

IndyCar Media Conference

Friday May 13, 2016

Simon Pagenaud
Jack Hawksworth
Josef Newgarden
James Hinchcliffe
Graham Rahal
Charlie Kimball

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started as drivers come in. Josef Newgarden, made it into the Fast Six. Your assessment of today.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: It's always good when you get to the Fast Six. It was a little surprise to us. Not that I don't have supreme confidence in what we can do. It's just this has been a tough place for us. It's kind of a unique track to find speed. You think it would be straightforward. It's very smooth, not bumpy, it's fast. There's nothing super crazy about the place that you would say, That corner has to be just a nightmare to figure out. It's fast, a very difficult track because of the high speed, low downforce, big brake zone.

It's just been tough for us to find speed around here the last couple years. I think we made a good step this weekend. I feel like we're already much better than we've been the last couple years. That's positive. Being inside the Fast Six only helps going into race day tomorrow, trying to stay out of trouble, have a clean race.

Hopefully we can make it through turn one, that's going to be the hotspot. Hopefully we don't have a car that goes off very hard, race up front, take on Pagenaud who has been on a tear lately.

THE MODERATOR: If you're a driver that has technical skill, is it good sometimes to have a track that has more character that may fall better into your hands?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I think technical skill kind of comes into hand here. It's when you don't know what you need to find that it becomes difficult to find speed.



I think we know what we're looking for. I know what I want from the car. Sometimes you can know what you want, it's difficult to find it still. Some other places, you can get rewarded a little bit more with bravery. Maybe you have a fast uphill or downhill corner, you can make a little bit more of a difference.

You can still do that here, but the car really has to be precise. It's kind of like the Indianapolis 500 to some regard. You got to polish the racecar as much as possible. It's got to be perfect. That's kind of why we have so much practice going into the 500. You got to make that car perfect for the race.

I feel like it's kind of like that, too, here on the road course. Nothing I can really do to manipulate it much more. We have to be good about our setup changes and what we are doing on the car.

THE MODERATOR: Jack Hawksworth joins us. We were talking to Josef. When you get in the Fast Six, it feels good. Tell us about your day.

JACK HAWKSWORTH: Yeah, no, it was good. Seems like an eternity since I've been in the Fast Six. Nice to be up here again.

Great day for the team. We had a very good car on the new reds in the first group, seemed to work well in the second as well. Didn't quite have enough at the end. But overall it was a really good day for us. We really needed it, as well. Now we focus forward for the race, see what we can do.

THE MODERATOR: A couple years ago you got people's attention and came in here and qualified second, finished seventh in the race, led a bunch of laps in the race. This is a good place for you to introduce yourself to the Indianapolis fans.

JACK HAWKSWORTH: I had a fun race here back in 2014. Racing for Bryan back then. Qualified on the front row. Was able to get the lead on the first restart. Led a bunch of laps. But unfortunately it didn't work out in terms of the result in the end.

Certainly a track I enjoy. Just nice to be back in the Fast Six.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Josef or Jack.

Q. Josef, how different were the conditions out there? Weird weekend where it's not as hot as it normally is. Longer for the tires to come up to temp?

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I'll say this. It certainly doesn't take Penske any time to bring up their tires. Holy crap. You watch Power and Pagnaud, they're like boom. They're like in. It seems like first lap they're dropping time. For us that's been more of a struggle.

I think it's affected the balance more, to be honest. The balance has been jumping all over the place. When we started yesterday, I had one balance in the morning. When we got to the afternoon, I had a totally different balance. Got kind of loose in the afternoon.

This morning again I felt like the car kind of hunkered down at the rear. I think it helped rear grip more than anything for me. The Fast Six, I think the balance shifted again towards the afternoon, started to change.

I don't know about bringing up the tires. I didn't notice a big difference with that. But I think the balance has been kind of all over the place, trying to figure out what you want from the car between the morning and the afternoon.

Q. I know, Jack, you mentioned you liked the new red tires. Comparison to the other road courses we've had, I don't know if Firestone brings the same tire, do you have difficulty getting the balance on the car when you switch to red tires?

JACK HAWKSWORTH: Yeah, I mean, it's a bit tricky, seems to have been this year for us. We've gone to many places this year, been competitive on the blacks, comes to the reds in qualifying for various reasons hasn't worked out. There's a balance shift between the blacks and the reds. Not being able to test on the reds makes it extremely tricky to get it right for that one lap.

But I think we're beginning to get an understanding of where it goes and what we need. Obviously the red tire is different, as well, road course to road course. This one is the same as Mid-Ohio. The Barber tire is different. Always a little bit different.

JOSEF NEWGARDEN: I would agree. I think Firestone, they're very consistent. For us, me, this being my fifth year, I think we've noticed a very consistent trend on where the tires go. This tire to me has acted very standard for the road course tire that we've run.

