

IndyCar Media Conference

Tuesday August 14, 2018

Ryan Hunter-Reay Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media teleconference. Over the next few weeks, we'll be highlighting the contending drivers for the 2018 Verizon IndyCar Series championship.

Today we're pleased to be joined by Ryan Hunter-Reay of Andretti Autosport. Ryan is the 2012 Verizon IndyCar Series champion. He is currently fifth in the points standings and is IndyCar's winningest active American driver, with 17 wins, including the 2014 Indianapolis 500.

Ryan, thanks for taking the time to join us this afternoon.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Any time. Thanks for having me on.

THE MODERATOR: Looking at the stats from up above here, you've had a pretty consistent season. You scored the win at Belle Isle. It's been a little rough of late. From your perspective, how has the 2018 season been for you and the 28 DHL team?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I think overall we've been pretty strong, competitive everywhere we've gone. We're back up at the front regularly fighting for podiums, and that's important.

No doubt, the past couple races have been missed opportunities. More often than not we show up at a racetrack and we're contending. It's been a strong season in many ways. There's been some missed opportunities in there, no doubt. Hopefully we can close out the season.

I learned a lot in my racing career, especially through the 2012 season, fighting for the championship with Helio and Will Power. Once you thought somebody really had an upper hand, thought they were running away with it, everything turned around. There's still a lot of racing to go.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned the 2012 championship, battling Will and Helio. What kind of experience do you take from that championship drive that you take into the final four races with a never-say-die attitude you have? Do you have the same attitude this year?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Absolutely, we're going for it,

no doubt. We have to focus on every session, make the most of it, race wins. That's what's going to get you there.

We had a strong head of steam going in that season. We won Baltimore, then we went to Sonoma, were taken out in the hairpin on one of the restarts, shuffled all the way to the back. We had a third in the bag basically with a few laps left to go. Very frustrating. At that point, I think everyone wrote us off.

Going to Fontana, nobody really had us at a shot of winning it. I forget what the points deficit was. At the end of the night we ended up winning by three points. It's not over till the last lap, especially with double points on the line, could be a huge swing race.

THE MODERATOR: This weekend is the ABC 500 at Pocono Raceway. You won there in 2015. What kind of racing do you expect with the 2018 car and maybe some of the options aerodynamically that IndyCar is providing for the weekend?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: It's tough to say. We've added in some new options, like you mentioned, on the aero side of it to really help the front of the car in traffic, to keep the front grip. What the drivers really need is that front grip later in the corner. We had an issue with that at the Indy 500.

Even with a good car, you could only get so close. It was very difficult to complete passes until you had a restart or something like that. Hopefully this will be a good change for us.

But I don't know what to expect. It's going to be my first time on that track with this new car, new additions to it. We have a lot of work to do in a short amount of time once we get on the track at Pocono.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions for Ryan Hunter-Reay.

Q. Ryan, the defending champion at Pocono is Will Power, Penske team. This year at Indy, they appeared to have a little bit of a horsepower advantage on the top end. I was wondering if you think that may still be the case at Pocono this year? How do you feel the Honda team chances are this weekend?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I think we have a great chance. I mean, Pocono race is different than Indy. It is its own

beast. It's very particular in that in turn three with banking, it's a true handling corner. Feels almost like a Milwaukee type of corner, but going twice the speed. You have to set your car up for that. You have to set your car up for turn one, which is a massively banked, tight radius corner. It comes more down to a handling aspect to balance, trying to get the setup right.

I think we're going to see a different type of race. I don't think it's just going to come down to top end speed, although that will help at Pocono. I think it's going to be more of a handling race.

Q. Do you feel the front wing changes that IndyCar is making, although minor, for this weekend is going to help the racing?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: It's supposed to help. We'll have to see. Even with the few cars that tested at Pocono last week, we don't really have an understanding yet of what these cars are going to do in a group, because nobody ran together.

The first session will really tell us a lot. It will be the first time we get this aero package and with add-ons, that IndyCar has opened up. It will be the first time that gets into a pack in actual racing on track.

We hope so. We think so. The data says it should help, shift the balance towards the forward. Hopefully we can make that happen and also make for a better race.

Q. Ryan, you were 20th and 18th the first two times at Pocono, then first, third and eighth since. I'm wondering if something clicked, you figured something out about that track? Also, could you speak to how, even though you won once, you feel like you could have won more than once the last three years.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Yeah, certainly. It's been some missed opportunities. One of those results you mentioned in the frontside of that lineup of data was we had a mechanical suspension failure during the race. That sidelined us. The next one I think we were running second or third, got run over by Takuma in pit lane on the entry, which broke the suspension. Then as recently at 2016 we were leading the race, and we had an electrical failure that put us all the way to the back of the field. Came back through, all the way back through, to finish third, but just ran out of time.

