



MotorSports Moments

Pictures, Cindy Estes, Story, Eddie Estes

Indy Racing, What is next?

Another year has passed in the history of the Indy Racing Series. One of its greatest stars will be missing from the 2012 schedule and another to a different venue. One from a tragic event and the other from change in a career path.

Dan Wheldon was without a doubt one of the most popular drivers ever to drive an Indy car. His relationship with the fans was terrific. He truly understood the importance of fans in the stands. He always went out of his way to meet and greet them, was always the first one to show up for fan sessions and took the time for those great photo shoots.

Dan won the 500 in 2005 and 2011. In 2005 he passed Danica Patrick for the lead and won the race. As everyone remembers, after the race all the publicity seemed to swing towards Danica. As a joke at Texas Motor Speedway a week after his victory, Dan had a T-shirt made that said, "Yes, I won the 500" much to the delight of the fans. Other drivers took his lead and some had "Danica's Teammate" on their shirts. Everyone really appreciated the humor and fun that came with his 2005 victory, let alone his terrific drive to the front.

In 2011 a last minute deal that Bryan Herta and Sam Schmidt Motor-

Remembering Dan Wheldon, British racing driver from England:
June, 22, 1978 - October, 16, 2011.

(right) Happier times: Dan Wheldon demonstrating the Wii Fit at Indy Media Center.



sports put together made a ride available for Dan. Dan didn't have a ride until the 500 or any other races scheduled for 2011. How could such a talented driver be without a drive? In this economy, many drivers bring sponsorships to the table and get the rides, that's just the way it is. It appears that is the future for all forms of motorsports.

As history would have it, Dan won the 500 on the very last lap after rookie J.R. Hildabrand lost control of his car on the fourth turn, crashing into the turn wall and sliding to a stop in turn one. Believe it or not, the car that crashed was Dan's ride the last two years in the 500.

The celebration after the 500 was one most fans will never forget. Dan and two young sons kissed the bricks the next day in the official photo shoots. This victory couldn't have happened to a nicer guy and family man, a popular victory to say the least.

Again, believe it or not, Dan didn't have a ride after winning the world's great race. He actually did commentary for Indy races with the Versus TV Network, now the NBC Sports Network, and did a terrific job, getting rave reviews from the fans and media members alike. He also was the test driver for the new Indycar program that will feature all new cars and engines in the 2012 season. These cars will feature three different engines, Honda, Chevrolet and Lotus. In 2013 the cars will have different aero kits for the different tracks. Dan's input and professional expertise should make these cars the best and most safe ever. All drivers in the future will benefit from his contributions.

Dan suffered fatal injuries in the final Indycar race of the 2011 season at Las Vegas. A tragic loss to the entire sports world, let alone the Indycar Series. Graham Rahal made a decision to donate his helmet and gear for Dan's family's benefit. After this was announced, several other drivers and sports figures donated items to the fund. eBay then donated a site for this auction and more and more items were added from all sport sectors. The auction just seemed to grow, and in the end the fund totaled more than \$629,000 for the Wheldon family.

Dan Wheldon, one of the brightest stars ever in an Indycar, also will be remembered as one of the nicest men on the planet. He will never be replaced, ever.

Danica Moves to NASCAR

Texas Motor Speedway always seems to be at the front on many of the stories that float around Motorsports. The track is simply one of the best on the earth and some of the best races seen are at this facility. The past year's final NASCAR event was one of the best ever and one that created all kinds of story lines for the rest of the season. First, the suspension of Kyle Busch after he crashed into Ron Hornaday in the truck race under the yellow flag, NASCAR said "no" to this and Busch was not permitted





(Clockwise top left) Nascar's most popular driver: Dale Earnhardt Jr. signing autographs at Texas Motor Sports. Danica Patrick, now a full-time driver for JR Motorsports and 10 Sprint Cup Races for Tony Stewart. Tony Stewart, 2011 Nascar Sprint Cup Champion. Indy Crew making preparations for the Indy 500 race. Daytona 500 winner, Trevor Bayne is very popular with fans.

to drive in the National wide race or the Sprint Cup race on Sunday. There were many Busch jackets and T-shirts and hats in the stands those two days, but Nascar put its foot down on this tactic. The other issue, of course, is a sponsor's reaction to what happened. M&M's said no to sponsorship for the remaining races also. Sponsors certainly have a big impact on sports and it seems that in NASCAR, they have the biggest.

Another exciting story at Texas in November was the Nationwide race. The youngest driver to win the Daytona 500, Trevor Bayne won the 7th annual O'Reilly Auto Parts challenge, his first victory in 77 NASCAR National wide series races. He was so relieved to win and is so popular with the fans and so young. The future looks bright for this driver.

