

INDYCAR iRacingChallenge NewsConference

Saturday March 28, 2020

Press Conference

Sage Karam

Dreyer & Reinbold Racing

Felix Rosenqvist

Chip Ganassi Racing

Will Power

Team Penske

LEIGH DIFFEY: Hi, folks! Hope you've enjoyed the inaugural iRacing INDYCAR Challenge, the American Red Cross Grand Prix of Watkins Glen. I think sort of the first one out, it was very enjoyable, and I think that we can call it a success. And we need to congratulate the top three in the race, starting with the race winner from Dreyer & Reinbold Racing, Sage Karam.

Sage, you're no newcomer to this form of racing. I think it was something like your 144th iRacing road course win, so congratulations. Nice way to come out and start 2020 that way. By the way, if you didn't know, there's going to be a donation made to the American Red Cross in your name, and you're also going to get a ring and a custom trophy from Jostens, so a couple of extra bonuses there for you on a job really well done today.

You had a victory of just over three and a half seconds, and from pole to Victory Lane you looked pretty much in control the whole way. Was that the case?

SAGE KARAM: I'd like to say yeah, but no, it wasn't totally in control the whole way. Had a few moments for sure, especially late in the race, had a lapper spin right in front of me and nearly lost it all there. But no, it was good. I was really worried about qualifying because Will was basically doing qual sims for the past week like every day all day, and I thought he was going to be hard to beat for pole. I didn't really have a perfect lap. It was a pretty good one, but when I saw his first lap, I thought, I think he's going to be able to get me here.

But I don't know if he like went off on his second or whatever, but --

WILL POWER: Yeah, I did.

SAGE KARAM: I wasn't too confident, and then when I just knew I had it, I was like, all right, this is going to make life a little bit easier hopefully. But it seemed like Felix found some speed today where he was able to run really, really good race pace. I was really banking



on my race pace to be my strong suit, and when I saw Felix was not going anywhere and not falling back, I was getting kind of worried. I was hoping I could get a little bit of a gap and kind of cruise, but I basically had to push basically the whole race.

Yeah, it was cool to get Wix up front and Dreyer & Reinbold Racing and it means a lot to those guys, and during this time where we can't really do much, it's great to be able to get the sponsors out and the teams out and be able to give the fans and the media something to cover and watch and have some fun.

LEIGH DIFFEY: It was a lot of fun for myself and Townsend Bell and Paul Tracy. Because you've been involved with iRacing for so long, what was your big picture view of it? Typically you would be racing fans, other racers, members of the public. Now you're in here against your INDYCAR peers. How was it in your view and in your mind?

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, no, it was a lot of fun. I'm looking forward to the rest of them. It's kind of cool, you've got like a complete mixed bag. You've got guys who literally just signed up for iRacing this week, and then you've got guys that have been there forever, since like 2007, like me. You know, it's pretty cool to see and try and help out everybody and get them fully up to speed, and I think it was really awesome to see the amount of time and prep that every driver put into it.

It was almost every single day, all hours of the day for the past week of drivers just in the rooms, doing laps. Even though some guys were new to it, nobody wanted to be that guy that just was out there just cruising around. We're all competitors. We all want to do our best. We all want to win, and it was really impressive to see everybody grab it by the horns and get after it. Big hats off to INDYCAR, big hats off to the drivers, all the teams, everybody who made it happen. It was a really cool event, and I really hope the fans enjoyed it.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Congratulations on the win. To second place now from Chip Ganassi Racing, Felix Rosenqvist. You had a very kind of parallel race and similar race to the one that Sage had and you got pretty close to him there towards the end. Did you ever think you may have had something for him?

FELIX ROSENQVIST: I think by just based on pure pace, I didn't really have what it took. I think we did similar lap times, but whenever I got closer, it seemed

like Sage was able to react and go a bit faster. So I was kind of hoping for the lapping part to be my advantage, but there were some cars flying and stuff, and every time I thought Sage was collected, he seemed to get through all of them.

In these races you can never really -- you have to do all the laps until the finish because you never know when -- it's very easy to make a mistake on your own or to get together with someone. It's pretty hard to race closely.

