

IndyCar Media Conference

Thursday September 6, 2018

Alexander Rossi

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media conference call. For the last few weeks, we've been highlighting the drivers contending for the 2018 Verizon IndyCar Series championship, and today we're pleased to be joined by Alexander Rossi of Andretti Autosport.

Alexander drives the No. 27 NAPA Auto Parts Honda and won the 100th running of the Indianapolis 500 in 2016. He is currently second in the points standings after a breakout season that has him winning three races and being on the podium eight times.

Alex, thanks for taking the time to be with us today.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: It's been a breakthrough season for you. From your perspective, what has 2018 been for you and the No. 27 NAPA Auto Parts team?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: It's been great. It's been a continuation of really the second half of 2017 where I think the whole Andretti Autosport organization made a pretty big step forward. It's been a pleasure to be part of the team and watch the progress that's been made since I came onboard in '16.

The fact that we've been able to win three races this year, run towards the front most weekends, has been kind of just the result of a lot of hard work and a lot of very good people on the team.

THE MODERATOR: You were eligible for the championship going to the finale last year. 29 points behind Scott Dixon for the championship this year. What has your first real championship fight been like?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: It's been a lot of fun. I mean, you mentioned that we were eligible last year, but we didn't even really consider that as a possibility. To actually be going into this weekend with a goal in mind of trying to win the thing outright, it's just a privilege. It's a privilege to be mentioned in the same sentence at Scott Dixon, to be able to race against someone of his caliber week in and week out, hopefully get the better of him.

THE MODERATOR: Do you have any regrets about the year? There's been some opportunities where you left points on the table which could have made your job

of beating Scott Dixon and making your chances easier at Sonoma.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: No, I think there's always points in the season which you look back on as a missed opportunity. You talk about that, then you look forward, you try and maximize the best that you have. Leaving Toronto, we had three pretty rough weekends in a row with Iowa, Road America, and Toronto. We knew that it was going to take something pretty special to get ourselves back in the fight.

Going to Mid-Ohio, we just focused on just doing our job on Sunday. We always had a fast car, but we weren't executing, sometimes making mistakes, generally up and down throughout the whole team. You can't win a championship that way. I think everyone just really refocused and recentered going into Mid-Ohio. We've seen the results of that.

THE MODERATOR: Next weekend is the IndyCar Grand Prix of Sonoma. It's the closest race to your hometown, Lake Tahoe. What kind of race do you expect at Sonoma? With all the friends and family coming, you're not going to feel any extra pressure, are you?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: No, I mean, the past couple of years I've had probably a bit more than 75 guests. It's an amazing weekend from that standpoint. Obviously with it being the last time we're racing at Sonoma, we'll hopefully end on a high personally, because that track has a lot of personal history for me and my family.

Yeah, we're just going to try to go out there, put on a show for everyone, make it a pretty awesome season finale.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll open it up for questions for Alexander Rossi.

Q. Last year Penskes were pretty dominant at Sonoma. I think you qualified around eighth, had some mechanical issues during the race. Have you tested this year there and how do you like your chances?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: We have not tested there yet. We'll test on Thursday leading into the weekend. Yeah, for sure, Penske has always been strong there, I think. I don't think there's been a year where those cars aren't at the front. Without a doubt there's a benchmark.

Yeah, I mean, there's really nothing we can do about them. They're always a threat. We'll go into it, and I think we found quite a bit of performance on road courses the second half of this year, really from Road America onwards. Hopefully that carries forward to Sonoma, we have a constructive test on Thursday, maximize that time, build a fast racecar.

No secret it's pretty hard to pass around Sonoma. We need to make sure we have a car we can qualify up front with.

Q. Last weekend at Portland, there was some controversy around what happened to you with the caution flag. It's happened many times in the past with IndyCar. Caution flags are caution flags, but then they closed the pits. You were involved a little bit in F1. Do you think IndyCar would be better off with a virtual safety car system like they use in Formula 1 so that maybe these cautions wouldn't be such a crapshoot, so to speak?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, I mean, I really have no idea. I don't know how a virtual safety car would work on an oval. I think that's really been the biggest concern because you don't want to have two different procedures for two different types of tracks.

We have to remember that Formula 1 has its spec track kind of specifications, whereas IndyCar doesn't really work that way, and the different types of venues we go to.

I don't know if, A, that works on ovals, and B, the infrastructure in terms of timing lines you can make that possible. I have absolutely no idea. So I don't really know those controversies. That's part of IndyCar racing. We all know the risks that go along with staying out, and you know the risks and potential benefits of coming in early. That's kind of what makes IndyCar racing what it is.

Not the first time it's happened. I've been on the right side of it before, for sure.

Q. On the ovals you probably wouldn't use a virtual racecar, you would use a regular safety car.

ALEXANDER ROSSI: That's something different.

