

YOUNG GUNS OF INDYCAR

An interview with:

GRAHAM RAHAL
JAMES HINCHCLIFFE

THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everybody. Kickoff to the 2015 Verizon IndyCar Series. We're joined by Graham Rahal and James Hinchcliffe, drivers with plenty of experience and who have made their way into Victory Lane.

Graham, some pretty familiar surroundings for you. Talk about your feelings going into the 2015 Verizon IndyCar Series.

GRAHAM RAHAL: James and I were talking about this. A lot of familiar faces, guys that haven't necessarily worked at our team before, but we've got a lot of good guys back.

Eddie Jones has taken charge at our team for this year, which has been a nice change. Coming along with him is Martin Pare who is going to do our damper work. We worked together in Ganassi. And then Mike Talbott, he and I worked together at Newman Haas.

There's a lot of new faces to our program, but guys that have all been together before, personalities that work extremely well together. We've seen already in the first couple tests of the year there's been a lot of progress made.

Of course, with the aero kits and everything, a few things thrown at us here in the coming weeks. We felt pretty good where we were at earlier last week. I think at the end of the day, the team, we learned a lot of lessons last year, hasn't been an easy last couple of seasons, but already the signs are pointing to a lot of progress and exciting days ahead.

I'm kind of ready to get racing. Being here is nice, but being around the guys is a tease. You want to get out and get running, see what we can do. I think it's about a month before we hit the track again. That's kind of weird.

Some guys ran four days in the last two weeks. You're building up, get going, then, boom, it stops all over again. It's going to be a long month but ready to get out there and get the season started.

THE MODERATOR: Racers tell us the most important moments are when they're in the racecar itself, you can put everything to the side. When you're trying to find a situation, trying to secure your position for an upcoming season, there's a lot of turmoil going with that. New operation for you, new opportunity. Talk about how that process worked out.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Luckily, turmoil free so far. But it's early case. I'm sure we'll have those days.

It's been a really great transition. It all happened quickly after the season ended. Like Graham said, we sat around waiting forever to get into the racecar. You can get to know guys on the floor, but at the end of the day what matters is what you can achieve on the racetrack.

Getting to work with Allen again, we worked together at Andretti motorsport, now he's running my program. Very experienced engineer. Been around a long time. That's been a natural transition there. A lot of mechanics I worked with either directly or indirectly when I was traveling for [] Sam in Lights. It's been easy to get into the culture there.

Obviously a much smaller operation from where I've been the last three years. It's cozy. We're obviously happy to welcome James to the team now. We're excited about that. Had a great test down in New Orleans last week. Echoing Graham's sentiments, to do all that testing, then know we have to sit on it for a while before we get going is hard.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Graham, David Letterman is retiring from the television. Is he going to be around more this year?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think so. It sounds like it. I think already with Dave's retirement, he's turned a bit more attention to the race team. I can tell you there's a couple sponsor deals close to being done. He's been very influential hosting people in his office in New York, which he hasn't done before.

I can see his influence is starting to take over a little bit. I hope he's going to be around a little bit more.

In particular, IndyCar racing, this track, this race, is what Dave's passionate about. But all signs point in the direction that he's going to be much more involved, hopefully take more of a Paul Newman role, as Paul Newman did for all those years, have a greater influence.

At the end of the day, he's a big powerhouse when it comes to celebrities, period, but people in this country, somebody who is going to be hugely influential. We need him to be involved and to really work with all the personalities that this team has, my dad and Lanigan in particular.

I hope we're all going to see him more because it will be good to have him around.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the dynamic of the season that all the races will be run with the aero kits?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Obviously we're all very upset to lose Brazil. I think we were excited to get to a new track.

At the same time logistically speaking it makes things easier on the teams to. Have to run the old body kits down there, rush back, prepping new bodywork, body fits, going into a pretty extensive test schedule in a pretty short period of time, everybody was dreading coming home from Brazil. Everybody was ready to go to Brazil, but scared about what would happen when we got back.

This has given us an opportunity to be thorough in the preparation to tackle this project. It's going to be hard for teams that haven't done the aero development to have four or five days with the kits.

GRAHAM RAHAL: Brazil is a great thing to have a race, for everybody to go, to do something different. But the travel, the logistics for everybody were brutal.

On top of that, we were going to have to leave guys behind. We're a single-car team. We were going to have to leave guys behind to prep a car, prep bodywork for when we came back.

