

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday July 28, 2017

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are pleased to be joined by Graham Rahal, driving the No. 15 Honda for Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. Graham is the 2015 winner here at the Honda Indy 200 at Mid-Ohio, also finished second fastest in this morning's practice session.

Graham, take us through this morning's practice, things that you noticed, things you'll work on later today to prepare for tomorrow's qualifying.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, this morning was good for us to go out there. To have that pace right away was nice. Obviously we didn't test here. I know some of the other teams did. But for us to be in the ballpark was good. See how this thing develops over the weekend.

We're struggling a little bit with a couple balance issues that have been for whatever reason consistent for us this year. They're kind of things, you know, corner entry problems, things like that, that we've struggled with across the board. So hopefully we can figure it out here in the next session or two.

But, yeah, I mean, it's great to be here at Mid-Ohio. It's nice to be back home, just see all the hometown fans, feel the support. I'm excited for practice this afternoon and obviously the weekend.

THE MODERATOR: We all know how special this event is to you. What do you remember from 2015 when you got that win? I imagine there has to be a little bit, maybe if not extra pressure to win, at least extra desire to win.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Getting that monkey off your back.

GRAHAM RAHAL: For me, I said it at the time, and I still feel that, had I won and accomplished a lot in my career but never won here, I think it would have been something that I would have regretted greatly or been disappointed in. So to get that off my back was nice.

But, you know, we've had good runs here the last few years. So the way I look at it is we have to try to find a way to do that once again here this weekend and put it all together.

I fully expect the Penskes to once again kind of be the

standard. But we're going to give it our best shot to try to defeat them here on home turf.

It was great to win here, special moment for me. It's hard to put into words. I think about it a lot. What I think about the most, you know, nowadays is obviously standing next to me on the podium was J. Wil, who I was thinking about just the other day, that moment, that time with him. So it was just a great experience for me.

Hopefully we can keep that going, get Steak 'n Shake another win here in central Ohio really, Ohio in general, build upon the momentum that we really picked up the last handful of races.

You guys have seen it, anybody that has followed the sport has seen it, I think we've been one of the cars, probably the most consistent car, over the last eight races or so. We got to try to figure out a way to keep that going here this weekend.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned the permanent road courses have been something you needed to work on heading into this race. What are some things you and the team have been discussing as you enter the event?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think one of the big things we've struggled with this year is to try to put our thumb on the pulse as far as the tire is concerned. Fortunately for us, here the tire is the same as last year, identical, same code and everything. The alternate is not, but the primary is. So that should help us at least know from last year to this year we shouldn't need to change much.

Having said that, a lot of places we've gone to, we have really struggled to figure out what the car wants. We haven't had that big of a struggle here so far today. Was I super pleased in practice today? No. The balance was a little off. But we managed to put in a good lap there and get through it. That's been something we've struggled with this year. Hopefully we can get past that.

Obviously we have Watkins Glen, Sonoma, a couple others coming up that will be important to understand the tire as well. So hopefully it doesn't bite us too hard as the year goes on.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Graham.

Q. You said you had good runs here. In principle, when you have a good car here, can you go out with the same setup like you did before?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Should be able to. But I think what we've found in a lot of places this year, this is what I was talking about with the tire, a lot of places we've gone this year we've run the same setups and we struggled. Road America. I mean, Road America last year, we were great, really strong. We just didn't have the right aero kit. Obviously this year the engine is so much better, we thought we just pretty much would go there and have some minor tweaks and the engine would make up a big difference. We were awful. Yeah, we qualified in the top six, but we struggled a lot.

So, you know, conceptually yes, you should be able to translate it over. But then you have the aging of the surfaces, are the tires really the same, is there a slight compound or slight construction. What might be a little bit different, you know, that maybe we're not taking into consideration, things like that.

But here, so far, it seems to have translated fairly well. This afternoon you're going to see everybody run reds. That could get interesting to see what happens in that scenario because the red is a different tire from last year. So we'll see.

Q. You're home. When you're not thinking about business, how much do you think about where you've been? How much do you take stock in where you're at? How much do you think about what you still want to accomplish?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, here is the truth, man. This is something I've recognized in myself recently that I'm trying to change. I don't stop thinking about business. I need to try to disconnect a little bit. Business isn't, for me, just racing any more. You have the dealerships, our performance line, everything else that we're doing. There's a lot of stuff going on. I don't take enough time to really maybe sit down and think in a different way.

But, you know, I mean, I'm proud of where we've gotten to over the last few years. In the start, obviously from a professional standpoint, my career, things were a little bit of a rocky road. But I'm very proud of where we are today. I think that we have a lot to look forward to in the future.

People forget I'm 28. People think I'm a lot older because I've been around a long time. But really, you know, I'm still pretty young. I feel like I have a long career left in this sport. I'm excited for the team that we've assembled.

Yesterday I spent a brief amount of time, 20, 30 minutes with Coach Meyer down at OSU. I thought it was interesting. One of the things we talked about, I said, Do you feel like you're going to dominate this year?

He said, I never feel that way.

I said, But you guys have all the talent in the world.

At that point it hit me, which is just what we've experienced, sometimes it's not about having all the talent in the world, it's getting everybody to work together well. That's what we have as a team here.

I think I'm very proud of that, proud to be a part of it. I think that the future for our organization, for myself, and for all of our guys is pretty bright. So I'm excited for what's to come.

Q. It's one thing to look at the number the drivers are behind each other, the total number of drivers within that group, but how wide open do you think the championship is with five to go?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it's pretty open. I mean, obviously with the double points last race, that can throw things completely for a loop.

