

NTT IndyCar Series News Conference

Tuesday June 2, 2020

Press Conference

Graham Rahal Takuma Sato



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everybody, to the latest in the series of video news conferences we're doing with drivers from the NTT INDYCAR SERIES in advance of Saturday night's Genesys 300 at Texas Motor Speedway. As a reminder, the race will be seen live on NBC at 8:00 p.m. eastern. We're pleased to be joined by Graham Rahal and Takuma Sato from Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. Thanks for taking the time to join us this afternoon.

The first question I have is for both of you. How much anticipation or excitement or anxiousness do you guys have entering Saturday night? It's been a while since we got geared up in March and then we had to wait.

TAKUMA SATO: Well, I mean, needless to say, I think all of us, ourselves, the fans and media all over the world, we've just waited so long and are incredibly excited about it. Yeah, I mean, just really appreciate what INDYCAR did and the government as well as of course Texas Motor Speedway and the sponsors, of course, to make it happen. We are really, really pumped and very excited for it.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think like Taku said, it's been an interesting period of life for everybody. I think a lot of people are looking to racing and to sports to bring some normalcy back to life. I'm excited to get down there. I'm nervous. I think everybody is nervous. If you're not nervous, I'd be concerned about the head that you have on your shoulders because you're going to probably one of the most intense tracks of the year and you're going there without testing, you're going there without much practice, you're going there without knowing what these tires may bring for us this weekend. You're going there without knowing what exactly is the Aeroscreen going to do to us on a track like that. I don't think it's going to do much. Visually it will be a little bit different, but the weight and all of these sorts of things.

So a lot of questions to be answered, but at the end of the day it's the same for every single one of us, and I know that Takuma and I and our team are well-prepared. Our guys have worked extremely hard. The engineering corps has never stopped working throughout that process, and I hope that we can come out and be very strong.

I think no doubt whoever is the best prepared is who's

going to have the most success this weekend because really there's not much practice at all, so it's kind of flying blind for most of us.

THE MODERATOR: It's a one-day show. In addition to practice, qualifying and racing, there's probably travel involved for you, as well. How do you prepare yourself for a long day at the office basically?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, trying to get rested really throughout this week, I think trying to get your body in good shape has been a longer-term process since we left St. Pete. I mean, you should have been prepared then. I think everybody was. And obviously to keep that motivation going has been a challenge for us over the last couple of months, but we feel good. From a rest side, it's just get your sleep, get ready to be down there. I am going to fly down on Friday evening. Thanks to Mr. Lanigan, we're going to utilize his plane and go down Friday evening and stay in my dad's motor home actually Friday night so that we're rested. But for the team, I mean, whoa, for those guys to fly down Saturday morning, to have such a long day and to fly home, I think it's a 4:00 a.m. departure from Indianapolis and you're going to get home about 2:00 a.m. the next day, that's a brutal day. I hope everybody is getting their sleep now. I know a lot of guys have a ton of adrenaline going because they want to go racing, too, and they're prepared. But it's going to be a pretty tiring exercise for everybody.

Q. Takuma, starting at Texas means that the season starts on an oval, which is unusual for what you and Graham have started in INDYCAR. Is it any different for you preparing for an oval than the season opener at St. Petersburg?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, in terms of the place, and like Graham said, we were really limited for the testing. Now, of course we were ready by St. Petersburg, but since then nothing has happened the last couple months, of course, and what we did was just really the simulation stuff, which is nothing like in real life, although I guess iChallenge was successful for the fan-based point of view.

But in terms of preparation, there are so little things you can do, and you have to really rely on your feeling when you get to Texas. And like Graham said, it's just most prepared the team and the car and the driver who's ultimately going up to the front. Honestly I really don't know what it's going to be like. Like I said, we're just really happy to go racing and really appreciate it,

but ultimately how we're going to perform, we just have to get on with it. We've never done a one-day thing without proper testing, and the windshield, as well, the Aeroscreen, especially for the race starting slightly early is unusual, which means I think we have direct sun, too. How it's going to affect, we just don't know. But hopefully we are capable enough to make a great show for it.

Q. Graham, you announced that you're going to be a dad soon, so congratulations. Just your thoughts on fatherhood?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I'm excited. I know the joy that it's brought a lot of people. Obviously every time I talk to Taku about getting his kids into go-karting and everything else, he lights up. It brings back a lot of great memories of my dad, my mom, myself, my siblings. Actually it's my little sister Sam's birthday today. For me it's an exciting period of time. It took us a little bit longer than we expected, but fortunately everything worked out.

