

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday April 6, 2018

Graham Rahal Takuma Sato

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with our media availabilities for this afternoon. Joined now by the drivers of Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, Graham Rahal and Takuma Sato. These drivers were fastest in all of the practice sessions at the preview in February. Graham, a team that has shown some speed at the track in this new configuration. Your thoughts heading into the weekend?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, yeah, it's great to be back, as you said. We certainly had a bit of success last time we were here, and I think it gives us a lot of excitement, a lot of enthusiasm and confidence to come back. You know, I wouldn't say that we were perfect last time out. There was certainly areas that I felt we were showing some weakness, but the cars had plenty of speed. That's always a good thing.

Definitely excited to be able to kind of look through all that data, understand maybe what went right, what went wrong, and turn our attention to being here this week.

You know, and for us, it's early in the year, but every single time we get a little bit of track time and every single time we get an opportunity to come to a race and score points is big. This is going to be a huge one for the One Cure team.

THE MODERATOR: Speaking of One Cure, you are driving the No. 15 One Cure Honda this weekend, and last time we were here for the open test, you talked a little bit about that relationship and made that announcement. Now that you've had a few weeks and months to build that relationship, your thoughts on driving their car this weekend at ISM Raceway?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, it's awesome. I'm extremely proud to be associated with One Cure. I'm proud to -- of the team for all the efforts and all the announcements that have come through the off-season into the spring, and I think potentially more to come here soon.

It's been really, really strong for us, and obviously One Cure is a great partner that we're all here, we've all been affected by cancer in some way or another, whether it's two- or four-legged family member. We all have. To be able to help spread that word here,

obviously it'll be on the car in Portland, as well. It's a big thing, and we're really excited to carry the colors and to have a good weekend.

THE MODERATOR: Joined also by Takuma Sato, driving the No. 30 Mi-Jack Panasonic Honda this weekend. You're going to have a busy day today; there's practice sessions and also qualifying. How does that format speak to your driving style and expectations heading into this weekend?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, like Graham said, we had a good test, but sometimes obviously the testing is not necessarily absolutely representative because the condition will be different and bearing in mind the open test we had was for everybody, sort of shake-down-ish because for a lot of the teams it was the first time to go to the oval.

To be fair, I think our team and engineer prepared really well and also showed tremendous potential because we were very competitive, either it was the daytime and a hot day or the cooler evening session, which is a very good suggestion that we will be hopefully competitive.

So therefore I think today, yes, it is a busy session for everybody, but I think in the daytime testing, practice session will be purely concentrating on the speed and the qualifying, so it's only short run with the new tires and the setup change and probably two or three shorts.

And then to qualifying, which is an unknown factor for us. I think it's going to be quite challenging and exciting, and then this evening will be just all the time a full tank, and we need to pound around and see how the car reacts and with the effect of the new downforce for the race. And hopefully this Firestone rubber down new project for to open up the second lane, helping us for the good racing.

THE MODERATOR: You say you anticipate qualifying to be challenging, but you obviously showed great speed here in February at the open test. What are your thoughts and why do you say that?

TAKUMA SATO: Yes, well, hopefully we'll be able to come to the top of the time sheet, but I'd say that's always a plan. But if you look at the course, our position is separated by thousandths of seconds all the time, so I think one little balance shift will make quite a great difference.

But here, I think even we have a new package, and it's still difficult or not easy to overtake. I think overtaking will maybe be happening in the last 20 laps of every stint where the tires are starting to degrade more. But I think if you started from farther ahead for the grid, it's always less chance of having unexpected things happen, and obviously very important to be starting at the front. That's our intention. Hopefully the two of us have a strong afternoon.

Q. Is it going to be -- are you going to have to fight and gouge and root your way to make passes here like you did with the old car?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm sure you will, but to be honest, yesterday I walked out on the track, and this tire-dragging thing, I think it will work if guys commit to trying it, and what I mean is if everybody runs on the bottom and just stays on the bottom, it's never going to work. If guys tonight determine that they're going to try that second lane and work it, it will come in.

It's all a mentality, and the way that we run around here, the mentality has always been you run on the bottom. But if you think about it, when we go to Iowa, immediately you go up top because we've all been trained to believe that up top works.

