

IndyCar Media Conference

Wednesday May 16, 2018

Dennis Reinbold JR Hildebrand Sage Karam Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're pleased to welcome the crew from Dreyer & Reinbold Racing. We have the driver of the No. 66 Salesforce DRR Chevrolet, JR Hildebrand. In the middle is team owner Dennis Reinbold. We also have the driver of the No. 24 Chevrolet, Sage Karam. Welcome, gentlemen.

Dennis, let's start with you. You started the team in 1999. Your first two-car effort since 2011 here. Talk about the process, how it came to be, why you wanted to have two cars.

DENNIS REINBOLD: We wanted to gear up in case we wanted to do some further races down the road. So to do that, we had to have the equipment to do so. We expanded our equipment. When you do that, we bought two new chassis this year. There's new electronics involved, tires, radios. I mean, it goes on and on what you have to do to do that.

Our main focus was we wanted to get two really strong drivers for this race, then that way it does set us up for whatever we do in the future. That was our plan, pretty pure and simple.

I decided to invest some expenditure into setting ourselves up for the future is what it amounts to.

THE MODERATOR: You mention drivers. You have two young men who have performed well at this racetrack over the years. Talk about why you wanted these two in particular.

DENNIS REINBOLD: Well, Sage, this will be the fourth time with us. We know him very well. Have worked closely with him.

JR, his first two or three races, too, I think, were with us. Then we worked together with Panther Racing where JR was. We know JR very well, as well.

The fit I think was a really good one. It was kind of a no-brainer. Both guys are exceptionally good at this track, other tracks obviously also. But our focus for this year is this track, so we wanted both these guys. To have a partnership and a teammate situation, it just helps you to be better. We wanted to get there.

THE MODERATOR: JR, talk a little bit about what this place means to you, being back here.

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, it's such a unique venue event, such a special place for all of us. Every year I come back, you learn to appreciate it even more of the little kind of nuances of what makes it special. To be able to be here with Dennis and Sage at Dreyer & Reinbold is really an exciting thing for me.

I've seen this group and this car, Sage and the 24 car, as a single-car effort, for the last few years be incredibly competitive on race day. I think over at ECR, now that I'm not there I can say this, we've been kind of particularly impressed with the Dreyer car over the years. It looks like it's really dialed. There have been a couple of times we didn't think we could do much up against the 24.

Excited to be a part of this group, excited to kind of learn about the mentality here around the Speedway with setup and all that kind of stuff. Got a great group of guys. Dennis was mentioning the work that the team has done to kind of expand. Certainly the level of preparation that they've brought to this is that of a full-time team and then some maybe. At least right now there isn't the distraction of other races. Guys have been able to work wholeheartedly to have everything ready to go at Indy.

For me personally, I've been lucky to be a part of good one-off programs in the past, just doing the 500 as opposed to being a part of full-season gigs. This is no different, working with lot of guys I've worked with before, a really familiar set of surroundings. Yesterday we were able to get right with the program. Just looking forward to it.

THE MODERATOR: Speaking of yesterday, was your first day in the car, new car this year. How did it feel?

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, being full-time last year, you get used to showing up at places and having it be like with it right away, whether you've been there recently or not. Flat (indiscernible) a couple laps, just trying to get back with the program. The car felt very comfortable right away. Had a little bit of info to go off of from Sage doing the refresher last week. That was really helpful.

I think with the new car, everybody is dealing with a lot

of the same things initially just to try to come to grips with it, come to grips with it in traffic. There are certainly some changes with the aero kit both in terms of the aerodynamics of the car and then some other things that kind of affect the handling.

I think we're all trying to wrap our heads around it, but feel really good about this team's ability to sort it out, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Sage, what does this place mean to you? You carry a lot of passion for this place.

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, no, it's definitely a magical place coming here. Every time you cross the yard of bricks, it's no different than the first time. It's always, like, the great feeling.

I feel like every year I feel more nervous. I felt like my first year I came in here, I didn't really know much of what to expect and everything, so I wasn't incredibly nervous. Then every year I come back, I get more and more nervous because I know the magnitude of this place more, what it means to do well here.

We've had a couple rough gos, some bad luck the last few years. Just putting a little pressure on myself just to be able to compete and do well this year. We've always had really strong cars, but something kept us out of it.

