

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday June 2, 2017

Helio Castroneves

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Graham, you look tired, sweaty. Take us through your practice sessions, first and second.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, first of all, it's great to be back here. We appreciate everything Roger has done here in the city to put this on. Certainly they made some improvements on the track, on the straightaways, which is nice. We appreciate that.

I'm excited to be back. It's been a track that's been good to me in the past. Had a couple podiums here, finished fourth last year, I think, in race one or something.

Overall, it's been a place I've had some success, which is nice. But obviously today started off on the right foot. United Rentals car seems to be very strong, very competitive right off the trailer this morning. The first session, we didn't even change anything. I mean, there was no reason to.

Definitely as the track heated up in the afternoon, it got slippery. It got slippery for me. I'm sure everybody will say the same. In fact, on my fastest lap, I was pretty much turning right -- supposed to be turning right into 11, but I was looking at the left-hand side wall. I know we had a couple more 10th in it.

It's going to be tricky out there. It's bumpy. You guys know that. It's bumpy. It's going to beat us up pretty good. We'll just have to go out there tomorrow and test it, hopefully the car will be nice and reliable. We'll get to the end and have a good day.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned the couple podium finishes you got here, a third and second place. The guy who finished almost as fast as you today, Helio Castroneves, three wins here. How difficult is it as a teammate of a driver to compete with somebody that's had that much success here at the track?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Helio is one of the best. Penske is always the standard, particularly when it comes to bumpy street circuits. Their shock department, their damper program, all that sort of stuff, they're always the standard. Always trying to keep up with them.

I'm pleased with what we had today. It seems like, as I

said, we were very competitive. I would have liked to -- trust me, I wanted to be fastest both sessions today, kind of set the tone a little bit. But it was a good day.

Helio is one of the best, one of the all-time greats. Look at the amount of poles he has and everything else. Obviously wins, Indy 500s, so on. He is a great competitor, and he's in a great machine. What do you say? You're trying to beat the best of both worlds. It's not easy.

We give him a lot of crap for being the old guy, but we're all still working hard to keep up. Actually, it gives me a lot of hope that I can be here for a lot longer.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Graham.

Q. (No microphone.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: Fortunately or unfortunately, the smooth part is on the straight lines. The bumpy parts are where all the twisty bits are.

It's better. It's better. But it also makes me think that anywhere from turn 11, the point of the island down here is all concrete. That could have been ground, just like it is from the middle of turn 13 to turn 1.

They've done an amazing job. I can't even tell you how much better the back straight is. It's actually nice. It's nice to go back there, sort of get a breather, which wasn't the case last year.

I know Roger spent a lot of his personal money and everything else. We can't ask too much of him. The guy has given so much to this sport for so many years. I don't think there's anybody else that would match his commitment. So we're not going to say much. It certainly isn't the smoothest place that we go to, for sure.

Q. (No microphone.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: No. Well, the braking into turn 7 at the end of the very back straight over here is way better. I think that can help passing, too, because it is a lot smoother. You can certainly feel way more confident going in there.

THE MODERATOR: The question was about the changes to the track, which area of the tracks were smooth compared to last year. Also, if you could brake sooner.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Later.

THE MODERATOR: In the final two turns.

Q. Graham, you've had some great runs at this track and in this format. A couple times you could have won the race. What do you think of this course? What do you think of the format? We've been having doubleheaders here for the last five years now.

GRAHAM RAHAL: You know, I've always enjoyed coming here my entire life, watching my pops here and stuff. It's great to be here. I think just being in the Motor City creates good vibes for me. I enjoy it.

As a Buckeye, we like doing well up in Michigan, for sure. Maybe that plays a part.

No, I mean, ultimately, look, I enjoy being here. It's served me well. It's a very demanding track. It requires a lot of commitment. Trust me, even us, when we watch the onboard, you see how fast you go through certain parts, you're like, Holy smokes. It takes a lot of commitment around here. There isn't a whole lot of wiggle room, margin for error.

I just enjoyed it. Like you said, a couple breaks here and there could have gone our way. Look, I want to win a race now. It's a good opportunity for us tomorrow. I know our strength is race day. Always has been. Hopefully tomorrow and Sunday will be good days for us.

I mean, look, after the entire month of May, to come here and to do a doubleheader, it's hard. It's hard. It's hard on everybody. Ideally you'd get a weekend off, the drivers. But for the crews, it's extremely difficult.

We're here. We've been doing it. We're going to keep doing it. We'll do the best that we can over the next two days.

