

VICTORY DANCE



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KISS THE GROUND HE DRIVES ON: Helio Castroneves kisses the yard of bricks on the front stretch after Sunday's Indianapolis 500.

HELIO CASTRONEVES WINS THIRD INDY 500 WEEKS AFTER ACQUITTAL ON TAX CHARGES

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INDIANAPOLIS — Helio Castroneves followed tradition Sunday afternoon, getting down on his knees after winning the Indianapolis 500 to plant a kiss on the thin row of bricks which serve as the venerable track's finish line.

After tossing his baseball cap to the side, Castroneves put a big fat kiss on those weather-beaten stones.

He then sat up, put his hands on his head and looked to the sky while chaos continued to surround him.

For Castroneves, Sunday's win was his second this year, only the first on the track. This victory was a long time coming for a driver who would have seen his successful career come to a close had he been sent to prison — a very real possibility weeks ago.

Sunday, Castroneves savored the

moment.

"I couldn't believe it, couldn't believe I was kissing those bricks again," he said quietly, struggling to find the right words. "It was a dream

•TURN TO INDY 500, 8D



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1. HELIO CASTRONEVES



2. DAN WHELDON



3. DANICA PATRICK

9 Helio Castroneves became the ninth driver to win at least three Indy 500s and the first since Rick Mears won his third in 1988. The 1.98-second victory margin was the largest since Juan Pablo Montoya beat Buddy Lazier by more than seven seconds in 2000.

'It's the highlight of my career'

*INDY 500, FROM 1D

come true. It was an amazing scene. I am so grateful. It's the highlight of my career. My life. It's unbelievable. I'm speechless."

Castroneves won his third Indianapolis 500 in runaway fashion. The Coral Gables resident, who won in 2001 and 2002, grabbed the lead on Lap 142 and didn't surrender it, surviving a pair of cautions and a pit stop along the way.

When the race restarted with 17 laps to go after a spectacular crash, it was all Castroneves.

Dan Wheldon and Danica Patrick ended up second and third, neither making a dent in Castroneves' big lead.

With 15 laps left, Castroneves led by 1.55 seconds. With six laps left, the margin was almost two full seconds — a gigantic number in an IndyCar. For the final laps, all Castroneves saw was Indiana sky and packed grandstands in front of him.

"What speeds was he

doing out front?" Patrick said.

When told Castroneves was zipping around the 2.5 mile oval at over 220 mph, Patrick laughed. "I was 218 and a half and was like 'Yeah, I'm doing pretty good,'" she said. "If he was doing .220 with the lead, well, that's pretty fast."

FAST COMPANY

Patrick's third-place finish was the highest for a female driver in the Indy 500 in the 100th year of Indianapolis Motor Speedway. In the end, however, Patrick knows this was Castroneves' event.

"I'm happy to have him around," she said, "but he's pretty tough to beat."

It has been a good couple of weeks for Castroneves and his family, who started 2009 in limbo.

He and sister Kati were charged by federal prosecutors of criminally conspiring to hide \$5.5 million in income. A Miami jury acquitted Helio and Kati Castroneves, and Helio quickly

resumed his racing career by flying on a private jet owned by owner Roger Penske.

"We talked with Helio about the win of his life a couple of weeks ago," said Penske, who now has 15 Indy 500 wins (three with Castroneves piloting).

"Outside he has that personality, he climbs the fence, but inside he's as tough of nails. He had to be to go through what he went through the last six months."

Two weeks ago, Castroneves — after running at Long Beach and Kansas after the trial ended — qualified on the pole for the Indy 500. Friday, he found out the one count still remaining was going to be dropped.

Sunday ... well, Sunday was big.

"Certainly, it's a great way to come back," he said. "I feel fantastic. I feel great."

Castroneves becomes the ninth driver to claim three Indy 500 victories, and it didn't come all that easily. Castroneves lost his spot atop the grid on the first full

lap under green as Dario Franchitti jumped in front on Lap 8.

Castroneves wasn't out front again until taking over for good on Lap 142.

"The guy won his third Indy 500, that's no mean feat," said Wheldon, the 2005 champion. "This race is incredibly difficult."

FULL SUPPORT

Castroneves often has thanked his friends and racing team — especially Penske — for sticking behind him during the bad times. But it was his family who truly had his back, and Sunday they were behind his pit stall all the way.

With 10 laps left, Kati Castroneves stood close to the action, her hands clenched to her face, oversized sunglasses covering eyes mostly closed.

As the laps clicked down, Kati was joined by their mother, Sandra. The two locked hands. Then Helio's girlfriend Adriana Henao joined the fray. Pretty soon

Helio's father — the elder Helio Castroneves — joined the group, all four holding hands tight and urging their loved one toward Victory Lane.

