

IndyCar Media Conference

Tuesday September 11, 2018

Art St. Cyr Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media teleconference. Later this week at Sonoma Raceway, Honda will be officially recognized as the 2018 IndyCar manufacturer's champion. So with that in mind, we're pleased to be joined today by Art St. Cyr, the president of Honda Performance Development.

Art, Honda has won the IndyCar manufacturer's title before, obviously in 2004 and 2005, the manufacturer's competition. Since the competition returned in 2012, you hadn't won a title. How meaningful is this championship to you and everyone at HPD?

ART ST. CYR: I think more than anything else this is kind of a culmination of a lot of hard work that was done by the staff at HPD and the support that we received from American Honda. I also don't want to leave out the impact that our teams and our driver lineup has had since every one of our teams for the second year in a row has won a race this year. That really bolsters our opportunities to win races.

But always one of our goals is to win the manufacturer's championship. We're just happy to have done it this year.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned every Honda-powered team has won a race. There's 10 total race wins this year, the top two drivers competing for the title are Honda-powered drivers. What has '18 been like from your perspective?

ART ST. CYR: It's actually been a really good year for us. You have to realize that when we started developing this engine, this was intended to be a sole supply engine. Obviously when the competition came with Chevy and Lotus back in 2012, the stakes had changed.

The competition has been very, very exciting, which is what IndyCar racing is all about. Going through the years, we've had our struggles and we've been working to develop both reliability and performance, developing our team lineup and making sure we give an engine that all of our teams have a chance of winning every weekend.

I think this year really shows with the 10 wins that we have, I want to emphasize so far, because we fully expect to compete for the win at Sonoma this

weekend, but it's been very gratifying, very exciting to see that all of our teams are really stepping up and have a chance to win every week.

THE MODERATOR: How do you build upon the success of this season for next year in 2019 and building towards the new engine spec in 2021?

ART ST. CYR: That's kind of the big question right there, isn't it? With the adoption of the next set of engine regulations, it's very exciting for us to be working towards the 2021 engine. Obviously we just started working on that.

Part of the process of going to the new engine is the homologation table is limited to what changes we can make in our engine for 2019 and 2020. With that being said, we're not satisfied. We did not win the Indy 500, which is one of HPD's goals every year. We still have some work to do. The staff we have here at HPD has been working really hard to exploit the areas that we can with this engine.

But I think it puts us on a very good platform for being competitive again in 2019 and in 2020.

THE MODERATOR: Let's open it up for questions for Art St. Cyr.

Q. There's been a lot of talk about Fernando Alonso coming, what engine he's going to run. Is Honda at its capacity or can you supply additional engines were Alonso/McLaren/Andretti, or are you guys maxed out at this point?

ART ST. CYR: All of these things are a little bit case by case. We're pretty much set with the lineup we have right now. With that being said, having Fernando Alonso come to the IndyCar Series, someone that's recognized as one of the best drivers in the world, that would bring a lot of media attention. I think having him join the most competitive race series around would be fantastic for the series.

Now, I think it might be a little bit premature because personally I don't know what his plans are right now, whether it's a full season in IndyCar, Indy 500 only. I know there's already some conflicts with his running in the WEC. I think right now I'd just kind of leave it as we're waiting to see what their thoughts are at this point, and we'll act accordingly.

Right now the main focus for us is this year and really

finishing this year strong, especially since we have Scott Dixon, I'd put him up there as one of the top drivers in the world, and Alexander Rossi fighting for the championship for Honda.

Q. With that in mind, I've heard stories that now that the championship is won for Honda, the drivers are sometimes getting new engines, paying the penalty and getting new engines. Is that what you're doing for the championship contenders or are they on old engines at this point?

ART ST. CYR: It was always the plan to be able to run this season on the spec engines. One of the reasons why we won the engine manufacturer's championship is we were able to keep all of our cars on points earning engines.

With that being said, with an active championship fight going on, we don't want there to be a limitation for the teams to be able to fight for the championship, so we do monitor the engines, engine's health very, very closely. If we see there's an issue with one engine or two engines or however many it is, not just the championship contenders, but any of our drivers, winning the manufacturer's championship and having the manufacturer's championship locked up, it gives us the flexibility to change engines if we feel it's necessary.

