

IndyCar Media Conference

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Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll welcome our second-place finisher, Graham Rahal, driving the No. 15 United Rentals Honda for Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. Graham, a lot of things happening up front in that race towards the end there, but you managed to stay out of it and ultimately capitalize on those opportunities. Take us through your race and what you witnessed in those final few laps.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, yeah, first of all, I want to tip my cap to Honda for an amazing job that they clearly did. No matter what the end result was going to be, a Honda was going to win, and that's pretty spectacular. There's a lot of competition in the other camp, and to see them come through the way they did today was pretty awesome.

Yeah, I mean, look, I apologize, as well, to Spencer for earlier in the race. I found myself in a similar situation. I think that happened -- I heard Dixon did it to Takuma. These cars have very little forgiveness, as you guys can see, and you get yourself in there, what feels sometimes like only about five feet, two deep, and next thing you know you're hanging on for dear life. It's difficult, it's frustrating, but it is the case of what we have currently.

You know, I was inside of Bourdais, too, on the restart, and I just looked up, and I saw the marbles, and I thought, this isn't going to work. So I literally just said to myself, take fourth, let's go home. And next thing I know, I saw smoke, and bam. It worked out even prettier than that.

But frankly I'm more than pleased and fortunate to be on the podium today. Our guys did a great job of strategy, and frankly I don't think this was given to us. We certainly had huge fuel numbers that we needed to reach, and thanks to Honda and the new aero package, we were able to get that number and save the tires as well as we could to do those long stints. I think there were 35 laps, I don't know, something really long, and it all worked out.

You know, as we look at ourselves as championship contenders, I don't care what happened the last two days, we still believe in that. We know that we are. This is a great way to start.

THE MODERATOR: Take us back a little bit further. We talked to you before qualifying after the first couple

of practices that happened on Friday, and you weren't necessarily too keen on what was going on so far. You knew that there was still some speed to find as you got ready towards the later part of the weekend. How were you able to find that, and obviously Takuma qualifying up front I can imagine helped out in terms of data information?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it did, although yesterday's qualifying was kind of a strange circumstance. I think actually when Marco got bumped out is when Takuma got in, and not saying that Takuma didn't have the speed over the weekend, but I don't know in qualifying that he actually did to advance, and then it rained, so it became -- ultimately he did a great job in Q2 and Q3 to continue on.

The trouble is that we made changes for qualifying that we really didn't get to see through, and so this morning as we went out, we went out blind as to what is going to happen, what are these changes going to be. And I think in general, I'm a little more sensitive to rear movement than maybe Takuma is, or Takuma can certainly go a little bit quicker than me when the rear is moving to that extreme, and so I was a little concerned, what way is this going to go when we go into race day.

And I don't think that it was great this morning, honestly. It wasn't at all. But guys did a great job, recovered well, made some spring changes, did a little bit of this, a little of that, magic fairy dust, and next thing you know, it's halfway decent for the race. We did have a lot of understeer, but I could see a lot of guys did. I could see Hinch behind me. He was on far fresher tires than me and he couldn't do anything with me, and I could see Bourdais start to struggle because we were catching him about half a second a lap, so I knew that everybody was kind of in the same boat.

But if those aren't some of the craziest restarts you'll ever see -- I mean, it is literally, I mean, far worse than any ice I've driven on in my life growing up in the Midwest. It was ridiculous, and I have a feeling we're going to see a lot more of that this year.

THE MODERATOR: I think the pole sitter on the streets of St. Pete has only won the race twice --

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, you might as well start last. If you look at the last few years, I think it's the best place to start.

THE MODERATOR: It worked out well for you this year and worked out well for Bourdais last year.

GRAHAM RAHAL: It worked out well for Seb last year. I'm trying to think who else won that started pretty much last or got knocked out. Well, even Bourdais today, he got knocked out and went to the back, right, went to last, and it worked out.

Today for Seb and I, and I think Ed was kind of third on our strategy, the trick was to get -- somehow get fuel number, somehow stay ahead of everybody, and somehow keep the tires underneath you, which are three of the most difficult things to do in that kind of order. We were fortunate. But even the year I won here, I got hit by Will, and we went to dead last, and it worked out. I joke around, but it might not be a bad play for the future. I mean, I had tires for days, so I was looking good for race day.

