

Jury acquits Indy race car driver Castroneves in tax case

By Mike Clary

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MIAMI

Two-time Indy 500 champ Helio Castroneves is free to climb back into his race car this weekend after a jury found him not guilty Friday of evading U.S. taxes on \$5.5 million in income.

After a seven-week trial, Castroneves said he would head immediately to California to compete in the Long Beach Grand Prix. Qualifying starts Saturday.

"Mentally, I might be a little tired. But what I want to do now is put on a helmet and jump in my car," said Castroneves, a 33-year-old Brazilian whose star power was revved up by his 2007 victory in the hit reality TV show 'Dancing with the Stars.'

"This has been a nightmare, and I am just waking up," added a tearful Castroneves, who faced more than six years in prison and the crash of a lucrative career if convicted.

The 12-member federal jury acquitted Castroneves on six counts of tax evasion but did not reach a decision on a single count of conspiracy. U.S. District Judge Donald Graham declared a mistrial on that count. Jurors brought back similar findings on identical charges against Katiucia Castroneves, 35, who acts as her brother's business manager.

A third defendant, Michigan motor sports attorney Alan Miller, 71, was acquitted on all three counts of tax evasion and the conspiracy count.

The decision ended a complex, seven-week trial and prompted an emotional reaction from Castroneves and his sister. As the judge polled the jury on their verdict, the siblings stood sobbing in each other's arms for at least 10 minutes.

Behind them in the gallery, about 25 supporters cried softly in elation.

Defense attorney Roy Black urged prosecutors not to retry Castroneves on the conspiracy charge. Alicia Valle, special counsel to the U.S. Attorney's Office, said, "We are reviewing all of our options to determination how best to proceed."

Prosecutors told jurors that Castroneves tried to hide income in offshore accounts in order to dodge a tax bill of about \$2.3 million.

Attorneys for Castroneves said he had not collected most of the money at issue, and would only owe taxes once he received payment.

Jurors were asked to decide if Castroneves was a sophisticated tax cheat or a race car driver with a modest education who left his finances to others.

Outside the courthouse, Castroneves called the jury's decision "the biggest victory [in a competition that] was out of my control.

"I couldn't drive this car," he said. "I was the passenger."

Pending the outcome of the case, Castroneves was replaced on Team Penske by Australian Will Power. But he is expected to be behind the wheel of the No. 3 car in Long Beach, the second IndyCar Series race this season.

Despite the toll of the trial, he said, "I'm definitely ready to race. Yes, for a guy who learned how to dance in seven weeks, I can do this."

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