

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Press Conference

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Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing

Jordan King

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by members of Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, celebrating the 15th anniversary of Buddy Rice's win here in Indianapolis.

Bobby, we'll start with you. The season for your team has been pretty strong so far. How are you feeling coming into INDYCAR's and motorsport's biggest race?

BOBBY RAHAL: I think it has been a pretty good start to the year, probably better than what we have historically had. Takuma winning Barber was obviously great for him, for the team. Being on the front row both guys, that was pretty special. That doesn't happen every day.

But obviously Long Beach, we might have disagreed with the finish, but it was a good, strong race for Graham and Takuma. You look at the qualifying, much better on average. You look at the pace of the cars over the course of the races, on average much better. I think we're very optimistic. We made some changes to the team, added some people. Allen McDonald coming into the team was a big plus last year. Tom moving to technical director was a big plus and is still, I'm sure will be for years to come.

The off-season was a lot of hard work. But I think it's paying off. We come here; I think we're pretty pleased the way things are going. I expect that we'll be certainly to be in the top eight, to be going for pole. Beyond that, obviously it's all about the race. I'm quite confident we'll have good cars for the race.

THE MODERATOR: Mike Lanigan, what are some things on the commercial side that have strengthened the team commercially?



MIKE LANIGAN: The series is gaining a lot of traction with the new TV coverage. We're excited about that. We've made some changes over the last year with some new marketing people. We're doing a lot of unique business-to-business opportunities. Actually very, very pleased with all the new members onboard. Digital Ally, Nissin Noodles, we're excited about it. We think we have some long-term relationships with them, United Rentals, Panasonic. As we all know it takes money to go fast. These guys don't come cheap either, by the way.

We're excited about it. I haven't seen it this good commercially in a long time. Of course, we have three great drivers. Like to welcome Jordan to the team. Of course, we have the young guy and the old guy over there. We're excited. We think we're going to have a great month.

In this world you need a little race luck. If we get a little race luck, I think we'll be right there at the end. Again, it should be a great month.

THE MODERATOR: Notice he didn't specify which is the old one and young one.

MIKE LANIGAN: Let me start off by saying Bobby is the old one and I'm a little younger.

BOBBY RAHAL: He loves that.

MIKE LANIGAN: I'm a lot prettier.

THE MODERATOR: Jordan King joining the team for the Indianapolis 500, a familiar face around the paddock. Been a while since you've been on an oval. How have you been reacclimating? How are you feeling heading into qualifying this weekend?

JORDAN KING: I don't think it's so much getting back into it as it's learning again. I did a handful of laps around Phoenix, so I wasn't really up to speed at Phoenix. Here is completely different anyway. It's very much been kind of starting from scratch, getting into it.

So far so good. We've made some good progress, passed ROP pretty easily. We can get cracked on with doing kind of the proper setup work. I feel quite confident that we're heading in a good direction. But today obviously is another new experience for me. We've got the extra boost, so, yeah, we'll see how it goes.

THE MODERATOR: Graham, as Bobby mentioned, there have been some competitive performances from the team so far to date. How has preparation for this race specifically been going for the team? What can we expect on Fast Friday?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Takuma and I have been off to a pretty hot start here this year. We've been in contention at several races. Definitely had some good luck and some bad throughout this year.

I think the team has been off to a great start. As we look at this race, it's a 365-day-a-year job. The moment you walk away from here, two Mondays from now, you're immediately focused on what we need to be better as we come back here in 2020. Obviously right now we're pretty focused on trying to find a little bit of speed and improve the cars.

Last few days particularly in race running, today your sights change a little bit, your focus changes on what you're trying to accomplish. Going out there in qual trim today with increased boost, see what we have got, where we stack up. The team has done an excellent job.

It was a tough winter, as dad alluded to. The amount of the hours poured in by everybody to make sure all three of these cars were ready to go and competitive here, it was tough. There's no doubt. We had a couple of guys that we lost on the team just from the workloads were being pretty heavy. The rest stuck with it. We have a great group of people that have poured their heart into this. Hopefully we can reward them both tomorrow and Sunday as well as mainly next Sunday.

THE MODERATOR: Takuma Sato, Indianapolis 500 champion here at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Takuma, you have a pole win, a race win, then also second on the charts yesterday in practice. We saw a similar momentum build last year leading up to your win at the Grand Prix of Portland. Do you feel like you have that momentum on your side right now?