Q. Graham, how different was this race with the new cars?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's hard. It's hard. You guys can see, I know there's a lot of yellow today. These cars are far more demanding than anything we've driven -- not demanding in the sense that it's harder to get the speed out, it's just easier to mess up. The window of opportunity, the margin is just very, very, very, very slim. You know, the old car we talked about, when you'd get a big moment of yaw, like when the car would snap out, I don't want to say it would straighten itself out, because it had so much downforce and sideforce. This new car doesn't have anything, so if it snaps, it just keeps going. You saw that today. Guys were in trouble a lot, and certainly the tires have become very tricky in their current form, what we have, and you saw it in the brake zones.

There's going to be a lot of excitement this year. I don't think that's -- there's going to be no lack of that for sure.

Q. A lot of talk about the difficulty of driving the car; kind of put it in perspective for me. I know they don't want to make the car hard to drive on purpose. I know it's just lack of downforce, but where is the sweet spot because this car is actually faster than the other car, too?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it is because it's so quick on the straight. Quite a decent amount of straightaways, so that makes a difference. Long Beach it should be considerably quicker than the old car because Long Beach is pretty much all straights. So it is in some ways.

But the combination of the tire is identical, if not very, very, very, very close to last year's tire, so it's pretty hard for this car. When you lose all the downforce, typically you need a softer tire, but like you saw today, I think if you could get the car in sort of a good operating zone, it was relatively consistent. Our

pace over a stint wasn't too bad. I'm not going to tell you that our car was great. Like I said, we had a lot of understeer, so we were working the front pretty hard, but the cars have naturally just become, and they are becoming harder and harder to drive or harder and harder to find the window that it really likes to operate in.

I was talking to Al Jr. last night, and he said it reminds him, kind of working with Gabby, he said it reminds him a lot of the 87 March that they raced, and that car was so quick when it was on, but it was just basically impossible to find the window that it wanted to be in, and that seems to be how this is. If you're on, you're on, and if you're not, you're going to be like us this weekend, up until this point.

Q. Graham, any race car driver that's been in business for any amount of time will have happen to them what happened to Wickens today where you're out front fighting for the lead and then you get punted back to 15th or whatever. When was the most difficult race that something like that happened to you, and what was your reaction to it?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, it's happened a lot. Everybody always talks about the six wins that I have or whatever, but I mean, I finished second like three times that amount, so there's only so many close calls, those close, close times that you were almost there, almost won. It happens a lot. The thing is I was having fun out there because Robby, James and I started racing each other when we were 10, 11 years old, so it was fun that -- it actually crossed my mind that 380 CC Junior National guys were in the top 5 of an IndyCar race, which was a pretty cool thing, so for all the kid karters out there, they should take a lot of pride and excitement in seeing that because it certainly is possible.

But Robby -- and I'll go see him, he needs to keep his head up. He did a phenomenal job this weekend. He did a great job up front. Obviously I didn't see a lot of it, but he obviously had a fast car. So did James. Schmidt did a great job, as well.

But he did an excellent job for his first, so there's no doubt that he's going to find himself in Victory Lane at some point. You've just got to keep your chin up. It adds a little fuel to the fire all the time when that happens. You know, but like James said, if you watch it -- not James, Alex. If you watch it, certainly it did look like Robby pushed him to the inside a bit late in the brake zone. It was kind of a calamity of errors, I think, that kind of caused that whole situation, but I haven't seen it -- it just looked like -- live, that's what I remember. But he just needed to keep his head up, keep focus because they'll be pretty strong, I think.

Q. Between yesterday's qualifying and what happened earlier in the race, a lot of times somebody would get in a position like that, you

might try the alternate fuel strategy, but it seems like this car get back up to the front. Is that accurate?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, in our case, when we needed to pass guys, there was a group there that we needed to get through six or seven guys, and Bourdais and I both did that pretty quick. So yes, I think that -- I thought it was easier to pass than the old car.

