

New 'Teams' of Brazilians in Formula Indy

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
Thursday, 15 May 2008

From 2001 through 2003 Brazilians Hélio ('Spiderman') Castroneves and Gil de Ferran constituted the entire complement of drivers for legendary Penske racing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, or 'Brickyard.' They won all three of those Indy 500 titles, contributing significantly to Penske's daunting record of 14 wins at Indy.

Castroneves, who won in each of his first two years in 2000 and 2001, is still with Penske; De Ferran won in 2003 and retired at the end of that season. They were the last 'set' of Brazilians to comprise an entire driver team at the Brickyard until now.

With the re-inclusion of former CHAMP car series teams into the Indy Racing League, or IRL, the number of teams attempting to qualify entrants in the "Greatest Spectacle in Racing" has expanded. Among the new arrivals are former CHAMP car teams Coyne Racing with Bruno Junqueira and Mario Moraes, and Conquest Racing with Enrique Bernoldi and Jaime Camara.

What follows is an exclusive Brazzil Magazine collective interview with Junqueira and Moraes from Coyne Racing and Bernoldi and Camara from Conquest. Junqueira, who performed impressively in four earlier starts at the Brickyard, is the sole Indy 500 veteran driving for either Coyne or Conquest. Moraes, already not to be overlooked at the age of 19, is by far the youngest of the four.

Junqueira: It's great to be back at Indy. First I had a great success here, I raced four times and all four times I led the race. Last time I was here I had a big accident (in which he suffered a broken back). To come back here ... it means I have had time to recover and I am ready to race. I had a big surgery that was very delicate. I didn't know if I would walk again ... It was a difficult, but I'm 100% recovered and ready to race again at Indy.

Brazzil Magazine: And you didn't lose any mobility because of the surgery?

Junqueira: A little bit but I'm able to drive with no problem.

Brazzil Magazine: It seems like you performed very well recently in Kansas City.

Junqueira: Yeah well, still not really well. It's very difficult for Dale Coyne Racing because it's a very small team and with the two series getting together ... it came with just three weeks notice so we got the car just three weeks before the first race. It's very difficult because we're already [at Indianapolis] five years behind the other teams.

Junqueira: We don't yet have the best cars (and) we don't have the track time that we wish, especially with the weather to improve the car. We just have to keep trying and slowly improving.

Junqueira: The other times that I had great cars ... I was racing CHAMP cars and I cam the first two years with Ganassi and the other two years with Newman-Haas. For us it was a just one out (non-CHAMP series) race so we were not supposed to have great cars. But we had great weather and great people, so somehow we got really competitive.

Brazzil Magazine: Are you aware of the great Brazilian legacy here, most recently with people like Felipe Giaffone, Hélio, Gil, Tony Kanaan, and Vitor Meira? Do you ever think about that?

Junqueira: Yeah, what's nice is most of those guys you mentioned, I have known them since I was ten years old. I used to race Go-karts against them. It's very nice when I race against Tony, Hélio, Felipe ... I used to race them when we were ten years old. I used to race Vitor since I was twelve or thirteen so I know Vitor for 20 years.

Junqueira: It was very nice to come to the most important race in the world and to race with those guys again. It's a pleasure, and I know those guys very well, they're nice people. So many people (Brazilians) did well here ... and for a period of time because of the (CHAMP/IRL) split we did not have as many Brazilians, but now we are back again and I think we have like a 50-50 chance for a Brazilian to win this race.

Brazzil Magazine: Mario, you were running in Brazilian Formula 3 at the age of 16, yes?

Moraes: Yes, I finished in second place for the championship. I just had a problem with the engine in the last race and then I lost the championship. Then I went to England to race in the British Formula 3. I didn't have a very good season there; I had a lot of problems with the team. But then I have this chance to come to US and race in CHAMP car, and then happens the merge. It's a pleasure to be here.

Brazzil Magazine: Who contacted you to come over to the US?

Moraes: I was talking to Bruno (Junqueira). It's a pleasure to be here in Indianapolis, it's a really different track from all of the others that I have been. We didn't have good weather yet, we lost two days on the race track to develop the car. But we can work a little bit outside the race track on the car.

