

One Lap of (Road) America

Bobby Rahal leads, and leads, and.... Say, will this be the longest race in history?

By Pete Lyons

Deep inside the leafy canopy the air is still. From time to time a ruffle of wind will sound softly in the treetops, and a moment later there is a scattered pattering as droplets impact the plants close above the woodland floor, but mostly there is quiet. Even the intruder's foot falls silently in the damp humus. And it is dim in here; the dense wet mist in the air above does not seem to penetrate the forest, but neither does much of what gray daylight exists. The scene is not somber, however, for the autumnal color of many of the trees, the yellowing of the oaks and the reddening of the maples, as well as the bold strokes of warm birch-bark white, lighten the gloom. It is almost festive.

It is the opening weekend of Wisconsin's archery season for deer, and the day is perfect for that. Unfortunately, outside the sylvan sanctuary we've been trying to run off a road race. The day has not been perfect for that, has in fact been nothing like even barely suitable, and we have failed.

That is why it is so quiet. The woods should be humming right now, humming and thrumming and whistling and growling and shrieking, pierced to their gentle depths by the cacaphonic cries of our unnatural wildlife. But the Indycars are still. They are still racing, in a manner of speaking, but they are not moving. They are lined up in the pit lane, nose to tail, looking smart in their tailored rainwear, but they are silent, and they are slowly cooling. They are also on the third lap of the race. And will be for nearly two weeks.

At Sanair the whole first day of practice was lost to weather, and now it has hap-

pened again. The inclemency then was rain; here it was fog, fog so dense that course workers could not see the next station along. So no Indycar turned a wheel all during Friday. It was a disconcerting way to start out a race meeting that was supposed to be offering the incredible five-way championship battle between Bobby Rahal, Al Unser Jr, Danny Sullivan, and Mario and Michael Andretti; two ties among them and only five points between them. There was no fog on Saturday, however, and an early rain squall had tailed off by mid-morning, so it was almost a good day. In one session of open-to-all qualifying, Rahal extended his current hot streak to his season's first pole position. That meant that, for another day, anyway, he actually led the points table with 108.

His time of 1:55.829 (124.321 mph) was not a track record, nor did it offer much of a margin. Sullivan turned a lap at 1:55.872, and Roberto Moreno (!) one at 1:55.895. Close work at the front. At the back, too: Roberto Guerrero actually was fourth quickest, but his time was disallowed by tech checkers who found his under-chassis skid plates missing. Not that they cared about the plates, but they could not overlook that his sidepod skirts were not within the allowable minimum height above the bottom of the tub. Guerrero would have to start at the back. Not starting at all was Rick Miasiewicz, who rode the second Machinists Union entry into the guardrail and the ambulance to the hospital. Mild concussion was the diagnosis. So there would only be 24 on the grid. Another hard luck story came from the Kraco stable, for Michael

Andretti kept having mechanical troubles, the total coming to three blown engines, two spark boxes and an incendiary turbo-charger—all in one day. He qualified seventh. The other two of the fab five, Mario Andretti and Little Al, were sixth and ninth, respectively.

Most of the reported troubles involved handling balance, for time had been too short to perfect it in many cases. The four-mile Road America lap soaks up more of a team's time than do more common courses. One gets in fewer runs per hour. The other side is that, with its long straights and slow corners, it offers more places for passing. So we could fairly anticipate a keen race. Nobody could have anticipated what we got. It was raining early Sunday morning, so the support races were held in the wet, and although it then slacked off and the track dried, we were being set up. The big race, due to start at 1pm, inherited earlier schedule delays and was put back 20 minutes. Twenty critical minutes. Precisely as the field began the first of two planned pace laps, from out of the pale white mist low overhead there came the first of two hundred billion raindrops. Also planned. As the pack was streaming by Station Eight on the second lap, all race track corner communications went dead. Therefore the pace car stayed on the track for a third time around. But on that lap the race was officially underway, under the yellow. The rain was getting heavier, and now there were flashes of lightning in the featureless gloom.

The wiring glitch was fixed in time for the starter to wave the green at the start of the second lap. The only green lap we

would get. Rahal got the drop on Sullivan and led on around the lap. Barely. It was raining harder by the instant. There were now 24 roostertails of swirling spume rising high between the trees on the straights, then 24 streaming wet, slithering naked-wheel racecars creeping, awkward and uncertain, around the corners. Guerrero, starting at the back, promptly spun off at the first corner. The rest of the drivers all looked as though they wanted to do nothing but make it back to their motor homes alive, but Unser Junior had decided to do it first, and he startled and alarmed his fellows by flying by them, one after the other, whing-whinnng-whinnng. On the veering straight at the far side of the track, having whinged by Sullivan for second, he finally aquaplaned off into the guardrail, injuring a shoulder and a cheek, and tearing the engine loose from the monocoque. The wreckage spun back onto the track, where several drivers, already busy enough with their own problems, had to swerve off the track. Mario Andretti actually tore part of the belly off his car in his excursion, but everyone avoided the wrecked No. 30 except Raul Boesel, who smashed into it and then the guardrail. The starter was reaching for his yellow flag anyway, and at the end of the third lap, the pace car led the 22 meek survivors into the pit road. The leader: still Rahal. The average speed: all of 78.545.

There ensued a general frantic scramble for cover, and for a while the rain, incredibly, grew yet heavier, while the thunder became louder and more frequent. Somebody up there just did not want us to run this race. After an hour or two, while the rain had eased, it had not stopped completely and the officials declared the day a washout. (The plan: Restart in single-file on Saturday, Oct 4, after a 45-minute warmup. If Unser's crew can fix his car—they say they can—he may join them.)

