

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday April 13, 2018

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Driving car No. 15 Total Honda this weekend, welcome to the party, Graham Rahal. Graham, you were 11th in this morning's practice. Talk us through your session this morning, how it went.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, it was decent. I wouldn't say that we were great. But I felt like we were probably better than we showed. Had a couple laps going that were certainly quicker than that, but I kind of -- the rear tires seemed to be a bit of a struggle after a handful of laps, and also just getting chopped up with yellows and stuff like that, but that's the name of the game. That's part of it.

You know, I think we'll be okay. Certainly seemed to be more competitive than we were at St. Pete, and we'll be able to work from where we're at.

THE MODERATOR: You said you were more competitive than St. Pete. You had a second-place finish there, fourth in the points right now, so you're off to a good start to the season.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Certainly better than last year's. I think last year coming in here we were probably 17th in points if not worse. Yeah, it's kind of weird actually because from a performance perspective we haven't been great anywhere yet, but we've certainly managed to do a pretty good job, and actually last week -- you know, in Phoenix we were a lot better than we showed. I think those of you guys who were watching it and were there saw we played the strategy card hard and saved a ton of fuel, went extremely long, and I thought when I saw Leist spin in pit lane, I thought it was perfect. We needed that yellow, and for some reason it didn't come. But we've actually been -- I would say decent performance-wise, but things have worked out well for us just overall from a points basis.

A lot better than normal. Normally we kind of heat up come summertime, and hopefully we can start that a little early and get a better run here.

THE MODERATOR: Talk a little bit about your history here. You've started 11 races here in the past. You've had only three top-10 finishes, so okay but not as good as you'd like.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I have never had a lot of luck here. I know sometimes it's been me, as well, but even last year we were running up front and got a flat tire with

two laps to go. I've never -- this hasn't been a place that's been lucky for me, but I think that's kind of the name of the Rahal game here a little bit, if you look at my dad finished second here, what, four times, I finished second a couple times, or once, and the team has finished second a handful of times, but none of us have ever won this race, so it's kind of a unique deal, and hopefully we can all get that monkey off our back this weekend.

You know, this is a better place we've been fairly quick at before, but we've just never been able to close the deal, and my hopes are certainly that we can make that happen here this weekend.

Q. Street courses in general, though, you've got a pretty good strong suit. You look at Detroit last year and then obviously St. Pete to open up the season. What is it about your knack on street courses that you have just a different feel for?

GRAHAM RAHAL: You know, just, I think, my mindset, the way I go racing compared to -- I heard Jenna ask Josef what's changed in him the last few years. It's been the same for me. I used to be an overly aggressive guy, and what I pride myself on today in my race craft is just not making any mistakes and being well in tune with strategy and knowing where I needed to get on lap counts. I've got all the lap counters and fuel and everything on my dash so I can kind of do some strategy in the car and know where I need to be, and I think that's been a big change on street courses because street courses just invite you to make mistakes. They invite you to brake a little too late, to hit a bump wrong, to put yourself in a bad spot, and it's really -- the last couple years it's just been a mindset. We go out there, and my goal each and every single session but mainly on race day is just don't shoot myself in the foot, and luckily it's worked out well for us.

I also think for whatever reason on street courses we take care of tires better than everybody else. You saw that at Detroit last year, and I don't know why that is. We've studied -- I don't know if it's my driving style, I don't know if it's -- I don't know, but for some reason we don't get the tire wear typically that most guys do, and so that's kind of benefitted us, as well, over the last couple of years.

But we talk about that, yet our setups, like our St. Pete setup is very similar to what we ran at Detroit just didn't work. It just didn't work on this new car. I feel like we're having to relearn quite a bit of things on our end

from a team perspective, as well, and maybe for some guys it is working, I don't know, but for us it's been a little bit off.

The good news is that when Takuma comes in today and I come in, we sit down, and the comments are the same. Our feedback is the same, the feeling is the same, which is a positive. It confirms the direction that I think all of us -- that I feel like we need to head in.

Hopefully we can continue to improve.

Q. Last year at Detroit, you can't have a much more perfect weekend in this series than you had. Is there anything -- the aero kit is so much different that nothing is going to be the same, nothing you can take from last year to help you here?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, our starting setup is the Detroit setup. We're trying. We're giving it our best effort. I don't know, Detroit last year was magic. You know, you go through that weekend, and you guys know how competitive this series is, and yet the worst we were all weekend was second on a time sheet. If you think about it from that perspective, that weekend was really just unusual.

You know, having said that, I do think that there's things that we can learn from that. Detroit is a bit of an anomaly because it's so bumpy that your ride heights are in a completely different area than what you'd run anywhere else because you have to there, but hopefully, yeah, hopefully there's stuff that we can find out of that, stuff we can work on from that. I think the tires are a big trick this year. Obviously it's a very similar tire to last year, yet the car has a lot less downforce, now how do you get the tire to work. You've got to work hard to make it work and then not have the huge degradation on the other side of it.

That's something I don't think that we've nailed quite yet, but hopefully this afternoon we'll be able to work on it a little further and make it a little better. But yeah, I mean, Detroit, there's a lot -- you talk about here and kind of the luck that I've had here, Detroit is like my polar opposite, it's like -- I don't know, I've had six podiums there or something like that. Detroit is just a place that I do well at, and here is a place that I haven't, so hopefully we can turn that around here.

Q. A couple of years ago there was a big issue about people kind of like focusing on driving to a fuel number, and last year IndyCar increased the race distance from 80 to 85 --

GRAHAM RAHAL: Which wasn't enough.

