

# NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Saturday April 6, 2019



**James Hinchcliffe,  
Arrow Schmidt  
Peterson  
Motorsports  
Bobby Rahal, Co-  
owner - Rahal  
Letterman Lanigan  
Racing  
Spencer Pigot, Ed  
Carpenter Racing  
Scott Dixon, Chip  
Ganassi Racing  
Takuma Sato, Rahal  
Letterman Lanigan  
Racing  
Graham Rahal, Rahal  
Letterman Lanigan  
Racing  
Sebastien Bourdais,  
Dale Coyne Racing  
with Vasser-Sullivan**

Firestone Fast Six News Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with our NTT IndyCar Series post-qualifying press conference.

Joined now by Graham Rahal, starting second. A new career-best start for Graham here at Barber Motorsports Park.

Graham, you mentioned yesterday you felt like there was one sector that you were losing some time with. Did you figure that out for today's session?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I think overall we got a little bit better everywhere. The one sector might still be a little bit not perfect, I would say, maybe a little thorn in our side.

But typically, I think the guys did a tremendous job today. This morning, our time and our finishing position, which ended up in the gravel, is not indicative of our pace, and we felt that. Did we feel we had the front row locked out? Probably not.

But the really good sign of this I think is that our cars are clearly pretty consistent with tire wear from first run to second run on those reds. I'm excited. I think we're in a good position as we go forward.

I think we've had good races here in the past, but we've never started anywhere near here. Hopefully, tomorrow can be a pretty straightforward, really strong day for us.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Graham.

**Q. There are some pretty big names that didn't make the Fast Six, including one major team, none of their drives made it. How surprised are you by that?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I mean, look, it's tough out there. It's tough out there. I mean, I looked yesterday, if I just told somebody, I'm P16, they'd be like, You guys suck. But then you look, you're four and a half 10ths off. It's brutal.

I think, too, today I felt good with this guy getting through because our first group was stacked. There's, like, 10 out of 12 that were, Oh, man, these ordinarily are locks into the top 12.

To get through that first group felt good. To be competitive, we were first and second in the first group, then to go in the second and advance. It feels good for us, no doubt.

It's just tough out there. The Andretti guys have done

an amazing job, and all they did was miss it by a 10th. That's all it takes now, man. We were lucky to squeak through.

**Q. Your father and the other team owners got to be a pretty good accomplishment for them. 31st career pole for the team. How excited do you get when you are able to see your dad and the other team owners that happy?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think the last time our team had a front low lockout from what I was told was Long Beach when my dad was driving. You're talking a long time ago, 20 something years ago.

Trust me, I think our owners have invested heavily into making this happen. Our sponsors. I mean, Obviously, One Cure is on the car this weekend. But United Rentals, Total, everybody is a big part of making this happen. We got kicked around last year, no doubt about that. It adds fuel to the fire. Everybody wants to be competitive and be up front.

This is the first step, but it's a great reflection I think on the effort that's gone in. I'm just really proud of the team. Go down there right now, you see a lot of smiles. You didn't see those smiles last year. I think everybody feels a little bit rewarded finally for all the effort that's gone in.

**Q. Did it come down to you guys made the right call in a difficult situation where you didn't know what the new red was going to do? Was that an engineering decision where you made the right decision?**

GRAHAM RAHAL: As far as in the Fast Six?

**Q. Just in total, your speed in qualifying.**

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, I think we made good calls. We kind of planned the sets that we were going to use when we used them. Because, you know, at least for us, I don't know about Dixie, but our reds were very different. Q1 reds versus Q2 reds were very different. Basically, we took a guess on which set we thought was going to be better for Q1. It worked. Q2 I struggled more. Then I ended up in Q3 using both. The second sets should have been quicker, but they bottomed a lot more. I lost too much time.

Overall, again, I think our engineers have done a great job. It's crazy actually because his setup and my setup is completely different, yet for some reason, it worked out this weekend.

