

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday September 14, 2018

Art St. Cyr Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Thanks for joining us for the final media availability for Honda Motorsports for the 2018 Verizon IndyCar Series season.

Our guest as usual is Art St. Cyr, the president of Honda Performance Development. Thanks for joining us this morning.

ART ST. CYR: Thanks for having me, everybody.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start by requesting some reflections from you on what has been a very successful 2018 IndyCar Series for Honda.

ART ST. CYR: It is one of those years that it's hard to believe we're finally here at the last race. 16 races down, one more to go. As you said, it's been a pretty successful season.

I can't say it's ultimately successful because we did not win the Indy 500 this year. Winning 10 of the first 16 races has been really good. It was nice to have clinched the manufacturer's championship at Gateway, so it's allowed us to really focus on the driver championship, which for yet another year is coming down to the last race here in Sonoma. It should be pretty exciting.

We have two horses in the race, right, with Scott and Alexander fighting against Will and Josef. I definitely like our position better than their position for this one. You definitely want to be in front coming into the last race. Still have to execute.

This is a difficult, difficult track. From what I hear, especially with the lower downforce this year, the tires are wearing off, if possible, even quicker than they have in the past. It's going to be a very interesting run on Sunday.

THE MODERATOR: A little bit about the 2019 schedule. Give us some reflections. We're in our final race at Sonoma, and we're adding Laguna Seca next year, as well as COTA.

ART ST. CYR: The first thing I want to acknowledge is how great they've been here at Sonoma for us to race here. I've really, really enjoyed the time that we've been here at Sonoma. I'm hoping that this track gets back on a schedule sometime in the future because the

wine tasting is a very entertaining -- did I say that out loud (laughter)? It's just a very interesting track, especially with the tire degradation that goes on here. It's very entertaining to watch the teams try to manage that situation.

With that being said, it's nice to go back to Laguna, the site of our first manufacturer's championship back in '96, I believe. We have some good, fond memories there. Of course, I'm really excited about going to COTA next year. That should be a very entertaining race. I'm looking forward to it.

I'm pretty happy with the way the schedule looks like it's going to be next year. Looking forward to getting another one of these next year.

THE MODERATOR: For the second year in a row, each Honda team has won at least one race this year. Bespeaks a degree of depth and strength across the board that I know you're very proud of. Give us some thoughts about that.

ART ST. CYR: For two years in a row, it's nice that Takuma won at Portland so we could make the case that all five of our teams, that's Andretti, Ganassi, Schmidt, Rahal and Coyne have won a race. Actually, it's great because what we try to do as a manufacturer is we want to give all of our teams a chance to win every week, no matter what the track is.

Last two years has been the situation that we're never out of any race. The depth of our lineup has really shown through obviously in the trophy here, but also in the fact that we're winning races, and we're winning races with all of our teams. It's very satisfying to see our teams execute and to see the strength of our driver lineup from top to bottom.

THE MODERATOR: What kind of things is HPD going to be working on during the off-season in preparation for defending this manufacturer's championship in 2019?

ART ST. CYR: In racing, work never ends. The IndyCar engine is a little bit of a unique animal because we have a homologation table with this that you can only work on certain parts of the engine in some years.

In the acknowledgment that we'll have a new engine in the 2021 season, the hardware spec of this engine, I won't say it's completely fixed, but it's all but fixed. The

fundamental hardware of the engine is pretty well fixed.

Really the gains that we're looking for moving forward, it's about how you operate the engine, utilize the engine, how you control the abuse we put on the engine. There's a lot of work going into operational activities.

It's interesting. A race engine, you're always running it on the verge of explosion. The key is to get right to that line but not actually go over that line. How do you manage being right at that line? That's really where our focus is going to be in this off-season. That actually started right after the Indy 500 this year, and we're going to continue to work till the first race of next season.

THE MODERATOR: As long as we're talking about Honda Motorsports, corporate activities, I should say, also worth mentioning we've had a fairly prominent presence in the IMSA sports car series with Acura Motorsports. Share some thoughts about the way that season has unfolded.

ART ST. CYR: Yeah, the other side of our pinnacle coin has been the Acura Motorsports program that we have that we run two programs in the IMSA WeatherTech Sports Car Series. We have a prototype with the Acura Team Penske car. We also work with Meyer Shank Racing for running our NSX GT3 for that, as well.