That's thanks to Firestone. They make our job a little

bit easier with that stuff. Just got to follow the trends.

THE MODERATOR: Charlie Kimball joins us. Career-best start for you. You'll start on the front row. Looks by the smile on your face you're pretty darn happy with that.

CHARLIE KIMBALL: Yeah, reasonably happy. Kind of the first session that really counts here at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in May. Nice to start up front. Although a couple of people have reminded me since qualifying that I think last year in the melee, second place was not the place to be. But I can't control what happens behind me, I can only really look forward.

I felt good that the car was good all weekend, at least from yesterday afternoon and this morning. We just found that last little bit of balance, little bit of grip.

A lot of credit to Simon for being on pole because I think it would have taken a perfect lap for us to be close. We didn't quite get it done and he did. It's pretty impressive, that lap time. A full second faster than I think we were last year around here, so...

I'm pretty happy. I was in the 68s there at the end. Last year I think I qualified in the mid 70s, so that's a big step forward from last year. Means that starting tomorrow, I'll have at least clear air for a little while and see what we can do with it.

THE MODERATOR: We have James Hinchcliffe with us. Good to see the mayor. Was this your best qualifying effort of 2016?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Yeah, definitely. We've been kind of knocking on the door of the Fast Six for the last couple rounds. It was nice to finally break into that. Not really full of the of the usual suspects. Charlie and I were joking, probably the youngest median age, six different teams.

That was a cool session. Mainly it was getting the lap on the Firestone reds. They were good for one lap and one lap only. To strap them on, no testing with them, no practice with them, trying to find the limit. Even missing by a fraction of a second made such a difference.

Credit due to everybody up here. It was the guys that really nailed the lap. Excited to see what happens tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with questions.

Q. Jack, you really seem to have a pretty good knack for this racecourse. You started here a

couple years ago. What is the reason why you seem to qualify well and run well here?

JACK HAWKSWORTH: Honestly, I don't think there really is a reason. I just happened to have had good cars here, to be honest. I don't really have a favorite track or a track that I dislike. If it goes right and left, they're all the same to me.

We've got a good car here. We had a good car last year. We took that, adapted it to the circumstances with the new aero kit this year, seemed to work well.

The track is good fun, good fun for racing on. I don't think there's anything real special about what I'm doing out there. I do the same thing at all the circuits. Good car underneath you.

THE MODERATOR: Graham Rahal joins us. Solid qualifying effort. Your thoughts and how you feel about it.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Yeah, I mean, it was a good run for us, for sure. To start third is going to be a good battle for us up front. Everybody up here is trying to stop Padge. Pretty pleased with the performance.

This morning the car wasn't so great. I was a little bit nervous going into this one. Worked out. The guys did a great job again with changes. Happy to start third in the Steak 'n Shake machine.

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with questions.

Q. Graham, how much has having Spencer this weekend been a help, second set of data to work off of?

GRAHAM RAHAL: It's good. Last night in practice we kind of went off, tried something big, just to kind of get a direction. Spencer stayed put, tried some other stuff, other ideas we had. It was good to be able to come together this morning, have a little bit of an idea.

I felt like the way we went yesterday was wrong. He felt pretty pleased with his car. It was good to have a base to go off of. All these guys would say the same. It's nice to have something else to look at than just your data.

I think Spencer is doing a hell of a job this weekend. Qualifying is an eye-opening experience, when you see these cars doing a second faster than practice. It's hard to imagine you can find that time anywhere.

All that said, he's doing a great job. It's good to have him.

THE MODERATOR: James, the reds going off so quickly, what does that do in terms of your psyche?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It makes me want to cry.

THE MODERATOR: I don't want you to cry.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I don't want to cry.

I mean, the tire's good. It's just that ultimate speed is only there for one lap. We obviously have no idea how it's going to degrade over a full stint. If you lose a couple 10ths from your fast lap, I can stay there for a while. That will still be the tire to be on tomorrow.

We're looking at temperatures considerably colder than we've seen all weekend tomorrow. That's definitely going to affect tire degradation and grip. Going into tomorrow, it's a little bit of guesswork about tire strategy and setup and how to take care of them.

THE MODERATOR: The tire dropped off quickly, but you still get the extra grip with the reds?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Exactly. I think traditionally here the red tire is a better tire. It's just, yeah, for that one lap in qualifying, it's so tough. Like I said, it's so close, so easy to make a mistake at this place. There's so many very inviting corners to overdo it a little bit.

Like I said, such a dream to drive this thing on a brand-new set of sticker reds on that one lap, then you start finding problems with it. But it's good till then.

Q. You were saying the tires go off, James. I would think this being a very smooth track, they would last a little longer than maybe some of the other tracks. If it's cold tomorrow, wouldn't using red tires be better? Do the blacks come up once you get them up there?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I can't tell you that because my competition is listening (laughter).

