

SPORTS

Helio Castroneves passed Alex Palou for Indianapolis 500 glory. Palou is ready for a rematch



Helio Castroneves celebrates after winning the Indianapolis 500 last year. The veteran IndyCar driver is looking to win the prestigious race for the fifth time Sunday. (Michael Conroy / Associated Press)

BY ALISON SNEAG | AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT EDITOR

MAY 27, 2022 4 AM PT

A little more than a month before [this year's Indianapolis 500](#), [Helio Castroneves](#) stood on Indianapolis Motor Speedway's Turn 2 with his hands atop his head, staring in distress at the now destroyed car he'd raced to a record-tying fourth Indy 500

victory in 2021. Hundreds of hours went into perfecting this car. But a sealant issue on the pit exit lane sent Castroneves (and two other Indy 500 winners) into the wall during a test day and brought the team back to square one leading into the world's biggest motor race.

Castroneves' Meyer Shank Racing team, which the 22-year open-wheel veteran joined for the first time last year, [rebuilt the car until it was "perfect"](#) for the start of 500 practice last week.

Two qualifying attempts later, Castroneves felt far from perfect, backing off the throttle but completing his four-lap attempt with the threat of rain looming.

"There's a line between bravery and stupidity and we were really playing with the edge of it," he told NBC Sports.

The Brazilian, who turned 47 on May 10, is vying to become the sport's first five-time Indianapolis 500 winner, and first back-to-back winner since, well, he did it in 2001 and 2002. To do so, he'll have to work his way up from the 27th starting spot through one of the fastest, most competitive fields in IndyCar history — including last year's 500 runner-up, [Alex Palou](#), who lost the race but went on to win the series championship, one of the only accomplishments Castroneves hasn't achieved.



This year, the 25-year-old will start the 106th Indianapolis 500 from the middle of the front row. The Spaniard, who'd never raced on ovals until he joined the IndyCar series in 2020, is one of the favorites to win Sunday's race; he has been among the most consistent cars since practice began May 17. He also sits second in the series championship.

But IMS doesn't care how old you are, or how experienced you are.

"At the end of the day," Castroneves said, "this place, Indianapolis, is gonna pick who's gonna be the winner."



Alex Palou crashes during the 2020 Indianapolis 500. (Marty Seppala / Associated Press)

Palou's first Indy 500 in 2020 ended in a crash after 121 laps. But last year, driving for Chip Ganassi Racing, he rocketed into the top nine qualifiers who would compete in a shootout for the pole. Afraid that his time wouldn't be good enough, he pushed members of his team to let him go out for a second run. They agreed — and he crashed.

“I felt really bad for pushing the team,” he said. “Not that much for crashing, but it was more like pushing the limits and not having enough downforce for those conditions. ... I knew that was my best car — the best front wing, the best rear wing, undertray, the best everything, and you crash it. And it's like, oh no, I'm done.”

But his team repaired the main car, Palou stayed in the top nine and started from sixth, the second row on the starting grid. Castroneves, who has won the 500 pole

four times, started eighth. On race day, for 405 miles, the two stayed near the front, taking the top two spots with 38 laps to go, playing cat-and-mouse with the lead and cycling back to the front after pit stops, Palou taking the lead from Castroneves with five laps to go.



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Valencia's Colton Herta willing to take risks for Indianapolis 500 victory

May 27, 2022

“I never thought that I would be in the position of leading the Indy 500 on the last laps,” said Palou, who led 35 laps and passed for the lead with five laps to go. “There’s always the race, so exciting in the last 30 laps where normally it’s two drivers or three where they just battle back and forth and you don’t know who’s gonna win.

“And there’s always one [driver] that is thinking ahead and one that is not, which it was me, but it was awesome to be in that position of, hey it’s 10 laps left and it’s only Helio and you. And that was like, oh wow. I felt really good. It was something I never did before, it was my first time leading an oval race — the biggest race — but it was good. It felt special.”