Obviously, like I said, Honda has done an amazing job with the engines. The overtake worked extremely well for me. It was very powerful. I felt like it was a little bit easier to make some passes today if need be. But like I said, I think this is the first of many great races. We're all just still figuring this thing out. It's going to take some time, but the first of many great ones for this car.

Q. And also what happened in qualifying and at the start, did you begin to wonder what next? It always seems to happen at St. Pete.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, obviously I didn't mean to do that to Spencer, and I've already reached out to him and expressed my apologies. Frankly I got in there, and literally the moment I touched the brake pedal, it went silent, which means that the rear is just locked up, and that's it, and I grabbed the clutch, and I don't know how I saved it. But yeah, I mean, it went silent the second I hit the brake pedal. I have never had that in my entire life. I knew -- it's like, I'm sure you guys have all been on ice and you hit the brakes and it seems like you speed up. That's literally how it felt. I knew that I was going to hit him. It was just how hard. Obviously these new cars are pretty durable because a lot of us hit each other like that today and continued on. You know, again, sorry to Spencer for that.

But I think that all considered, it was a pretty good day for everybody.

Q. Were you concerned you might get a penalty for the contact at Turn 1?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I was last already, so I don't know where else he was going to put me. I thought that there was a chance, but then I thought to myself, literally, I'm last, what is he going to do. And if they make me drive through the pit lane, you lose a little bit of time, but again, in this race that's not necessarily a bad thing because it almost can work out for you. You get your clear air. You can go hard and save fuel. So I wasn't too, too concerned, but again -- and Spencer was still ahead of me after the sequence and everything. Where else am I going to go? Like I said, it's the trickiest I think all of us have had it, and I also think in some ways, I know it sounds crazy, in some ways I almost think rookies had a little advantage here this weekend because they don't have an expectation of what the old car should be here. The first practice session, I literally felt like I was driving somewhere I had never -- my mind is telling me, you should be able to do this, you should brake here, you should do that, and you just couldn't do it, and it was just nasty. This car is so different than anything that I think a lot of us

have driven. It's fun, but it takes a while to adapt.

Q. In a lot of ways, how do you overlook what your old Newman/Haas teammate did today, especially after what happened to him last May? A lot of people thought his career was over. Here he comes right out of the box doing exactly what he did last year with a victory.

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, I mean, Seb did a great job. He always does. When he's on his game, he's as hard to beat as anybody out here. There's no doubt about that. He did a phenomenal job, and obviously the team and Craig, and it was exciting. They have new sponsors on board and stuff, so a great way to kick off the year for them.

Like I said, I had a little look-see there and thought to myself, this just isn't worth it. After where we started, the points were key for us, and now we'll move on and hopefully have a couple good races coming up. We've got three weeks in a row or whatever in a couple weeks. I've got Sebring next week for me, but I'm excited for what's to come for us.

Q. There was a point early on that I was outside and I was watching a video board, and it was an on-board camera, and I couldn't tell if the screen quit working. There was no video. That wasn't working. I took my sunglasses off and it was bright, it was a shadow. You mentioned the whole thing is like ice. I know you're from a little bit up north. You'd get away from the ice and then it's shadows in the middle part of the circuit, so how difficult is it to contend with those?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, you're used to it running here for sure. This place with the buildings, anywhere we race on a street course it's very similar to that, so really it's no big deal. Yesterday it was tricky because yesterday, dark visor, a little bit overcast, yeah, you think the shadows aren't there but they still kind of are, and it gets pretty dark. Today was no big deal.

It's hard, though, when it does go dark typically here it's in corners 7, 8, 9, and those are areas that you need to be able to see the wall really well, and this year they had black signage on the wall in those areas, so to gauge your margin, it's a little tough, and to find the grip around this place, literally you have to be like an inch away. If you're eight inches off the wall, you'll feel it, you'll notice a big difference. To know where you have to be is tough, but I think everybody gets used to it for sure.

Q. Graham, now that we have that first race under your belt and you've got a little bit better feel what the car is going to do during race conditions, if there was one thing you could tweak on the car, what would it be and what area would it be in?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I probably shouldn't say. I probably shouldn't answer that. Sorry. I'll get myself in trouble, so I'll just -- we'll...

THE MODERATOR: Graham, thank you so much.