

# IndyCar Media Conference

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## Sam Schmidt Robert Wickens James Hinchcliffe Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media teleconference. Earlier today Schmidt Peterson Motorsports announced its driver lineup for the 2018 Verizon IndyCar Series season. The team will feature an all-Canadian lineup with returning driver James Hinchcliffe pairing with his long time friend Robert Wickens.

We're happy today to be joined by the team co-owner of Schmidt Peterson Motorsports Sam Schmidt and the two Verizon IndyCar Series drivers for Schmidt Peterson Motorsports, James Hinchcliffe and Robert Wickens.

Guys, thank you for joining us today.

Sam, first question is for you. Obviously you know James very well from his experience with the team. What role did he play in the process of getting Robert back to North America and IndyCar racing?

SAM SCHMIDT: Well, thanks for having us on. As everybody knows, we've been trying to work to improve the program as much as possible. We had a stint in '12, '13, '14 where we finished fifth in the points. I think we want to get back to that level of competition.

We felt like we were missing things in having two cars with equal funding and equal drivers and equal capabilities. We think this gets back there.

Of course, James and Robby have a long history here racing against each other going way back and through the support series, had a lot of history there. There was good chemistry, and Road America, even though Robert was only there for the day.

Just given his level of experience in Europe at really top shelf there, 3.5, Formula One, DTM, really hoping he can bring that sort of technical side of things to the program, everybody work together for a common goal.

Yeah, James had a little bit to do with it, but I think it was just really the underlying factor here is looking for two quality drivers that can get the job done at this level of competition. I think we have that.

THE MODERATOR: Sam, late in the 2017 season, the team announced an expanded partnership with Honda. Now you have your drivers in place fairly early here in the off-season. Are there other plans that you can talk about? You mentioned your goal of moving the team back to where it was in 2012, 2013, 2014.

SAM SCHMIDT: You hit the nail on the head. An integral part of being successful in the series is having a close relationship with manufacturers. We're one of only I think two teams that have been with Honda since day one. I think they recognize that loyalty factor and have been using us more and more for R&D and off-track activities. This is an extension of that.

Testing the AK-18 car as soon as it was available, then straight line testing, other R&D things we're doing for them. The funding we're getting from Arrow Electronics and Lucas Oil and other long-term kind of technical sponsorship partnerships, it's all tied together to make this happen. You can't do anything without the other.

Yeah, like you said, to have it done relatively early, I think to have the two drivers named by mid October is probably the earliest we've been able to do that in our history. So we're excited to get going.

We have already started obviously with the '18 package testing. I know Robert is fired up to get into Indianapolis and get fully integrated into the team and bring what he can.

Again, we feel like we should be a regular top-five contender and competing for top five in the points starting next year. This is all working towards that.

THE MODERATOR: Robert, let's turn to you. First, welcome to IndyCar. Congratulations on today's announcement. I know you've been racing for much of the last decade over in Europe, the last six with a roof over your head in DTM. With that small taste that you got at Road America and I guess the ride swap with James earlier, how much of that experience led into the decision to come back to North America?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, I would say it had a pretty big impact on it. But overall, I mean, the big game changer for me was when Mercedes announced their exit out of the DTM series at the end of the 2018. I think that really accelerated everything.

After the ride swap, Sam, myself, Piers Phillips, we've all been in communication about the possibility of something in the future. But really everything started to materialize once Mercedes, yeah, announced their exit from DTM and we realized this is something that could happen as soon as 2018.

But that said, the ride swap, I had a blast. At Road America, I had even more fun. I was actually a little bit gutted that Mikhail showed up for the weekend in Road America because I really wanted to do that race.

THE MODERATOR: I know you were pointed towards the Champ Car ladder before you went to Europe. You were on the road to Formula One. What about coming back to IndyCar is so appealing at this point in your career?

ROBERT WICKENS: I think IndyCar is constantly on the rise. James and I have always been in contact. I can see from the outside, as well from the inside through James, that IndyCar is doing the right things. They're continuing to grow at a pretty substantial rate.

I think the 2018 new aero kit is going to make racing even better, it's going to bring more excitement to the fans, it's going to continue to grow the series hopefully at a larger rate than what it's already been doing.

I think it's an exciting time for a new person to jump in.

