

IndyCar Media Conference

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Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined now by our fastest driver of the day, Graham Rahal.

Graham, fastest in practice today. What are you guys noticing that's found the speed and led to these high finishes in practice so far?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, today was definitely a better day for sure. From the get-go, I knew that yesterday we didn't put in any effort to actually put in a decent lap. I found myself all day yesterday in the middle of the pack. It's impossible to put up a number from that position.

Then clearly everybody starts questioning, worried, this and that. So there was a lot of reason and motivation to go and try to put together a decent one today.

It was obviously our second lap. I went out, I was trying to do a qualifying simulation. I just went out, a bunch of guys came out. Stefan Wilson came out in front of me. He was at the end of the back straight as I was going out of two. I thought, For once I'm just going to do this, just stay in it. Not normally my MO, but I thought I might as well put a good one up there, at least lower my dad's blood pressure for the night, Lanigan and everybody.

It was a solid run. We tried another qual sim. Every qual sim I did today everybody came out in front of me. I didn't get a qual sim today. Not a single one. Hopefully Mother Nature will be nice to us tomorrow.

The good thing about that is we didn't use very many tires today. A lot of other guys did. We should be pretty tire rich tomorrow if we need to go after it. We'll see how it goes.

THE MODERATOR: I know it's just practice, and leading practice doesn't really mean too much as you look ahead towards qualifying, but is it cooler to lead practice here?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's cooler to lead practice than be 34th because you don't have to answer all the questions about why you're 34th, all that sort of thing.

For sure today was in the end a very good day. We had the car. We showed that it had the pace, number one. Number two, at the end of the day we found and made some big strides with our racecar. That's more

what I was focused on.

But that last run, that was by far the best I have felt. Obviously there's a lot of cars out there, a bunch of people, it was by far the best that I have felt in traffic to this point. Felt a lot stronger than a good amount of guys that I was around. Still hard to pass when you're 20th and 15th in line. This car, it's very disruptive back there. The last car was, too. I think it's going to go out there and race just fine.

Today was definitely a good day for us overall just to make a huge step forward in a lot of phases of it. We can all rest a little bit easier. For tomorrow we've been scratching our heads like crazy. Everybody has been nervous. Everybody has been trying a hundred different things.

I have to say Takuma and Oriol have been extremely influential and beneficial to our program. It's great to have three guys that have so much experience around this place. I can guarantee you that come Monday, we'll be much better off from a racing perspective than where we are even today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. (Question about learning the handling of the car on race day.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think first and second is awesome. Anything beyond that is tough, tough. You see that. Obviously with JR's incident, I can't tell you how many times I thought I was going to be in that scenario today where the right front tire is so overworked, you have so much slip angle in it, it just gives up. When it gives up, I literally just explained it on TV. It's like ice and then, bang, you hit a curb. You turn into a neighborhood, it doesn't turn. We've all done it. That's exactly what it feels like.

It's difficult because you don't know what a fine line is. Sometimes it's slide, slide, slide, then okay. Other times it never comes back. I just think the further back you are, you have to hang on. These cars, you got to drive the you know what out of them. The rear is sliding around, the front is pushing. It's not pretty, that's for sure.

But the one thing it does do, if you do get a tow, it is massive. I mean, when you get 10 car lengths back, the acceleration rate is unbelievable. Takuma and I were even joking about it. Do you want to lead the last

lap or not? Where do you place yourself if you're in that position in the race?

I don't know. If you're leading, you could be in trouble. So we'll see. We'll all make strides by Monday, I can guarantee you that.

Q. How much of this is the new car, what you're feeling that you felt before, what are you feeling that's new?

GRAHAM RAHAL: A lot of it's new car. A lot of it is trying to understand the way that it wiggles. It sounds ridiculous, but it's true. We're used to the old car. You know what it's going to do. You know what to expect. This car is a different animal.

Fortunately with this car, knock on wood, I don't want to jinx myself, when it does tend to go, the front is what gives up. That's a much better feeling than the rear. In the old car, the rear would tend to go. This is definitely better off.

But for sure, understanding the front wing, what angle does it work at, what angle does it stall at, the end fences, all of this stuff is so new, just to try to make it work is a bit of a chore.

Q. Put us in your mind or your shoes. When you leave here the last two nights or tonight, are your nerves kind of frayed from chasing this?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's been late nights, long days here. I don't think I've left here, gosh, earlier than 8:45, 9:00 the last couple nights. That's pretty unusual. Normally when practice day is done, do you your debrief, go home and get yourself dinner.

We've spent a lot of time poring over data trying to understand this thing a lot better. Tonight I'm going to sleep a lot easier than I did last night, other than the fact that Cathy planned an 8 a.m. press conference. You guys better all be here, because if I have to be here at 8 a.m., you need to be here, too.

But it's been long days. Yeah, for sure last night everybody is a little bit on edge.

Q. (No microphone.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: No doubt, it always feels good, right? Yeah, it feels good. There's no doubt about it. In particular that's not really my expertise. Going out there and sitting in a big tow has never been my thing. I've never been the guy to put up huge numbers here. But when you do, yes, it feels nice.

Q. I think 227 has been the highest. What do you think it's going to take to sit on the pole?

GRAHAM RAHAL: With a high boost, you're obviously going to go quicker, right? I think it's going to be, you know, 28, 29, somewhere in there. I could be off on that. It could be less. The reason for that, this car is a lot draggier than last year's car.

There's a common misconception that this car has less downforce and less drag. It doesn't here. This is the only package, the speedway package, is draggier than the Honda package from last year. Both packages from last year.