TAKUMA SATO: Yeah, definitely feel the momentum. It's just like Graham said, it's just continuous work the team. Obviously last year we were far from the ideal from our expectation, especially for the beginning of the season. The second half, we pick up a good speed, combined result coming together. Over the course of the winter, the engineers and boys at the factory work so hard to be prepared for the 2019 season to give Graham and me a great opportunity to race in very competitive equipment.

Of course, the month of May started. We show some good speed. So, yeah, I feel really good. It's just great traction for the immediate point of view, but the significance of the engineering, moving forward the situation compared to last year. I feel definitely great

motivation in the team.

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

Q. Graham, next Sunday may be your 200th career Indy car start. What is your favorite memory so far of the first 199? Bobby, how proud as a team owner and father watching your son?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I didn't know it was 200, honestly. That's pretty cool. Hopefully 200 is not only from a number standpoint but a special one.

We feel we can really contend here. I think yesterday we made some great strides in our racecar. While we didn't get in any big groups, I think Takuma and I both felt like we were pretty competitive.

Hopefully 200 is a special one across the board. I mean, I don't know, for me in the first 199 there's been a lot of great memories, a lot of close calls. I don't know that anything, probably nothing other than winning the Indy 500, will beat Mid-Ohio for me. I know a lot of people would say Detroit. Sweeping Mid-Ohio was a dream come true for me. That will be hard to replace until we do it again.

Yeah, I mean, I feel good about next week, I really do. I think we're quietly optimistic. We haven't gotten any of those big crazy tow laps to put us at the top of the charts, but I certainly wouldn't sleep on our team in general. Looking forward to it.

Q. Bobby, depending on funding or sponsorship, is there a possibility you will enter a three-car team for a full season in the future?

BOBBY RAHAL: I think that's our intent. It's like anything. We're really pleased to have Jordan join us because I was impressed with what Jordan was able to do last year in his first year in Indy cars. He was quick, has a talent to run up front. To be frank, that was the could he to asking him to join us for this race. We certainly would like to see Jordan running with us at other races.

It does become a matter of funding. I think he's fit quite well in with the team. That's what you're really looking for in a second or third car. That person has to contribute to the overall performance of the team. It's not a matter of just a number. Our goal I think is to have three cars. But we want them to be the three best cars possible. First things first.

We continue to push. We're really pleased to have Takuma back with us again this year for obvious reasons. He's a great driver, great champion, a great teammate with Graham. We're getting to the level where we want to be, where we're there every weekend on average.

That's when you start to look for the third car. So, yeah, our goal is certainly to expand the number of entries

we have, but only if it's in the right possible way.

Q. Jordan, concerning the future, are you focused now to follow INDYCAR or you look also to other championships?

JORDAN KING: My first port of call is INDYCAR. It's where I want to be racing. I think I made it quite clear at the end of last year what I was pushing to try to achieve. Obviously it's taken a bit of a sideways step, I suppose, this year in racing other categories.

I wouldn't shut that door completely. If INDYCAR doesn't come up, then, yeah, I'll be looking elsewhere. My first kind of reference is to come into this paddock.

Q. Bobby, Graham, the last four to six weeks have been debated the idea of guaranteed spots in the field. Fans have reacted violently against that idea. The talk about that, does it come from a flaw in the system? Truly the fastest 33 are not going to be in the field under the way the system is. What is your position on guaranteed spots?

BOBBY RAHAL: I think now the fastest 33 under the current system make it. I mean, having been on the bad side of that situation, some would say in '93, I can tell you for a team it's gut-wrenching, particularly given the effort. Everybody puts forth a lot of effort. Inevitably in the good old days, there were a lot of people that would go home very disappointed.

I think it's amazing that we're in the situation we are now, where we have more than the 33 entries. I think that signifies the commercial viability of the series because we have sponsors and teams willing to enter and participate, new teams participating. Personally I think it should be the way it's always about, that the fastest 33 and that's that.

Again, I got to tell you, last year I was not sleeping well the night before qualifying because it was looking a little bit marginal. Obviously we had no problem in the end. That's part of the lore, mystique of the Indy 500, you got to suck it up and get it done on qualifying day.

As much as it would be nice to have that guarantee where we don't have to worry about it, especially as a long-term, season-long entrant, I think that is not loyal to the history of the Speedway and the history of the 500. I think the way it is is the way it should be.

