

Brazilian Giaffone Stalks the Field at this Sunday's Indy

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
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The personal histories and accomplishments of Brazilians like Hélio Castroneves, famous for his 2001 and 2002 'spider man' fence climbing victory cappers at Indianapolis, Gil de Ferran, who won in 2003, and the hard charging, relentless Tony Kanaan have been told now many times.

The three accounted for the closest ever one-two-three finish at Indy the year De Ferran won. But De Ferran has since retired and four other Brazilians will join with Castroneves and Kanaan when the race begins this Sunday. I've had the pleasure over the past week to interview three of them for Brazzil Magazine. Here, then, in the first of three new introductions for you.

The fortunes of Felipe Giaffone at Indianapolis have been more than credible, if less than he would have liked them to be. Like Castroneves and so many other Brazilians, Giaffone made an immediate splash by securing a top-10 finish in his 2001 Indy inaugural. In fact, he'd had trouble 'getting a ride' that year and ended up driving a car qualified by fellow Brazilian Raul Boesel.

The driver-switch had forced Felipe to start from the back of the pack. When he started fourth and finished third in 2002 no one was surprised. The family Giaffone, in São Paulo state, manufactures all of the chassis and engines for Brazilian stock car racing, and the media guide from Felipe's major sponsor this year tells us that "at one time there was a total of eight Giaffones racing."

Felipe and his Luxembourg born wife Alice were married at the end of 2002. The next year the Giaffone's moved from Indianapolis to Orlando. The move seemed appropriate since Felipe and Alice had met at an amusement park. That took place back in Brazil when Felipe was 18 and Alice was 15.

Although not frequently together the two maintained 'a thing for each other' until time and circumstances permitted something more. Their nuptials and the move seemed to herald in a promising 2003, but the coming year would be less than kind to Felipe.

Felipe struggled to qualify well at Indy in 2003 owing to "car handling issues." But the car had a strong engine and Felipe was an unquestionable talent. I'd pegged him for a top-five finish and I recall he expressed optimism before the race.

But while De Ferran, Castroneves and Kanaan were destined to sweep the top three spots, Giaffone's engine failed before he could complete a single lap. Later that year Felipe was seriously injured in a racing accident. Felipe recovered to compete in the final two races that year but his annual contract ran out and Felipe and his sponsor were unable to reach a timely new accommodation.

The Giaffone's returned to Indianapolis in 2004, where they lived for a year. In 2005 they resided in Brazil, although Felipe continued his IRL career in the states. At the start of 2006 they moved to Miami, taking up residence - in fact - across the street from the Tony Kanaan and his wife.

He finished 15th in each 2004 and 2005 in spite of starting from the 25th and 33rd positions respectively. Felipe was still 'delivering the goods.' Felipe had in fact 'bumped' his way into the field in 2005, qualifying at a faster speed than an earlier qualifier who was then dropped from the field.

While three Brazilians, Castroneves, Kanaan and Vitor Meira will be starting from the second, fourth and fifth positions on Sunday Felipe will be starting from the 21st spot in his red, white and blue ABC Supply Dallara-Honda. You may want to watch for it because this driver and this car may surprise.

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.