

IndyCar Media

Conference

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Takuma Sato

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We will go ahead and get started with our first media availability of the afternoon. Joined now by the driver from Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, Takuma Sato, driving the No. 3 Mi-jack Panasonic Honda. Takuma, we haven't talked to you since practices yesterday. We want to look ahead to qualifying, but in your observation how is the car reacting to the streets of St. Pete, and what are you expecting heading into this afternoon's session?

TAKUMA SATO: Tough. To me they're tough to drive, and that's what we probably expected, and fans love it. We love it usually more challenging, but we're just finding difficulty to find a good speed. We're on the way, and hopefully in qualifying we will be competitive. But so far overall I think we love it. We love how look the car and obviously the reduction in downforce impacted heavily how we drive and how you treat the tires and the setup, et cetera, et cetera.

But as a group, I think engineering is working really hard to find the speed, and we make the car fast, and I think all in all, it's good for the sport, and certainly I enjoy the driving.

But for the St. Pete's part, it was much tougher than I thought. We went to the Bower (ph), we went to Sebring for preparation, and obviously the short oval is the short oval. But for these road courses, it's built reasonably well. We can find the car balance what we wanted, but come back to the St. Pete, the street course, it's so bumpy and less grit and a lot of track revolution involved, so therefore we just realized how much downforce was important last year, and now we have to work quite hard. But I think everybody is in the same boat and same game, and I think Graham and I are finding bits and pieces of the positive side. Hopefully we can put everything together for qualifying.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously last year for you was highlighted by your big win at the 101st running of the Indy 500. But a new lease this year for you, a new team, obviously a new teammate. What are some of your goals and really aspirations for what would make this season what you would consider a success?

TAKUMA SATO: Sure, without doubt, last year was significantly my whole career, and obviously without Andretti Autosport I'd never be able to win or challenge

for the 500 in that competition level, so I really appreciate the entire organization, and not only for that, we had a special bonding feeling as a team so it's a fantastic feeling.

But just moving forward, obviously I was at his dad Bobby's team in 2012, and ever since then, Bobby is just being supportive and very, very supportive of mine, and I just got an opportunity, come back to his team, and now you see that Graham was one of the best Honda drivers of the last few seasons, considering he's a single-car team, so it's very impressive in sharing what he's driving.

I just wanted to be part of it, and especially with the new car, there is always opportunity. So I felt this is for me a great opportunity to challenge for the championship, and I think it truly this year is principal to paper (ph) anyone can have as a great opportunity. That's what I thought come back to Rahal. For me it's one of the, I don't know, exciting moments.

THE MODERATOR: Joined also by your teammate Graham Rahal, driving the No. 15 United Rentals Honda for the team. Graham, I know the time sheets probably haven't necessarily reflected where you want to be heading into qualifying, but what are some of the things that you and the team have been going through to get ready for this afternoon's session?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, yeah, I would say the first three sessions have been tricky for us. I think that not only just getting a handle on the car, but combine that with the fact that we just haven't really had smooth sessions. It's been -- I feel like every new tire run and everything we're kind of caught up in a bit of traffic, and a lot of guys are in the same position. But it's been difficult. It's just been kind of tricky for us. So having said that, I don't know exactly where we are competitively. I know that we're not -- we're definitely not there, if you know what I mean. To be up front, we're going to have to find quite a bit.

You know, Takuma and I, it's been great to have him. We've gone on two completely different tangents on setups, and obviously here this afternoon we're going to have to come back together and try to make it work.

You know, I think he was pretty happy, or happier, with his car this morning than where I was at, so thank God we've got him. But yeah, it's been a tricky weekend.

Coming out of preseason testing, how well that went for us, obviously we kind of worked the car probably a little bit too much and tuned it a little bit too much to what suited some of the testing tracks versus what was going to suit here. Even though the tire was the same, it was what we used at Sebring, the grip level there is obviously higher, and it completely fooled us I would say.

