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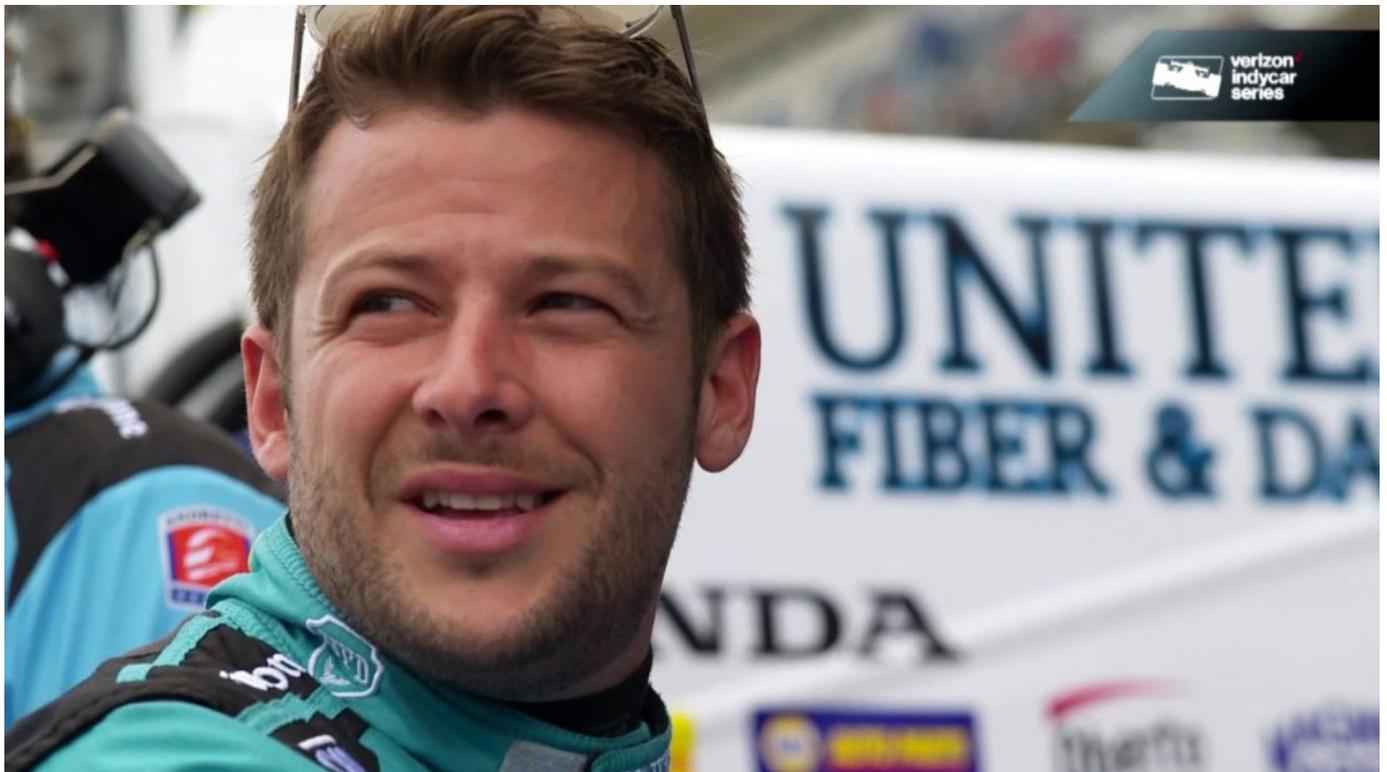
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RULE: Indy 500 is Worth Watching; Here's What You Need to Know



By [Heather Rule](#) - May 22, 2017

I'm not naïve about sports fans and where auto racing, specifically [IndyCar](#), ranks compared to such pastimes as baseball, football or basketball. Sometimes I'll forget to mention IndyCar in discussions about the sports I follow, because I know plenty of people that have no interest or knowledge in the subject.

I've been an IndyCar (CART and ChampCar, to go a little inside-baseball here) for most of my life. It's an exciting sport with speed and strategy. Sunday on Memorial Day weekend, the field of 33 cars will line up for the 101st running of the [Indianapolis 500](#) at the storied oval race track in Indiana. The IndyCar drivers qualified for their [starting spots](#) this weekend.

If there's one race a casual fan checks out each year, it's the Indy 500, known as the greatest spectacle in racing. Here are a few things to know:

There's a reason it's not the 101st annual race

File this under bits of trivia. Most long-standing events are followed by the word "annual." Not so with the Indy 500. The first race was in 1911, when Ray Harroun won the race. The race has continued with just a couple interruptions for the World Wars. The Indy 500 didn't happen in 1917 and 1918, and 1942-45.

Other tidbits: The race has been broadcast live since 1986; before that, it was shown on a tape-delay. The local Indianapolis market still sees the race on a delay, during the primetime block on race day, to encourage those in the area to attend the race. The 100th race last year was a sell-out.