Overall our engines have been strong, our engines have been reliable. We're looking forward to taking that to the last race.

Q. Looking at the engine regulations for 2021, a lot of fans, a lot of people might look at that and go, Why are we building for that now, it's so far out? To turn this into something, what are the challenges that y'all face whenever you look at something that is quite a few years as way, what are the challenges in building like that?

ART ST. CYR: I guess I look at things a little bit different. I look at it that we have to have engines on track here within two years. I look at that as, Oh, my God, it's only two years.

The development of a race engine is a pretty long-term process. Just starting now, it really fits into our schedule. Really we needed the rules fixed when they are so we can actually do it. It's a pretty long process because we want to start over.

As I mentioned before, this particular engine was designed in sole supply in mind, so we really didn't have planned, I don't want to say obsolescence, but increase in power and design when we developed it. It created a lot of problems we were looking forward to designing in the ability to compete with this engine for four, five, six years, however long this next engine is going to exist.

Fundamentally it's going to take us, as we start putting

pen to paper or lines on a computer screen as it is nowadays, this is just the first step towards developing an engine. We really have our process of design, we'll build our first prototypes here somewhere in the future, not sure when that is yet, testing those, hopefully with enough time to get a second iteration in before we actually start racing.

The timeframe we're talking about is actually pretty short when it comes to full engine development.

Q. Obviously Jay Frye has touched on it in the past about trying to get a third engine manufacturer in the sport. You've expressed you believe that would be good for the sport, as well. Whenever you run into a situation where y'all are supplying engines for essentially half the field, how difficult is that to look at, knowing that your resources are a little spread out this year, condensing that down by trying to hold onto some of the key teams?

ART ST. CYR: I don't exactly understand the question. What is the question on that one?

Q. Y'all have a pretty good program with some of the teams already in place. Y'all have quite a number of teams that are Honda powered. If a third engine manufacturer were to come in, how do you want to say this, what are the challenges in trying to make sure that y'all power some of the teams like Andretti, Ganassi, what are the challenges in potentially losing those guys?

ART ST. CYR: That's always a risk that you have, right? Part of competition it's really trying to maintain your core competencies, right? You want to have good cars, teams, drivers. Right now, as I mentioned before, all of our teams have won races, not just this year but last year as well.

I think that the capability of all of our teams has shown through. The fact that they're all capable of winning shows we have a pretty strong stable to choose from.

One of the issues we're having, brought up on the last question, with the rumors of new teams coming, obviously we had a lot of new teams this year, so the sport is expanding. I think having only two engine manufacturers right now is potentially a limiting factor for our expansion because, as you said, if we get a third manufacturer in, we would obviously have to go down in engine supply.

But I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing because it allows us to focus more on performance gains so you don't have to start building engines so quick.

In acknowledgment of your question, we will have to make some decisions, but I don't think it's a bad thing. I think there will be new teams in, as well, so I think both the Honda side and whoever else is competing against it will be on the same playing field we have right now by trying to get the best teams, best drivers,

and having the best cars.

Q. The engine for 2021, there was an attempt a couple years ago to have standing starts, then it was abandoned because of stalls, some accidents that occurred because of them. I know Champ Car did some back in 2007, had perfected the system pretty well were the cars weren't stalling. Any discussion between you and Chevy and IndyCar about doing something with either the electronics or whatever it takes to get these engines to work well for a standing start? Is that not on the table?

ART ST. CYR: Well, to be quite honest with you, we haven't really discussed that. But with that being said, given enough lead time, it's always possible. Anything is possible. Obviously our sister company in Japan, in F1, they do standing starts. The technology exists.

Right now, at least in the rules as we have discussed them, there's not really been a consideration in place for standing starts. With that being said, though, we're always looking to improve the show, improve the racing, make it more interesting for fans. If doing that makes sense, it would be something that we'd be willing to consider in the future. Right now there is no timeframe or no plans to talk about those activities.

