

IndyCar Media Conference

Wednesday May 4, 2016

Simon Pagenaud Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone, to today's IndyCar media teleconference. Today's guest is the points leader in the Verizon IndyCar Series points standings, Simon Pagenaud of Team Penske.

Simon will drive the No. 22 Menards Team Penske Chevrolet in both the Angie's List Grand Prix of Indianapolis on May 14th and the 100th running of the Indianapolis 500 on May 29th.

As I mentioned, he does lead the 2016 points standings by 48 over Scott Dixon after wins at Long Beach and Barber Motorsports Park.

It's been a dream start to the season so far, two wins, a pole, two second-place finishes. How much confidence do you have coming into the month of May?

SIMON PAGENAUD: It's been a great start of the season. I'm obviously feeling great. Most importantly I feel like I'm driving really well. The whole team is in a very good dynamic on the 22 side. It's exciting.

I think obviously we worked really hard in '15, even though the results didn't come. But now it's paying off, and all that work we did last year is rewarded.

I feel very good for my guys and the team at Team Penske for their trust.

THE MODERATOR: With a double points race at the 500 looming at the end of the month, then another important race on the road course at IMS, do you change the approach you've had to the start of the season heading to Indy?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Not really. Indy is a track that suits us really well. We won the inaugural Grand Prix in 2014. I feel this is actually probably the track that suits my driving style the best. Also great memories. I've lived in Indianapolis for nine years. I'm always excited to go back to Indianapolis.

I think we should be strong there. If we're in a position to win, I think we need to push to get the points. But if we're not, then the important thing is to score as many as we can. That's going to be the approach.

Obviously Indy is a bit of a one-off because the Indy 500, this is the 100th running, it's the 50th anniversary of Team Penske. Obviously this is going to be a very exciting race. Like I said, it's a bit of a one-off in the championship where second is nice, but it doesn't really do anything for you.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned you won the first race on the road course at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2014. What do you like about the road course, and what kind of race do you expect?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I love the road course. It's a beautiful layout. The surface is really smooth so we can really be aggressive with the setup on the IndyCar.

I just love the fact that we kick off the month of May with a road course. The fans can see the cars in that configuration. Then we switch over the Indy mode after that.

I think it's great. It's what IndyCar is all about: diversity. We're showing what we can do. Different kind of tracks, different configurations, the aerodynamics. I find that very exciting.

The track itself, it's quite flat, which I like that better than blind corners. You can really maximize your vision and your driving.

THE MODERATOR: Let's open it up for questions for Simon Pagenaud.

Q. Coming into the month of May, in terms of ovals, do you actually feel this is the year where you can go into an oval thinking that you're not just learning ovals but you have a proper shot to win one, given how you were last year?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I do feel that way. I feel like in Texas yesterday I really focused on race running. I feel like I've got enough experience now to know which way the tire is going to go during the stint.

I've been in Indianapolis for a few years now. Okay, it's not as much experience as Kanaan, for example, but it's enough. It's what I have for now.

I just need to use people like Rick Mears, Helio, on my side, Juan Pablo, they have so much experience on

these kinds of tracks, they can be a great help.

I feel like last year was so strong, I don't see any reason why we couldn't reproduce. I'm lucky to drive for Team Penske. They provide us the best equipment in the Verizon IndyCar Series.

I think we'll be strong. It will just be a matter of preparing well during the month of May. I'm quite excited about it.

Q. You have this big points lead, yet all the little publicity things done by IndyCar over the last few weeks, none of them really include Simon. Are you waiting for a breakout for who you are, your personality, so forth?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, no (laughter). That's an interesting question. Nobody's ever asked that one. I like surprises.

Listen, I'm just going to do my thing. I don't mind being under the radar, as long as we win races. At this point I'm pretty happy to be where we're at. I don't feel like people are forgetting about me. I don't feel that way.

We'll see when I get there. I don't know what else to say (laughter).

Q. Not taking anything away from the Schmidt team you were with previously, but what have you noticed are the biggest changes from going from a smaller team to a team of the enormity of Penske Racing?

SIMON PAGENAUD: That's a good question. Actually, it won't take anything away. Schmidt Peterson is a fantastic team with really, really good people onboard. What I think they do well is maximize and optimize everybody on the race team, whether it's the crew, the engineering. They do a lot with small resources. Quite frankly, it's a really, really good team.

For me, it was the best opportunity to shine. So thanks for the opportunity from Sam and Ric Peterson.

Team Penske is a huge, huge company. Great organization, a team that has been going on for 50 years with the biggest success in IndyCar history. They obviously have a lot of partners, a lot of resources, a lot of employees.

It's a completely different dimension. All of a sudden I'm a lot more busy with off-track activities. I have to be present to a lot more appearances. I'm certainly a much busier driver than I was before. I'm almost more of a speaker now than I am a driver. That's one side of the job that has changed.