THE MODERATOR: Let's turn to your teammate. James, I know over the last few years with SPM, you've had a few teammates in the driver's briefing room next to you. Obviously chemistry is big to building a strong team dynamic. You've brought in someone that you know pretty well. How strong a team do you think SPM is going to be in 2018?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, we had multiple different guys just in the second half of last season. So for us going into 2018 knowing the driver lineup, knowing there's some continuity there moving forward is huge. The fact that it's a driver of Robby's caliber is just an added benefit to that. The fact that it happens to be a guy I've known for, you know, the better part of my racing career and happen to be pretty damn good friends with, it's just putting all the pieces in place.

I think from the team side, from Robby's side, certainly from my side, we're all incredibly excited to get the 2018 season underway because I think we're as a team putting all the piece in place to be successful and, as Sam said, regularly be fighting for top five in races and top five in the championship.

THE MODERATOR: Finally, James, you're one of the few drivers that has driven the 2018 Verizon IndyCar Series aero kit, that car. Knowing what you know about that car from your experience, how much of a learning curve do you think Robby will have when he

gets into the car?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: In all honesty, I was saying earlier today, the 2018 car is probably better suited for him than the 2017 car because of the experience he's had the last handful of series. The AK-15 through 17 bodywork was such high downforce, it would be a big change coming out of DTM. But with the loss of downforce that we've seen, the car is moving around a little bit more, brake zones, things like that, it won't be as big a transition I think.

Just based on the experience that I got in our ride swap, I think he's going to adapt very quickly, be comfortable very quickly, and as a result be competitive very quickly. So it's going to be exciting.

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

**Q. James and Robert, a bit of a mixed fortune I would imagine for your countryman knowing the great Gordon Downie was lost overnight, and we have a great announcement of Team Canada this morning. Anything you can share about a day I guess of mourning, but a day of celebration.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think for us it's pretty exciting. Growing up as kids, we watched the Forsythe team sort of be the unofficial Team Canada of Champ Car. Having two Canadian drivers in the same team, it just so happens to be the team that is co-owned by a Canadian as well, there's a lot of points of pride there.

I've certainly seen in the last six, seven years how much this country gets behind their athletes and how much they've gotten behind us in the IndyCar Series. To be able to add a second driver to that lineup is huge.

We're hoping to give Toronto and Ontario and Canadian sportsfans in general something to cheer about over the next season.

**Q. Robert, for you specifically, we've seen that experience in IndyCar definitely be a big contributor to success. With some of the fairly significant testing restrictions, can you share any thoughts on how busy you will be this off-season in using on-track test days, manufacturer test days, simulator time so you are ready to deliver as much as possible once we get to St. Pete?**

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, I feel like the busier the better at this point. I think Schmidt Peterson Motorsports have a fantastic driver development program. They showed that in their multiple Indy Lights championships along the way. I think we will have a strong program in place. I have a feeling that the simulator will be my new best friend.

But that being said, testing is very limited. We have to share it equally between myself and James. I'm very

fortunate that I have James as my teammate because he's so experienced, I can learn off him. Because we already have such a good off-track relationship, I feel like you can just take his word, trust him, kind of move forward with it. I think we kind of already crossed that bridge when we were 15, and now we can just kind of get to work and get things going.

**Q. You had the opportunity to be teammates before back in the day. Had you had any other opportunities in your formative junior year careers where you were either close to teammates or were close in having an opportunity to work together beyond just being good friends?**

ROBERT WICKENS: We actually met for the very first time as teammates in karting in 2001, I think. I want to say 2001, 2002. We were in ADCC junior at the time. I was 13, James would have been 15. So we actually were teammates first in karting. That's where our relationship really started. It was just coincidence that we were teammates again in A1 GP a few years later. Yeah, third time's a charm now.

**Q. Do you have any fun A1 GP memories?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: There's not many bad A1 GP memories. It was a pretty exciting championship. We were teammates in the sense that we shared the car. We kind of rotated race driver duties throughout the season, and the other one would be reserve driver for the other on off weekends. That was kind of a cool dynamic. It was almost the sports car driver dynamic of sharing the same car.

I think we're both excited to have our own buggies to go play with, help each other, push each other, just move the whole team forward.

**Q. I'm hearing friends forever, karded together. This isn't going to devolve into a Nico-Lewis kind of thing, is it?**

ROBERT WICKENS: You know us well enough. What do you think?