I think clearly, as you say, spectators have made their voices pretty clear on that. Let's just go qualify and go racing.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I don't have a lot more to add. My voice was kind of clear with Jim, my comments that were made. I think I grew up watching this place. Obviously I was pretty young. When dad missed in '93, he was the champion in '92, and obviously last year it very easily could have been us. I really, really, really was nervous that it was going to be us. In the end was

Hinch (James Hinchcliffe). That was an extremely unfortunate situation, one of the biggest names in the sport sitting on the sidelines.

As I said to Jim, as far as I see and understand in this world, things have to be earned, never just given. If you guarantee spots, it just follows the path of, in my opinion, a lot of society, which is that you don't have to earn it, you can just get it.

I don't stand by that. To me, you got to go out there and work for it. Our teams work awfully hard. We worked awfully hard last year, and it could have been us. Yeah, would it be hard on United Rentals, on every partner that we have that puts a lot into this? For sure. But it's the name of the game and you got to earn it.

Q. Almost a hypothetical, but in real talk, what would it mean if you or Takuma didn't make this field to the program? Would that be a devastating blow?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I'll tell you, all you have to do is look at history. Roger didn't lose his sponsors when he didn't qualify in '95, right?

Q. But that was '95.

BOBBY RAHAL: Right, but still...

I mean, I didn't qualify in '93, I got a three-year extension from Miller Brewing Company, thanks to Dick Stroup, head of marketing.

Last year with Arrow, Arrow didn't walk away. In fact, they expanded their involvement with Schmidt. You know, I don't know of any of our sponsors thinks everything is a guaranteed, it's a given. I think they understand.

As a driver, I'll never forget sitting up in our suite, watching the pace lap, all our sponsors there, I belong here, not up there. It was an emotional time. That's your obligation to your sponsors. You make the best of it and go on.

I don't see many sponsors out there, if they were true partners with the teams they're with, that would walk away if you had an issue in qualifying. I think most would say, How do we make sure this doesn't happen again?

Q. Usually in the past everybody looks at the no-tow speeds, but are they fairly irrelevant in Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday? You don't get into qualifying trim until today and tomorrow.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think for sure early in the week it's pointless. Yesterday the three of us did some qual sims all at the same time. We decided as a team let's do it at the same time so we can compare to each other. Some that ran an hour or two hours later, the ambient was a little bit warmer, probably going a little bit quicker because there's less drag.

You got to just stick as a team and see where you think you really stand. Obviously there's a few cars out there that are definitely fast. But I think as a team we should be pretty decent. Today is a good judge. Again, today somebody is going to put up a crazy speed that is pointless.

The key for us is to understand that today you really have to stick to your plan, which is you got to be on your own, be in clean air, understand gearing is so important. You get in a tow, it ruins everything.

The speeds at the early days are definitely irrelevant as far as tomorrow goes.

Q. (No microphone.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: Should be, yeah, for sure. Should be.

Q. With the return of bumping this weekend, do you expect the crowds will return in the same way that we saw in the '90s when it was such an emotional day for a lot of people?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I think you have to recognize the decline in the audience on qualifying weekend was certainly happening even in the late '80s, early '90s. In '82 when I was here my rookie year, it was packed. But it changed.

Certainly the drama of that, that's a draw I would think. Are we going to fill the place? I doubt it. You look at what's gone on on Carb Day, crowds, how that's grown tremendously compared to how it used to be. I think clearly the more qualifiers that make the attempts, the more drama there is, the more interest there is. Surely it's got to attract more people, I would think.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think something that's commonly missed in this entire discussion is everybody said 'bumping'. I don't know that bumping was the big draw back then. Part of the big draw was the speeds. Every year the speed went up.

When they broke down the barriers, you listen to the crowd roar, that was a huge part of it, probably more so than bumping. Unfortunately where we've gotten to is the speeds are regulated. We could go a lot quicker, but they just don't want you to go a lot quicker, which personally I think if you want to really bring it back, you have to increase the speed. I think that was such an important part of those days, is to see what the number was going to be.

Nowadays, I'm not going to say it's predictable, but it's going to be about the same as the year before, know what I mean? Look, even two years ago I think it was Dixie did a 232 in qualifying or something. That was the fastest lap that had been done since Arie or something. Everybody that was here went nuts. Even all of us watching. It was a big deal to see that.

That's got to be a big part of it, as well.

MIKE LANIGAN: 1977 qualifying, Tommy Sneva broke the 200-mile-an-hour barrier, 200,000 people here on Pole Day. The problem is, how fast can these guys go safely? 230 in my mind is probably the best you're going to see here for a while.

