

FAST TALKER

Canadian IndyCar driver James Hinchcliffe is as quick with a quip as he is on the track

BY PAUL FERRISS



James Hinchcliffe has the heart of a race-car driver but the soul of a stand-up comedian. The self-appointed “Mayor of Hinchtown” has become almost as well known for his goofy, off-kilter web persona as for his exploits on racetracks around the world.

His website, hinchtown.com, is loaded with videos directed to fans that serve as news updates and could also prime the 26-year-old IndyCar series driver for a

potential post-racing career in broadcasting. Videos range from the straightforward (interviews with fellow drivers such as three-time Indy 500 winner Helio Castroneves, who praises the “stop” and “go” that are taped to Hinchcliffe’s left and right driving shoes) to the mischievous (spreading Canadian flags throughout the IndyCar paddock) to the ridiculous (putting himself into an automatic dog-washing machine at his sister’s pet salon in Burlington, Ont.) >>

PHOTO: FELIX WEDGEWOOD

While Hinchcliffe’s soul and outgoing personality helps him gain fans and keep sponsors happy, his heart is what keeps him in control of a 650-horsepower Dallara Chevrolet race car capable of speeds of more than 350 km/h, racing 19 times from March to October. It has also helped fuel the ambition that’s behind the silliness of hinchtown.com—as he’s fond of saying: “These days you have to be 80% businessman and 20% racing driver.”

Scott Goodyear, the Canadian-born former IndyCar driver and current racing analyst for ABC/ESPN, says demands beyond the track are nearly a full-time job. “To be successful, a driver has to give 100% on and off the track,” he says. “But if you eat, sleep and breathe racing, then you love it. Hinch loves what he’s doing. And that will help him get through the highs and lows.”

One of the highs came when the Oakville, Ont. native notched his first win in the IndyCar series at the 2013 season opener in St. Petersburg, Fla. “I don’t think you can get much better than winning the first one because as soon as I crossed the line I burst into tears, and I never thought that was going to happen when I won my first race,” he said on his team’s website after the race.

Hinchcliffe is in his third season in the IndyCar series (which makes its annual stop in Toronto in July, this time for a double-header weekend of two back-to-back races) and lives in Indianapolis, Ind. He drives for the Andretti Autosport team, helmed by former champion Michael Andretti and comprised of such other young guns as 2012 champion Ryan Hunter-Reay. Hinchcliffe carries the bright-green Go Daddy colours, but came into the series in 2011 sponsored by Toronto-based finance company Sprott Asset Management. His three top-

Hinchcliffe with three-time Indy 500 winner Dario Franchitti



five finishes in 2011 earned him Rookie of the Year honours. In 2012, he notched five top-five finishes and started from the front row of the Indianapolis 500, a race in which he finished sixth. His on-track performance, along with his personality, won him the Favourite Driver award, voted on by IndyCar fans. As the 2013 season progresses, the Mayor of Hinchtown is focused on building on that momentum.

The young Hinchcliffe’s interest in the sport was fostered by his father, Jeremy, a native Briton. “It’s my dad’s fault,” he says. “Growing up, I wasn’t one of those kids who sat down to watch hockey with his dad because my dad had no interest in hockey. It was always racing. Sunday morning we’d get up at 7 a.m. and watch Formula 1 and then IndyCar.”

Hinchcliffe senior took his son to his first Toronto Indy race when he was just 18 months old “and I’ve been to every one since, as either fan or participant. [Going to the race] was like Christmas in July—I absolutely loved it. You saw it, you felt it, you smelled it. It was a very cool experience.”

From then on, racing in one form or another became part of the Hinchcliffe family. When young James was eight, his father took up racing vintage sports cars. “The running joke in the family is that he had a midlife crisis, bought an >>

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“THESE DAYS YOU HAVE TO BE 80% BUSINESSMAN AND 20% RACING DRIVER”

Hinchcliffe suits up at the Milwaukee Mile



Hinchcliffe handles the helmet carefully and becomes sombre when he brings it out and when talk turns to Moore's racing, his life and death. That spectre of death reared itself again when British driver Dan Wheldon was killed in a crash at Las Vegas Motor Speedway in the final race of 2011. Wheldon was the first IndyCar driver to die in a crash since Paul Dana in 2006.

Hinchcliffe accepts the risks of the sport. "It's blind acceptance, it's almost an ignorance is bliss," he says. "Even though in the back of your mind you know it's possible, you never go into a race thinking something can go wrong today. You're always thinking about how you're going to win. If it does come up, then there's something wrong. Racing is dangerous, but it's exponentially safer than it was 25 years ago."

