

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Press Conference

Simon Pagenaud

Team Penske



THE MODERATOR: Forever an Indianapolis 500 champion. How does that sound.

SIMON PAGENAUD: It's amazing. It's another dream come true, and the biggest dream of my life come true. It's hard to fathom really. It's really hard to process it right now, but I'm just filled with a lot of joy. I drove really spirited today, but it's just incredible. I can't take all the credit because I think I definitely -- and I think it showed I had the best car out there. What a day. Wow, incredible.

THE MODERATOR: You used the word spirited. You were a madman out there at times going for it. You drove this one full throttle, didn't you?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, yeah, we've had so many times we thought we could have won the race, especially since 2015 when I joined Team Penske. I think '15 was one of those years, I think last year was one of those years for sure. In '16 we had a mechanical issue that took us out, but we were running second. You know, there's been a lot of races we were strong, but we never really executed to the end.

Today was about attacking. We had our strategy meeting this morning, and we decided we were going to attack, we were going to control the day, and we were going to take our fate in our own hands. Destiny is what we decided to control. It was pretty cool. Obviously everything played for us really well. The stars, like I've been saying, have aligned this month, incredibly, but especially today.

THE MODERATOR: (Alexander) Rossi passed you late in the race. Did you have concerns that might be it?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, because actually I was concerned -- obviously I led most of the race, so I didn't have -- except when I was passing back markers, I didn't have a big knowledge of my car in traffic. So what I did was obviously at one point we ran so much up front we didn't save enough fuel. When I let Josef (Newgarden) by and I ran behind Josef for the entire stint and the car was phenomenal. It was really easy to follow for me. So we adjusted the car really well during the race. Obviously Kyle Moyer and Ben Bretzman, my engineer, were giving me the perfect information. I think we had the perfect amount of downforce on the car, all the right decisions were made. The car was just

fantastic, and I realized that I could run second as long as I wanted and pass people when I wanted.

As you saw before one of the pit stops, I regained the lead on Josef just to make sure I wasn't losing too much time in the sequence. But then when Rossi -- Rossi I knew was going to be the biggest threat for a while because he looked really strong. He came back from the back and he's always really strong in these races, so he was a bit of a concern.

But yeah, I let him by to save fuel again just before the yellow came out, so that was a bit of a bummer. But we were able to get him back. Quite frankly I wasn't really worried about getting back, I was just worried about the rhythm, when to get him back to finish first. There was a lot of planning, a lot of brake drafting, as well. It was a lot of fun, and obviously my teammates, I think about Juan Montoya, I think about Helio Castroneves, I think about Josef and Will (Power), and I think about Gil de Ferran, especially Rick Mears, as well, they've been teaching me so well the intricacy of driving on an oval, and I applied it today, and it worked.

Q. You're a fierce competitor in every race, but is this as fierce a drive as you've ever had in your career?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yes, yes. I was never going to give up on that one, I'll tell you. But the same with the Grand Prix. That's pretty much my trait, that's my character is I can never give up until it's over, even if I'm eighth, I'm ninth, you never see me give up. That's what saved me, saved my career at one point. That's what always helped me, and I always believed. I've been saying it, but kids, if you're looking, if you're watching, always believe in your dreams, and if you really believe it, believe it hard, and if you work hard enough, anything can happen.

Q. Will's record of a May sweep only lasted a year. You're now the only other driver that's swept the big events here at the Speedway. What is it about this May that just kind of flipped the switch with you?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I think it's fate, quite frankly. Obviously in racing you need a little bit of luck on your side. You need everything to go your way. So it did today. I could do nothing wrong, quite frankly. And sometimes I can't do anything right. That doesn't mean I lost my talent, that doesn't mean my team is not doing a good job. It's just you have to accept that there's a little bit of mystery out there that you can't control. All

you can do is the best you can and extract the best out of yourself in every situation. The rest, it sorts itself out really.

Q. What do you think the impact will be back in France about this win? And number two, those last 13 laps, can you explain your mindset? Was it hell-bent? How would you explain what was going through your mind as far as win or else?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I've got 330-something texts, so I think the impact -- in a little bit, and I'm sure it's going to keep coming. Actually people in France are sleeping right now, so I'm sure tomorrow morning will be pretty crazy. I'm just so, so proud. Obviously flying the French flag like this, obviously there hasn't been a winner in a long, long time, almost a century, being the next one is just phenomenal. I'm so proud. Proud of myself, proud of my country, and I'm happy that I'm giving smiles after obviously the burning of Notre Dame was a catastrophe. It's good for the country to just give back, give some smiles and make people happy. That's what sports are all about. It's about transporting joy and adrenaline and fun. That's what we did today. I'm so proud that I think France is going to be very excited. Obviously the numbers talk for themselves. I'm sure we'll do a media tour there, as well.

