

IndyCar Media Conference

Saturday April 8, 2017

Helio Castroneves
Alexander Rossi
Ryan Hunter-Reay
Graham Rahal
Scott Dixon
James Hinchcliffe
Press Conference



But, you know, two years ago, in '15, winning the race, almost winning last year, coming up with a second-place finish, having another strong car this weekend.

It depends. I think the street courses, the toughest part is strategy. As we saw at St. Pete, it can be flipped very easily. You have to be somewhat aggressive and somewhat cautious on how you approach the race. Instead of maybe going for the win, sometimes you have to be on the safe side and settle for a podium.

We'll see how that plays out tomorrow. I think the fuel window is going to be quite aggressive just because of the extra five laps. Last year was really quite tight on fuel. So tomorrow, you know, adding five laps is going to make it a fuel save if people are going to go for a two-stopper. A must more defined two-stop from a three-stop race. For us, if it's a two-stop, should be really good.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Scott.

Q. (Question about frustration about yellow at St. Pete.)

SCOTT DIXON: It's a hard one. You know, I understand where they're coming from. You got to err on the side of safety.

For us, we always look for consistency. I remember the race two years ago here, we had a piece of debris that stayed on the frontstretch for the whole race, never went down.

You're always going to be angry after the race if it, you know, doesn't go your way. We're all competitive people. St. Pete for us, I think we had a really strong car, had a great shot at possibly winning.

But, you know, it is what it is. It generally cycles out. For us, for everybody at Honda, it was an exceptional race for them. Obviously congrats to Bourdais on that victory.

But, yeah, I don't think it's something that can really be changed. I know when IMSA ran a race over there, they zoned in on that piece, maybe had a caution or a debris flag there. But they give normally two to five laps to let everybody maybe take a pit stop, depending on how much on the racing line it is.

Each time it's different. It's not something that's easy

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with today's Verizon IndyCar Series post qualifying press conference.

Joined now by Scott Dixon, who matches his best start here at the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach with second, driving the No. 9 NTT Data Honda for Chip Ganassi Racing.

Scott, very active qualifying, and a good showing for Honda. What did you take away from qualifying going into tomorrow's race?

SCOTT DIXON: I think the car has been strong pretty much like St. Pete. As soon as we rolled off, we changed very few things. Unlike in the past, everything but the kitchen sink. It's been nice to know what to expect every time you get in the car. I think that's definitely helped the performance for us.

Our biggest struggle has actually been the red tires. The car, every session we've been on blacks, even yesterday's afternoon session, until we went to reds, we were very strong. Still just trying to figure out how to get the most out of the reds now.

Qualifying second is a great spot to start. I think our cars are typically good on the long run. I think we have a great shot at competing for the race win tomorrow. Hopefully that's the case with all four Ganassi cars.

THE MODERATOR: You are a race winner here at the Grand Prix of Long Beach. What does it take to be successful here? A very tricky track.

SCOTT DIXON: Yes, it's definitely a tough one. I think I raced here for maybe 12 or 14 years before I got my first win here. Maybe not the track that is most suited to what we've done.

for them to call.

Q. (Question about times from session.)

SCOTT DIXON: You know, this year I think was exceptionally different just because we went after the IMSA race. I think group one struggled to get up to speed. You have different rubber going down, it gets quite tough. Each year the tires change anyway. Firestone do a fantastic job every year. Maybe it's just a different compound or something.

But the car right now is basically running aero-free, there's no sort of development going on there. I think Honda has done a superb job on the engine. Lots of power.

It was kind of cool today. The tire was maybe out of its operating window. With the blacks, it took a while for them to come in. The reds maybe a little bit better. At the end, there, if you kept running another two or three laps, I think maybe the pace would have picked up.

THE MODERATOR: Scott, thank you very much. We appreciate your time.

SCOTT DIXON: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and continue with our post qualifying press conference. We'll make our pole winner wait a couple of seconds. We'll introduce our third-place starter for tomorrow's race, Ryan Hunter-Reay. Ryan does have one pole here at the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach, also one win.

Ryan, take us through qualifying, the challenges you face for tomorrow's race.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: It was certainly tough. We knew it was going to be close. You can tell from practice the difference between P1 and P2 was two-ten-thousandths of a second. We knew it was going to be very close, the top eight were within a 10th. Every little placement of the car, brake release, power application, is absolutely crucial to the final lap.