You know, we're just going to have to rethink it a little bit. It's going to take some time, but I certainly hope that this afternoon we can get ourselves in a decent starting position, and tomorrow's race is going to be -- I think it's anybody's race. I don't care who starts up front. I just think with tire wear, fuel life -- the fuel usage is way down compared to last year, so the windows are going to be big. There's going to be a lot of strategy that can play a role in this thing. It's just going to be -- I think it's anybody's to have. Hopefully we can just have a good afternoon and go into tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously as we see on the screens here, we have a lot of other series with us here this weekend. It's always great to have the Mazda Road to Indy. At the same time, all the rubber being laid down certainly plays into the practice sessions and as you guys prepare for qualifying. Are you noticing anything on the track as it's changing throughout all of these sessions, and do you feel like that'll be a factor in qualifying?

GRAHAM RAHAL: You know, it's interesting, I thought actually the first session pace was pretty good. If you look at the overlays from the track, the way that it was before, new car, all that being considered, session 1 to session 1 was pretty close.

Session 2 we gained, as you would expect, but this morning I didn't see a huge change there, so frankly, I think it's -- yes, it always helps to get more rubber down. It's always great to have Mazda Road to Indy. It's always great to have all the PWC, the sports car guys, whatever, with us, depending on which series that is at given weekends. I always enjoy that as a fan myself. I love watching it.

But yeah, it's a little bit all over the board, but yeah, any type of rubber that gets laid down is going to help us this weekend. The paint on the front straightaway and the brake zone on the runway is unbelievably slippery, and anything we can do to kind of overcome that would be a great thing.

You know, the track, as always, very consistent. The guys, they do a great job of building this place, and we're going to go out there and push as hard as we can. We'll see what happens.

THE MODERATOR: As you look at Takuma sitting next to you and adding that second full-time driver for you

and the team this season, where has he been helpful or where do you feel like maybe you've been helpful in terms of teammate feedback? Are there particular tracks, maybe even Indy, considering that's an aspiration of yours to win the 500 at some point in your career, where you guys feel like you've been playing well with each other?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I think everywhere. Quite frankly Takuma and I have had pretty much the same feedback at every test we've gone to. There may be some things that bother me that don't him or vice versa, depending on the place. We've kind of seen some differences there, but that's very typical of drivers and driving styles, and quite frankly even if you set the cars up identically, let's be real, it's a race car. All of them got their little differences here or there.

You know, he's been a great addition to our team, as you can see this weekend. Like I said, we've gone on two very different tangents as far as setup, and this afternoon will be the first time that we kind of come back together, so we'll see how that works. But it's been great to have a second car.

This new car is tricky, and I don't think I can stress enough that from what we experienced last year -- quite frankly, my entire career, starting in 2008 when we won here, corners like Turn 3, corners like the chicane right over here before the last turn, these are corners that were always flat. You never really thought about it; it was always flat. And it is really, really, really, really tricky if you are going to be flat at all. I think I did one lap this morning that way in Turn 3. I mean, areas that you didn't think about before have become a huge challenge, and so just to cope with that and get used to it and get the car to work right, obviously the tire is pretty similar to last year, but last year's car had a lot more downforce, so it's a fairly hard tire for this car, and it's a little bit tricky how to get it to work. Some guys have figured it out. Here I don't think that we -- we just haven't quite yet, but with Takuma, I think we'll be able to overcome that pretty quickly.

THE MODERATOR: Takuma, I believe this is the eighth consecutive year that the Firestone Grand Prix of St. Petersburg has opened the Verizon IndyCar Series season. What does this track mean to you? What are some of the things that make it unique or special or challenging as Graham mentioned?

TAKUMA SATO: Oh, you just love it. You know, just love St. Petersburg. As everybody said, really, it's a perfect venue for the opening of the season. It's good weather -- well, today it's a little bit cloudy, but usually typical Florida weather, blue sky and good food, and the fans, like yesterday, Friday, it's just awesome. It's lots of crowded, people come, and they're very enthusiastic, and everybody is very excited. And also the street course -- other street courses, this is a lot of opportunities for overtaking and lots of happening. So I

think it's a great track.

And personally I had quite a few good memories, especially for the qualifying, and I never finished higher than maybe fifth maybe, but hopefully this weekend I renew that record.

But I personally like St. Petersburg a lot.

Q. I have a question about the tires. I know, Graham, you said that the black tires were hard; did you guys have any feedback on the red tires yesterday?