"I thought I was going to pass out there for a little while," Kati said later. "But I know, at Indy, this race isn't over until the flag. I couldn't pass out until it was over. I'm just so happy."

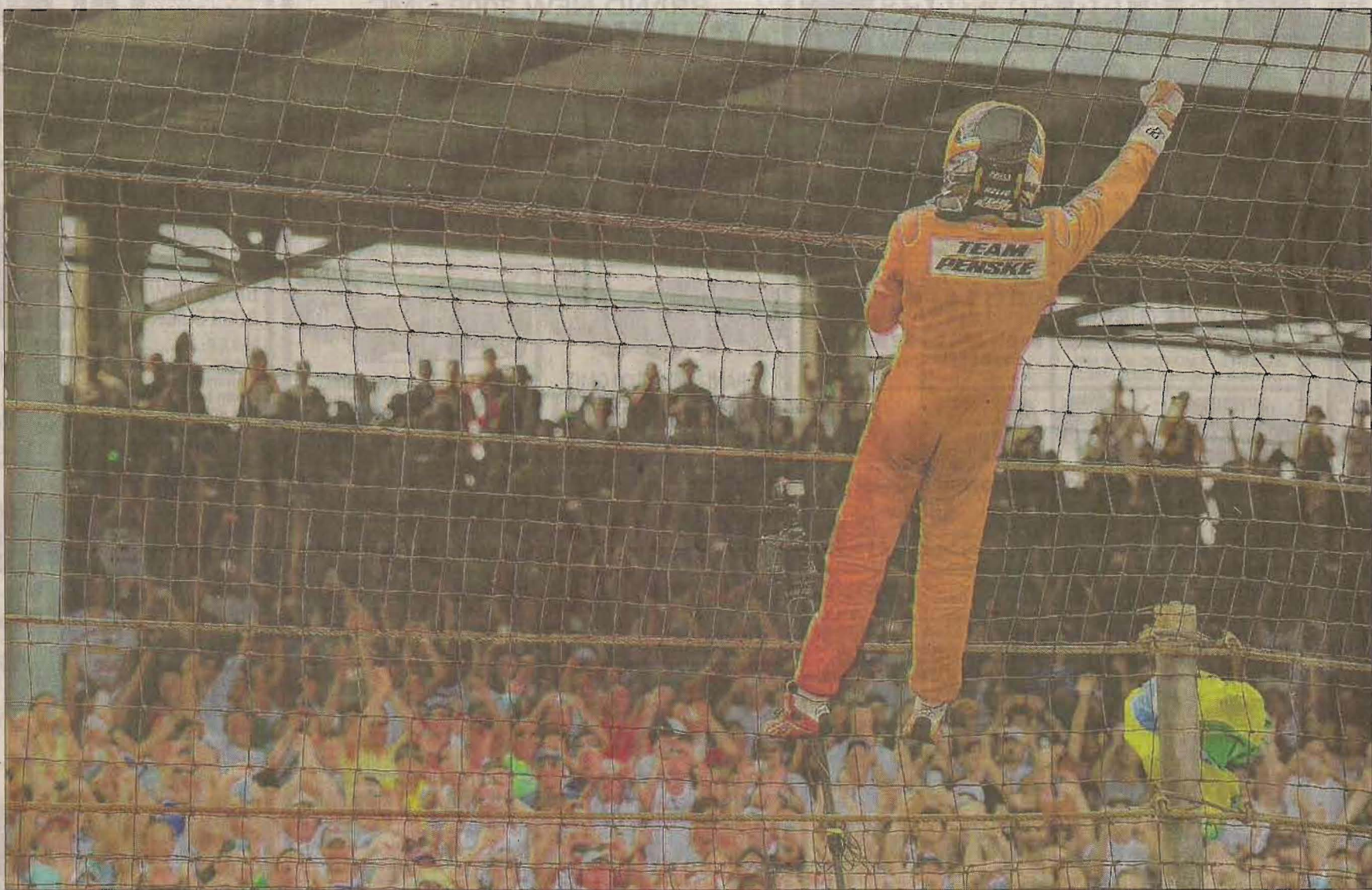
Added Henao: "It was great once it ended. During the race, it was just so stressful. What a relief."

After Helio Castroneves kissed the bricks and said his thanks, his immediate support group joined him on the grounds of the hallowed hall.

Joined by Kati's husband Edu Asola, the Castroneves clan went to the track surface in unison, all putting their lips to the legendary stones. The family hugged, then headed back to Victory Lane.

It was time to celebrate.

"I'm so glad I'm still doing what I love most," he said, knowing he wasn't alone.



ROBERT LABERGE/GETTY IMAGES

QUITE A CLIMB: Helio Castroneves scampers up the fence on the front stretch to celebrate his third Indianapolis 500 win on Sunday.