

Heartbreak and Redemption: Brazilians Define Drama at Indy 500

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
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Two Brazilian Formula Indy racing legends - Hélio Castroneves and Tony Kanaan - have two distinctly different tales to tell, their two divergent trajectories at the "Greatest Spectacle in Racing" continue.

If drama has a king at Indianapolis it might well be Hélio Castroneves. After watching teammate Dario Franchitti hold the pole for nearly the entire six hours of first day qualifications two weeks ago, Hélio completed a second, faster, four lap attempt with less than four minutes remaining to secure the top spot.

Hélio today, in the main event, fell from 1st place to 29th place in a heartbeat, but charged back like a lion to finish 3rd. In his six previous Indianapolis 500s Hélio had already garnered two victories and finished second once. The venue so responsible for making Hélio a legend once more acquitted him well.

If drama has a crown-prince at Indianapolis it might well be Tony Kanaan. Tony has never started from worse than fifth and entered the race today as the only driver in the history of the classic to have led at some point in each of his first five races there ... without gaining a victory.

Tony extended both streaks today; extending his record to having led in all six of the Indianapolis 500s he has ever competed in ... while twice in the same race being denied what seemed to be sure victory.

Indianapolis has become a kind of Shangri-la for Castroneves, but a great white whale, a Moby Dick, for Tony Kanaan, the man who is clearly the best driver in recent history to never have won at Indy. In a poll conducted among the 33 starting drivers for today's race, 15 had picked Kanaan as their odds on favorite to win today. But it was not to be.

What transpired defied scripting: after a near perfect month of warm temperatures and bright sunshine some clouds, some rain and cooler temps crept in the Friday night before the Sunday competition, and hung around. It was not clear by mid-morning Sunday whether the race would run at all.

With just enough time, about two and a half hours, to dry the track so that the race could be safely run, the rain stopped. The pre-race ceremonies, which rival those at the Kentucky Derby and other great sporting events, were completed on schedule and the more than 300,000 spectators cheered as Indianapolis Motor Speedway CEO Mary Hulman pronounced "ladies and gentlemen start your engines."

Tony tried, but was denied, to take the lead from Hélio entering the first turn. Like linked shadows they sped around the track at more than 200 mph and Tony captured the lead on lap two of the 20 lap event. Kanaan and Castroneves

continued their private duel for first place until fellow Brazilian Roberto Moreno, on lap 37, pushed his baby blue Panoz G-force racer into the turn one safer barrier (wall).

Running now under the yellow caution flag, the full field of competitors entered the pits for fuel and tire changes on lap 40. Castroneves' pit-crew, which had won the pit crew competition on Friday, had problems with a valve on the refueling hose. Hélio had to pit again on lap 41 to confirm that he'd received enough fuel. He re-pitted a second time on lap 44 to double-check whether the refueling was functional, falling to the 29th spot.

Kanaan slipped from 1st to 3rd by lap 40, and remained near the front in subsequent laps. But when the leaders returned to the pits on lap 54 under the yellow, after Jon Herb slid into the turn one safer barrier, Kanaan, Jeff Simmons and Buddy Rice remained out on track. Kanaan regained the lead.

The green flag came out again at lap 60, and Kanaan was still in the lead on lap 66 when Venezuelan Indianapolis 500 rookie Milka Duno, one of three women in the field, spun out. Like Moreno and Herb, she met up with the turn one safer barrier.

Kanaan finally pitted on lap 69, still under the yellow, giving up the lead. Castroneves and Brazilian Vitor Meira, who had started from the 19th position, were slowly beginning to move up in the field, but remained well behind the leaders.

Since 2001 Brazilians had tallied 20 top-ten finishes at Indianapolis, but by lap 80 on this day Kanaan was running 12th, Meira 13th, Castroneves 20th and the only other Brazilian, Moreno, had exited in 33rd (and last) place. But by lap 93 Kanaan had regained the lead, Castroneves and Meira were holding their own.

Kanaan briefly lost the lead again when John Andretti ran into the turn two safer barrier on lap 99 and the leaders pitted. Tony retook the lead with a daring maneuver on the 'restart' on lap 107. A restart is when the flag goes green following a yellow flag caution period after an accident.

At almost the very moment that Kanaan was wowing the crowd with his daring, the wind picked up, and an already overcast sky was darkening as rookie Phil Giebler spun out and hit the turn one safer barrier, prompting yet another yellow. Rain was moving in.

Since 101 laps are required to constitute an official 'running' of the 500, a rainout at that moment would have given Kanaan his long denied victory at Indianapolis. Meira by then had quietly moved up to 4th place and Hélio 6th. Three Brazilians were among the top six places when race was halted after lap 113.

The ABC television announcers, and pretty much everyone else, seemed convinced that the odds were against a restart. Tony, perhaps, would fulfill his destiny, and the Brazilians would continue their dominance at Indianapolis. But something had been left unconsidered. Indiana had changed time zones in the past year.

Under daylight savings time Indiana now had another hour to hour and a half to play with. If the rains moved out quickly enough, and the track could be dried, and if it didn't rain again very soon, more laps could yet be run. And it was that, following a three hour rain delay, the race was once more restarted. A lingering question was, for how long?

Tony came out very strong, Hélio continued to run well and - for a time - Vitor held his own. But after Marty Roth pushes his car up into the turn one safety barrier Kanaan is among the leaders who pit under the yellow on lap 155, and he gives up the lead.

A lap later Tony is involved in a multi-car crash which did not disable his car, but left him well off the pace - in 17th place - and with a tire problem that would force him to pit on lap 156, and again on laps 157 and 160. Another rain shield approaches, Tony's fate is sealed.

Castroneves had by then moved up to third, but Meira had slipped to tenth. A Brazilian might still win, but it wouldn't likely be Kanaan and, collectively, the Brazilians had given ground to the competition.

Lap 163 is marked by a spectacular two-car accident in which the car of Marco Andretti flips and slides down across and off the track. Tony's teammate Scotsman Dario Franchitti takes the checkered flag when the rains begin again on lap 166. Scott Dixon of New Zealand finishes second and Brazilian Castroneves third.

Twice it seems Kanaan was denied victory, first when the race was not called after 113 laps when it first began to rain, and again when an accident set him too far back to recover before the weather once again halted the proceedings.

Hélio nearly completed a remarkable comeback. In a post-race press conference Hélio lamented that he clearly had enough car to win the race, had the weather not intervened, but he was just as clearly pleased with what he had accomplished.

The Indianapolis 500 and Hélio have been more than good to one another. And Brazilians had garnered two more top ten finishes in an event they have dominated since 2001.

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