

Hinchcliffe quickly adapting to IndyCar series

By Herb Garbutt
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

James Hinchcliffe climbed out of the cockpit of his car earlier this month, his hands blistered from nearly two hours of gripping the steering wheel while maneuvering his car around the bumpy 1.968-mile track through the streets of Long Beach.

Somehow, they didn't hurt nearly as much as they should have. They could be seen as a badge of honour after completing the longest race of his career. Or perhaps it was his fourth-place finish in just his second IndyCar start that eased the pain.

Whatever it was, Hinchcliffe is looking forward to toughening up those hands over the next six months.

"I just have to man up for this series," he told an interviewer minutes after the finish of the April 17 race. "I'm just a rookie out there with soft hands."

That may be the case, but Hinchcliffe showed he is more than capable of holding his own against the IndyCar vets. He turned in the second-fastest lap of the race and avoided an accident in the latter stages of the race that claimed three of the front runners, including his Newman Haas teammate Oriol Servia.

"I'm learning that 50 per cent of the game

is just getting to the end," Hinchcliffe said from Indianapolis last week.

Hinchcliffe found that out the hard way in his IndyCar debut when E.J. Viso, trying to turn his car around after a spin, clipped Hinchcliffe as he drove past, knocking him out of the race.

It looked like bad luck had followed Hinchcliffe to Long Beach when his car caught fire just four laps into the practice session. With no backup car, his team rushed to prepare Servia's backup car for him.

"A three-hour turnaround and we were on the track," said Hinchcliffe, who would qualify 11th. "We lost time running on the track but I have to say a thank you to the team for getting us ready."

Hinchcliffe had plenty of reasons to like the Long Beach track. He earned his first ChampCar Atlantic podium finish on the track and last year recorded his first Indy Lights victory there. But racing in the tighter confines of a street course in a more powerful car changed things significantly.

"The first couple of laps, you appreciate how much faster the IndyCar is, how much closer you are to the walls," he said.

With his debut being cut short, the 24-year-old also found out how much more taxing the

longer IndyCar races can be.

"It's mental more than anything," he said. "You feel every bump, you're driving faster, conserving fuel, taking care of tires. There's a lot of stuff going on."

The same could be said for Hinchcliffe off the track. It's been less than a month since he was standing trackside watching other drivers qualify for the season-opening race while awaiting a sponsorship deal.

Now, despite missing the opener and not finishing his debut, Hinchcliffe's latest result shot him into second in the rookie-of-the-year standings (no other rookie finished better than 14th at Long Beach) and 17th overall.

Although he's quickly made up for lost time, Hinchcliffe isn't about to take his foot off the pedal.

"It's definitely a shot in the arm in terms of the rookie of the year standings, but it also shows how quickly things can change. I can't relax and get too confident."

Not for long anyway. After a whirlwind start to his IndyCar career, Hinchcliffe spent a few days at home in Oakville for Easter before heading to Sao Paulo, Brazil for the fourth of the 17-race circuit. That will be followed by the granddaddy of all races, the Indianapolis 500 at the end of May.

— Follow Beaver sports reporter Herb Garbutt on Twitter at @Herbgarbutt

Minor atom A Rangers were league finalists

The Oakville minor atom A Rangers recently concluded their rep hockey season as Tri-County Minor Hockey League playoff finalists.

Oakville went 5-1 in the round-robin portion of the Tri-County playoffs to reach the final, where the Rangers dropped the best-of-five championship series to Centre Wellington Fusion in four games.

Three of the four games in the final went to overtime, including Centre Wellington's 2-1 win in Game 4.

The Rangers were 20-7-1 during the regular season and 4-2 in the Ontario Minor Hockey Association playdowns before competing in the Tri-County playoffs.

Members of the team are Noah Church, Curtis Blakely, Anthony Tabak, Russell Sands, Ben Doherty, John-Franco Ionno, Alexandre Moreau, Jack Morris, Cooper Elliott, Robbie Gauthier, Tristan Kerec, Christian Sbaraglia, Kieran Drover, Ryne Thacker, Jodh Dhillon, Ryan Eadie and Curtis Goddard. Jamie Church, Dave Kerec and Phil Ionno coach the team, and Peter Sbaraglia is the trainer.



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