

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday June 22, 2018

James Hinchcliffe

Robert Wickens

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined now by two members of Schmidt Peterson Motorsports. James Hinchcliffe, driving the No. 5 Arrow Electronics SPM Honda for the team, and Robert Wickens driving the No. 6 Lucas Oil Honda.

A track that has some significant moments for both of you.

Robert, last year was kind of your first taste of an IndyCar race weekend event. Didn't get to compete in the race, but did get your first sort of event weekend feel of an IndyCar. What do you remember from that experience, and looking back on it, how different is your perspective and motivation heading into this weekend?

ROBERT WICKENS: This is my one-year anniversary of an IndyCar press conference. That's kind of cool. Good timing for a coffee.

It's cool. I mean, to do it at a track like Road America is even more special. I mean, it's such a cool place, so much history. As a driver, I think it's a favorite for everybody.

A big reason why I agreed to help out the team last year was because it was at Road America, just because it's such a cool track to drive. Driving an IndyCar on such a good track, it was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Now I'm a full-time guy. Hopefully we can get some good results this weekend.

THE MODERATOR: I decided to look back at that transcript before this press conference to read through. I was hoping I could get you on something. I didn't catch anything. But you did mention that part of the appeal of racing in the series was competing with guys that you had competed with in the past growing up, going up the ranks. What is it like now to be challenging for a championship with them?

ROBERT WICKENS: I don't know if I'm challenging for a championship.

THE MODERATOR: Challenging for wins.



ROBERT WICKENS: There we go.

No, it's cool. There's so many people I grew up racing against. This guy is one of them.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I was there.

ROBERT WICKENS: But, no, it's cool. It's always nice to see when the kind of ladder system works. Kids that you grew up racing against, you end up being professionals with. Some are good. Some are bad. You have this childhood rivalry that you can't shake. Luckily that wasn't me, but I know other drivers that have been through that.

But honestly, it's just fun. I mean, I'm racing with a smile on my face, which not every person can wake up in the morning, be really happy to go to work, regardless of the environment.

I'm just looking forward to this weekend. Hopefully we can rebound well after Texas and go from there.

THE MODERATOR: Joined also by your teammate, James Hinchcliffe. A significant racetrack for James because it was the first time back in an IndyCar after his crash in 2015.

We don't have to revisit all of that, James. Your thoughts of heading into this weekend and the competitiveness of your car this weekend.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: This place has always been one of my favorites. I got my first open-wheel race win here back in Formula BMW, all the way up to getting back into an IndyCar for the first time after the accident.

I was gutted when I got to IndyCar and we didn't race at Road America, so I was very excited when they finally announced when we were coming back. As Robbie said, this is a lot of drivers favorite road course in the country. It's always nice to get to rip an IndyCar around this place.

We were here testing last week, which I think was great for the team. The test went fairly well for us, which makes us a little bit nervous. So far this year we have had, like, some abysmal tests. This was a pretty good test, so we're not exactly sure how this is going to go.

Going to go one of two ways: going to go really well or... Good to get to test here. The car has been solid the last few weekends. Hopefully we can bring home some more good points.

THE MODERATOR: This season has been quite a grind so far with early three back-to-back races, heading into May, Detroit, Texas. You are coming off of the first off weekend in quite a while. Did either of you get to do anything fun, relaxing, regroup a little bit, a lot of work?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: We were testing here on Wednesday. Then I went to New York Thursday for IndyCar. Then I went to Toronto Friday for IndyCar. Thanks for my weekend off, guys.

ROBERT WICKENS: I had a good week at the gym. It was nice. On Saturday, Sunday, I hung some curtains and some light fixtures at my house. It was quite the domestic weekend.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

Q. Is this track the closest track in America to Mosport (Canadian Tire Motorsport Park) in terms of the feel and rhythm?

ROBERT WICKENS: I would have thought Road Atlanta would have closer to all sport than this one. Kind of more flowy corners, slightly more elevation in corners.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Doesn't have a lot of long straights, which this place has a few.

ROBERT WICKENS: I mean, I really haven't thought about that to be honest.

Q. Just the terrain.

ROBERT WICKENS: Yeah, no, I mean, they're two entirely different tracks. I wouldn't really compare them. I wouldn't put them in the same group personally.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: But the scenery is nice at both.

Q. You've now had two races with Will Anderson as your race engineer. How has that been going?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: The engineer role has been great. Coming into the season, I had exactly zero people on my stand from 2017, or any other year of my career. Having worked with Will for a bunch of years as assistant race engineer, it's nice to have that familiar face on the stand.

We already speak the same language, know how each other works. It's made that transition a little bit easier. It's never ideal to do that mid-season.

