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Penske celebrates long-awaited 100th win

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The Captain smiled. Roger Penske's long wait was over.

Within minutes, caps announcing his 100th victory as a Champ-car owner were all over Nazareth Speedway, the picturesque track Penske built in the Lehigh Valley of eastern Pennsylvania.

"It's great to be back," he said.

Then the normal look of reserve returned to his face, and the man whose world-renowned team had just broken a 54-race losing streak talked about the difficulty of winning in CART.

"There's 23 other people out there waiting to knock us off," Penske said after Gil de Ferran gave him his landmark victory Saturday in the Bosch Grand Prix. "So, we got to get on to Milwaukee to show that this is not just one of a kind."

That shouldn't be an issue Sunday in the Miller Lite 225. In the face of competition so tough there have been different winners in each of the first five races this season, the team has been successfully rebuilt with new management, equipment and drivers.

Only The Captain remains to back briefly in the feeling of euphoria he knew so often when

his cars were driven by the Unsers, Rick Mears, Emerson Fittipaldi and Danny Sullivan. Then he moves ahead, quickly.

"Let's get on to 101," he said.

That attitude has made Penske Corp. a giant in the transportation services industry and carried its founder and chairman to the pinnacle of racing.

"He represents the elite, the creme de la creme, in the same category as Enzo Ferrari and Colin Chapman," said Mario Andretti, who won twice for Penske as a moonlighter while taking the Formula One championship.

Three-time CART champion Mears gave Penske four of his record 10 Indianapolis 500 victories and 29 overall. He says those numbers were achieved in part because of astute planning and race strategy.

His best example was the 1991 Indy 500.

"Not just because it was our fourth win at Indy, but because everything in the race went according to our plan," Mears said.

It was that way so often, the slump remains particularly baffling.

The vaunted in-house PC series chassis that once controlled the sport lost the edge to the Reynard. The Mercedes engines were outmuscled by the Hondas. Firestone over-

whelmed Goodyear, with Penske among those on the wrong brand of tires.

Al Unser Jr. stopped winning. And then, 1999 happened.

"It's a year I want to forget," said Penske, a 63-year-old former sports car racer.

His two-car team used four drivers, among them rookie Gonzalo Rodriguez, killed in September while practicing in Laguna Seca, Calif. But tragedy didn't hide failure.

"I knew what we had to do," Penske said.

First, he hired for this year hard-charging Greg Moore, at 24 a proven winner on the cusp of superstardom.

But before Moore turned a lap for Penske, the Canadian was killed in his final ride for Gerald Forsythe, in the season-ending Marlboro 500 on Oct. 31 at California Speedway — another track Penske built.

The free fall of the sport's greatest team began as a big slip, when Penske cars were unable to qualify for the 1995 Indy 500 after starting 1-2-3 a year earlier and getting victory No. 10 from Unser.

Although Paul Tracy won three straight times in 1997, neither he nor Unser seriously contended for the championship. Unser, who gave Penske the last of his seven

CART titles in 1994, slipped to 11th in points in 1998 and 21st last year.

Breaking the tie with Unser wasn't easy for Penske, but dealing with death was far more difficult.

"Certainly, it was a tragedy, the accident in California," said Penske, who has 88 victories since the formation after the 1978 season of CART as the car owners' alternative to USAC. "It was hard even to believe we were experiencing that after Rodriguez."

Penske began talks with Moore in June, and with de Ferran a month later. Both had won with a Reynard chassis, de Ferran with Honda power.

For Penske, who later replaced Moore with Helio Castroneves, new sweeping changes were needed.

Goodyear dropped out after last season, solving the tire woes, and the organization was streamlined with Tim Cindric becoming the first president of Penske Racing.

"We felt good coming in," Penske said. "But you still have to get up to the podium."

There, last Saturday, not far from Pocono International Raceway — where Mark Donohue gave him his breakthrough victory in 1971 — The Captain was at the head table for the first time in three years.

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