But I also want to thank America. I've always been so welcome here, and that's a trait of character that you guys have is incredible to me. I want to thank you all for welcoming me so well in the country, treating me as anyone else really, not as a Frenchman but treating me like a friend of yours, and that means a lot to anyone, I think especially me. So I want to thank America for welcoming me here and making me feel like I'm home.

Q. Did you already think that you had won something here, the guy who wore this hat never won? Is that a reflection, like Senna never won anything like the Indy 500?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I would never think that, no, because I don't think of myself as bigger than him, but I actually wore him today.

Q. I have another. (Gives hat to Simon)

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, thank you so much. Thank you very much. I appreciate that. I won my bet. He said -- so Ayrton Senna is my hero and that was Ayrton Senna's hat and he said, if you win it, I'll give you my hat. I've never had the Nacional hat. So super proud of this, too, because when you have a hero and you accomplish your dream and you emulate your hero, it's very special, so thank you very much. I have to keep my sponsor hat, though. (Laughter.)

Q. Simon, the win in the Indy 500, it essentially checks -- it checks off the last box in your career. You've won an INDYCAR championship, you've won an American Le Mans championship, now an Indy 500. What's the next box that you want to check off?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I want many Indy 500s and more championships. You know, my goal, I'm already leading the championship this year, so it's fantastic. I told Ben Bretzman before the month, knowing our momentum, I said, we can win the next two and be in the championship, and it happened. So we're going to go into Detroit with a really good street car. We've done a lot of work on that car, and I think we're going to be strong there. So I'm excited. I love that track. That's the place where I won my first Indy car race in 2013, so we'll try to make it happen again. But that's my next box, obviously, is to win another championship. I got to close in '17. It would be awesome to add some numbers.

But some day I want to go back to Le Mans and win it, but some day. I'm not in any rush. I've got more to accomplish here. I want to keep driving for Team Penske forever and keep winning races. Le Mans would be one of my dreams, and another dream is to win the Monte Carlo in rally, but that's for a long time ahead. Probably when I'm 45, 48 years old.

Q. After the race last year, I caught you out in Gasoline Alley, and you said that the race rewarded the best drivers, and I said, did that include your teammate, and you said, yes, he was the best driver, which I thought was one hell of a compliment for a teammate. Today did the race reward the best drivers, and today are you the best driver?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I don't know, you guys watched the race. I didn't see what happened in the back. Certainly Will -- I think I led 116 laps, so I didn't see many people quite frankly. I mean, the car was just so far. They kept coming at me, and I was like trying to defend. Will, I saw him -- I check the TV when I'm on track. There's like a big screen and you can check the pylon, so you know a little bit what's going on, but you have to focus on your own race. But certainly Will, if he didn't have that problem in pit lane, I think would have been a big contender. He was very fast. He came back second right at the beginning of the race. I think he would have been a big threat, and Josef was a big threat, too. Obviously the Penske cars did really well. But I personally feel like, yeah, it was the best car that won. And best driver, you guys have to decide on that, I guess. I wouldn't have the pretension to say that.

Q. Rossi said that the red flag at the end kind of punished him and helped you a little bit. Do you agree on that?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, not at all.

Q. So you would have gone until the end because your last pit stop was on lap 169, I think.

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, I mean, the thing is with -- it actually helped him. The crash happened, it was such a big crash, they needed to clean the track. So if they didn't go red flag, we would have had an eight-lap shootout, so I had plenty of fuel for that, no problem.

And when I went by I was planning on saving fuel to attack him at the end, and as you could see, no problem re-passing him. No, I don't think so. I think he -- obviously it was a position race. You had to be assertive when you needed, and we just had a better package today.

Q. Simon, just a minute ago I was a little bit surprised about your answer that you would like to go to the rally Monte Carlo. Would it not be something special to have Roger as a navigator? He raced himself a long time ago.

SIMON PAGENAUD: I don't know if he would like that. That's kind of -- it's kind of a dangerous sport for sure. But I'm sure he would trust me enough for it. But I would probably want a French navigator. It would be an honor, though.

Q. Roger has got a few of these Indy 500s, but John Menard has been trying for four decades. You delivered the first one for him. How special is that to you?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I mean, obviously bringing another win to Roger is very special. You want to see him happy like that. He gives us so much. He treats us like his children, really. When you drive for Team Penske, you represent his brand that he's been building for 60 years, and he trusts you to represent him at this level of the sport, the sport that he loves, and it's a dream for him to win the Indy 500. Making his dream become true, big part of it really is sensational. Super proud of that. And John Menard, he's been trying so hard. I felt so bad that we didn't get one for him already, so finally getting one for him is very special. Having that livery is very cool because people notice the car so easily. It's so great for all that he's done for the sport. He's done so much. He deserves to get a Borg-Warner, so I'm very proud, very proud to be the driver driving that car.

