

Brazilian Muscle Back at the Indy 500 Track

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
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The first day of qualifications for 92nd running of the Indianapolis 500 failed to stand up to the 2007 tension filled Brazilian duel in which Hélio Castroneves grabbed the provisional pole on the next to last run of the day and Tony Kanaan barely missed edging him out on the final run. But Brazilian muscle in 2008 remained evident.

Three Brazilians made the first eleven positions which are filled on the first day of qualifying. Castroneves captured fourth and Kanaan sixth, bracketing media darling Danika Patrick in row two. Patrick recently became the first woman to win a Formula Indy (Indianapolis Racing League or IRL) competition, the Indy Japan 300.

Brazilian Vitor Meira, always under the radar in spite of being so consistently reliable and impressive in recent years, qualified eighth, in the middle of row three. Mario Moraes and Bruno Junqueira took to the track for first day qualifying attempts but Moraes didn't have the speed to hold a top-eleven position and Junqueira's attempt was waved off by his team.

Conquest Racing and Dale Coyne Racing each feature two Brazilians as their complete complement of drivers. Junqueira and Moraes each race for Coyne. Jaime Camara and fellow countryman Enrique Bernoldi each race for Conquest.

Moraes' attempt may have been hindered by the absence of chief mechanic Charles (Chuck) Buckman, who suffered a fractured skull, concussion and lacerations when hit by Patrick as she entered the pits in a Friday practice session. Teammate Junqueira's chief mechanic Mitch Davis reported that Buchman stepped in front of Patrick.

The conquest team had its own problems as Camara was recovering from back pains following a practice run crash earlier last week. FANIQ online has reported that Camara, a former IndyPro (now Indy Lights) series champion, replaced driver Frank Perera when a Conquest sponsor went 'belly up,' financially.

The appearance of Coyne and Conquest at Indianapolis this year is a result of Champ Car (earlier known as Championship Auto Racing Teams, or CART) rejoining the IRL this season. If all seven Brazilians qualify for the IRL crown jewel it will match, but not exceed, the largest number of Brazilians to ever run at Indianapolis.

Brazilians have all but owned Indianapolis in recent years, accounting for more than twenty Indianapolis 500 top-10 finishes in this decade, three Indy 500 victories since 2001 and a 1-2-3 sweep in 2003 when Gil de Ferran crossed the line just ahead of Kanaan and then two time defending champion Castroneves.

Late in the 2007 running Kanaan seemed to have won the 500 when it appeared the race would be called after 113 (of 200) laps due to rain. Kanaan, Castroneves and Meira were all among the top six at the time. But the race was restarted following a long delay, and Kanaan was caught up in an accident which set him well back in the field.

Kanaan was in 12th when rain finally did prematurely end the 91st running. Castroneves, who was charging hard to the front of the pack, and Meira finished 3rd and 10th respectively. Ironically, had the state of Indiana not changed time zones darkness would probably have set in before the 2007 race could be restarted - que será será.

Brazil's big three, Castroneves, Kanaan and Meira all figure to be strong contenders again this year. And a talented and experienced Junqueira who figures to qualify should, if Coyne can provide the horsepower, have at least an outside chance. Junqueira captured the Indianapolis 500 pole position in 2002 finished 4th in 2004.

With Brazil's big three already in the field and Junqueira all but certain to make it, Brazilian eyes might focus more attention for the next few days on Camara, Bernoldi and Moraes. Although they will all be attempting to qualify next weekend for one of the remaining 22 positions in the greatest spectacle in racing, they will, unlike Junqueira, be doing so for the first time.

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