

Back *in the* Driver's Seat

FRESH OFF HIS INDY 500 WIN, HELIO CASTRONEVES TALKS TO HAUTE LIVING ABOUT THE TUMULTUOUS EVENTS OF THE PAST YEAR.

BY LEA BLACK





HELIO IN THE WINNER'S CIRCLE WEARING THE VICTORY WREATH AFTER WINNING THE INDY 500 IN 2009
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE SWOPE



A YOUNG HELIO AND KATI



"WIND BENEATH HIS WINGS,"
SISTER KATI BLOWING AIR UNDER
HELIO'S CAR

Just after lunch on April 17, 2009, attorneys Roy Black and Howard Srebnick got the call. It was Clara Foster, the deputy clerk for United States District Judge Donald Graham, who was presiding over the criminal trial of Black and Srebnick's clients. For seven anxious days, the jury had been deliberating. Finally, they had reached a verdict.

The packed courtroom held its breath as Ms. Foster retrieved the verdict form from the foreperson. She cleared her throat before reading it aloud: "United States versus Helio Castroneves and Katiucia Castroneves. We the jury find the defendants, not guilty!"

The courtroom erupted as the siblings fell into each other's arms, sobbing for several minutes. For seven long weeks, Helio and his sister Katiucia had been criminal defendants in that courtroom on charges of tax evasion. Now they were free. Their storied life was back on track, but not even Helio's most fanatical fans could have predicted what happened next.

Whisked out to California on a Penske team jet, Helio finished seventh in the Long Beach Grand Prix after leading the race for several laps. This was an extraordinary feat for a man who had not trained for nearly seven months. But he soon topped that by winning the pole position at Indianapolis and then the 500 itself—the Golden Grail, motor racing's biggest and most celebrated event.

It had been seven years since he last visited the victory circle at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Surrounded by the beat of the samba drums and chants of his adoring Brazilian fans, after crossing the finish line, he sat quietly in his driver's seat, his face bowed down in his hands, thinking how close he had come to losing it all. "I think the tears speak for everything," he says. "Because it was good tears, honest tears, tears of joy." He then exited the

car, and could hear the 400,000 fans in attendance screaming his name as he climbed the fence to salute them.

Helio Castroneves and his family have fought against the odds all of their lives. His father started a pipe company in the small town of Ribeirao Preto, Brazil, and turned it into a successful family business. He also was a motor racing enthusiast who sponsored a makeshift team. While he recognized that he did not possess the talent to be a racecar driver himself, his 10-year old son was born with the gift—and just as importantly, the courage—to be a great driver.

Helio got his start behind the wheel of go-carts, winning the state and national Brazilian championships. Racing is far more expensive than other sports; the cars, engines, and crews cost hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars each year. Helio's father and mother would have to do what few parents would dare do: put it all on the line for their son's career. So Helio's parents sold all of their property and invested every dollar financing their son's career. His father abandoned his pipe business in order to work full time as Helio's manager and promoter. His sister Katiucia (known as Kati to friends) cut short her own promising career as a ballerina to join her parents in the endeavor, knocking on doors and cold-calling prospective sponsors. The Castroneves family made the sacrifice and risked it all so that Helio would have his chance at the top. They never wavered in their support of his career. And he never disappointed.

As a teen, Helio traveled the length and breadth of South America winning races. Then it was on to Formula Three in England, Indy Lights in the United States, and finally, the Indy Car Series. When sponsorship money started drying up, Helio again turned to his family. His dad resumed the search for sponsors, and Kati moved to Miami to manage her brother's affairs.

Just before entering the final race of the 1999 season at Fontana, California, Helio learned that his team was folding. As he was rounding the track, what was racing through his mind was the possibility that Fontana might be his last race. And then the car in front of him flipped over at 240 mph and hit an infield wall. The driver, Greg Moore, died instantly. Moore had just penned a multi-million dollar contract to drive for the legendary Roger Penske the next season.