For Courtney I think it's huge, too. Since she retired, it's no secret it's been -- it's a tough road when you step away, and obviously she stepped away for this reason, but when you lose that competitive spirit -- you never lose the spirit, but when you lose what you're competitor for or the fire within, it becomes a hard battle, so for her I'm extremely excited, too. I think she's extremely pumped up for this to finally happen.

November, while it feels like a long time away, it certainly seems that -- we're looking at it, she's almost halfway through already, the pregnancy, so we're pretty excited. It's going to be awesome.

Q. For either of you guys, talking to Jay Frye yesterday, he said that there will be very little, if any, testing for the season just due to the timing constraints. There might be some for teams that are looking to test prospective drivers, but that just being another component of this very odd, very unusual setup for the 2020 season, how do you expect that to affect you guys in any way moving forward as we navigate the rest of 2020?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it's a challenge. Not to have any testing, it's a challenge. It certainly has benefitted the teams that tested, because Taku and I only did really one day. Some teams that they had their cars prepared in time were able to test in January. We were not one of those, and while normally that's something we wouldn't think about much, having one extra day would have been extremely -- would have been double of what we had, right, so it would be valuable.

I just think there needs to be no testing, even when they talk about prospective drivers. We can all say we have a prospective driver but really what we're doing is putting somebody good out there to go testing and learn more. In my opinion if there's going to be no testing, there should be no testing, period.

On this weekend I think they're allowing rookies to run for 30 minutes before. It is what it is. I think the rookies do need to run, but also let's not forget that after COTA a lot of rookies did go to Texas and did run on ovals there, so they would have had that information and data, as well, whereas Takuma and myself do not. I think Penske ran McLaughlin there, I know Palou ran there and a couple of those guys. So anyway, my point is if there is going to be no testing, there should be no testing, let's go racing, and may the best man win.

Q. You guys have touched a little bit on the uniqueness of approaching this one-day show as the first race of the year at an oval, which is typically a very exciting track but also can be kind of dangerous at times. How will you guys approach just specifically the on-track aspect of Saturday as the first race of the season, wanting to be aggressive, wanting to start the season off strong, while knowing that there are a handful of rookies in the field and just a few of them in general certainly not quite finely tuned where it would typically be at the start of a June year?

TAKUMA SATO: I think we just are looking after it and take care of each other more than usual. For the rookie drivers, I think it's just naturally a very challenging field, but so do we. Like Graham said at the very beginning, we're intense and a bit nervous, too. I'm sure that everybody goes there cautious. But at the same time, we're such competitive drivers, and once it goes to the green flag, I know everybody will go flat out. Hopefully we just respect more, and we're going to have a drivers' conference call with a lot of stuff to prepare as much as we could. But the reality is once the race starts, we just take care of each other. Otherwise really nothing we can do other than go to a little cautious. For every procedure you have to make sure what we're doing, and then we go to the next step as a logistical 100 percent all the time.

Q. Graham, one thing you haven't experienced yet with the Aeroscreen is the glare factor, and that will probably come into play with the sun setting at Texas. I know that iRacing and the other simulations don't really do that much with glare. How much will that be a potential issue?

TAKUMA SATO: Honestly, I, we just don't know. We haven't done a test. The only time we drove into the sun was the COTA open test in the evening. At that time it felt pretty difficult to see, but with or without the Aeroscreen it's always difficult driving into the sun.

I think the night session, we won't get to absolute dark for Texas due to the time, but I think it's going to be a challenge, too, that I just don't know. But for sure INDYCAR tested it before and the drivers did test before in the night session, and I'm sure if there is a serious issue they'd already get on with it. I believe there is no huge issue.

As a driver going to Texas, going to Phoenix, as well, we always ask INDYCAR to start after the sun sets because driving into the sun late -- like in Phoenix Turn 3, Turn 4, it's virtually nothing, isn't it, Graham. You can't see anything but yet you have to go full throttle without rate and miles per hour, which is not good. That's not even a race.

Hopefully Texas will present a little better that way in terms of the sun and the angle, but hopefully the Aeroscreen does no more than what we're usually having a problem just with the visor.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think what Taku said, really, is that we have to trust in what INDYCAR has done and we have to trust that their due diligence has been done properly. I know I talked to Jay and he said since we drove it last there was some new anti-glare stuff that they've utilized. Again, I don't know if that's even been tested, but you have to believe that they've done their due diligence, and I think they did a great job in general. A lot of people are very critical of it. I think it's been a success so far. We just have to -- this is going to be a first for us. The glare, the pitting, does it get beat up on an oval, just the visibility standpoint, the heat, all of these things on an oval, we don't know. We just don't have any answers for that.

