

SPORTS

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HELIO CASTRONEVES | COMPLETE COVERAGE ON 1A

Helio already in the winning circle



IN MY OPINION

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Helio Castroneves left the courtroom a free man, acquitted of tax evasion by a jury that deliberated his fate for six tortured days. One of his lawyers slapped him on the back.

"Drive carefully, Helio!" he said.

A U.S. Marshals Service officer raised his fist and said, "Go get 'em, Helio!"

Then, as the tearful Castroneves headed out into the Miami sunlight Friday, a security guard manning the metal detector hugged him and said, "¡Eres un Caballo!" — meaning, "You're the man!"

Castroneves clutched a rosary and kept shaking his head, like a person returning to consciousness.

"I feel like I've been stuck in a

nightmare and I couldn't wake up," he said.

It's over, seven weeks after the trial began. The charming Castroneves resumes his charmed life. Only now he will cherish it even more, knowing what could have been. He faced five to 10 years in

•TURN TO ROBERTSON, 4D



PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

HE'S ALL SMILES NOW: 'It was like a race, but, unfortunately, I couldn't drive this car. I was just a passenger,' Helio Castroneves said.

Helio back on track again

•ROBERTSON, FROM 1D

prison, wearing a jumpsuit rather than in his Hugo Boss suits. He faced deportation and the ruination of his career as a race-car driver.

Castroneves, beloved as the dashing *Dancing With the Stars* winner and the daring Indy 500 champ, faced an ugly kind of fame, that of a disgraced tax cheat, too greedy to pay the IRS for \$5.5 million in income.

AVOIDING A BIG CRASH

The feds rarely lose. So Friday's verdict was in keeping with the Helio legend. He avoided a spectacular crash. The magnetic smile was back. So was the sparkle in his eyes. The guy is irresistibly lovable. No one would have been surprised if all of a sudden he had run from the courthouse steps to the fence across the street and climbed it — as he does after one of his victories.

"It was like a race, but, unfortunately, I couldn't drive this car," Castroneves said of the trial. "I was just a passenger."

That changes Saturday, when the 33-year-old Brazilian is expected to be back in the driver's seat of Team Penske's No. 3 car, qualifying for Sunday's Long Beach Grand Prix.

"I want to put on my helmet and jump in my car," Castroneves said.

Wasting no time, he was scheduled to fly to California on Friday in one of Roger Penske's private jets.

"We're excited to know he can go on with his life, business as usual — hard as that is to say about Helio since his business is kind of unusual," Penske president Tim Cindric said with a chuckle. "He hasn't been in a car since October, but it will be like riding a bike for him."

The Indy Racing League is thrilled to welcome Castroneves back, given that the Coral Gables resident is the IRL's most successful driver — and most popular, along with Danica Patrick.

"He has made enormous contributions to the growth of our series and his *Dancing With the Stars* title made him more of a household name than we could have imagined," said Brian Barnhart, president of racing operations for IRL.



PEDRO PORTAL/EL NUEVO HERALD

LEAVING THE COURTHOUSE: Helio Castroneves, center, walks with Howard Srebnick, left, and Scott Srebnick, two of his defense attorneys.

No one who was outside the jury room can explain why Castroneves was found not guilty of six tax-evasion charges, as was his sister and manager, Katiucia. Or why the jury deadlocked on the main conspiracy charge, which the government would be unwise to retry.

The sheer complexity of the evidence probably played a role. Castroneves' celebrity certainly did. He is handsome, with a diminutive build, like a leprechaun. His genuineness cannot be denied. He came off as a sympathetic character, a driver, a dancer — not a tax expert.

"Celebrity always matters, even though jurors say they are not affected. If they watch you on TV, they think they know you," said Castroneves' attorney Roy Black, who has defended plenty of celebs and is one himself. Another defense attorney, Robert Bennett, represented Bill Clinton in the Paula Jones case.

On the other hand, Black believes prosecutors targeted Castroneves because he was famous and they wanted to make him an example. But this wasn't a civil matter. The feds reached high but failed to prove Castroneves was a criminal scamming the IRS.

"Nobody wants to hear

the excuse that 'I didn't know what I was signing; I didn't know what my accountants were doing,' " Black said. "But in a criminal context, the government has to prove you knew what you were signing and you intentionally, deliberately did it to evade taxes."

OTHERS IN TROUBLE

Other athletes have had tax troubles — Derek Jeter, for example, Mr. Clean himself. If Castroneves makes good — and he has promised to pay the \$2.3 million he owes — he will quickly repolish his image.

"Tax issues are not in the realm of other crisis situations, like cheating on your wife or steroids," said "Reputation Doctor" Mike Paul of MGP and Associates. "But there is a difference between the court of law and the court of public opinion. Helio is under the microscope. He can't have another financial problem, or it will all bubble up again."

Less than 24 hours after Castroneves sat in a courthouse praying to get his life back, expect to see him behind the steering wheel, cheered by thousands.

Knowing Helio, it won't be long before we see him in the winner's circle.

In fact, he's already there.