

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday September 1, 2017

Alexander Rossi

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll begin today's Verizon IndyCar Series media availability. Joined now by Alexander Rossi, driving the No. 98 Honda for Andretti Autosport. Real exciting announcement this morning that Alexander will return to Andretti Autosport in 2018. Also that NAPA has renewed their co-primary sponsorship with your car for 10 races next season.

Congratulations on the announcement. You have racing in 2017 left, but looking ahead to 2018, knowing you're stable, you know what you're going to be doing next year, for the next couple of years with Andretti Autosport?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, I think it's a wonderful opportunity to be able to have that stability, like you said, continuity going into an upcoming season.

It takes a lot of focus. Racing can take the focus away from a lot of people for the task at hand. For the next year, you just have to focus on winning races. It's kind of easy to get caught up in what's happening. You can start to kind of lose morale at times among the team because there's just the unknown, right? They know you're talking to other teams. It's a difficult situation for everyone involved.

So to have it done before the end of the year so that we can focus on the last two races, really put strong results together, on top of having the excitement of what we've built this year, continuing on from 2016, there's been a huge amount of improvements from the entire organization, from myself, I just think the whole dynamics within the team. What we're doing on the racetrack is a representation of that.

Still a lot we feel we can improve upon and accomplish, but there's certainly a lot of reasons to be positive based on 2017. It's going to be a little bit more of a level playing field I guess with everyone resetting to a new car in 2018. But I feel that with the structures that we already have in place, with the improvements we have in mind for this off-season, just the relationships I formed across the entire board at Andretti Autosport, with NAPA, with Honda, it's an amazing thing that all parties are very happy to have done.

As much as we're excited to go racing in 2018, we're now very much focused on getting the best possible results we can these last two races.

THE MODERATOR: You touched on this briefly, but 2016, it's May, NAPA comes onto your car, you win the Indianapolis 500. How have you seen your relationship with NAPA in particular grow since then, and their continued support of your career?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Well, it certainly helped. I don't think it was expected for them coming onboard. It wasn't expected really for the team either. So when we did win, it obviously put the entire program under a spotlight for 12 months, thanks to the media tours that the Verizon IndyCar Series puts together, and the national and global exposure that NAPA got, that I got, and kind of my name and brand being developed in the United States, which was something that was severely lacking at the beginning of 2016, because I had been overseas for so long. It really gave us the opportunity to show NAPA, you know, what this series could offer, what I could offer, what Andretti Autosport could offer.

They obviously re-upped for 2016 in a slightly bigger role. They're doing that again for 2018, which was a huge thing for the series. It's massive to have one of the premier auto parts manufacturers involved in the championship, to have a household name, brand and company put the effort into remaining with us and the team and the series. It's a huge thing for everyone. It's a big honor to be able to represent them and try and get them as good of results as possible.

THE MODERATOR: Going back to having stability with Andretti Autosport, I know a lot of people ask you how has your life changed since you won the Indianapolis 500. How would you feel it's changed since you came over to the States and began this relationship with them, now get to continue it for a couple years in the future?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I think it's changed only for the positive. I can't say that there's been one negative thing. I think as a driver, they've helped me improve on track in a huge amount. Off track, as well. I mean, this was a very new environment for me coming into 2016, into this championship. Being taught to do things a certain way was very much part of my background. Then having the team really kind of understand that and embrace that. I think a lot of that comes from Michael having had experience over in Europe, knowing what transitions are like. The whole organization was just able to, in a constructive way, help me get better with that, help me get better on track, help me understand ovals. There were a lot of

new things in a very short period of time. There was a lot of key contributors to helping me get adjusted here and to be in a place where we could start to have success.

In terms of making the decision for 2017, that had a lot to do with it. Gave me an opportunity to come race in this championship, a championship I've fallen in love with. They gave me an opportunity to win the Indianapolis 500, a race that is now my favorite race in the world. Now we're getting results at the other types of tracks. Everything is positive within the team.

