

IndyCar Media

Conference

Saturday April 23, 2016

Simon Pagenaud

Will Power

Josef Newgarden

Scott Dixon

Sebastien Bourdais

Graham Rahal

Fast Six Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Let's get started with today's Verizon P1 award qualifying press conference. We're joined by driver of car No. 9, the Coca-Cola Chevrolet this weekend, Scott Dixon, who qualified fourth with a lap of 1.07.2083 seconds. You've been in the Firestone Fast Six all three races this season. Tell us about your day today.

SCOTT DIXON: I think today got a lot better than when we rolled off the truck. I think we also saved a lot of tires yesterday, as well. All in all, a little disappointed. Just nearly spun on the first lap so I had to wave that off, and then the second lap I nearly spun in 3 and then nearly spun in 9. I think we tried a few adjustments for Q3, and the car was just really, really loose. We tried to minimize laps on the tires because this is a really high degradation track and race typically. As we saw last year, guys that ran the least amount of laps on tires really stormed through at the end.

Looked like a lot of people were running double stints on tires in qualifying, so hopefully that plays true tomorrow, and it should be pretty good for the race.

Obviously we would have liked to have qualified a little bit better, but all in all, it's a decent weekend, and cool to be rocking the Coca-Cola colors here again in Alabama.

THE MODERATOR: Six years here; on the podium every year. Haven't quite gotten to that top step yet. What will it take for you to do that tomorrow?

SCOTT DIXON: Pass three cars. That's going to be what we've got to do. I think our strategy here typically



has been pretty interesting in the past. Weather looks perfect tomorrow. Track looks like it's going to be extremely hot, especially with the sun and clear skies.

Back to my point of tire degradation, it's going to be really important and how the car manages it. Hopefully we can work on that a little bit in the warmup, but yeah, unfortunately our competitors in the championship for the most part -- at least it's Simon. Congrats to Simon, too, for getting the pole. Obviously did a great job there. But we've got to try and get some points on those cars up front, and tomorrow we'll do our best, but strategy I think is going to be key tomorrow and how easy the car is on tires.

Q. Scott, last week there were no cautions. We talked about downforce, but you had the walls. Here you don't have walls. Do you predict some people getting brave and the chance for caution flags and restarts?

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, here is always kind of interesting. It's very high speed, so when you do make a mistake, things happen pretty quick. You do have quite a lot of downforce on here, but I think the difference here is that the degradation of the tires, again, is just so massive that you get good cars coming from the back or some of the faster cars or maybe even a car that's out of sequence going off quite quickly and creating a lot of passing, and when you get a lot of passing, a lot of close quarters as we saw last year in many different segments of the race and in many different parts of the grid.

I think here always plays for a fantastic race, and I expect no different tomorrow. I think when you're in close quarters, you have the likeliness of a few cautions.

Q. Scott, was there much difference between the red and black tires, because I got the impression that the reds didn't have that much speed, and then going back to Long Beach, I thought maybe the black tires, between the reds and the blacks, that the blacks really didn't go a lot longer than say when the reds fell off. I don't know if the reds lasted longer.

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, I think it's very car dependent. I feel like some cars work better on blacks than others do maybe on reds. Setups, there's so many different

variations that you can have. But I think we normally see that the red is just plain quicker with almost similar degradation. The black used to last a bit longer, but we see almost the same falloff now. But it depends on the track. I think tomorrow you could see some difference between those two, but we'll have to wait and see. But yeah, here tomorrow will be real interesting, I think.

Q. The finish at Long Beach, is that behind you now?

SCOTT DIXON: Yeah, we're in Barber, man. On to the next one.

THE MODERATOR: We'll introduce the driver of car No. 11 KVSH Racing Chevrolet who will start fifth in tomorrow's race after a Firestone Fast Six lap of 1.07.2965 seconds, but in the second round of qualifying, established a new track record of 1.06.6001 seconds, Sebastien Bourdais. Talk us through your qualifying day.

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Well, it's always screwed up when it goes like that, right? You set the track record and then you get disappointed when you finish fifth. You know, it's a shame. The guys did a great job. We unloaded off the truck real strong, and that HydroxyCut machine was really dialed in. Just couldn't quite make it happen on the rerun on the tires, just picked up a bit too much understeer and just couldn't get back on power on these long, long, long turns. Only the juice of the new tires could have allowed me to put it together, and it was a really clean lap, and it's so funny when the car is like that, everything seems easy, and it was one of the very enjoyable moments of the week for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about your prospects for tomorrow's race.

