

A Letter to the Newcomers

There's a place in Indianapolis that calls us home each May. That patch of land lies west of downtown and calls the bravest of souls face it challenges, to defy what was once considered impossible. It has a fairly simple layout: 4 left-handed turns and 4 straightaways. But she is anything but simple. If you're not careful this beast will chew you up and spit you out without a second thought, and remind you of one fact while she does it: You're not special.

On that Sunday at the cusp of summer, we gather in a town that should've died when Main Street did. We gather as 33 of the bravest men and women strap themselves into a proverbial rocket ship. At their feet are suspensions elements that can easily impale them. At their back, a 2.2L twin turbo V6 engine, filled with flammable fuel and they must control the steering, shifting, braking, and acceleration. They have to maneuver this rocket ship at 230 miles an hour, covering two and a half miles in less than 40 seconds. Now do it again. Again. And again. For 500 miles.

Oh, and there are 32 other drivers breathing down your neck the entire time because they are chasing the exact same thing you are: immortality.

There isn't a race on this planet where man and machine are asked to go this fast for this long. Finish first and you'll join one of the most elite clubs in all of sports. Finish second and no one remembers your name.

I arrived in 2001, in the shadows of the hundreds of thousands that had made the pilgrimage before me. 7-year-old me had no idea what was about to happen, that I was about to lay eyes on my first love. I still remember the first time I walked up to the gate. I could see the water tower while walking down Crawfordsville Road, my dad telling me that was about how far we had to walk. Then, as the trees break, you see it.

Mecca.

A massive grey wall of bleachers that seems to blend with the sky. I still get goosebumps thinking about it. I have since asked my dad about what led to him dragging a kid to the largest single day sporting event on the planet. "I asked and you said yes. And that was that," he says.

"You know, looking back it probably wasn't the smartest parenting choice I made." I couldn't care less. That dumb parenting choice has led to a 20-year love affair with that plot of land at 16th and Georgetown and I wouldn't trade it for anything. I've seen drivers whose names will one day be thought of as legend. People will say that they wish they could have seen them race. I'll be able to say I did.

If you're coming in for the first time, do yourself a favor and stop for just a second. Take everything in. Take in the sights (the family taking a photo together behind the pagoda, how the cars glisten as they're being rolled to the grid, or the sea of color once the grandstands fill) the sounds (Dave Calabro over the PA or the whistles of the yellow shirts directing traffic in Gasoline Alley), and smells (the tire smoke, the engine exhaust, grilled meats, cigar smoke, the sunscreen, or some combination of them all). It'll be something you crave going forward, like a druggie trying to figure out how he'll get his next score.

Ask anyone who has been to that place and they'll be able to tell you the first time they were there and the first time they knew what that place was all about. I went five years just going through the motions.

2006 rolled around and I experienced something I still can't quite describe. 350,000 people and 20-some odd cars had no business being as quiet as they were when the checkered flag flew. The appreciation has only gone up through the years as I have experienced some incredible things.

- I've seen a woman lead.
- I've seen two rookies shock the field.
- I've seen a rookie lead in turn 800, only to finish second. Twice.
- I've seen a world champion expose this race to a new continent.
- I've seen a three-time winner lose the fourth by less than a quarter of a second. Twice.
- I've seen a fan favorite finally have his number called.
- I've seen middle fingers at 220 miles per hour.
- I outran a tornado (seriously, that happened).
- I met a man who was fulfilling his lifelong dream, at the age of 56, of attending the 500.

And that's only 20 years. Imagine what you could see in 30. In 40 or 50. Maybe even 75.

But you know what blows my mind the most? This place was built for cars to go 80, not 230.

This place has a weird trait about it. She will suck you in and won't let go, but I'm okay with that. I think we all are. It's why we come back each year. There's an excitement in the air that is unmatched anywhere in the world. The euphoria of Back Home Again. The somberness of Taps. That thunderous roar of the flyover. The electricity that courses through the air as six simple words are projected over the PA system, making your hair stand on end.

Whether you're here to watch the race from the seats or rage your fucking face off in the Snake Pit, you'll be with 350,000 of the closest friends you'll never meet.

Join us, won't you?