With two laps to go, Castroneves made his move on the outside down the front stretch for the lead, and made it stick heading into Turn 1.



Alex Palou navigates into Turn 1 during the 2021 Indianapolis 500. Palou finished second in the race. (Darron Cummings / Associated Press)

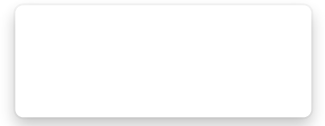


Defending IndyCar Series champion Alex Palou is looking to win the Indianapolis 500 this year after finishing second in 2021. (Darron Cummings / Associated Press)

“I wasn’t even thinking about it in terms of [Alex’s] age or experience,” Castroneves said. “I was just trying to play the cards right, play what I need to be in front on the last lap because I didn’t care about leading the most laps. I cared about leading the right lap. I used my experience to do that. I read the scenario correct. And it paid off.

“I don’t think [Alex] did anything wrong. ... I knew how strong he was, he was definitely stronger than me in terms of leading the race. And so I couldn’t just keep playing around because he would just bring more people to us. ... I lost several races in those conditions as well, with experience. So it’s not about just the experience; it’s what the car can do and handle as well.”

Several days after the race, Palou tried to debrief with the newly recrowned 500 champion.



“I was like, were you waiting [to make the pass]?” Palou said. “And he just said, ‘You will never know.’ That’s the best answer he could have come up with.

“He didn’t make it by luck, which I think would have hurt more if there was another first-time winner. If you lose against Helio, I mean, sorry, like he’s 20 years more experienced than me. So it was not meant to happen.”

Twelve years after winning Indy for the third time, Castroneves crossed the finish line, jumped out of the car, climbed the fence with his team, sobbed and ran backward down the front stretch in a victory celebration for the ages.

“The first [Indy 500 win] you never forget,” he said. “I was so eager to win my first oval race that I was like, wait a minute. This place changed my name.

“The second one, not many people were able to [win multiple 500s] over a hundred years, and wow, I can’t believe I was able to match that. And the third one, I didn’t know if I was going to be racing, and all of a sudden I was visiting victory circle. (In

2009, Castroneves was temporarily replaced on Team Penske by Australian Will Power pending the outcome of a tax evasion case, [in which he was acquitted](#).) It took a long time for us to get the last one, which is when people start to think, that's not going to happen. And that probably added more fuel to my fire to prove them wrong. ... And the belief that all of us on the team believed that we need to make that happen, and I feel even more strongly going ahead.”

With his 2021 win, Castroneves joined A.J. Foyt, Al Unser Sr. and Rick Mears as the only drivers to win the Indianapolis 500 four times. Castroneves was able to sit down for a broadcast special with the four-timers club eight weeks after his win; in December, Unser died (Unser's brother Bobby, a three-time Indy 500 winner, died in May 2021).



Helio Castroneves stands by his car during Indianapolis 500 qualifying on May 21. (Darron Cummings / Associated Press)

“For me to be able to experience [it with him], he was one of my rookie orientation [instructors, along with Johnny Rutherford],” Castroneves said. “I will definitely have those precious moments that we had forever in my mind and in my heart.”

Has he thought about what a fifth win would mean?

“I dream all the time,” he said. “I can promise definitely, I’m going to fight for it. I have the guys, I have the car, we’ve just got to put ourselves in a position to be there [at the end].”

There are two other entrants with multiple 500 victories: Japan’s Takuma Sato (age 45, winner of the 2017 and 2020 races), and Colombia’s Juan Pablo Montoya (age 46), who won in 2000 and 2015. Five active drivers have one win each. Is there another four-time winner on the horizon?

“One day it’s gonna happen again,” Castroneves said. “This new generation has the potential to achieve what four of us achieved.”

Minutes after he watched Castroneves cross the yard of bricks ahead of him last year, Palou met the media, disappointed but smiling.

“[Helio] had three [wins]. Why did he want four — he couldn’t give me one?” he joked. “I just wanted one.

“But it’s OK. We’ll come back next year.”



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