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: Yeah, I don't know, I think like a lot of guys, just a lot of questions really, because we kind of get to the point where the reds are usually -- the Firestone reds are usually pretty quick to get up to speed and everything, but really every time I took one warmup lap after the out lap and did my qualify lap -- yeah, you know, just couldn't quite make it happen. It's weird. Sometimes you just like the reds are just very durable, you can do lap after lap after lap, but here on the long duration corners and pretty abrasive surface, it's taking its toll, and when the sun is out, the track tends to run 116, 120, and definitely you have a hard time.

I think as far as we're concerned, we're a little concerned for a full stint on these reds because first of all, there's only one that's going to be brand new. Second of all, they seem to fall off pretty quick. Then when they lose their edge, if it's the front, you can manage. If it's the rear, it gets pretty interesting.

So we'll see how that goes, but should definitely be an interesting race tomorrow with possibly different strategies and very different pace between new tires and old tires as the tire degradation kicks in. We'll have to be careful with that.

THE MODERATOR: We are also joined now by Josef Newgarden, driver of car No. 21, the Ed Carpenter Racing Chevrolet. Josef qualified third today with a lap of 1.07.0283 seconds. Josef, talk about your performance today.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, it was okay. Pretty happy actually. I didn't think we were going to be that high up. I have a lot of confidence in what we're doing, it was just kind of hard to put everything together this weekend. We were just floating inside that top 10, and I never felt like we could get up to the top three, top five as easily as we wanted to.

We made a really good change going into qualifying. I think it's something we were probably missing, so luckily we hit it at the right point, and that really helped us in qualifying to get where we were. Close -- kind of like Bourdais said, it's really hard to put it together on the second lap around here, second run on red tires. They wear out.

I was pretty happy with my lap, but it wasn't enough to beat the Penske boys today.

THE MODERATOR: Now also joined by Will Power, driver of car No. 12, Verizon Team Penske Chevrolet, qualified second today, 1.06.9421 seconds. Will, I believe you've qualified first or second here every year except for one. Talk about your performance here today.

WILL POWER: Yeah, it was good, you know. Got through every round, and get to start on the front row. Need to have some good finishes here to have a shot of being in the championship at the end.

So yeah, Penske has definitely got our stuff together, and Simon did a mega lap there, an awesome lap. To do that on these reds is very good.

Q. Josef, I know you were asked this before, but this is the first time in your career that you've been able to come to a racetrack where you are the defending winner. How does it feel when you walk into a place that you've already conquered?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Well, I mean, it feels good. Felt really good last year winning the race. I think it's a special place now for me just -- I've always loved this track, but I love it so much more now because it's the first place -- I got my first win here, so it's very special.

But I think everyone just assumes you're going to go back and do the same thing, and that's been kind of hard to manage over the weekend. Not hard, but it's just funny because everyone is like, hey, you're going to do this again, right? You're going to win the race because you won last year, and I'm like, well, that's not really how it works. It changes every year, and things are different. You've always got to try and be catching up. All the teams are evolving all the time, and same as the drivers.

We've been doing our best to try and keep up with the changes this year and everything that's been going on, and you know, in qualifying I did a pretty good job. I was really proud of everyone. We hit on it right where we needed to, so I feel a lot more confident now going into tomorrow that we can try and repeat a win.

Q. Seems like the guy to your right (inaudible)?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: Yeah, Rahal looked pretty good there at the end of that race, didn't he, all race. We're going to have to watch out for him. I don't know who's going to be the best tomorrow on tires and fuel and trying to make it happen all race long, but I guarantee you he'll be there.

THE MODERATOR: With that, let's introduce Graham Rahal, driver of car No. 15, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing Honda. Graham qualified sixth today with a lap of 1.07.6388, his best qualifying effort of the season so far. Talk about your day.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I think we had a good run there. Pleasantly surprised with the pace. You know, obviously we've been close in practice and stuff, but this morning we didn't get to run a set of stickers at all, so I was telling Josef at the autograph session, I had no clue what to expect, which way the car was going to go. Obviously I know what it typically does, but no, it kind of worked out. The car was good on reds. We snuck through that first group, and then didn't quite hit it on the first round, didn't get the reds to match their capability, and then finally second round we did. That was about as good of a lap I think as -- there was definitely nowhere else for me to find time. So I knew in round three we were going to have to put some magic together to be up front.

These guys are all great competitors up front. We're top Honda. Obviously we'd like to be the top of everything, but we're going to keep working hard and try to harass these boys tomorrow in the race.

