

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Press Conference

Graham Rahal

Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing



THE MODERATOR: Had some strong races this season. Ran well at COTA. You ran well at Barber. How confident are you coming into the weekend?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, I feel good. We tried I think to build upon what was a fairly strong base on road courses, tried to understand a little bit more of why at a place like Barber we were really strong and at other tracks we seemed to struggle a little bit more. That's something I think we've been trying to identify a little better.

We have been a little bit inconsistent. While we've been strong at some, struggled at others. Trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together the last couple weeks, see how we could come out here a little bit stronger.

As you guys can all see, we went out first today. Just seemed like everybody was content to sit till God knows when. We had some changes that we wanted to get to. We decided to go. It was good. We put in a good base lap there I think for everybody to chase.

At the same time our tires were quite used up by the end of that session. I think we got to see this afternoon where we are, where we are really stand.

But I feel like we're kind of starting off on the right foot. While 13th or 14th doesn't look great, we were up in the top five, top six. Even when a lot of the good guys we expect to be fast did go, we were right in the hunt with them.

Just got to keep building upon that and see where it takes us this afternoon.

THE MODERATOR: I remember a GP race in the rain.

GRAHAM RAHAL: It snowed.

THE MODERATOR: What else have you driven here? It's an interesting place that you drive through the Rahal straight up there.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, it's cool. This track has a lot of family history, a lot of team history for us. The team has always done well here.

To be very frank, my racing career here has been

pretty short. I think I've ever only done two or three races here. This isn't a track that I have that much experience driving on.

I do have experience, or I guess I've spent a lot of time here with my dad, with the team over the years. But I really haven't actually driven here that much.

It's a great track. It's challenging. It's going to be extremely slippery I think as this race goes on. We saw that earlier today. Even the amount of dirt that comes out onto the track is extraordinary, the amount of dirt that gets thrown up.

It's a great facility. I'm really excited that IndyCar racing is back in this part of the world, back racing here at Laguna Seca. I know dad and everybody is excited to be here and get going this weekend. It feels good, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Where else does your dad have a corner or a portion of the track named after him? Anyplace else?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I don't think so. I don't think so. But if you win here, what, four or five years in a row, and that's on two different tracks, that's when turn one was a fast left, then went up to what is now turn six, then up to the corkscrew. Over two different variations of this place, still kicked everybody's butts. It's pretty cool.

But I know dad has a lot of pride when it comes to this one in particular. This was always a vital race in the championship from a winning perspective. I think in '91 it really came down to this. He and Michael in the duel. He came out on the short end that year.

This was always a great place for our team, as I side, both in IMSA, IndyCar racing, one year with Max, one year with Bryan. Always had good success.

We're definitely thrilled this is back on the calendar. Had a good IMSA race last weekend for the team. Hoping that some of that can carry over for us, have a little luck here on this last race and perform well.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Last night Scott Dixon was describing this as an epic track in that it has a lot of classic road course elements, different from other road courses you run. He said if you make mistakes here, you get

penalized, but there's also risk/reward. Your feelings on this? Is this place different for a lot of reasons?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It has in a lot of areas a speed like Road America but a runoff like Long Beach. Six is so fast. But if you go off, I mean, you're going to hit something hard. There is no runoff. Whereas turn one at Road America, you're going to hit something, but you're going to travel quite a while before you actually get there.

This is a very unique place in that respect. There really is not much space. With the sandy, gravelly stuff on the side, it's very slippery, too. It's very easy to make a mistake.

But, I mean, the biggest of elevation drops here, of anywhere you're ever going to go, drive or see. Everybody always asks, What is it like to go through the corkscrew? What does it look like? It looks like nothing. You can't really see. You're waiting for the thing to land and that's what you get (laughter).

It's a tremendous track. We talk about your Road America, Mid-Ohio. Here, they just don't build them like this. COTA is spectacular. But COTA is spectacular in the size and scope. It's not spectacular because it looks like this. These are the old-fashioned style racetracks that we don't see any more. That's why I think a lot of people are excited to be back.

