

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Friday April 5, 2019

James Hinchcliffe, Arrow Schmidt Peterson Motorsports Colton Herta, Harding Steinbrenner Racing

Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama -
Friday End of Day News Conference

Note: The transcript below is from the Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama's Friday End of Day News Conference with James Hinchcliffe, driver of the No. 5 Arrow Schmidt Peterson Motorsports Honda, and Colton Herta, driver of the No. 88 GEST International Honda.

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with Colton Herta, driver of the No. 88 GESS International Honda for Harding Steinbrenner Racing. Second fastest today of both overall practice sessions for the Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama. Take us through both practice sessions today and the things that you worked on and ultimately the speed that you found.

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, I think we had a pretty good baseline coming here. We worked a lot on the sim. I know a lot of the guys were in the sim, so we got in there Tuesday after COTA, and we found some good stuff, and that translated into our starting setup a little bit. So, we already had a baseline on what we felt comfortable with, and moving forward, just little things, spring changes, maybe a little bit in the damping, but kind of general changes, not too big a changes. We did do a (differential) change over lunch, which I'm not sure how that went. But yeah, just normal changes, I guess.

THE MODERATOR: What have the past two weeks been like for you? Obviously quite the whirlwind following your win at the IndyCar Classic on March 24. A lot of things going on. You went to New York; you were actually here right before you went to New York doing some work to promote this race. Has it been an absolute whirlwind?



COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it's nice. I don't mind doing this stuff if this is what comes with winning. Yeah, I enjoyed it. I always love going to New York. I got to go see opening day, got to do 30 Rock, as well, which was cool to see where they film SNL. Yeah, I got to do a lot of media, and yeah, it's nice to kind of be done with the media and start focusing on the driving. I always enjoy that part a little bit more. But yeah, it was nice to get down here a little early, as well, and promote the race.

THE MODERATOR: Speaking of the driving, you mentioned how your day went today, but this course in particular, what do you find most challenging about it? What are some of your favorite parts of the track?

COLTON HERTA: There's so much that's challenging about it. The whole thing, it's a bunch of combination corners, so corners left followed by right, so you can give in the left-handers and get in the right-handers or you can get in the left-handers and give the right-handers. You know, there's always time to find. You can never drive a perfect lap here. It's so different. You could have a great setup and feel like you did a killer lap time and come in and be a half a second off. It's just that type of place. It's probably the toughest track that we go to. It's definitely the most technical for the driving style, and quite a bit different from COTA. 1,600 PSI brake pressure with COTA and then you come here and you're getting 1,000, so it's a completely different track.

Q. Colton, when the rules were at COTA, no track limits, it was kind of the wild, wild west show. Here it's a lot more technical. If you go off line, if you experience the second practice --

COLTON HERTA: There's no -- yeah, you're out.

Q. How different could those tracks be, and how much more precise is a driver going to have to be here?

COLTON HERTA: It's different. You still had to be extremely precise at COTA because with Turn 19, how bumpy it was, there actually was a preferred line. Whether people found it or not there was a really good line through there. And it's the same here. Obviously there's a little bit more risk touching the wall and stuff, so you have that going for you, but yeah, both styles take skill, and I think that kind of shows the best ability of IndyCar is how we transfer it from different tracks to tracks and still cope with different situations.

Q. I think I caught part of an interview where you

were being asked about -- I assume you had an opportunity to run both the red and black tires this afternoon. Can you kind of talk about what you found were the differences?

COLTON HERTA: Massive differences. (James Hinchcliffe) was the only one that I saw that actually got quicker on the reds. So, I'm not really sure what's going on. The reds felt kind of awkward for some reason. They didn't feel good at all. And I thought it was just me when I was out on track, but it looks like a general trend. I actually went half a second slower on reds. So, it's definitely something to look at. It's going to be changing up the tire strategies and what people are going to be doing in practice compared to tires for qualifying and the race, but yeah, it's definitely a different situation. I'm not sure what's going on, but it should be a mix-up. I'm extremely puzzled and kind of threw out my whole qualifying prediction on what tires we were going to run and the whole plan of the weekend has changed.

Q. I just wondered how much of a comfort zone you have here because you did so well in Indy Lights. Is it a track you're looking forward to?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, I enjoy driving on the track. Racing on the track is a little bit more difficult. There's not a lot of passing opportunities, but obviously pit stops open that up a lot, and it's actually usually a pretty good race here, depending on how good the passing is. But yeah, it's a track I enjoy. I've had a few poles here in Indy Lights, and it's just a beautiful facility, too. You know, it's not as green as it usually is, but it's still got the amazing stat use, and yeah, it's an incredible facility.

