

Photos By MIKE HARRIS
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INDIANAPOLIS -- When uncertainly about his future had Helio Castroneves down in the dumps, he thought about his true love - being in a race car.

Saturday, less than a month after being acquitted of charges of tax evasion, Castroneves was right where he wanted to be, back in the cockpit and on the pole for the Indianapolis 500.

On a cool, windy Saturday full of strategic guesses on when to qualify and when to stay off the track, the Brazilian driver took a big gamble, voiding a fast qualifying effort from earlier in the day and knocking Penske Racing teammate Ryan Briscoe off the pole.

Castroneves's four-lap average of 224.864 mph on the historic 2.5-mile oval came with less than two hours remaining in the six-hour opening round of time trials for the May 24 race.

Castroneves said his third Indy pole in seven years is more special because of the uncertainty he faced from the time he was indicted last October until the end of the trial April 17 in Miami.

"Many times during the trial I was thinking about it," he said. "I knew what I loved (is) racing, but I realized even more that's my life. And just to be here is a dream come true and I appreciate that every day when I wake up in the morning.

"I enjoy life. Now I enjoy it even more. But I have to say that what I learned from the trial, probably my mind is much stronger and my skin is a little bit thicker now."

Castroneves stood by his car in the pits as Briscoe and several other challengers, including former Indy winner Scott Dixon, Tony Kanaan, Marco Andretti and 20-year-old Graham Rahal, took shots at knocking him off the top spot.

"This place is magic," said Castroneves, a two-time Indy winner. "It's just amazing. ... We just had to keep working through the weather, working through the day. Ryan and I were really strong. When he went out there at the end, I was thinking I didn't really want to have to go out (again)."

Castroneves, who previously won poles in 2003 and 2007, gave boss Roger Penske a record 15th Indy pole. But The Captain was just happy for the driver, who he strongly supported throughout his legal ordeal.

"There's no question the emotion around him," Penske said. "He's one of the most electric guys in racing and everybody likes him. And the good news is he puts the numbers on the board. He doesn't say it, he does it with his foot."

Penske also was proud of Briscoe, who made the decision to withdraw a 224.131 run from earlier in the day and try to take the pole from Castroneves in the final 10 minutes of the session.

"That was a call that Ryan made," Penske said. "He wanted to go for it. I've got enough confidence in him that he isn't going to make a mistake out there."

Briscoe, who qualified a little slower on the second attempt at 224.083, said he might have had a better chance to knock his teammate off the pole if the decision had been made sooner.

"When you get down to it, it's all about timing," the Australian driver said. "We really wanted to do another practice run and then everybody got in (the qualifying) line and we had to get in line. We ran out of time.

"From that standpoint, it's unfortunate, knowing you've got the equipment to get the pole."

It was a big day for Penske, who also placed Will Power, his third driver, ninth among the 11 drivers who locked up starting spots in the 33-car race field.

"Three in nine is pretty good," said Penske, who also has a record 14 Indy wins. "We've just got to be sure we've got one of those in the Winner's Circle on race day."

With wind gusts up to 25 mph making the famed Brickyard oval more treacherous than normal and each entry allowed up to three qualifying attempts, many of the teams tried to outguess the gusts and their rivals.

Dario Franchitti, the 2007 Indy winner, waited until after an early flurry of qualifiers in the windiest part of the day and posted a speed of 224.010 that wound up being good enough for third on the grid.

"That wind is horrible," said the Scot, the only driver in the front two rows who chose to sit on his first qualifying speed and not make another try. "We knew we didn't have the pole speed. It was a pretty nerve-racking. We were really concerned somebody would knock us off the front row. ... It was a long day."

Franchitti's effort bumped Castroneves to the outside of the front row and that was when the Penske team decided to send him back out.

"That was OK," Castroneves said. "I knew we would be good. But I didn't want to have to do it again."

Rahal, the son of 1986 Indy winner Bobby Rahal, wound up fourth at 223.954.

The youngster was followed by Dixon at 223.867, Kanaan at 223.612, Mario Moraes at 223.331, Andretti at 223.114, Power at 223.028, Danica Patrick at 222.882 and Alex Lloyd, who barely made it into the first-day lineup in the last five minutes at 222.622, bumping Hideki Mutoh's 222.470.

Mutoh, who qualified earlier at 221.680, was bumped from the top 11 twice, while Raphael Matos, Ed Carpenter and Paul Tracy, making his first Indy appearance since losing in a controversial finish with Castroneves in 2003, also were bumped.

All of them will have another opportunity on Sunday when the next 11 spots in the lineup are filled. The other 11 positions will be filled next Saturday, with next Sunday reserved for drivers attempting to bump the slowest qualifiers out of the field.