But yeah, I think I was also really impressed with the effort that everyone put in and how well it came together. I actually had a look at the TV just to see how it looked, and the cars look amazing and the track and everything almost looks like real. It was cool to see my NTT Data car there, as well. Yeah, in these times it was nice to do something for the fans and for ourselves. We're competitors, and we don't want to sit around all the time just waiting, so yeah, good fun.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Just listening to a couple of things you said there, was there a few times it was a bit wild? Was it a bit of a wild ride?

FELIX ROSENQVIST: I mean, my race was pretty smooth. I think Sage had more -- he had more things going on when he lapped other cars, but he never lost any time, so yeah, it was hard to make any advantage doing that. My race was -- I never really had any battle with anyone, just the lapped cars, but I just blew my Push-to-Pass trying to get around people quick, and I think Sage kind of did the same thing.

Will was behind us, so his gap was also kind of static, so he had some quick laps, as well, so he was pretty fast, and I don't know what happened in the beginning, but he had like a 10-second gap to us already from the beginning, so hopefully next time he can get into the fight a bit more, as well.

LEIGH DIFFEY: There will be more questions coming from fellow members of the media here shortly. To third place, Will Power, Team Penske. You've got this ridiculous top-5 finishing percentage on iRacing. I think it's almost nearly half the races you've run you've finished in the top 5 on iRacing road courses. You continued that streak today. How was your race?

WILL POWER: Yeah, it was pretty good. I didn't know that I actually had that many top 5s in iRacing. Every time I do it, I always bloody crash out. But yeah, it was fun. I kind of was really cautious on the first lap and lost a couple positions, and then got stuck behind a couple people and Felix and Sage were able to check out, and once I cleared those guys through a pit stop sequence, it got a little longer. The gap kind of just maintained. They'd catch traffic, I'd close a little and then I'd get that traffic and it would open up again. Yeah, just tried to focus on not making mistakes, and yeah, it was

enjoyable.

It was actually not very eventful for me. I kind of kept out of trouble and didn't have cars really spinning in front of me or anything. It was a pretty straightforward race. It would have been nice to have a restart or something close up with those guys, but that may have been bad for everyone watching because maybe the top four would have taken each other out, who knows.

LEIGH DIFFEY: I can't let you go without asking about this: What is this (pointing to mustache)? Is that just boredom?

WILL POWER: Yeah, it is. It's a 30-day lockdown regardless, so by the time the 30 days is up this thing is going to be gone. I might keep it, man. Nigel Mansell has never been the same since he shaved his mustache. All the great things he did with a mustache, he looked tougher; he shaved it off, it just looks weird. So maybe this is to stay.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Going to hand it back over to Arni now, and if you can take it from here for our fellow members of the media.

Q. Felix, after the race you had said that you really liked running at Watkins Glen, it had a great flow to it. Do you feel that flow even in a virtual game like you would in a real race car?

FELIX ROSENQVIST: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I don't remember when was the last time we did Watkins. I think we only did it one time like two, three years ago, but the track is just amazing. You can definitely feel it in iRacing, as well. Every -- almost every corner is a high-speed corner. There seems to be a lot of grip and one of those tracks where you just kind of hang on for a lap in qualifying.

Yeah, I would love to do that again. I mean, that's a really historic track, as well, with F1 and other kinds of series that has been there many times, and yeah, hopefully we can go there in the real car.

Q. Felix, you're a big hero in Sweden. Do you have any data yet as to how many people from Sweden tuned in and watched this on any of the various platforms that it was on?

FELIX ROSENQVIST: I don't know. I haven't really got out of the sim yet, but I have to look. I mean, the last time I did a sim race there was a lot of action going on, especially in these times people are just eager to watch something, so I think even not only Sweden but a lot of Americans are following.

Q. Question to all three: We saw the race run an esports events with retired drivers and older drivers. Would you be open to integrating some ex-INDYCAR drivers or even maybe some team owners into these races and driving against them?

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, I've got a second rig at my

house. I can get Mario Andretti over here maybe. That would be cool. We could race in the Lotus 79 then.

WILL POWER: Actually that would be awesome to do a race in that, with some old school drivers, old school cars.

FELIX ROSENQVIST: Yeah, it's fun when you have some invitational. I think it's important that the focus remains on truly INDYCAR and INDYCAR drivers and the real liveries and all that to get like a true experience, but it's always fun like Scott Speed joined the race and Jimmie Johnson. It's always helpful to have one or two of those.