Q. Obviously as a driver you're always evolving and growing and developing. What do you think particularly this year, where have you felt maybe you've improved or gotten or developed in most areas?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: That's a good question. I mean, I think that every time you get in a car, you learn something new. You're trying to be better and learn from the people around you, your teammates, other drivers. I don't know that there's one area in specific. I mean, I just think you get better overall. The more time you have in the series with the car, the team, on track,

you see upticks in performance.

Really, I think the big thing for us this year is just going back to a spec aero kit. It's really leveled the playing field and taken away advantages that teams have had in the past, just given us some opportunity to show the mechanical capabilities of our car, the strength of the Honda engine, all of that.

I think it's a lot of factors as to why we've been competitive in 2018. It's not down to one thing by any means.

Q. What about the sources that Andretti Autosports has, the continuity?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Continuity is such an underrated thing in racing. The fact that I've been able to be in the same team, first of all, but have the same crew and engineering staff for the past couple of years has really kind of just allowed us to move to that next level of communication, you know, being able to work through problems. I think that's the biggest thing.

It's pretty easy to have a good weekend when we show up at a racetrack, you roll off and you're fast. I think a lot of guys in the series can race and be up front when that happens. It's the day you roll off and your P15, 18, whatever, you have a night to kind of regroup and try and come up with a solution to your problems.

I think the guys who have been with their respective teams the longest are able to do that because we know how to maximize the most from each other, exact the most performance to get the end goal we're all looking for. We've had to do that a couple times this year. For sure on year two with Jeremy has a lot to do with that. It makes me even more excited for what our potential is in 2019.

Q. I wanted to remind you before the season started, there was some concern from you and Ryan expressing how much testing time Andretti Autosport was not getting relative to some of the other teams. Were you confident that since you started in 2016, what you saw from the team then, how they are now, that they have that same ability to make that leap, present you with the opportunity to contend for the lead at the very first race and remain on that hot streak pretty much throughout the year?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: In '16, I don't really know that I knew what was necessary to win at all. I think that's a little vague. But definitely from the beginning, probably middle of '17, I started to see kind of the results of the engineering changes that we had made in the off-season, kind of the structure and methodology changes we made from '16 to '17, started to have concrete results on black and white paper. That's when I started to think we were going to be able to do something great in 2018.

The addition of (indiscernible) and Jeremy Miller, the work of everybody at Andretti, from Michael to Rob, no one has even been content. Even if we're winning races, you come back on Monday, Whoa, this was not good enough, this was not good enough. It's that kind of methodology you need to win races and championships.

To answer your question, really from the middle of 2017 I thought we can definitely do something, making the steps forward we needed to. Then the big question was, That's great, but Ganassi and Penske and Carpenter and Schmidt are doing all this testing going into 2018, that's going to suck.

But Ryan and I were pretty calm and relieved after the first day we got in the car in Sebring and my performance was instantly there. While there was a concern about it, I think that we were both blown away with the package that we were able to start with and the baseline that we had. That's a huge testament to all departments there to be able to take kind of the numbers that they were getting from Dallara and such in terms of what this car is going to do, then come up with mechanical packages based on that.

Q. We were all excitement earlier this week with the announcement of Circuit of the Americas. You're one of the few current IndyCar drivers that have spent time on that course. What are the differences and how does that really stand out from other courses in the Indy season that others will have experience on?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Good question. Probably just the size. I mean, IndyCar tracks are generally pretty short. Most of our lap times are between 58 seconds and 1 minute 12 seconds, aside from Road America. Going off of the standard layout we all know, it's a big track. There's a lot of segments you got to put together to be quick. That was the highlight of COTA on the F1 schedule, is how they were bringing together three different kinds of sections of a racetrack and putting it into one. I think that's kind of the biggest thing.

At the end of the day, it's a racetrack, right? I think come qualifying, everyone will have figured it out and know that they need to go quick. Yeah, I'm excited to get there. I think everyone will fall in love with the city of Austin like we all did, and it will be a great weekend.

Q. Do you think there's going to be apprehension about the length of that course?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Oh, no, not at all. I mean, I love the layout. It was one of my favorite tracks. It is one of my favorite tracks I've ever driven, for sure.

Q. You had an opportunity to be a teammate with Fernando Alonso in 2017 at Indy. There's talk he may come over and run full-time. Do you think he'll have an easy time, given the diversity of tracks, in IndyCar? You came over from Europe. How do

you think Alonso will make out in the first year, let's say?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I mean, I have no idea. I mean, if you look at Robert Wickens for example, this year, talk about diversity of tracks, I think he set the bar incredibly high for what a rookie can do with very little experience on these types of tracks. I think you need to look to him, look to the results he was capable of.

Q. Are you kind of in a Catch-22 situation, the fact that you're from the Sonoma area, have a lot of family and friends there, does that add to the pressure or help the pressure?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I don't really think either. It makes my weekend busier because there's a lot more kind of meet-and-greets, stuff like that. At the end of the day, you don't really realize, I mean, who is there or what's there as soon as you get to pit lane, put your helmet on.