The team, the preparation that goes into it, is quite tremendous. There's not a day of rest at Team Penske. They work over Christmas. I mean, it's just incredible how much they work and how much they prepare to optimize the car. Whether we're talking about the gearbox, whether we're talking about the suspension, even the steering wheel goes into a phase of development to make the best steering wheel possible, and the brakes.

I would say the car is new every time I step in it. I know that every component of the car is optimized to its maximum. And we're still learning. That's the crazy thing. Even with all the work that we do, we're still learning.

I would say that's the difference.

Q. Last year you laid some great groundwork with Team Penske. Obviously your teammate Juan and Helio and Will were likely seeing a good bit more success than you were on the track. This year it seems like that's completely reversed. How does that change the team chemistry between the teammates at all?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Actually I wish we could put a web cam inside the debriefing room to see how much fun we're having. Maybe there would be a lot censored.

We're having a great time all together. When we sign for Team Penske, we're being told to all work together. I think there's a great understanding of that. I get along very well with Montoya. Helio is such an easy guy. Will, I've known him since 2005. We've been racing together for a long time. I think we know each other's strengths and weaknesses.

It's interesting to complete yourself as a driver by watching what the others do, what they do better, how you can do something better than them, can you use their strengths. I think that's what makes us so strong, and I think we all understand there's an advantage to be friendly off track to each other and try to help each other. We don't hide anything. I think it makes for a great dynamic.

Compared to last year, it hasn't really changed. There are years where you have luck on your side, years where you don't have any luck. That's just the way it is.

But I certainly am way more - how do you say - better in the system this year. I have a better relationship with everybody. Everybody knows me better. Things are going very smoothly. It's the best it can be right now.

Q. Yesterday I know you spent the day at Texas Motor Speedway testing. I'm wondering if by the end of the day you or your teammates came away with any great revelations about the dome skids, their effectiveness at TMS?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, whatever it does, that's what we've got. You could say that the car doesn't handle the same way. For sure it doesn't. What are you going to do about it? You can't change the situation.

IndyCar has proven that it's a safety device. It's better for our safety. We just have to find ways around it to make the car behave the best it can behave.

I think that's my spirit right now. The car feels very different to last year, for sure. It slides a bit more. But we have other aerodynamic pieces we can put on to help that. Then you have to work on the mechanical package, springs, to make you feel like you want it.

Yesterday for me was more about learning what was doing what so we could build our toolbox and use what we need when we have a situation during the race weekend.

I came out of the test with a lot of answered questions and a direction we need to take for the race weekend. It's certainly going to be different than last year.

I thought racing at the end there when we ran in a pack was actually quite good, so it actually might make for good racing.

Q. Yesterday Graham Rahal said his rivalry with you goes back to the Atlantic days. He said, It's in my head that I don't lose to Simon. I'm wondering, given the outcome at Barber, if we're going to see the launch of a really good rivalry for the rest of the year?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I don't know. I didn't think about it that way. I know I've been racing with Graham since 2006. We had great battles in Atlantic and Champ Car, and now in IndyCar.

Graham is a very aggressive driver, very exciting to watch. I don't really focus on these things. I try to just focus on my work. One weekend he might be strong, one weekend it might be Dixon. I just want to be that guy that is doing well every weekend.

At this point I'm more focused on that than rivalry. There's a long way to go in this championship.

Q. What is the sensation like when you really get into the zone when you're pushing to the limit in the car? What kind of mental preparation do you

use to help you get there? I think you've used things like meditation in the past.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, meditation is one of the tools I use. I've had to channel my energy. When I was a kid, I was a little bit too emotional, too excited in the racecar, but even before that. Something I've been working on for years, channeling my energy, trying to find that path to ultimate concentration.

It's happening more and more after years of practice, for sure. When you have confidence like we do on the 22 team, it makes it easy to trigger.

So certainly I've had a few instances this year already of really good moments within myself. I would say Barber qualifying was one of those moments.

Yeah, it's discipline, in my opinion, that gets me there and can get any driver there. But it takes many, many years to control it.

Q. Have you already had that sensation at Indianapolis on the oval in particular?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Oh, yeah, I've had it. I've had it last year. It worked out really well for me. The whole race I was in that zone for sure. I've got to tell you, I went even further in terms of concentration and execution after I had the incident with my front wing at the end of the race. That's why I was able to come back to 10th position after being at the back of the pack.

Q. Did you talk to Graham during the test yesterday?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No. I think I said hi, but that's all.

Q. You were talking about breaking your front wing at the end of last year's 500. Is that one you kind of hang on yourself as a mis-step, and that's probably why you charged back so well? Did you think it was just kind of circumstances?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I mean, I think that was totally on me. I don't hide behind mistakes. That was a misjudgment on my side.

Late in the race I didn't have water in my drink bottle. I was out. I may have been a bit dehydrated and I misjudged it. I misjudged the pass on Justin and I clipped my front wing on him. That's totally down to me.

It certainly triggered that same thing that Graham triggered when he punted me off the track at Barber. I was able to drive pretty aggressive each comeback. In 12 laps I came back up to 10th position. That was a great piece of driving. Just want to be able to replicate that when I need it.