Q. Some of that is probably related to electronics.

ART ST. CYR: It's electronics, it's clutch. There's lots of things that go into standing starts. It's about do you do it with cold tires, hot tires. How do you actually plan for it, right? I think the way it was done before, the concept was good, but I think there were some things we could have done better to prevent or at least mitigate some of the risk we were taking when we were doing standing starts.

Q. The 'push to pass' controversy has been that the 'push to pass' is used as defense as well as offense, and therefore we're not seeing as many passes as maybe we would if it was just an offense mechanism. What would it take, is there any issue for you to make it so it only works as an offense mechanism?

ART ST. CYR: I mean, from a -- I'll answer the question from a technical side. From a technical side, we can do anything that IndyCar wants to do, right? Originally you got 10 pushes, then we turned it to time because that's what people wanted. As soon as we make rules, everyone is going to look to try to figure out how to best utilize, how to best race within those rules. It's almost like it's a moving target when we do that.

The actual how to define what is defense and what is offense, I think it's a very valid point, but I think it needs a little bit more discussion. Whatever rules are or however we want to do that, I think we are capable of adjusting the system that we have right now to accommodate anything we want to do on that.

The devil is going to be in the details when it comes to

that. Conceptually it sounds very easy. In practice it might be harder. I don't know because we haven't engaged in deep thought about how that's going to work, to be honest with you.

Like I say, as a technical exercise we can do anything at this point.

Q. Given there's no discussion, you don't see something like that happening before 2021?

ART ST. CYR: I wouldn't necessarily say that. We'd be just as capable of doing it in the 2021 engine as we would in -- well, 2019 might get a little bit tight. Again, we're always looking for ways to improve the racing. The current Verizon IndyCar Series, what used to be the Verizon IndyCar Series, the current IndyCar Series is some of the best racing on the planet. Anything that we can do to help improve that as manufacturers, that's what we want to do.

Does that answer your question?

Q. It does. Something has to be done because some of these races the passing has been difficult. The complaint is it's used as defense, they are not doing what it intended to do.

ART ST. CYR: I agree with you on that one. I would also counter by saying, to be able to turn it on and off was going to improve the racing, as well. I think we need to think about it from a whole conceptual level. The question on the technical side is, yes, we can do it. The question of how we can do it still needs to be worked out. The question is how can we make it better for racing.

Q. You talked a little bit earlier about looking ahead, the limits in development you can do for next season. Can you talk about what kind of things in general detail what you're going to be lacking for in the off-season, looking ahead to 2019?

ART ST. CYR: The snarky comment is, I can tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.

Honestly, with the hardware pretty much fixed, right, the things that are still open, things like pistons, valves, those types of things, you got to realize that we've been developing this engine now for seven years. All the easy stuff is pretty much taken out of these engines. We've already done it all.

We'll look at how do we operate the engine better. How do we exploit whatever durability margins we have on the engine. That's really the way we're looking at moving forward. To put it in technical terms, how do we allocate (indiscernible) in the most strategic ways. It's a lot about race strategy, usage, how do we actually apply the power. Those are the types of things we look at. They're subtle, but in a race environment, hopefully it could be more impactful to the actual racing.

It would be easy to say, We're going to change the head, do this. Again, we're not allowed to do that, so we have to look at how we utilize our engine more effectively.

Q. This engine was originally developed as a single-supplier engine. To get the years of usage and success you've had with it, it's a testament to all the associates at Honda, HPD, everybody across the board there.

ART ST. CYR: Yeah, I appreciate the comment. Actually to expand on that, part of our kind of mantra here at HPD and Honda in general, not just in racing, in the real world as well, is to have a challenging spirit, really attacking the problems that we have.

It's been a very interesting journey over the last several years. As you improve power, something else breaks, you're always chasing what is breaking. Our guys never gave up. That's what racing is all about. There's a test every week, we like to say here, when there's a race. It's always about trying to improve, improve, improve, improve, and get to the point where we are winning races on a regular basis, giving all of our teams a chance to win.

We're really proud of where we ended up.