And it also still provides a thrill, for both driver and spectator, which is why Hinchcliffe takes every opportunity to race. "I'll drive anything," he says. He's competed in the Rolex 24 at Daytona sports car endurance race (he was slated to co-drive a diesel-powered Mazda6 in this year's race but mechanical problems sidelined the car before he could take his turn at the wheel). Last fall he headed to Australia to compete in the popular V8 Supercars series but was caught up in a first-lap crash that ended his first race early, then the second race ended after a wheel was improperly installed. None of those results dimmed his enthusiasm for speed and competition.

When he's not on the track, Hinchcliffe's daily driver is a Chevrolet Tahoe or his Mini Cooper JCW. "I'm pretty tame on the street. I've put a car into the wall at 100 mph,

old British race car and went to race in a series that was comprised mostly of expat Brits who were having midlife crises." Hinchcliffe got a go-kart for his ninth birthday and started racing on weekends. This eventually led to international competition, which meant he was competing on racetracks that he was too young to drive himself to. But the go-karts exposed him to tracks throughout North America and helped point him toward a career in IndyCar racing.

As Hinchcliffe moved up the ranks of open-wheel racing, he continued to be a fan. He feels a particular affinity with the late Canadian racer Greg Moore, who died in a crash at California Speedway in 1999. He owns one of Moore's racing helmets, which he stores in a glass display case in his parents' house. Like Moore, he wears red driving gloves when behind the wheel and years ago he bought Moore's first race car, a Van Diemen Formula Ford 1600.

"DRIVING ON THE 401 TERRIFIES ME"



Taking to the track at the Honda Indy Toronto



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ANDRETTI/AUTOSPORT



(Above, from left) Hinchcliffe with his parents Jeremy and Arlene; with a fan at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course; in the cockpit at California Speedway for the 2012 IndyCar finale.

PHOTOS: (LEFT TO RIGHT) COURTESY OF LAT; ANDRETTI/AUTOSPORT

so I know what that feels like." He maintains that "driving on the 401 terrifies me," preferring the confines of a high-speed racetrack where he knows each of the drivers and what they're capable of.

Racers often talk about needing to trust the drivers around them, which is important when they're moving at nearly 300 km/h, often inches away from one another. For Hinchcliffe, that trust is still mixed with the awe of a racing fan when he considers that his peers are some of the biggest names in motorsports—people like Helio Castroneves, Dario Franchitti and Scott Dixon.

"At my first race, we had done some testing and there I was parked alongside Dario and then I'm on the grid thinking, why am I here?"

For Franchitti, the answer is clear. "The thing about James is that you could tell when he first came into the series he was going to come up to speed quickly," says the four-time IndyCar series champion and three-time Indy 500 winner. "When he got in the car, I knew he had the chops straightaway. He's not joking around when he's in the car, I can tell you that."

Hinchcliffe had another awestruck moment when he started from the front row in the 2012 Indy 500 and for a few laps led one of the world's most storied races. As the race began, and he hurtled around the 2.5-mile track surrounded by thousands of race fans in the Memorial Day sun with 32 race cars behind him, he allowed himself one thought: "This is pretty cool." He finished the race in a respectable sixth place. >>



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At the 2012 IndyCar Championship Celebration

Now that he has his own fans, Hinchcliffe has to remind himself he's no longer one of them. When he sees supporters dressed in bright-green Go Daddy shirts, hoping to get his autograph or photo, Hinchcliffe's first instinct is to put himself in their shoes. "Part of me wants to say to them, 'Hey, why would you want to buy something with *my* name on it?'" he says. "It's awesome in Canada. The fans really get behind their guys."

Of course, auto racing has its glamorous side, too, and it has allowed him to see the world. In addition to his travels throughout North America during race season (which usually amounts to a sequence of airport, racetrack, hotel, airport, home) he's visited Malaysia, Australia, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Cape Town.

Hinchcliffe's girlfriend, model Kirsten Dee, hails from Australia but she's just one reason it's his favourite place to visit. It also offers him the chance to indulge in his off-track passion: scuba diving. He enjoys the juxtaposition of scuba compared to the noisy, dusty life he lives when behind the wheel and its ability to take him to another place. "When I'm down there, the whole world's quiet and I can cut everything off," he says.

As the 2013 season rolls on, Hinchcliffe's goals remain to win more races, win the Indy 500 and win the IndyCar championship—not necessarily in that order. He would also like to see IndyCar racing grow both its fan base and sphere of influence, and he'd like to be part of that growth.

"The goal is to make it as long as a career as I can," says Hinchcliffe. "And to be respected by the guys I respect." Spoken like a true mayor. **CAA**

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DRIVERS FROM YEARS PAST.
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