

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday April 28, 2017

JR Hildebrand

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with our Verizon IndyCar Series post practice press conference. Joined now by JR Hildebrand, driver of the No. 21 Fuzzy's Vodka Chevrolet for Ed Carpenter Racing.

JR, we'll talk about practice, but obviously, the question on everyone's mind is how is the hand feeling, how great does it feel to be back in a car?

JR HILDEBRAND: It definitely feels good to be back. It's a good place for us to be coming back. We were strong here in the test. I think with the kind of injury that I'm dealing with and the surgery that I had, an oval definitely is a little easier just literally turning left versus turning right even.

So it felt better than honestly I thought it would in practice. I didn't have any, like, major issues. I got a couple of different braces that I'm kind of playing around with and stuff like that. But felt like I got it pretty dialed in. Feel good about qualifying today and then the race tomorrow as well.

THE MODERATOR: You've obviously been contributing to this team for a long time, not as a full-time driver, but how difficult was it for you to kind of be on the sidelines knowing that was your car racing out at Barber?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, it was definitely different to be watching in that situation than it was last year, you know, or in years past when I've been stepping in for testing or whatever and doing that on behalf of other guys.

It was painful to sit there and watch, but I think was in the end the only, you know, feasible kind of way to get through that weekend. Just glad that it all feels good enough to get back in here.

THE MODERATOR: Now, all of that being said, it doesn't seem to have slowed you down very much, finishing second fastest in practice today. Your thoughts on the wind conditions and just practice in general for that first session?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, the conditions were, like, as crazy as I've seen them at a track in a long time. Just the amount of wind that we had, obviously as you guys were I'm sure very clearly aware, like the dust and all

that kind of stuff was pretty crazy looking.

You know, we felt pretty good for where we were at in those conditions. For tomorrow it's going to be a guess what downforce level you want to run and those types of things just to get through the race and be good in different types of situations in the race.

We did as much race running as we could earlier today just to try to figure that out before, you know, doing more qualifying simulation stuff later on. But, you know, felt like we made a little bit of progress from when we were here at the test, certainly in the race running.

You know, the car's certainly got some speed in it. I feel like, you know, if we nail it this afternoon, we got a good shot at starting on the front row, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions for JR.

Q. At any time during that practice, did the wind catch you out any?

JR HILDEBRAND: I was doing my first (qualifying) sim actually. It was like going through one, two. It didn't catch me off guard because you know that that's something that you might have to deal with.

But had a, you know, pretty good moment, you know, just getting sort of some tailwind going through two at the exit. So, you know, doesn't look like it's dying down much. It will definitely be something that everybody will have to deal with.

It's also kind of gusty. That at these places, it's no different at Indy than it was when we ran the Milwaukee Mile. It's the gustiness that actually is what really throws you off. It's not really the consistent wind in any particular direction, you can kind of get used to that and account for it. We'll just kind of have to see how it plays out.

Q. The dust on the track, did that affect you at all?

JR HILDEBRAND: You know, I was surprised that that didn't seem to be having a huge impact. I didn't personally notice it. You know, I was kind of thinking all right, you start trying to pass guys, get offline, are you going to notice that going into the next corner, the front tires maybe don't feel like they're totally in or something, like it takes 30 or 40 feet back on the racing line for everybody to scrub off and feel back normal. I didn't really see a lot of that out there and didn't

experience much of it myself.

Like I said, was honestly a bit surprised that that didn't seem to be a bigger problem.

Q. A question concerning the wind conditions. Is there something that you can do with the aero package that the car is not so sensitive anymore against the wind, to feel better?

JR HILDEBRAND: You know, it's tough. You can add downforce. I mean, that's kind of the easiest solution when you get into these types of situations. Most cars, I felt, were able to run a little bit more downforce this weekend as compared to the test. There was, like, a slight spec change from IndyCar coming to the race that allowed all participants to run a little bit more downforce sufficiently. I think you're seeing that more or less up and down the paddock.

Other than that, it's a very difficult thing. Because the cars or so aerodynamically dependent, it's quite difficult to account for difference in wind one end to the other. I think the Silver Crown cars are probably less affected by a lot of wind than we are. Figuring that out will be the difference between being good tomorrow and great tomorrow.

Q. Not only the wind, but what about the sand situation, all the sand blowing on the track? Does it make it slippery?

JR HILDEBRAND: Like I was mentioning earlier, I didn't feel like that was as big of an issue. I think you'll notice that it will sort of accumulate offline. If you get into a situation that, sand offline ends up being just like marbles offline. But just kind of doing regular running, it didn't feel like the track was badly impacted by that.

Q. Was it hard having to sit out Barber, being you had just come back getting your full-time ride? Do you feel more confident coming back here being that you were so good at the test, this place has been good to you in the past?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, it was for sure tough going into Barber. It's hard when you're in a situation like that. You feel like it's kind of out of your hands. Like we didn't even get to a point that I was trying to get back in the car, figure out if that was possible there, just 'cause the doctors that worked on my hand were pretty firm in their feeling that even if I could sort out how to run there, it was going to be causing -- I was putting myself at fairly significant risk for longer-term damage.

As we have Phoenix this weekend, regardless of the fact that we knew we would be competitive here based on the tests, May comes up in a hurry. You just don't want to get behind.

