

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday June 8, 2018

Bobby Rahal Graham Rahal Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Joined now by two special guests from Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, co-owner Bobby Rahal, and driver Graham Rahal.

Bobby, we've seen the press release hit our inboxes, but I'll let you do the honors on announcing some good news today.

BOBBY RAHAL: Thank you. It is good news. This past week or two weeks ago I guess now we came to final terms with Graham for an extension, five-year extension, on his contract with RLL as one of our drivers. So we're very pleased. I know our sponsors are pleased who are committed out several years in advance, as they are very pleased with the job Graham does on and off the racetrack for him.

As a team owner, I know you're going to say I'm biased, but I admire and respect Graham's work ethic on and off the track for our team, for our sponsors, and we're really pleased that we now go forward for the next five years as a team together because I think the best five years of Graham's career are ahead of him. Consequently the best five years of RLL's career, in effect, is going to ride along with him.

Real pleased about that. So I'll leave it at that. I'm sure there will be questions, but I'll leave it at that.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, I know this might not be as much of a shock or surprise to most people in the room. To have a team that's willing to make a commitment to you regardless of what team it is, it has to be a huge relief for you, knowing you have a long-term future in the sport.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, it's been a lot of fun for me to be here. I think we've come a long way over the last handful of years. You guys see that. We see that. From where we started in 2013 to the success that the team has had over the last few years, I think together we've come a long way.

Certainly as a driver, when you get into a contract deal like I've been in, you're always kind of testing the waters, all that sort of stuff, that's natural. As you really look at it, you take a step back, RLL has done a tremendous job and has proven themselves, ourselves, to be one of the premier teams in the series

consistently, probably the most consistent team over the last few years other than maybe Penske. I think from that perspective it was great.

A lot of this is clearly thanks to our sponsors. As dad said, a lot of our partners, most of them are long-term contracts, so I was kind of the outlier in the whole deal. So to be able to put it all together and know that we're going to be together for many years to come.

I'd like to think that the next five years, maybe a little after that, is the prime of my career. We're kind of entering that stage. We have the consistency. I know where I'm going to be. That's obviously extremely important for myself.

I'm excited about it. We have a tremendous team here. We've got amazing individuals that are behind the scenes that make this all happen. Obviously the mechanics. Obviously the engineers get a lot of the credit, but the mechanics put a lot of heart into it, have done a really, really good job for us.

I saw a stat the other day, up until I decided to hit a fence in Detroit, we were the only car that had finished 18 consecutive races and had no mechanicals. I think that speaks volumes for our team. I'm just excited to continue on here and continue to build.

Got great partnerships, obviously United Rentals has been huge and instrumental for us, will continue to be on into the future. Total, many others. The list goes on. This is a tremendous deal that started a couple years ago in a very small way and has continued to increase, increase, increase to a great new level this season. So we're excited about that.

Yeah, I mean, the next five years should be awesome.

THE MODERATOR: Looking to the task at hand this weekend, I know probably not quite where you want to be on the speed charts after this morning's practice, but you are the winner of the closest race finish at Texas Motor Speedway. What are your thoughts about this afternoon's session and tomorrow night's race?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's going to be interesting to see what this evening's session gives us. Qualifying is going to be important. But I think that having a good racecar is even more so. We've seen that before. We saw that last year. I mean, there were quick cars, a lot of them ended up not making it to the finish.

We've got to be smart here. This car, this track, after the repave, it challenges us all in a very different way than it ever did before. We'll just have to see how it all plays out.

I think our speed this morning wasn't great, clearly. We're going to have to work and put our heads down, figure out where to find a little bit more. We can see in the data with Takuma a little bit, our setups kind of differ a little bit, but we'll see how it goes here in qualifying. I guess we're seventh from the end to go due to points. We'll go see what happens.

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

Q. Bobby, how tough a negotiator is your son?

BOBBY RAHAL: Luckily we don't negotiate with each other. I give that to Mike. I let Mike negotiate.

It's interesting, I'm sure Michael Andretti can tell you, having your son, there's a lot of pluses, maybe a few minuses when you have your family. It's a family business in a lot of respects. The pluses are you got a guy that can go out and stand on the gas, he's proven that time and time again. Probably two of the craziest oval races in the last I don't know how many years, five years, Fontana in '15 and here in '16, we ended up at the front. I give Graham all the credit in the world. I'm glad I retired when I did because I don't think there's any way I could have -- maybe I could have, but anyway...

In the end, I don't care who it is in that car, they've got to be up front, be capable of running up front, and I think Graham has proven that. I think for our sponsors it's a plus having he and I together. Whatever small negatives there may be, they quickly go away.