Yeah, I mean, I'm excited to have a teammate again this year. I think the last time I was able to compare steering traces or anything like that was in 2015. That's always good to come back to the garage and bounce ideas off another guy. We got more engineers in the room this year.

It's definitely a good situation. Me and JR are working well together. The cars have been great. The refresher went well for me a couple weeks ago. We just picked up right where we left off.

Yeah, I mean, the car feels good running alone. I think the biggest challenge right now is in traffic. I think everybody's kind of got the same issue. I think it's just going to be who can figure out that next bit before everybody else. That's who is going to be able to excel here this month.

We made some changes overnight that we hope can make the car stronger in traffic. Car is pretty good in traffic right now. You're always trying to make it better. I think the last few years the main focus has been work on your racecar, get your racecar as good as you can. Now bumping is back, so there's now another main priority, which is to actually be able to qualify for the race. Not only do we have to make our racecars good, but now we actually have to make sure we have the speed running alone to actually make the race.

I'm looking at the field. You can't really pick out two cars that you're going to say like, Oh, these guys definitely are probably off the pace. Everybody is really, really close. IndyCar has done a great job with the aero kit, of making it really close racing. The engine manufacturers, with Chevy and Honda, I think it's really close this year. I think it's going to be really tight in qualifying. I think the race is going to be really well. I don't think you saw much passing yesterday. As this month goes on, I think it's going to get better. It's only day one. Everybody is working out all the little kinks and everything. It's our first day with the car as a team.

I'm pretty pleased with how things are going.

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

Q. Dennis, you mentioned running more races. What is your timeline for doing that?

DENNIS REINBOLD: Well, we don't really have a timeline for that. It's just going to happen somewhat organically. We need the budget to go do that. That's the priority. That's going to be what dictates our timeline if we're able to pull that off or not.

Q. Dennis, the fact that your team wasn't in the Grand Prix this past weekend, there were a lot of teams on Monday turning the car around, garages were closed Sunday. How much of an advantage was that that you didn't have to turn the car around?

DENNIS REINBOLD: Yeah, we feel like there may be a little bit of an advantage there because we've been prepping our car for the Indy 500. On the flipside of that, there's a disadvantage from the standpoint of we don't know these cars.

JR, that was the first time on track yesterday with that brand-new car. When Sage did the refresher test, we only had two sets of tires. We had some electronic gremlins learning the new ECU and the systems. The Cosworth guys did a good job of coming over, being on our pit stand. The Chevy guys were unbelievable. They were there working through all these different channels for us. Our team has to communicate through the Cosworth system to the Chevy guys. We couldn't have gotten better support.

By the time we hit the track yesterday, I was very concerned we were still going to have some issues. We had just tiny little issues from the standpoint I heard JR a couple times, he couldn't see certain things he wanted to see on his wheel. We were able to move those things.

So the support level that we've received has been pretty incredible. I feel like right now we have caught up from the preparation standpoint. That was my biggest worry going into yesterday. Thank you to Cosworth, thank you to Chevy for pulling that off for us.

Q. JR, Stanford is probably not known as being a hotbed for IndyCar fans. What do your students think when they find out you're driving at the Indy 500?

JR HILDEBRAND: The guys that I work with, I work with a lot of small groups, they're all gear heads already. They know what's going on. Yeah, it's cool with Salesforce to be dialed into a West Coast, Bay Area company. That's obviously where I'm originally from. Spend a lot of time back there still. I have been spending more time there frankly over the last few years from when I moved away with the program at Stanford, so...

Hopefully we'll have a good cheering section back West. We can pull it off for the boys in the Bay Area.

Q. Dennis, the last years you just made the 500. Were you involved in other championships or series or categories here in America?

DENNIS REINBOLD: Yeah, last several years we ran Global Rallycross. This year we plan to run the GRX series. This is a new series since Global Rallycross has gone away essentially.

We will have Lights cars in that, and potentially a Supercar as well. We've done Supercars in Global Rallycross before. We're looking at that. For right now, we've talked about that a little bit, that I'm pushing that to the side so we can focus on the next few weeks here.

Q. This is for Dennis or Sage. It's been mentioned you had strong cars the last few years at the Speedway. How does being a two-car team this year specifically help you improve on that record over previous attempts?

