

Soggy finish for Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama

It started in a downpour, restarted in the dry, ended in the wet and took two days to complete, but when it was over, Team Penske's Josef Newgarden completed a sweep from pole by winning a wild strategy game at Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama.

Late showers and a master call by Newgarden's race strategist Tim Cindric turned the tables on Sebastien Bourdais with less than 10 minutes remaining as the Dale Coyne Racing with Vasser-Sullivan driver tried to survive on Firestone's slick tires.

Moved to web tires earlier than was optimal, Newgarden saw a massive lead in the dry and a tow-stop plan go south for a brief period as Bourdais looked to leapfrog the American with a one-stop plan.

With the track damp but far from drenched, Bourdais pulled away from Newgarden as his slicks had enough grip to generate speed. The crossover came a few minutes later as increasingly heavy rain made the Honda driver's slicks a liability, and with the worsening track conditions, Bourdais' one-stop strategy was abandoned as wets were needed to survive the final laps.

The timing of Newgarden's early switch to wets, coupled with the big margin he held to the drivers behind Bourdais, allowed the Tennessee native to cruise home with almost 10 seconds in hand over Andretti Autosport's Ryan Hunter-Reay and Schmidt Peterson Motorsport's James Hinchcliffe.

SPM rookie Robert Wickens came home in fourth, two seconds behind his teammate, and due to his last-minute stop for wets, Bourdais crossed the finish line in fifth.

"Everyone did a great job," said Newgarden, who became the first repeat winner of 2018 and took the points lead with the victory. "That was more eventful than I wanted it. That rain crept in and

I couldn't believe how long everyone stayed out, and I'm glad we made the choice to stop so soon. It kept getting worse and worse every lap. We put the rain on early to protect, but I fried the fronts early."

Coming off a dismal race at Long Beach, Hunter-Reay was thankful to reach the checkered flag without incident on misfortune ruining his day.

"This is the first weekend we haven't had any problems and we finished second," he said. "I'm relieved with the result, but we need to get back to winning."

Hinchcliffe was proud to lead a 3-4 result for SPM.

"Solid weekend for us," he said. "Two cars in the top 10 qualifying, two cars in the top five for the race."

Bourdais, who moved to third in the drivers' standing after Barber, was not particularly pleased with losing the strategy gamble to Newgarden.

"We did everything we could, and it was seeming good enough because I'd saved a ton of fuel but the sky opened and that was that," he said. We tried to go for the win, and I gave it my best, but it bit us in the end."

Chip Ganassi Racing's Scott Dixon, whose team also tried to complete the race on a single stop, drag-raced Bourdais to the line and completed the top six, a scant 0.08 seconds behind his fellow four-time Indy car champion.



TRYING TO STAY DRY

Photos: MSA Staff



POLE WINNER-NEWGARDEN



MR. BARBER AND POINT'S LEADER ALEXANDER ROSSI



RAIN CLOUD'S LOOMING OVER BARBER MSP



THE START



HARD TO PASS



VERY FUZZY VIEW



RAIN FINAL 10 LAPS



AND THE WINNER FINALLY- JOSEF NEWGARDEN



HUNTER REAY FINISHES-2ND



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