With that being said, their continuation with Honda, obviously NAPA's commitment, et al., all the pieces fell together for the next couple years.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions.

Q. I know you set the bar rather high for your own expectations. But when you look back at the level of improvement you've made this year from last year, from those of us who have watched, it's pretty impressive. How would you categorize it?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: It's been a whole lot better. I would say every track we've been stronger, we've been more competitive. The beginning of the year got off to a little bit of a rocky start. We had some technical issues that didn't go our way, we had some incidents. Just kind of racing scenarios. That's just the way it goes.

It was a difficult start because it was a new relationship, had a new engineer, new strategist, new technical director. It wasn't the dream start to 2017.

But through that, we learned from our mistakes. One thing that I'm very adamant about within the whole team, from a mechanical, engineering, driving standpoint, I don't want to make mistakes twice. We learned from those early on, we're very cognizant of making sure that doesn't happen again.

I think we started to see the fruits of that the past five, six races. The strength that we have from a car performance standpoint is really astounding. You talk about the improvements I made. It's making me look good this year. I know the tracks now, which is a big help, but also the car is in a much different place. We know the improvements that Honda made in the off-season. That's been very apparent on a lot of the street courses as well. All the factors were better. I'm glad we're seeing obviously improved results.

Q. The fact that knowing Ryan Hunter-Reay is staying on until 2020, how important was that in order for you to gauge your progress against him?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Hugely important. Not only to gauge my progress, which is something that every competitive driver does. You want to be better than your teammate, right? But not only did I have that as a

benchmark, if you will, but I had his wealth of knowledge that he's acquired.

Obviously the way that the team works, I know that it's talked about a lot, but it's very difficult to really get the point across of how open everyone is.

He would sit down with me through scenarios, walk me through steps of what needed to be different in order to get better results. So not only do you have a benchmark of someone that's obviously incredibly talented, but you have his help as well. I know it to him, I owe it to Marco, I owe it to Carlos last year, Takuma this year. All the teammates I have, all of the engineers that are involved in the program, help one another.

For someone coming in as a rookie to a car that he doesn't know, to a track he doesn't know, to a series he doesn't know, there's no better type of scenario for someone to have. That's been a huge reason we've seen this exponential kind of growth. It's hopefully only going to continue as years go on.

Q. A question concerning your sponsorship. As an auto parts dealer, does NAPA contact you and get your advice what kind of auto parts can be improved or constructed?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: No, because the only maintenance I know how to do on my car is put gas in it, so... And adjust the tire pressures, I guess. I don't think that I'm probably the best person to go to, Oh, you should design a new after-market rearview mirror. So, no.

But, I mean, there is a lot of away-from-the-track activation that we do. Obviously NAPA is a nationwide company. They have a lot of stores, a lot of customers, a lot of partnerships with other brands. We do a lot with them in the months of October to February.

Q. The press release said a multi-year agreement. Can you comment on how many years this agreement is for, with NAPA and Andretti?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: More than one.

Q. That's all you can say?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I mean, I don't really see what the reason to get into specifics is. It's more than one. We're obviously looking ahead to Watkins Sunday, Sonoma the following weekend, 2018. We'll cross the bridges of the following time after that.

Q. IndyCar has a shock program, where teams can do their own engineering on the shocks, which costs money but doesn't put any fans in the grandstands. The fact you were a little bit lost last year, was it because of the shocks? As a driver, do you like the fact that the teams can do their own shocks program or would you prefer the shocks just to be spec?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Okay, well, first of all, I certainly don't think open dampers are reasons for fans coming or not coming. Second of all, yes, that was one of the areas where we struggled last year, no doubt.

But you can't pinpoint one thing. It's not like you can say, Oh, you need to make this type of damper with these parts, and you're all of a sudden going to go from 15th to first. That's not how it works. Dampers were one area where we weren't good.

