

Helio Castroneves primed for Indy 500 run after finishing runner up at Kansas

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — Helio Castroneves had a whirlwind opening weekend to his season, flying cross country to Long Beach less than 24 hours after being acquitted on tax evasion charges. He finished seventh in his first race in six months.

A week later, with much more time to prepare, Castroneves was even better - and much more relaxed.

"At Long Beach, everything happened so suddenly. I was just coming back, trying to relax and have fun," Castroneves said. "Here, with the weekend starting from the autograph sessions on Friday, the practice and everything, it was more comfortable."

Castroneves started in the back for Sunday's Road Runner Turbo Indy 300 because of a qualifying infraction, and went to the rear for a second time after clipping the back of Vitor Meira's car on lap 15. The Brazilian Team Penske driver never let the setbacks or difficult windy conditions slow him down, working his way through the field for a second-place finish behind Scott Dixon.

With two top-10 finishes in two races, the two-time Indianapolis 500 winner is ready for next month's big race.

"Running with the other guys, at least be the first weekend like a normal weekend, for me it was very good," he said. "I know this track is totally different than the Indy 500, but at least you knew who you were racing against and what teams are going to be competitive and quick."

NO THREE-PEAT: Dan Wheldon's bid to match his own IRL record of three-straight wins at the same track came undone by a bar.

The two-time defending champion at Kansas battled with an imbalanced car for most of the race after the roll ball locked in a fully stiff position. Wheldon, the 2005 Indy 500 champion, did the best he could with a stiff car in difficult wind conditions, finishing 10th.

"I just lacked a little pace at times and because of the imbalance in the car I just couldn't get close to anybody," he said. "Everybody at Panther (Racing) is incredibly disappointed, and we know we have several changes to make before Indianapolis."

FISHER'S DEAL: A year ago, Sarah Fisher sat by the phone, hoping to get word on a sponsorship deal for her new self-owned race team.

That won't be a problem this year.

After three races with Dollar General last season, Fisher signed on for two more with the discount retailer for 2009, giving her six for the season.

"I was near tears, crying, sitting there waiting for this phone to ring, making sure the wire had actually made it through," said Fisher, who finished 13th Sunday. "Well, it's made it already and the confidence in that and knowing we can have an accurate budget, where we can put our beans to have the best on-track package, that's a relief in itself."

Fisher already signed on with Dollar General to race at Kansas, Indianapolis, Kentucky and Chicago. The new deal will allow her to also race at Texas and Homestead in Miami – and possibly beyond.

"The economic times are very tight right now and we were excited about being able to offer the two additional races for Sarah," Dollar General CEO Rick Dreiling said. "Sarah and I chat quite a bit and we have a thoughts about what we can do long term, and we're going to have to let a few more months play out."

GOOD START: Robert Doornbos was the surprise of qualifying, earning a spot on the front row in his first oval race.

The Dutchman was still second in Sunday's race after the first pit stop on a caution, but was sent to the back of the field for clipping a tire from the pit stall in front. He finished 12th for Newman/Haas/Lanigan Racing - not bad for someone who's only experience on ovals was two testing sessions.

"I'm very happy to have finished," Doornbos said. "I passed many cars and I learned so much today that I will probably go to bed early to absorb it all. It's the best preparation I could have gotten for Indy, that's for sure."

SAAVEDRA WINS: Colombian driver Sebastian Saavedra pulled past pole-sitter Wade Cunningham on lap 10 and never relinquished the lead, winning the Kansas Lottery 100 for his first career Indy Lights victory.

Saavedra, making his fourth career start on the circuit, battled strong winds and won under caution after Dillon Battistini and Pippa Mann collided nine laps before the finish of the 67-lap race.