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## IndyCar lacks an 'American Hero'

by **Derek Daly**  
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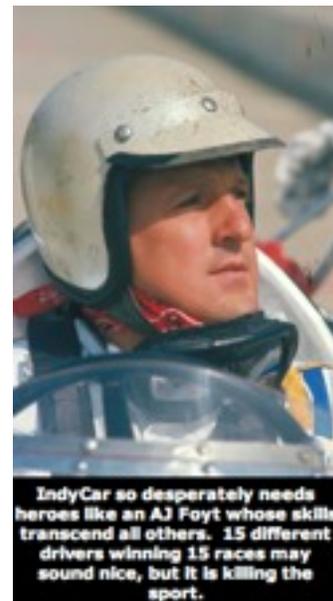
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The top of the tree in American motor sports before 1996 (the split) was – IndyCar racing. However, the split was not when the current problem of lack of significant interest really started. From 2012 onwards, with new engines, chassis and locations, many wait and hope that IndyCar racing can regain its position of prominence in the US motor sports culture – there is however one vital missing ingredient, local and national pride.

Local and national pride is a powerful weapon at sports events. Stats showed that when Americans are contenders at the Olympics, television viewership increases. The 2009 NFL Super Bowl was a huge event for the people of New Orleans and the stadium could have been filled several times over. Not just because New Orleans was playing good football, but because the local residents admired and supported “their” team – everyone in the city gushed with local pride and followed the human drama story and many wanted to see and experience it in person.



Despite this huge American domestic sports story, few people in Europe cared. Why, because they had no emotional connection to what went on because there were no European players for them to connect with, and therefore there was no more than a passive European interest.

As soon as America dropped out of the 2010 World Cup soccer tournament, so too did the US television viewership drop. The same happened in England, Ireland, Spain and every other country that lost their country’s involvement.



**Michael Schumacher took over when Ayrton Senna died and dominated F1 just as Senna had done**

National pride is particularly strong in motor sports. German television ratings have been at record levels for more than a decade because of Michael Schumacher and now Sebastian Vettel. Germany currently also has six Formula One drivers – the most of any nation. Strong television viewership is also prevalent in England because of their recent world champions, Jensen Button and Lewis Hamilton. In 2010, Spain finished the most active motor sports circuit construction period in its history. Spanish interest in motor sports at an all time high, mainly because of the success of their local hero, two time Formula One World Champion, Fernando Alonso.

Conversely, interest in Formula One is currently low in France. For more than twenty five years French oil company, Elf, invested in the career development of young French drivers including four times world champion, Alain Prost. That support led to seven French drivers competing in Formula One in 1980. When Elf's financial support suddenly stopped, so too did the development of French motor sports heroes. Today there are no French Formula One drivers, no French Grand Prix, little national pride and consequently low television viewership and low corporate investment.

This vital national pride element is what American open wheel experts have misunderstood (or ignored?) for more than two decades. In 2010, there was a record low nine American drivers that started the Indy 500 – and four of those were just part timers. I doubt it was a coincidence that the attendance was also the lowest for the past two decades. Many blamed the economy, but the same economy hosted the sell out NFL Super Bowl the same year where the New Orleans Saints played against the Indianapolis Colts.

America's biggest sports franchise, the National Football League, understands that sports franchises live and die by the strength of their star athletes. Teams therefore invest in the development of their future stars every year. The NFL has a structure and specific coaching right from the college level, to ensure that the skills of its future stars are fully developed. So too does baseball, basketball and hockey etc. The IndyCar racing community has yet to understand the importance of this concept and therefore, hope has largely become the open wheel success strategy. However, with the decline in interest in open wheel racing over the last two decades,

no longer can the IndyCar community rely on hope to develop its new stars. Hope that someone finds a sponsor – hope that someone finds a team that does a good job and hope

that the drivers self learn what the rest of the open wheel racing world already knows.

The Indy 500 was once one of the largest motor sports marketing platforms in the world when it was flooded with American winning heroes. Americans gushed with pride when their favorite drivers beat all comers. It was so big that it became a legitimate career move for many of the world's drivers. Starting in 1983, the foreigners came in and literally took over. Their superior development beat the American drivers regularly. Many have said that the problem with IndyCar



**Marlo Andretti and AJ Foyt, two American heroes who took IndyCar to a new level**

is that there are too many foreigners. Make no mistake about it, this is NOT the problem, this is the symptom. The problem is that there are too many underdeveloped American open wheel drivers and not enough winning Americans to take the fight to the foreigners and beat them. As a consequence, American fans are no longer interested in a sport when they have no heroes to cheer for.

The last display of true American national pride at the Indy 500 was when Danica Patrick took the lead towards the end of the race in 2005. This was an American driver with a human drama story emotionally engaging the American fans. The American fan has followed Danica ever since, but they don't really follow anyone else in significant numbers because no one else has really captured their hearts for any reason. As a result, attendance is weak, as is television viewership and as a result, so is corporate involvement.



**The all-American hero front row of the 1969 Indy 500, from left, Bobby Unser, Marlo Andretti and AJ Foyt**

So what happened and more importantly, how does it get fixed. The lack of vision by any and all past decision makers in IndyCar have to shoulder the blame for ignoring the need to develop the future generations of winning American drivers. Every sports franchise (and indeed every successful business) needs to invest in the development of its future heroes (or products) – and for what is essentially a domestic American IndyCar series – why should IndyCar racing be any different. The true fact is, it's not – and with the decline in American success has come the decline in American interest from both fans and corporate America.