Q. We might see a lot more fire out of Simon.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Maybe (laughter).

Q. Growing up in Poitiers, what was your first recollection of the Indy 500? When you saw it for the first time, what did you think?

SIMON PAGENAUD: That's a long time ago. I used to watch on TV. I started watching Formula One on TV when I was four. I got interested in IndyCar right away as well.

I remember the Marlboro cars, I remember the Valvoline cars. I remember the sponsors on the cars. Those are the blurry moments that I have.

My favorite race was when Rick Mears and Michael Andretti went at it at the end of the race there. Michael was leading the whole time, and Rick was just tuning his car, managed to get him at the end of the race. I thought that was an amazing moment. Certainly one of the most incredible pieces of driving I've seen.

Q. I'm sure you're aware in today's world of social media, drivers, especially in NASCAR, go to Twitter and whatnot to build their brand. Dale Earnhardt Jr. tweeted about a mayonnaise sandwich and it becomes a sensation. Yet you say you want to stay under the radar. Do you feel you're missing the boat as far as building your brand and getting your name out there?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, I don't feel that way at all. I'm not Dale Jr., that's for sure. I don't have the same name. I think I'm pretty new in the sport, too. I'm not American. It's always a bit more difficult to build the brand.

But we're doing that. We're trying to do our best to build the brand. It takes time. It takes championships. We need to win more races and be up there on a consistent basis.

Certainly being with Team Penske really helps because it's a big name, we've got big partners with us. You say I'm missing the boat. But not really. I don't think so. We manage to attract people, sponsors, like Hewlett Packard Enterprise, signed on for six races with us, and long-term as well. And we managed Menards to be our partner for the month of May and for the Road America race. Those are big partners and new partners, as well, back in the sport. So I'm very excited about that.

Verizon is a huge supporter of us. I think they're doing a lot of things for the sport, as well, and for our team. PPG colors were just shining for two weeks in a row.

Overall I think we have a lot of partners and a lot of ways to shine and show ourselves to the public. I think it's just the growing pains of just being new on the market. Let's see what happens in the next 10 years.

Q. You've driven with Senna's colors before. How important was his influence on your career? He had some surreal moments in a Formula One car, qualifying at Monaco. How far do you understand the things he went through?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, absolutely. He's been my idol, my role model, my life model really since I was a little kid. I think he is the reason I got interested in racing. Even as a living person, he still had that mythical attitude in him. I think he had this special aura around him.

I felt attracted to what he was talking about. His ability to go deeper in his thoughts and concentration level was very intriguing.

I started experiencing it pretty early at times, not on purpose, but in my go-kart. Then I started to get very interested in the technical side of racing on my go-kart, as well. A bit like he used to, I used to work on my go-kart as well, just to try to optimize it.

As I started racing, I figured that the physical aspect was important, but the mental side of things was probably the most important because your brain commands your body so you basically need to train your brain to do what you want it to do.

He's definitely my inspiration. Sometimes when I need more motivation, I go and watch movies of him. I read the book, the Senna book. That's how I find motivation sometimes.

Q. You're entering your second season with Penske. Related equipment, despite aero kit updates. Is there a sort of moment where you realize you can try and spin things your way this year, coming off two consecutive wins? Was there a moment entering the season that you felt you could really go for it this year?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I felt that way last year already. We had great performance. In terms of performance, I felt like I did much better than I did in the past. So I knew I would have speed. I knew the speed was there. Now it was about executing and putting everything together.

When I say 'everything,' it's not just on track, it's also off track, finding a way to have perfect chemistry with my whole team, finding a way to make sure that we were all on the same page and pushing in the same direction. I think that's what everybody's doing now.

Again, this year we started really strong because of last year. Last year the results were not there, but it's actually what we did last year that's paying off now.

I expected we would be strong. We started really, really strong. I just want to keep going now really.

Q. One thing that occurred over the weekend was the Boston news, a bit unfortunate. Were you surprised by that? Is there anyplace in particular that sticks out you'd like to go for a replacement round?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Yeah, I'm very disappointed. That was going to be a great event, perfect position in the city. I managed to see the excitement of I guess half of the population in Boston because I know some of the population was not excited about it. There were a lot of people that were pulling for the race. I saw the excitement.

The racetrack itself looked like it was going to be a beautiful layout. We were going to go through a tunnel, which would have been really cool.

It is what it is. It's beyond my reach. I hope we can replace the race. For sure, I'm thinking of Watkins Glen. I've never been there, but it looks like a beautiful track. It's been repaved, as well, recently. That would be a good market and really cool track to go to.

There's plenty of tracks in America that could be exciting to go to. I'd like to go back to Fontana personally. I love that oval. But I don't know what's going to happen.

Q. Maybe you could bug John Menard to get Milwaukee back on the schedule.

SIMON PAGENAUD: There you go (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Seeing as we have no more questions for Simon, we will thank him for his time today and wish him the best of luck in the month of May.

SIMON PAGENAUD: Thank you.