

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday April 6, 2018

James Hinchcliffe

Robert Wickens

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everybody, for joining us today for our first Verizon IndyCar Series press conference of the weekend. Joined now by the two drivers of the Schmidt Peterson Motorsports team. James Hinchcliffe, driving the No. 5 Arrow Electronics SPM Honda, and Robert Wickens, driving the No. 6 Lucas Oil SPM Honda. James, we'll go ahead and start with you. I know that Phoenix has certainly been a challenge for you in the past. I think a best finish of 12th. Sounds about right, right?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Not one of those ones I keep personal track of.

THE MODERATOR: Exactly, but ultimately with the new car here, there's a lot of high hopes how it will perform on a short oval like Phoenix. Your thoughts going into the weekend?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I think you're going to hear this a lot over the first phase of the season. There's a lot of unknowns. First short oval for us, first oval race with the UAK-18 kit. There's still a lot to be found out when we hit the racetrack. We were all out here obviously for a couple days in February. The challenge seems to continue for us at SPM in February, but we've had a regroup, had some time to think about it. It's been a good chunk of time off since St. Pete to kind of get our heads around everything that we learnt there, and hopefully we can apply some of the general knowledge we've picked up on this car over the last sort of six weeks and be in a stronger position.

THE MODERATOR: To that point, St. Pete, there's not a lot of crossover in terms of track strategy, but in terms of getting back in the swing of the season and building momentum, is there anything at all that will translate over, even if it's from a team-building standpoint?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I think that's the biggest point, right, is just having everybody working together in an actual race weekend, an actual race setting. For us at SPM, we had a lot changes in the off-season personnel-wise. I don't have a single person on my timing stand that I did in 2017. Every opportunity to be working together on the racetrack is vital for us, and having that first race weekend under our belt was big.

We learnt a lot about ourselves and had been a little bit of time to make some adjustments, tinker some things, get used to what we want to do better and differently, and hopefully that kind of knowledge plays into our hands here.

THE MODERATOR: Joined also by your teammate Robert Wickens. Robert, obviously an eventful St. Petersburg weekend for you. I know it didn't finish how you were anticipating or hoping it would finish, but coming into your first oval race here at ISM Raceway, what are your thoughts and what are you thinking in terms of sort of what James was talking about, not a lot of track knowledge that translates over from St. Pete, but you've gotten several weeks under your belt now, and heading into what could be a big weekend?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, from my side, first oval race, another new experience here in IndyCar. So yeah, learning a new format. From what I've heard, these two-day weekends are pretty chaotic, and I think today is just going to fly by, and I think we're going to qualify, and then I'll get to the hotel and realize that we actually qualified already. I've never done a race weekend where you've qualified on the first day with only like an hour between practice and qualifying.

I think we have to -- we've done a good job. From my side at the test here in February, it wasn't terrible. I just didn't know what to expect. James unfortunately took the big brunt of the test items because I had never driven an oval before, so it was more me just kind of getting up to speed. I had a very conservative setup on the car, but it was pretty steady, drove a bunch of laps, got my eye in for an oval. James was off track a lot doing big setup changes to make the car better, where I was just pounding laps with the car.

Unfortunately I feel like I didn't really help the team much in terms of what we learnt, but they've crunched some numbers. I think we're coming with a better car than where we tested, and hopefully we can hit the ground running here. It's only an hour practice before qualifying, but yeah, we'll see where we go.

THE MODERATOR: I'll ask a very hypothetical question. Let's say your first race isn't a short oval, let's say it's a superspeedway. Is your approach or thought process or your anxiety, nervousness any different heading into that kind of a weekend?

ROBERT WICKENS: No, I just don't know what to

expect. Same thing in St. Pete; I went in with zero expectations and just kind of lived the weekend and kind of go session by session and see how it goes. That's been my philosophy in racing for a while, and it's just -- it works for me. I don't like to kind of think hypotheticals or do whatever, I'm just trusting the team and doing the job -- leave them to do what they need to do, and I just try to focus on driving and do the best I can.

You know, we'll see. I mean, first oval, I think today will be fine. I'll just be driving laps and qualifying, and then tomorrow in the race will be something new entirely. So we'll see. I'll be really happy if I can qualify around-ish the top 10. I think that's a pretty modest expectation. And then from there, the dream would be to finish every lap of my first oval race. I wanted to finish every lap of my debut IndyCar race, and that didn't happen, so we're going to try to do that this time.

Q. Two years ago when the series returned here, Alexander Rossi and Max Chilton, it was their first oval race, and their response afterwards was you've got to be crazy to do this. Are you kind of expecting the same type of feeling yourself once you get out there and you're inches apart wheel to wheel with some of these guys trying to improve position?

ROBERT WICKENS: I mean, luckily I'm driving beside 23 professional race car drivers. I mean, I think we trust everyone out there. At least I do. You know, it's going to be an experience. I guess ask me afterwards, but right now, I mean, I'm pretty calm. I'm not that really nervous about it. I just kind of wanted to do it. I've been more anxious for this race over the off-season than I have been for St. Pete or for anything else, just because I know how to drive a road course, so that wasn't anything crazy apart from learning a car, but this is a whole entire philosophy altogether. I'm still like in awe in the setup meetings and stuff like that when they're talking about staggers and this, that and the other and all this funky stuff that I didn't know was really a thing until a couple months ago.

