

Season Report

2008 IndyCar Series

Rahal Letterman Racing

September 15, 2008

RAHAL LETTERMAN RACING MAKES GREAT STRIDES IN INDYCAR PROGRAM IN 2008

HILLIARD, Ohio - The 2008 IndyCar Series season went a long way toward restoring order in the open-wheel universe.

The 12-year rift between the IRL and Champ Car was healed, resulting in the largest field of competitors since 1995, while the '08 season schedule was massaged to include some of the best events from both sides, giving former Champ Car teams a shot at the fabled Indianapolis 500 crown.

But more importantly to a hard-fighting race team, order was restored in a shop in suburban Columbus, Ohio as for the first time in three seasons, Rahal Letterman Racing powered its way back to Victory Lane.



As one of the few single-car teams in the IndyCar Series, Rahal Letterman Racing did not have some of the benefits that a multi-car mega-team can bring to bear over a season, but what it lacked in track time it more than made up for in grit and determination. With Ryan Hunter-Reay at the wheel of the #17 Ethanol Dallara/Honda/Firestone, Rahal Letterman Racing had one of its best seasons in recent memory, finishing eighth in the final point standings and scoring a victory at the Camping World Grand Prix at Watkins Glen on the weekend of July 4th.

"I think that 2008 said a lot about the heart and character of Rahal Letterman Racing," said team co-owner Bobby Rahal. "We were a one-car team in a series of multi-car outfits and scored 10 top-ten finishes, won a race and won Rookie-of-the-Year honors at the Indy 500, which is pretty impressive considering the quality of competition in the IndyCar Series this season."

After winning the IndyCar Rookie-of-the-Year Award in just half a season in 2007, Hunter-Reay was eager to prove his mettle over a full campaign in 2008. He started strong on an unfamiliar Homestead track and rarely looked back in a season that proved that he and the RLR squad belonged among the series leaders.

"All in all 2008 was a successful season for us as a team," Hunter-Reay said. "We had a few boxes to check off this season. We were able to check all those off and that was very important for us. This Ethanol IndyCar program has had more than its fair share of setbacks and just plain bad luck over the years so it was nice to steer the ship straight in 2008. Getting that Ethanol car to victory lane was a very special moment for me. We won with 100 percent Ethanol in the car and Ethanol's branding on the side of the car and they certainly deserve it and more. I've always had full confidence in myself that if given the right opportunity I can win and RLR and Ethanol have given me that."

The team showed improvement right out of the gate and continued throughout the year, although the results weren't always there to prove it. A top-five run at Homestead was knocked back to seventh when a disabled car trapped Hunter-Reay on a late-race restart, then came St. Petersburg where the #17 car led late in the race before running out of fuel.

Indianapolis gave the first glimpse that Hunter-Reay and RLR were up front to stay as he charged from 20th on the grid to finish sixth, using all 500 miles to work with the engineers in making the car faster, allowing Hunter-Reay to make a late pass of Hideki Mutoh to secure top-rookie honors.

“We started the year with a new engineering staff and a driver that was still learning some of the tracks, and we went out at Homestead in the opener and showed we could run up front,” Rahal said. “Our guys never backed down, never quit learning and kept moving forward all year long. The crew did outstanding work on pit stops all year long, and the guys built a great chemistry that will serve the team well in the long run.”



Two races later, the #17 car was up front again as Hunter-Reay battled in the top three all night at Texas Motor Speedway. Sadly his charge was blunted when Marco Andretti triggered a crash that ended the RLR victory bid with less than 20 miles to go.

“Texas was a tough one to swallow,” recalled Hunter-Reay. “We were bad fast there and we certainly would have finished second, but I know we would have challenged for the win on that last lap. To have such an outstanding night going only to end up in the wall a few laps from the end was heartbreaking. Not to mention the points we lost, had we finished we would have been fighting for a top-five in points all season.”

Another competitor’s miscue cost the team points in Richmond, but things went right the next weekend in Watkins Glen. Celebrating the Fourth of July, the Texas-born Hunter-Reay qualified third and made it stick with a strong performance. Faced with needing a pass of Darren Manning for the lead with nine laps to go, Hunter-Reay made a bold move in Turn One and took the point. He held off Manning and Tony Kanaan on the next nine trips around the New York road course for his first IndyCar Series win and third major open-wheel victory.



“Our win at Watkins Glen was huge,” said Hunter-Reay. “We ran well all weekend; qualified up front and ran the entire race in the top three. We had to make a pass for the lead to steal the race and we did it, then pulled away from the pack, which made it that much sweeter. After Watkins Glen seeing myself on that IZOD billboard in Times Square was a surreal experience. The board actually went up a few days prior to the Watkins Glen weekend with the words “I AM NEXT”. Timing is everything I guess. We pointed to the stands and knocked it right out of the park!”

“The win at Watkins Glen was a big moment for the team and validated us in a lot of ways after we had been beaten up for a couple of years,” stated Rahal. “You had a lot of people on this team that hadn’t experienced a victory before and Ryan’s performance in winning that race gave everybody on the team a big confidence boost. It was valuable in getting everybody energized for the latter part of the season, which helped us close the year in strong fashion.”

Building on that momentum, RLR and Hunter-Reay scored top-10 finishes in five of the year’s final six races to secure the eighth spot in the final IndyCar Series point standings. The result kept a Rahal Letterman Racing streak alive that has seen at least one of the team’s cars finish the year in the top 10 every season since the team joined the series in 2003.

“I always say this sport doesn’t get enough credit for being a full team sport, but every person on this team and the cohesiveness within the group have a direct effect on our race day results,” told Hunter-Reay. “We have a great chemistry here at RLR and it improved throughout the 2008 season. I work great with the guys on the car, they believe in me and I in them and I can’t stress how important that is. On the engineering front we have made gains as well and the relationship there is one of the best I’ve had.”