Basically if we had gotten back the 8th or 9th, whatever day it was going to be, our first day of the aero kit was the 14th, 16th, 17th, then four days later to Sebring, then right into St. Pete two days after that.

I think the guys have just been absolutely drained to try to manage all of that. It's a shame that we lost it. Nobody ever likes that. But I think it's a blessing in disguise for the people that

actually make this thing happen.

Look, I mean, the aero kits, obviously most have not seen them. It's going to be extensive. I'm sure the body fits and everything else is going to take a lot of work, a lot of time. We all know how important that is to what we do.

Not that I plan on using them, but spares and things like that, that's going to be pretty limited. We have to make sure we're on top of our game.

Q. Is this reminiscent of what it was like when the Champ Car teams came over in 2008?

GRAHAM RAHAL: That was hard for sure. I think it's almost more extensive because those cars were fairly simplistic. To actually put an old Dallara together was that difficult. The Honda, all that stuff. I think even the wiring and the plumbing and everything we have now is far more advanced than the engine packages were then.

I would think this is going to be more difficult, so it's going to be more important. All hands on deck.

Q. James, Schmidt Motorsports puts together a good car. What do you expect out of yourself?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: A good driver. I think that's why they called me. It's always flattering to be pursued by a team. Sam and Rick came after us pretty hard the end of last year. They've always done a really good job. They're a relatively young team in this sport when you compare against Penske and Ganassi. The success they've had in that short period was very impressive from the outside. Now getting to see how it works from the inside, I certainly understand why.

I always said that racing isn't about cars or tires engines, it's about people. Rob Edwards, though he's not here anymore, was a big part of assembling a really good team, of really good people, along with Sam and Rick.

I feel that pressure as well because they have been successful. It's up to me to kind of keep that going. But the testing we've had so far has been very good. We're learning a lot about each other.

There's some differences in setup and things like that that I had to get used to, some things that I brought with me that suit more my style. It's all an evolution and I think we're getting there.

There's no reason to think that we can't be just as competitive if not more so.

Q. In talking about the aero kits, that is a new challenge with the teams, talking about body fit, can you elaborate? Sounds like that's really complicated. The parts are supposed to fit, you just snap them in place the way I look at it.

GRAHAM RAHAL: That would be tremendous. That never happens (laughter).

Look, on a road course, street course, body fit is important, but not critical. But when we come here, I mean, if you have any gap in the body at all, a seam that shouldn't be there, even on the undertray, everything else, purely drag.

When we come back here to start, the first test is the beginning of May, at least for us as a single-car team, I imagine the same for Schmidt, I doubt you're going to have much wind tunnel time. We only have one car to go off of data. They're going to have two, against the Penskes

that have four, the wind tunnels.

It's going to be extremely important that we cover all those fine little details. When we come back here, who knows what we're going to get. If we can cover the details like a body fit, find a few pounds of drag, that's going to help us down the road.

It's never plug and play. I wish it were. You should see some of the gaps on the bodywork. It's pretty bad.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: Even if it does all fit together, the guys will make it fit together better. Dallara gets us the pieces to do that. We have our one or two cars we're going to spend all our time on. They have to build 30-something of these things. We just have two. It's going to be that much more complicated now with the body kits, all the bits and pieces that go along with that.

Q. James, what is the value now of knowing who your teammate is going to be?

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: It's huge. Obviously as a team you want the right people in the right places to help push the team forward.

As Graham can attest, being a single-car operation, it's that much more difficult because everything falls on one car, all the development, especially in a year that's going to be a big development year.

We have the drivers sorted, a guy with experience, that's fast. We worked together well at the test we did last week. We like similar things in the car. That's huge. Infinitely valuable. We're at a disadvantage to the three and four car teams.

Having that sorted now, knowing it's a solid guy, that makes me sleep better at night.

Q. Graham, is it going to be better having a single-car focus for the year? There was a second car off and on last year.

GRAHAM RAHAL: I think there's a plus and minus.

I will say this. We started to find a good amount of speed out of the car at the test we've been at. The most important thing is that the team has worked extremely well together. That's what we learned last year wasn't the case.

I think we're pretty cautious about throwing a second car in there and maybe disrupting that. We don't have the finances together to run a second car yet. We have had a lot of people come to us about it.

But I think for us to have one team that works extremely well, together with the engineering staff that we have, all the damper work, everything else that we're doing, we'll be fine.