After the race, Penske asked Helio to replace Moore in a Team Penske car. Shaking off the specter of Moore's tragic death, Helio accepted. In his first appearance at the Indy 500, Helio won. He repeated his victory the next year, and nearly won three in a row, but finished second to his teammate by a few thousandths of a second.

Helio's captivating personality and thousand-watt smile (not to mention his paso doble) won him legions of fans and victory in ABC's hit show *Dancing With The Stars* 2007 season. He was at the top of fame when he collided with the IRS; a federal indictment against him and his sister brought his world crashing into a wall. Knowing they were in the fight of their lives, Helio and Kati enlisted Roy Black and Howard Srebnick to put Helio back in the driver's seat. The legal eagles led a dream team that included tax expert David Garvin, legal scholar Scott Srebnick, his longtime friend Mark Seiden (who ended up testifying as a defense witness), and tax accountants Carlos Samlut and Noah Fox.

In summation, Black told the story of how two kids from a small town in



HELIO AT THE INDY 500





HELIO CELEBRATES AFTER HIS VICTORY



HELIO WITH HIS LAW TEAM
IN THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

Brazil had come to the United States to achieve the American dream, not to cheat Uncle Sam. Srebnick described for the jury that little boy with a special gift and immeasurable courage, whose big sister had dedicated her life to him, always walking in his shadow: “You are the wind beneath his wings, Kati. Yes, you are.”

Many before Helio were unable to survive let alone conquer such an ordeal. But no one ever expected this Hollywood ending: only seven weeks after being acquitted of federal tax evasion charges, Helio just took his third Indy 500 victory—a result far more compelling than the ending of any of this summer’s blockbuster movies. Here, Helio shares with us the compelling details of his ordeal.

HAUTE LIVING Helio, you have been through a lot. Tell us about the range of emotions you have experienced.

HELIO CASTRONEVES Well, as you can imagine, there was nothing worse than being accused of a crime that I knew I did not commit. It was especially painful because my sister was also accused. But I had faith in the justice system and that faith proved to be right. To then go to Indianapolis, win the pole and the Indy 500 for a third time, with my sister and parents there to see, wow! Even now it’s hard to believe.

HL What has given you the strength and fortitude to get through all of this?

HC Without a doubt, the support of my family, my friends, and my fans. During the trial, my sister, her husband, and their baby moved in with me, as did my parents. We were together all the time—eating, sleeping and praying together. I appreciated the phone calls of support from my friends at Team Penske, especially Roger Penske and Tim Cindric. I was proud that community leaders Adrienne Arsht and Mark Buoniconti were prepared to testify as character witnesses. It was important that they believed in me. Whenever I

would get really anxious, I would read the letters sent by the fans. That was the bright spot of my day. It reminded me that a lot of people were supporting me, and that gave me strength.

HL Speaking of anxiety, compare car racing with dancing on national television. What makes you more nervous?

HC Dancing, for sure! I grew up in racecars, and have been racing ever since I was a little boy. Of course, I get butterflies every time I get into the car, but I am used to it by now. But having to do the cha-cha live on television, now that is anxiety. If it was not for Julianne [Hough] being such a good teacher and dancer, I might have made a fool of myself in front of millions of people.

HL What was it like walking onto Pit Road at the Indy 500 speedway with 400,000 people cheering for you? What were you thinking to yourself when you were racing toward the checkered flag?

HC It was awesome. After all I had been through, I just wanted to go out there and have fun. I was excited to be back on the track again, talking race strategy, hearing phrases like “start your engines” and “pedal to the metal,” instead of “objection, sustained, and overruled.” Once I was strapped into the racecar and the competitive juices started flowing, I could not help but focus on winning. When I crossed the finish line, all I could think about was climbing the fence to salute my fans and thank them for all their support.

HL You are 34 years old, you have won the Indy 500 three times, and you have won *Dancing With The Stars*. What’s left to accomplish?

HC I have always enjoyed spending time with my family, most recently with my one-year-old nephew. As much as anyone, I appreciate having a family and want to start my own. In the meantime, I will set my sights on a fourth Indy 500 trophy. And a fifth! 🏆