

Da Matta racing toward CART record

Brazilian goes after fifth consecutive win in Cleveland

BY RICK MATSUMOTO
SPORTS REPORTER

CLEVELAND — Cristiano da Matta will earn his own place in the CART record book if he wins tomorrow's Grand Prix of Cleveland.

It would be his fifth consecutive win and he would become the only CART driver to take that many checkered flags in succession.

So it's hard to believe that less than six years ago his driving career was flopping along on four flat tires. He had finished eighth in the European Formula 3000 series and didn't have a ride for the 1997 season.

He had returned to his hometown of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, to ponder his future when Canadian Brian Stewart showed up and offered him an Indy Lights ride.

Da Matta credits Stewart, the owner of the Pefferlaw, Ont., racing team bearing his name, for putting his career back on track.

"I was coming from a very bad year in Formula 3000," he said after gain-

ing the provisional pole yesterday with a lap of 57.641 seconds around the Burke Lakefront Airport temporary street circuit. Paul Tracy qualified in ninth place, Patrick Carpentier 10th and Alex Tagliani 12th.

Da Matta said: "When you're younger you don't know how to deal with it. That kind of performance affects you a lot more than when you become more experienced. You become really frustrated and your level of confidence goes down. . . .

"Brian showed me that racing is simple. If you don't have the right team around you it's a nightmare. Once you have the right guys around

you, it's pretty simple."

And da Matta has certainly made it look simple this year, winning five of the eight races to date. He comes into tomorrow's event off a wire-to-wire victory in the Toronto Molson Indy.

Stewart is not surprised by da Matta's success in CART.

"Technically, he's really awesome," said Stewart, who is now competing in the IRL's Infiniti Pro Series. "That's why he's so good. He knows how the car works. He's not just a driver."

MOLSON INDY MOVES BACK: The Molson Indy will move back to its traditional second weekend of July date next

season, according to a schedule CART president Chris Pook presented to the board of governors yesterday, obtained by The Star.

The 20-date schedule is subject to change, but Pook is hopeful approval will come swiftly enough for it to be released late next week.

The Molson Indy was moved up a week this year (to last weekend) because of International Youth Day and the visit of the Pope.

The 2003 season would begin Feb. 23 with the inaugural race in St. Petersburg, Fla., and end Nov. 11 in Fontana, according to this unofficial schedule.