But the good things is Texas will probably cross all of those questions off the list, right, so even when it comes down to heat -- when I was looking, it's like 96 degrees on Saturday. We're going to be able to figure all this out pretty quickly.

Q. And also there's an opportunity Saturday the series hasn't had before, and that's the fact that the big NBC is going to put you on primetime.

Although that may not guarantee a huge rating there is the opportunity there for more people to see you. How valuable is that to the series?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, particularly in this period of time, it's huge. We can't thank NBC enough for that opportunity. All of our sponsors are -- they're looking for good numbers. They're looking to see a good ROI on our return to racing here. Fans want to watch it. It's easier to find on NBC than anywhere else, so we're appreciative of that.

I hope we get a good number. I hope we start to see some advertising here in the next couple days that's promoting that race coming this week. It's a challenge -- we were talking about this the other day. Normally they promote racing and sporting events from other sporting events that are happening and you go and go and go. Well, there are no other sporting events, so now how you promote that is kind of a question, but I'm excited, and again, I'm very thankful to everybody at NBC for making that happen.

Q. As you know all too well, consistency is so important to this series, so with this season being

shortened as it is, how important is it going to be for you guys to balance the risk and reward, recognizing situations on the track that could take you out of a solid result and recognizing when you may have to sacrifice a win or a podium to get that solid result, get home and move on to the next race in the championship?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, nobody wants to see bad things happening, so for sure it's everybody is going to be cautious. I think more than usual I would say. Naturally we will because I think everybody gets nervous, too. There's no one that has got a confidence in the entire things, so they have to go feel it and then move to the next.

I think bringing the car home is the number one thing. Safety is the number one thing, particularly for -- it's great to have such a good start to the season. Let's have a fun, great show, but ultimately, as we repeatedly say, this is such a competitive series. At the end of the day, for the last 10 laps, going for the win, I'm sure is going to be -- there's a huge battle for sure, but other than that, I just hope everybody really respects each other. That's our only hope.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I'm with him. I think that's really critical. Everybody needs to respect each other and be careful this weekend because it is the most intense race that we probably do all year. You combine that with the fact that obviously points are huge. Each and every weekend it's massive. It is anyway in a normal championship. Obviously this year that's magnified.

But also we have some rookies who have never raced on an oval before, and yet they're going to step in, their first one is going to be there, and many people would say, yeah, well, their first one would have been the Indy 500. The Indy 500 in concept is a lot less intense than going to Texas and racing in a bullring like that. Hopefully they don't race like they did on iRacing and we'll all be good, but it's going to be an intense weekend. I think that there's a great chance that whoever the smartest driver, team and everything else will come out on top throughout this one.

Q. With the 35-lap max for tires, how does that affect your strategy and what do you think it can do to the overall racing on Saturday night?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, we haven't gone through the strategy meeting yet, so we don't know yet, but we all respect the concern for the situation and Firestone's recommendation for 35 laps, which is okay. Obviously ultimately it shrinks down to the opportunity for doing different things. But I think everybody is in the same boat. You can do obviously short pit, make it more challenging, too.

There is still opportunity, but the first thing is just the safety. We have to go through it, and then I think as the season goes, everybody will get confident with

everything, I'm sure it will open up more and more, until it gets to eventually no more season. But as a start, I agree with what Firestone and the league decided to do with the technical regulation.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think it's good to be a little bit conservative in this one in particular. Last thing we need is for anything to go wrong. Firestone has had to weather the storm, as well, and not understanding fully without any track testing whatsoever what this tire compound may do. So I'm appreciative of what they're doing and being cautious, which they typically are.

You know, strategy, it's going to change a little bit. Obviously if you look at the numbers, there's going to be quite a bit of pit stops throughout this weekend, so it'll be interesting to see how that gets the guys' juices flowing and gets us back going. But I'm excited about it. It's the same for everybody. As Taku said, it might actually open up some opportunities with short pitting and stuff like that. You know, we just don't know that. We've got to get in there. We have got to run our practice and understand fully where we're at.

But we never know, maybe 35 laps is all the tires or 30 laps or whatever is all the tires are going to last anyway, so it might work out perfectly.

Q. I've always felt like sports has been part of the healing process in the history over the years, and right now given everything that's been going on with the pandemic and the protests, how important do you think it is to get the racing back, especially in the NTT INDYCAR SERIES that is growing across the country?

