

Penske Racing Press Conference

Saturday, April 18, 2009

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An interview Roger Penske, Tim Cindric and Helio Castroneves

THE MODERATOR: On behalf of Penske Racing, I'd like to welcome everybody. I'd like to introduce everybody on the podium, beginning with Roger Penske.

And, Roger, your thoughts on the last 24 hours here.

ROGER PENSKE: Well, I think we won one of the biggest races that we've ever had to get Helio back in this car. As you know, we've stayed together as a team for many months. And we talked about this when it started and obviously stayed in contact as he went through the ordeal.

And I just have to say that I'm proud to see him be able to walk out and be able to get in the No. 3 car. It's amazing what happens in your life, and certainly Helio has gone through a chapter I'm sure he wants to close this book, this chapter in the book.

But to me it's over. He's back where he wants to be. He's a great race car driver. He's been a great ambassador for our team. I've said to many people, he doesn't have a bad bone in his body. And to see him back here is just tremendous. And I appreciate everyone that's written to us, his fans, my friends, the press that has supported us during this very, very tough time.

And it's behind us now. And hopefully we can move on. And certainly today Will Power jumped out of a pretty good car, but it was great to see him jump in the 12 car and put up a good lap time.

So we've got three good bullets for tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Helio, welcome back.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Thank you, everybody. It's been a very interesting situation and a mix of feelings, obviously. It feels like I just woke up from a nightmare. (Crying) I'm sorry, everybody.

Everybody knows that I'm a pretty emotional guy. And to go through this with my family, it was very difficult. But the family, not only the family but the fans, they were amazing. As Roger said, so many people sent messages. So many people sent prayers through Facebook, through the Internet, through my website.

And I tell you one thing: I never lost faith. Sometimes I questioned it a little bit, but those prayers that people were sending me, it kept me really strong. It kept me really focused. And without everybody, without those prayers, it would have been very difficult to go through what I did.

But, again, my message is believe the guy upstairs, believe in the Lord, because he will not let you down. And today just proved that he did not let me down.

So now, it's turn the page. Probably going to be -- I'm going to write a book now. (Laughter) And put that in the book. Not me, somebody write a book.

And, again, I just want to -- I'm just so happy to be back to hearing words like I did coming in, take the slap, and things like that. And enough of "objection" and "sustained" and "overruled" for me. It was a little bit difficult to understand.

But after seven weeks I want to forget about that; and, again, my life definitely is starting all over. I cannot thank enough -- I can only thank my team for being incredible. Roger and Cindric, you guys have been amazing friends. Besides being my boss, but you guys have been incredibly supportive. And I don't think I have words to describe through this whole six, seven weeks how much your small words, small notes, it means so much to me.

And when you guys told me about Monday or Tuesday that you guys were taking the car over here to Long Beach, it was just -- it made me believe even more that I can be here or I could be here. And here I am. It was incredible to be running today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q Helio, through all this ordeal and to come back so strong today, did you have any time at all to work on your fitness throughout that to be ready for today?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: For probably until January, actually, until March before the case started, even going through meetings with attorneys and things like that, I always was focusing on the race, on getting myself strong, because I knew the storm would come and I would not have enough time to get myself ready.

And, yes, it was about seven to eight weeks of a few runs here and there, but it was very hard to focus on my job. It was only a matter of hoping for everything to come through, and it did. But I'm not worried about that. I tell you. If I'm running out of air tomorrow or today, whatever, trust me, I will go to the end of my air and for sure I'm not worried about that.

Q Helio, can you tell us what was going through your mind the seconds leading up to the reading of the verdicts?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Hard to describe. You know, in the mornings were the toughest one, because you wake up in the morning. Today's going to be the day. And as the day goes by, I think the hope and everything was getting a little bit better, or I was being more optimistic, because no news is good news, you know?

So I was -- about in the afternoon I was like: Okay, one more day. But every morning was the hardest thing. And just getting up to the Thursday when they announced they found a verdict for Alan Miller and they did not find a verdict for myself and my sister, it was very difficult.