I mean, it's smooth, yeah, but that's not -- bumps don't wear tires out. Corners wear tires. Abrasive tracks wear tires. The other thing that wears tires is sliding around a lot. This is a very smooth racetrack. But that means you slide around quite a bit. When you slide around. When they slide around, they overheat, and when they overheat, they fall off badly. Protecting the tires for sure is going to be the name of the game.

The cooler temperatures will help. Heat is the enemy up to a certain point. Like you say, because of the cooler temps, they probably will get up to temp quicker than blacks. That will maybe even lead more towards reds tomorrow. TBD.

Q. Graham, is there a place where you can

definitely tell you have a little more power or something? What feels different about your engine this week compared to three, four weeks ago?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I don't think it's necessarily like there's a massive amount of power. But the guys have just kept their heads down and worked hard. It's a combination of power and aero. Honda, they've had their backs up against the wall. Everybody has been very critical of them. We've tried to lead the charge for them. I think they're doing a great job. Seeing three Hondas in the top six, that's probably the first time that's happened in a few years. It's great to see.

At the end of the day these guys have no quit in them. Honda is a company that will do what it takes to win. I think they're going to continue to try very hard.

This is a good sign because always on race day I think typically we perform pretty well. It's in the ultimate pace is where they typically got us before. It's crazy to me, you look at this, Hinch touched on it a second ago, if anybody were to dispute the thought that IndyCar racing is the most competitive form of motorsports in the world, you just need to look at the time sheets this weekend. It's not like this is easy. You slide a 10th in practice, it's like five, six, seven spots. It's crazy right now.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, guys. See you tomorrow.

Simon Pagenaud joins us. This is thus far a bit of a magic carpet ride and just continues.

SIMON PAGENAUD: It's pretty fun right now, let me tell you. I'm just very thankful for the opportunity with Team Penske. They give me the best car. It's my job after that to do the best job possible. Ben, my engineer, gives me a monster car every time I'm out there.

The Firestone tires, not just to put sponsor names here, but the red tires on my car really works magically every time. Obviously the more you go into Q3, the more confidence you gain, then you can polish your driving on these kind of tires. Certainly it's suiting me really well right now.

I'm in a good zone. The whole team is executing really well. The 22 team, only our second year together, and it's exactly the same people as last year. Consistency, like Roger would say, is key. We definitely made big improvements.

My strategist made such good decisions. There's actually a lot of strategy in qualifying. We did one lap in the Q1 segment, two laps in the Q2 segment. That was enough to go to the next segment and have fresh

tires for Q3. That takes - I don't know the right word to say - it takes some guts.

THE MODERATOR: Penske has a streak in terms of consecutive poles. Suddenly you're the lone representative in the Firestone Fast Six. Was there some trepidation in the team that you'll be knocked off the top or were you confident going in?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I was confident going in we would be competitive enough to get to the Fast Six. This morning the car was really strong on the black Firestone tires. I got my balance where I wanted it to be, to be in good shape for the red Firestone tires. I knew we would be up there.

The thing is, quite honestly, the Hondas have improved massively after Long Beach. Barber and here, they're really strong. It looks like they've got a lot of power. It's obviously harder now to get in the Fast Six than it was at the beginning of the year.

Congratulations to them. It's great to see them fighting so well against Chevrolet.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for Simon.

Q. Simon, could you speak to the zone? What does the zone feel like when you're in it?

SIMON PAGENAUD: It's really hard to explain, quite frankly. I think every athlete tries to explain when things go right.

I have been very focused on the task, more so than the result. It started last year. It was difficult because I had no results to back it up. But this year I'm just focused on the tasks. Since the results came quickly this year, I could reinforce that.

I'm driving corners by corners, trying to be one with the machine. I'm certainly way more on this level than I was in the past.

Obviously every year I'm trying to improve myself as a driver. You're always trying to push the limit. Finding that zone is key. Sometimes you make it, sometimes you don't. It's a bit like opening the door and finding the key.

It's a lot about concentration and just having everything go right for you in your head.

Q. Everybody thinks when you get to Penske, there is a pressure there to win no matter what. Long Beach, did you feel a weight lifted? Have you felt different from then?

SIMON PAGENAUD: No, I haven't changed at all since

last year. That's one big question. Everybody says, What are you doing different? I'm not doing much different. I worked hard in the winter, for sure. I know my team a lot better. I'm also just more used to my environment. I know the people. I know who to talk to when I have a problem. The communication within the team is stronger. My teammates, there's a confidence and trust that works really well with them.

It's the whole situation. I think that is my answer really.

Q. Last year Will Power thought he had a legitimate chance to sweep the month of May, to win poles for both races and both races. Do you feel that could be you this year?