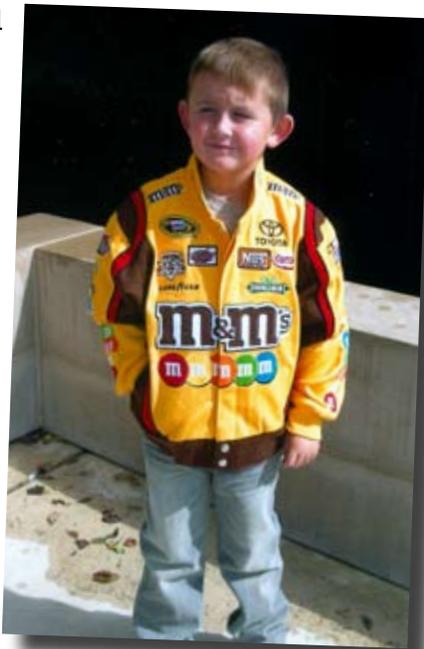
Danica Patrick is another one of those stories. She is and has been Indycar's most popular driver for several years. Her performance on the track and at Texas and Indy have been stories by themselves. The past couple of years the media and fans have been aware that she might leave the open wheel ranks and move to NASCAR full time. After several Nationwide drives with JR Motorsports she seemed to be heading that way.

The problem was looking at some of the history of other open wheel drivers who tried to make the switch and it just didn't work. Probably the most successful open wheel driver to move was Tony Stewart. It is a lot different driving a car with a lot of downforce to one with not so much. As the rumors continued to flow about Danica and her future it became clear that she was going to make the switch. But would she still compete in the Indy 500, the race that clearly brought her fame.

During NASCAR media week in late January, those questions were answered. She will complete in a full Nation-wide Series schedule this year and drive 10 Sprint Cup races. She also indicated that she will not drive in this year's Indy 500.

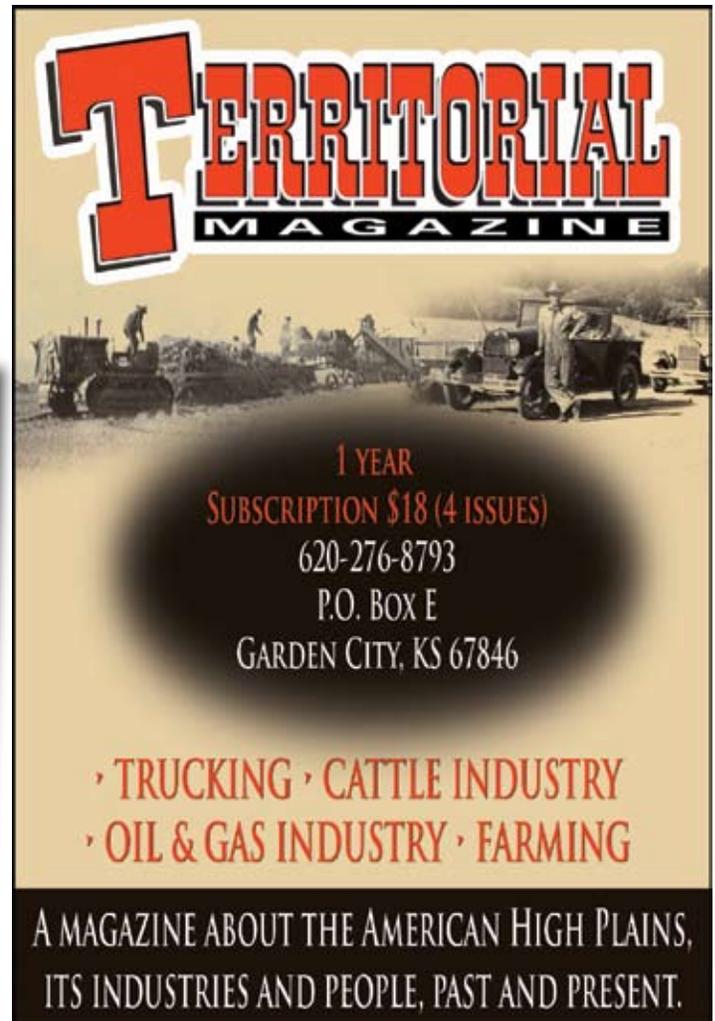
The 10 Sprint Cup races she will drive she will be a part of Tony Stewart's team and have the talents of his group at her request. She realized that the new career choice would be difficult but she is certainly up to the task. Stewart is certainly supportive as is JR Motorsports on the Nationwide side.

This season in Motorsports could be one of the very best, but it certainly won't be the same without Dan Wheldon. New faces, new races, and some in new places.



Where's my driver? . . . So sorry, he is in a bit of a time-out!

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