

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday March 11, 2016

Graham Rahal

Spencer Pigot

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We will continue with our Verizon IndyCar Series media availability. We are now joined by the two drivers of Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, Graham Rahal and Spencer Pigot.

Graham, this is a special place for you because it was the site of your first win in 2008 here in St. Petersburg. What does the track mean to you and how does it feel to be back?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, it's great. It's awesome to finally get the season underway. I feel like we've done a lot of talking and thinking through the off-season to just get back to driving.

It's fun to be out here. I think the crowd looks great today. Anytime you come to St. Pete, I think everybody loves the location, probably the best view out of the media center you're going to get all year, so enjoy it.

For me, it's special to get the season underway after where we came off of last year. Had a little bobble there in the first session. I think we know where we went wrong on both cars and we'll improve a lot here.

It's nice to get 2016 going. The off-season has been long. There's been a lot of work put into the off-season. For me it's like the quietest part of the year, which is starting now, which I'm looking forward to. Happy to be back, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: You also have a teammate this weekend, Spencer Pigot, who actually in 10 starts here in the Mazda Road to Indy system has five wins.

Spencer, this is your first one here in the Verizon IndyCar Series. How has the acclimation to the team been, working with Graham, and also the car?

SPENCER PIGOT: I think, yeah, so far it's been great working with everybody as a team. They've all been super helpful, answering all my questions, taking time to teach me all the things I need to know. Graham included. He's been very helpful.

A big change from Indy Lights. A lot of new things to learn on the car, the way you drive it. The races are totally different with pit stops, the length of them, all sorts of stuff.

So far it's been great working with everyone. I think this weekend will be a good one. We came out of the gate here in the first session with some things to improve on. Like Graham said, we know where to go. I think we're just going to be improving every session.

Really looking forward to the rest of the weekend.

Q. (No microphone.)

SPENCER PIGOT: Definitely feels like a home race for me. I grew up about an hour away in Orlando. I've got a lot of friends and family supporting me. Great to be back in Florida enjoying this great weather, sunshine. It's great to be here. Always enjoyed the event. Always been good to me. Can't wait to get started on Sunday.

Q. Spencer, the weather forecast for Sunday is not the greatest. Have you ever raced in the rain?

SPENCER PIGOT: Yeah, I've raced in the rain quite a few times throughout my career now. I've actually never raced here in the rain, so that will be another thing to learn, if it does rain.

The team has been here a lot with those conditions. I'm pretty sure Graham has driven here in the wet. I'm sure I have good people to learn from and ask questions to.

Q. How are the Hondas comparing from a year ago?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think Honda has done an awesome job through the off-season. We've put in a lot of work. I think there's still more improvement to come with the car, getting information. I think we got our latest aero information at 4 o'clock last night. So our guys are still kind of poring through some of that.

Honda does a tremendous job of supporting these teams, giving us the information we need. Clearly a team like ours, a smaller team, we don't have the budget to go to the wind tunnel and learn all that on our own. We rely on them quite heavily.

So far it looks pretty close. If you look at track speeds and stuff like that, I'd say it's similar. Like I said, on our car we had a basic mechanical issue that we kind of self-induced a little bit. We'll fix that for the second session.

I'd say they seem pretty competitive. I'm proud of Honda for the work they've put in. We have more to do, for sure. But first step is definitely a good one. I think we're going to close the gap further as the year goes on.

We're still on a '15 spec engine, same engine from last year. Once we get an updated spec, which is a few races away I'm sure, that should help us close the gap even further.

Look forward to that.

Q. Graham, for a long time you and Marco were the two American drivers. Neither of you were really winning. Has anything changed for you now that you've delivered the performance? Does it feel any different, or is the attention any different?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, I would say I don't get the question anymore, When are you going to win again, which is nice. I don't get the pressure of everybody saying that I can't do this, because I knew all along I can compete with these guys. I've been teammates with a lot of the good guys. I could always compete. On Sundays, we weren't able to put it all together.

Last year we did. So there's less pressure for me from that standpoint because I have no doubt coming into this season that I can win races. There's not a question of that anymore.

I have a tremendous team behind me, which is really what made the biggest difference last year. I'd love to help move this series forward.