So we just have to find a way to get that second groove in, and if that happens, as Takuma said, first of all, the stint lengths here are considerably longer than last year because the car is so much more efficient, the fuel mileage is so much better that it cuts out a complete pit stop from what we've seen so far based on the test. By that, you're going a long way on tires, and the tires really aren't any different than last year, not much.

The last -- geez, it might be 20, but it's probably more like 30, 35 or 40 laps is going to be a handful, and therefore if we can get that second lane in, it will make it -- it could make it pretty good.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, I agree with what Graham said. Unfortunately this is not a track where you can go to the high lane all the time, right. You still have to do the out, in, out to go lane because especially if you think, for example, because if you think about the downforce we're carrying today, especially last year qualifying downforce is the one we really have to go to the race. So you've got to imagine, both ends is going to be lifting a lot, which is obviously really good for the sport. I think it will be both challenging. But like Graham said, I think if you open up the second lane, or 1.5 lanes, it always gives us an opportunity, and we will hopefully see a bit more overtaking opportunity.

Q. Will you try to get drivers to commit to that second lane?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. I mean, I hate to joke about this stuff, but as I always say, if it goes wrong at the top lane, it's a lot less distance to travel to hit the wall at

the top than it is at the bottom. I think guys -- I'll bet you Ryan will do it. I'll bet you myself, obviously -- I think there's probably five, six, seven guys that will at least give it a good, fair, honest shot, and if you get enough guys that just kind of commit themselves to doing that, it will work.

Look, I mean, I could show you photos of yesterday walking out there versus the test, and I had the in-car camera from the test. I have the in-car here, too, the helmet cam, but from the test, you could see where I was, and Takuma and I talked about this at our Long Beach media day, like anywhere above me was just dirt. But you go out there yesterday, and you look at where I was at the test, where the seam is, and now I'll bet you it's another at least car width higher than then, at least where you can see rubber, you know, darkness.

I asked Frye and I asked Bryan Sperber if that was NASCAR rubber from the race a couple weeks back, and they all felt very confidently that no, when they first showed up at the beginning of this week, it didn't look like that at all. The process could be working, and we just have to commit ourselves to it, and perhaps going forward at more racetracks, Texas and others, they could be doing this process and just immediately get the track to a more friendly position where guys are willing to try it. The biggest thing here before was nobody wants to try it because we've all been up in the gray here, and when you get in the gray, the likelihood is you're going to hit the fence. Now at least it's pretty enticing. You know, you want to give it a shot.

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, and if you look at February's open test, as soon as you go through -- the guy overtake, the guy who was overtaken is forced to go 1.5, two lanes, and you can see all the kicking of the dust. It was just incredibly dusty, and that's not going to happen anymore. And that means, like Graham said, it's A, it's obviously a psychological thing so once you commit to it and get a constant, you can do it, but secondly, this is a very scientific moment. So the grip level is actual grip from the rubber, plus downforce. When you follow somebody, you lose the downforce, but having the bottom lane, you have a mechanical grip. Now of course if you're looking out, you lose the mechanical grip but you gain downforce.

It's always a combined scientific calculation, and if you can go there, I think I'm sure it will open up a lot of confidence, and then I think people will starting more use it. It's better to rubber down, better for the show.

GRAHAM RAHAL: If you look at last year where everybody is just flat-out, if you're flat for a whole stint, like the Penskes and I think a couple others were last year, then you're going to want to run the bottom lane. It's going to be quicker. But these cars you are not going to be flat. You're not going to be flat in qualifying. Nobody is going to do either end flat, I'll bet you.

So due to that, when you have that significant amount of lifting, if you can go to the high lane and carry a little more throttle, it's going to be quicker, as we've seen in a lot of places. We just have to balance that all out and see if you can make it work.

Q. As the only Japanese IndyCar driver and Indy 500 winner, do you think you will maybe work in the long term or in the short term as a catalytic converter and that more Japanese drivers will come over to America and race here?

TAKUMA SATO: Of course I'd love to. Love to see followed by new generation of young drivers. That's what we need. I mean, here we have a great scholarship system from their Master to IndyCar, Indy Lights and then obviously go to IndyCar. There's a Road to Indy. I think there's a system, great system, great business model, and hopefully there's more young Japanese drivers committed by having a great history like last year.