Q. In that great run that your dad's team had in the late '90s, early 2000s, he won by having absolutely the best car and driver on the track that day, and he also won by having a guy start 25th and not pass a car all day. Does it show there are a more than a few ways you can win here?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No doubt. The year with Max, they pitted, I don't know, 15 times or whatever. They still won. Strategy is an amazing thing. If you play strategy right, it can do things that you don't see as being possible.

Let's look at this here. You look at Josef at Texas. He's running 11th. Next thing you know, he's leading the race. Yes, he had a car that was quick when he was out on his own. Also the strategy play was done perfectly. That's part of racing. That's what makes this world go round.

When you look back, in those days with our team, Scottie Roembke, I don't know if T.C. was still there at that time, but you had strategist guys that thought outside of box. You look at that day, finishing first and second, Papis and Memo. They start on the last row together.

It doesn't matter. It worked out well. Hopefully this weekend we're not on the last row. Hopefully we can find a way to have a good strategy and make it work.

Doesn't matter how you win as long as you win. That's a fact. It's worked out well.

Q. What is the etiquette for racing the championship guys? Over in NASCAR there's a controversy last week.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I saw.

Q. Are you expected to give them any more room here? Do you race them as hard as always?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, you got to race them as hard as always. At the same time I do think you've got to respect the position. You have to respect that you don't want to be the guy to alter the championship. You don't want to be the guy that ruins it for somebody that has worked as hard as they have all year.

With the double points scenario, really it's very easy to do that, to screw it up. If we didn't have double points, this thing would be pretty much over. You just kind of move on and see who is going to finish second.

I lived it. In 2015 when I came into Sonoma second in points, got punted by Bourdais actually in the race, we were running fifth. We weren't going to win the championship, but had we not been hit, we were going to finish second. We finished fourth in the points. That was a pretty big swing for us.

You don't want to be the guy that is the one that has that effect on it. At the same time, in my case, I'm here to win. I have no other interest but to win this weekend. If I finish seventh again this year, it's not going to do me any good.

If I look at the amount of top 10s I've had this year, I've had as many as I've ever had in my career in a year. I finished seventh or eighth I can't tell you how many times. I'm not interested in doing it again.

I'm here to win. I think Takuma is here to win. Everybody else on the grid is. They have to respect that, too. They have to know we're not all going to lay over for them. Isn't going to happen. Didn't happen for me in 2015. Isn't going to happen this year.

Q. Totally un-racing related. I saw you posted something the other day the laser thing. You've said before you're the biggest guy in the series. What led you to go down that route?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Honestly, it is no secret, I'm not shy about this, that I've struggled with my weight. I can guarantee you that from a strength perspective and a stamina perspective, there's very few guys out here that can keep up with me. I'm just not a super skinny build. It's never been my thing.

I've tried. We've kind of looked around, there was some mutual interest from them to look into trying this, see if it works. I'll be honest. I was always very skeptical of the stuff. Where I'm at, I've done one treatment. I can't

even tell you today it's this something that really works or not.

The facts are it's not going to work if you don't work out, too, and eat well. It doesn't do anything. But earlier this year, man, I had given up drinking completely for three, four months. I was working out every day, twice a day on most occasions. Went to a nutritionist, doing everything. I literally was not losing an ounce. It was the most frustrating period of time for me.

I am the biggest guy here. Is it ever going to be equal for me? No matter what these guys talk about with driver ballast, it's a whole different thing, where my center of gravity is, so on...

It is a challenge. Ricky and Helio weigh 60 pounds less than me or something. There is no ballast there. That's a big swing, a lot of weight to be carrying around.

We have to try anything we can. If you're going to be serious, try to find the performance advantage and the edge, you've got to look outside of the box.

It is something new for me. But the fight I guess against being an ultra-skinny guy...

I fly home with most of these guys after races, I see most of these guys a lot of times, they're sitting there eating In-N-Out Burger, whatever else. Literally I cannot do it. If I do it, it immediately reflects for me. These guys you see them the next weekend, they're like this big. It's like, Shit, it's not my build.

