

The **IndyCar** is the dominant open-wheel racing championship in North America, surpassing rival series Champ Car in both TV audiences and in number of manufacturers involved. Although its centerpiece, the **Indianapolis 500-Mile Race**, is one of the oldest events in motor racing history, the current IndyCar Series's history begins in 1994, when **Tony George**, the **president and CEO of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Corporation**, founded the Indy Racing League. The IRL began racing in 1996, creating a breakaway group of drivers and team owners from CART, which had sanctioned Indy racing since 1979. George claimed that the CART championship was **too expensive** for teams, had **too much foreign drivers** and it began to divert from the American traditions of oval racing by **including more and more road course races** to suit better the Formula 1 and Formula 3000 drivers that were flooding the series since the early 90s. Some suggest that Tony George's efforts to run his own series were backed by no other than **F1 supremo Bernie Ecclestone**, who considered CART as a potential threat to F1's domination on the world scene.

There was a litigation involving the use of the "IndyCar" trademark, which was settled off-court in December 1996. The terms of the settlement agreement were not fully disclosed, but from 1997, the CART series didn't include "IndyCar" anymore, while IRL could not use the name before 2002. The first **Indy Racing League** schedule consisted of only three races, including the 500, and most of the drivers, even in the Indy 500, were virtual unknowns or drivers coming out of retirement.



However, former F1 vice-champion, **the late Michele Alboreto**, competed as a rookie in all three rounds, finishing 11th in the championship. No fewer than 17 rookies made it on the grid of the 1996 "500". The race, marked by long caution periods, was won by American veteran **Buddy Lazier** returning to racing for team Hemelgarn despite suffering serious back injury earlier that season. The cars used throughout the year by most of the field were outdated Indy cars that raced previously (1992-1995) in the CART championship. **Scott Sharp** and **Buzz Calkins** tied in the final standings, and were declared co-champions. Calkins had one win (the inaugural round of the IRL, on the **Walt Disney World Speedway**), while his rival did not win in the short season, but Sharp's Foyt Enterprises team scored more team points.



A new 10-rounds all-oval season already started on August 18, 1996 in New Hampshire ending on October 11, 1997 in Las Vegas. Team Menard's **Tony Stewart** was declared champion, despite winning a single round. The future **NASCAR Nextel Cup** champion scored 278 points, six ahead of **Davey Hamilton**. By 1997, the IRL had its own cars, powered by 4.0 litre V8, methanol burning, production based, normally aspirated engines. Initially, the engine manufacturers were Oldsmobile (badged as Aurora) and Nissan (badged as Infinity), while chassis were supplied by **Riley & Scott**, **Dallara** and **Panoz** (under the G-Force label).

F3000 driver **Kenny Bräck** from Sweden had the chance to substitute for injured Davy Jones in 1997 and, after learning the hard way that there is no mercy if you make the slightest mistake on an oval, he won the 1998 IRL championship with **Foyt Enterprises**. The IRL was following CART's path with plenty of non-US drivers racing for the top teams, like Dutchman **Arie Luyendyk**, Stephan Gregoire of France or the Brazilian pair of Marco Greco and Raul Boesel. Davey Hamilton was again second in the standings, with Tony Stewart third. In 1999, American Greg Ray won the championship, with Bräck second not far away in the points table, but the Swede won the Indianapolis 500 that year, before switching to CART at the end of the season.



From 2000, the engine formula was replaced by a 3.5L format and the requirement for the block to be production-based was dropped. This formula was used through 2003. One of the most popular American racers in the 90s, double CART champion **Al Unser Jr**, switched to full-time IRL racing in 2000, following a poor season with Penske Racing. He brought a lot of publicity to the championship and won his first IRL race that same season at Las Vegas, although "**Little Al**", aged 38, was neither very fast or consistent enough anymore.