Q. Will, obviously everybody on Team Penske has different driving styles, different engineers, but what do you think of Montoya's lap and where he's starting?

WILL POWER: I have no idea where he's starting.

Q. Last.

WILL POWER: Oh, last? Yeah, he's definitely got -- he's a different driving style than I've seen of anyone, actually. But he's really impressive in some places. Obviously he didn't get his setup right here. But it's amazing in our team, the different setups, and the eventual similar lap times. Yeah, it just shows how competitive this series is, you've got so many different driving styles and drivers. It's all covered by -- whole field covered by a second.

Q. Graham, James seemed to be a little unhappy that he didn't get into the Fast Six, and when I asked him about if it's a more even field, he said three Hondas in the top 12, so it doesn't appear that way, but you're one of the three. Do you still see a little bit of disparity in the competitive field for tomorrow? It seems like you've got a pretty good setup.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Well, I mean, I think it's really, really hard to tell. I think it seems like right now we're struggling for a little bit of horsepower, and perhaps to get -- to match their lap times -- everybody up here is ringing its neck, right, but it just seems like you're taking risks that are kind of crazy to try to get close. I mean, I'm sure James isn't pleased that he's not in the top six because unfortunately it's become like a war of who's the fastest Honda guy, and it feels pretty good to go home with the fastest. It's kind of become that sort of battle a little bit, sadly.

But look, I mean, like I said, that lap I did in round two, I know for a fact like I don't think I could have done better than that, and we were still two tenths off or a tenth and a half off of whoever was fastest. Is there maybe a little bit that we're lacking? Yes, but I'm not so sure that it's aerodynamically. I think we'll be pretty good tomorrow, and then if we can find a way to keep the rear tires under us better than the rest or whatever, kind of like last year, I think we'll be looking good.

As I said last year, I'm not going to sit up here and make excuses or anything. We feel like we can compete, and we're going to give it our all no matter what we're driving.

Q. Is it drag?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I don't think it's drag. Ask any of these guys, it's so hard to tell, right? Really, it's hard to tell. I think if you can find a really -- like really good balance, you can find a tenth of a second, and maybe that helps a little bit. But it's tight. It's tight.

I mean, name one field in motorsports in the entire world that's this competitive, and you can't do it. You can't. As Will said, you slip a little bit, doesn't matter

what manufacturer you're in, you're going to be at the back.

Q. Will, after today, how much more comfortable do you feel, and do you learn from today?

WILL POWER: What we learnt today?

Q. How comfortable do you feel after today with this track?

WILL POWER: Yeah, it's amazing with the amount of downforce we have now how many of the corners are such -- it's about bravery. Like you've really got to be committed. I think it would be a different story on the racing tires with the grade. There might be tire conservation, and hopefully it's a good race. It has been the last few years. But yeah, real comfortable.

Q. For anyone, did the new format change the approach today, the fact that it was only a six-minute Q3 rather than the standard grabbing ten with five guaranteed?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I mean, you know what's hilarious, I totally forgot that was a thing until I got going, and then I was like, you know, it wasn't that different. I think it didn't hurt anyone here because the red tires you have to do it on one lap, especially when they're used. You've got one lap to go out and hit it. Everyone went out -- most people, I think everyone went out and did both their red sets. I did, and did one lap apiece. I think probably the time didn't change much. It's probably good it was condensed. Most guys normally wait, so now it's taken away some of that waiting period, which is good. But from a performance standpoint or a lineup standpoint, I don't think it changed anything result-wise today.

WILL POWER: I think it needs to be 10 minutes on the street course so you have people do two runs to make it more interesting. But like Josef said, here it's just one lap, but you have these tracks where you can do three laps or four laps and then come in and go again. I think it makes it more interesting because of a red flag or something, but it is what it is.

Q. As far as passing goes here with the aero kits and trying to get up behind somebody, there's going to be some turbulence; is there another place to pass other than going into the hairpin at 5-6? Can you pass down the front straightaway?

WILL POWER: You can probably pass in the 12 --

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I mean, 5 is obviously the best place. But actually, I mean, like if you look at the race last year, I think I passed Dixon out of 9, which is never a place that you would think. But with the way the tires fall off here, it's pretty easy to make mistakes, and I think it opens up a lot of places to pass. It really just

depends on how guys are struggling. It is hard to follow in general, but I've seen some cars go off really bad here. We'll see tomorrow.

Q. Sebastien, last week was caution-free. Some of it had to do with downforce, some of it perhaps the walls. Do you see any more contact between cars, yellow flags, restarts here than last week?

