

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday April 15, 2016

Graham Rahal

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with today's Verizon IndyCar Series media availability. We are joined now by Graham Rahal of Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing.

Graham, a really exciting announcement yesterday with Theodore Racing coming onto your car for this race, the Grand Prix of Long Beach and the Indy 500. Tell us about their contribution to your team and how they'll fit in for those races?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's cool to have Theodore Racing onboard with us. Really it was an interesting sort of development. We got a call earlier in the year from the folks over at Theodore, and Teddy Jr. in particular, expressing his interest to get back involved in IndyCar, particularly for these events, because of his dad Teddy Sr.'s involvement over the years.

Obviously with the 100th running of the 500, so on, it was a big deal. I think Teddy's mom still lives here in Southern California. It was kind of a perfect coming together, uniting and bringing them back into IndyCar.

I think Teddy Jr. is extremely excited. He's done a lot on the team ownership side over the years, mostly in Europe, Japan, Macau, places like that. This is his first venture back stateside.

It's cool having them. We've had a lot of fun. They were at Phoenix just kind of watching over everything and seeing what it's all about. He's a great guy, an extremely good guy. Hopefully we can continue to work with them for many years to come because, certainly with his age and mine, there's a lot of stuff we can do together.

THE MODERATOR: Speaking of people living in Southern California, you've been splitting your time here and other places, with your wife Courtney's ties to the area. Does this feel like a home race to you? Are you adapting to the local culture, traffic specifically?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, a little bit. Obviously this race in particular, because I spent so many days here as a kid with my dad and mom, family friends that own some restaurants here in town and stuff. When I came out here with Courtney, I came to Long Beach, I kind of

knew everything. It was nice to get out here.

It definitely feels like a bit of a home race. A lot of friends and family obviously coming out this weekend. Just like Mid-Ohio, 60 some-odd people having hitting us up for tickets. So, you know, it's a pretty busy weekend.

To win at Fontana last year was awesome because it was like my home race here, then we went to Mid-Ohio, won my real home race. It was kind of fun.

To clarify, I'm an Indiana resident, and I do not and will not and hope to not pay any taxes in the state of California. I will make sure I live in Indiana for many years to come.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about this morning a little bit. About mid pack for your in the first practice. What are some of the things you took away from that first session?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Actually, we were pretty good. We just didn't get to complete a lap. My fastest lap I got held up by Ryan, through the last section, which was fine. I just wanted to complete the lap to put one in. I think we probably had another three or four 10ths in the bag there. It certainly looks like Montoya is kind of in a league of his own.

I don't know though who ran tires or whatnot. We were extremely limited on tires. In St. Pete after the impact from Munoz, we had to use an extra set, so we didn't have any carryover tires, which some people are able to carry over a set from St. Pete to here.

In particular, we were at a big disadvantage. In some cases even those outside the top 10 I believe get another set on top of that. So we were at a major hole. So we didn't get to run very much.

And I'm not sure we'll get to run a ton this afternoon either because, again, we just can't use many sets right now. But the car feels real good. I've been pleased with the progress so far. Obviously I'd like to start up towards the front and stay out of trouble and not get, you know, T-boned again and all that sort of stuff and have a good weekend.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Graham.

Q. There's been a lot of controversy between the aero kits, Honda and Chevy. I assume on this track it's not as big a deal.

GRAHAM RAHAL: It is. You have a lot of long straightaways here. That seems to be where their gain is, mid and top speed. They seem to continue to pull. In essence this aero package is the same as what we ran at Phoenix, right? The top speed at Phoenix for our competitors I think was -- well, the top speed for I think a Honda car was what Helio ran at average speed. So we're in a little bit of a hole there.

But honestly I think the Honda guys have worked really hard. We continue to develop on the engine front and everything else. And I'm not going to complain. I just keep working hard and putting myself in the best place we can to win.

This is a big weekend for us. Monday we all got to go to Honda, so we got to make sure we got a good one so we don't get our wrists slapped.

Q. Do you have enough data to prove it's the aero kit and not the horsepower?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, because we don't know what they do. We don't have a competitor's car to go run in the tunnel. As I say to my guys, this is what I said all last year, which was probably our key to success: Who cares. We have what we have. We have to make the most of what we have, do the best job with what we have. If we do that, run our race and everything else to the max of our potential, we'll be just fine.

