

IndyCar Media Conference

Saturday April 7, 2018

Robert Wickens Alexander Rossi

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We will go ahead and get started with our Verizon IndyCar Series post race press conference from the Desert Diamond West Valley Casino Phoenix Grand Prix here at ISM Raceway.

Joined now by our second- and third-place finishers, Robert Wickens and Alexander Rossi.

Robert Wickens driving the No. 6 Lucas Oil SPM Honda for Schmidt Peterson Motorsports. Your first time out on an oval, you end up on a podium. What does that mean for you knowing this was a new experience for you?

ROBERT WICKENS: It means a lot. My goal coming into this was to finish every lap. Even on that last restart, leading, knowing there is only the three of us that stayed out, my thought process didn't really change.

Even if I finished fifth, I would have been kind of, well, a little bit disappointed but still happy that I got even a top five on my first oval race.

I feel like I'm setting the bar a little bit high for myself. But I never would have expected the first two races to go as well as they did. Hopefully we can get our season going now.

THE MODERATOR: You and your teammate James Hinchcliffe running together for a lot of night. What does that say to the strength of your team this season?

ROBERT WICKENS: I think it means a lot. I think we made up so many places through the pits like tonight on both of our cars. We came into the pits under yellow in fifth, I came out fourth. Then on the green flag stops, recycled out P1 and P2. It was a remarkable job by the guys, by the team.

I think our pace was really strong tonight. Traffic was always an issue. I don't think -- well, I know I actually didn't have a single clear lap without a car, at least five cars, in front of me the whole time.

It was a tough night. It went by actually a lot quicker than I was expecting. When I saw it was 250 laps, kind of strapping in for an endurance thing. I had a lot of fun out there, especially the middle part of the race

when James and I were fighting for the lead, had a good little battle a couple times. I was smiling under the helmet. It was fun.

THE MODERATOR: Also joined by Alexander Rossi, who finished third tonight. With this third-place finish, that vaults Alex to second in the points standings. It is Alex's best finish at IMS Raceway, driving the No. 27 Military to Motorsports Honda. Alex has the most passes of every driver tonight at 53.

Alex, you probably don't know this because you were driving, but no other car was talked about than yours in terms of the speed and power it seemed to have. Where did you find that throughout the race?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I mean, I think we always had it. We went into the weekend or the race rather very confident in the Military to Motorsports Honda. We spent a lot of the open test focusing on tire duration and tire life. Qualifying was important to us, but it wasn't the most important thing.

Warmup was pretty good for us last night. We were cautiously optimistic about the night we had. The car was pretty easy running in third behind Sebastien and Simon. All hell broke loose a little bit in pit lane. I thought that I was going more than adequately slow coming into the box, but that wasn't the case, so...

The first thing that I need to say is it's obviously very important that no one got hurt, and it was a minor thing from that regard. But not only did we lose all the spots because they had to push me back into the box, but then we got a drive-through on top of it. It definitely put us in a big hole.

It was at that point kind of up to me to try to dig us out of it. I was really hoping we would get a yellow to unlap ourselves. We never did. To be in the position that we were with 10 laps to go was a blessing and a huge shout out to the whole 27 crew and the car they gave me, the opportunity we had to win tonight, which unfortunately escaped us a little bit.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Three of the best young drivers in the series finishing in the top three. Do you think tonight is a preview of the battle for the championship?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Rob should definitely have two podiums right now, so I think so. It's great to be up

here this weekend.

ROBERT WICKENS: About time you said it (laughter).

ALEXANDER ROSSI: You needed to wait till we were both up here, man.

It's good to be here with him, and obviously Josef has proved what he's capable of already, carrying the No. 1. Yeah, we all have a very long season ahead of us. By no means does this mean that we've figured it out. A whole new set of challenges approach us in about five days.

ROBERT WICKENS: I'm still going day by day. We're gelling right now, I guess, at Schmidt Peterson Motorsports. By no means, I can't expect this throughout the season. I think it's going better than anyone expected, better than I expected.

But nevertheless, we're just going to keep doing the job that we're doing. Yeah, like I said, take it day by day. Motorsports, things can turn so quickly, you just have to do the best job you can each day. Sometimes that's a podium, sometimes that's a 10th, sometimes you can't even crack the top 10. We just have to take what's given to us and go from there.

Q. Robert, how do you prepare or have you prepared for the oval? Never raced on an oval before. Is there any, for example, possibility to do it with computer stuff or with a simulator?