TAKUMA SATO: Well, I think it's extremely important to get the people's -- get the union of it. Everybody is stressed, everybody has struggled, no matter who you are, no matter where you are, with this situation. It's just hurting our entire life. To be able to see something excited, a sport, you just name it. I think it's good that one of those is us and that INDYCAR is one of the first international sports to open the world, making people get back an energy and an excitement. That is why, just back to a couple questions ago, we wanted to make a really good show. Obviously it's never fixed, so we will be competing seriously, but all we want is just a happy moment, and that's making it worldwide at least something energetic, something positive about it, shall we say.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I'm excited. I think everybody is. And I think as Takuma said, we need to go put on a good show. Everybody is looking for something great to watch and something to give them excitement for the weekend, and hopefully we can provide that. You know, I think racing in general, NASCAR has done a great job going back to it. As I said earlier, it provides some normalcy to life a little bit when you start to see sports come back on. Trust me, I know even buddies of mine who play other professional sports, hockey

players, everybody is texting me about how fired up they are that racing -- that INDYCAR racing is coming back this weekend. So even for them, it means a lot. I think a lot of those guys are looking forward to it. It'll be good to get back and get going.

Q. This will be the fourth race at TMS since the track was reconfigured and repaved, and the NASCAR guys still talk about the differences between Turns 1 and 2 and 3 and 4, 1 and 2 at 20 degrees, 3 and 4 at 24. When you're talking about the windscreens, possible glare, how does Turn 1 and 2 factor into that or how do you think it might factor into that this weekend?

TAKUMA SATO: I believe it's going to be less grip, less speed, because even the last year it was difficult to go side-by-side. Unless you go to the rubbered down and complete dark to have more downforce, you're going to side-by-side, other than start and restart takes more speed, and it's incredibly difficult. Not like old Texas Motor Speedway; to go a full lap and go side-by-side is never possible at the moment. But it is challenging. I think it's a good thing, and Turn 1 and 2 is going to be more challenging for sure because the Aeroscreen made it -- aero efficiency going down. You had more drag but less downforce, yet INDYCAR tried to get back some of the downforce, but we really don't know how much it's going back, and obviously COG is higher which is asking a tire on the outside more even harder. So I think tire degradation is even bigger. That's why Firestone prepared the new compound, which like once again, like Graham said, we just don't know how it's going to react.

Everything is up in the air, and it's a little bit unknown, although they tackled most of it, but there is some unknown factor, which makes I think the racing more challenging. But we're not going to expect to go to the side-by-side for full laps all the time. I don't think it's going to happen.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, and as far as the glare, I think 3 and 4 is where the sun gets into your eyes, obviously setting in the west there, so 3 and 4 is always the issue with the visual. It also happens to be typically where most of the problems happen, so hopefully we are all able to get through that phase pretty safely and get the sun down there a little bit further.

As Takuma said, I'm not even sure what time actual sunset is, but I do know that with the race time we're probably going to have sun for quite a while, and so who knows if we're actually going to get full darkness ever or not this weekend. If we don't, as he said, too, it makes it a little harder in 1 and 2 to go side-by-side. We need the cool track to get that grip, so that'll definitely be a challenge.

Q. Graham, with the baby news, no shortage of opinions inside the paddock. Just wondering how

much unsolicited advice you've gotten, fatherly advice you've gotten since the announcement, who's given you the best advice, who's given you the most ridiculous advice?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No one has given me much, honestly. Nobody has given me much. But I'll tell you this, I've had a couple conversations with people that when I was a kid -- you know, I used to go -- I'm not going to lie. I remember as a kid, everywhere we went all the time, you'd get so excited about seeing something. Dad, we've got to have this; Dad, we've got to do this; Dad, we've got to -- and it brought back so many memories. I thought to myself, oh, Lord, I should probably prepare just in case that this is going to come back and bite me, and I'm going to be the -- my kid is going to be the same way. But for me, nobody has said too much. I'm excited about the opportunity to become a dad. I'm excited about what is to come.

Everybody has asked me about what gender is it. We're not going to find out until the baby is born. I mean, Courtney wants to keep it a surprise, and she says I'm like the one person in the world that every surprise she tries to plan I ruin, so this is one I can't, and we're excited about that, so it'll be pretty cool.

THE MODERATOR: That'll conclude today's call. We appreciate Graham and Takuma taking the time to join us. Both of them have had success at Texas. Graham won the 2016 race that started in June and ended in August and then Takuma won the pole last year. Wish you guys the best of luck having more success at Texas Motor Speedway. Thank you everybody for joining us.