

Brazilians Meira and Castroneves Shine at Dramatic Indy 500

Contributed by Phillip Wagner
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Seven Brazilians had qualified for the Greatest Spectacle in Racing, three in the first three rows, but eight were on the track as the race began. Pace car driver Brazilian two-time Formula 1 series champion Emerson "Emmo" Fittipaldi, a winner at Indianapolis in both 1989 and 1993, led the field of 33 as they roared down the straight-a-way toward the starter's flag.

Unusually cooperative weather greeted Indianapolis on Sunday morning race day as Fittipaldi helped to initiate the 92nd running of the 500. Emmo was the first in what has become a long line of notably impressive 'pilotos brasileiros' at Indy, and he set the bar high for Brazilian excellence in US open-wheel racing.

The face of Fittipaldi has recently returned to the hard-copy and virtual cover pages of global race magazines and e-zines as the head of Team Brazil in the 22 nation emergent A1GP "World Cup of Motorsport." But his popularity in the US rests on his standing as a former two-time Indy 500 champion, an ambassador for Formula Indy and a spokesman for the ethanol industry.

The cars at Indianapolis run on ethanol and Fittipaldi is building his own refinery in Brazil. Emmo asserts that within a couple of years all A1GP races will be run purely on ethanol. But as the bright green Emmo-driven E85 (ethanol) fueled 2008 Chevrolet Corvette pace car left the track any thoughts of Fittipaldi and his green fuel campaign were drowned out by the roar of engines at the start of another Indianapolis 500.

The early favorites included Brazilians Hélio Castroneves, Tony Kanaan and Vitor Meira (photo), who were starting from the fourth, sixth and eighth positions. Castroneves had already matched Fittipaldi's two victories at Indianapolis and had earned as well a second place in his seven earlier appearances.

Meira and Kanaan each finished second in earlier 500's and Kanaan would have won last year had the race been declared over, as many expected, following a lengthy post lap 113 rain delay.

When pressed by a reporter last week to name a favorite, Fittipaldi, who at first declined to say, singled out Kanaan. And a confident Meira offered that he felt better about his car this year than he had in 2005 when he was runner up to England's Dan Wheldon.

The number of Brazilians competing for the Borg Warner Trophy in 2008, seven, tied a record. But matching what the 'magnificent seven' of 2002 had accomplished would be a tall order. The 2002 cohort accounted for both the pole position (Bruno Junqueira) and the victory (Castroneves).

And five of them led at some point, for a combined 105 laps of the 200 lap race (Junqueira, Castroneves, Kanaan, Felipe Giaffone and Gil de Ferran). That didn't include Raul Boesel, who started from the third position.

The bizarre loss of Bruno Junqueira's right side-pod mirror very early in the 2008 race might have been a bad omen for the Brazilians. The lost mirror became track debris, triggering a second early yellow caution flag and Junqueira, perhaps not realizing that Formula Indy rules prohibit running without both side-pod mirrors, remained on track as the rest of the field pitted.

Technically, Junqueira was at that point the new race leader. But he was forced to pit for the repair. A member of his pit crew had to hustle back to the Coyne Racing team garage in "Gasoline Alley" to retrieve a new right side-pod mirror. Subsequent installation of the new mirror dragged on as precious minutes passed. By the time Junqueira left his pit he was 16 laps down in thirty third and last place.

Kanaan, Castroneves and Meira, at that point, were running strong. But a seemingly inexplicable rash of single car accidents including, even more inexplicably, two while running under the yellow caution flag and two on pits road, began to take a toll. A smart driving Junqueira patiently bided his time and steadily began to move back up in the field as car after car fell out of the competition.

Castroneves suffered damage to his rear wing when he ran over track debris. His Team Penske pit crew quickly installed a new wing and he had only fallen back to fourteenth, where he was running when a third Brazilian suffered misfortune.

Indianapolis 500 Brazilian rookie Jaime Câmara became a single-car crash victim when he lost control entering the first turn on lap 80, then met and scraped the outside wall and safer barrier clear around to the second turn before drifting helplessly to a stop on the infield side of the track. Câmara later reported that he had been having front end problems and was attempting to correct them from inside the car when the accident occurred.

More tragic was the fate of Emerson Fittipaldi's pre-race favorite, Tony Kanaan. Kanaan, who first arrived in Indianapolis in 2002, has led at some point in every Indianapolis 500 he has ever competed in. He broke a Formula Indy record when he took the lead on lap 94 of this, his seventh and seventh consecutive appearance.

Kanaan was in the lead on lap 105, just after the midpoint of the 200 lap race, when New Zealand's Scott Dixon went high to his right for a pass. Tony's teammate Marco Andretti unexpectedly then went low on Kanaan's left, leaving him nowhere to go. Kanaan lost control, drifted into the wall, slid back into traffic and was hit by Sarah Fisher.

A perplexed, frustrated and angry Kanaan, on the radio to the Andretti-Green team pits, could only ask "Why did he have to do that man?" He later called Andretti's move "stupid" and when he was informed that Marco had said he was sorry responded "he should be."

Castroneves had moved up to ninth by the time he exited pit row on a yellow caution flag pit-stop precipitated by Kanaan's misfortune. The loss of Câmara and Kanaan had reduced the Brazilian cohort to five, but Meira and Castroneves continued to press.

With only 40 laps to go Meira pulled the trigger on a daring move which made him the fourth Brazilian to lead the race. Nineteen year old Brazilian Mario Moraes had led laps 136 through 138 when he stayed out on the track while the field pitted.

With 29 laps to go Meira was overtaken by Scott Dixon. Castroneves had moved all the way back up to third. Dixon, Meira, Castroneves and Marco Andretti were running 1-2-3 and 4. When the green flag ended another in the long string of yellow cautions with about 25 laps to go it became clear that it was going to be a sprint to the finish. With only 18 laps to go Andretti passed Castroneves and began to aggressively stalk, but could not catch, Meira.

Lap after precious lap bled away as Andretti charged hard after Meira who was, in turn, stalking Dixon. The tension was thick as each of the final laps was completed. Meira pressed Dixon but couldn't find the speed. Castroneves remained strong but never seriously challenged Andretti after being passed. Hélio ended the day where he began it, in fourth place. Meira took the checkered flag less than two seconds behind Dixon.

Brazilian Indianapolis 500 rookies Enrique Bernoldi and Mario Moraes finished fifteenth and eighteenth respectively after starting from the twenty ninth and twenty eighth positions.

Bruno Junqueira finished a very respectable twentieth after starting fifteenth, considering the early misfortune which had dropped him to thirty third, well off the pace. Crash victims Kanaan and Câmara finished twenty ninth and thirty first. Câmara, however, had started from the thirtieth position.

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.