

IndyCar Media Conference

Wednesday January 31, 2018

Bobby Rahal Graham Rahal Christophe Dussoux

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media conference call. Earlier today Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing and Total Specialties USA announced a multi-year agreement that will see Total Quartz as the official lubricant partner of the Verizon IndyCar Series team and the primary sponsor of the No. 15 IndyCar driven by Graham Rahal in April's Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach.

We're happy to be joined by Christophe Dussoux, senior vice president of lubricants for Total, Bobby Rahal and Graham Rahal.

Gentlemen, welcome to the call.

Christophe, we'll start with you. Total is a name known throughout the motorsports world, but not a widely recognized commercial brand here in America. How important is it for the brand to be involved in IndyCar racing both as a technical and strategic partner of Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing?

CHRISTOPHE DOUSSOUX: As you said, we're known all over the world, but our brand awareness is still limited in the U.S., which for the business I'm responsible for, lubricants, is today still the biggest market in the world.

Our ambition is to grow there. Therefore, growing the brand awareness is crucial for us. We believe it makes sense to grow this awareness by more consistent involvement in motorsport, motorsport being an area where we've been focused in the past to grow our brand recognition.

Therefore, IndyCar, which is a tough discipline, very demanding in terms of technological challenge, was a great fit for us.

Being chosen as a partner for RLL is a unique opportunity to show what we are able to do in motor racing.

THE MODERATOR: Bobby, I know you have a history



with Total, as they were a sponsor of your team in 1992 when you won your third IndyCar championship, the first as an owner/driver. How happy are you to welcome Total back to your team and IndyCar racing?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I mean, yeah, when we first started the discussions, of course I was quick to remind everyone I'd won my last championship with Total as one of our sponsors. Naturally that was all the more reason for us to get back together again.

But seriously, it's been clear right from the outset that there was a strong passion here on the part of Total to come together with us, just as there was with them. It really couldn't have been an easier kind of courting period, I suppose you might say.

Of course, Total has a fabulous reputation in motorsports, as fabulous or maybe even better reputation in the entire gas and oil industry. To be associated with a world class company like Total is a real plus for us.

Frankly, I think it's a huge plus for IndyCar. A new company is coming into the series. It's been 26 years, so some people might have forgotten they were here previously. I think it's a big plus for IndyCar right now and a big plus for us at RLL.

We're looking forward to a long, successful relationship with Total.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, this off-season, in the past few seasons, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing has really excelled at bringing in new partners to IndyCar. What does having a worldwide brand like Total, which I think you said is the fourth largest oil and gas company in the world, especially at Long Beach, mean to you and the team?

GRAHAM RAHAL: This is a big deal for us. I want to emphasize that. It's great to have Total onboard. We already talked about the nostalgic feel to it. I'll get a nice throwback posted tomorrow that will explain that further.

It means a lot to us. I think Tom Knox, Brian Marks, the entire group, Mr. Lanigan obviously, my dad, I think everybody has worked very hard to help grow our sponsor base and grow this sport. I think we're starting to see some tremendous success. We're in a great period of time I think for IndyCar racing at this point.

This is a big one for us. Total, with their experience and their expertise in lubricants, obviously is something that we can work very closely with. We can use Indianapolis as it truly was built for in the first place, as a developing and proving ground, you know, for the product. Obviously May isn't that far away.

If you look at Total, if you're familiar with the company, as I am, the racing heritage is very deep. The success that they've had is tremendous, whether it be Formula One, whether it be World Rally, whether it be sports car racing, and IndyCar obviously in the past with dad.

It's a tremendous, I think, get, let's call it, for our sport, for us. We're excited to represent Total for many years to come.

THE MODERATOR: Let's open it up for questions for any of our guests.

Q. Graham, having Takuma back on the team gives you a two-car strength, last year's Indy 500 winner. Talk about having Takuma back on the team.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it's great to have Takuma. I think Takuma, maybe other than Helio Castroneves, he's probably the happiest man alive. To have him join us is phenomenal. I think he had a great experience with the team back in 2012. Obviously coming off the year he had, it's tremendous to have him with us.

We've only really had one test together. He and I felt and said a lot of the same things. I think he's going to be a big asset for us as we go into St. Pete. Obviously clearly in May. He knows what it takes to win there. He knows what a good car feels like.

I think actually last year, we were one of the guys to beat at Indy in the 500, as well, until we got a flat tire. Still I think he'll be a great person to have back with our organization.