Q. Recently we said farewell to Mazda with the Road to Indy program. I'm familiar with the fact that Honda is involved with Formula 3, Formula 4. Is there a thought to expand on the junior levels in America and get involved with the Road to Indy in some capacity?

ART ST. CYR: I think the question is an excellent question. It's a very obvious question. One of the reasons why we are in Formula 4 and Formula 3, from Honda, it's a very strategic thing, to try to help develop more North American race drivers for the series. Honda Performance Development is responsible for North American racing. I don't want to make this sound negative at all, but a lot of the stars in the series have been in here for a while, won't be around for ever, Scott Dixon, Tony Kanaan, Will Power, those guys. We recently lost -- I won't say lost, but one of the biggest stars moved to our prototype program in Helio Castroneves, Juan Montoya, those type of things.

We need to for the soul of our sport, IndyCar is a North American series, I think it bodes well to have North American drivers in this series. Strategically having more options for the junior level drivers to develop their skills, bring them up towards a career in IndyCar, really is in our best interests.

With that being said, does inclusion in the Road to Indy make sense? I'm not sure yet. It's not really my thing. Obviously there will be discussions with IndyCar and HPD to see is there a way that we can develop synergies for that. Ultimately very have to keep in mind that the ultimate goal is to have I don't want to

say stockpile but a continuous flow of qualified, energetic, charismatic racers that are available and that will perpetuate the IndyCar Series long into the future. That's why we do it.

If it makes sense to have some more cooperation, then we should do it, for sure.

Q. Does it make it any more enticing when you see the numbers? In this year's 500, the Road to Indy were represented among 25 drivers of the 33-car field?

ART ST. CYR: I'm measuring my words a little bit because Honda is a very unique company. We have racing in all levels. We go from go-karts all the way up to Formula 1. It's not necessarily that we want to focus solely on one particular path. We have sports cars, we have Formula 1, which is a global series, which is run out of Japan that right now -- right now doesn't have many North American drivers, at least American drivers, in the series right now. We also want to be able to help bolster that sport, as well.

I think it's a very encouraging we do have a system that drivers can go from go-karts up to IndyCar. I wasn't aware of the numbers. 25 out of 33, that's actually pretty good, have come through that. We do need to have a system in place in North America to help develop these drivers that can come from aspiring eight-year-olds all the way up into IndyCar.

I absolutely support that. Like I said, I think strategically we have to look, does it make sense to have a closer cooperation or not. I don't know the answer to that right now. Right now we're focused on developing a bigger pool to choose from.

Q. Back to Alonso. I want to try to put a rumor to bed. The rumor out of Europe is that Honda does not -- Honda Japan does not want to supply engines to McLaren or Alonso, given the negative relationship they had over there at F1. Is that true? Has there been any directive from Honda Japan that said, We do not want you to do McLaren and Alonso?

ART ST. CYR: To say that we haven't had discussions would be a misnomer. Again, I really don't want to get into making news when it's not -- those plans -- there's nothing saying that Alonso is even going to come to IndyCar at this point. Quite frankly, I don't want to change any focus on the drivers championship we're doing this year, that type of stuff, to fuel speculation.

I think once Alonso decides their plans on that, we can decide from our side what we can do and what we can't do given our engine supply and where we're going forward with that one.

I know it's a very evasive question, but it's a hypothetical question that I don't want to get into right now if that's okay.

Q. Is there any swapping of technology or technical information, internal combustion engine design secrets between the F1 program and the IndyCar program today, are the engines just too different?

ART ST. CYR: Well, the engines are very different between the Formula 1 and the IndyCar engine. With that being said, though, it is a piston, internal combustion engine. There's definitely some discussions we have about technologies. A lot of it's more about analysis and how we simulate things, so there is a lot of cooperation, so much so that the current technical director of our Formula 1 team, Mr. Tanabe, he actually was at HPD last year, now he's running the Formula 1 team this year. So there is some cooperation between the two groups.

As a company, we would be remiss not to capitalize on whatever learnings that each side has to help the other side.

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as that was our final question for Art, we will thank him for his time. Again, congratulations on the 2018 manufacturer's title.

ART ST. CYR: Thank you so much.