I think he slipped into the role very nicely. He had a couple races under his belt with Jack. I think him and I have been working pretty well together. It's been

productive so far.

Q. (No microphone.)

ROBERT WICKENS: I never waited to get here, to be honest (laughter).

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It wasn't a conscious choice.

ROBERT WICKENS: That was the big thing. Obviously as a kid I grew up watching IndyCars and loved racing IndyCars. My career went to Europe at a pretty young age pursuing Formula 1, then we got approached by Mercedes to race in the DTM in German touring cars.

I was never always hoping for an IndyCar opportunity. I was honestly completely content where I was. But then situations changed and I had to look for some new avenues to go racing.

IndyCar was my top prospect. It's what I probably wanted to do the most this season, given the new aero kits, given like IndyCar is always on the rise, other championships are starting to struggle a bit.

I think the timing was right. Happy to be a part of it. Even more I'm happy that the results are coming in the first year.

Q. Did you know at this event last year that you would be pursuing a ride in INDYCAR the following year?

ROBERT WICKENS: When was the race here last year? Same time?

Q. Yes.

ROBERT WICKENS: Well, it was in July, so...

Yeah, let's just say at this time last year, I was just doing it for the fun of driving a car. Mercedes let me, like, potentially participate in the full race weekend. Around the Toronto weekend is when I kind of first thought about, like, talking to teams, kind of seeing what I could do.

Yeah, at this time last year IndyCar wasn't really on my horizon. It was more just to tick off a bucket list.

Q. Last time you ran here, Robert, was a race back in Formula Atlantics. Do you feel you're on your back foot compared to the other drivers who have had at least the past two years of experience?

ROBERT WICKENS: No, no, because I mean there's also tracks they've been driving on for, like, 10 years, eight years, whatever. I think two is an advantage for me.

Honestly, it was nice to test here last week. The plan is to start at the front, race at the front, finish at the front, right? I don't think not having race experience on this track... If I follow my game plan, I won't really have to pass anyone, so...

Q. You're halfway through your first year. What was the biggest surprise?

ROBERT WICKENS: The schedule has been very intense. I think I realized that racing in DTM was almost a part-time job.

No, it's just been busy. I mean, the schedule I knew was going to be three weeks in a row, then the whole month of May, then back into like more racing. I was excited for that.

I didn't take into account the extra days, a lot of testing. In DTM we didn't have any in-season testing. You think years ago I really have Monday to Thursday off. Now you have to go here, there, back off, you have one off weekend, the team knows you have an off weekend, so they cram in a bunch of stuff for you to do.

It's all been fun. I mean, actually once we finished Detroit, I saw someone tweet 'nine down, eight to go'. I'm like, What? How have we already passed halfway in this thing? I thought we were still in the first quarter of the year. That was a reality check.

It's been a fast season. I mean, it's crazy to think that it's already almost the end of June. It's all been pretty exciting.

Q. The intent with this aero package is less topside downforce, more mechanical. A track this size, are you able to get closer to each other? Do you think it will be a different style of racing to what we saw the last few years?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: This track is probably going to be the most similar to 2017 just because with the old kit we could come here in a very low downforce configuration. Last year's kit at low downforce is comparable to this year's kit, maybe not max-max, but normal trim level.

I don't think we're going to notice the difference as much here, even just in the feel from behind the wheel. It will be something to see what the racing is like.

Everywhere we've been, the cars have been able to follow closer. You'd like to think that will hold true here. We're not sure, because it is the closest configuration to what we had in the past.

Q. Characterize what role you played in getting Robert here.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, we convoyed up together. Okay, you mean the proverbial?

Q. Yes.

ROBERT WICKENS: He was my mole.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I was his spy on the inside (laughter).

For me, I had obviously a huge interest in Rob coming to the team. I was a huge advocate for it very early on. I was one of the few guys -- myself and Piers Phillips were the ones that followed Robby's career all through Europe, knew what he was capable of. We were the ones that put our foot down and said, This is the guy we have to take a look at.

Once his name was on everybody else's radar within the team, I tried to sit back. What I didn't want to happen is I didn't want people to think I was trying to get my buddy in the seat. I laid out all the facts. If you looked at everything on paper, the facts were this is the best available guy in the world for this car in the world. I wanted them to figure it on out on own rather than just hammer it in.

Yeah, had to occasionally threw in a little comment here and there to make things were staying on track, going the way that we wanted. Honestly, once they looked at what he was capable of, I think the decision was pretty simple from everyone's point on this side.

Q. Fairly rewarding that he's back?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, it's really fun saying, I told you so (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thank you very much. Good luck this weekend.