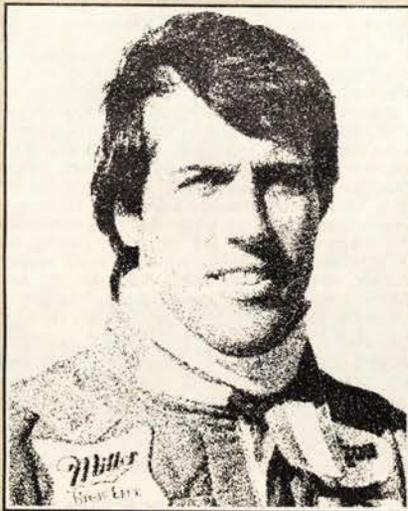
With that, the rain stopped completely, the sky brightened, and the first hints of watery sunshine shone out.



QUALIFYING RESULTS—RACE FOR LIFE 200 ROAD AMERICA, ELKHART LAKE, WI SEPT 20, 1986

RESULTS: 1) Bobby Rahal, March 86C, 1:55.829; 2) Danny Sullivan, March 86C, 1:55.872; 3) Roberto Moreno, Lola T86/00, 1:55.895; 4) Kevin Cogan, March 86C, 1:57.266; 5) Emerson Fittipaldi, March 86C, 1:57.288; 6) Mario Andretti, Lola T86/00, 1:57.324; 7) Michael Andretti, March 86C, 1:57.332; 8) Rick Mears, March 86C-Ch, 1:57.421; 9) Al Unser Jr, Lola T86/00, 1:57.808; 10) J. Villeneuve, March 86C, 1:57.814; 11) Raul Boesel, Lola T86/00, 1:58.885; 12) Tom Sneva, March 86C, 1:58.955; 13) G. Brabham, Lola T86/00-H, 1:59.938; 14) Arie Luyendyk, March 86C, 2:00.823; 15) Derek Daly, March 86C, 2:01.367; 16) Jeff MacPherson, March 86C, 2:01.657; 17) Desire Wilson, March 86C, 2:03.312; 18) Randy Lewis, Lola T86/00, 2:03.361; 19) Rocky Moran, March 86C, 2:04.611; 20) Dominic Dobson, March 86C, 2:06.077; 21) J. Rutherford, March 86C, 2:08.689; 22) Dale Coyne, DC-1, 2:10.895; 23) Ian Ashley, Lola T86/00, 2:15.818; 24) R. Guerrero, March 86C, 1:56.801

A la Cart



By Danny Sullivan

For a while at Road America, you could have convinced me I was back in Europe—maybe driving a hydroplane on some European river. Come to think of it, the name Road America really doesn't seem too appropriate right now. Elkhart Lake fits a lot better. So far, the story of Elkhart Lake is a story of water, but it isn't over yet, because we have to go back. Imagine: rained-out of a road race.

I don't mind racing in the wet. I've done a lot of it. Most of the time it isn't too bad, but the conditions at what was supposed to be the start this time really were...well, the only word is "horrific."

Wet driving technique starts with where you place the car. Sometimes the best line is the regular racing line, sometimes it's right around the outside. But if there's a big puddle on the outside at the end of the corner, that line doesn't do you any good. That's the main key to a wet track, puddling. You simply have to avoid any puddles that form, especially on the straights. The car doesn't weigh all that much, and the tires are so wide they float on anything, especially at higher speeds.

Just as every track is different, so is every car. The "right" setup is really a matter of what you like, and what you find works for your car. Normally you would soften the car's roll bars and shocks, because that gives you more grip in the wet, but I can remember when we stiffened up the car and actually improved it.

You'll also adjust your brakes to more of a rearward bias, because the reduced grip means there's more weight on the rear

tires as you're braking.

It's a matter of very delicate feel. The steering is very, very light, and the throttle can steer you almost as much as the steering wheel. In wet conditions, driving an Indycar is a little bit like driving a Corvette on ice, only with a third the weight and three times the horsepower. And all that power can come in with a bang.

What you're trying to do most is feed the power in smoothly and gently. You might try a gear higher than normal in some places, and most of the time you're short-shifting. The idea is to keep it off the cam at lower speeds, so you won't break the tires loose.

The killer is when you think you've got it real good, and all of a sudden it comes on cam! That's what we were thinking when Wally Dallenbach wanted us to take the start real slow, so the whole field would be up on the level part of the pit straight. We told him we wanted to be in a higher gear. If we're in low gear, and somebody jumps on it too hard, he could get sideways and take out half the field.

When we started the warmup lap conditions weren't so bad but the rain came on strong, and after three of those four-mile laps under the yellow there was a lot of water on the track. Bobby Rahal was on the pole, and I was alongside. When we finally got the green, Bobby jumped ahead. In a couple of the early corners I tried to get inside him, but had to back off. I couldn't see.

As we came down the hill toward the Carousel, I thought, "This is crazy." The rain itself prevented you from seeing anything, never mind the spray. I knew they had to stop the race. So at that point I was just trying to get on around the lap safely.

That's when Little Al passed me, coming out of the Carousel, going into the kink, and I thought, "Boy, there is No Way." That bottom straight puddles like crazy. It's not actually straight; you've got a little zig-zag to steer through. I was in third gear, no throttle, where normally you're flat in fifth, and I could see Al going off to the right side. Actually, I couldn't see anything but a ball of spray, but I knew he was off because I started seeing mud on the track. Then I accelerated, because I was afraid of him bouncing back out on the track. Which of course he did, and got tagged by Raul Boesel. Anyway, we try it again on October 4, after Michigan. Seems like a funny situation to be working on two races at once. I don't remember anything quite like this happening in Europe.