Q. Given what you went through today, though, you said you were kind of thrown for a loop on qualifying. I was wondering what you're expecting come tomorrow and how critical is it to qualify here at a place like this?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it'll be very interesting because we definitely got the balance wrong on our reds, but if we can find that half a second to match the black tires, it would have to be a pretty good lap, and the black lap that I put together, even though it was quicker in time, I don't think it was a great representation of what we could have done, but it's going to be very interesting because I think if you nail a red lap, you could go as fast as the blacks, but I feel like the blacks are easier to do that lap time. I honestly have to clue what it tell you. I've never been in this situation before. I think even guys like Ryan Hunter-Reay and guys like Rossi haven't been in this situation before. It's very strange to see this, and I've never seen it.

It'll be a very interesting weekend. It's supposed to rain tomorrow, so we'll see. Maybe we don't have to worry about that in qualifying. But we're definitely going to have to worry about it sometime.

Q. Colton, your birthday was March 30th, so age is kind of catching up to you now. At any point have you ever woke up one day and said to yourself, did I really do that?

COLTON HERTA: Yeah, it's been like every day since I've done it it's been like that. I couldn't believe it when it happened, and it's still kind of hard to believe. And it was a blessing, but it was also terrible because now I just want to win every race now that I have that feeling of winning an IndyCar race, and it's pretty incredible. It's hard to describe. But yeah, I definitely have a little bit more of a fire in my belly to go out there and get it done this weekend.

THE MODERATOR: We'll welcome in James Hinchcliffe driving the No. 5 Arrow Schmidt Peterson Motorsports Honda for the team this weekend. A podium finish last year at the Honda IndyCar Grand Prix of Alabama, I believe also a Firestone Fast Six appearance. James, obviously last year was a successful race weekend for you here. Are you seeing things in practice that make you believe that you might have that momentum coming into this year, as well?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, certainly. I mean, we were P3 in the first practice, and honestly, this one -- so that made us feel good just knowing that rolling off the truck the car was pretty strong. I think that's big. That's been maybe not our strength the first two races of the season. We kind of had to dig ourselves out of holes the first two weekends, which I think I actually did a pretty decent job at. But if you can start with a good car and just sort of have to fine tune it, it makes it that much easier. But the guys did a great job. The Arrow car rolled off the truck really quick. I think we only did like two actual fast laps in practice this morning, but they were decent.

This afternoon was very weird. I made a couple of mistakes on my black lap. I don't think that we were as high up before switching to reds as we would have liked or where we were capable of being, and then we threw on the reds, and the balance just fell apart, and the car was -- I've never been so unhappy with the balance of my race car. It's interesting because last year at Barber the balance between the black and the red Firestones was actually quite small for us. This year that was not the case. I'm really glad we got the set for P2 because it would have sucked to go in qualifying back down to (indiscernible).

Q. Is that just a difference in the tire Firestone has brought to the event this year?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: In theory it should be the same, so it could be a function of track conditions, the various different rubbers on the track. Obviously there's a few more supporting series here than they've had in the past, at least different ones. So, it's a combination of a lot of things. But obviously it caught everybody out. At a track with a bunch of long fast corners, normally the reds were going to be significantly faster, and most

guys didn't improve their times. Like I said, I think our time was more just because we didn't get the best out of our black tires, or I think it would have been pretty similar, as well.

Everybody has got a bit of homework to do for qualifying tomorrow. Like Colton said, there's a chance of rain, but if it doesn't rain on Sunday, at some point you've got to run both tires, and trying to find a car that is going to handle well with both of them is a little bit of a terrifying thought.

Q. Qualifying is obviously very important around this track, as it is at most tracks, but is there a part of you that was hoping almost today that it might rain a little bit just so you could prepare for a qualifying session that might be like tomorrow?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: No, we got a lot of laps in the wet last year, so I think we're relatively prepared for that. But no, it would be a shame just with the way that we're running to have that curve ball thrown at us. But at the same time, in the wet we finished on the podium last year. So, whatever happens tomorrow, it's going to be the same for everyone, we've just got to make the best of it and just see where everything shakes out.