It was like they're telling you but not going to tell you. And Friday it was just nerve-racking. It was very difficult to think about it. Just sitting in the courtroom and hoping for the best. And I'm very happy that they came out.

Q Helio, Roger said it's like winning the biggest race. You've qualified for the Indy 500. Got in a car. Were you nervous getting in the car today? What went through your mind?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: I'll tell you one thing, I never felt so much comfortable being here my entire life. Just sitting in the car -- actually, I was early to be in the car. I normally go, I always wait for the last minute, but this time I just wanted to be in the car.

And oh, man, it was just awesome, the first few laps. I was smiling through my helmet, looking for every detail. I feel like I want to hug everybody today.

And it's been a great day. And right now I just want to go back to my race, go back to my normal life, talk to my engineers, set up my car, and continue moving forward.

Q Roger, have you ever been through anything like this before where you had a driver who was in a situation where you just didn't know what was going to happen?

ROGER PENSKE: No, not really a situation like this. I guess you could go back, I think it was '81, when we won the Indianapolis 500 and the next day they said we didn't. And we went for, what, I think someone can look back, for five or six months through testimony and looking at different notes that USAC had.

And it was the same situation. I mean, we went through a process. And I was in New York at a meeting, I got a phone call that said we won. And that's kind of the way this is.

It doesn't come to you slowly. It comes fast and hard. And I think that that was the only time I would think that we were in this type of situation. Obviously, a race is a race. This is a person's life, his future, and it's certainly a lot more important than winning a race.

Q Helio, Will stepped in and filled in your spot for a while, and then when you got here this morning about 6, 6:30, have you had a chance to talk to Will a little bit and how is he kind of taking his new role? And also, Roger, when you guys say you want to try to help Will continue this season, if you could kind of define exactly what you mean by that, what some of the ideas may be trying to keep him in a ride this year.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Yes, I did have a chance to talk to Will. Obviously, I don't know if you guys remember in the press conference in Indianapolis, the beginning of the year. And, of course, I wished him well. He's a talented driver.

And no question about it. No one wants to be in a situation like this, but you gotta do what you gotta do, you know? You've got to have plan A, B, C. And I understood that he accepted the situation well.

He knew about the whole scenario. And, to be honest, I never felt that he was trying to -- even here again he was actually very supportive for the outcome.

And this morning I spoke with him and he's like, "Hey, man, the car's ready for you. Man, the car's fast." And you can't ask for a better class person to come up like that and say, "Hey, your car's ready."

So for me it was just to see the organization always looking for not only good drivers, but great people as well. And Will proved that to us, to the team, and I'm happy that he was able to support the team, to keep scoring points for the team and represent well the team.

ROGER PENSKE: As far as Will's future, I think that everyone's asked that question. As Tim laid out a plan for him early in the years, we were trying to determine what were our options.

It was interesting that he wanted to drive the car. And it's a little bit like Rick Mears, when Mario Andretti was in Formula One and I talked to Rick about maybe being able to run a few races and he said, "Look, I'll run one race, I'll run two, I'll run three." And he ended up winning Indy for us four times.

So I think Will has proven that he's fast. He's certainly been a great team player working with Helio and with his crew. And our plan, because this came on so fast, we're able to put him in a car this weekend and we will not run three cars at Kansas, but he will be in our car, the Verizon Wireless car at Indianapolis.

I think at this point it's only speculation on what we'll do in the future. So we certainly would expect to give him a real chance to run at Indy for what he's done for us.

And I think that was based on the different scenarios that we laid out for him when he signed up. So I think he's proven he's a great driver.

We certainly hope that he has a great day tomorrow for the team. And we're looking forward to having him in the No. 12 Verizon Wireless car at Indianapolis.