Rookies and winners

The field is made up of 33 cars each year. Most are full-time IndyCar drivers, though some teams add cars for a "one-off" race at the 500. This year's field boasts five rookies and seven past winners. Any driver who wins the 500 has a special place in racing history, regardless of how the rest of the racing career plays out. Rookies: Fernando Alonso (Car No. 29), Ed Jones (No. 19), Jack Harvey (No. 50), Spencer Pigot (11) and Zach Veach (No. 40).

There should be a * next to Alonso's name. He's a guy fans will hear about a lot this week. Alonso is a Formula 1 champion who decided to run the Indy 500 this year instead of racing at Monaco, one of the most beautiful tracks on the F1 circuit. The announcement this spring made a splash with racing fans. He'll start fifth.

As for the past winners, Helio Castroneves (No. 3) is the lone three-time winner in the field looking to join an elite club of four-time winners (A.J. Foyt, Al Unser, Rick Mears). He got his third victory in 2009 and has raced in IndyCar for 20 years.

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His teammate Juan Pablo Montoya (No. 22) won in 2000, then in 2015 after he re-joined the series. Alexander Rossi (No. 98) won the race last year as a rookie. Tony Kanaan (No. 10), Buddy Lazier

(No. 44) and Ryan Hunter-Reay (No. 28) have each won once. Scott Dixon is this year's polesitter, a former series champion and won the 500 in 2008.

Watch the start and the last 10 laps

If 500 miles seems like a very long task to watch, tuning in for the start of the race and the final 10 laps or so wouldn't be the worst thing. It's the obvious bookends with the most excitement. Pay attention to the first turn under the green flag. Drivers are amped up and wanting to start the race by passing other cars when they're all bunched up. Sometimes a crash right away is a likely scenario, too. You can't win the race in the first corner, but you can lose it.

Historically, the leader with 10 laps to go has a very good shot at winning the race. The past few years have been a bit more exciting though. There have been plenty of very close finishes over the years, too. Look up 1982, 1992, 2006 or 2014, just to name a few.

Traditionally, the winners come from the first two rows on the starting grid. Forty-two winners have started from row one, 18 from row two. It gets more spread out after that. The past three years, winners have come from rows four, five and seven.

The Indianapolis 500 is the biggest sporting event in the world.

Don't sleep on Team Penske

Team owner Roger Penske is a legend in IndyCar with one of the powerhouse teams. He's probably like the New York Yankees of racing. They usually qualify and race well, especially at Indy. So it was a bit shocking to see his five cars well off the top speeds this weekend. Only one, Will Power (No. 12), made it to the Fast Nine with a shot at qualifying for the pole this past Sunday. Even then, he ended up in ninth position.

After that, fans won't find another Penske car until the outside of the sixth row. Montoya starts 18th, Castroneves is 19th, Josef Newgarden (No. 2) is 22nd and defending IndyCar Series champion Simon Pagenaud (No. 1) starts 23rd.

They're all running with Chevrolet engines, which haven't been as dominant as the other Honda engines in the field. Maybe they're "sandbagging" and holding off their true speed for the race. Or maybe they're just missing something on their setups with the cars.

Still, don't be surprised to see any of the Penske cars charge through the field. If any team could win the race starting from back in the pack, it's Penske.

JR Hildebrand still looking for redemption

California-native JR Hildebrand will start sixth on the outside of row two with his Chevy engine. His best finish in the 500 was second in 2011, but that's not as great as it may sound. Hildebrand should have won that race. Instead, the final lap is a story he's probably tired of hearing.

Hildebrand got too high passing a lapped car coming out of the final corner on the last lap, a pass that didn't seem necessary in order for him to keep his lead and win the race. The car got high and he crashed into the outside wall, skidding down the front straightaway while the rest of the field streamed past.

It gave the victory to Dan Wheldon, which turned out to be even more meaningful a few months later. Wheldon was killed in the season finale at the Las Vegas oval. That Indy 500 – his second victory – was the last race he ever won.

As for Hildebrand, he hasn't had a consistent full-time ride in the series since then, but he's back this year with Ed Carpenter's team. (Carpenter is a team owner/driver who will start second on Sunday.) Hildebrand would love nothing more than to win the race and put all those haunting memories behind him.

Winner drinks milk

Sports love their traditions. The Indy 500 winner gets a jug of milk in victory lane, a tradition that started in 1936 when winner Louis Meyer asked for buttermilk to wet his whistle. Before each race, drivers are asked which type of milk they prefer in case they cross the line first.

If you ever get the chance...

The Indianapolis 500 is the biggest sporting event in the world. It's a tradition for many that attend. Other die-hard race fans will go every year. There are also plenty of people that see it as a chance to party on Memorial Day weekend. Anyway, if you ever get the chance to attend the Indy 500 or another IndyCar race, I'd highly recommend it. It's worth it.

HEATHER RULE



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