Q. Can you remember back to your first victory, and can you relate to what this kid is going through?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I was like six years older than him when I did it, so I was a very different person, I think, than an 18-year-old kid. But what he did was phenomenal. He's proven since the first time he strapped in he's got maturity far beyond his years. He's handled himself incredibly well. I mean, the pace I think everybody knew was going to be there. He's in good equipment. He's going toe to toe with Rossi and Hunter-Reay and guys like that, so it's very impressive. But it's his maturity I think over the course of a race that's been the big surprise for a lot of people. Not because we had any reason not to think that other than his age. He's always been a very level-headed kid, watching him come up through the ranks, and it's very cool that he was able to set the record.

Q. How cool was it for you to be back up on top (indiscernible)?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, that's why we do it, right? So for kind of all the challenges that we've been facing this weekend -- and not just us, the series as a whole. These 45-minute sessions go fast and all it takes is one red flag to sort of throw a wrench into everybody's plans. That's the biggest thing I've been surprised at so far this year is if you go back through all the practice sessions and qualifying sessions, we've had a lot of red flags, and I really think it's a function of everybody is pushing so hard because it's so much more competitive than it's ever been, and it's just so close, and those extra hundredths and thousandths are hard to find, and I think a lot of guys are pushing above and beyond the limit to try and get there.

So it's making it difficult to manage your time on a weekend session, but it's the same for everyone, so we just kind of have to figure out how to make the best of it.

Q. I think there's five different tire manufacturers here. You talked about that earlier. Is this a case where you run out (indiscernible) in qualifying, could it be different?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Exactly right. We spend a lot of time documenting who we run after and what the car balance is as a result of that. Now that we've run where we've run after the Porsches, we have to take a look at that. The weird thing is on the blacks it was okay. There wasn't a huge change in balance. But the difference from blacks to reds I think caught everybody off guard. So yeah, we definitely have to pay attention to the rubber that we're rolling out on.

Q. Is it exciting when everyone is this confused going into a qualifying Saturday?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: No, it's terrible because we're just as confused as everybody else. It's nice when you're P1 and you know exactly why and how and you're pretty sure you can replicate it. I'm not sure we're in that space. No, it's honestly exciting for you guys, it's exciting for everybody at home for sure. It's going to be very kind of nail biting evening in the trucks trying to figure out exactly what happened and how to fix it, like I said, balance between blacks and reds. You've got to run them both in qualifying after everybody runs them both in qualifying, so to have a good car on reds you're going to be like undrively loose on the black tires, and is that going to cause more issues. What do you do? So there's going to be a lot of sweating tonight. Normally you like wrapping up, put everything on the trailer, sweet, polish it and go back tomorrow. It's not going to be that kind of night.

Q. Your team has certainly shown the last two seasons how competitive it is. When you got here, did you have the confidence that your car would roll off the trailer, that you had the right setup for Barber? You're explaining the confusion between the different tires, but is it something the team has found that works better here than maybe some other tracks?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Well, you know, I think if -- if I'm totally honest, we went to St. Pete with a setup that we sort of developed over the winter, and it didn't work as well as we were hoping at St. Pete, so we sort of fell back on old knowledge, and obviously we've had a good car there in the past, and in the race we were pretty competitive. COTA was new for everybody, and here we sort of rocked up with last year's car. We made it to the Fast Six, we finished on the podium, and we just sort of -- hey, that kind of worked, let's start there. And luckily Barber hasn't changed a ton. Luckily right off the truck it was quick. Like I said, when you get so few runs in a session, the way these sessions are

playing out, it makes such a difference trying to battle back from a huge handling and balance or something like that, so yeah, coming into the weekend we were fairly confident we could have a competitive car because we did last year, and after today hopefully it means we can kind of just keep chipping away at it and keep finding little bits of time.

Q. They're repaving after this race or sometime this fall; something you would like to see or would you rather it be the way it is?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Man, when you repave a place like this, it just gets so fast, and it's so much fun to drive, but like it normally hurts racing for a year or two until the surface cures a little bit. I remember we were one of the first guys out at Watkins after they did that repave, and it was mind-blowing how much grip it had. They did a treatment here a few years ago, like diamond grinding, and it was incredible, but unless it really chews up the tires at the same time, it sometimes hurts the racing.

But when they did the diamond grinding, it made the cars a lot faster, but it didn't chew the tires out. So that makes racing exciting when tires fall off and makes pit strategy and tire strategy important. But look, evolution of a racetrack. 10 years we've been coming here, I think the track was around for probably five or six years before that even. It's due. That's part of the cycle for sure.