Yeah, it's not easy. The way I view it, just like Phoenix, I knew we weren't going to win Phoenix unless it was like a miracle. But I told my guys before the race, I'm not a big team meeting sort of guy, everybody knows what they need to do and stuff, I sat them down and said, Guys, you have great pit stops tonight, I'll drive this thing to the front. I know we can do it. We did. Don't focus on the stuff that's out of control, focus on doing our little stuff right and we'll be fine. Luckily it kind of worked out.

Q. Around the domed skid pads for Indy, I know there was some talk about it maybe hurting the racing, hurting the show.

GRAHAM RAHAL: We'll see.

Q. In your opinion do you believe the teams will dial those cars in by race time?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, I think we'll get them closer, yeah. With the sidewalls on, that definitely helps. It puts us in a lot better position. I drove the car at Indy the other day and it was miserable. But there's

40-mile-an-hour winds. It was a tough day. It was an ugly day. It was cold. You know, it was just not a day you'd really want to be on track at Indy.

I'm not a fan of the domed skids. I don't really believe in it. But we have to put our faith in the people at IndyCar and go by the rules. And I told Bill Pappas when he took this job, one thing he needed to do, which I know Bill, and I knew he wasn't going to have an issue with this, is put his foot down, and when they make a rule, stick by the rule. Don't be pushed around by Penske or Ganassi or Andretti or anyone else. We're a one-car team, so we don't have much of an influence honestly. Don't get pushed around when you make a rule. Stick with it.

That's kind of what they've done. They've said they're doing the domed skid, we're doing the domed skid. Now we're going to have to go and make it work as best as we can and we'll do that.

Trust me, the Indy 500 is going to be a hell of a show. It's going to be. And we will make sure of that.

Q. But will you need a miracle to win it?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Ask me in a couple weeks. I don't know. I mean, I do know. We're running our aero kit from last year in essence, right? Obviously we'll have the '16 engine, which will be a horsepower increase. But I do know last year, and I watched the Indy 500, when I work out a lot I watch old tapes to try to learn about old races. I watched the Indy 500 two days ago while I was working out. And I was flat for the last like 20 laps that I raced. They were all lifting like crazy, and still holding even if not pulling away slightly. So that's not a good sign.

But then again, you know, we were able to change our rear pods and our front wings, and that's it. Hopefully magically those two things did the trick, then Honda will give us a hell of an engine and we'll be looking good.

But I don't know. And as I've said all along, this is more than the hundredth anniversary for me or the hundredth running. It's 30 years on for my dad. In my history, I won my Formula Atlantic championship 30 years after dad. I won my Daytona 24 Hours 30 years after dad. I won Mid-Ohio 30 years after dad. For me, it's a big anniversary, for our family. I just want a fair shot. I just want a fair shot.

I'm young. I'm 27. Everybody thinks I'm old because I've been here forever. But I still think I've got many years ahead of me that I can potentially win this thing, but I don't want to waste years. I want to go there every year with opportunities to win the Indy 500.

You know, hopefully we can get it done.

Q. Sitting here today as a Honda driver, do you think you have a fair shot?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I can't answer that really because I don't know. I mean, I know at the test, I know Marco came out and said they were sandbagging. And they were. That's fine. They did a 216 or something. They did 225 or 226 opening day of last year. They've improved their aero. You're going to tell me you're 10 miles an hour slower. It's not possible. That's just not possible.

But, having said that, I'm not going to say we're at a disadvantage yet because we have not gone out there and run in anger full on yet. So I really just don't know.

I mean, hell, we could all be talking about this when we show up in a couple weeks and maybe the Honda is fastest by five miles an hour. It's very, very hard for me to say. What it always seems, though, is that they always -- our competitors have a little left in the bag. If you ever watch qualifying, even on road or street courses or whatever, they're always able to dial it up a little. Watch their hands. They're always able to twist the knobs for like one or two laps. They can run or do something that we haven't been capable of doing just yet.

But having said that, I think we'll be -- I hope we'll be okay. I hope we'll be okay. I have really a lot of confidence in my team and the way that we build the racecars. The fit and finish of our cars are really, really strong. And so hopefully we can make a little difference there, put ourselves in the best chance possible.

I mean, it's the one we want to win.

Q. Chevy, which obviously wanted the domed skids, their drivers are saying it's a safety thing, that they think this will be a safer car with the domed skids.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Program to message.