Yeah, it doesn't really matter to me. I'm really happy there will be friends and family and such there. Hopefully it's a good enough weekend that we can all have a big celebration Sunday night.

Q. Given that's essentially your home track, where does Sonoma rank on your list of personal favorite tracks?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Well, not in the top five. I don't know where to go from there. I mean, it's a great track from the standpoint of it's in a beautiful part of California, it's very challenging to drive. It's a track most affected by weather conditions because it's on the hill. The performance and pace you have in the morning to where you are in the afternoon is drastically different. I mean, it definitely keeps you on your toes.

No, I wouldn't consider it a favorite of mine.

Q. You spoke in Portland about changing the perception of yourself, at least you think the perception changed about you this year. Why was that important to you?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I don't know that it changed this year. I think it was more last year with all of the work that we did from May of '16 all the way into May of '17. I think that was a pretty great opportunity for me to get myself out there and introduce people to who I was, because obviously I came into the series without having come up through the U.S. ranks. I was an unknown to a lot of people.

I don't know that anything has particularly changed this year other than the fact that Conor and I were (indiscernible). Even more people knew about who we were. Yeah, I would say the perception more changed kind of in the middle of last year than anything changing in 2018.

Q. Is it you've noticed more fans wear your stuff?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, that's just a result of

winning races. Regardless of who you are, I think people, if you're on TV more because you win races, you have onboard cameras and stuff, people are going to be able to become a fan of yours, hopefully go out and buy your stuff.

Q. How do you think you're going to run Sonoma? You have to finish one or more spots, two or more spots ahead of Scott Dixon in order to win. Are you going to be running your race based on what your team is telling you as to how he's doing or going all out from start to finish and whatever happens happens?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Yeah, definitely, I mean, you don't change your approach. I mean, I'm going to win, I'm going to try to beat people, do exactly what we've been doing all year. That's our only responsibility.

If we win, we've done our job right. If it doesn't happen, that doesn't really matter. We have to go into the weekend and do all we can do to maximize ourselves, our potential. We have had a car in contention to win a race probably 90% of this year. There's no reason to change that now.

Q. It's tough to look at something that's not finished yet. Looking back at 2018 so far, no matter what happens next weekend, you talked about the growth of Andretti and yourself, talk about the growth of the series. Do you see it getting better, the competition better? Where do you think it is, considering the season?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: Man, I mean, it blows my mind that it just continues to go upwards. I think an indication of that was Portland. I mean, there was a lot of negative speculation, a lot of concerns, it being Labor Day weekend, all of this. It was a massive event. People weren't just going because they wanted to go, it was people that were going because they knew the drivers, knew what was going on. To be able to introduce new races to the calendar next year, it's going from strength to strength.

You look at how many cars were in Portland, how many cars are going to be in Sonoma, there's just no negative. It's been very cool to kind of see the progression. I don't see it slowing down any time soon. It's been fun to be a part of.

Q. You talked about going to the universal aero kit this year. Talk about that part of the series, the decision for going forward with the new engine package, where it's going in relation to how big a challenge is it as a driver, going into the final race looking to win the championship, how does that combine to make it difficult to win?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: I mean, I think it's going to be difficult regardless. If you look at the past four years, five years, I don't know, the past couple of years, it's definitely come down to the last race. Really it's come down to the last race regardless of double points or

not. That's just a testament to how challenging it is to win.

If you look at how many different race winners there's been this year, even last year, it's very, very hard to be good every weekend in the Verizon IndyCar Series.

To win a championship, it takes a lot. That really is regardless of manufacturers or aero kits or whatever. Obviously you're taking one of the variables out by making it a spec aero kit, you're leveling the playing field in a way. You're allowing your team and your engine to do most of the talking.

But at the end of the day I think it's really what the tracks -- it's the diversity of tracks and the challenge of the schedule, just the overall level and caliber of drivers. That's what makes it so challenging. It's not really any of the rules or regulations, it's just the people that are in it and how good everyone is.

Q. Do you see that continuing through 2019 with the new tracks, new engine package? Do you see an end to good competition?

ALEXANDER ROSSI: No, not at all. When a new engine comes, there will be some separation at the beginning just because it's a new spec. But I think it's all good things. Hopefully we can have a third manufacturer, can run more cars.

It all finds a way of leveling itself out at some point. I think IndyCar from a competition standpoint does a very good job of keeping it open enough in terms of the regulations to allow teams to have engineering creativity, but at the same time having a rule book that has 16 cars within half a second at Portland last weekend. You can't find that in any other championship on the planet. I think that's also down to how IndyCar regulates what we as teams are allowed to do. They should get some credit for that.

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as we have no further questions, we will wrap-up today's IndyCar conference call.