This is just nice after the season that we had last year, on street courses, for us to come back. Worked really hard in the off-season to take a new direction, all new angle at street courses to be strong at St. Pete, come here to Long Beach, it's nice again. Nice to be strong at Long Beach. This race has meant a lot to me over the years.

Thought I had a good lap until this guy spoiled it. I thought it was a good one. I was pretty amped there. He comes out of nowhere. But congratulations to Helio. It's amazing what he's been able to do over the span of his career. He's still logging poles.

I think the IndyCar Series is the most competitive it's ever been at the moment, so it says a lot.

But just great to get this DHL Honda back up to the front again. Hopefully we can have a great race tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: This is Helio's third pole in a row here, his fourth total in Long Beach. Also his 48th career pole. That's fourth on the all-time pole list. One more pole will tie him for third on the all-time pole list.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Means you're getting old.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: And I'm still kicking ass (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Helio, three in a row here. Seems like you have this track's number. What is it that makes you so successful here in qualifying?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: It's those damn kids, coming over here trying to steal my thunder.

I tell you what, actually exactly what Ryan was mention about this competition in the Verizon IndyCar Series, it's so incredible. It's ridiculous.

Plus every time you go into a session, it's something different. The track change, the tire change, traffic. It is absolutely very difficult. The crucial time when it comes, you see everybody hundredths of a second separated from each other.

For me today it was interesting because the first qualifying was a little bit tough. We almost didn't make it. John and the rest of the guys were able to adjust the car for the next session. After that, we kept rolling.

Car felt pretty good. Especially with the reds, my car came alive from this morning. So the AAA Chevy is working really hard. Also Chevy in particular. We noticed that our competitors, Honda, are strong. To put a lap out there together, now we got to think about tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Graham Rahal is starting sixth in tomorrow's race.

Graham, a great performance from Chevrolet, taking pole here. As one of the leading Honda drivers from last season, to see so many Honda drivers sitting around you right now, what does that mean to the development of Honda and where you're sitting right now?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, it's great in particular here. Honda being based just down the road in Torrance. I think the guys have done an excellent job pushing the engine as much as they possibly can. Clearly you're seeing a lot of gains from that.

I mean, the aero kit is what it is. They kind of focused

on the next area they can control, and they've done a hell of a job. Very proud of them.

You know, hopefully we keep pushing because we know that our competitors come May are going to have something for us. We don't want to get stuck believing that we've got them covered.

But, yeah, it was a good day for us to qualify sixth. I had a little issue there in the Fast Six. But overall for a little single-car team to fight through.

We were not very good yesterday. I was pleased with the changes we made. To get ourselves in there, it feels pretty awesome.

Proud of the PennGrade boys. Keep working hard for tomorrow. Tomorrow should be a good day for us.

THE MODERATOR: James Hinchcliffe is starting fourth in tomorrow's race. James, a big day for your team. A cool announcement that Sam Schmidt will be racing with Mario Andretti before the IndyCar Grand Prix this May, then obviously a good starting position for you tomorrow. Your thoughts on qualifying and how the team is positioned for tomorrow.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: First off, I'm pretty jealous that Sam (Schmidt) gets to race Mario. It's going to be pretty cool. Curious to see who wins that one. Sam has been practicing. I'm not going to lie to you.

But, no, as far as our weekend has gone, it's been pretty solid. We rolled off the truck with a pretty decent car. In these weekends when it's so tight, the track time is so limited, that's huge.

Yesterday afternoon, we had a little bit of problems. This morning we had a couple problems. We didn't panic. Huge credit to Schmidt Peterson Motorsport. Two Fast Six appearances for two, which is great.

Congrats obviously to Helio. All these kids are trying to steal his thunder, which is making Ryan really happy because he hasn't been called a kid in a long time (laughter). Been awhile.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: How old are you?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Doesn't matter. Younger than you (laughter).

No, I mean, it's just so tight. I think that's been the topic of the weekend, for sure, is how competitive it is. You got to be I think in the top six to have a shot at this thing. There's a lot of great cars up there. Going to be perfect execution tomorrow, in the pits, on the racetrack. Hopefully we can get the (indiscernible) to the front.