Q. As a Honda driver, you found the cars to be more unstable, correct?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yes. Because if you actually were me and you talked to a competitor, I know Power told me his car was terrible to drive. Ed Carpenter hates them. So these guys that are saying that it's fine, like, they're not telling you the facts. That's what I believe. But, again, that's fine. You know, if everybody wants to play games, then we can all play games.

But as I said to Robin Miller in an interview I did a few weeks back, I mean, I don't want to get involved in all of that. You know, the way I believe is if one person

has an advantage, that's fine. They earned that. But everybody else should be allowed to continue to develop to get ourselves to an equal position.

There's too much money, there's too much sponsorship, there's too much on the line for us to show up and know the best that we're going to finish at the Indy 500 is 15th. That's not fair to our sponsors, it's not fair to us as teams.

I'm not saying that's the case. It might be the opposite, as I said. All I think is, I grew up in the day that Christmas for me what when the new Lola, Reynard or Swift or whatever it was came rolling in the shop. Every year it happened. And I love that. I love seeing development. I love seeing the teams have the access to develop to make changes.

It's just like it was a handful of years ago. If a team goes out and they develop and they find an advantage, that's fine. If they release it on the I.R.I.S. system we have, so every other team can see the drawing, every other team knows what they're doing. That's the way it was 10 years ago. No small team was at a massive disadvantage. They could have the parts made, do what they wanted.

Sure, there's a cost to that. But I want to see development. I enjoy being part of that. So for me I think it should be opened up a little bit. If manufacture wants to spend some money, you know, to close the gap, because you better believe Honda, they don't want to be beaten. But we were already behind last year. I think they genuinely worked their you know what's off in the off-season. But now you're in a position where we're still behind and we can't change anything so what do we do. That's what's difficult.

I prefer to just see it. A, allow development. The domed skids, strakes, let them run whatever they want to run. If those Chevy guys believe, genuinely believe, no sidewalls and no strakes is better, then they don't need to run them. But if we believe that they are better, then we're going to run them. And if we put both of them on and we're too slow because the drag is higher, then we'll take them off. You don't need to micromanage that. If those guys really believe what they say they do, then they won't try it.

That's my whole philosophy on all of this stuff. 'Cause at the end of the day right now we should be talking about Long Beach or the Indy 500 or Barber or Grand Prix or whatever. All we've talked about for three weeks is domed skids, which really not a single person sitting in the grandstand is going to have a clue what a domed skid is or notice if they look at it what the difference is. It really doesn't matter much.

Q. Talking about the single-team mindset. How hard is it knowing how racing is to keep the team focused so you're not thinking about what others are doing?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's tough. It's tough. But, you know, like last year, our guys did an excellent job and we focused very hard on what we're doing. Where it got really difficult for us was like Phoenix. Phoenix, you know, we came out of the box, and my gosh, that thing was loose, really bad. But how do we recover. You have no time, turnaround from one session to the next, no data to learn from. If you're Andretti with Honda, you've got four cars to learn from. So somebody can be trying one pod and another guy can try different speedway trim, this, that. That's where it really hurt us honestly. That one was kind of a slap in the face.

But we came out of it pretty good.

Other than that, I can tell you right now I genuinely believe this, I would put my team up against any team out here as far as the quality of personnel that we have, the mindset. I mean, we have an excellent group of people and I don't think that they get distracted. They know what they need to do. We focus on what we need. They trust me. The engineers, what I say, they know if I tell them I need something for race day, I'm not lying to them. They're going to give it to me. We'll go racing and we can beat them.

That's kind of the philosophy we had last year. I think it works well. My guys are awesome. I mean, they really do make a heck of a difference in this whole deal.

So the mindset has been pretty easy. They know what we need to do.

Q. In practice today, how was it with the two new curbs?

GRAHAM RAHAL: Good. Actually the curbs, I think that was a good improvement. I told Brian Barnhart yesterday, IMS, of course it's IMS, so it's the absolute best you're going to get, but they made these temporary curbs that are like a metal shelf, then you pour the concrete in them. It's pretty much a set slab of the design and the profile. We should just run those as a standardized thing everywhere we go.