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, we have had strong cars. Like JR said, when he was on the outside, I think a lot of people could see we had strong equipment. There were a couple times we would come back to the garage, I'd be telling the crew before we push it back, Let's change the wing angles, not give away our little secrets here what we're running. The teams look at that, they look closely.

With two cars, we can go through the checklist a lot quicker. We can try things throughout one session. I can try aero stuff, where JR could try mechanical stuff, kind of try and find a sweet spot where if you only have one car you got to go through all the aero stuff, then when you're done with that you can go through the mechanical stuff or vice versa. It makes things a lot smoother.

I mean, like everybody says, JR, Stanford, everything, he's a smart guy. Bringing him in here, being as intelligent as he is, it definitely is cool to hear what he has to say, his ideas, bounce things off of him.

I was joking around earlier, I said, Back in school, if I was going to school with JR, I had a math test coming up, didn't really know that I was going to have a test or didn't study the night before, JR would be one of the guys I'd sit next to in the class.

JR HILDEBRAND: I was going to say (laughter).

SAGE KARAM: It's going well. Makes things go a lot smoother, for sure.

Q. JR, you came so close in 2011. As you look back years later, how has that race shaped you as a person and a driver?

JR HILDEBRAND: It sort of teaches you, like, this place doesn't owe you anything basically. I think anything in particular about that year, just the fact that as far as I'm concerned, I've been sort of 2014 in particular stands out, 2016. I've had some really great cars since then, like cars that for sure were good enough to win the race. Pit stop strategy and everything worked out, if we'd been up at the front, we certainly would have been in the hunt, had top 10s, all that kind of stuff.

2011 frankly for me was not a race where we were really good enough just outright to be able to win the race. Why we took a major strategy gamble and ended up in the position we were in at the end.

Having gone through kind of all the ups and downs, different types of cars, different types of situations since then, looking back on all of it, makes you realize how good you have to be at every little thing to be able to actually close the deal. It doesn't just come down to having a really great car. It doesn't come down to just having really great pit stop, calling the right strategy at the end of the race. You got to be prepared for all of those things to be exceptional, to be able to put it all together.

Sometimes it falls into your lap a little bit. Sometimes the way that you end up doing things, your group of guys or whatever end up making decisions, you end up with a little bit of an unfair advantage at the end of the race.

I think I've adopted much more of a mentality of, like, We're just going to try to be great at everything here so that we increase our chances regardless of how this whole thing plays out over the last stints basically. I think that's made me better. That's made me a little bit more focused on how we go through the month. I think as a group it helps you to be more ready to take advantage when good opportunities come your way at the end.

Q. Dennis, when you started your team back in 1999, IRL, a lot of great cars, not necessarily a lot of great teams. 20 seasons later when you see how deep IndyCar has become, what do you think?

JR HILDEBRAND: That's a good question because you're right. You think about the teams that were there, that were the top-level teams, Treadway, Hemelgarn, a lot of the teams, Kelly, a lot of the teams that have gone by the wayside since then.

With the merger, that changed a lot of things. That was a big event obviously. You got a lot more depth of teams that came in. Right now IndyCar is growing. You can see it. You can feel it. It's exciting. It's a great place to be in right now. That's a hard thing to say for motorsports these days.

I guess the fact that there are so many good teams and better-prepared teams, way better prepared than the early days, the field is way deeper than it was before by a longshot. That makes it harder to win. It makes it more competitive.

We had a team owners meeting the other day. There were a lot of really good questions. Jay Frye headed it up, talked about the direction of IndyCar. I'm not divulging any secrets here when I say that it was a good two-way interaction, which frankly since I haven't been full-time since 2013, I was pretty impressed. I haven't been to an owners meeting since then either. I was pretty impressed with the level of conversation and open dialogue that existed.

It's come a long, long way. Back when I was full-time and we had owner meetings, they were contentious, not that much fun. A lot of head butting was going on. I would say they've come a long, long way in IndyCar. It's poised for the future very, very well.

Q. JR and Sage, former Indy Lights champions, came up through the ladder series. This is a one-off race for both of you. Dennis talked about building a team for the future. How do you approach this as far as what you can do this month to show, maybe springboard or kickstart your careers here?