THE MODERATOR: Finally, Alexander Rossi starting

fifth in tomorrow's race. Not only a best career start at Long Beach, but your best career start in the Verizon IndyCar Series. I know one of your goals leading into the season was to improve on those road and street courses. This obviously has to be a great start to that.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, no, for sure. I think the turnaround that we as a team at Andretti have had since last year has been pretty unbelievable, especially here.

Huge credit to them, the belief they had in the off-season they were going to resolve the issues. That's very cool to see and be a part of.

For me particularly it's obviously good to be here. I think we missed a bit there in the Fast Six on a personal level just because I didn't know how the used reds were going to be because I hadn't done it before.

Other than that, a strong weekend and the NAPA Auto Parts has been good since we rolled off Friday.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Helio, going back to the first session, what really happened between you and Simon? Did he impede your progress that much? Did you feel it warranted a penalty?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, unfortunately I think it was a snowball. Will, like, wasn't going. We were not understand because we took enough gap from each other. I think maybe he was having issues with the brand-new set of reds.

In my position, because I was the third car, so I was so far back, I was catching those guys. All of a sudden when he came to the hairpin, obviously Simon was also trying -- he was also penalized from that situation. It was too suddenly.

I actually touch Simon's wheel ring on the hairpin. But we were able to come back and still made it to the top six. Were surprised actually when they penalized him. Obviously we didn't say anything. It's a shame because he was also a very good competitor. I mean, it's another car for Team Penske able to win.

We never know. Sebastien won starting from the back. I hope that's not the case this weekend, tomorrow. But for Team Penske, anything can happen.

Q. Helio, yesterday you told us, you were talking about the prestige of winning at Long Beach. You were happy you had. Then you said, And I'm going to do it again. You obviously have a very fast car right now. Is this the year?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, it is. So we're looking forward to a great race tomorrow. I feel the AAA machine is running rails right now. Qualifying is one thing, the race is another. But I feel like we have a very

good chance.

Q. Graham, in the Fast Six you mentioned you had a small issue. Can you explain what that is? You did have any problem with anybody slowing you down?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No. We were fine. I mean, we just had a good one going. Just got an insanely long over-boost penalty. Went into four, five, up into the six complex, even on my best, on my four, came out three-and-a-half 10ths down just due to it, had to pretty much bail out. That was it. Wasn't going to be able to improve on my lap from before. Just saved the tires.

I mean, it's stacked. These guys talked about it before. I mean, I was looking this morning, I caught myself again looking at Formula One times. The top four are spread by a second. Here, it's the entire field. I thought to myself, My God, it would be nice to have a nice second gap.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I was saying to James, it makes it stressful when you wake up in the morning.

GRAHAM RAHAL: You know, literally as a driver, if you are not 100% on your game, you could not nail the lap, you will not qualify well. I mean, it's that simple.

We've all been doing this awhile. Your butterflies get going before qualifying because you know you got to hit it every time.

But, yeah, I mean, we had a little deal. I'm sure all of us have had it at some point or another. Unfortunately it bit us. That was that.

Q. Helio, how much is it motivating to try to keep these kids in their place? How much does that keep you going?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Oh, man, I tell you. A lot. Every time I wake up in the morning, I do my workout. Sometimes some of the guys got friends that come by, that are really young. When you come out and say, Yeah, you're tired, aren't you? It feels good.

The point is always when I come to the race, I feel great. In my own team, I have incredible teammates. Incredibly talented, incredibly fast. I'm always learning with them. I'm not worrying about the other ones.

I tell you what, when you beat our team, you feel pretty darn good because you know you're right on top. Today is extra special because Long Beach is a great place. I remember winning here from the pole in 2001, and last two years was -- I mean, we were right there. We're not going to let this escape again.

Q. For you Honda drivers, two years ago we come to a street course race and see six Chevy drivers in the Fast Six. Look at it now, there's five and one. How redeemed do you feel?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: It's a nice change. Honda has done a great job working over the off-season. We've been stepping up through specs. Each introduction of the next engine spec has been sometimes a small improvement, sometimes a chunk. It's definitely made a difference.

But I do remember that. I remember looking at the sheets and seeing all Chevys.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I remember crying myself to sleep here. Brutal.

