

Brazilians Reload for IndiBrazilianapolis 500

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
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So dominant have been the "Boys from Brazil" at the Formula Indy Indianapolis 500 since 2001 that characterizing what people in the U.S. call the "Greatest Spectacle in Racing" as anything other than the IndiBrazilianapolis 500 seems ludicrous.

In only the five last Indianapolis 500 races, Brazilians have accounted for 28 of the 165 starting positions - nearly an entire 33 car annual field of drivers. They've won three of those five races, finished 2nd in the other two years, finished 2nd in two of the years in which they did win, and blew away the competition in 2003 when Gil de Ferran, Hélio Castroneves and Tony Kanaan finished 1st and 2nd and 3rd.

In the same period they accounted for eight top-3 finishes, twelve top-5 finishes, and eighteen top-10 finishes prompting questions like "who really are these guys and what makes them so successful?" Brazilians have qualified for, and will be running in, positions 2, 5, 6, 21, 29 and 33 this year.

If their luck had really not been all that great we might credit luck as a deciding factor. Felipe Giaffone seemed poised to contend for the victory in 2003 but a mechanical problem sidelined him just after the race began. He finished 33rd, in last place, but Brazilians still finished 1, 2 and 3.

Bruno Junqueira won the pole position in 2002, but suffered a similar fate, finishing 31st. Castroneves won that year and Giaffone finished 3rd. Raul Boesel, Bruno Junqueira and Kanaan started 1, 3 and 5 in 2002 but finished 31, 21 and 28.

But that same year Castroneves, De Ferran and Ayrton Dario - who started 13, 14 and 30 - finished 1, 10 and 13 - while Felipe Giaffone started 4th and finished 3rd.

In Dario's only three starts at Indianapolis between 2001 and 2005, he translated starting positions of 30, 30 and 33 into finishing positions of 8, 13 and 24, reflecting the impact of raw talent, hard-work and racing team strategy on results involving Brazilian drivers at the famed Brickyard.

This conclusion is reinforced by what happened over last weekend with rookie Brazilian driver Thiago Medeiros. The PDM race team car he was testing hit the 'safer barrier' wall in practice two days before time trials and the car, PDM's only potential entry, was totaled.

PDM mechanics worked feverishly over the 48 hour period before qualifications to acquire parts and construct a replacement from the ground up. Medeiros was only able to attempt a qualification run at the last minute on 'bump day' because the replacement could not be prepped quickly enough to run on pole day. Still, the rookie Medeiros did make the field.

This year's group of Brazilian drivers appears to be no less promising than the previous five, with three Brazilians in the first two rows of three cars each. Raul Boesel and De Ferran are now retired, but the 'Brazilian pipeline' has simply replaced them with the likes of Vitor Meira, who finished 2nd last year and Medeiros, who dominated the Indy Pro Formula Indy driver development series two years ago.

Brazilian Dominance at the Indianapolis 500 Fact Sheet 2001-2005

From 2001 through 2005 Brazilians at the Indianapolis 500 have:

- * Won three of the five races and finished second each year they did not win
- * Also finished second in two of the three years they DID win
- * Swept the top three places in 2003
- * Accounted for eight top 3 finishes, twelve top 6 finishes, and eighteen top 10 finishes in these five races
- * Averaged 5.6 entries in each race with seven entries in 2002

Year/Driver Start Finish Year/Driver Start Finish

2001 2004

Castroneves 11 1 Kanaan 5 2

De Ferran 5 2 Junqueira 4 5

Junqueira 20 5 Meira 7 6

Dare 30 8 Castroneves 8 9

Giaffone 33 10 Giaffone 25 15

2002 2005

Castroneves 13 1 Meira 7 2

Giaffone 4 3 Kanaan 1 8

De Ferran 14 10 Castroneves 5 9

Dare 30 13 Giaffone 33 15

Boesel 3 21 Junqueira 12 30

Kanaan 5 28

Junqueira 1 31

2003 2006

De Ferran 10 1 Castroneves 2 TBD

Castroneves 1 2 Kanaan 5 TBD

Kanaan 2 3 Meira 6 TBD

Meira 26 12 Giaffone 21 TBD

Dare 33 24 Dare 29 TBD

Giaffone 16 33 Medeiros 33 TBD

TBD - To be determined on race day, 28 May

Phillip Wagner is a regular contributor to Brazzil, covering the Indianapolis 500 for several years now. He is also the founder of the Rhythm of Hope in Brazil at <http://www.rhythmofhope.org>, maintains a very extensive pro-Brazil website at <http://www.iei.net/~pwagner/brazilhome.htm> and regularly works with and for social programs serving favela children in Bahia. He can be reached at pwagner@iei.net.