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, yes, the red tire is purely more grip because it's just a softer compound. But the way designed, mechanism wise, I think it's difficult to make the most of it yesterday. A lot of people, probably half of the field, didn't go quicker with the red tire. But I'm sure this afternoon, everybody will figure it out. But it was great to see that kind of a challenge again, and on Friday to see how it react. But purely I think it's not huge in terms of the grip level, it's not huge, but there is some, and for sure the red tire will be better but also higher degradation. We'll see, just the normal things, but because they're taking off the downforce by 20 percent, it's just more really highlighted how you use it. It's very, very important.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, I agree with that. I think to go quicker on the reds, your car is going to have to suit them, and I think that it depends on what you have in that given run and where your car currently is. I think if your car -- for me, if your car is loose, I think that the reds become looser in the high speed. Yeah, probably better traction and everything else in the mid and slow speed corners, but I actually got -- I was fortunate enough to do the Firestone tire test in Sebring last week, and they didn't tell me this, but I ran both of these tires. The primaries everybody ran, but I got to test this red tire, and my comment there was over the bumpy sections that were higher speed, my car was very loose, same as yesterday. So I think that that translated, which is cool, but as Takuma said, I'm certain guys are going to go quicker. We're all going to run them, we're all going to see what we can do with them, but I do think that the tire deg is going to be pretty big on them, and if you do happen to get traffic on lap 1 or lap 2, it could be detrimental to your session in a big way.

Hopefully we both -- we're in the same group. Hopefully we'll both get clear laps and stay out of each other's way and just have a good one because I think they don't last long, but probably make it more exciting tomorrow.

Q. The over/under in Turn 1, the Turn 1 overshoot, that seems like that's going to be a common occurrence, at least based on what we've seen in practice, how badly some people are actually overshooting that corner.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I thought I was going to knock the fence down a good handful of times, so I've probably been one of those guys. I don't know what to say. This car -- it doesn't have obviously the drag levels, right, so when you go to just get natural deceleration from aerodynamics, it just doesn't really decel. So you have to use the brake at such a significant level for a longer period of time than last year. So you're on the brake pedal, you're pushing it, and that includes going over those white painted strips, right.

It used to be you to could get a lot of your braking done before the white starts, and then you could kind of release and roll the thing to the apex. You can't do that anymore. You need all that gap that you have to get the car slowed down. Well, then sometimes you get over that white, maybe a little inside brake lock, maybe a little outside, it's just kind of all over the place. Yeah, I think you're going to see that a lot, and obviously tomorrow is going to be a lot of guys that are trying to live all the dreams that we've all had in the off-season about winning this race. There's going to be a lot of guys pushing hard, and who knows what will happen. Turn 1 here is always entertaining.

Q. Are you watching for other people to make a mistake? It seems like the way the cars are you can force somebody into making a mistake.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think that that's the name of the game. I talk about that all the time. One of the most -- we're all here, we're all competitive people, but one of the most rewarding things that you can ever do in a race car is that mano-á-mano battling, and sometimes that battle doesn't take one lap or one turn, sometimes it takes 10 laps or more to constantly pressure somebody, pressure somebody into finally making a mistake.

What I do think about this car is it is easier to make a mistake. That simple. You push the brakes on 20 feet too far, there's a good chance you're going to miss the corner. That's just what it is. So again, I think tomorrow will be more active due to that.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, I agree pretty much with what Graham said. Obviously last year we had tons of downforce, that means like a parachute you have, so if you lift you have like over 1Gs of the decel. Our cars now, it's very, very clean and we just go fast. I mean, in Turn 1 we'll probably be 10 percent faster than last year's car, but you have a 20 percent reduction in downforce, that means you have to brake earlier than last year, meaning we talk about tenths of seconds, but our actual duration of the braking time is longer than last year. That means that you have a more chance to play with and not play, but it's the racing part. The braking time is longer than last year. Overall, that means you have more time available. That means you have more attack and you can have a battle, and then people can make it more highlight the mistakes, not

only for just one single lap, but also over the course of the stint, the tire degradation is massive, because not enough downforce. The tire is sliding around. Sliding faster is worst case for the tire. Like Graham said, red tires drop off significantly, but I would say the black tire, too. Blacks are never going to be consistent tomorrow, so we will see it.

I think towards the end of the stint, people easier to make a mistake, or the car or the driver has more consistent platform will be stronger towards the end of the session. That's good for the racing.