Like Graham said, you can probably do 265 down the straightaways and go down to 220 in the turns and have a 245, 248 mile-an-hour lap. We're going to lose drivers. That can't happen.

You are right, it's the threshold of the speed, but how do you fix it safely?

Q. Mr. Lanigan, Takuma has a special paint scheme. What is going through your mind? Look like traditional Mi-Jack car.

MIKE LANIGAN: Back when they stuck the IV in me in the early '90s with this track, we were a sponsor for years and years and years. We brought out the old tradition red and yellow car. Takuma and the Panasonic people were kind enough to work with us on that. All the Mi-Jack employees and all our customers are very excited to see it. I think we ran 10 or 12 Indy 500s with the red and yellow.

Takuma, thank you. Thank you, Bob, for letting him do that. We're real excited about it. I think Takuma looks much better in red and yellow, quite frankly.

Q. Graham, I remember a year ago in qualifying, how nerve-racking that process was. Here we are a year later. There's more confidence, more optimism. What has changed?

GRAHAM RAHAL: What's changed? For me, I don't know, I can't stress enough I think what Allen McDonald has done for me this year across the board from the start. Tom was with me last year. He moved into a great role that suits him on the technical director side. Allen and Eddie, who is Takuma's engineer, they're like two peas in a pod. Really strange they're so alike. Those two worked together in the Andretti in the early days, are best of friends. I think Takuma would say the same. As a group it's so much more cohesive.

Come here, there's no doubt Allen has been on pole with Hinch, with Ed a couple times, he's won this thing with Dario, with others. He knows this place. That gives you a sense of, like, calmness all the time. You can just look him in the eyes and tell if he's all right, you're fine.

I think we've done a lot of great things. We've come here with a setup that was immediately more competitive. We've been able to work from there. I can't probably stress it enough. That's not only at Indy. I think you have seen all year the worst we've qualified all year is 10th on a road or street course. Last year that was probably the best we qualified. We've had a

front row start and everything else. I think just think he's helped me a lot across the board.

But it is an entire group. I see the work that went in. You guys can walk up and down, check out any other team, any other car, I guarantee you, you won't find a better car than the three RLL cars. We take a lot of pride in that, for sure.

Q. Jordan, you obviously have two experienced teammates, experienced team owner. One piece of advice that any of them have given you that stood out so far?

MIKE LANIGAN: I'll give him one. No right hand turns here (laughter).

JORDAN KING: Yesterday and the day before, just said, Trust your ass. If your ass is telling you it's not safe, it's not safe. It sounds quite funny. It is true. When you're going 230 miles an hour around here, you do have to trust what your instincts are telling you.

Yeah, that was probably the best one.

Q. Always talk about setup. There's hundreds of variables, weather, track conditions, aerodynamics. You have to start with a baseline somewhere getting a setup. What are two or three items that must be solved talking about a setup for a car?

TAKUMA SATO: My turn (laughter)?

Tough to say. Obviously you have to have a good platform which gives you the solid mechanical grip and the stability, how much you can trim aerodynamically. That is a key.

Here, this place, by yourself, in traffic, is totally different scenario. The car is totally different animal, shall we say. Going around the fastest you can go, I think it never easy but you can predict how much you can go faster by setup.

Truly have a strong car in traffic, it is extremely challenging. The car good by yourself not necessarily good in traffic. That's how we all are working every single outing. It's not just one element. It's just total package. That's very important to have it.

I don't know if it answer correctly.

Q. Three full days of pounding around here. Who has the advantage in horsepower, Chevrolet or Honda?

TAKUMA SATO: I don't have that answer (smiling).

Q. Do you think it's even, as even as we've seen it here?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Dad (laughter).

BOBBY RAHAL: Let's face it, I don't think anybody knows yet. Today is the day we'll find out, right? I

would just tell you I think we have a lot of confidence in Honda, particularly come race day. Again, there's two events here: qualifying, has very little relevance to the outcome of the race, then you have the race.

I think it's real easy to get wrapped up in the whole idea of what you have to get on pole, all this. That's great if you can do it. More important to us as a team is to know that we have three drivers who are confident in what they have come race day, all the conditions, that we produce cars that can respond to changes made either inside the car or outside by the team, pit stops, what have you. If we have cars that can react to those changes in positive ways, then we're going to be looking pretty good.

I think it's always a ratio of what's most important to you. For sure, winning the race is the most important thing to us.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much.