Q. You guys have touched on this a little bit already, but what do you feel like are the most important things as we go into these next five races of the challenge to just continue to keep this interesting for the fans, keep kind of building this momentum that you guys set up here today?

SAGE KARAM: I think we were talking about this actually earlier today, like just some cool ideas what we think we could do. Maybe instead of just doing one long race, maybe we do like three short sprint race things or something, just to kind of like freshen it up or something. Who knows, we have no idea. I think it was a big learning experience for everybody doing this for the first time, so we'll see how this went and what the fans want to see. I think that's the main thing. We want to do like what the people want to see, and we're down for whatever. I know some guys are more down to be racing on ovals right now, but we'll see.

I think whatever we do, we're going to do our best to put on a good show.

Q. Will and Felix, I know you guys certainly would much rather be out on a real racetrack this time of year, but what was just this whole experience like for you guys today, overall fairly happy given the circumstances how everything went and how it was all received this week?

WILL POWER: Yeah, I think it was pretty good. I haven't actually watched the race and how the coverage was, but from what I heard, from just my family, they said, man, that looks so real, which is great, and obviously the commentators are the commentators we actually have for the real races.

Yeah, I think it's good. Obviously we all want to get back in the real car, get back testing and all that, but in the meantime this is what we've got, and it's kind of amazing that you can get a bunch of drivers all in different places racing a race in cars that look exactly the same and doing about the same lap times, so it just shows you what technology -- how far technology has come in the last 20 years.

Q. Will, how important is this, and also for Felix, how important is this as a mental break? We're all

cooped up at home and not doing the things we want to do. How important was something like this mentally, just to have something to look forward to?

WILL POWER: Yeah, I feel like that's been the hardest thing before the schedule came out was you didn't really have anything to aim for. We had no idea when the season might start, which race it would be and what to prepare for, but I think when you have something to work towards, it kind of makes the time pass a little quicker and gives you a bit of motivation.

Yeah, it's a competition. We're all drivers and super competitive people, so we kind of take it seriously, and like Sage was saying, everyone was in the sessions doing laps and getting prepared and ready to go, so yeah, it gave us something to do.

FELIX ROSENQVIST: Yeah, I agree. Mentally it's tough right now to -- there's not really much going on. I think for an hour there, there were times where I kind of forgot I was in a simulator, and you see all these names and the cars, and you're trying to find hundredths of seconds in every corner. Even yesterday like going to bed, you kind of have that -- not the same, but a little bit of a nervous feeling. Waking up you feel like you're going to accomplish something. It's pretty cool that you can achieve that with technology today, and yeah, hopefully the fans liked it, as well.

Q. Sage, for you, you're kind of the ringer at this a little bit; how much knowledge have you been trying to share with your competitors, or are you trying to hold a few things back?

SAGE KARAM: No, I mean, I'm an open book when it comes to it. If people ask me questions, I'll answer to the best of my knowledge and ability. I mean, I was trying really hard to make things right for everybody. At the beginning a lot of guys couldn't do more than two laps, and I worked with iRacing to really just try and get a setup that was easier to drive for everybody, and we started working on things and got into a range that I think was pretty respectable at the end there.

I felt like I had a lot of best friends this week just because everyone knew I was like a sim guy, and so many people were setting up rigs and everything and just calling me. I had so many people FaceTiming me, just like how do I put this together, what setting do I put this, and yeah, I was a pretty popular guy for a little bit there.

But it's cool. I love to be able to help them, and I did sandbag most of the week, though, in practice. That was the hardest part. Like I literally sandbagged so much and just wouldn't put a lap in because I knew these guys that are on the podium with me, if they saw me put a 24.6 in, they were going to sit there all night until they got down to 24.6, and I just couldn't have that, so I definitely sandbagged.

WILL POWER: We know your game now, Dude.

SAGE KARAM: Well, you guys saw it.

WILL POWER: You've got a half second in your pocket.

SAGE KARAM: Yeah, it's all good. I've got one win under my belt now, so all is good.

Q. How do you guys feel about maybe having a mandatory caution or some restarts on a road course?

WILL POWER: Yeah, I think that's -- instead of having like two separate races, I think that's a much better idea, just to throw cautions every third crash or something or something like that so it's random, so it's not like planned. So I think throwing yellows rather than multiple races would be the best thing to do.

SAGE KARAM: I agree.