It's a lot of responsibility for me as a team owner when your son, your blood, is in that car, right? You want them to achieve their goals. Now you're kind of pretty responsible for that. Obviously there's a lot of other efforts, people, that go into it. To me it's worth the pressures of that. To see us do well is very, very satisfying. No question about it.

I look forward to five years. We know we've got one of the best drivers in the series in our car, and that's comforting to our sponsors. They've developed relationships with him, maybe more so than they have with the team because he being their spokesperson. I think this will make our sponsors happy, and any new sponsor that we're talking to, and there are many of them, it's a plus having that continuity and that consistency in our lineup.

Q. Graham, IndyCars don't have keys, but is this like your dad giving you his keys to the hotrod?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I've had them the last five years, so...

Look, I mean, as I said, as a driver, you've got to put aside the family aspect from time to time. As you asked, luckily dad and myself have never really done any of the negotiating, it's always between my management team and Mike. That at least takes the two of us and the heart out of it, puts it more into business' hands.

As a driver, clearly when your contract is up, you're always looking around, trying to see what's out there because you should. That's your job, too, to go try to put the best piece of the puzzle together. We talked to others.

What became clear to me is over the last handful of years, this team has done a hell of a good job, and we've done that together. No matter where else you look, no matter where else you go, I can guarantee you you don't get the effort and the energy put into it like we do at this team.

For me, as you can imagine, five years is a long time. Yes, it's nice, but it's a long time for a driver, too. A lot can change in five years for good and bad obviously. As dad said, it's key for us, I've developed a really close relationship with many, many of our partners. If we have to in the business that it is, you've got to work together, you've got to be hand-in-hand, find a way to continue to evolve, continue to grow the sponsor base of the team and of the sport. I think our team, with the group that we have, has done a better job at that than anybody else out here. We want to keep that train going and try to continue to march forward and ultimately win a championship.

There's no doubt this team can win a championship. We've got to put the pieces of the puzzle together, but there's no doubt that we can.

Q. Your wife also drives for a family team. That dynamic come into this at all?

GRAHAM RAHAL: We work very differently than they do, I think. Yeah, it comes into it I guess a little bit. Obviously this is good for me, it's good for Courtney, just to give our family some stability, for sure. You got to believe in this sport, whether it's her, whether it's myself, it's an industry that can go upside down in a second.

To have that comfort is a great thing. Obviously that plays a big role in our decision, our commitment length, all that sort of stuff as well. But yeah, I mean, for sure dad and I work very differently than they do. Both are different ways to skin the cat, both work.

But I would say our relationship is really in many ways much more just father-son. Like I said, when it gets to business, every once in a while business comes up, there's no doubt, but when it gets to business, typically it's handled between Mike and John Caponigro. Hell, I

didn't even read the contract last week.

BOBBY RAHAL: That's good (laughter).

GRAHAM RAHAL: John said it was good, so I signed it (laughter). Maybe there's a couple surprises in there.

BOBBY RAHAL: Fine print (laughter).

I might add, I look at this also as a real commitment on the part of Mike, David and myself, Mike Lanigan, David Letterman, myself to IndyCar. I'm 65 years old. Obviously I'm going to be here when I'm 70, probably when I'm 75, probably 80, who knows, right? I look at this as a real expression of commitment on our part towards IndyCar, towards all of the great things that are happening under Mark Miles and Jay Frye and their teams.

I'm not sure I would have been willing to make this kind of commitment 10 or 15 years ago. But I see the way the series is going today. I can speak for Mike and Dave, I think we want to be a part of it for many years to come. I'm hopeful this is a sign to others that this is the place to be.

Q. You explored the driver market, John your agent went to find out of the what everybody is expecting to be making in the future. What does IndyCar look like from a driver contract standpoint?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think it's all over the board. Truly that can completely depend on sponsors. Your sponsor commitment, sponsor base, all that stuff is huge. I mean, obviously there's guys out there that are making great money, there's some that are making very little. But that's the name of the game. It certainly hasn't declined. If anything, I'd say over the last handful of years, a lot of guys here are making more money than they were before.

In that sense, it's in a positive direction. But we obviously keep everything private between us and all of our negotiations. Yeah, I mean, there's good teams out there that are well-funded, no doubt about that. But a lot of those seats are clearly taken, and I don't see them changing any time soon.

The guys that are making the good money are guys that obviously do a good job on the track, but guys that do a great job off the track. It's not just driving, as you guys know. There's a lot of elements to make this whole thing go round. There's a lot of good guys out there that are great at doing that.

Q. Coming from the NASCAR world, we see a bunch of guys coming from dirt into the NASCAR ranks, but we don't see any dirt guys coming into IndyCar. What is the reason behind that?