Q. Graham, can you talk about the change to qualifying. You have qualifying in the morning for race one, and I think you get 12 minutes, split the groups in two, same thing on Sunday morning.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm kind of fine with just the consistency of it. In years past, it was practice on Friday morning, qualify Friday night, practice, then race, then qualify, then race. It was always a little funky.

Look, I'm perfectly fine with it, you know, going the way it is. I suppose finishing second today, we're going to be group one. Maybe that's a good sign for me because my car was significantly better in the morning than it was this afternoon. I think a lot of guys will say that.

For me, this morning, you know, it all pretty much came extremely easy. It was not easy (laughter).

You know, maybe that's a good omen or a good sign for us. We'll see. I mean, I just like the consistency of the scheduling. We go racing, qualify in the morning, go racing. Hopefully we'll be up front.

Q. Graham, your fast times today, were they something you found that you didn't have earlier this season? Was it just experience here or something else?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, it's hard to say. It's hard to say. This setup kind of started with a concept out of Long Beach. It is very, very, very, very different from what we ran here last year, or over the last handful of years, so...

It is certainly a departure in our mindset than what we had done for a while. But this was something that we had tried at Long Beach, in basic theory, and it worked relatively well. I mean, on race day, had it not been for a flat, we were in the top 5 for sure.

You know, I wish we had found this maybe at St. Pete or something like that, honestly. But we live, we learn. I think the tire has changed quite a bit this year. We've had to chase that. Maybe some guys haven't. But for us, like at Indy, we've had to chase it. We've had to chase it all year long.

Certainly I think what we've got going here is better. I don't want to get over-confident, but hopefully it's going to be strong tomorrow.

Q. Graham, your two best qualifying experiences this year are both on street courses. Does that give you more confidence with this unique format? You were lacking a lot of straightaway speed at Indy. Did you find that here? Are they not long enough?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, this one is not so important when it comes to the straight line performance. Yeah, I mean, this morning we were, on the sector times, fastest in I think five corners. We were 18th on the back straight. I don't think necessarily we're quick, but it is what it is.

I mean, we're just going to keep plugging along and doing the best we can. It's not so crucial here that it's going to be make or break for our day. If everything goes well, we'll qualify well in the morning, we'll start up front.

I think if we start up front, we can take off and dominate this thing. I really feel that confident about where we're at. If we can be on that front row, we'll be strong, if everything goes to plan.

This race, nothing ever goes to plan. Not that a lot of IndyCar races do. This place, for some reason, you look at the starting grid and finishing, it's all over the place. We'll see how it goes. Hopefully we'll have a

good day out there.

Q. Graham, with Oriol as a teammate this weekend, does that give you a second set of data? How good is it having him this weekend?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I mean, after session one, we had to vacuum all the rust out of his seat (laughter).

But he did a good job the second session. Frankly, honestly, we haven't done anything yet. He's the same as me. I'll talk to him now after this session. I struggled with the back of my car quite a lot this session, and I didn't the first. So maybe he found a couple of things that will lead us down a better path.

Look, you guys know how you feel about Oriol. I've said it five thousand times. He's a great teammate, a great partner. He's a guy that's going to help us. He has the same feel as me. We're going to push down the same path and do the absolute best we can to get this team in Victory Lane, United Rentals in Victory Lane. We're running the Turn for the Troops this weekend. In May alone, we raised \$48,330. Definitely proud of that. We're going to keep pushing hard to do some more of that.

Oriol is a big part of that. We're very thankful, as you noticed, to have (indiscernible) take his primary here is pretty cool. Very thankful for that. Hopefully we can continue to find some money to keep racing with us because he helps us a lot.

THE MODERATOR: Graham actually posted the second fastest time of today's practice, so sorry about that, Graham.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I thought second. I was going to take it, but...

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the fastest driver of the day, Helio Castroneves, who set the fastest time of both sessions.

We just had Graham in here, who posted the second fastest time today. He was saying that you really set the standard, and Penske really sets the standard, around this course with three race wins here in your name. What is it about this course that you seem to have mastered so well?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, first of all, it's great to be back again in Belle Isle. I think there were several things. First, it's probably on the emotion side. I won my first race here, so you have that special attachment. When you win your first race ever, you do have good memories, I guess.

In racecar driving, some careers, some driver's careers, some tracks are really, really suitable. Probably because the combination with the asphalt, concrete, it probably suits me really well.

Normally, with the drivers looking to each other for data, I'm always looking in to learn. This is one of the tracks that I don't look to their data. Actually they're looking to mine, which means it comes natural. Probably that's why. Maybe my style, maybe the way I drive, things like that. That's one of the reasons it suit me really well.