Q. Helio, you have Honda everywhere you look.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I tell you, I'm not worried about them at this point. I say they did a very good job during the off-season. Chevy, we are working on it the way we can.

I'm proud of those guys. I'm sure that we're going to continue working because, you know, in the past I think they won the past five, six years, the championship. At one point Honda will step up their game. That's what they did this year.

Now we got to keep it together and keep working. Hopefully at the end of the season we'll also be battling for the championship.

Q. Alexander, it looked like in the final session there you locked up the brakes, going into turn six. Did that affect the ultimate speed during your qualify?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Didn't matter. Probably, yes, that was the mistake on my part. So, yeah.

It was unfortunate. I think we could have been fighting for the front row. But at the end of the day it's OK. I mean, we're in the Fast Six. It's a strong starting spot. I think we can definitely fight to go win from there.

Q. Helio, some years ago you got Roger to climb the fence with you after winning Indy. This year you kind of did a mosh-pit like jump into your crew members' arms after winning pole. Do you think you can get the old man to jump into the crew members' arms?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: No (laughter). Not going to do that, I guarantee. But it's pretty cool to have Roger in your corner, again, calling the shots. In fact, when I came in from the lap, I don't think he was looking to the lap time. He knew we were running out of gas. He was just make sure I came in without stopping on the racetrack.

When I came in, he was like, Oh, all right. When I looked to the time sheet, Whoa, what a lap.

I know. I know.

It was pretty funny.

But Roger is a master of calling some shots, especially strategy. I have the best team in my corner for tomorrow. That's why I'm super confident.

Q. This was brought up yesterday, about the pit exit, which became an issue last season when Dixon was coming down the track and Pagenaud came out of the pits and managed to get in front of him. Helio, since your starting in the front row, what is your understanding of where you can exit the pit lane? Can you see where you have to pass by? I know there's an orange stripe, but how much can you see from the car?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yeah, you can. It gets a little bit confused, to be honest, because it's really far down. Yesterday, I thought I did a good job. Sounds like -- towards the end, they called me. I'm not leaving any doubt. I'm just going straight to make sure I don't have any issues.

You can see. There is a sensor. You just need to be careful because you can't go in that gray area. You might be called. But you can see.

Q. Ryan, you may have been confused about the number of laps this year. The race is five laps longer this year than last. The question to you or anybody up there, is that going to make it definitely a three-stop race? Do you think you can stretch it on two stops?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Unfortunately, no. It's very possible still on two stops with saving. So we need a yellow to really kind of spice it up. I know we managed to go without a yellow last year, which was pretty impressive. Realistically it probably should have been shortened by five laps, like by 15, yeah.

For us kids, we're happy (laughter).

I commend IndyCar for trying to address the issue because we did talk about this last year, but unfortunately we just missed it. I really hope that there's some yellow early in the race to throw some strategy.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I agree with him.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: First time for everything (laughter).

Q. Ryan, how nice is it to have Ray (Gosselin) back on the 28, have Eric (Bretzman) overseeing the team's engineering side?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Yeah, I mean, I have to credit the whole team. It's really been a group effort. It hasn't just been one guy here or there. The idea has been everybody has been looking forward to that new angle of approach on street courses. On road courses, as a whole, you know.

The drivers are really working well together. It's nice to have Ray's full attention. Now we can actually go through some data traces and stuff like that rather than him disappearing all the time, overseeing everything.

The entire team has done a really good job, with Eric coming on, Jeremy, Alexander's engineer. All of us really working together in the same direction has been beneficial so far.

Early days still. We've only been to St. Pete. We just qualified for the second round of the season. Long way to go. I really won't say much other than that. It's a good start.

Q. I'm looking up there, Team Penske, no teammates. I know you're not a kid. But can you look back 12 months from now, are you having more fun now? Your teammates are absent.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: It's surprising. I think Simon would be up here, for sure, and Will. I'm not sure what happened to them, to be honest. I was kind of like surprised.

But, well, it is what it is. I give full credit to my teammates because we're working so together, each one learning from each other. I did get this pole position because of learning from those guys.

It's a great team effort. It's great to work with guys like that. Josef is a great addition to the team, as well. But in the end of the day, we are having a good time.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thank you very much. Good luck tomorrow.