Beyond that, there was other kind of just flow of setup, I guess, flow of kind of what we were doing through the weekend. There were guys kind of going different directions at times. The 98 car specifically, we were on an island a little bit.

With the addition of Eric coming onboard, the technical director, he kind of brought everything back into a circle, if you will, which was a positive, improved our damper program. We've improved everything from pit stops, car build. I mean, it's a whole lot of things to making a car fast than just the dampers you put on it.

Also with the addition to my engineer, Jeremy Milless, brought another mental philosophy and approach from a different manufacturer, so we got some insight into that, what was working for them.

Those two additions were I think the biggest kind of factors in terms of our improvement this year. On top of that, I think, yeah, the damper program and the way the IndyCar rules are laid out is fine. I think this is a premier auto racing championship, and there are some things that need to be left to development and left to teams. We see that even within that, you can have the entire field within 9/10ths. I don't think there's anything wrong with the model or what we're doing. If as a team you found something better in terms of car engineering and setup, you should deserve to win and it's up to us to catch them.

Q. We're seeing more and more Formula One-type drivers, rookies working through the Road to Indy. What advice or information would you give to one of these drivers that's looking at the IndyCar Series? You came in as an outsider.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: To not underestimate any element of the championship. You really have to bring your best effort from Thursday morning when you get here to Sunday night. That's not just in the racecar.

I mean, an example that I'll give, in Mid-Ohio, we led P3. We were really good in Q1. Went to Q2, I made one rear spring change, and I only last half a 10th or a 10th, but it was enough to not make me advance to the Fast Six. It was one spring change, like one step. It's not like we revolutionized the car, put on a whole new package. It was one little thing.

It actually didn't hurt performance that much, but it

didn't give us the extra 10th we needed. That's how on it you have to be for every single lap and session. If not, you make that mistakes, you can very quickly -- it may be the difference of not only not getting into the Fast Six, it could be the difference of not getting into the top 12, then you're starting 14th, you have to recover all weekend.

It's every decision you make you need to be sure about. I think I underestimated that. I think a lot of guys underestimate that coming in. It's not just the competitiveness of how good the guys are on the track, it's the decisions you make in the hours between each session that's also super critical.

Q. How would Jeremy coming from a different competitor, manufacturer last year, the fact he's been able to be good on setups with you, how have you two played off each other?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: He's a very smart guy. He's able to adapt. Like a racing driver can adapt to a new car, he can adapt to a new car.

I think you may not have -- you wouldn't have seen it, but, I mean, it took us probably through the month of May to really start to be on the same page, which I think is fairly normal and natural. Not because either of us were doing anything wrong, you're not on the same communication wavelength yet. Under pressure situations and crunch time, being able to kind of take the information I have and relay it in an efficient way, make decisions based on that, that's something that comes with time. I think we're at that point now.

Each weekend we get better and better. It's a very exciting thing for me to be able to continue with what him and I have developed this year, also having Ron involved. All three of us work very well together and much better than how we started in St. Pete, which was still positive. It's something that's going to continue to grow and I think be very, very strong in the future.

Q. Just wondering about where you are in the championship, the way the team is going, the new deal, all the changes that are coming for next year, do you get to the point where you're just anxious for the last two races to finish and you can start next year with a clean slate and go forward as a driver?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Not really, no. I mean, like I said, I mean, I think a lot of us were thinking about 2018 as you're trying to get the deal done, get things put together. As soon as it's done, it's like, Great, glad that's behind us, you focus right back onto what you're doing.

So no. We have an opportunity to climb a couple more spots in the championship if we execute really well these next two weekends. I think we have a good opportunity to do that. Our road course package is

pretty strong. We're very cautiously optimistic about what we're capable of here, with double points being available in Sonoma, hopefully we can fight for the top five. That would be a pretty successful thing.

THE MODERATOR: Alexander, thank you very much.