It's great. Not only is a place that is very important for a lot of people, especially for Roger, but it's because of the corporation, Penske Corp is here. And Detroit, Detroit has really put a lot of effort into this place. I really feel that we're driving for the home team. It's great to have that support.

THE MODERATOR: I'll ask this question. It was a rewarding yet tough finish for you last weekend in Indianapolis. How difficult is it for you mentally to move from that sort of a situation to a doubleheader race in Detroit?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, we just use that kind of like situation to fuel the entire organization and come back here stronger. We did everything we could. Unfortunately was just a little too short. As I said before, Honda did their homework to bring their A game.

Actually, you know, instead of making excuse, saying they're much faster than us, we went to work and made a fantastic racecar. Big props for the entire organization, especially my teammates, we all work together. That day was my day in terms of the Team Penske five drivers there.

Now we just move on. The good news is from this situation, we lead the championship. That's something that I'm really working very hard. Now we got to continue executing and never look back.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Speaking of looking back, 2014, you had a hard-fought second-place finish to Ryan Hunter-Reay, then came here and won a race. Last Sunday the same thing happened. If the trend continues, you come here and you win a race. Does that give you confidence?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Well, that's not give me confidence. Give me confidence that I know every time I come back here, I have the best car, the best group of guys giving their best, which is not only here, but every place.

As we talk about, for several reasons, this place for me, it make me energize. Bring the best out of me, just

like Indianapolis.

Q. How difficult is this weekend from a strategic standpoint? It seems like if you qualify well, you get hosed on yellow timing. If you qualify towards the back, you move forward. No rhythm to this race. How do you plan for the unexpected?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Good question. We definitely want to sit down and look all the possibilities. You can only, you know, do what you think is best. Obviously last year we got, unfortunately, penalized by the yellow, went one lap longer instead of just pit, while we were in the lead.

It is difficult. But we can only control things in our control, obviously. Hopefully we going to be prepare as much as we can this time to put ourselves in the best situation.

Q. What kind of difficulty is it with all the bumps last year, the track seems smoother to you?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: They did a really good job of sanding out, not resurface, but sanding out the back straightaway. Completely different. As I said, I like the way it was. I don't know why they decided to change it. A lot of drivers complain. I told him, Don't listen to the drivers, they complain a lot, you know.

But to be honest, I think it's great. From the airport, coming over here, you see a lot of people. The press actually, watching the news, people talking about it. That's exactly what we need not in one place but everywhere. Some tracks, unfortunately, promoters didn't follow that scenario. I was really glad there were a lot of people today here. Belle Isle looks phenomenal.

I came here on Tuesday night. Wednesday I was taking my time, going around. Man, I didn't know the fountain was all marble. I mean, it's beautiful. A lot of marble. I thought it was concrete and painted. It's all marble, white marble. It was really nice to see details. Unfortunately, when we come over here...

I'm really happy everything is working well.

Q. Apologies for bringing up the R word. It may rain Sunday. How do you like racing in the rain? Did you ever watch Senna race in the rain?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I don't have a problem. As long as you in front, you can see it, no problem. But I tell you what, Sunday there is a possibility. Right now I'm thinking one day at a time. Tomorrow sounds it's going to be pretty clear. We're going to do everything we can to keep doing what we doing, collect as much points as possible, and that win we're waiting for for so long.

Q. I watched the in-car camera. You were struggling with the steering wheel. Looked like it was bouncing in the car. Having to do two races

this weekend, do you have to worry about blisters on your hands?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: No. Right now, no problem. In the past I don't remember having any issues with the blister. It is physical, no question, because of the twists and turns of this place.

That's why I want to show those young kids that I do my homework at home. I don't sit drinking wine. I do my homework. I can't wait to go there and never look back.

Q. The way qualifying is, in other words, there's only a half hour in the morning, you get 12 minutes, both Saturday and Sunday morning, for each of the races. If you're not right on it right away, you can end up in the middle even though you're the fastest guy. How many runs do you think you can do?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Good question. In fact, this place changed so much because of the concrete. I was looking to the temperature. We were about a hundred degrees. When the cloud came in, it dropped about seven degrees. I'm talking about 30 seconds. It shows that this track, it change temperature. For those that don't know, our cars are very sensitive to the temperature.

It's extremely important to be in the right time, to come out of the truck with the car well set up. I'm very glad we did that again this year. We're going to fight. Sounds like the red tires and the black tires, there is some difference. It's going to be a real treat tomorrow for you guys that been following longer. It definitely going to be some strategy for qualifying and obviously for the race, too.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.