His personality, the ease in which he kind of carries himself, the presence that he has I think is very uplifting to our team and to our guys that work so hard. No, I think he'll be a great partner for us.

Q. Bobby, you certainly in your experience have seen the IndyCar, in terms of looks and aero, go through a lot of different metamorphoses since you were winning championships and the Indy 500, the whale backs to the flatter Lola. This new car seems to be a good performer. For the fans, one of the bonuses is the thing looks like IndyCars used to look like. Talk about the fact that this thing is looking a lot better, it has got to be appealing to you and certainly to the fans as well.

BOBBY RAHAL: Oh, yeah, definitely. I mean, I think the car looks like a proper IndyCar should. Very good lines on it. It looks modern, it looks purposeful. There's not stuff stuck on it to try to make it do

something it can't do.

I mean, I hate to say it's a throwback, because it's not, it's a modern-day racecar. But the shape of it is such, the kind of shape that drew people to IndyCar racing in the first place.

I think it's going to make for a great championship. They're going to be a lot faster in a straight line than they were the last several years. I think that's good. It will open up the braking areas a little bit more, making passing a little bit easier.

The drivers, they're really going to have to drive these things. Not like it was easy before, for sure, but there's less downforce. When there's less downforce, you really have to -- a driver really has to like a car that kind of feels light, the car is dancing around. I think it's going to separate a crowd a bit. I think that's all good.

Q. Graham, there's been some comments by some of the drivers about the lack of testing with the new car versus what the so-called Honda and Chevy factory testing teams got to do. Was any of their data shared with a team like yours? Do you think it's a big deal or do you think you guys will catch up pretty quick?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I mean, yeah, I think it's a clear advantage for them. But to be honest, at the first test, Schmidt was a team that had a lot of testing. The first test, we were quicker than them. I don't see that as detrimental to us, I guess is my point.

I think with good quality engineering staff, with a great team around us, drivers that are capable of getting up to speed quickly, I feel like we'll be right in the hunt right away.

Clearly a Penske, Ganassi, a team of that stature, those statures that have had a lot of off-season testing, it might help them. But I think, as you guys saw with our team in 2015, when a lot of teams, Honda teams, were struggling, we made no excuses, went out there and performed really well. I think that's going to be our attitude again.

I don't look at us in any different light. I believe we should be able to go to St. Pete and we should be able to win. Frankly, there's a lot of testing. I mean, I'll go to St. Pete at least a couple more days, I'll be in Barber a couple days, we got Phoenix. There still is quite a lot of testing. I think we need to look beyond the excuses and just focus on what's next.

Was the data shared with us? I would say some of it. We all have to remember it's fairly easy to fudge data a little bit. My point is, the distances or things like that, the data sets that are getting sent, are they accurate? Doesn't mean they always are. Thanks to Honda, they share with us. We don't get the setups, but we get the basics we can learn from.

Takuma and I need to drive the cars, we need to develop our own opinions, and we need to go racing.

Q. Bobby, with this new sponsor that was announced today, an overseas-based company, do you think IndyCar should try to do more to become more of an international series? Do you think, from your perspective as a team owner, it's better to focus on the United States or North America?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, certainly IndyCar racing shouldn't try to be Formula One. There's already that. Having said that, I do think if there was an opportunity to race in China, I mean, you've got to look at the companies that sponsor you or those that might be interested in sponsoring you if you race various places overseas. It's like, why not? If it's right, if the economics are right for the series, for the teams, why not?

We used to have great races at Surfers Paradise, as you know. That did a lot to spread the popularity of the IndyCar racing not just internationally but even within the U.S. A lot of people would come from Australia and go to the States, watch races here, what have you.

Let's put it this way: Our last race is September 15th, our first race is March 15th, somewhere in that area. That's a long downtime. You can't race here, so why not go to places like Australia or South Africa, which has had a strong motorsports heritage there. I don't know why you wouldn't want to do that.

Hopefully one day.

Q. Curious how this lines up with your other sponsorship partners.

BOBBY RAHAL: I'm not sure when you say 'lines up'. I will say this.

Q. You have Steak 'n Shake and a couple other sponsors that have been with the team. Are they going to be back? How many races, et cetera?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I was just going to say we have a number of announcements that are going to be made over the next couple weeks. I will tell you that I don't think we've ever had as good of an off-season in terms of attracting not just existing sponsors but new ones to the team.

We've made an investment in our marketing and sales group over the course of the last year. Thanks to Mike and I and David, we made that commitment. I got to tell you, I think the results will be obvious to that. It's been very successful to date.