I blame my dad. I do. You can tell him I said that (laughter). I told him, it's a genetic thing. I got good genes in some ways. I'm very excited, told my wife this the other day, very excited for someday when my career ends just to have a dad (indiscernible), be able to let go for a minute, see how things turn out, because this is getting a little bit exhausting.

We're going to stay committed through the winter. I try my hardest every year, but I never tried harder this year to be thin. I weigh about the same as last year, but it took so much effort to get there, I just got to think outside the box.

Q. Is it Cool Sculpting?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's called Sculpture, the group we're working with. Kind of very different. One uses basically a laser. It feels cold when you touch it, but Cool Sculpting works, if I understand it right, it is effective. It was invented by a doctor who found it with swelling in kid's cheeks. Basically what that does is it freezes, uses like dry ice, freezes your skin and stuff, which can have other harmful downsides.

Sculpture, which is the one I've tried, is a laser that in essence uses heat to go there and kill the fatty cells. Like I said, I've done one treatment. It takes a long time

I think. It's going to take multiple I think to get there. One of the difficulties for us, too, is the consistency of being somewhere. I'm not anywhere that much.

It is tough, but we'll see.

Q. You said this is the hardest year you've ever worked. Did it get kicked off when you couldn't fit in the Penske car at Rolex?

GRAHAM RAHAL: That wasn't a weight thing. That was just pure size. At the end of Petit Le Mans last year, I got out, we did a good job, a quadruple stint, which is like three hours. But the issue was every time I'd turn the wheel any direction, my hands would hit my knees. While my pace in the race was very good there, and I had no problems being competitive, I was not comfortable.

It's just that easy. If the car snapped loose, I could not catch it. It was not physically possible for me because I couldn't move my hands.

So I decided that it was in my best interest -- not mine, it was in the team's best interest to move on for me. I knew that would have a downside to me, which was that Alex would step in. I knew it was going to be Alex. That relationship, my relationship with Honda, is very important to me. I knew that would strengthen his, perhaps hurt mine a little.

I thought it was best for them. That's what I told Art St. Cyr last year, whatever. But this year I started to think about it more and more and more. I was like, If the opportunity comes, I'm going to get back in there. I've known about the V8 thing since Long Beach. They called me, too, to run with Ricky again. Alex mentioned this might be a possibility.

I waited and waited. When I heard about it, I called T.C. I said, If there's something we can do, you guys are willing to have me back, let's talk. Let me go down to the shop and see if we can do something.

It turned out from Petit last year, to this year, they moved the steering column up. Back in the shop three weeks ago, I could actually turn the steering wheel, which I was shocked about. My head touched the roof, whatever, I'm used to that. Physically being able to steer, which I now should be able to do better.

So I'm excited about it. It's another great opportunity obviously with Penske. But more importantly for me is Acura, Honda. It's a great thing to be back in.

But that wasn't a weight thing. It's purely size. They just don't build cars for guys my size. I used to talk to J.W. about that. It's the facts of life. Even the GT cars. You would think a GT car would be big. I don't know if I've ever been in a GT car I was comfortable in either. They're built for small guys. That's the way it goes.

Q. You were joking about blaming your dad. Did having a few extra pounds in the '80s and '90s matter as much?

GRAHAM RAHAL: He wrestled with it, for sure. I don't know that it was a competitive disadvantage as it is today. But there's no doubt from a space standpoint.

You go back and look at it, what year was it at Road America, the '93, '94 Lola that was at Road America. I sat in that thing and my dad's hips and mine are the same. I sat in it. Purely from a space standpoint, there's no space for a big guy in those things.

If you were small, it's like what we were talking about with the Acura. His whole career was that way. It's actually to me even more remarkable what he did competitively against Michael, Mario, Rick, all the best of the best being like that. There's no way he was ever comfortable.

But I don't know that the weight thing was as big as it is today because I don't know that any of the drivers from a strength standpoint, that they were working out as much as they do today or anything like that. Little bit of a different era.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. We've learned a lot.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm sure that's what you guys wanted to hear about (laughter). Thank you.