The 1996 Indy 500 winner **Buddy Lazier** had the best package for the 2000 season teaming with Hemergarn Racing and sponsor Delta Faucet. This partnership resulted in a model season for the team in 2000 with Buddy winning 2 races on his way to the series championship followed by a second place effort in 2001. But the victory in the 2000 "500" went to Colombian rookie and CART reigning champion **Juan Pablo Montoya**. **Chip Ganassi's** team, the dominating force in CART at that time, had a highly successful debut in the IRL placing his drivers 1st and 7th in the best known and long most-popular open-wheel auto race in North America. Montoya led 167 of the 200 laps of the race, while second placed Lazier led none. Was it a spectacular burst of Montoya's talent or the confirmation of the fact that CART had better drivers? A little bit of both maybe.

Following **Ganassi Racing's** success in the rival series, CART founder **Roger Penske** entered the 2001 Indy 500. And it was Penske's Brazilian pair of Hélio Castroneves and Gil de Ferran who finished first and second. In fact, the best placed IRL regular, Chilean former F1 driver **Eliseo Salazar**, managed no better than 7th in the most important race of the season. In the IRL standings, it was 24-year old **Sam Hornish Jr** that took the title from reigning champion Buddy Lazier, who finished the season a distant second. The Panther Racing driver earned no fewer than 11 top-five finishes in 13 races.



In 2002 the Penske team switched from Champ Car, and Sam was able to beat their top driver Hélio Castroneves (who won again the Indy 500) to his second title, scoring a league-record five wins. He defeated Al Unser, Jr. by .0024 of a second in **Delphi Indy 300** at Chicagoland, the closest finish in IndyCar Series history. Hornish Jr was hard charging again the following year on the finish line as he won Delphi Indy 300 at Chicagoland Speedway by .0099 of a second over **Scott Dixon** and .0100 of a second over third-place **Bryan Herta**. The finish was the closest 1-2-3 finish in IndyCar Series history. But he ended 5th in the standings.

The **IndyCar Series** name is adopted for the 2003 season. And there were more substantial changes too: several former CART teams brought their full operations to the IRL as well as former CART engine manufacturers Toyota and Honda, replacing Infiniti who shifted its efforts to the new Infiniti Pro Series. Many of the IRL's old guard including **Robbie Buhl**, **Greg Ray** and **Buddy Lazier** had difficulty competing in this new manufacturer-driven landscape. The league, also added its first international race this year, taking over the CART date at **Twin Ring Motegi**.

Although a road racer at heart and a F1 hopeful, Ganassi Racing's rookie **Scott Dixon** adapted quickly to the requirements of an all-oval championship, winning the season opener in Homestead, Florida. A tangle with **Tony Kanaan** in Japan left Dixon with a shattered hand, but he bounced back to take two more victories and win the championship at his first try. He also set a record with 343 consecutive laps led, a mark that will be very difficult for any driver to top. However, the year ended on a tragic note for Dixon. Ganassi had recruited **Tony Renna** as his team-mate for 2004.

The young American and Dixon were already close friends. But at the **Indianapolis Motor Speedway**, during Renna's first practice session for the team in October 2003, he spun across the track and became airborne. Renna's car hit a post at massive speed and was shredded. The car's cockpit was split on impact. Renna was killed instantly of blunt force **trauma to the head and chest**. Two weeks before, during the last race of the IndyCar season, returning IRL champion **Kenny Bräck** suffered a serious crash that almost cost him his legs. His car locked wheels with **Tomas Scheckter's** car, flew into the catch fencing and broke apart.

In 2004, the displacement was reduced to 3.0L, in an attempt to curb top speeds. The championship went to **Andretti-Green Racing's Tony Kanaan**, who had a very strong season, finishing top five in all but the season opener. He was on the lead lap in all races that year. His British team-mate **Dan Wheldon** came second in the championship. They swapped position on the top of the standings in 2005, with Wheldon becoming the first Briton to win the Indy 500 since the legendary **Graham Hill**, in 1966. On the grid of the 2005 "500" there were 18 foreign drivers and only 15 US-racers. So much for Tony George's ambition to have a mostly American field of competitors. However, the main focus that year was on young rookie **Danica Patrick** who qualified fourth and fought for the win until the last stage of the race. She went on to finish a creditable fourth, as she was forced to slow down in order to conserve fuel.

For the American drivers, the year 2006 brought a return to form, they managing to finish 1-2-3 in the Indy 500, with **Sam Hornish Jr** clinching both the **Borg-Warner Trophy** and the IndyCar Series title.



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