I think we will see more. That's what I hope anyway. And if anything, I can help. By doing that, certainly I'm willing to.

Q. And a question concerning the new car. What is the biggest difference compared to last year? Is it difficult or easier to set up when you compare it to last year's car?

TAKUMA SATO: I'd say -- I like to use the word more challenging. It's always difficult. It doesn't matter whether speed in the new car or old car. This new car, would you rather say difficult? Yes, it is difficult because the driver has to work more. Like Graham said, you can't do pounding around on the flat here. Even the new tire, in the qualifying session, I was never able to go flat either end. I mean, yeah, maybe Turn 3 and 4 was very close to flat, and we will be flat if the conditions allow us to do so. But Turn 1, nobody. I think we back off more than 50 percent the throttle. We could carry only 40 percent or so into Turn 1. That's how sketchy it is nowadays.

But it is difficult. But I mean, go-karting, Formula Ford, Formula One, IndyCar, which one is easiest and which one is difficult? I would say everything is difficult, right, so I think it's the name of the sport. Is it challenging? Yes, it's challenging, and we all love it.

But the biggest difference is not just the downforce. I think when you follow the car, some of the last year's package, we lost the rear end, which is the worst thing. You can't really follow the people, just not aerodynamic turbulence made the back of the car really nervous. Here seems to be just the whole entire car losing downforce and then sliding, at least so you can feel the car, and therefore I think it's good for the racing.

Q. Is committing to the second lane something you can ask other drivers about? Can you politic for

that before you guys get out there?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I think what's good about this deal. There's genuinely a lot of drivers that really care about the sport and care about the show, and so with that in mind, I mean, I do think that there are guys that will commit to giving it a shot. I do. You know, if everybody was really selfish and didn't really care, then perhaps no. People are going to just run around the bottom and stick there.

But then again, we'll see how qualifying goes. If guys that are pretty quick have something wrong in qualifying or the balance isn't quite -- as Takuma said, it's going to be so competitive, and to be honest if your balance is slightly off and you're two tenths of a second slower than maybe you could have done, it could -- I mean, it could be 10 positions.

You know, so if you get a guy who's actually pretty decent but he's starting at the back, we're all going to be looking, where can we go, where do we go to make this better.

So I do think -- I texted obviously with -- mainly with Ryan last night because I know he and I are typically guys that are willing to give it a shot, you know, and so I just said, hey, let's give this thing a good effort tomorrow and see if we can get it to come in, and I think he's fully on board. I'm sure Takuma -- I do think that people are going to try tonight.

The first session is hard, right; it's hard, it's not really relative to what we're going to see tomorrow. Even the second session is a little bit early, I think. But it's not super relative.

But right here you're going to be focused on qualifying. This evening I think you're going to see some guys that will try it, and if I'm not mistaken I think they said they're going to continue the dragging before the second session, the second practice, which will be really good. So we'll see. But either way, what's great is that obviously Phoenix, ISM Raceway, Bryan and his staff as well as IndyCar and Firestone making -- obviously giving the tires, everybody is making an effort to make this work, so hopefully it does.

Q. Graham, your father was at the Mario event last night. When you were growing up, Mario was a competitor of your father's. But as you look back at his career and the fact that it's the 25th anniversary of his last victory here, how did he inspire you in your career?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, yeah, it's -- when Dad told me he was going last night, I actually chuckled because as a Rahal, we're like born and raised to dislike Andrettis. You know, that's kind of the way it's supposed to be.

But when you really take a step back, there's a few, handful maybe, of drivers that changed the world, the face of motorsport, and Mario is certainly, in my eyes,

one of those guys. You know, Mario, AJ, Dan Gurney, in many ways in my eyes.

Point being, though, that he was -- watching him as a kid, it was kind of fun being here with that and Mario and obviously we even have a Fittipaldi in the field -- everything else. It feels like kind of a little bit of a throwback for me. But Mario is an idol. He's an icon. He's a legend. He's a guy that everybody looks up to and admires tremendously. It's great to see him being honored here.

Obviously my dad had success here, as well, so hopefully we can win another one for the Rahals this weekend. But Mario Andretti, anywhere -- there are names in sports that no matter where you go, that name is known, and Mario Andretti is certainly one of them.