Good job to everybody up here. How about Honda, huh? It's a great weekend for Honda. Hopefully, we can finish the job off for them tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Scott Dixon, his best start here of third. Take us through your qualifying effort today but also the strength of Honda here at the track.

SCOTT DIXON: I think being pretty much a home race for Honda, a lot of Honda partners here, it was good. I think we locked up the first five. Would have been nice to have the whole six, but didn't quite work out that way.

The PNC Bank car was strong. A lot of people have had a very up-and-down weekend. Yesterday we weren't sure where we needed to go. There was a bit of confusion on the tires yesterday as well. Really didn't get any good runs.

Today clear traffic, can put laps together fairly good. Seems like our car is fairly good on new tires. Looking forward to that. Typically, this race is pretty high deg. P3, good starting spot. Still, have a great opportunity to try and move up a couple there. We'll see what tomorrow brings.

But congrats to Sato.

THE MODERATOR: James Hinchcliffe starting fourth. We talked a lot yesterday about how everybody was a little confused, red tires, black tires, rain, dry. How did things turn out in qualifying for you especially with tire strategy being so unknown?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, I think a lot of people came into qualifying not knowing exactly what to expect from reds after yesterday. We kind of decided to not do too much. We had a good car on blacks. We sort of not knowing what it was going to do figured we'd strap them on, see what we had.

Honestly, it was decent. I made a mistake in turn 17 on my fast lap in Q3. Kicking myself for it because the No. 5 (car) has been so nice to drive all weekend long. Really proud of the boys, rolled off the truck strong. But we can race from the second row, for sure.

Congrats to Takuma and Graham. As Graham said, great weekend so far for Honda. We're definitely going to be looking to keep our heads down tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Our polesitter, Takuma Sato. You said you had mixed feelings yesterday. What changed overnight?

TAKUMA SATO: Like James said a little bit, yesterday we have a chance to go to the Firestone red tire. The performance quite honestly was very similar to the black. We all got confused today how we going to do the setup differently.

But I think probably Graham said that the team did an extremely good job, team effort. Big credit for the boys and the engineers, trying to make everything go together in today's conditions.

Before qualifying, we never thought we could lock into the front row. We knew it could be competitive.

Obviously, James this morning's time is very impressive. We tried to catch him. Luckily all the conditions were towards us. Great job for the entire team.

THE MODERATOR: We're also welcoming in Spencer Pigot, who we spoke with right before qualifying, starting sixth in tomorrow's race. Spencer, we talked to you about your perspective going straight into qualifying. Did everything go sort of as you anticipated heading into qualifying?

SPENCER PIGOT: Yeah, I think it went according to plan, for the most part. We have been making improvements all weekend. The car was at its best in qualifying, especially the first two rounds. Nice to have that progression and the ability to get the most out of the car, the handling.

Fast Six, I think we tried to be a little creative and go sticker blacks at the end. Looking back, that might not have been the best idea. Overall happy with our performance, happy for everyone at Ed Carpenter Racing, Autogeek, to be in the Fast Six. Looking for a bit more tomorrow. Looking forward to fighting with all these guys from the get-go.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

**Q. Spencer, how rewarding is it that you get your appearance in the Firestone Fast Six here, a track you won several times before in the Road to Indy?**

SPENCER PIGOT: I really enjoy this track. A lot of fast corners, elevation change, a little bit of everything. It's always a joy to drive around here. I've had some success in the past. But you kind of reset all that when you get up to this level.

Like I said, tomorrow is a new race. Just try to do the best we can.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Sebastien Bourdais. We'll continue with questions.

**Q. For whoever wants to answer. The fact that seeing you guys up here kind of shows how competitive the series is, at least in qualifying. There's no Penskes, Andrettis up there. How surprised are you guys by that?**

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I mean, I think you've seen all weekend the times are incredibly close. A track like Barber, it's so easy to make a small mistake that costs a lot of time, all the fast corners like Spencer was talking about. A car a little bit out of balance, it's a lot of lap time. You can't afford to lose a lot of lap time.

