

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

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Press Conference

Simon Pagenaud

Team Penske



THE MODERATOR: We welcome second in the championship, Simon Pagenaud from Team Penske. As I watch the highlights of while Felix was finishing up, you were in most of the shots. You were pretty exciting today. It didn't go as well as you'd like, but you certainly gave it everything you had.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yes, it was a big day for us at Team Penske, that's for sure. The mission for me was simple: It was to go to the front and then be aggressive.

We had a pretty aggressive strategy on tires, but our car was actually really, really good on long runs. So it was very important to go to the front, and we did that after the first stint. We managed in the pit sequence to jump Rossi, which was the number one goal, be ahead of him so we could secure somewhat the championship for the team.

But then I realized that I had the pace to go get Dixon and Herta, so I tried, and unfortunately the lock was Dixon. It was very, very difficult to get around him. I was out of Push-to-Pass, which I had to use in a pit sequence to jump people, and I spent too much money, basically, too quick (laughing).

But overall I thought it was an amazing race. I thought we gave a great show for the fans, and it was a great crowd out here today, and there's nothing to be disappointed about. I tried as hard as I could all weekend. You saw me drive with my heart. I won Indianapolis this year. There's nothing to be disappointed about. We finished second. That's the second time we're second in the championship. We won the championship in '16. I think the numbers talk for themselves.

Do I want to win the championship? Of course. But I'm just equally happy for Josef and the whole team, to wrap up the Indy 500 and the championship in one year is just absolutely incredible.

I had a blast. I had a blast today. It was disappointing not to get Dixon because I really thought I had a shot for the win and Herta. But it is what it is. I tried everything I had and it didn't work out.

THE MODERATOR: You made a couple moves on Scott in Turn 2 that looked pretty close. Did you think

you had it?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I was bluffing. I thought he was going to give up, and he did not. Certainly surprised me. He was more aggressive than usual. You know your opponents, you know what you can do with them or not, and I knew with Scott, if I -- I knew if I was overly aggressive, that maybe he would maybe give up. But he did not give up. He's a tremendous champion. I could have maybe pushed him off, but that's not my style. I'm a clean racer, and I respect him a lot.

I tried, I gave it an honest try, and it wasn't enough.

The other day if I qualified a little better, I think it would have happened. But again, I think on the whole weekend, I don't think we could have done much better than this. So yeah, it was our fate.

THE MODERATOR: You did have one little scuffle there with Alexander Rossi early in the race. He ended up getting pushed into the dirt. How was that moment?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, listen, I had a mission. The mission was to be ahead of Rossi, so I was going to be ahead of Rossi at any cost. He came out of the pits, he was on cold tires, I was on warm tires, I went to the inside, he blocked. I was like, man, you're blocking, I'm going for it. And I think he knew that. I was in a position today that I had nothing to lose. I didn't really care if I was going to be third or fourth in the championship, to me it was either second or first.

So my mission and the Team Penske mission was to be ahead of Rossi to lock it in for the team. I was going to do it at all costs.

Q. Simon, I think today there was more passing in this race than there's been in the 22 races before. Just talk about how maybe you were surprised it was that racy, but it was really kind of fun to watch.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Absolutely. The biggest thing this track has to do is absolutely not repave the track. Leave it as it is. The track is absolutely perfect. No need to change anything. It's perfect. It creates the perfect racing because there's some tire degradation. The last corner is a hairpin and you're going into a double left, which allows you to run two lanes because the inside is so used up, the outside lane has got more grip.

So it opens up opportunities for inside lane, outside line, like you saw me and Rossi -- Dixon do. That's the biggest thing, I think tire degradation always creates great racing because it differentiates aggressive cars and setup versus more conservative like we had.

So you know, I think Laguna has always been a great racetrack for racing in sports cars. Certainly I used a lot of my tricks here that I learned in sports cars today. I hope nothing changes because I think they've got the perfect format.

Q. Were you surprised (indiscernible)?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, actually I noticed in the warmup, practice, whenever it was -- it's a long weekend. I think it was Friday. Yeah, Friday afternoon I noticed you could really pass. Yeah, I was expecting that. I was expecting at least our car -- I knew we could pass, so that was good to see. Good fun.