SIMON PAGENAUD: That's a long way. I'm going to focus on the Grand Prix. For the championship, it's big tomorrow. If we can do well, it's going to be big.

I just want to keep going in that direction. Yeah, I'm focusing on points really. But then the Indy 500 is a one-off for me. That one, it's a championship in itself.

We'll see when we get there.

Q. Because your performance level is so good since the start of the season, do you almost wish there was a way you could save some of that performance for May 29th?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Certainly using Lady Luck in a good way. It's not coming by luck, but you certainly need luck to succeed so much. I'm using a lot of that.

There will be bad days, I know that. I hope it's not May 29th. But there's nothing you can do about it. Just get the points when you can.

Q. Having talked to you before you got your first IndyCar ride, you had the confidence you could be successful given a chance. You said, I'm going to change my name. I'm going to change it to Simon Indy. You had the confidence you could do the job. Now it's coming to pass. That has to feel great.

SIMON PAGENAUD: It's great. It's a fantastic feeling. I think what I'm feeling right now is what every driver is seeking for their whole career.

Certainly I hope I can carry on this way. Like I said, everything's going right. There will be tough days. Those tough days, that's when you make a good running for the championship, by being the strongest you can be. Even if you're not winning, but finishing sixth those days, that's a pretty good day. That's what makes the difference.

As you know, I've always had consistency in my career. If I can keep that consistency as my trait, I think it might

not be so exciting to watch but it pays off in the end. That's really my approach right now.

Q. You're all by yourself because we had the other five drivers in the top six. One of the comments was that when the Penskes put on the red tires, the cars are immediately fast. Can you tell us the secret?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Never (laughter).

There is no secret. It's work, research and development. The team is incredible. We have people at the shop right now in Mooresville trying to understand what happen right now, trying to connect the data, to work on it, to make the car better next time we're on a road course.

It's just a team that doesn't leave any details. Even when we win, the goal is to understand why we won, what made the car good, how can we make it even better. They're constantly working on that. Ron, the technical director is really prioritizing what we need to do. It's a whole department working at Mooresville that's just doing a tremendous job.

We have all the resource we need. It's just an incredible team that has all the resource they need, the right people, and they do a great job.

Q. In Indianapolis you've experienced the highest of highs and lowest of lows in the last two years. Do you feel like tomorrow is going to be another one of those highs for you?

SIMON PAGENAUD: Well, I hope so. I can't read in the ball, so...

I certainly hope so. I hope tomorrow goes well. I feel just like I did in Barber, quite frankly. The car is quite similar in terms of how it feels. I also feel like if we can make turn one and be in the front after turn one, we're going to be in good shape.

Let's take the start first and see how the car is in the warmup, then I'll be more confident on what we've got.

I don't think there's any reason to be too concerned. Rahal is going to be strong. Do you know where he is?

Q. Third.

SIMON PAGENAUD: I think he's going to be very strong in the race. We'll see. It's going to be high pace, for sure.

Q. Graham and you had a great battle at the end of Barber. He'll start right behind you tomorrow. How big of a challenge do you think he'll put up throughout the entire event?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I actually thought about it already. I think he's going to be very strong. He's always very strong in race pace. He's very good on the black Firestone tires. He knows how to use that well.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, Simon. Thank you.

He usually doesn't have as many tires because he went to the Fast Six. So we'll see. But he's going to be a strong competition and I'm going to have to watch out in turn one, for sure.

Q. How do you rate this track? This track is fairly flat. How do you rate this as a road course? More difficult, less difficult because no elevation change?

SIMON PAGENAUD: I personally love it because there is no elevation change. I'm not a big fan of elevation changes. I'm a visual person, so I like to see what's happening. I don't like to be in the blind corner, that's just the way I am.

I like this track because of the rhythm you have to have around the racetrack. Turn four, that funny chicane is a lot to drive on the curbs. All the braking zones are very important for lap time.

Then you get the braking zone in turn one, turn seven right, then you get that section turn eight, nine, ten, you have to be inches perfect on the curb there to set up for the next corner, so you're thinking three corners ahead as you drive at this speed.

It's very physical. We're putting a lot of Gs these days. The cars are very much on the edge. It's really, really hard to get a perfect lap around here. When you do it, it's very rewarding in a way.

Q. Tomorrow it's supposed to be in the 50s. Might be at the limit of where the Firestone tires are supposed to run. You're on a road course, you do a lot of braking, probably put heat in the tires. If there are cautions, people's tires cool down. What do you think the drivers will have to do to keep the heat up in the tires?

SIMON PAGENAUD: It's a good point actually. I think you might struggle with the front tires, to get the front tires going. But also the game can be interesting because you can actually take away downforce when it's cold because there's more downforce naturally with the air density.

You might be able to see people trimming on their car and some other people adding downforce, so we might see differences which could be interesting and making for better racing.

We'll see.