

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday April 21, 2017

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll keep rolling with our next Verizon IndyCar Series media availability. Joined now by Graham Rahal, driver of the No. 15 Rahal Letterman Lanigan Honda. This is a good track for you, best finish is second, couple podiums and seventh fastest in practice today. Take us through the practice and things that you'll notice that you'll work on in the second practice and then tomorrow in qualifying, as well.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think it's been a good start here. Yeah, as you said, this track for whatever reason has been good to me over the years, having finished second here the couple years running, and I think I finished third or fourth a couple years before that. So, it's always been a strong one for me for whatever reason, but I absolutely love coming here. It's without a doubt probably the most beautiful venue that we go to all season long, and we always seem to put on a good show.

I mean, practice earlier, yeah, we were seventh, but we definitely had our hands full out there. I think we need to improve quite a bit to catch up to obviously the Penske guys were 1 through 4. So, I think we've got some work to do to catch up to them. But you know, so far, so good, we'll just keep our heads down, keep working hard.

THE MODERATOR: We've seen rain here at Barber Motorsports Park before. We may or may not see it at some point in week. What does that do to your preparations?

GRAHAM RAHAL: We'll take it as it goes here. If it rains, great. I don't really care. We'll go out there and drive the wheels off of it either way.

This is definitely -- we raced here in the rain a couple years ago, or partially, and it's slippery around here in the rain, but it's slippery everywhere, so we'll just have to face that as it comes. I think it's going to be fine from what I can see, but you guys are probably checking a little more often than I. When I looked, I think, this morning, the chance was creeping up a little bit at 8:00, 9:00 a.m., but I didn't see anything towards race start. Hopefully we'll be okay.

Most importantly I just hope we don't get the weather for the fans, because I love the way that this place is for them, and we'd love to have a good crowd out here.

Seems to be a lot of enthusiasm about the event overall, and hopefully it will be nice and dry and a cool day, perfect spring day, so we're not melting like today, and have some fun.

THE MODERATOR: Looking ahead to tomorrow's qualifying, what does it take to put together the perfect lap?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Oh, it's impossible here. I mean, you pretty much just try to get together some really good segments, but is it possible to put together the perfect lap? I don't think so here, because to get the car to be really solid in one section makes it difficult in the high speeds. You're kind of looking for a balance of everything.

And nowadays, as competitive as it is, you're just pushing -- literally you're braking at the last possible inch and just trying to muscle it around anyway. I think as old Willy P. has probably taught us over the years, it doesn't necessarily have to be pretty, you've just got to get it around and make it go quick. That's how it felt earlier today. Not a single lap was pretty, but the pace was decent, so we'll just have to go from there.

But it's -- I can tell you Long Beach in section 2, or round 2, was as close as I've come to putting together like a perfect lap in my entire career, and it definitely felt really good. But even that, you know, only put us like third or fourth in the round. I mean, it's just so competitive. It's really tough right now.

THE MODERATOR: What does that mean when you have a moment like that and you're as experienced as you are throughout your career, and you're like, wow, I'm still having these moments?

GRAHAM RAHAL: A lot of guys around here. We're a single-car team. I've said this time and time again, but it's hurting us, without a doubt, this year. I think what you're seeing is a lot of the other teams have caught up to us. Some have certainly passed us. But as a single-car team, it's even more rewarding when you can find yourself in the Fast Six and you can put yourself in that position to be dueling it out with Ganassi, Penske, Andretti, everybody else. You know, it's just unbelievably competitive.

Even this morning, I thought, heck, maybe this weekend we're going to see a little bit bigger of a gap from first to last, and I looked, and other than (Zach)

Veach, everybody else was within nine tenths, so it certainly doesn't seem like that's going to be the case.

It's unreal. I mean, I've raced in a lot of stuff in my time, a lot of different series, and to be fastest here even in a practice session honestly anymore, it's meaningful. It means something to accomplish that.

Q. Kind of a flair for the dramatic in late-race runs here over the years, but you've always ended up on the back end of that. What is it going to take on Sunday to get that victory?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, we're going to do the same thing we always do. Hoping to qualify up front like we did last year and just wear them down. That's what we do around here, physical track, make the other guys tired, save our tires and go chase them.