Tough spot to be in kind of all around there. But then coming here, to your second point, definitely feels good to be coming back here. It's a little easier to get back in a car at a place where you've been competitive, you

know. There was no reason that we didn't expect to be competitive here again when we showed back up.

It's a good spot for us so far.

Q. How are you able to embrace your mentor role to Zach (Veatch)? How did he progress over the course of the weekend? You made your debut in almost an identical fashion.

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I filled in for Mike Conway at Mid-Ohio back in 2010 in sort of similar conditions.

Yeah, I mean, knowing this was going to be sort of a short-term thing, in particular, I wanted for the team's sake to be able to get as much as they could out of having Zach in the car in my absence. That in some ways sort of requires that Zach is up to speed.

But being a driver myself, being in that situation before, I know that it helps a lot to have somebody that, you know, is kind of just there to help you through whatever those difficulties and challenges are.

Barber is a really tough place. He had some testing time at Sonoma, which is not really super relevant going into Barber. And on top of that, like, we were not great there when we tested there previously.

You know, he was in for an uphill battle going in. He had a great attitude about the whole thing. I thought he made evident progression through the weekend. You know, was definitely helpful for the team and did a good job for himself.

Q. At Indy for two, three years you were the third car for Ed Carpenter Racing. Now this year there's not going to be a third car. Will that help the overall effort between you and Ed?

JR HILDEBRAND: I think so. I mean, like last year with Josef, Ed and myself, that was a really potent sort of combo of I feel like drivers and engineers and all that kind of stuff.

I think from the team's perspective, you know, having me there in the third car, that's always a little bit of a drain on, you know, the resources of the team and doing all that stuff.

I know Ed went into this year feeling like unless the team had a deal done way in advance with all the right people, that he was, you know, sort of opposed to doing that. He's ended up holding firm in that.

To answer your question more directly, I feel really good about what we're going to be doing there and know that at a bare minimum we'll be able to focus really intently just on what we're doing.

Ed and I, over the course of the last few years, we're looking for very similar things, driving a very similar way around there. We'll be looking to make good on it,

for sure.

Q. You have a brace on your wrist. Are you doing anything different in the car to help your wrist?

JR HILDEBRAND: This is just my hand. So my wrist is actually sort of fine.

This is actually the brace that I started using in the car. I've got some carbon fiber stuff, other things like that. This has ended up being sort of the most comfortable. It's basically just to try to form fit it to the steering wheel, wear it under my glove. So it's just to kind of like disperse load in my hand to make it so I sort of can't grip super hard with my last two fingers.

In terms of what I'm doing in the car, that's all I'm doing in the car. To change it, we've moved things around, remade some steering wheel grips and things like that. But that's all things that guys do between weekends kind of anyway.

Other than that, it's just a lot of other stuff outside the car to kind of be prepped as well as I can be for getting in it that I wouldn't normally do.

Q. Do you have any concerns about mechanical problems on your car since your teammate spent some time in the garage today?

JR HILDEBRAND: No. I think it was just an isolated incident. Yeah, no stress on our side.

Q. When you're in the corner, have you adjusted? Are you pulling with it more? Have you changed your style when you go into the corner because of it?

JR HILDEBRAND: I don't know. I think I'm probably using my hand a little bit differently. But, you know, haven't noticed -- I'm certainly not, like, consciously doing anything differently. Feel very, very much the same being here the last time around in terms of what I'm doing, where I'm putting the car, how I'm able to do that.

I was a little bit concerned getting out of pit box and stuff like that, which was no stress. You know, it's not affecting my, like, normal movement pattern, I don't think.

Q. If it was reversed and it was your right hand, would it be almost impossible here?

JR HILDEBRAND: I think it would definitely be tougher. That's where kind of like where it is on my hand and the severity of the injury were both, like, had a lot to do with where I could go and where I couldn't.

Because it's my left hand and where it is, sort of pulling with your left hand around here, that's definitely, you know, not as bad as it could have been otherwise. Like if we decided to switch directions, I think that would be, like, more of an issue, for sure. Thankfully that's not something that we do.

Q. It seems like you and Spencer have come from the back to the front in the two races you ran. You haven't really had the finishes you might have liked. Where do you think you need to improve? Do you think you just need better luck your way?

JR HILDEBRAND: You know, definitely as a group I think on the road courses, road and street courses, need to improve a little bit. We're working really hard to find where those areas are, what we can do as drivers and, you know, crews to be a little bit more dialed in when we show up at road and street courses.

That's a process that we're sort of, you know, continue to go through. But we've definitely made gains. I think the fact that our race pace tends to be pretty good is at least, you know, one positive among all the things that you work on.

So it will be a little bit of, you know, catching some breaks and things like that. But, you know, in the end I think we definitely feel like there's some pace that we need to be able to go get to compete on a more regular basis.

Q. Did you and Mikhail talk after the contact at Long Beach? Are you concerned at all with how he's been driving, since he's had a few other incidents besides yours?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, he came over and told me he didn't block me while I was still sitting in the car. Then he got a penalty 30 seconds later for doing that. Whatever.

I'm not -- like, I don't have hard feelings about it, for sure. But, you know, I think that there's definitely a track record that, you know, he's begun to build up.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Good luck in qualifying.

JR HILDEBRAND: Thanks, guys.