Q. Did you feel anything about the team strategy hampered your personal strategy towards winning the championship?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Not at all. Actually it was the other way. I think I had full support from TC, Tim Cindric, and Roger, even Josef himself, Will, and they had my full support, as well, on the other side. At the end, it was like, don't create a yellow. That could be a problem for Josef, so I had that in my head. They told me about it. I had it in my head, I'm like, I am not punting Dixon off, so I had to try and pass him clean.

You know, on my side, TC told me the mission is to go forward and try to win the race. So I was pretty much free to do whatever I wanted. When I got around Josef, I took the outside because I didn't want to put him at risk. I wanted him to give him the choice to do whatever he wanted, and I didn't want to risk him. So I went toward the outside, and he gave me the room, so I went around, took as much room as I could to avoid getting him in trouble.

From then on, my goal was to go forward and try to catch people, which we did. Mission accomplished, except I didn't win the race, but mission accomplished because we were 1 and 2 in the championship. That was to me a perfect Penske strategy today.

Q. I take it the yellow at the halfway mark was probably not what you wanted to see; that was impactful to your day, as well?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I don't know, was it?

Q. You were better on the long runs?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, for sure, and that's when I was really catching Dixon and Herta. I really think it would have helped if we kept going on that run. But you know, that's racing. It's the way it is. There's nothing you can change, and it's the way it was going to be.

Certainly on long runs we were really strong, and I really enjoyed driving the car today. It's awesome. We've turned things around massively compared to last year. I've heard a lot of negative comments on my '18 season, but the reason why I'm here today in Indy is because of the '18 season. So out of all negatives you've got to transform it into positive, and that's exactly what we did. I'm so proud of that.

THE MODERATOR: I want to ask you one about Josef. Alex had said earlier that the best driver, the best team, crew, the best year came from Josef as you look at it as a whole. He's a deserving champion I'm sure you feel?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Absolutely. I think he had the most consistent season. He was fast when he had to be. He took care of his own destiny, and he was definitely -- he had the championship from the first race. I think he was the most deserving guy to win it this year. I love personally working with Will and Josef because we push each other and improve each other every session. Every race I feel like I'm a better driver than I was in Portland.

Yeah, Josef really deserves it. He does. I think he was the best championship driver this year, and his crew did a great job, too, and Team Penske was the best team. Very happy for them for sure. Yeah, we'll see what we can do next year, come back and try to beat them.

Q. Just kind of rate the season. I know from a fan standpoint, you've had a smile on your face even before Indy. You seem like the stress was even gone -- we were trying to put it there for you, but it didn't seem like you were taking it. Can you tell us how it's gone this year?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Absolutely. There were a lot of rumors about me, which was very negative. It was all made up, and I don't know why that was happening. The performance was there, and we turned things around in the winter already, and I felt really confident going into the season.

So I took the approach of staying positive and trying to let the universe go my way this year, and certainly we turned things around in that aspect in May. We had a lot of bad luck to start the season, despite having performance, and we just kept getting better and better through the year.

But certainly winning Indy, on a personal, note was a huge relief, just because personally I feel more relevant in my sport. I feel like I've stamped my time. It's a very fulfilling accomplishment, and it certainly helped me to drive better and be a better driver after that, a hundred percent.

Q. Do you now feel as comfortable with this car as you did with the previous generation car in your

unbelievable year of 2016?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I think so, and I think you've seen me drive even better than then. I've managed to work on other areas of my driving style, and I think you saw it today. I can be really aggressive. I can pass people, and I can -- it was something I couldn't really do before. I had to start up front and go.

Now I can start in the middle and go to the front, which is a new thing that I can do. I've improved myself, and I feel like, especially this weekend, we've come to a point where I really enjoy driving this car just as much as '16.

Obviously next year things are going to change with the aeroscreen because that's going to move the weight of the car forward, so we're going to have to adjust again, but I think we've understood the philosophy that I need. So it's quite exciting, and yeah, as you see, I still have a grin on my face. I enjoy myself driving, which is the most important thing.