What, 17, 18 races in this championship. That's a lot of races to fill. I got to say, you'll see over the next several weeks, but there's a lot of really positive news coming out of RLL from a commercial standpoint.

Q. Graham, you just ran in the 24 Hours earlier this week, a grueling race for a driver. When you find out that 80-year-old Roger Penske did the entire race without taking a nap, what was your reaction to that? That's pretty incredible.

GRAHAM RAHAL: As I said to my dad, I thought the more impressive thing was I got an email the next morning, apologizing that he didn't see me after the race because he had to get to Ireland for a breakfast meeting, and he was in Germany for a lunch meeting. That's what's more impressive than anything else. The guy, he's a machine. He doesn't stop. It was an honor to be able to race with Roger and that entire organization.

I'm excited for Sebring, hopefully more in the future. It just doesn't surprise me. I think he's so passionate about his racing. He wasn't on my car, he was on the 6 car. But I don't know, it doesn't surprise me at all. I know Bud Denker was awake the whole time doing strategy stuff. Obviously TC was with us. It's impressive.

He's a machine that just doesn't seem to stop. Actually in many ways I think, to me, there's a lot of similarities between him and Mr. Lanigan on our side of things. Mike is cut from the same cloth. Just never, never, never stops, never quits. The memories are unbelievable. Just really impressive.

For a young guy, there's a lot. For anybody. But for young people, there's a lot to be learned from that mindset and that work ethic.

Q. Graham, the last three years we've seen you finish 4, 5, 6 in the championship. Do you feel like with this momentum gain over the off-season, some of the moves made, in addition to the reset year, maybe those are the missing pieces to the puzzle to get you not to just take top Honda honors but be a major championship contender this year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think we've been a championship contender. I feel we will be this year. I feel really confident in that.

If you look at our year last year, I saw a statistic that we really didn't score any points through the first four races of the year. We had a bad start. But from the fifth race, the Indy GP on, for instance, Pagenaud out-gained me by two points the remainder of the year. That's impressive. That was with a couple big mistakes, too. Gateway, we were running fourth, left the pits early, got a fuel penalty, had to go to the back. We were looking good there.

My point is that our team is capable, our team is ready, our guys are excited. The work ethic that our people have, there's no doubt that we should be championship contenders. I expect that. I know dad expects that. I know Mr. Lanigan, Mr. Letterman, everybody, the entire staff expects that. So we're excited about what's

ahead.

I think getting a universal aero kit, the new car is going to help us considerably. I think the depth of the engineering staff, partners like Total, that's a huge deal from a strategic side, things that we can do, that's going to help us in areas that we haven't really pushed much before.

I think there's a lot of reasons to believe we'll be very strong.

Q. We go to Phoenix for the second race of the season in April. How critical is this test next week coming up in Phoenix?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it's important. It's important, there's no doubt. It's important in part because this car is going to be very different on the short ovals from what I see and from what I hear. So being my first exposure, Takuma's first, to driving the car on that sort of circuit, it's going to be different.

The challenges are ahead of us. We'll have to go out and try to figure it out, make the most of it.

Q. Christophe, how crucial was it that you would want to join an All-American lineup in order to promote Total in this country? Obviously Graham is American, his dad is American. Even the Honda engine is built here in California. You're going to be at Long Beach, which is one of the all-time classic IndyCar races. Was that in your thinking when you signed up for this deal?

CHRISTOPHE DOUSSOUX: I didn't hear very well the beginning of your question.

Q. I was asking you whether the nationality of the team, the driver and the fact that Long Beach is one of the American classic races, whether that was part of your thinking behind promoting Total in this country?

CHRISTOPHE DOUSSOUX: Yeah, absolutely. My mission here is to develop the brand in the United States, so being involved in a discipline that gets maximum traction among Americans and among automotive industries in the U.S. was my number one goal.

In that respect, yes, it made a lot of sense to be in a motorsport discipline which has a very rich history in the U.S. which is focused in the United States.

The fact that it has some awareness abroad, especially the Indy 500, which is seen all over the world, of course, helped me in getting the support of my head office because everybody knows IndyCar. I don't need to explain them what it is. Of course, my colleagues in HQ know IndyCar and know Bobby. It was much easier for me to defend my case.

But the strategy goes with this partnership, it's to

develop our presence in the United States. So our target is the U.S. consumer.