I want to say I'm not going to even really sit and worry about it. Toronto was a pretty big burn for us, unfortunately, from where we should have been. So I pretty much just determined I have to go out there and just do the absolute best that we can.

Obviously when four of the guys you're competing against are Penskes, and the fifth is Dixon, it makes life pretty tough. That's a pretty strong crop of guys right there. And obviously the Penskes, you know, Helio has been on his game this year, you have to give him a lot of credit. Pagenaud has been good. Power has been good. Newgarden is right there with them.

I totally expect it's going to be a tough road, you know, to the finish here. But I still feel like it's wide open, but at the same time we need to win. So this weekend will be a good opportunity. If we can win races, then the rest will take care of itself. I think that's a fact.

We have some races coming up where I feel like the Honda should be very strong. I mean, Pocono should be very good, right? You if look at Indianapolis, I think we should be strong there.

We'll see. But it still is open. It still is open.

Q. (No microphone.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, the short oval will add a different element, but that will certainly help the Penskes a lot. They will be very fast there. We know that the short oval aero kit is our great weakness, so they will be very hard to beat there.

Q. Looking at the race weekend where you have Cooper, Firestone, Pirelli rubber down, does that throw an interesting mix in your setup or the same as last year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It sure does. It definitely throws a

different mix out there. As you get these guys running, then you got all the feeder series, the Mazda Road to Indy is out there blasting around. You get a lot of different types of tires.

But in general I would say, you know, as long as we continue to put rubber down, lay rubber down, it should help us just in general. It does make it slippery at times. It does change the track at times. And this track is very sensitive, always has been, for whatever reason, to heat. When you get rubber like this down, if it gets real hot and sunny, which fortunately it looks like we're going to have a really nice weekend here weather-wise, not too hot, but if it gets really hot and sunny, it will get slippery. We'll see how it goes, but we've all raced here long enough to get the flow of that.

Q. IMSA announced they're coming back next year. IndyCar is off. Would you do a one-off?

GRAHAM RAHAL: There's just not opportunities any more. Would I be interested? Sure. But there's just not a lot of opportunities unless you got a check stapled to your forehead, and I don't. For me, that becomes a different challenge.

Would I love to get out here and drive? Sure. If there's an opportunity comes up, you know, in the NSX or anything else, maybe it would be of interest.

But at the same time, you know, when all these guys have off weekends, I don't. Get an off weekend might not be a bad thing. With Courtney's schedule, our clashes and stuff, it's pretty busy, man. To add more to that makes life a little bit trickier. We'll see.

I love racing here. I love racing in IMSA. We'll see.

Q. What were your thoughts on the new car, what you saw in the test? Jay mentioned we'll see a windscreen on those cars.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Jay has been working on that for a while. I don't know that we all give Jay enough credit for finally pointing this thing in the right direction. You know, I mean, personally I felt over the last, you know, 10 years the cars have just gotten progressively, in my opinion, uglier. Now we're finally getting back to what an IndyCar should be like.

I salute Jay, Bill Pappas a lot, Tino, that team, for what they did. The response that I'm hearing from Juan and Oriol, having driven it, is they were both blown away by how good it was out of the box.

We've all tested and we've all driven new cars. A lot of times it's not pretty. When we got this one for the first time in 2012, this chassis, it was awful to drive. We had to change a lot to adapt to that. So now all of a sudden you get rid of the pods. That moves a lot of weight around. The floor of the car is different. The wings are different. All this other stuff.

For them to go out and feel as good as they felt about it on day one speaks volumes about the job that IndyCar has done here.

So, you know, I'm definitely excited to get in it. I love the looks of it. I think the road course car is even sexier, which I think will be here this weekend or is here, whatever. That's going to be even better.

But the biggest thing is it's going to race better, 100%, 100%, on the ovals, it will race a lot better, particularly short ovals, than what we currently have. That will be a very good thing.

Q. (No microphone.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, the windscreen is a good thing, if we can get it. I've tried to explain this to all my friends in racing, the drag racers are like, Man, put a windscreen on there. It doesn't really work that way. It's been quite a process.

Jay has been working on this since Justin's accident. I know he's been pretty quiet about that. But the key is clarity, distortion, size. You know, there's a lot of elements that go into this. I think that's what people forget. I think we saw that with Vettel recently, who tried it. The shape of the windscreen, you could tell by looking at it that the distortion would be bad.

That's one of the biggest keys, when you're racing here, going into turn one, you're looking out by the Honda sign as you turn in. You're way ahead. When you're looking out of the side of a windscreen, if it's distorted, it can be a problem. When you go on an oval, can be a be problem.

Drag racing is very different. They shouldn't be looking anywhere but straight. It becomes a simpler process to have that clear visual straight ahead. For us it's not.

I think the windscreen is the right way to go. I personally don't think that the halo -- still there's a lot of open air area, right? I don't know how that is a solution. But for us, you know, the windscreen, just takes time to get it right. We can't just slap it on this thing. You have to find a way to properly mount it. It's got to be strong. It has to withstand and accident like Josef had at Dallas last year, whatever else we've seen.

They're working hard on it. If it comes, be excited. The bigger thing for me with the new car that I'm more excited about, I told somebody this yesterday, is that the side pods are forward and they're higher. The biggest concern I've ever had in these things isn't getting hit in the head with something, which maybe it should be, but it's more there's a lot of side area right here that's exposed for the legs to get hit.

If you've ever spun mid track, somebody T-boned you, it would be an ugly deal. Not that it wouldn't be in any

other case, but now side pod's going forward quite a bit, it's a little bit higher, got the nice new carbon crash structure on the side, that will help a lot. I'm excited about that.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, thank you very much. Good luck today.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you.