Sure, it's going to put a little extra load on our backs. It is a little more difficult at times.

As James said, if you have two guys that work well together, two engineers that work well together, the team is in unison, that's one thing. But to throw somebody in there, not give it 110%, I think that becomes a little bit of a problem.

Dad was in town last night. We kind of talked about it a little bit because we had a couple people call yesterday. I think we're very cautious about that. We made a big hire the other day who will be announced soon. We spent a lot of time this off-season trying to put the right people together, which is what we didn't do in the past.

We cannot do anything to take that away and all the effort that's been put in. We'll see.

Q. Graham, what is the pressure on you? You won the first race you ran. How does the pressure build to try to become a winner on a regular basis?

GRAHAM RAHAL: I mean, obviously I get hit on this a lot. It's one of those things. I've had my opportunities that I've kind of let go. I finished second, seems like every single time, like 10 or 12 times. Any one of those could have gone differently.

As we look forward, my biggest key is not pressure. I pretty well have learned to ignore everybody and everything they say. If I can qualify better, I think I can win races.

When I look at like a lot of races this year, the amount of effort it took to get to the front, we had a lot of other issues, myself included, mistakes we made like Houston. But the amount of effort it takes to get to the front, if you started there, it would be a heck of a lot easier to maintain that. We haven't done a very good job at that. As I look forward, I mean, I think there's opportunities to win ahead of us. I'm only 26 years old. I know I haven't won a lot of races. I don't really plan on going anywhere anytime soon. I think those times will come.

A lot of people are very hard on me. But I use Ryan Hunter-Reay as an example. Early in his career he didn't do anything at all. Then all of a sudden he left for a couple of years, came back to dad's team in 2007 I believe it was. Next thing you know, he's a champion, winning all the time. Everybody views him as one of the greats, which I think he is. Number one, great guy. Number two, hell of a driver.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: He's an okay guy (laughter).

GRAHAM RAHAL: He's the example, right? People probably looked at him and said, His career is over. It's not going to happen. Next thing you know, here he is.

We're focused, as I said, very hard. We lost a couple years. We focused very hard on making sure we have a great opportunity ahead of us this year. We'll see what happens beyond that. But if we didn't win a race or we weren't right up front, very competitive at every single race weekend this year, it would be pretty disappointing with all the effort we put in.

Now, of course, we talk about the aero kits, who knows what that is going to bring. I think as a goal for our team, as tough as it may be at times, our goal is to make sure we're the fastest Honda everywhere we go. If that means the Honda aero kit is the best, that will be fine. Those are the goals we've set for ourselves.

Q. Talking more about pressure, as I do the mental math of people trying to put together the Indy rides, 36 engines, good chance of having Bump Day. As I look at your teams, Andretti was caught out not long ago. Reflections about how you're looking at the terrors of Bump Day this year.

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE: I think every team at some point or another has been caught out. Nobody takes this place for granted. Even if there are only three or four cars going home, you have just as much opportunity to be one of those three or four cars as everybody else. As everybody knows, this is the be all, end all race for the drivers, mechanics, everybody. It is a bit of a scary thought.

I remember my rookie year, 2011, I think 43 cars or 41 cars, something like that, tried to qualify. I was a rookie. Newman/Haas was a good team. We were pretty under-funded at the

time. There was a serious concern going into the month that could happen. I remember living through that all through practice.

Craig Hansen, who I have worked with a bunch, is pretty good at painting out worst-case scenarios (laughter). As a result, we were so much prepared for it. We qualified 13th. We were fine. We didn't even have to run on Sunday.

I will never forget the pressure of that leading up to qualifying weekend. It was kind of terrible. Ryan has been through it. The Penske guys have been through it. It's happened to a lot of really good drivers, a lot of really good teams. I think that's something everybody is acutely aware of heading into May.

GRAHAM RAHAL: My old man had to go home one year. That's the way it should be. It's got to get back to being something spectacular. Even three cars going home, it would be better than 10 going home, as long as we weren't one of them.

I think that's what Indy has always been and it needs to get back to that, frankly. I don't necessarily worry about car count anywhere else. This place should have drama. This place should be interesting for the fans.

I think what happened last year was a great thing for the qualifying. It seemed that the people were a whole lot more into it. The month of May was an increase. The whole event was just awesome last year.

But it should be intense. Years where it's not, there's something lacking, something missing there. Hopefully we'll see more than 36.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much.