Q. Felix, you also mentioned, it's kind of a follow-up to what you said about your love for Watkins Glen, and also you brought up that going into Barber, you're going to be -- you haven't driven much INDYCARs on the iRacing side. What's the game plan for Barber?

FELIX ROSENQVIST: Well, I think whatever lap time someone makes, you kind of have to try and beat it, what Sage said. It doesn't really matter which track or which drivers. If someone is making a lap time, that's kind of the danger with the sim because you can spend endless hours just trying to get quicker and quicker, so that was pretty clever of him to sandbag because he actually didn't look like a contender, but I kind of expected something was coming. He was a bit sneaky there.

But I mean, Barber, Watkins, whatever track it is, I think it's going to turn out probably tighter next time because there's going to be more guys maybe upgrading their rigs a little bit, spending more time, so yeah, I think the second race is going to be really tough.

Q. Sage, what was your strategy coming into the race?

SAGE KARAM: Qualify first, lead every lap, and hopefully keep the car in one piece. That was the strategy, and it worked out pretty well, I think. You know, I think the main thing I had to do was make sure I was starting first. I was like -- I spent basically all morning this morning just offline practicing qual sims, and that's why I wasn't in any of the practice runs this morning, guys, by the way. I was on offline just literally doing qual sims, and I really just focused on that because that was I feel like going to be half the battle.

The car was pretty hard to drive when you were in dirty air, so I knew I had to be at least first or second. Once I had that checked off the list, then it was all about just

like keeping it consistent for 45 laps. It was a long time in the sim, that's for sure, and it was -- I feel like when you're driving a real INDYCAR, it's really physically demanding, but I feel like this INDYCAR on a simulator at your house is so much more mentally demanding to me. I don't know, I feel like maybe it's just because you're looking at screens or I have no idea, but I was like mentally shot after all of that, and you have people talking to you all the time on discord and everything and you're just trying to filter everything out and just focus forward.

Q. Will, what was your favorite part of being in this race?

WILL POWER: I'd say my favorite part was just competing. We haven't been able to do that obviously because we didn't get to race the first race. I think everyone was really ready for it. Just to get out there and be in a competition, everyone has got equal equipment. I love that. That's what I live for. I don't really live for driving the car or anything, I just live to compete, and that was what I enjoyed the most.

Q. Felix, you've been racing on iRacing for a while and recently got your setup here in the U.S.; what differences are there with your new setup versus your other one?

FELIX ROSENQVIST: I mean, my other one was only a steering wheel attached to the desk, so it was very -- like the most simple rig you can have, so I've made a big upgrade this winter because the off-season is so long. I started to get bored, and I was thinking, what do I need to do to keep up with my driving, and I bought a really good setup here in the U.S., and yeah, it kind of came in handy. I got that in January, so I'm pretty happy I did all that, and I got some practice done the last couple of weeks. So yeah, it's good fun. It's a good way to get into the sport, as well, for young kids. I really want to stress the point that you don't need a really expensive sim to be competitive. You know, there's plenty of guys out there iRacing who they finish top three in really, really tough races and they only have basically what I had before, just a steering wheel on a desk.

So yeah, it's pretty cool, and as Will said, it's also the same for everyone. Everyone has the same car, the same setup. That's what it's all about, so really good fun.

SAGE KARAM: I just wanted to thank the American Red Cross for making the donation and everything. That's really cool. A really cool thing to do, especially when we're in downtime to have something to do and try to make a silver lining out of all of this.

LEIGH DIFFEY: Having the Indiana Regional Chief Chad Priest of the American Red Cross on the show today was an extra bonus, as well. There are dozens of you on this call. Thanks for making time to ask the drivers questions, especially Asher with three great

questions, and I think one of the great things is that we always talk about date equity over the course of the season. Well, obviously this is a mini-iRacing INDYCAR Challenge season, but we're going to try and build that time and day equity with it being attempting to be every Saturday at 4:00 p.m. eastern. So next week it's going to be Barber Motorsports Park, same as today, 4:00 p.m. eastern.

I think we're off to a really positive start. We've got our racing fix for the week. The drivers loved it. We enjoyed it. We hope you did, the fans enjoyed it, and yeah, it's filling a void, and it's perhaps taking our minds off greater things and certainly more severe things that are occurring in the world right now.

Thank you very much. It's been an enjoyable afternoon, and we'll see you next week at 4:00 p.m. eastern for Barber. Looking forward to it.