Q. Explain the emotions on the front straightaway. Generally drivers drive straight to Victory Lane and do it there, but you got out of the car. Was it just overcome with emotion? What was that time like?

SIMON PAGENAUD: It wasn't planned. We didn't discuss it on the radio. When I got to pit entry, I'm like, oops. I think I should have went to pit lane. I was crying a little bit on the decel (cool down) lap and the fans were going so crazy, I thought I have to share this with the fans. There's no racing without fans. Obviously I wanted to go to Victory Lane and we did. I didn't think it was going to be that complicated. But I wanted to share with the fans -- they filled this place up. It's incredible. It's incredible to be part of this sport as a driver, and it wouldn't be the same if we didn't have 300,000 people in the grandstands. It was my way of saying thank you for your support and please come back, we'll give you more of this, and that's what I did.

Q. The last five winners of the Indy 500 came from five different continents, which has never

happened in this sport. I'm just wondering, do you think this legitimizes that any driver who can't expand his career in the Formula 1 --

SIMON PAGENAUD: Can or cannot?

Q. Cannot. This sport is currently the highest and the most competitive racing sport?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I mean, I don't know about Formula 1, quite frankly. I'm not there to judge it. And I would never judge it. But I certainly know what's going on here, and you see all the drivers come in, you see the level of competition on road course, street course, we're fighting for tenths of seconds, hundredths. You saw here it was the smallest margin in history in qualifying between first and last. I think it shows the level of the teams, the level of the drivers, the sponsors that we have, obviously it's a growing field. We had 36 cars. It's a testament to IMS and INDYCAR for doing such a great job promoting the race, and we see our numbers are going up. It's an exciting sport. You know, you saw it today with all the fans that we have. It's the biggest race in the world. Yeah, I think it is very competitive, yes.

Now, driving on an oval is not easy, let me tell you. It took me years to get to this level. I remember we were just talking about it with my engineer, my first Indy 500 start was definitely not like that. It's just you've got to work. You've got to work really hard.

Q. It was fun seeing Norman down there with you on Victory Lane. I'm surprised he's not here with you right now, but he's been around a lot this month. Do you think he kind of contributed to the magic this month for you?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, all my family, Hailey is the same, she contributes so much to my balance, you know, in my life. My best friend is here, Thomas, and my mom is here, my dad was on the phone because he's too scared to watch this race. You know, he was the first person I called. Family, friends are everything to me. It's what brings balance into life, and you can't live a lonely life and be happy. So to me, it's happiness for sure.

Q. During the weekend of the Grand Prix you had mentioned that in 2018 you and your team kind of struggled with the new aero kit. I think it's safe to say you're not struggling with it anymore.

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, we're not.

Q. Between the Grand Prix qualifying and the race, those are three very different scenarios. What does this mean for the rest of 2019 and how scared should your competitors be about this resurgent 22 car?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Thank you, appreciate that. Well, you know, let's not -- in French we say let's not put the car in front of the cart. They still have work to do for the championship. There's been a lot of very competitive teams. It's not going to be easy. We're going to have to

work really hard at this. But certainly I think we've hit our stride. I think we've understood what I need from this car and how to get it. That was the biggest thing. We knew what I needed. It was how to get it. We did get that. Very comfortable on the oval now. I love the package. The racing is awesome. And on road course and street course, I think Team Penske has done a phenomenal job now, and I think our team is going to be very strong.

Yes, the goal is to win the championship this year. There's a lot to achieve still, and we're going to get back to work tomorrow. But I hope everybody is scared.

Q. You mentioned earlier that resilience has been a key trait for your entire career. I was wondering if you could -- if you'd thought about -- I think it was 10 years ago when you talked to your dad about getting a loan to try to keep this thing going. Have you thought about that yet today since you've won?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Not yet, no. That will be one of the things that will make me understand what just happened for sure. But yes, it's been tough to get to the top level of racing. Especially when you come from a non-racing family. You know, I had nobody in racing. I had to learn it all on my own. But actually I think it's an advantage because I had no choice, it was either going to work or I was done.

So I put all my guts in it, and I tried as hard as I could, and I learned quickly. But I had great mentors, as well. It's all about the people that you meet in your life really. Obviously I was lucky enough that my dad could help at the time, but with all the sponsors actually I found, at the time I found 350 sponsors back in 2004 to keep going racing. 350. So I used to drive my car and go meet with potential sponsors and sell them a driving school. I had my own driving school. And that's how I financed my career. So yeah, those moments are very special when you think about it, when you think back on that. After that when I became professional it was about perfecting my craft and using everybody that I met, and I did.