**Q. Probably not. James, I want to ask you, you're turning 31 this year. You signed a multi-year deal with Schmidt Peterson.**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Thanks for pointing that out to everybody. That was cool (laughter).

**Q. You signed a multi-year deal. Some people might see this as a pivotal point in your career. Can you talk about how much interest there was from other teams and what led to your decision to stay instead of looking elsewhere?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I think it's been pretty documented over the last sort of decade in IndyCar racing that your sort of 30 to 35 age range is pretty much a driver's peak. We have a much younger than that champion at present. But he's certain an outlier and not a rule.

That being said, my experience at SPM over the last three years were phenomenal ones. We've talked a lot about how continuity in racing is very important, and there's a big part of me that wanted to keep building what we have been building. The transition to a universal body kit I think was an important part of that. As Sam discussed, the last time we had a universal body kit, SPM was in the top five in the championship three years in a row.

I think that leveling the playing field a little bit gives us as a team better opportunities to close that gap and be competing at the front more regularly.

So there's no real desire to leave. Sure, there was interest in other places. But, you know, I've had, like I said, a tremendous experience with what has become my extended family here at SPM. We didn't want to break the momentum.

Hopefully with all the pieces in place, we're going to be regular competitors.

**Q. Can you talk how much confidence you have going forward with the team to get that top five that Sam wants? Also, how much does Robert coming in figure into that equation?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, the driver in the 7 car was always a big part of the puzzle. In Robby, we have a proven winner at a very high level. The level of technical expertise that he comes with from his time in DTM is very impressive. I think the team was all blown away even in two practice sessions at Road America with his feedback, his approach to the setup side of the car.

Like I said, that's kind of been a huge piece of it. With the field kind of being equalized with this kit, there's a ton of confidence. We had a top probably six or seven in the championship run going in '16, were it not for a fuel miscalculation one day and a fairly unjust penalty other day.

So with the added benefit of a driver in the 7 car that can push the whole team forward from a setup point of view, from a competition point of view with me, there's no reason that we won't be up there regularly.

**Q. Robby, can you talk about, is this a really good time to be coming into IndyCar with all the changes happening in 2018? Will that kind of allow you to not have a bit of a handicap versus the other drivers, be able to get up to speed and contribute a lot quicker than you would have?**

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, I mean, I think ultimately IndyCar experience is IndyCar experience. I'm definitely going to be, you know, a little bit on the back foot. But that being said, with the new aero kit coming in '18, from what I've been hearing from James, the car is very much different to drive than what it has been in the past. It will be an adjustment for all drivers, which

will definitely help me.

To be frank, any change is good for me because it's nothing different from my previous experiences, it's all just something new. So I'm really looking forward to really just getting started and seeing what this 2018 car can bring.

**Q. Are you going to have to remind yourself to put your visor down again?**

ROBERT WICKENS: Luckily, I was the weird guy in closed cockpit racing that drove with my visor down anyway, so that won't be a problem.

**Q. James, I wanted to ask you, how involved were you in the process of trying to find a teammate? How much campaigning did you end up doing for Robert?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: You know, one of the greatest things that's improved within the team since the appointment of Piers Phillips as general manager is communication. I was kept very much up to speed. My opinion was very much weighted in the whole discussion.

But at the end of the day I didn't want people to think that I was just going around trying to get my buddy a ride. I wanted the best, most qualified, most capable driver in the 7 car. When we all sat down around a table and wrote out the pros and cons of all available drivers, Robby's name came to the top anyway.

Whether or not we had an existing relationship on paper, and with the experience he had with the team, I think he was the choice from the get-go. So it really is just kind of a cherry on top that we have the friendship we do, we have had some experience working together like we have.

Was I quietly jumping up and down when it all came together? Yeah, absolutely. Like I said, the last thing I wanted was people thinking I wanted my friend in the car. I wanted the best possible guy available. That was Robert Wickens, no question about it.

**Q. Was Road America the clincher? I know everything wasn't settled, but when you look back, was the way he performed there kind of the clincher for you? Even if that hadn't happened, would you have known?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: You could reconvert it back to Sebring. We did our ride swap. He had two hours in the car, hardly anything even resembling a test day, and his performance was pretty impressive.