Brazzil Magazine: You have performed really well up until now this year but your starting positions haven't been all that great.

Moraes: Yeah ... well the team is not the biggest one but we are trying to. It's my first time at the track and every week when I go someplace it's my first time at the track. (Each time) I have to learn the track and learn the car because compared the Formula 3 car the Indy car is a big difference.

Brazzil Magazine: What about your youth? It can be a great advantage or a disadvantage. How do you think about it?

Moraes: I don't have nothing to lose, ok? Yeah, I think like this. Right now my focus is just here in the US.

Brazzil Magazine: Are you aware of how important this race, the legacy, is?

No. (Laughter from Junqueira)

Brazzil Magazine: Well I think Bruno's going to take of that.

Brazzil Magazine: Enrique, how do you feel about coming to Formula Indy from Formula 1?

Bernoldi: Well, in Brazil Formula 1 is the king. It was my goal to be in Formula 1 since I was a child, it was my dream. I been there and I raced for two years and I been tested for some other years. At the moment I think that what I had to do there is done. It's not like I wanted it this way but I had such bad luck on the team that I was. Now my goal is to be here and do the best that I can ... Indy is the best place to be. You know I'm still 29, its not that old so I still have some time to race, especially here in the US.

Brazzil Magazine: It's more dangerous to race in Formula Indy, isn't it?

Bernoldi: Actually, like all the people in Formula 1 go to the drivers meetings and say oh this track is dangerous you know. But it's like when you come to this place here, Formula 1 it's like ...

Junqueira: ... a piece of cake (laughter).

Bernoldi: Yeah, I think it is impossible to get hurt in Formula 1, and its different here. I mean that's the main concern here because you're going at such a high speed inside the walls. And sometimes you get into a crash and it's not even your fault, you go into the wall at 200 miles an hour and you know nothing good can happen if you do this. So it's a big change.

Brazzil Magazine: What about the race day setups?

Bernoldi: In Formula 1 when you got a full tank and new tires at the start, after maybe four laps run the car gets really 'nervous' we say ... the car moves around and it steps out you know. It's not an easy car to drive but compared to this car ... I mean when you go behind another car, if you don't have much down-force ... that's ...

Brazzil Magazine: You really have to worry about the trimming out here because you can loose the back end. I mean when you're going three wide down the main straightaway and you enter the first turn it can get hairy. The first turn is everyone's greatest fear here, is it not?

Bernoldi: Well ... it's a ...

Junqueira: You can't have fear around this track (laughter).

Brazzil Magazine: Well, maybe fear is not the right word.

Bernoldi: It's a great question though because on a normal day the wind is not blowing to each side and you do the fastest speed down on the straight and then there's a wall. It's the vision, sometimes you don't see ... you just see a wall in front of you and you have to go around. Indianapolis is a place where you really have to concentrate ... you should not take anything for granted because just every time it can catch you.

Brazzil Magazine: Is your focus at this point just to finish the race, just to have 'a finishing position'?

Bernoldi: It's like ...

Junqueira: First you have to qualify

Bernoldi: ... yeah, first we have to qualify, first we have to worry about that you know. It's like the things that I'm doing now, its not that I should think about the race so much at the moment. We still need to find more speed so we can try to get into the field.

Brazzil Magazine: Jaime, how does running in Brazilian F3 compare to running in Indy?

Camara: You can't compare the two. A Formula 3 car is such a small car; it's just a learning step to here. It's a lot different.

Brazzil Magazine: So is that comparable to Indy Lights?

Camara: No. Formula 3 is such a small car. The engine is 200 horsepower, it's like a bigger Go Kart, then you come to Indianapolis and it's a bigger car and it's loaded.

Brazzil Magazine: After several years of Indy Lights including running the Freedom 100 here (at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway) how do you feel about the track, and how do you feel about your chances for qualifying?

Camara: Well the track, in my opinion, is the most difficult track to drive on the calendar. So I mean it's a lot different in an Indy car than in an Indy Lights car. In an Indy Lights car this place is really, really easy to drive ... you're running flat (out) all the time.

Brazzil Magazine: Because of the difference in horsepower?