England invests in its future open wheel stars and has a dearth of driver develop programs. They provide financial

assistance in addition to their superior on-track learning environment. They proudly boast when their drivers win all over the world. According to Stuart Pringle, President of the British Racing Drivers Club, by investing in and developing their future star drivers, they have 25,000 extra people pay to see Lewis Hamilton and Jensen Button perform at the British Grand Prix. If they just spend \$200 each over the weekend that is \$5M spent by British fans in just one weekend.

The American open wheel community must also find a more complete way to invest in itself. American motorsports is in a battle with the rest of the world and we must make pro-active moves. No one should be allowed to participate in our “system” without being expected to give back. Strong teams should have an obligation to support the platform that is American open wheel racing.

If there is not a more complete systematic development program for young American drivers, the future of the sport cannot grow significantly. If the big teams only look to the “best drivers available” (and there are no proven American winners), they are raping the future value of the very sport’s platform they wish was stronger. For more than twenty years, team Penske has inadvertently locked the door to the next generation from even getting a paddock pass because of their Marlboro tobacco association – now might be a good time for Roger Penske to give back and sow some seeds of growth for the future.

Teams all through the open wheel ranks have demonstrated that they do not possess the understanding or desire to understand or change this. Therefore this initiative has to come from the top. IndyCar has to create a structure whereby hope is not their strategy for success. America is now pitted against the foreigners for control of the sport that they once enjoyed. The only way to take back control is through success on the track. America must therefore create more than a ladder system that strings together a variety of series.

The American Mazda Road to Indy ladder system is one of the strongest financial support programs in the motor sports world. However, a ladder system, that is stringing together a series of classes and offering prize money (significant amounts from Mazda), is an assistance program, not a specific driver development program. The foreigners also have financial support programs, but their big advantage is that they also have a much more sophisticated on track product that churns out drivers of a higher ability – the results prove this point. When these foreign drivers miss the opportunity to go to Formula One, they head for America and continue the domination that their country envisioned, when they participated in their nationally based driver development programs. Meanwhile, American has been left behind in the results column. Without an equal (or better) complete development program, the chances are that the money that is currently invested in drivers’ careers could become money well wasted. Thus the downward spiral of American open wheel racing continues. In an ironic twist of fate, the support of American

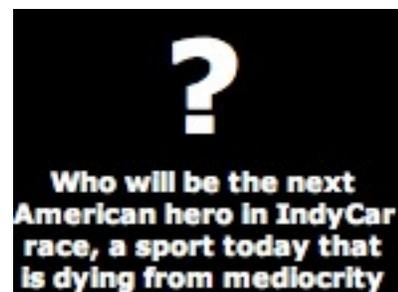
open wheel racing by foreigners, that is encouraged because it brings the best drivers available, is now slowly killing off the very platform of greatness that attracted them in the first place.

So what do we do, how does it get fixed, how do American open wheel drivers become dominant in IndyCar racing once again? Well the first thing to do is to become possessive – possessive of the funds that are available to develop drivers. We need to use those funds in a selfish manner, just like every other successful country, to develop just American home grown talent (even if this is politically incorrect). Within a ladder system, young talented American teen drivers must be first identified, correctly equipped (through specific coaching and development) and then positioned as a cornerstone of the sport. Just like gifted teen football athletes require specific coaching and development, racecar drivers, in the specialized arena that we are now in, require the same specialized support. As drivers are developed, their development program should follow them from team to team to maintain a consistent message. This is vital because if teams could provide this part of the puzzle, we would not be where we are.

Teams cannot be left to do this development because history tells us that the primary focus of lower level race teams is to stay in business. These teams cannot be entrusted with the future of the sport as they have proven over the past decades that this method has failed. Just about every junior team now advertises that it is a driver development team. The truth is that race teams are just one of the “components” needed to develop successful racecar drivers.

Driver development resources must ultimately be increased and more carefully distributed to the real potential American stars of the future. These funds are then provided on a case per case basis and accompanied by a systematic professional development program. The system then uses teams as a component as opposed to teams using the system as a profit center. The big teams should also have a responsibility to give back to the sport by investing in a development system. The drivers who receive the support likewise become supporters of the system when their careers flourish.

The seeds of our national pride in home-grown success stories must be sewn and their success stories must dominate headlines once again. This has to happen for the benefit of the Americans *and* the foreigners. When national pride is stirred more people show a greater interest. When the greater interest is activated and the American success continues, more and more show a greater interest. It eventually gets to a point where



significant media outlets cannot ignore it. Media coverage attracts media coverage and when this wheel starts to roll, corporate America follows with its support. Dario Franchitti and Scott Dixon are two of the worlds best drivers but few in America outside the die-hard fan cares much about them. Stars are few and far between in IndyCar today. Just think what it might be like in five years time when there is no Dario, Dixon, Helio, Kanaan or Danica.

Without this vital pride element, it won't matter what chassis or engines or locations IndyCar uses. The star American athlete driver is the absolute key to the future growth of IndyCar racing. The cold hard facts remain that the future growth of the sport does not depend on what chassis is raced, or what engine is used or where the race is held. A chassis or engine will never provide the human drams story that a star athlete will. Chassis, engines and locations will not grow the series, but the series can absolutely grow chassis, engine and location interest.

American open wheel racing was once great because it was populated with national heroes – we must get back to that same formula. For the sake of the very future of the sport we must make sure that we are doing the right things, as opposed to doing things right – and the right thing is to use a new template to develop future winning American heroes.

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