If you don't hit it, in one sense it is surprising, but in one sense it's not. It's more surprising that those guys just didn't hit it, but it's not surprising when you don't, this is the result.

**Q. Takuma, RLL has had some qualifying struggles in the last couple of years. Last year wasn't easy for them. It's been a history of qualifying issues. How satisfying is this? What was the thing that made RLL take a leap here?**

TAKUMA SATO: I'm extremely happy. I've done it a few times on street courses, but this is the first time on a road course. Such a nice feeling.

As a driver, as a team, top of the timesheet, whatever is special. First time in road course qualification, the pole. Front row locked in the team; this is a dream result.

Like everybody said, incredibly tight field. Today I think the team got everything together, so I feel really good. Obviously, tomorrow is a completely different scenario. A lot of big teams coming, chasing. It's going to be challenging.

We feel very happy today, and hopefully tomorrow we can stay competitiveness.

**Q. Sebastien, you mentioned yesterday that you feel like you might have left something on the table. Do you feel like you found what you were lacking, were able to perfectly today?**

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I still feel like the team has been up there for most of the weekend, better or worse. It's been in the mix. Just obviously a lot of red flags, a lot of weird circumstances, very difficult to put the lap together in general. I'm still struggling really to feel the Firestones. We've lost just about a second a lap from last year to this year in fairly similar conditions. I'm just not recognizing my car. We really haven't made any changes. We just kind of circle around the same base.

Just difficult to hit it right, to do a good job. I feel like, yeah, I left some on the table. I'm not quite sure what else to do. Ultimately it's the best qualifying effort we've had this year, which I guess I don't know if I should be proud or sad about.

Yeah, I mean, it's a track we historically have been really strong on. It's the first Fast Six of the season, so we'll take it. See what we've got tomorrow.

**Q. Seems like tires have been a prominent part of the conversation this weekend, whether it's going to be wet or dry. As a driver or team, how do you keep all of that in perspective and manage it with being so uncertain?**

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Clearly it's the same for everybody. It's not just me that dropped a second a lap from last year to this year, it's the whole field. I'm sure everybody is feeling the same. Talking with Scott and Spencer, there's no real good explanation. The Yokohamas, this and the that, other guys are talking.

Once everybody put a new set of Firestone tires on the

ground, the track has rubbered up. I don't see it being a factor. I just don't know if something has happened to the tires. I don't want to throw Firestone under the bus either. It's not that there's something wrong, it's just different, slower. Maybe the track has aged one more year, it's lost that much grip. It's definitely different. It makes things very challenging. We've seen a lot of unforced errors, a lot of red flags, a lot of people going off.

Yeah, I mean, it could be a pretty interesting race tomorrow. Hopefully, we just got a clean day, yeah, just put some points on the board.

**Q. St. Pete, COTA new, this place, Long Beach. Is this the most frustrating portion of the season, leading up to May, with its own challenges?**

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I'm barely hearing you.

**Q. The first couple races of the year, is that the toughest portion of the season, maybe most frustrating?**

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: No. Oh, no. It gets better. This is easy. When we get to Indy, that's when it gets all out. I go seven weeks straight from the Indy Grand Prix, qualifying, 500, Detroit, Texas, Le Mans, Road America. That's just the appetizer.

THE MODERATOR: Bobby Rahal, we heard from both of your drivers after qualifying. Congratulations on such a great effort. Your thoughts from an ownership perspective of how proud you are of this effort here.

BOBBY RAHAL: No, obviously we work very hard every year to put ourselves in this position. We've been close before. A couple years ago, '17, Graham was in the top six almost every road course. Last year was a bit of a struggle. Thank God Takuma won at Portland last year to kind of make our year.