SEBASTIEN BOURDAIS: I don't know. I think this is like so unpredictable. Every time you think it's going to be a crash fest, you don't see a yellow. Every time you think it's going to be nothing, it becomes a carnage. I don't know, honestly. But I think here obviously if the tires really go bad, which has got potential with the hot temperatures and stuff tomorrow, it leads to mistakes. It's very easy to make a mistake and really, really hard to keep it on the black stuff. That can definitely lead to a pretty interesting race and some strategies of sequence and whatever, and then from there it's just all bets are off. Sometimes you think it's going to be kind of a boring race and it turns into a super exciting one because the pace difference is so massive between new and old tires that inevitably things happen.

Once everybody settles in then it's different, but when you have different strategies going, then things can definitely happen, but I couldn't tell you what's going to happen, obviously. I wish I could. It would be very convenient.

THE MODERATOR: We'll bring up our pole winner, your Verizon P1 award winner from Team Penske, driver of car No. 22, the PPG Automotive Refinish Chevrolet with a lap of 1.06.7262, his third career Verizon IndyCar Series pole, Simon Pagenaud. You snuck in there at the end. Talk about your day.

SIMON PAGENAUD: It was a really good day. This morning -- yesterday, like we talked about, we worked on the race car. Today we worked on the qualifying car. Made a few good changes. We made a few good changes and the car was really nice this morning for what I imagined being the red tires. We kept good notes from last year, and we knew we had to be competitive on that one lap. So what we did is we planned on making sure we could bank a really strong lap on one lap, the first segment, which was enough to go through. Second segment, same thing, and then we had fresh enough tires for the Fast Six. Then it was about putting the least amount of fuel in the car and go for the special lap, and glad it worked out.

Q. Some of the other top six said basically you're going to get one set, one set and qualify. How do you determine you're going to go out early in the six minutes or wait until the track settles in more, and who determines that?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I think for us it's the discussion we have before the qualifying. We imagine the scenarios, and we discuss it, and we decide with Ben Bretzman and Kyle Moyer. That's what we do, and then we decide the fuel level, as well.

But that depends what the driver is comfortable with. For me, I felt we could do it and we put two for two laps to start and then fuel for one lap at the end because I felt like, yeah, I felt good enough with the car to put it all together.

Q. Simon, you're on quite a roll this season. You've been on quite a roll this week. Are you just enjoying the ride?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I'm just -- honestly, I'm just having a lot of fun, but of course I'm working really hard. I'm still working as hard as I worked before, but suddenly everything is rolling really well and really easily. The whole team is fantastic, and we don't have to really think about it too much to make it work.

You know, like I said, the biggest thing for me is to make myself comfortable with the car, whatever the setup is, and once I am comfortable, I can really push it and do some things like today. So that's where we're at right now, and it feels really nice. We're just going to -- I don't want to jinx it, so we're just going to keep doing what we're doing and not get too excited.

Q. I see you have a new puppy, too.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, a bit of personal life there, yeah. Different setup, I guess. But yeah, we got a little puppy. We got him right after Long Beach. It's a little Jack Russell. Makes me think of Montoya, the way he is. (Laughter.) I'm good friends with him, so that's good.

Q. Is there any extra confidence that comes with beating Will to a pole on a road and street course now that you're on the same team for the first time?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, it's just nice to be the fastest today. In qualifying it's important to be in the lead for sure, especially here, because it's so hard to pass and it's such an aerodynamic racetrack. Definitely want to be ahead. It's definitely a game that I enjoy. Qualifying is fun, and Will is definitely the best in the business, so when you can beat him, it feels nice for sure.

Q. The other five drivers in the top six have been here and they talked about tire degradation being a big issue here. Do you get a chance to actually go through, simulate a full fuel stint at the beginning of the weekend? Have you done that, and do you think with the setup on your car that you're going to have problems with that? Are you able to kind

of help that?

SIMON PAGENAUD: That's a good question. We see in the morning in warmup, that's what we focus on. We start the weekend usually on the 22 car race package, then P3, practice three, we go to the qualifying package, what we think is going to work, and then warmup we'll go back to the race package and try to tweak it for the race. But after a while it's experience, how you feel -- how the tires are going off on the one lap. You can sense a trend after 15 laps. It's more difficult on the oval to feel it, but on the road course the tires are pretty robust. I think there will be degradation.

I think we're actually in really good shape. I think it will be four tires going off together. You've got to take care of the rear, but our car has been really consistent all weekend. We'll see in the morning I'd say after the warmup, but that's when you run the most laps to see.