

Meira and Medeiros, 2 of 6 Brazilians on Indy 500

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
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As improbable as it seems the Brazilians just keep coming, and each that arrives proves to be equal to the task of upholding what has become an unparalleled tradition of drivers from a single country outside the U.S. dominating the track at Indianapolis.

I've covered the stats already in earlier articles ... all since 2001: 18 top-10, 12 top-6, 11 top-5, 8 top-3 and two victorious finishes ... a 1-2-3 sweep in 2003. And they just keep coming.

I was about to snap a photo of Vitor Meira emerging from his bright orange formula Indy car following his qualification run, which placed him solidly in the sixth position, on the outside of row two. A large high-pitched roar from behind broke my concentration.

To my amazement, just behind the high chain-link fence that separates the stands from pit-row, several dozen school-children, all dressed in bright orange T-shirts with "Vitor Meira Fan Club" on them, were screaming their approval. Not one of them was Brazilian! So captivating are the young Brazilians it seems, that now even U.S. schoolchildren are adopting them!

The handsome young Brazilian from Brasilia is starting his fourth Indy 500. By turning his three previous starting positions of 26th, seventh and seventh into finishes of 12th, sixth and second Meira has clearly helped to solidify the grip of Brazilian drivers on status at Indy.

His best start yet, coupled with that impressive three year record, places him among the favorites to compete for the victory this year. He seems to have come out of nowhere, but like all Brazilians he spent years working his way up through the ranks: Go-Kart racing (1989-1996), Formula Four in England (1997-1999), Brazilian Formula 3 (1999-2000) and Formula 3000 (2001-2002) and, finally, Formula Indy.

Originally from Rio, Vitor's family moved to Brasilia in response to economic incentives, they virtually all work for the government. Meira's original foray into Indy Car racing was with the Menard team. From Menard he went to Rahal-Letterman before moving on to the Panther team. Interestingly, Meira and Medeiros, the younger Brazilians say they actually have time for personal lives.

"It's only hard work when you're not enjoying something," says Meira. He thinks about things outside of racing, like doing something to alleviate suffering in Brazilian society, but makes clear that he'd like to do that in Brasilia. "If everybody would do a little bit for the place they know" he says "the problems could be solved."

Meira's not superstitious, he does not maintain any scripted pre-race regimen which he fears breaking might bring bad luck. He's in bed by 9:30 PM the night before the race and sleeps well.

But after he's mentally drained and prefers to be left alone or with family. "Last year" he recounts "I quickly found I had 57 congratulatory emails waiting for me." Tip to friends and acquaintances - wait a day or two this year.

Thiago Medeiros is only 23 and starting his first Indianapolis 500. Although he had dominated in the Indy Pro developmental series he didn't even have a ride two weeks ago. It was then, two weeks ago to the day that he received a cell-phone call from PDM racing asking him to show up the next morning to have a customized seat made. The message was pretty clear - Thiago "had arrived."

Medeiros raced for a time in Brazilian Karting when Vitor was still doing so. He is a former South American Formula 3 champion whose surfer brother thinks racing is too loud and whose half-sister has a dental degree but opted to become a flight attendant instead. Family is a big, big deal for Thiago, as it is for most Brazilians.

A big smile swept across his face when he mentioned that his parents were coming in for the race - and especially when he talked with his mother. He still flies 'coach,' loves movies and has been with his present girlfriend, a strikingly beautiful Italian-Brazilian named Aline for four years now.

Getting into the field of 33 was much more of an adventure than he and Royal Spa sponsored PDM racing had counted on. Two days before qualifications Thiago, attempting to avoid contact with another car during practice, ran up into the wall.

The car spun and hit from the back end doing seven G's. Medeiros emerges without so much as a sore back - a

testament to the advances in safety geared to protecting Formula Indy drivers. But the cockpit was broken and it appeared it might not be possible to repair his car in-time or put together another car.

The PDM technical crew worked literally around the clock. They missed pole day altogether and things got dicey on 'bump day' as the hours moved along. It was only near the end of the day that Thiago, in PDMs 'put together' car - literally constructed from parts scavenged from many teams around the garage area - was able to run a four lap average that secured for him the 33rd and final position in the field.

Had he not had the accident it seems likely he'd of been in the middle of the pack. Look for Medeiros to finish well above his starting position. No one should be surprised if he finishes in the top twenty.

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.met/~pwagner/brazilhome.htm> and regularly works with and for social programs serving favela children in Bahia. He can be reached at pwagner@iei.net.