great at putting a lap together, getting one in. It is going to be a tough group to advance out of.

Once again, we talk about motorsports worldwide, what's the most competitive. Look at the freaking practice times this morning. I'm 13th, and I'm three-and-a-half 10ths off. It's so tight, you can't miss all.

We were sitting there poring over the data a second ago. You have to find every little bit, make sure your trim level is right, on and on.

It will be tricky. We'll see what happens.

THE MODERATOR: The win here in 2008, fast forward to 2015, a race win eluded you. Three race wins since 2015. It's almost as if there was some sort of change or sudden alteration that has led to success.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think it's a combination of a lot of things. You've got to be in the right circumstances and have a good team surrounding you, which we do.

I always thought my race craft was really good in years even prior to that. But I was able to kind of hone that even further, make sure I didn't make any mistakes on race day.

In 2016, we were able to combine that race day speed with a lot of qualifying pace. Our key this year is to try

to keep that going.

Our pace in '16 was even better than '15, but we just didn't have the consistency or the luck. We had as many top fives as any other person in the series last year, but our bads were bads. We need to make sure that we don't have that.

It's a combination of a lot of things. The guys have done a great job. The engineering staff has done a great job. Having a great environment, family environment, people that love to go racing, have that one mindset, which is to go win. If the 15 car wins in particular. It's served us well.

As a driver, I always say, you look at a guy like Will Power, he's always on top because he's not only confident but he's got a great car. When you put confidence together with a good machine, anything is possible.

That's kind of what we've had the last couple seasons.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it to questions for Graham.

Q. How much difference has the race surfacing made? Is that going to have any real impact on the typical passing points?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I mean, I would say turn three is going to be the biggest difference on passing. Turn three is obviously so much tighter now with a brake zone there and stuff. It will be interesting to see.

I'm not sure it's going to help passing. But we just have to see how it is on race day. I think tire degradation could be a factor here tomorrow, which is good. That could mix things up a little bit, if the rear tires start to go off a little bit.

The repaving onto the front straight as added a lot of grip at the very exit. The power down is a little better. Even if you're offline a little bit, it's still good. That could create some more passing and good opportunities onto the front straight.

The paving down into turn one, you no longer have a change of pavement under braking, then back to the different pavement when you get into the corner. Therefore, you might see some later braking moves and stuff like that.

The paint on the runway is still very slippery. So that's tricky.

Other than that, you know, I mean, it's nicer, but a lot of the same bumps are sort of in the same places. Right here, turn nine A, whatever they call it, has a nice big bump at the apex.

I think the paving and brake zones will help with

passing or should help with passing. We'll see. It's always hard to tell until you go out there on race day and kind of see.

To be honest with you, the brake issues could create a lot of excitement tomorrow. I hope we're on the good end of that excitement. It's going to be interesting to see what happens.

Q. Could you explain a little bit about the difference in the Precision Performance breaks in terms of what you ran last year at this track? Do you brake earlier, later, the same?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's tricky. It's really, really tricky. It was interesting. Yesterday I went down into turn one at the 400 board, I stomped on the pedal like I used to, and I missed the whole corner.

The next lap I went to the 300 board, barely touched the brakes, I made the corner perfectly fine.

It's hard to understand these brakes. They don't really give you the feedback that you're used to. I think Pagenaud had a quote about how linear they are, the lack thereof. That's kind of what you feel.

It's interesting, you know, I was struggling into turn four unbelievably bad this weekend. I would hit the pedal like I normally would want to. When I start to feel locking I would try to peel off. As I peeled off brake pressure, the rear started to lock again, which just shouldn't be possible. You're bleeding off brake pressure. You should start to roll.

It's very inconsistent. It's hard. Some guys are having front locking. My car has been rear locking like crazy, to the point where I've gone 3% forward on bias, which is a ridiculous amount, and it hasn't cured it. We had to go back just for safety.

I don't really know. I don't know what to say. In Sebring, I didn't have these issues nearly as much. But it's definitely showing its head a lot here this weekend.

I just hope everything is safe tomorrow. I had an incident this morning on my last qual run. I went out and my pedal was soft from sitting in the pits 20 seconds. It kind of went to the floor.

I hope that everything's just safe tomorrow, is my main focus. But it's been a challenge. I can tell you, the in-car camera has been exciting this weekend, a lot more movement than you would typically hope for.

You know, I guess you just got to muscle it around and try to find a way to make it work. It's the same for everybody. Just some have got it less, some have got it more. I hope it's all good tomorrow, so...

I can tell you from my typical driving style, driving late, hit the brakes hard, release, try to roll out of speed. It's

been tricky for me to kind of reprogram my mind from what I've driven these things the last 10 years. So it's tricky.

Q. You mentioned the cornering speeds being much more impressive than when you started the series. Would you put that down to the aero kits more than anything else?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Aero kits. Firestone always gives us a great product to go racing with. Just the competitive level. It's shocking how much better, how much quicker a driver can be just when you see that lap time. You look at it and think, Wow, okay, so that's possible. Then you just push harder. You push harder than you think you can. Suddenly you find a little bit of time here or there.

Just the competitiveness, the level of the field has gotten so much better. It's tough.

Q. Are you having some discomfort with your shoulder?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm good. This place moves your bones around a little bit. Shoulder's a little sore. But we'll be okay.

The first weekend's always physically the toughest. You train all winter. You think you're ready to go. Then you get in this thing and run. There's no training quite like driving these things. I can go run a marathon or whatever, it wouldn't be the same.

We'll be good. We'll be good. I just hope we can qualify well here. It's going to be our challenge. Obviously for the promoters and everybody, I hope it's dry and sunny and beautiful tomorrow. But we'll see if this is going to be as tough a qualifying session as we've ever had. Find out here shortly.

Q. This is the 14th Indy car race here on the streets of St. Pete, the seventh consecutive that the season has opened here. What does this city bring as a season opener, in your opinion?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's just awesome. It's a great venue. Right on the water here. It doesn't get much better than this.

Obviously the people here, I think it's been awesome to see the way they embrace it. Everybody gets excited about this event coming to town, which is awesome. We know that's not always the case when you're coming in here and setting up walls on city streets and stuff.

Everybody has been so accommodating over the years. To go downtown last night for dinner, there's a ton of people out here. It's a packed house. It's fun to be here. I look forward to this one as much as any every year, and more than most.

It's great to be back. Hopefully we can have a good

result, refresh those awesome race day memories that we've had from the past.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, good luck in qualifying this afternoon. Thank you.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you.