Last year I genuinely think we would have won the race, but I thought (Jack Hawksworth is going one way and I'm looking in my mirrors at (Simon Pagenaud), and he goes from the left side of the track across to the right, and it just caught me out. So my mistake, and it cost us a lot, but I think we definitely had the car to beat on the long run. Not the short-term speed. I think there's a lot of guys that have that quick out-of-the-box speed, but for whatever reason, over the entire race, we seem to wear them down. I'd like to say we're going to get out front and just run away with this thing, but I don't see that as a possibility. We're just going to have to have good pit stops. Got a good clear in here into our pit box, so hopefully we can roll a good amount of speed in, guys do a good job on the stops. Just got to put it all together.

Trust me, I want to win here more than anybody because I have been close, so I think I probably have more top fives here in my career or over however many races we've done here than anywhere else that I've probably ever gone. I'd love to get one here. It would mean a lot to me, and just to get the monkey off of our back for the season and to start the next string of races really good. I mean, Phoenix I think is going to be a bit of a challenge for us, so you know, as I look towards Indy and stuff, it would just be a nice way to start the month of May, which is pretty much here, so it would be nice to get out of here with a good result.

Q. Expected temperature change Sunday, is that something you address mechanically that morning or can you look at it today and --

GRAHAM RAHAL: That morning probably. You know, mechanically I don't know how much will change, but aerodynamically you'll change a lot. If it is 20, 30 degrees cooler, track temp is going to be down, that changes the aerodynamic quite a bit, so we have to chase that quite a lot. But same for everybody. Hopefully by Sunday morning we've got the thing pretty well sorted out so we're not having to take too big a swings at it. But yeah, same for everybody, just address it then.

Q. We used to hear the term hustle a car around a street course. Is this a road course where you can actually hustle the car around?

GRAHAM RAHAL: You've got to hustle everywhere nowadays. I mean, this place is tough because you can find a lot of time in brake zones, although there aren't that many heavy brake zones, but you still can find time. But you have to get this combination of braking late enough, carrying the speed through the corner but then getting off the corner well enough because, for instance, Turn 5 down there, I can brake deep, roll a lot of speed, but if I get a bad exit then every bit of time I gained there I'm going to lose on my exit just down the straight. So the straights are just long enough where there is a lot of time to be gained on them, too.

There's so many different ways to skin the cat here. It's always how you do it, what your driving style is. My driving style, you guys will think this is funny because we've had success here. My driving style doesn't really fit this circuit. I'm more kind of an attack-in sort of guy, and here is more focusing on exit. It takes me a little bit of adjusting around here, but you have to hustle it for sure, and it's not pretty. Like I said, to get the car balanced in 5, it's probably going to be a bit of a handful up over the crest in 13, so you fight this thing all the time, where do you want to be really strong and just go from there.

Q. But is it a road course where you have to be precise, or can you get a little physical in some of these --

GRAHAM RAHAL: You have to be precise, but there's a lot of different lines. Go watch in Turn 2 and 3, just go sit up on the hill for half a practice session, in all seriousness, just watch the lines, the variety of lines. There's 50 ways to skin the cat through there.

So yes, you have to be precise, but there's also a little bit of something for everybody, you know, and it's not a one size fits all basically. But if you go over the limit, then it will bite you fast, really quick.

Q. I'm sure you've probably been asked this question before already. Most drivers I'm sure have. But how do you feel about Alonso running the 500, and do you wish that those two races, Monaco and Indy, were on different weekends so we would see maybe more crossover?

GRAHAM RAHAL: First of all, it's impossible to get a crossover going that way because in my opinion, there's a big financial aspect to it. They're not going to park some of these guys that are bringing money to the teams or whatever so we can go. And the other side of it, and I had this conversation with Jenson Button not long ago. I'm really not that interested in running 15th. I mean, I'm just not. So for me, Monaco would be great, but if you're not a Mercedes or Ferrari, you're not going to win right now anyway.

I'd rather, I think, for Alonso, I think he's going to have a ball. He's going to come over here. He's going to be in a damned good car. You guys know that, and he's going to have fun. He's going to get passed and pass more cars in one month than he will in his entire Formula 1 career combined, but he's going to have a complete blast, and I think it's great for our sport that he has the interest that he has in it, and I hope that other guys want to come do it, too.

I think it says a lot, and I know that they're struggling, but I think it says a lot that he would miss Monaco to come do this. I mean, had it been the Barcelona Grand Prix, I get it, but Monaco is a -- that's a big one, you know, and so for him to kind of wave off that to come and do it would be -- is awesome. And like I said, most of all, I just hope he comes and has fun.