No doubt the time in Road America helped because that really gave us a better sense of his technical feedback, integrated with the team a little bit more. Everybody was happy to work with him on that day. For sure, for a lot of people that made it an option that they were a lot more comfortable with.

Yeah, sure, there were certainly people on this team that didn't know much about him and his past, his accomplishments. Working with him even for just one day made a lot of believers on the team. That's what we need, a lot of guys that believe in what we're trying to do, how we're trying to do it. No doubt, that played a big part in it.

**Q. James, you mentioned the friendship and obviously wanting somebody who was qualified. I can hear all the excitement. Is it camaraderie? Chemistry? What is it about having Robert as your teammate next year that you're most looking forward as far as helping mentor him through this process?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Man, Robby is my best friend, almost little brother-ish kind of thing for a long time now. I'm so excited to get to share this role with him. I know how fierce a competitor he is, I know how talented a driver he is, I know how well he's going to adapt to this world.

For me it's about pushing the team forward. I'm not going to perform at my best if I don't have somebody regularly pushing me, someone help push the team forward from a technical point of view. He checks both those boxes. It's exciting on a lot of levels.

For the last six years, we compared notes from across the pond of what life as a professional racing driver is like in our own series. It's been kind of funny hearing the stories from over there, sharing stories from over here. It's just going to take it to a whole new level to have these experiences together, live through some of these things together, grow as drivers together and hopefully start winning together very soon.

**Q. Sam, James mentioned a minute ago some of the aspects when Robert jumped in the 7 at Road America that made it a real possibility. When did Robert being in that car full-time really start to become reality? Has this been something that was pretty optimistic for a while? Has it finalized itself more recently?**

SAM SCHMIDT: Yeah, I think it's really when we drew the line in the sand. We got a lot of things going commercially, very positive, in the technology industry. Got a lot of targets up in Canada, as well. As we know, my team partner Rick Peterson is Canadian. It's almost the Canadian full court press.

But seriously, it's all about performance. We're here to win. We're not a mid pack team. When it kind of came down to a list of available drivers, us wanting a professional long-term relationship that we could build on both on the track and off the track, it was a pretty obvious choice.

**Q. Sam, what impressed you most about the time that Robert was able to spend working with the car**

**at Road America?**

SAM SCHMIDT: It was only one day. I think, you know, just the level of professionalism. Come in, put the head down, we got to get this done. We're not sure if it's one day or three days, whatever. Let's get there, let's get fitted, let's get in the car and go. The pace was immediately on par.

The communication, feedback, technical side, as has been mentioned before, was very professional, which comes from driving for Mercedes for six years. They're not going to keep any slackers on the payroll. I think when you see somebody come from that kind of background, and the European training ground, they all seem to have a little bit more knowledge, feedback capability. I think obviously James is in that realm as well, too. But I think having both of them working together towards a common goal will produce great results.

**Q. Rob, this is going to be your first opportunity to run an oval. Any hesitation, thoughts, excitement?**

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, definitely some excitement. I mean, again, I'm only going off of what I know from James. But he seems to think I'm really going to like them. I'm just really motivated and just want to really just kind of get started with the job for next year.

Definitely getting on my first oval is high on my priority list. But I think before I drive on one, in reality I'll probably do some time on a simulator first to kind of learn the ropes, kind of understand the whole, like, weight jacking situation, this, that and the other. There's so many areas of the game that I need to learn.

I think oval racing has to be taken seriously. You have to really respect it. So I'm definitely not just going to jump in with my eyes closed. I'm definitely going to be well prepared when I get into my first experience, but I'm looking forward to it.

**Q. James, a new engineer this season. Something you're looking forward to?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, ultimately the driver/engineer relationship is an important one. Learning someone new is always a bit of a challenge. We're always up for a challenge. We're here to push the whole program forward, and that's what we're going to try and do.

We still have yet to obviously completely finalize that, announce to everybody who that is going to be. But we're excited to ingest some fresh blood into this team on the engineering side, as well. With a new aero kit at least, that's as important as ever. I think we're going to end up with the right person in the job.

Again, it's all about pushing the whole team forward, everything from the changes we made on the shop floor to the engineering department to the other driver.

I'm very excited about 2018 and the future.

THE MODERATOR: As that was our final question, that will wrap up today's IndyCar media teleconference. Thank you.