

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday March 9, 2018

Ryan Hunter-Reay James Hinchcliffe Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined now by the driver of the No. 5 Arrow Electronics SPM Honda for Schmidt Peterson Motorsports, James Hinchcliffe, who finished second fastest in this afternoon's session, and second fastest overall.

James, St. Petersburg has to be a special place for you, the site of your first win in IndyCar in 2013. You also got a chance to test the new 2018 IndyCar here on the streets this afternoon. Your thoughts on what St. Pete means to you, and the performance of the car.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, St. Pete for us, I think it's the perfect venue to start the IndyCar season. It's got such a cool vibe. It's a very vibrant city. The city really embraces the race, which is very fun and exciting for us. It's a hell of a backdrop, not a bad piece of scenery here. It's just been the start of the season for so long, I couldn't really imagine it being anywhere else at this point.

As far as the car goes, the '18 car is very different, I can tell you that. I think you're going to hear that a lot over the weekend and a lot over the year as we go to the racetracks the first time with it.

St. Pete, it's always interesting on Friday, super low grip, a lot of different series out there laying rubber down and all the rest of it. Some interesting challenges today, a lot to learn with the new car, our side personally with the new team, new personnel on the team I should say. But, yeah, a solid start to the day.

THE MODERATOR: We had your teammates in here earlier today. You mentioned the different chemistry. Elaborate a little more on that. Probably not too many adjustments in terms of obviously you and Robert have known each other for a long time and you worked with Jack before. Your thoughts on the team chemistry heading into the weekend and the season.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I mean, we brought in a lot of new people, whether it was on the mechanics side, engineering side, even the commercial side. The team has really grown a lot, changed a lot internally over the last six months.

We worked with Jack last year. He's a great addition to the team. Robby, can't get rid of him. I sent him off for

10 years, he kept clawing his way back. Here we go.

No, it's been great. The dynamic in the team, the engineering office, is very different than it was 12 months ago. That's a good thing. I think we're already seeing the benefits of that. At the same time a lot of new people, a lot of learning to do. In a year when there's a lot of learning to do on the car anyway, that's kind of an extra element to tackle.

Piers Phillips, our team manager, has put a lot of new people in place with a goal to be strong for a long time. Might be some teething problems to get going. Certainly seems like it started off all right. We're prepared for anything in the short-term and really just trying to build this team up for long-term success.

Here he comes, I'm just going to go. Let myself out (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by our fastest driver of the day, Ryan Hunter-Reay, driving the No. 28 DHL Honda for Andretti Autosport.

Ryan, we just got a little bit of a download as to how the 2018 IndyCar has been performing here on the streets of St. Petersburg. You have the best finish of second here, a best start of third, heading into qualifying tomorrow. What do you think the new car is going to do on the racetrack?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: We've been on the podium here a few too many times. I would really love to win this one. It's my home race. It would mean a lot to us, for sure, especially to start off the 2018 season the right way.

I think today went pretty good. Good start. I don't think anybody is really happy with their racecars at the moment. So it's just making the most of it.

But this is a race that, yeah, like I said, we've been close. Especially with the lower downforce cars in the past, we've been pretty close to winning this thing. So hopefully we can put it together and put our heads together tonight at Andretti Autosport and raise it up a few notches for tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. James, it said you did your fastest lap on black tires. Is that right?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: No, that is incorrect. Will Power did that. We were on reds.

Q. Did you notice a big difference in acceleration out of the final turn compared to last year?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, out of the final turn, out of turn nine as well. There's definitely a lot of things different about the cars. You definitely feel like you're hauling the mail, going down into all the big braking zones, one, four, ten. I almost kind of was hoping we could talk to the track about adding some sign boards down in turn four because there's only three, two, one. We used to brake after three, now a good chunk before it. It's hard to judge.

That's how much it's changed. We literally need new brake markers because we're going so much faster and have so much less downforce.

Q. A lot of engineers and drivers have said that the cars have a very lively rear. How difficult is that for the driver to keep that rear under control?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Really the whole car is just overall lack of downforce. We come out here and we're used to years past knowing exactly how hard we have to push it. In the past with more downforce, we actually had to go a little bit beyond our comfort level to get the lap time out of the car because there was so much downforce on it. That was the most awkward thing about today, trying to rein that back a little bit, try not to ask so much of the thing.

That's where it's difficult. It's just sliding around. It's overall lack of grip. I remember after my first two outings coming back trying to get feedback. It's not really doing one thing wrong or another thing wrong, it's all over the place light.

I think the biggest issue is going to be tire degradation in the race just because you're sliding around so much, asking so much of the tire.

It's good though. It's a new challenge. Got everybody on their toes. We'll see who makes the most of it in the shortest amount of time.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Echoing the sentiments that Ryan said, it's a very different beast. I think we saw a lot more guys kind of back in the tail end of the car in turn one on the brakes there than we've ever seen before, power down. I don't know how yours is, mine is a whole lot worse. Everything in the back of the car is different. Everything in the front of the car is different. The aero map is different, mechanically what it needs to be efficient, with the aero.