Q. Bobby, it's very rare in motorsports to have a company come back, especially after 20-some years. Who reached out to who in this whole thing? It's a very good fit for both of you. The second part of the question is, will Total be an associate sponsor in any races in addition to being the primary sponsor in Long Beach?

BOBBY RAHAL: The introductions, we looked to them, they looked to us. Consequently, the conversation was very lively, very passionate, as I said earlier today. Clearly having had a previous relationship didn't hurt, that we had so much success before. I think clearly the success of the team over the last several years was a draw.

Total has a great reputation in motorsports in particular, many Formula One championships, World Rally championships, Le Mans victories. For us Total represented in particular the potential of a real technical advantage that we might be able to fashion with them in terms of lubricants and what have you. As I said, I think it just seemed like a good fit as we approached it from both ends.

Total is with us every race as an associate sponsor. Of course, they will be the primary at Long Beach. This is a multi-year agreement, which we're very pleased about. It gives us the ability to work together for many years, to discover and devise those advantages we might be able to create along with them.

In the meantime, it does have such a great reputation as an oil and gas company on a worldwide basis, that it's a bit flattering for us, frankly, that they decided to come along with us and have us help them gain the awareness they're looking for.

Q. Graham spoke about Roger Penske staying up for 24 hours. How much sleep did you get during that 24-hour period?

BOBBY RAHAL: I got about an hour and a half worth of sleep in the middle of the night. It's so loud there, you can't sleep. It's impossible to sleep. At some point you take a shower and put your clothes back on and go back out (laughter). If anything, fall asleep on the timing stand, I don't know.

Luckily it was relatively warm this year, so it wasn't so uncomfortable. No, I didn't make it all 24 like Roger. I gave it a good try.

Q. Bobby, I don't think there's anyone who can doubt that IndyCar racing isn't hands down the best racing in the world, and I include Formula One in that in terms of racing, how good the entertainment is for the fans. Yet there seems to be some difficulty in landing, on the commercial side, an additional manufacturer, land overseas

aces. From your perspective, you used to be in Formula One with the Jaguar team, you've been exposed to that, you've been a team owner and driver of course in IndyCar, and we're seeing a lot of manufacturers going into Formula E and Formula One, which have global TV deals all over the world, so that an engine manufacturer or any sponsor would get exposure globally. Do you think that needs to be a focus? That seems to be the part that's a bit lacking for IndyCar, is landing those commercial deals.

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I mean, we've been stuck with a television contract that finally is up for grabs at the end of this year. Even Randy Bernard had to deal with that, Mark Miles over the last several years. I think there's been improvements for sure.

When you see quotations about the number of people that Formula One reaches, Formula E, I don't believe those numbers whatsoever because I've been in Formula One. I just know those numbers are not factual. Makes it look bigger than it really is.

Let's face it, Formula One still has a huge following. But I think IndyCar racing is in a good spot right now in the sense that the television contract coming up at the end of this year, it's in a position that most major sports are not in the sense that I think NASCAR's television contracts run for another five years, NFL same thing, although I saw Thursday night is going to be on FOX, and Major League Baseball.

Let's face it, the world is changing rapidly between what I would call terrestrial TV - ABC, CBS, NBC - versus not just the cables, because they're suffering, like ESPN and others. That's across the board. That's not motorsports on ESPN, that's ESPN, period. Much of it is going digital.

To me, the first series that really is able to grab hold on the digital side is going to be the ultimate winner. I think IndyCar racing is in a position to do that.

I'm not negotiating the deal for Mark Miles. He's plenty smart enough to do that on his own. But I do think we're in a good spot. Who knows what's going to happen in terms of, again, what I call terrestrial TV or cable, who knows where we're going to be. ABC, ESPN, has all kinds of issues. I'll leave that to Mark and his group.

But I do think we're in a good spot in terms of being able to take advantage of these new technologies. I think it's moving so fast right now for everybody, those even within the industry, that everybody's kind of running like crazy trying to figure out which way to go.

In the meantime, in the meantime, Total is not the only new sponsor that we'll be announcing, we have several, let alone renewals of existing sponsorships. So I got to believe there's a reason for all that, and

that's that people believe in the IndyCar Series as motorsports entertainment.

You look at the circuits we run on, they're great venues. The addition of Portland this year. Back in the Northwest after many, many years. I just think these things are happening because people are seeing the value in it.

We're glad to participate in some small way.

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as we have no further questions for our guests, we will thank them for their time and wrap up today's IndyCar media conference call. Thank you, everybody, for joining us today.