



Media Information

IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship

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### **“Welcome back, Alex”: US companions talk about the phenomenon that is Alessandro Zanardi.**

- **At the 24 Hours of Daytona, Alessandro Zanardi will be reunited with numerous companions from his time in the US.**
- **Memories and anticipation for Chip Ganassi, Jimmy Vasser, Bryan Herta and co.**
- **Bobby Rahal: “I feel privileged to have him with us”.**

**Munich. For Alessandro Zanardi (ITA), starting at the 24-hour race in Daytona (USA) is a bit like coming home. He celebrated the first successes in his impressive racing career in the United States. From 1996 until 1998 he contested the IndyCar series CART there, and was crowned champion in 1997 and 1998. After two years in Formula 1, he returned to US racing in 2001, until his accident at the Lausitzring (GER) on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2001 gave a new spin to his life and career.**

At the official pre-event test, the “Roar” in Daytona, Zanardi received an enthusiastic welcome. He met numerous old acquaintances in the paddock, and was reminded of his time in the USA.

“I was able to enjoy beautiful moments of my racing career in this country but on top of this I was able to share this type of emotions with a lot of people,” said Zanardi. “Some of the people who are in this paddock gave a huge contribution for changing my life for the better, to what it is, a never-ending privilege. It’s just great to see many of them again. I can’t go any further than a few feet and then bump into another friend who I would love to go to dinner with and who I would love to spend more time with. Of course, we are all busy doing our own stuff but it’s just great to be surrounded by so many ‘family members’.”

One of these good old friends is 1996 CART champion Jimmy Vasser (USA), Zanardi’s team-mate at Chip Ganassi Racing. Now, as team principal, Vasser fields his own team in the GTD class of the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship.





**Jimmy Vasser:** “It’s been so good to see Alex again. We have spent a lot of time privately and in the interviews reminiscing about our past together as team-mates at Chip Ganassi Racing. As usual, I did more listening than talking! Hail to the great Zanardi on his return to North American racing! Competitors beware...”

And Zanardi and Vasser’s team principal at the time, Chip Ganassi (USA), is a permanent feature in the IMSA paddock these days. The veteran of US racing also met up with Zanardi at the “Roar” – and is thrilled that he will be contesting the 24-hour race.

**Chip Ganassi:** “I don’t think anything surprises me with Alex anymore. From his accomplishments in an Indy car with us, to the ranks of Formula 1, and then on to gold medals, and now the Rolex 24. What can you say about him that hasn’t been said? He embodies everything good about the human spirit. I look forward to watching him compete later this month in Daytona. He’s a guy that everyone pulls for.”

Zanardi’s current team principal in BMW Team RLL is Bobby Rahal (USA) – another former companion from IndyCar. Back then he managed Team Rahal in the CART series. He still remembers well the time when Zanardi entered the US racing scene.

**Bobby Rahal:** “I first remember when Alex came on the scene in IndyCar and obviously was an extremely talented driver. He won a lot of races and had his signature, the doughnuts. He was such a magnetic personality then and everybody loved Alex because he just had this energy, joy of life and everything. He just drew people to him. He then suffered his horrendous accident and thankfully he survived. And you see the story today and he is an inspiration for so many people. Coming back from what happened to him and then seeing him excel not only in racing but also in other parts of life. For us at BMW Team RLL, to have Alex with us at Daytona is just hugely exciting. Frankly, I feel privileged to have him with us. He is a professional, he is a great guy and I am confident that he will do a great job.”

However, there is one thing from that time, which, in Rahal’s own words (with a twinkle in his eye) “broke my heart and I haven’t forgiven him for to this day”: the legendary overtaking manoeuvre “The Pass” in the CART race in Laguna Seca (USA) in 1996. Back then, Zanardi overtook the leader, Rahal driver Bryan Herta





(USA), with a spectacular ride through the sand on the Corkscrew turn on the final lap. This saw him clinch the win ahead of Herta. More than 20 years later, this manoeuvre is still a hot topic of conversation and the video is a hit online.

Everything comes full circle at the 2019 24-hour race in Daytona. Not only will Zanardi drive for Rahal's BMW Team RLL – so will Herta's son Colton Herta, who will line up in the #25 BMW M8 GTE.

**Bryan Herta:** “Well, back when we were racing in CART, I think it's fair to say that we were big rivals and we weren't really best friends. We had several moments together on the track that weren't pleasant, but I have to say now, over time, watching what Alex has accomplished in the Paralympics and coming back in driving – he just continues to do these amazing things. My son, who was not even born back when he had ‘the pass’, obviously knows some of the history, but he is very excited to be on the team with Alex and I'm very happy to see that. I'm really looking forward to meeting Alex at the 24-hour race weekend and to re-connect with him. I'm just very impressed with what he continues to accomplish. I think he is an amazing individual.”

Rivals on the track back then and both members of the BMW family today: this is true of Zanardi and the present team owner of Andretti Autosports, Michael Andretti. The IndyCar legend won the title in 1991 and contested races along with Zanardi as of 1996. These days, he contests the ABB FIA Formula E Championship with BMW as BMW i Andretti Motorsport.

**Michael Andretti:** “It's really cool to see him race in Daytona. He could have raced in Le Mans as well, but he chose Daytona. That's awesome for us. He loves America and America loves him. It's amazing what he has been able to do. He's an inspiration to all of us.”

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