Like he said, having to reprogram your brain as to what normal is with this car has been a huge challenge everywhere we've gone. Doing it for a street circuit for the first time has been a bit of an eye opener. I think Ryan is right, degradation in the race, wow, 110 laps, is

that all? Wow, that's fun (laughter).

Q. What is the most surprising newly challenging portion of the track?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: From turn one to 14 I think is probably, if I were to pick, just one section (laughter).

Man, I don't know. Literally, you take that amount of downforce away, it's that much worse everywhere. I don't know if there's necessarily one place. Maybe the chicane, 11, 12, is a little trickier. I don't know.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I think all the high speed sections that used to be no-brainers in the other car, you used to get through it, even though we're hauling the mail. Now our corners, I think that's the biggest challenge.

Q. (No microphone.)

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Three, I mean, you're using up every inch of track. You feel like it could step out and smack the wall at any point. Like James mentioned, the chicane down here, fifth gear, what used to be flat, flat is, is now gun-to-the-head feeling, isn't it?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: For sure.

Q. In the practice just now, both of you had faster laps than the fastest lap in any qualifying session last year. Is that a surprise to you?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Last year was a completely different track because last year turn three was modified to address a new problem with a bump or something. We had this kind of awkward little curb that sat out in the middle there, makeshift chicane. You got to throw out last year. You'd have to compare it to 2016. I'm not sure where that was.

Last year's times are completely off because of that corner.

Q. James, you are working with a new race engineer. How is that going so far in terms of the learning curve for both of you? Are you surprised it's taken this long for there to be a female race engineer in IndyCar?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I'll start with the second part.

Yes, I guess. Yes and no. Like anything, you've got to have an interest in it young if you want to get into motorsports in any facet. We're seeing a lot of industries try to help encourage females to get involved in different areas that they hadn't previously. Maybe yes, maybe no.

But we're obviously thrilled that she's here. She comes with a wealth of experience. She's a straight shooter. She's a no BS kind of girl, which is exactly what we needed. Definitely a baptism of fire for her. This series and these cars very different than what she's used to. She has a ton of experience, like I said. I think she's

adapting very well given the limited amount of testing we get. Hadn't seen an oval until we went to Phoenix. Kind of a big deal.

Like I said, there's a lot of new people and procedures in place at the team. That's going to take some getting used to. I think she's doing a great job so far. Every time we work together it gets that little bit better, little bit better, little bit better.

Q. You both have rookie teammates. You keep talking about having to reprogram your brains. Is it really an advantage for these guys that they just experience it for the first time?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I think there's a bit of that. Everybody is going to come back down to what the expectations are. The veterans will adapt. Yeah, the rookies that haven't been in that other car and are going to all these tracks, those reference points aren't there in the first place.

The Lucas Oil car slamming around a few weeks ago. James and I for my charity event, we spent hours behind the wheel of the Lucas Oil cars passing each other three or four times a lap, all by ourselves out there. That's why we're here now.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, to pick a year to be a rookie, not that they picked it, it's as good a year as anybody because everybody is learning from scratch. You don't have those expectations. Even from last year, in all honesty, the cars are challenging to drive no matter what aero we're talking about.

But if you're coming from a Lights car or a touring car, having to adapt to the amount of downforce we had last year would have taken a bit. It took me a while, at least the '16 kits for the Honda cars, to really kind of program my brain to be, No, no, it will come out the other side. Did not have to do that for these other guys I think is a benefit, for sure, had they come in 12 months ago.

Q. James, you talked about the downforce level. What about the physical aspects? It should be 'easier' to drive from a physical standpoint, but it sounds like it more stressful to drive.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: That's actually a great way of putting it. When the car is on the edge with the rear being sort of questionable at most times of the lap, it is very stressful. You're a lot tenser as a driver, a little bit more on edge. Pure physicality is way down. Steering torque way down.

But, yeah, I think it will be a physical race in an entirely different way. Again, I said it before, 110 laps around this place is like a marathon.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I haven't been there yet. I think that will be a big issue, especially through those fast sections I was talking about. Aren't going to be

able to follow anywhere near as close as you have in the past. That will be difficult, no doubt.

Q. (No microphone.)

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I feel similar. The steering weight is not as heavy. The peak steering weight probably isn't as heavy, but you're so much busier behind the wheel. I feel like your busier counter steering, doing all that stuff. You have more inputs into that wheel, sawing on it, so...

Q. Sorry to ask about Danica, but you are talking about it's a good year for rookies with the new car. She's not going to get in the new car for six weeks. Is it truly an advantage that she's coming in when you have a new car, or everybody's going to have all this time in it before she gets in it?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Nobody is going to have any time on a speedway, right? She's going to get the same amount of time as the rest of us on a speedway at Indianapolis.

I think we haven't been on a speedway yet to know what the differences are going to be like. I did one day a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far away, and the car devolves a lot, Ryan, whatever (laughter).

Anyway, no, when it comes to Indy, it's kind of a double-edged sword because if she was coming in last year, everybody knew what to expect, how to race, how to set them up.

But now, coming in with a new car, she's going to have to be part of that learning process with the team. For Indy and Indy-only package, it might not actually be as advantageous as it is for the guys that are doing full seasons.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.