I think more often than not we've been very competitive there, we've shown that we can be strong. But last year I feel we did about as good as we could have done. I had a huge shot in qualifying, started last. We got up to the front, led the race. In the end when it really became a shootout, we couldn't match the Penskes.

Hopefully this year we can turn that around. All new car. It's basically starting from a clean sheet of paper

for everybody. It will be interesting to see how we can roll out.

No doubt I expect, Will has a great record there, so I definitely expect the Penskes and expect those guys to be strong. I believe we can be there with them as I mentioned before. It comes down to handling, and hopefully we can get that sorted.

Q. Driver history, the fact that you're among the people that have won there before, how much does that help you or how much is that a boost for guys like you and Will that have done well there?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Well, it doesn't directly do anything for you other than the fact you know what you want, what you need out of the racecar to win that race. You know what you're looking for when you're setting up the car in practice and in warmup. You know what you need out of it in turn three versus turn one, the compromise that's there, because there is a compromise between the two.

I think that's where it really helps.

Q. Ryan, from a momentum standpoint, motivation, confidence, you've got to be really feeling good right now because you're in the middle of the playoff chase. This year you're in it, and you have the potential to win the championship again. Talk a little bit about the confidence and the motivation for you and the team as you are now as opposed to the last couple of years when you were kind of watching other guys win the championship, you fell short. Tell me about this year, how confident and motivated you guys are now.

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Yeah, I think as a team we kind of struggled during the aero kit years. Now that we're back on a universal aero kit like we were when we had some success in 2012, '13 and '14. You show up on a race weekend, you know you have a chance. You're going in there and the team is going to be able to give you the car that you potentially need to win. That makes all the difference really for a driver, just knowing week in and week out that you've got a shot at winning and making that run for the championship. I think that's what we showed this year.

It does a lot for your confidence and it really keeps you motivated, no doubt.

Q. Ryan, obviously with it being a new aero kit this year, is there anything you can take from the previous ovals this year in terms of the right setup for Pocono? Or is it just because it's a completely different circuit, you have to kind of learn completely new in terms of the right setup?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Yeah, there's some similarities to Indianapolis that we can take over to Pocono. It does have an offset that we have found in the past. The two tracks are not exactly similar. They definitely require different setups.

But that's really what we'll do, I think. Zach Veach tested last week, he was the only Andretti car to test, but he got us some good data. Probably a good starting point there.

Really the tricky part now is getting in traffic and seeing what we have. It's one thing to put a good qualifying car on track, do it all alone, but it's a completely different set of circumstances when you put yourself into a group of 10. We'll have to see where we are there. That's will be the difference maker, I think.

Q. What are your thoughts on Fernando Alonso, he won't be racing in Formula 1 next season? Would you like to see him in IndyCar next year?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: That would be great, absolutely. This series, I've been saying it for a while, this series is the most competitive series in the world, no doubt. You cannot name who is going to win each race. There are no favorites. There's a long list of winners even from this year. You have a really tight championship.

It would be appealing to me, if I were him. I spent time with him as his teammate. He's as hungry as ever to win. I think IndyCar is a great spot. IndyCar stock continues to rise for that reason.

Q. Ryan, how difficult is Pocono in terms of a track to get the setup right with three distinctly different corners but long straightaways? How difficult is that, especially only having two short practice sessions on Saturday to get the car dialed in?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Yeah, it's a major time crunch. Really hard to get all that done in a short amount of time. It's really the compromise between turns three and one. That are polar opposites. One corner feels like it's got no banking, no support to it, the other one is massive banking and a tight radius. It's very difficult to get those two corners right and get the compromise right with the car when you're along.

Once you get into traffic, things change a lot. There will be a qualifying setup, a race setup. We have to do all this with two hours total track time. It will be very difficult, no doubt.

Q. Is turn three one of the bigger corners to get it right with getting such a run on the straightaway? It looks like the temperature is supposed to be about 10 degrees cooler than Indy. There's a new package this weekend. Do you expect that corner, you need to hit it right the most of the three to get a run on somebody?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: You kind of led to the weather side of it there. I think that's the biggest thing. That's the biggest, you know, variable. First of all, ambient weather, track temperature. Most importantly is wind direction. Wind direction will dictate if the lead passing zone is coming out of three going into one, or coming

out of one going into two, or coming out of two going into three. It all depends on the wind direction. That's huge.

Q. 95 pints out, four races to go, you've had a lot of strength on ovals, especially superspeedways. Is this not quite a must win but must podium?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: No doubt. Being 95 points down to Scott, what needs to happen now is we need to go on a run and he needs to start having some bad luck, some difficult races, some circumstances going against him, things like that, which it can do.

Man, like I mentioned earlier, the 2012 season, there were so many swings and kinks in that season. As soon as I thought I figured out who really had the upper hand, it all changed.