Due to that, that's what kills the speed. When we're talking about more drag, we're talking about 60 pounds, which is six miles and hour, six miles an hour. The only way you make up for that is horsepower nowadays.

So we've all been obviously reaching for the stars today. Saw some guys do 223. Will I think was the only guy I saw do a 23, no tow. I saw some other guys try, get close for a lap, next thing you know they were in the pits. It could be pretty interesting, for sure.

I do see there's going to be a lot of people very close together. I think from one end to the other end, one mile an hour could make 15 positions, which has never happened at this place.

Q. I don't know if you've had a chance to do a full stint on the fuel, but I was wondering how the car behaves, last year's car, when it lightens up, weight-wise?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Like I said, it's about managing the right front tire. If you're too hard on that right front tire, it starts to degrade, you're in trouble. As the run goes on, it gives up, gives up, gives up.

But to be honest with you, that last run that we just did was by far the best we have done. By the end of the run I actually felt pretty strong compared to those I was around.

But it's definitely a handful. Even if you watch last year's race, the key always is to make your car good at the end of the stint. There are guys that can go fast, but you got to make it last. That's where our head is right now, make it a little bit more consistent throughout.

Q. With the work that you're doing this week, would you say it's safe between you and Takuma and Oriol that you're focusing more on the race setup than Saturday's setup?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah. I would say yes, that's been the case. I went out and did a qual sim our very first run of the whole week on Tuesday morning, did a mid 221, completely clear on my own. At the time that was the quickest no tow of the day. I ended up second behind Ed or something. But we really did that without much effort.

Yesterday I went out with the same setup and it repeated pretty well. Today, this morning, my quick lap was the exact same setup. It repeated pretty well as far as balance. We haven't really been overall

concerned about the qualifying.

Doesn't mean we're going to be on pole. We should be decent, but some of the speeds I saw today, the 23.3 by Power, four laps in a row, I feel like from what I saw of his teammates, he's maybe mile and a half or two miles an hour clear of his teammates. He's kind of extreme. I don't know that we have that. But we should be decent. We haven't been really overly panicked about that.

Having said that, if you can start up front in this race, you can stay up front in this race, it is going to make your life a lot easier, no doubt.

Q. With the increased drag from this car, has that had a bad effect on fuel consumption? Will we expect to see a big variation in stint length?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I wouldn't expect a big variation, to be honest with you. I cannot tell you I focused a lot on it. From what I hear from the guys, no. It should be pretty similar. Honda has done a heck of a job with fuel consumption and stuff for us, making more power and using less fuel. Hopefully that will be the case here, as well. But I have not really dialed into that just yet.

Q. Your finishes here over your career at the 500 have ranged from third to 33rd. What is it about this track that makes it such a hard race for you?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, we've actually been I think a lot of times been better than that's reflected. Even going back to my rookie year, we were pretty decent. Made a rookie mistake. My second year I honestly think I had the car to win the thing, and it's bothered me ever since. Made a stupid mistake early in the race. That's kind of when the light bulb went off. When I came back here in 2010, had a decent run. Got a little bit unlucky with the late yellow, I think it was Conway. A lot of guys weren't going to make it. So it did change the end result quite a lot.

2011 was obviously a good year. 2012 we had a high fuel pressure pump go out, so we were down horsepower the whole second half of the race, still actually ran in the top five most of the day, didn't have much power.

At the end of the day this place is challenging. I've been reminded of so many times in my life, and the stat could be a little bit off, Robin might know this, but Johnny Rutherford didn't finish an Indy 500 till he won it. There's guys that have achieved greatness here that it took a little while. Yes, this is my 11th, but I'm 29. I hope you'll see me here a lot more.

I love this place. It's gotten me over the years. This year in particular we're more focused as a team, more driven as an individual, and I hope that -- last year slipped for me. Takuma was going to be hard for me. We were actually ahead of Takuma at the time, and the only two cars ahead of us were off sequence. We got

a flat tire with 35 to go, put us a lap down. Just bad luck. That happens.

I felt that last year we had a great car. That one bothered me. Hopefully this year we can bounce back. Yeah, it's been all over the board here for me. There's certain places that I don't really enjoy racing at much and I've had great results. Never really understood that either. It's just the way the story gets written. Hopefully, as I say, someday in the story of this place I'll have my own chapter. It hasn't been done yet.

Q. Having Takuma on your team now, have you talked to him about that at all?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, you know, I mean, Takuma, he's definitely the right guy for this place. He's quick. He's aggressive. I think it takes that to win around here sometimes. You got to make the right move at the right time. Last year he put the whole combination together. I think he had the fastest flat out car during the race, but he put all the pieces together.

It's awesome to see. Every time you mention it, there's a huge smile on his face. That's cool. I was very, very happy for Takuma last year. He's a great guy. Hopefully we can together work together with Oriol and everybody and make this thing even better for us.

Q. The new aero kit, instead of 2018 being an outright engine manufacture war, hitting the setup one day to the next might be the key to victory. Have you gotten a feel yet in superspeedway trim whether that might be the case for qualifying for the race or is one manufacturing beating out a little bit?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yesterday if you asked me, I would have said one manufacturer flat out had a little more qualifying pace. Today it actually kind of neutralized a little bit. There's no doubt that you got to work on all the little things. You got to get the scrub down, all this little stuff. If you can get all the pieces of the puzzle together, anybody can put -- any manufacturer can put a good number on the board.

We'll see how it goes. We'll see how it goes. It's going to be definitely important to hit it, particularly on race day. When you go to race trim, people are all over the board. It's pretty crazy out there. So we'll see.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, thank you very much.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you.