We work hard. This team works very hard to compete against the level of teams that we do, like Penske, Ganassi, Andretti obviously. Today is a fulfillment of that effort. Tomorrow is the day that counts. Now we have to finish the job.

Historically we've had good races here. We have yet to start where we are. I think by all rights we should be competitive and in the hunt for the win tomorrow. Certainly, that's my expectation. We have a lot of work yet to do. It's not going to be easy. Penske didn't have a good qualifying session, but you can never count those guys out.

Like Sebastien said, if there's a lot of yellows, it may not matter how fast you are from the beginning. I think we hope for a good, safe race tomorrow without yellows. Hopefully, we can do a good enough job tomorrow to be back up there.

**Q. Takuma, your thoughts on Bobby's leadership**

**and the team they've put around you?**

TAKUMA SATO: Bobby's determination never stops. I knew that. Obviously 2012. Since then, like Bobby said, Graham obviously did an absolutely amazing job in the road courses, a couple of years ago, a one-car team, always come back very, very strong. So, the team has been there. The team never showed the ultimate speed in qualifying.

Like Bobby said, I think the engineers work so hard. Of course, everybody is working so hard in every team. We trying to find what was the actual problem because last year was a huge trouble.

Here we are. I think today with a bit of luck; the conditions were liking us. But in the end I think put everything together with just so fine work done by the team. Thank you, Bobby. Thank you for all the engineers and boys. I so proud of the team to be 1-2. This is great result, yeah.

**Q. Bobby, do you even recall the last time your team swept the front row?**

BOBBY RAHAL: Last time, I asked my crack PR girl, Cathy, when that was. We think it was '98, my last year, at Long Beach, with me and Bryan Herta was on pole. I was second, front row. Should have won that race, but we didn't.

You know, I've got to tell you, I'm lucky that my partners, Mike Lanigan, David Letterman, have as strong a passion as I do for this sport. We do whatever we can to ensure that we give our guys the tools they need to be up front all the time. Clearly today there's a great sense of satisfaction, but there's also a great sense of expectation that we should be up here every race.

We've made the commitment to the team to give them the tools and the resources they need to do that, to give Takuma and Graham. You can see what happens when we give them the cars. We give them the cars; they're going to be up front. It's really our obligation to do that every weekend.

**Q. Takuma, I believe seven out of nine times the pole winner has won the race here. What is your plan for tomorrow?**

TAKUMA SATO: My plan is to win, of course. Like I said, is extremely challenging. Of course, why we are here, we always aim at winning. Any condition I think it will be exciting for the spectators. Hopefully, we have no mistake. I think no mistakes, Graham and I working together. No, I think this is exciting. Hopefully, we get on the podium.

**Q. Bobby, the only thing better than a 1-2 start would be a 1-2 finish. How cool would that be?**

BOBBY RAHAL: Yeah, I'm not even going to think about that. We just need to do our work tomorrow. If we do our work as a team, I think there's a chance they

can be there.

We have to recognize we have to have a perfect race, and we have to recognize that other teams are going to try to have a perfect race, too. It's going to be a hard race tomorrow. I don't think there's any question of that. There's a lot of tire degradation. It's really going to come down to who is the best on old tires. It should make for an interesting race, as this race has been for many, many years.

Yeah, it's going to be a great race to watch. Now it's up to us to do our job.

**Q. Takuma, this track has a lot of character. What would you say is the most difficult part?**

TAKUMA SATO: Well, I think there's no easy corners, to be honest. I think it's connected. Like Sebastien said, just the balance change. Obviously, there is some completely blind going into turn eight, turn 12. Is challenging. If you don't have the confidence with the car, you can't bring the speed up on that way. That is a challenge.

I think also another challenge there is speed difference and degradation, how you going to cope, how you going to put the car good. I think that is a challenge for the drivers and engineers. This is a pretty difficult track to get everything right.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, congratulations. Thank you very much.