I think there's no doubt that a name, whether it be myself or Marco, would have a great impact on that. I hope it's us. But there's a lot of good, young Americans in this sport. If you look at last year, I mean, there was a string of races where Americans were pretty much dominating it.

It's exciting times as a whole. There's a lot of guys that can help take this to the next level. It's how do we build names of them enough to, you know, get this sport to the stage where all of those individuals, Newgarden, Spencer in the future could play a big role in this, how do you get those names large enough to help carry it forward?

Marco and I, I certainly hope that Marco can have a great year, too, because both of those names are going

to help more than just one.

If you look at his performance last year, it wasn't that far off either. Didn't have the podiums or the wins, but they were in the top 10 for the championship solidly. He was pretty strong. It's what can we do to take it to the next level.

Sponsors are a huge part of this too, right? You can have a name, but if a sponsor doesn't build around it... We went to a Steak 'n Shake appearance last night and it was packed. I went to appearances before that nobody was at.

When you get a sponsor who truly activates and puts it on the radio, that's how you build stars out of people. That's what has happened in NASCAR. Hopefully we can see more of that in the future, too.

Q. (No microphone.)

GRAHAM RAHAL: I feel like we are. If I look at last year, you know what, we had races that went our way, but we had a lot that didn't.

Iowa we finished fourth. We probably had the best car at Iowa, but the car wouldn't shift because of the box that controls when it shifts nowadays, and it failed. We still finished fourth.

You look here earlier in the year running fourth and we get a penalty, which is whatever, we'll skip over that. Still we left a ton of points on the table here. We didn't score any points the last two races of the year, right?

There's a lot of races we left a lot of opportunities and points on the table. Montoya didn't, that was his strength all season. We didn't maximize double points races. Obviously our competitors took quite the advantage at Indy last year. We kind of left some on the table there.

I think we're in that or we should be in that conversation. I don't want to put too much pressure on ourselves. I mean, we finished fourth last year not by luck. I mean, we earned it. I think we can be there right in the thick of it once again.

Q. Graham, what does Spencer bring to the table, having a teammate?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think it helps a lot with data. It was interesting after the first session, our feels were identical. What Spencer said was the same thing I was saying. Last year we didn't have that sort of thing to go off of, which is great.

I'll say, I mean, I think he's a very levelheaded kid. I think he'll do a great job for us. There's a lot of these young guys that come in - I know because I was there

once - with the impression or the belief that they're going to come in and kick everybody's you know what. That's not how it goes around here. There's a lot of good guys here.

I think Spencer has come in with a good mindset. He has a great team around him as well. I think he can add a lot to the equation on all the places he'll race.

He'd love that car to operate more than it's scheduled to right now. Certainly the first session was a good time. It was interesting, I didn't notice during the session, but we tried the same changes on our cars separately. Our pits are way apart, so we didn't talk during. But after our feels, those changes, they were identical and everything. So far, so good.

Q. Spencer, this being your first IndyCar race, can you talk about how much testing time you've had and how comfortable you are. There are differences in the cars from Indy Lights.

SPENCER PIGOT: So far, as far as time in the car, I haven't had a huge amount. I did two days in Sebring last week. The one thing we concentrated on doing in Sebring was doing as many laps as we can. We did about 300 laps at Sebring over the two days just to get used to the car and get as comfortable as possible. Only two days is not a lot. But still, that's what the situation was. We definitely maximized it, got to do a lot of laps, work on a lot of things.

Coming into St. Pete, obviously it's a track I know, which helps. But got a good amount of time in the car recently. That's nice to keep it fresh. Coming in here first session is always learning the track again. I've been here a lot of times, but still it's a lot different in an IndyCar. The car is a lot bigger, a lot faster. The braking points are different. I just have to get used to all that all over again.

In terms of the team growing and shrinking, we've brought a lot of people in for my car. It's only a three-race program. RLL has a team in sports cars, as well. We've been able to bring them in, our engineers are focused on that program. They also have a lot of IndyCar experience. Everybody on my car has a lot of IndyCar experience and are top-quality people. That's one thing that they wouldn't have done this if they couldn't have put a really good team together. They've done that for me. We feel really comfortable. Everyone's working really hard for me.