It's been an interesting year. There were some high expectations if Acura teaming with Team Penske to run the prototypes. We've had our struggles with that one. Some of it comes from us, some of it is team side, some of it is us trying to understand how the balance of performance is working with that particular series.

Overall we have a race win, we have several podiums in our prototype. We deem that as a pretty successful season, not as successful as we wanted it to be, but we're still looking forward to improvements going forward.

On the NSX GT3 side, it's been a very interesting season. With the 86 car that's run with Katherine Legge, she's had a couple co-drivers, she's now running second in the championship. That car originally was only intended to run in the North American endurance championships. With that car being so successful, we decided to run that for the full year.

Right now we're in second place with that vehicle going to Petit Le Mans next month that we're hoping to close in on the championship. Not just the North American endurance championship, but the overall championship. We're right in the hunt for second place with that one. With a good race at Petit Le Mans, we have a chance of winning that championship as well.

It's been very exciting this year.

Q. When you think back to that day at the speedway in 2015 where everybody was called in to a conference room with IndyCar. It was the one track where the aero kit that you had actually looked pretty good at the Indy 500. You had to basically give that up to go along with the plan. At that point would you say that was probably the lowest that the program had gotten? Now in two and a half years, here you are with the manufacturer's cup. That's pretty impressive.

THE MODERATOR: Can I step in for just a minute? Everybody wasn't called into the room. That was the issue. But you can go ahead and take the question, Art.

ART ST. CYR: Hmm. I don't even know how to follow that one (laughter).

It was a challenge, right? I don't really want to go back about that because I'd really like to focus on the fact that not just that particular event, but that whole era was a challenge for us.

I'm really proud of the comeback, though, using your words. How well we've responded is probably a better way to put it. For all the folks at Honda Performance Development, we really put our heads down, said no matter what challenge gets put in front of us, goes to the Honda corporate culture, we took that challenge head on. Some companies might say to forget it. We looked at it differently. What do we have to do? We kept clawing our way, clawing our way back. We won 10 of the 16 races this year. Our plan is to win this one, as well. We want to keep going and win every race that we're at, no matter what obstacle gets put in front of us.

It's a real testament to the perseverance of the folks at Honda Performance Development, our teams, our drivers, and everybody really putting our heads down, reflecting on what went wrong, how to make it better, get to the point we're at right now.

Q. You look at it today, the level of demand for your engines, so many people want to be part of the Honda program. You're at capacity, maybe a little over. How do you handle all that? Seems like all the new teams that join want to be part of your program.

ART ST. CYR: Yes, so we do acknowledge we do have a good engine. But the competition out here, it's still not easy to win these races. We do have to look at who is coming in. We don't want to be limiting who joins the IndyCar Series. We really want to figure out a way to make it accessible to more teams. That's how we're going to grow.

The good news is that right now, with the engine spec being fundamentally fixed, there's not that much

development of the hardware side going in, so it does free up a little bit of capacity.

But we do acknowledge the fact we are actively seeking another manufacturer. By the time the 2021 engine comes in, it's probably not something we can do and support 30 cars between just two manufacturers. I don't know it's 30 cars, but hypothetically.

We do work to try to grow the series. We do want to have a competitive engine. What's the balance for that?

Yes, you're right, we are pretty much at our capacity right now. Adding more engines to that program makes things difficult.

Q. You said earlier for 2019 there are only specific areas where you can work on the engine. Can you give more details, what kind of areas those will be?

ART ST. CYR: I don't have the homologation table in front of me. What specific areas are we allowed to work on? Pistons, connecting rods, valves, valve springs. But that's about it.

Q. They're outside suppliers?

ART ST. CYR: Those are outside suppliers for our engine, correct.

Q. That mean you work with the outside suppliers to make improvements or make it better?

ART ST. CYR: Well, first of all, it's our design. Those have been open since the beginning, those parts. We have been developing those parts for the last seven years. The improvements that we're talking about right pretty small from a hardware side.

Most of our improvements that we've been able to do, aside from the hardware stuff, is obviously figuring out how to run this engine -- running this engine for seven years, we have a lot of information on how to run it and run it better. We're looking at trying to improve that area, the operation of the engine more so than the hardware because the hardware pretty much we've developed it out.

Q. Winning the manufacturer's championship in IndyCar, in general all your motorsports programs in North America, is it used in Japan as a marketing tool?