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, we tested here in February, as I'm sure you're aware, at the open test. That kind of got my eye in for the ovals a little bit. Then just simulator work, a lot of home studying. I mean, I think I watched Phoenix races from, like, 2004 through present, every onboard you could find, trying to figure out anything I could.

I don't know. I'm just kind of a guy that I feel like there's always trends. If you watch stuff, you might find something. I don't know. I think I watched one video of Tony Kanaan passing, like, 28 people on the outside after a restart. I'm like, Probably not going to try that one.

No, honestly I think the team is doing such a great job getting me up to speed. They're carrying me. It goes from my teammate with Hinch, both car crews, the 5 and 6, are doing such a strong job. The camera team is phenomenal. James is taking the brunt of the work for us because he's the one basically setting up the car because he has a lot more oval experience than me. I'm kind of doing the basic stuff, but he's taking the job list of the tough things.

He's building us a great car. I'm just reaping the benefits of driving a well-balanced car. Hats off to him. I don't actually know where he ended up in the race. I think it shows that we're a strong team here. Yeah, the

team is just doing a great job getting me going.

Q. Alex, in the beginning until lap 39 or 40 when Fittipaldi crashed, there was no changes in the front, no lead changes. I had the impression your car was quicker than Bourdais and Pagnaud when you were third. Was there no way to pass them? Looked like you stayed very patient behind them until the first caution came out.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, I think you're right. We were quicker than them. I didn't really feel the need to try to force the situation. I obviously would have taken it if it was there for me. But we weren't -- we didn't have as big of a margin in terms of better performance on people as we did through the middle and end of the race. It wasn't as easy as that in the beginning.

It was just kind of about staying in touch with the leaders and working our way through lap traffic in the beginning, finding our feet with how it was going to be tonight.

I mean, this is all very new for us still. Every day is a learning experience. We went into this race, you know, even having two tests here, we went into it with a lot of question marks. The first stint wasn't about trying anything too crazy, then just getting the car under us the next couple, hopefully being there in the end.

Q. Alex, I went outside and watched the middle section of the race as you were chewing through cars while nobody else was doing anything. You were being aggressive. Was there any anger in there, feeling like you needed to make up that pit road incident? Not bad driving, but you were getting after it.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: We had to. We were two laps down. No yellow coming to save us. We had to unlap ourselves and try to do something.

I mean, I don't care how frustrated or how much you want to pass cars, if you don't have the car to do it, then you're not going to do it.

The only reason I was able to do that was because the team gave me an unbelievable car. As I said, we spent so much of our time and brain effort and research in the time between the open test and here on focusing on tire life. Hopefully it's something that we can keep an advantage on people going forward for the next short ovals.

But in this series, it's amazing how people catch up, figure things out. You got to take the podiums when you can get them. Unfortunately we probably gave away a win today, but that's the way it goes. We have another shot in five or six days.

Q. If the series gets to renew here and come back next year, are there any changes that you would like to see made, or do you want to leave the

package just as it is?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I mean, I'd love to see more banking, wider. I don't think that's really the changes they had in mind.

I think the track is doing what they can. I think the series did a great job. Obviously I think we, the 27 team, were a representation if you nail it, you can pass. But, I mean, it's very hard to do that week in and week out.

I think it was a much better race than last year. I mean, I haven't seen it on TV, so I don't know that. But from my side, it was a lot easier to pass cars than last year. I think that's a shout out to Jay Frye, his team in the competition department at IndyCar, for the changes they made. It's a moving target. It's a very difficult job to come up with aero packages and changes.

I think St. Pete was the most passes we have ever had at a street course before. I think there's probably quite a few passes here. So that's all steps in the right direction.

ROBERT WICKENS: This is the only oval I've ever driven on so far. I don't know what more banking would do or that.

Q. (No microphone.)

ROBERT WICKENS: I don't think I'm -- I mean, I don't --

ALEXANDER ROSSI: More grip.

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, more grip would be good.

I mean, again, I don't know the old car, but I feel like we can follow pretty closely, then if someone makes a small mistake, you can capitalize. Any pass I made was having a good corner while someone made a small error or didn't get a great exit. I mean, I never had I guess the need to do like a high-risk pass, which I'm sure Alex tried to do a couple throughout the night.

No, I mean, from my side, it was all pretty controlled and pretty relaxed. Sounds like it was an exciting race. From my side, it was kind of being patient and just trying to make it to the end.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, congratulations. We'll see you next week.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Thank you.

ROBERT WICKENS: Thank you.