

# ROAD & TRACK

## THE PODIUM GUEST EDITORIAL

BY DEREK DALY

THE FORMER F1 AND INDY CAR DRIVER, WHO KEEPS A CLOSE WATCH ON HIS SON CONNOR'S RACING CAREER, BECAME A U.S. CITIZEN IN 1983.

## Needed: New American Heroes

THE TOP OF THE TREE IN AMERICAN MOTORSPORTS before the split of 1996 was Indy car racing. However, the current lack of significant interest in the series actually traces back to 1983, when foreigners such as myself, Emerson Fittipaldi, Teo Fabi and Roberto Guerrero started a wave of drivers who came to Indy cars and stayed, changing the character of the series forever.

Although the new 2012 car may help IndyCar regain its position of prominence, there's still one vital missing ingredient—national pride in an American hero.

National pride is a powerful sports weapon. German television ratings have been at record levels for more than two decades because of Michael Schumacher and Sebastian Vettel. Germany, coincidentally, also has six F1 drivers—the most of any nation. Strong viewership is also prevalent in England, thanks to World Champions Jenson Button and Lewis Hamilton.

Conversely, interest in F1 currently is low in France. For more than 25 years, the French oil company, Elf, invested in the career development of young French drivers including 4-time World Champion Alain Prost. That support led to seven French drivers competing in F1 in 1980. When Elf's financial support suddenly stopped, so too did the development of French motorsports heroes. Today there are no French F1 drivers, no French Grand Prix, low F1 TV viewership and minimal corporate investment.

American open-wheel experts have misunderstood (or ignored?) the importance of national pride for almost three decades. In 2010, there were only five full-time American drivers in the Indy 500, a record low. Was it a coincidence that the attendance was the lowest it had been for two decades? Many blamed the economy, but wasn't the Super Bowl that year between the Saints and the Colts sold out?

The IndyCar community has yet to understand the importance of this concept and therefore, hope has largely become the open-wheel success strategy. We hope that someone finds a sponsor. We hope that someone finds a good team. We hope that the drivers somehow self-learn what the rest of the open-wheel racing world already knows.

Many say the problem with IndyCar is that there are too many for-

eigners. Make no mistake: This is not the problem, this is the symptom. The problem is this: We have too many underdeveloped American drivers who are unable to beat the foreigners.

As a consequence, without an American hero, American fans have naturally lost interest in a sport they once loved.

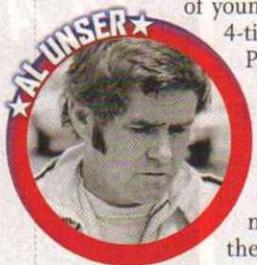
England invests in its future open-wheel stars and has numerous driver-development programs. What's more, it pays. According to Stuart Pringle, president of the British Racing Drivers Club, the investment in and training of future star drivers means that 25,000 extra people will pay to see Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button perform at the British Grand Prix. If each spends \$200 over the weekend, that's an extra \$5 million spent by British fans in just one weekend.

For Americans to succeed in the sport they once enjoyed, they must win on the track. It's that simple. But this requires more than a ladder system that strings together a variety of building-block series.

The Mazda Road to Indy ladder system is one of the strongest financially supported programs in the motorsports world. However, it's an assistance program, not a specific driver-development program. The foreigners also have financial support programs, but they also have a much more sophisticated on-track product that churns out drivers of a higher ability—the results prove this point. Therefore, America must become possessive of the funds available to develop drivers. We need to use those funds selfishly, just like every other successful country, to develop American home-grown talent. Otherwise, money that is currently invested in drivers' careers may well be money wasted.

In an ironic twist of fate, this lack of American heroes (and subsequent lack of fan interest) has been slowly killing off the very platform of greatness that attracted the foreigners in the first place.

But let me be clear: Our system has failed. Chassis, engines and great tracks will not grow the series. The future American hero, properly funded and groomed, is the absolute key to the growth of IndyCar racing.



*"There's still one vital missing ingredient—national pride in an American hero."*