ART ST. CYR: That's an excellent question. I don't know the answer to that, per se, how much they use it there. We are a subsidiary of American Honda. As an American Honda program, it's very important to us here in North America to win this.

It's one of our three main goals, being winning the Indy 500, winning the manufacturer's championship and the driver championship. Those are our main goals. We utilize that to talk about our challenging spirit, our fun to

drive, our performance heritage in the Honda brand here in North America.

Q. If you had to choose one standout moment this year in IndyCar, what would it be?

ART ST. CYR: Wow, just one moment? There's a lot of them.

One of the most satisfying things was our performance on the short ovals this year because, especially in the aero kit era, we really, really struggled on the short ovals. The fact that we're able to fight for poles and fight for victories in those situations is really one of the more satisfying things.

But quite frankly, the season has been pretty successful because of the fact that we had a chance to win everywhere, right? Obviously our street course performance this year has been really good. But trying to narrow it down to just one thing is a little challenging.

I will say that this year in general, this maybe calls me a little bit of a homer on that one, the work that HPD has done, how much passion they bring to finding that little bit of something that gets us over the top, has been inspiring. I'm very happy to be working with such a dedicated and talented group of people to get us to this point.

Q. Since this year was the year for the universal aero kit, it would seem to take out of the equation the differences between the two engine manufacturers. It would seem to highlight the performance of both engines. It seems Honda has better fuel mileage. Over the years you haven't been able to do everything you maybe wanted to do based on the homologation. Do you think your engine has always been powerful enough to take on Chevy, beat Chevy? Now that you're running the same universal kit it shows?

ART ST. CYR: I appreciate the question on that one. I think the question is a little bit oversimplified for what is leading to our success.

So, yes, there were some tracks that the aero kit had a real or perceived, doesn't matter, disadvantage. Going to the universal aero kit obviously takes one of those variables out.

I think there's more to it than that. Obviously we continue to develop the engine. We continue to work on how to operate them better. But we also have to give credit to some of our teams as well, because the dampers are a very big portion of how you can go fast around these tracks. A lot of teams have put work into that so we can maximize what the engine can actually do.

It's a cooperative effort that I can't take credit for 100% ourselves. But teams and drivers and setups, all those types of things are equally as important to try to get

victories.

As I said, all of our teams have really stepped up. That's why they have shown the ability to win races every week. It's been a true group effort.

Q. How important to Honda is Alexander Rossi in terms of what he does now and in the future?

ART ST. CYR: Well, obviously Alexander and Scott, they're running for the championship right now. Scott has been around for a while. I don't know how many years he has, five or six years. If you extrapolate that out to Alexander, he has another 13 or 14 at that scale.

I think it's important, not just Alexander, but it's important for the IndyCar Series, at least from a Honda perspective, to get North American drivers in the series. It's important for what we're doing. Drivers like Alexander are important, drivers like Josef Newgarden are important, Spencer Pigot, Robby Wickens, James Hinchcliffe, those drivers are very important. We want to do everything we can to really grow this series and really put the best drivers in position. Hopefully they're driving Honda cars, but it's important to have those types of drivers in this series, and we'll do everything we can to keep the best of them.

Q. You have two more years with the 2.2 liter, then we move on. How exciting is it for you as a competitive entity to be able to build something new? Is that something you get that excited about?

ART ST. CYR: Well, the simple answer is yes. It's very exciting to have a chance to build a new engine. That's actually a really good question because one thing we can talk about in answering that question is realize that this engine, when we did the fundamental design of this engine, this engine was developed in an era of sole supply. We weren't expecting to have the power improvements in this engine that we're actually getting, right?

We're thankful that Chevy and at the time Lotus came in to give us some competition. It really has been a struggle for us. As we gain power, we find the next weak link in our engine that breaks. We always have to keep our finger on the development side. Now that we have a chance to redevelop it, we can learn from I won't say our mistakes but our miscalculations with this engine. Hopefully the development portion of the engine will be a little bit more straightforward with the new engine starting in 2021.

Give a bunch of engineers a brand-new assignment, they get pretty excited. Our director of engineering is standing back there with a smile on his face, right? The biggest challenge is he wants more money and I won't give it to him (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: With that we will wrap-up. Thank you all for joining us. Art, thanks for your time today.