Q. I guess the point about changing the weekend so that there would be more crossover, I guess maybe we would see more F1 drivers that would be running in the 500 along with Alonso.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think Alonso works well because of Honda, so for right now that's probably all that you would see.

You know, look, I'd love to see more of them come do it, but not that many of those guys would have the pull that Fernando Alonso does, either, so we've kind of got the right guy. You know, voted most popular Formula 1 driver however many times. Lee might know, I don't know, but he's the guy, and on a worldwide scale, I'm not going to lie, I grew up a big fan. I loved watching him. I loved his style. I loved his aggressive nature, his battles with Schumacher back in the day and stuff. I loved that.

I think that's why I think he's going to have a lot of fun here, and he's going to get back to being able to just go race. Not a lot of electronics and stuff in these things compared to those, and so I think he's going to enjoy the purity of the racing here. But there's not that many guys that have the flash that Fernando Alonso is going to have coming here. I think it's definitely the right guy. It fits the right -- obviously, I wish that he was going to be seated next to us in our team, but I mean, look, you can tell Dad and I are McLaren fans because if you remember a couple years ago we ran a McLaren orange IndyCar. It wasn't that long ago that you saw McLaren orange out here. It will be fun to see those colors run around Indy. Zak Brown is a great family friend of ours, and I think Zak is a brilliant marketer. He's a smart guy. He's a race fan, which is awesome, so hopefully this is just the start of what we see McLaren's involvement in IndyCar going forward.

Q. Not only is this a track where you need to be a closer on Sunday, but you've got another race May 12th. You've also passed a lot of cars. You drove from last last year all the way up to --

GRAHAM RAHAL: Fourth, yeah.

Q. How much do you look forward to that race?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I love Indy GP, and I think we should be very strong there this year. You know, we qualified third there last year and got DQ'd for being, whatever it was, 1.7 pounds underweight, so we started last, finished fourth. I think we'll be pretty strong.

And I also think we'll be strong at the 500. I think we had a really great test there.

This is an important period of time. So far this season, nothing has kind of gone our way. St. Pete didn't. Long Beach we had a quiet race, but we were on for -- we were fifth, sixth place worst, and then we get a flat tire with three laps left. Didn't make any contact, just must have run over something. I didn't see anything, but a flat tire, so we get punched in the ribs again.

But the team is deserving of a good result, and so, like I said, I'd love to get it going here and get a win. This is one of my favorite events of the entire season, as I've said, and I've got a couple second place trophies from here and would love to get one bigger.

We're focused -- I can tell you we're putting a lot of energy into this one, through the test and after the test to improve. I didn't think we were very good at the test here. Just putting a lot of energy and focus into being better come this weekend because this is a track that we feel like we should be up front, there is no doubt. And then the same for the GP.

It's home for me, you know, going back to Indy, and I just think we'll be very strong there, as well, so we'll see how it goes.

Q. You kind of alluded to this a little bit ago, Zak Brown and McLaren (indiscernible)?

GRAHAM RAHAL: You know, I don't know. I don't know. Zak is coming here, isn't he? You can ask Zak. But I do know that he's an Indy car fan. You know, he was a resident of Indianapolis until recently, and as I said, he's a good family friend of ours, very close friend with my dad, and I'd love to see them involved more in the future.

I think IndyCar is still the hidden gem of motorsports, and I think that it often gets overlooked. But it's the bargain of all motorsports when you look at the international impact. Obviously we've got to work on our TV rating for sure, but the crowds are always great. The sponsors love it. We get a great return out of it. So for a team like that that spends what they currently spend, I'm not saying it replaces because that it doesn't. But for them to add a program wouldn't be that much, and maybe it ultimately would lead to others getting involved on down the road in the future.

We all know that one of the things that we focus on as

a team at RLL and I know Ganassi did is you've got to be diverse in what you do. It was RLL, now we've got GRC, you've got the IndyCar, you've got sports cars. We've got a lot of stuff, and I think for them to add just another thing to sell the sponsors on a global impact, I think it's a great platform to do that. Hopefully, you know, there's a lot more good to come in the coming years of the series. I think that there's a lot of great things happening right now with Jay and his team, and adding a name like that would be pretty special.

As Zak pointed out in all of his articles, McLaren's history at Indy is pretty deep, you know? In many different forms of racing, that they're not really in it from a factory perspective currently. I mean, they're road cars. A lot of you guys know, I'm big into cars for sure, and McLaren has got a great road car program but really doesn't have an international racing program for the sports cars yet. There's a lot of different things that they could do, so hopefully we'll see them do some more in the future.