You just have to keep your head down. In this series, it's the same way in a race, you could be starting mid pack, back of the pack. If you go into it with the right mindset, keep your head down, be tenacious, persistent, you can win races, any of them, and you can win championships.

Just have to keep focused and make the most of it. Number one thing we have to do is go on the offensive and make a run for it.

Q. Ryan, the last two years at Pocono, you've had to start in the back, and you've been able to come to the front. Talk about what it's like, what that is like, marching to the front, the patience that you have to get to the front?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Ideally we wouldn't want to start back there. It makes the day a lot more straightforward when you start up front. That's our number one goal. Really focusing on race setup, practice, making sure we have what we need from the car, I have what I need in traffic is most important.

I think that's why we've been able to do, what we've done in the past, which is go from the back to the front, not getting too carried away with forcing the issue, trying to methodically pick 'em apart as you go through.

Through the race, we've been in the past very good about making the car even better as we get through it with setup changes, tire pressure changes, things like that. Hopefully we can use some of our past lessons and apply them, as well.

Q. With the points situation, how do you kind of approach that? You say you've got to go on a run here. How closely do you watch what the other guys are doing? How closely do you watch the other guys you're chasing in this points battle during the course of the race, or do you have to worry about what you have to do?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I think you can't help but notice

where you are. You really have to be focused on yourself and just winning. You can't worry about who is where at what time in the weekend. You got to absolutely focus on putting yourself up front.

After the race, first thing I ask is, Where are the guys that we're fighting in the championship, where did they finish? It's just a curiosity standpoint. You just have to stay focused on yourself.

Q. Ryan, with Fernando Alonso, you raced with him last year as a teammate at Indy. If he were to come to IndyCar, would you welcome him into the Andretti team either as a teammate or as a co-teammate with McLaren? How did he work together in terms of car setup with you guys? Was he a good asset?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Yeah, absolutely. Worked very well together. Yeah, I'd welcome him, no doubt. I have no idea where this whole thing is going right now. I don't know where McLaren stands right now. I don't know how that relates to Andretti. A lot of speculation at the moment.

I think he'd be a great addition to IndyCar and I think he'd have a lot of fun here.

Q. Ryan, obviously one of the guys ahead of you is Alexander Rossi, your teammate. Where is the fine line to working with a guy and being happy for how he's doing, but also wanting to beat him on race day?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: I think Alex has done a great job. We work really well together at teammates, so... The two of us working together, and actually the four of us working together, that's the great thing about Andretti, is four cars, all of us as a group, we're all very close.

But, no, Alex and I work very well together. We tend to like similar setups. We've definitely found in the past it's better to work together than go your separate ways.

No doubt, we're pushing forward. We want Andretti Autosport to win the championship, whether it's him or myself. Obviously I'd prefer the 28 car was the one that won it. We're pushing for that common goal, no doubt about it.

Q. Ryan, Sage Karam tried to get a ride this weekend, came up sponsorship dollars 50,000 short, something like that. What do you think about Sage, he runs that one race, the 500 every year, but it's tough to get back on the circuit. Speak to the challenges a young guy faces getting sponsorship, the permanent ride?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: It's very difficult. I mean, I was there, no doubt about it. I jumped around team to team, just trying to find whatever opportunity I could, IMSA, GRAND-AM, IndyCar, even some NASCAR testing, super late models. I've been everywhere.

It's very difficult. You just have to keep putting your face in front of the right people, making yourself available at the right times. I mean, he's doing sports cars. I think he's doing what he has to to keep himself behind the wheel of a racecar.

You just have to keep pushing and hope that door opens. That's what you're waiting for, that door to crack open enough to get your foot in there. Once you get your foot in, you have to rip the door wide open.

A lot of times it comes down to sponsorship funding, corporate funding. Those things are moving pieces. It's tough to really -- sometimes tough to really nail that down.

I've been incredibly fortunate being with DHL and Andretti Autosport, great family there. It's tough at times to really nail down that consistent ride that can really turn into results.

He's done a great job in the past. Yeah, I don't know. Just has to keep pushing it. It's tough, no doubt. There's a lot of other great drivers out there going for the same thing.

Q. Obviously Sage, his hometown track, Pocono has been on the schedule for six or seven years. How do the guys look forward to it? Do they see this as an important track to keep on the schedule, East Coast market?

RYAN HUNTER-REAY: Yeah, it's an important market, no doubt. It's a great track for IndyCar racing. The races there have been unbelievable, passes every lap, nailbiting finish. It's been great.

I think everybody looks forward to going back to Pocono, put on a great show there. It's a great fit for IndyCar, absolutely. I think hopefully we'll be there for many years to come.

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as we have no further questions for Ryan, we'll thank him for his time and wish him the best of luck this weekend at Pocono Raceway.