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# Safety Advancements Are Everywhere in Sports – Including the Indy 500



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By [Heather Rule](#) - May 23, 2018

In sports, as in other things in life, there are always advancements.

Cars didn't always have seat belts. Baseball stadiums didn't always have netting to protect spectators. Cell phones weren't always attached to our hands. Looking back a few years or decades is like a time capsule of "I can't believe this is how it used to be."

That's one of the things so interesting about watching the Indianapolis 500 – and auto racing in general – evolve over the years. From safety to the look of the cars, it's a much different world now than back in the 1960s or 1970s, even if the common theme is still there: It's still a dangerous sport.

Take last year's race, the 101st running of the Indianapolis 500 which saw Takuma Sato become the first Japanese driver to win the famous auto race. But the event wasn't without dramatic moments. On lap 56, veteran driver and 2008 Indy 500 winner Scott Dixon found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time with a scary-looking crash.

Jay Howard went high on the track out of a turn and hit the outside wall. As Howard's car drifted back down the track toward the infield at a slower speed, a full-speed Dixon didn't have a choice but to collide with him.

The crash sent Dixon's car up into the air, scattering pieces of his race car across the track. Dixon's car came down on the inside catch fence and barrier. The race was red flagged until the mess could be cleaned up.

Once Dixon's car finally came to rest, the entire back half of his Team Chip Ganassi Racing open-wheel machine was not even attached anymore.

The good news?

Dixon climbed out of his seat and walked away from the crash – to the amazement of many watching in the stands and viewing the broadcast, no doubt.

Dixon is known as the "ice man" and didn't even seem fazed during a TV interview later during the race.

## Scott Dixon/Jay Howard Indy 500 crash 2017



It's frightening crashes like Dixon's that can show the difference in safety at tracks and with the cars over the decades of auto racing.

Forty-five years ago, the 1973 Indy 500 had a month of May with tragedy weaved into its storyline. During this era of auto racing, the threat of danger was much greater than it is today. There are a number of factors involved, and things fans and racing teams take for granted now. Things like SAFER – steel and foam energy reduction – barriers, pit-road speed limits and plenty of technological advancements in the cars and driver equipment.

In 1973, tragedy first hit the speedway during a practice session on pole day, May 12. The day was barely underway when driver Art Pollard hit the wall in turn one, spun and flipped. His heavily damaged car came to a stop in a blaze of fire and was barely recognizable as a vehicle.

Pollard died later that day.

Once race day hit on Monday, May 28, mother nature had her own ideas.

Heavy rain fell and delayed the race for hours. Once the race finally got started, it was red flagged (stopped) just as quickly. As the leaders took the green flag and drove cleanly through turn one, the middle of the field turned into a sea of cars and bright-orange flames with an 11-car crash.

Salt Walther's car touched wheels with another, hit the outside catch fence hard, and then spun round and round down the main straightaway, spraying fuel in every direction, including through the wire catch fence toward the grandstand, injuring spectators. Walther's car spun like a pinwheel and ended up upside down as it came to a rest on the exit of pit road.

Walther survived the crash and was hospitalized for months with severe burns and injuries to his hands and face. He returned to race at Indy the next year, finishing 17th in the 1974 race.

### 1973 Indianapolis 500 - FULL RACE "EXTENDED VERSION"



The race was not restarted on that Monday, thanks to the lengthy clean-up from the crash and more falling rain. They postponed until Tuesday morning, but more rain during the parade laps delayed the race once again. Wednesday, May 30 hosted the bulk of the 1973 Indy 500. Because of the delays, series officials postponed the next race on the series schedule, in Milwaukee, by one week.

Once again, however, a clean Indy 500 race just wasn't in the cards.

Driver Swede Savage started fourth in the race and had led 12 laps before he lost control of his car in turn four on lap 59 while running in second place behind leader Bobby Unser. Savage's car made hard contact with the inside wall, scattering debris everywhere and, with a full tank of fuel, exploded into a giant ball of fire.

Despite the appearance of such a violent and fiery scene, Savage survived the crash.

According to a former medical director for CART/IndyCar, Dr. Stephen Olvey, in his book “Rapid Response,” Savage was actually conscious when rescue crews tended to him on the track.

Savage then spent 31 days in the ICU at nearby Methodist Hospital being treated for bruised lungs and renal failure. Savage’s liver failed and he died from hepatitis B when the virus was injected into his veins through the contaminated plasma. This tainted plasma also caused many other deaths throughout the country. Before the liver failure, Olvey expected Savage to make a full recovery.

There was another tragic element to his crash, however. A 22-year-old mechanic, Armando Teran, was struck and killed by a fire truck speeding along pit road rushing to come to Savage’s aid. Since then, rules were put in place in regard to the direction safety vehicles can travel at tracks.

Ultimately, three men lost their lives in connection with the 1973 Indy 500.

The race was again red flagged after the Savage crash and later restarted. But it (at the time) became the third Indy 500 to be shortened by rain. Gordon Johncock won the race, his first of two career Indy 500 victories, after just 133 laps (332.5 miles of the scheduled 500).

It was the shortest Indy 500 run to date. It was also one of the most tragic.

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