Q. Exactly. But then this year the cars are more economical, more efficient in a straight line, and that's something that managed to eliminate pit stop speeding. Do you see any major changes --

GRAHAM RAHAL: You look at Phoenix from a strategy standpoint, last year if you were going to do on three

you had to hit specific numbers, and most guys couldn't hit it. This year you could pit on lap 20 and make it on three. The fuel economy in this car has just increased that much. There is no doubt this race is, no problem, a two stopper, whereas last year I did a two, Dixie bailed off of a two and lost him the race, but guys were kind of split two, three, whatever. There's no doubt that this year in my book from what I've seen, it's a two. What I love about that and what I think the fans are going to love about that is -- as long as I've been racing here, it's a fuel race.

I mean, I remember in the Champ Car days, we'd be clutching and coasting into Turn 1 on the first lap, that's how bad it was. Finally we're getting to a point where we can all go race, which is going to be, I think, a lot more fun for everybody, because while a fuel strategy race is boring for fans to watch, it's even more boring to drive, so I'm hopeful that those days are done.

But then again, you look at tire deg, if tire deg is bad -- I knew what Newgarden saying St. Pete wasn't as bad as we expected. It was freaking bad. If that's still a big part of this, which it should be here this weekend, I might switch things up and have a yellow -- you guys know this, there's a whole bunch of different things that go into it, but from a fuel standpoint we should be able to go race.

Q. Graham, in St. Pete you were talking a lot about kind of having to kick the old habits from the old car and changing braking zones and things like that. How has that learning curve progressed now that you're in race 3, or is it still just trying to relearn everything here?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, it's getting better. It's getting better. I went out there this morning and it felt a little bit more natural. Phoenix was quite eye opening having to hit the brakes for Turn 1 or Turn 3 in the race is something I've never done, so that was a bit different. But I think here, you know, you're kind of just getting back to -- yeah, there's areas you can't push as hard. It just doesn't have the downforce.

But it's fun, and the way that the thing accelerates down the front straight, it's a good time. It's nice to feel that again.

But the new car, I mean, I've got to say here it still brakes pretty darned good. There's a lot of positives to it, so it should be good.

Q. There's a lot of talk of the new engine in 2021, I guess, having more power, drivers want more power. What's that going to do for the racing besides making the speeds higher, which the fans probably can't perceive visually? What's that going to do for the racing? Are you in favor of it, or do you think it's a waste of money?

GRAHAM RAHAL: You know, at the end of the day, what I'm in favor of is trying to find a way for this to

continue to be even more relative to the streetcar of today because ultimately the lifeblood and the success of this sport I think relies heavily on that, and motorsports in general, right. And so probably increasing the displacement a little bit, getting a little bit more power out of it, I'm always -- that's always going to be a positive to me. All of us love more power, so that's a good thing. But with that comes other stuff. Obviously if you have more power, then the tire needs to change. If you have more power, then -- I'm never won for driver aid, so I don't think it should have traction control and power steering and everything else like some guys have lobbied for, but there's a lot of elements that go along with that. So for me I would love to have that.

And more power, power equals noise. That's the truth. You'd better believe I remember what it was like as a kid to stand right back there and listen to the cars go roaring under the tunnels. I'd love for the kids of today to hear the same and to fall in love with those same noises. I think ultimately for the spectacle of it, it would definitely be a good thing.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you and Takuma also have very similar feedback. Tell us what he's brought to the team, and when you both give your feedback to the engineers, are you also perhaps giving a little bit of direction on what changes you think should be made or do you give the feedback and they make the changes?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, we definitely meet and discuss what I want to do versus what he wants to do. Takuma is a very successful guy. He's very fast. But what brothers Takuma sometimes is different than what bothers me, or the severity of it, right. So we also have to take that into account every once in a while and make our own changes and our own adjustments. Our cars really start the same, although when they came in there for some reason after that session they were quite different, even though neither of us really changed anything, so something is askew there, but overall, Takuma has been a great addition to the program. You guys know this, you guys have seen him, you've been around him. He's a smiley guy. He's a happy guy. I'd say he's the second happiest man in the world behind Helio, and I stand behind that. He's always on top of the world, which is a great influence on all of our people. One of the things we focus on at this team is that it's a family, and we all have fun. Not a lot -- there's other programs out here where guys aren't like that, but out here, it's all about everybody working together and enjoying the experience, and Takuma fits right into that role, which is the biggest concern you always have with adding a second car.

So we're very thankful for that, and obviously Taku and my dad have always had a great relationship, so it's worked out really well.

Q. Graham, on press day last week, you talked with

me a little bit about the heritage and the history of the Long Beach Grand Prix and that your dad raced here. Looking big picture how would you describe this race's impact on the sport of IndyCar?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's a huge one. It's huge, there's no doubt. You know, it's definitely a big event, 44 years running. Had tremendous success here as far as an event, and I think from an IndyCar perspective, it's one of the big ones that -- really you look at Indianapolis is never going to be able to be beaten by any motorsport race, but closely behind, this event is a huge deal.

When you look at what all is going on in Southern California all the time and yet there's a lot to contend with. It's not like May in Indianapolis where Indy is it. Here you've got a lot of stuff going on all the time, yet you've got a couple hundred thousand people turn out to this. It is a huge event, and that can't be understated. I've enjoyed being a part of it. I've enjoyed growing up around it, seeing it. I just hope somehow this weekend we can get a Rahal to finally win this thing.

It's one of my favorites, there's no doubt about that, and I think all of you guys would probably say the same. It's just an enjoyable place to come, enjoyable place to race, and the people out here get it, they love it, they have fun with it, and like I said, hopefully we can win this thing this weekend. It would mean a lot to me.