But I've got this guy beside me, he's been keeping me grounded and giving me good race cars because he's been doing a lot of the work.

Q. Before you joined IndyCar, you were over in Germany with DTM, the highest national German championship, totally different environment with touring cars. Was there any problem when you made the move from touring cars to open wheel to IndyCar to adapt to these kind of race cars?

ROBERT WICKENS: To be honest, no, because my DTM car has so much downforce that it wasn't that hard for me to get back to open-wheel racing. Also before I joined DTM I was only driving open wheel. It wasn't that different for me to jump back.

But the only thing that was interesting for me was

getting used to just open cockpit, hearing the wind. That was the strangest thing for me because for the first like three days of testing I did, I could only hear wind, I couldn't hear the engine. I was just driving around like hitting rev limiters on every upshift because I just didn't know -- it was just something new that I completely forgot about. It wasn't even my head moving or anything like that, it was purely just like the wind noise.

But now I've gotten used to it, and it's just business as usual now.

Q. And the second question, DTM, you have direct involvement with the manufacturers. They do all the marketing stuff, they have extremely impressive hospitality. Now you are coming into an independent team. Is it more enjoyable to work because maybe they're more flexible than a big, big outfit in DTM?

ROBERT WICKENS: The short answer is yes, it's more enjoyable. Being a part of a great big manufacturer like Mercedes for so long, you're pretty limited with what you can do and what you can say, where here I think we have a lot of freedom. We can make some funny videos online and we don't have to worry about this person being upset or that person. Obviously we have our own guidelines, but it's way more relaxed than what I'm used to.

Q. This being a celebration of Andretti, a reunion race weekend, I'm curious about your thoughts about the drivers that have come before you and the way the sport has evolved to today?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, when we announced we were coming back here, I think a lot of the drivers were very excited because this track was such a staple on the IndyCar calendar for so long and there were so many great races held here, so many great battles that if you're a fan of the sport and a bit of a historian of the sport, you probably watched and enjoyed some of those battles. And the fact that Mario had his last win here obviously makes this place extra special for us.

No matter what track we go to, whether it's a place like ISM Raceway all the way to Indianapolis Motor Speedway the guys that have been driving these cars back through the start of the sport, they are heroes to us, they're legends in our field, and it's a huge honor just to be able to say that you are an IndyCar driver and kind of follow in their footsteps.

Q. Since you tested here in February, did you discover if there was a -- like when it comes to lapping back markers, are you going to have to bully them off your preferred line, or are you going to have to go off your preferred line to go round them?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think that's still TBD. The series obviously has been taking some measures to try to get the second groove going a little bit for us.

Ultimately this is still going to be a mainly one-lane racetrack, so I think not a lot of people did a lot of running in traffic during the test. We're not going to see too much of it in P1, but surely this evening we'll see some of it, and I think it's still going to be a case of you getting your car where you want it to be and forcing the other guy to kind of lift, or if he wants to hang around the outside, so be it.

Q. Are passes going to be just as hard as they were with the old kit?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, it's still IndyCar racing. It's still a tough series to pass anybody, and the level of competition is so high, and that certainly hasn't changed. If anything, it's gotten worse in the off-season with the addition of rookies like Wickens who come here with boatloads of experience and get pole in their first race.

This track has always been tough to pass on. It's partly due to the track, partly due to the cars, partly due to the closeness of competition. I think the cars are going to be a little bit more forgiving in that sense. The track is still the track, and the competition is still high, so two out of the three things that made it tough to pass here before are still valid, but we're definitely hoping that with the new kits we can be a little bit more racy.

Q. And also after I talked with you after St. Pete, you hadn't had a chance to watch the end of the race, the last restart and all that. Having had a chance to see that, I know social media was pretty lively that night about the way it all came down. What was your view of how that happened, and especially how well he did in his first race?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, I mean, I'll start with the second part of that. I don't think it can be overstated how well Robby did in that first round, to go into a new environment, a track he'd never been to, qualify on pole in pretty difficult conditions, and really just command the race. He said he learned his biggest lesson on that first restart when Jordan got him on the outside of 1, and I think that was the only time he really on merit gave up the lead, until he was bunted. Huge credit to him, and it just shows that at SPM we made the right decision to put the right guy in the 6 car for 2018.

As far as the incident in St. Pete goes, I think that everything that could be said has been said about it. The big question mark is really just a clarification, which I hope we get in the drivers' meeting this weekend, from the stewards as to why the decision was or was not taken for a penalty. No one is going to criticize Alex for trying that move. 23 out of 23 guys on that grid would have done the same thing. The outcome obviously was suboptimal, as we like to say in the engineering world, and if you look at the way the rules are written and the way stewards have expressed how rules will be enforced in that kind of situation, it

definitely led some of us to think that a call was deserved.

But it's up to them. Some clarification as to why that decision was made would be great, so hopefully we get it in the drivers' meeting here.

THE MODERATOR: James, good luck this weekend. Thank you very much.