
Seven Brazilians in the Indy 500 Field. Can They Repeat 2002?

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
Sunday, 18 May 2008

Is there a lucky number seven? For the second time in seven years seven Brazilians have qualified for the most celebrated motor racing event in the United States, the Indianapolis 500. It would seem all but impossible for this year's complement of Brazilian drivers to match the 'magnificent seven' of 2002.

In 2002 five Brazilians, Bruno Junqueira, Tony Kanaan, Gil de Ferran, Felipe Giaffone and Hélio Castroneves, led for an incredible collective 105 of the 200 laps around the famed two and a half mile oval. That feat may never be matched by another Brazilian contingent at the Greatest Spectacle in Racing.

In 2002 Junqueira sat on the pole, perennial Brazilian favorites Raul Boesel and Giaffone started from 3rd and 4th respectively, rookie Kanaan from 5th, Castroneves from 13th, De Ferran from 14th, and Ayrton Dario from 30th. Castroneves won the race, after also winning in 2001; Giaffone finished 3rd and De Ferran 10th.

In spite of starting from the pole and leading the first 32 laps, Junqueira, in 2002, suffered a gear-box failure and finished 31st in the 33 car field. He started 4th position and finished 5th in 2004 after an absence in 2003, but exited early again in 2005 after starting from 12th. That year an accident, in which Junqueira suffered two broken vertebrae in his spine, ended his hopes for a victory and nearly ended his career.

This year Junqueira, looking for a reversal of his fortunes of 2002 and 2005, the last year he competed at Indianapolis, will start from the 15th position and hope to better his two career best 5th place finishes. Junqueira demonstrated that he can compete for the win from that far back in the pack in his first year at Indianapolis in 2001, when started from the 20th position and earned his first 5th place finish.

With Castroneves starting this year from fourth, Kanaan from sixth, Vitor Meira from eighth and Junqueira from 15th, another credible showing by the Brazilians is all but assured. A repeat of the De Ferran led Brazilian 1-2-3 sweep of 2003 may even be something to dream about, but what about the three Brazilian rookies?

The Brazilian rookies occupy the entire tenth of eleven rows of three starters this year. Mario Moraes, Enrique Bernoldi and Jaime Camara will start from the 28th, 29th and 30th positions respectively. The good news is that Brazilians are not noted for failing to represent in their rookie year.

Hélio Castroneves won each of his first two races at Indianapolis in 2001 and 2002, after starting from the 11th and 13th positions. Junqueira, of course, finished 5th in his rookie year, and Meira finished 12th in his first Indianapolis 500, in 2003, after starting from the 26th position. Kanaan, who has become one of the top drivers in Formula Indy, led the race at one point as a rookie in 2002, but was taken out by an accident and finished 28th.

The 2008 Brazilian rookies look no less promising talent-wise than their acclaimed predecessors. Their own fame and fortune however may rest on a combination of horsepower, race trim, weather, and pure luck. All three, like Junqueira, race for one of two former CART series teams who, before it was announced that CART would re-merge back into the Indy Racing League (IRL), had not anticipated a run at Indy.

Former CART teams like Conquest and Dale Coyne, for whom Junqueira and the three Brazilian rookies run, are at a distinct disadvantage. They lack experience at the track in Indianapolis which, unlike traditional banked ovals, is flat and asymmetrically configured. Conquest and Coyne also have fewer resources than some teams, especially the big three at Indianapolis: Penske, Andretti-Green and Target-Chip Ganassi.

Against all odds, Conquest and Coyne have been scrambling to make up for lost time. Indiana weather, which is notoriously problematic in May, has not cooperated. One full day of qualifying was rained out, rains have cut down on the number of practice sessions, and the final weekend of qualifying was plagued by unpredictable winds.

In the end though, it will still be one driver in one car versus 32 other drivers in 32 other cars. Come race day all 33 drivers will face the same conditions on the same track and steel themselves for a marathon of concentration, reflexes and good judgment. To be 'in the field' means it is possible to win, but you have to finish the race to win it.

Brazilians have for so many years fared so well in great measure because they nearly always finish the race. Contrary to popular opinion it isn't so much 'in the blood' as it is 'on the track'. Bruno, Tony, Hélio, Vitor ... these guys and Jaime, Enrique and Mario ... have been competing on the track, beginning with Go-Karts, since about age 10.

It would be great to see the Brazilians continue the remarkable run they have enjoyed at Indianapolis since 2001, with twenty-plus top 10 finishes, three victories and the 1-2-3 sweep in 2003. It would be great, too, to see Brazilian rookies continue to shine and become dominating veterans in the IRL.

Although F1 may always be king in Brazil, the IRL must keep slowly growing a fan base there. If the Brazilian rookies fare well, and the four veterans don't disappoint, Tony George should not forget to send a personal note of thanks to Conquest team owner Eric Bachelart and one of the most engaging new ambassadors for the IRL, Dayle Coyne.

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.