Q Helio, obviously you had a great team of attorneys. How did you go about picking that team and who advised you? Who helped you to get that great team that you had?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Oh, man, I just don't even remember. It's been so long ago. But I have a good friend of mine which is Mark Seiden, a friend of mine for over 10 years, I would say. He's a well-known attorney down there in Miami. And he just suggested that team. David Garvin, he was the first to be on board. And then Howard Srebnick, was the second one that worked in the same firm with Roy Black, and those guys were incredible.

Not only were they business, but they've become great friends. And it's their territory. And I let them drive. Obviously, I could not do anything at that point. And they did a hell of a job.

Q I wanted to ask you, Helio, how is Katia doing?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Katia's probably here. She's over there in the back of the room with the baby as well. It was very difficult to go through that again. But she was very strong. I'll tell you, she was amazing strong. She was pulling me up most of the time.

And we came through. So I'm just -- when they're delivering the news, my only worry was my sister and it came out the best result we could ask. So it's great.

Q At any point did you think in the last 10 or 12 hours did you think maybe this isn't such a good idea to rush back into this race car because you've been so emotional the last few weeks and things?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Like I said, the best place for me to fix and to heal this scar, it is here, and to see these fans and all of you guys. It's been just incredible. The whole Indy community, it's been so incredible. The drivers.

Man, it's been so awesome. And, like I said, when you put the helmet on I'm a different person. And I'm glad that I'm able to be back to my normal life. And from now on it's just going to go back and pedal to the metal.

Q Talk about that first session. You were squirrely, you were really pushing things and seeing...

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Remember, it's been six months. And there are some little things different from the past. I understand there was the red tire now and those things that I did not try yet.

So my qualifying is going to be the first time I'm trying those tires. So you gotta remember, I'm just going with the flow. I'm not trying to rush anything. Just trying to have everything go normal.

And it will. Remember, it's been six months. But I've been doing this for more than 20 years. It might be a little rough in the beginning, but later on we have a lot of laps to make it right. And I'm not even worried about that right now.

I just want to continue working with my guys, working with these two guys over here. I know Roger is going to try to do everything he can to continue winning the races. And I'm sure Cindric will do his best to beat these guys as well, so it will be fun.

Q Roger, from the moment of the indictment you supported Helio not knowing how long this was going to take, not being a lawyer, and with all due respect to Helio, not knowing exactly probably what happened. Why were you so supportive from the get-go?

ROGER PENSKE: Well, I felt until he was proven guilty there was no reason for me not to support him.

And the team, you know, our sponsors, obviously we were concerned. But he had to know that the folks he had and the people he had been around for so long were there with him.

And it's unfortunate when you go into a court and all the publicity, every article you read was all the things that were negative. It's just the way every news release came out.

And, really, he was guilty if you read the newspaper. And we had to in some way have our arms behind him to say, look, we're behind you, let's let this race play. In fact, he and I talked a number of times. And we'd talk about it in racing terms. Seconds ahead. Seconds behind.

And so we tried to communicate, and we talked a lot. And I think that -- I guess it's our nature of the team. Myself, you have people that have issues. Whether they're personal, whether it's something like this, we try to stand by them. And I think that's the DNA of our company and the people we have.

Q Helio, the last time that you raced here you led 82 laps from the pole.

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Not a question I want to answer. (Laughter)

Q Is it comforting to come back, even though you haven't been here in a while, to come back, make your comeback here?

HELIO CASTRONEVES: Like I said, from the memories that I had, the gears are pretty much the same. But some of the corners, like the fountain, felt a little bit different from what we used to run. I'm sure it's the same; they didn't change.

And the hairpin, in the past it used to be more walls than the way it is right now. You can see through quite a lot this time. But, again, it's so nice. Last year I came here just to watch, coming from Japan, and I'm just so glad to be in the race car and in Long Beach.

This place has been for so many years in Indy car racing. And to be back again as one series, this is just outstanding, just to prove that places like this, places like Indianapolis and Milwaukee, which there is a rich history behind, it is fantastic to be here. And where people want you here.

So I'm just so thrilled to be back. And, hey, I just have good memories here. So let's keep those good memories until the end of the day.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

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