BOBBY RAHAL: That was certainly the way it was in the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s maybe. With the influx of road racing circuits, street circuits, paved circuits, of course

you have a few ovals these days, let's face it, there aren't many ovals any more, it's mainly road racing. I don't know if I've seen much interest, frankly, from dirt track guys to get into that.

There's nothing that keeps them from doing that, for sure. If you look at Mario Andretti, Al Unser Sr. Bobby Unser, these guys were very capable of winning on a dirt track one day and a paved road course the next. It's not like it's impossible. It just seems to me that, I don't know, probably starting in the early 2000s is when all of a sudden guys driving midgets started to go to NASCAR. Just seems like that's kind of the direction in that kind of racing now.

I think it's a matter of desire. If a young guy running Sprint cars or midgets or whatever, stockcars on dirt, really was that interested, if you're good, you're going to be good enough. Let's face it, if you have talent, you have talent, and the talent will take you wherever you want to go. As I said, there's clearly examples of that. Some of the greatest drivers in the history of this sport, A.J., Mario, Bobby, Al, I'm sure I'm missing a few, showed that it was possible. But there was a desire there. I don't know if there's much of a desire, frankly.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I would say the same. I do see in the grassroots, I have some great buddies who are Sprint car guys out of Indy, I definitely can see they're starting to pay more attention to IndyCar racing. It seems like a lot of them when you're around them, all they want to do, their dream is to run the 500. Now, they're living in Indy, so that affects that.

I do think clearly motorsports is in an interesting cycle right now. IndyCar racing is on the rise comparatively. I do think there's more people that are going to be looking in this direction. I think there's going to be more opportunity that's going to be coming in the sport.

There's a lot of guys who in the next handful of years might have on to another phase of life. There's going to be some opportunity there for some young guys to get in. That hasn't necessarily been the case over the last however long, but I can definitely see it going in that direction.

We need to continue to connect with our grassroots. Obviously Danielle Frye, Jay's wife, has been doing a great job with USAC, quarter midgets running around with us, which has been awesome. Go over and see them. Maybe the evolution is coming back in our direction, I don't know. A lot of us have a great amount of respect for dirt track racing, Sprint car racing, the whole deal.

As dad said, what really has a huge effect on the championship today in this sport is road and street course racing. It's obviously a very different thing.

BOBBY RAHAL: Every day I get letters from all kinds

of drivers from Europe, sports car racing, open-wheel racing here in the United States, SECA. I don't recall ever receiving a letter from somebody from Sprint cars or midgets. That's their direction to NASCAR, that seems to be the ladder. I think that's unfortunate because I do think what made racing so great in the '50s, '60s, '70s, when had guys like Mario, A.J., Unsers. One day they're on dirt, next day a paved oval, next day on a road course, next day at Pikes Peak. They're all over the place.

Maybe I'm showing my age, my nostalgia for that era, but I think there's a shame we don't see that. We had some guys try Indy, did a reasonably good job for a one-off deal.

It's there if you want it, but so far nobody seems to want it.

Q. You both talked about how important it is what you do outside the car. How much do you think how well you do it is what may be absorbed from watching your dad?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I was definitely very fortunate. When I was a kid, a lot of you guys know this, but my nickname was The Shadow. I followed him around everywhere I went, hung out at sponsor dinners when I had not a reason in the world to be there, but I was there. Spent a lot of time kind of figuring it out.

Now, I will also say, though, what changed me was in 2010 when I lost my ride at Newman/Haas, it put me in a tough position. One of the two ways to go: you sit there and sulk like a lot of young racers do, which as dad just kind of mentioned one of the problems -- well, this could go on and on. One of the problems out there purely is work ethic. A lot of guys think the talent is going to get them there alone.

In 2010, it was like, Well, I know I can race with a lot of these guys, but now I'm out of a ride. You have to go find the sponsorship. I spent that whole year trying to figure it out. We finally put a deal together to race with Chip the year after.

I've been very fortunate to learn from my dad. Obviously just being exposed to my father-in-law, he does it in a clearly very different way, but it still is extremely powerful.

I think Courtney is lucky, too, because she can see it two very different ways, with him and her dad. But when you're able to learn from that, it helps mold you into perhaps somebody that can do it as well as anybody. But it's a huge part of what we do today. You kind of have to accept it and make the most of it.

I've definitely been fortunate in that way. There's clearly a leg up that I've had. Actually I'll say this, too. When I first came up, if you remember Formula BMW, Wickens was there, Hinch was there, a lot of guys were

there. In that deal, you had to take classes, they put you through media training, did all the stuff. At 15, 16 years old we were going through that, as well with them. They were pretty instrumental in it, as well.

THE MODERATOR: Bobby, Graham, thank you very much.