Obviously there's some places we go, you have sports cars and stuff, so it can be tough to get everybody to agree. But at the end of the day the main show is the IndyCar race. I just believe if that was the standard curb profile, you'll see it if you watch the Grand Prix, it's like in the fast chicane, and they're awesome.

But these are good. The ones in turn five are much better than the bread loaf things we had before, which is just a good opportunity to hit the tub, hurt yourself

pretty much. So I think it's a good improvement, for sure.

Q. Does it make for faster times, do you think?

GRAHAM RAHAL: No, I don't think. Like I don't think those items will make it quick every. I mean, I would anticipate with horsepower and everything else, the car should be faster this year. But we'll see.

Honestly here it's tough because they have the Formula Drift or whatever they had last weekend. If you get offline right now, it's literally like going on ice. It still is. That has probably more of an effect on the track than curbing.

Q. Talking about philosophy, NASCAR has taken downforce off the cars. A lot of discussion right now out there about whether these cars have too much downforce and whether or not we should reduce the downforce to increase the skill of the drivers, so to speak. What is your opinion on this?

GRAHAM RAHAL: So driving through turn one at Phoenix, going 100 miles an hour, is a lot different than 180. So when we talk about downforce, it's not fair to compare NASCAR versus us because the cornering speed capabilities are two different animals. I can slide this thing at 100 miles and feel comfortable. Go slide this thing at 180, you're going to need a new pair of underwear every corner. Seriously.

You cannot compare those. It's frustrating seeing some of those guys comment about what we're doing. It's not the same.

If you look at Phoenix, Phoenix wasn't a downforce issue. Nobody was flat until the end of the race, right, when the conditions are absolutely at their best. It's cool. Sun's gone. Whatever. We're stringing out. I didn't do a single lap flat till then.

Now, in my opinion, what would have benefited me the most is raise the horsepower. It's not downforce. If we were flat around there, I get downforce. Like Iowa is a little different because Iowa you can be flat like in traffic. But if we're flat around there, that's one thing. But for me, the key is getting more horsepower so when you lift and you go back to power, the thing accelerates a lot harder and it would have created passing.

Then the other thing might be to introduce 'push to pass' if we could, which was a discussion. That came up. But if we had 'push to pass' at places like that, because 'push to pass' at St. Pete was big. You could feel it. It was finally a really good jump in horsepower when you used the button. I think that would have helped passing.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Thank you, guys.

But the downforce thing, we can try to take some off if we want and go run around. Right now the difficulty of that is with no underwing, right, they took the sidewalls and strakes off here, even at Long Beach we don't have them, you rely heavily on the upper wings. If you take the upper wing off without an underwing, you won't be able to follow. It will be impossible. It's difficult to just say downforce off, go have fun, figure it out.

Q. Let me take it one step further and then I'll shut up. The next generation of the car, they haven't designed that yet, but is it inconceivable to have that car designed with a huge under body and almost no wings at all?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It should be, in my opinion, it should have a significant amount of underwing downforce. It doesn't need the topside wing. I mean, you're still going to want wings and stuff on it, right? But it doesn't need nearly the amount, you know, what we have right now as far as the wings and all the stuff.

I mean, maybe I'm old-fashioned in my mindset and nobody will agree with me, but I truthfully, like I'm the type of person that finds a Formula One car extremely ugly. And I don't find these things that pretty either. I don't find LMP prototype cars attractive anymore. For me I like streamline. I look back like, what was it, the '93 Penske, the '92 Lolas, cars like that. Even the Champ Car, the first one I drove, the 2001 through '06 Lola, the thing was beautiful. I mean, it's so simple, but just gorgeous. That's what I just hope it would look like.

Honestly, I just drive the thing. Whatever they give me, I'm going to drive it. But, you know, the underwing is the key. That's one of the things I've been blown away by, you know, a little bit, over the last couple years, even here. Give us the under wing back. The truth is nobody's going to run with the underwing and everything else and still the wing angles we have right now. You'd be too slow down the straights. We trim out for qualifying anyway with what we have. If you have underwing, you're going to want to take the wing angles down even more, you have to have straight line speed to equal lap time.

But, you know, I don't make the rules, so... It's fine. I mean, but like I said earlier, with Bill and those guys, Tino, they're smart guys, very smart. I've worked obviously with Bill. I know Tino. Whatever the rules that they make, they need to just stick by them and let's go racing.

THE MODERATOR: We have to let Graham go. Thank you very much.