Camara: It's because they're totally different cars. There's horsepower, down-force, grip level, everything. And in an Indy car you don't have any margin for error ... and that (Camara spun out in a practice session the previous week - photo) showed me that if you're too aggressive with the car you're gonna hit the wall, if you're aggressive with the setup you're gonna hit the wall. You gotta be careful to know where to place yourself.

Brazzil Magazine: The weather hasn't been helpful.

Camara: It's kind of tough, especially for the teams coming from CHAMP car because you don't have time to work on race setup. We're learning, every day we go to the track we're learning something, so ... its getting frustrating now with all this rain but I still think we're gonna manage to qualify. I am still positive about it and ... we'll see if the track can hold up for two days. I think we can do the work and be in the field.

Brazzil Magazine: How much practice time have you been able to get in so far?

Camara: Two days, maybe five hours.

Brazzil Magazine: What about the weather when you're on the track?

Camara: The biggest factor is the wind. If it's gusty you have to be careful with that. And as for the setup, I mean, you're gonna have to try your best. You try to get your engine where the best (the) car was (earlier) in the month you know ... just for the race. But, we don't have enough track time now so it's gonna be kind of hard for us.

Brazzil Magazine: I understand you're going to be a father, any chance that could be June 1st?

Camara: No, it's gonna be June 25th.

Brazzil Magazine: Has that changed your perspective at all? Or maybe I should be asking this both to you and to Enrique who has a one year old.

Enrique: It's different. You know you have to think about somebody else you know, not just myself ... and the future of this person. So it changes a little bit, but while I'm inside the car it's like I'm racing just like I was 10 years ago, I don't think about it. The day I will think about it when I am in the car will be the day that I will maybe think that I should stop.

Camara: For me nothing changed yet. I'm gonna have to see how it's gonna be when my kid is born, so I don't know.

Qualifying for the 500 is the more immediate concern for Camara, as well as for Bernoldi, Junqueira and Moraes. The track was closed and unavailable for practice on Monday and Tuesday, which were bright and sunny days. Today, Wednesday, the first day of practice following Sunday's rain-called second day of qualifications, was almost a complete washout after heavy early morning rains and, subsequently, persistent drizzle.

If Junqueira, Moraes, Bernoldi and Camara can all qualify for this year's 500, when second day of qualifications opens positions 12 through 22 on Saturday, or on 'Bump Day' Sunday when the final eleven spots are filled, it will mark the second time that seven Brazilians have made the field.

Junqueira captured the Indy pole in 2002, when Raul Boesel qualified in 3rd position, Felipe Giaffone 4th, Tony Kanaan 5th, Castroneves 13th, Gil de Ferran 14th and Ayrton Senna 30th. Five of these seven Brazilians led the race at one point or another and the then defending champion Castroneves took the checkered flag for the win.

The Brazilians are back in force again this year, but Junqueira, Moraes, Bernoldi and Camara have yet to qualify and time and the weather, so early in the proceedings, are working against them. Ironically time and the weather worked against the Brazilians at the end of the proceedings last year. In 2007 it appeared Kanaan would be granted the win when rain intervened after 113 laps, enough to make the race 'official'. Kanaan, Meira and Castroneves were running in 1st, 4th, and 6th at that time.

Had it been 2006 darkness would have set in before the race could be restarted, but Indiana had changed times zones. The race was restarted and Kanaan was caught up in an accident that pushed him well back in the pack. Meira had to pit too shortly before the race was stopped for a second, and final, time on account of rain and finished in 10th place. A hard charging Castroneves finished 3rd and Kanaan 12th.

Phillip Wagner is a long-time contributor to Brazzil Magazine, and has covered the Indianapolis 500 since 2001. He recently received a second Masters Degree from Indiana University, in African Diaspora Studies after earlier receiving an Indiana University Masters Degree in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. He is the founder and director of Rhythm of Hope in Brazil at www.rhythmofhope.org, which recently incorporated in the state of Georgia and is now in the process of applying for federal 501c3 nonprofit status. He also maintains personal Brazil web pages at www.iei.net/~pwagner/brazilhome.htm.