SAGE KARAM: I mean, I think for us, this is the only race we're signed up for this year right now. A lot of people say you're remembered by your last performance. We got to come in and perform because ultimately we want to be in a seat more times than just the Indy 500. To do well at this race I think is a bit bigger than doing well at a different race. If you can win this one, it's pretty good.

It's just one of those things where you just got to come in here with a clear mind and your absolute best, be as prepared as you possibly can because you want to do well at the Speedway, but also you want to show that you belong as far as the situation we're in.

Dennis is talking about doing more races and stuff. If we can do well for Dennis, I think it helps him out, as well, helps our effort going full-time or part-time in the future. It's like a two-way street. Good for us, good for

the team, good for all the sponsors. It's just overall a good situation if you do well here.

JR HILDEBRAND: Yeah, I mean, I think I would say the same thing. A lot of it's just about over the course of the month, then kind of culminating with race day here, just trying to build momentum, build momentum with the team, with the team's sponsors. That's a big part of if we can kind of roll in and kind of have everything, like, cranking upwards towards lap 200, towards the end of the race, that leaves everybody feeling good about continuing to stay involved.

Like Dennis said, at the end of the day it's all about partnerships and being able to grow on that side in order to give Sage and I a chance to continue to grow with the team.

I think that's really what we shoot for, just to be able to do great on race day anyway, but I think that will also go hand-in-hand with being able to do more down the road.

Q. You talked about the level of the team, this being a brand-new car, universal kit. I don't think I've ever seen for the Grand Prix all 22 cars were within one second of each other in qualifying. I don't think I've ever seen that. For you to come in now, there's a reality that two drivers are going to be leaving after Saturday that won't make the field. Having to tackle this new car, you had very little time, is it more difficult to find the sweet spot on this chassis? Do you try and compensate for having less downforce or mechanical grip? Would you do that for an oval like Indy? How do you not overthink it and get lost between now and qualifying and race day?

JR HILDEBRAND: I mean, the cars for the Speedway in terms of like their downforce level, you've seen on the road courses, street courses, short ovals, they've been significantly less downforce than they have over the last few years. The Speedway kit was kind of designed to be in a similar window to where we've been over the last few years. From that perspective, it's not nearly the delta from years past to now.

Absolutely the competitiveness of the field is a serious thing to overcome. But that's I think we're in a particularly good spot in terms of how much effort the team has gone through to be adequately prepared.

Indianapolis, going fast for qualifying, a huge portion of that is just how well prepped is the car. The aero setup this year is much more simple than it's been the last few years. We don't have all these crazy configurations you have to work through. I think having, like, a really good mechanical package, having really good prep, is because of that a bigger percentage of what goes into where you qualify.

In years past, like, last year was a perfect example, at

ECR we were great in qualifying, maybe better in qualifying than we were in race trim or something. A big part of that was we nailed the exact aero configuration that we were going to run in that was optimal. I can't tell you how much time we spent over the week of practice trying to just figure out what that was supposed to be. That's less of a factor now. Because of that, the kind of more standard things I think matter a lot more. I think that sort of plays into our favor.

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, I think also it's just really new to everybody. Like last year, when we're only doing one race, that car has been around for a little bit, a lot of the teams had a lot more experience with it than we did. I think we were behind the eight ball going into day one a lot more than this year. I feel like this the much more new to all the big teams and everything. I think we saw that yesterday.

Yesterday was one of the best first days I think we've had just because I feel like everybody is in the same boat trying to figure out the same thing. I'm 100% confident on the preparation of the car. You can go look at some of the cars on pit lane, you can see which cars are prepped well and which ones aren't. Our cars always look really, really nice.

They have 365 days from checkered flag to massage the car. They're immaculate, they're really good. But, yeah, I mean, it's just one of those things where I think everybody, it's so new for everybody, it just kind of makes a level playing field.

Like JR said, there's not a whole lot you can do with the aero this year, so I think it's going to make qualifying quite tight. Last year I think you saw more of a spread in the field. I think this year you're going to see all 35 cars within a pretty respectable, close window. It's just going to be, you know, who is going to find that extra half a mile an hour off of preparation. That's it.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you for your time. Best of luck this week.